



**‘If only for a little while, beyond the confines of this world, and into another’: Queering  
Time in *Orlando*, *Giovanni’s Room*, and ‘Thirteen Ecstasies of the Soul’**

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*‘The true length of a person’s life, whatever the Dictionary of National Biography may say, is  
always a matter of dispute’ (Woolf 177)*

Although aiming to resist any form of monolithic typification, the notion of *queer time* is generally defined as a direct opposition to the normative social structures, temporalities, and modes of being through which mainstream heterosexual society defines and conceptualises its own existence (Halberstam, *Queer Time and Place* 1). Dale Peck's short story 'Thirteen Ecstasies of the Soul', James Baldwin's novel *Giovanni's Room*, and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* all engage with these ideas of queered time—both within the internal confines of each text and the external worlds that they seek to represent. By adopting a comparative lens of analysis, this essay will argue that experimentations with form and genre, the fragmentation of temporal structures and internal narrative frameworks, and the liminality of queer bodies navigating temporal confinement are what primarily facilitate the queering of time within these three texts. I propose that it is through each writer's queering of time that a queering of the textual form itself is then also achieved; this combination of queered temporalities, bodies, and texts then plays a complex and multiplicitous role in seeking to liberate the queer subject from the shackles of heteronormative subjugation.

Beginning with a brief outline of the key theoretical concerns enmeshed within this queering of time, I will highlight how normative conceptions of time as linear, tripartite, and forward-moving inevitably serve to further the marginalisation of queer identities. According to Jack Halberstam, queer time consists of 'alternative temporalities' through which 'futures can be imagined [...] outside' the frameworks of heteronormative '[life] markers' which continue to exclude and erase the experience of queerness (*Queer Time and Place* 2). José Esteban Muñoz echoes these sentiments in asserting that 'the future is queerness's domain' because it rejects the 'prison house' of the 'here and now' in which the queer subject continues to be alienated and otherised (1). Queer time therefore disrupts the oppressive hetero-temporal paradigm by creating new realms of future possibilities that the present

moment continues to withhold from queer identities. Nevertheless, many critics also still point out the heightened emphases that queer time places upon ‘the here’ and ‘now’ (Halberstam, *Queer Time 2*). This focus on embodied presence in queer temporalities can be traced back to the devastating impact of the AIDS epidemic, with its threats of an early death severing the prospects of any future whatsoever for much of the queer community, and consequently ‘expand[ing] the potential [...] of the time at hand’ (Halberstam, *Queer Time 2*). Moreover, scholars also highlight how these normative temporalities restrict the queer self’s right to agency in their engagements with the past. For instance, queer scholarship is often confronted by exclusionary historical narratives which render the queer subject as ahistorical, invisible, and/or entirely absent from the world of the past (Mullan 244). In effect, these normative temporalities essentially exclude queerness from the present, erase it from the past, and deprive it of a future. The queering of time therefore seeks to ‘interrup[t]’, ‘resis[t]’, and challenge the rigidity of these hegemonic temporalities by ‘engag[ing] the temporal politics of deconstruction’ (Freeman xxii, xvi). This allows both the queer writer and the queer subject to then transcend the present-tense as they reshape, reimagine, and relocate queer temporalities within a ‘meaningful and transformative’ dialectic with queerness itself (Freeman xvi).

Moving on to how Baldwin, Woolf, and Peck incorporate queer time in each of their respective texts, I will first elucidate the role and significance of form and structure in disrupting, condensing and/or expanding the boundaries of normative temporalities in the process of queering them. *Giovanni’s Room*, for instance, employs a first-person narrative structure written from the perspective of David, the central protagonist. Although the novel’s primary plotline (David’s affair with Giovanni) takes place in the past and is narrated retrospectively, the novel still continuously shifts between the conflicting temporal domains of memory and the present. This can be seen in how both the beginning and the end of the

novel sees David situated within the present moment: opening with ‘the night which is leading [him] to the most terrible morning of [his] life’ and concluding with ‘the awakening sky’ on the morning of Giovanni’s execution and David’s return to Paris (9, 159). This suggests that, according to normative conceptions of ‘real time’, the entirety of the novel technically takes place over the span of a single night, with the narrative ending as it fades into morning. However, Baldwin problematises these normative constructions of time by setting them against the queer fluidity of the text’s internal temporal landscape, thus creating a powerful juxtaposition between the two. Therefore, despite the novel only taking place across one night when measured in ‘real time’, the expansive temporal framework within the text still allows for a far more penetrative and wide-ranging exploration of David’s past (as both an adolescent and an adult), his immediate present (as both the narrator and the textual subject being narrated), and even his speculations about the future. This simultaneous ‘compression’ and expansion of time in *Giovanni’s Room*—whereby a single night in real time can contain the entirety of David’s lifespan through queer time—is what Halberstam identifies as a hallmark of queered temporalities; whilst also highlighting Baldwin’s engagement with the textual aesthetics of late modernism (*Queer Time 2*).

Dale Peck’s queering of time in ‘Thirteen Ecstasies of the Soul’ follows a similar pattern of ‘compressing’ and expanding normative temporalities within its textual landscape (Halberstam, *Queer Time 2*). This can be seen most strikingly in the second subsection of the story, titled ‘Sloth’, during which the narrator ‘stay[s] in bed all day’ fluctuating between sleep, consciousness, and the liminality that lies between (Peck 314). We witness the story’s narrator expand the timeframe he initially allows himself to remain in bed for, switching from ‘just a moment’ to then eventually encompassing the entirety of the day (314). This outright ‘abandon[ment]’ of the day and its expectations of mental and physical productivity is significant because it aligns with Halberstam’s ideas regarding queer temporalities allowing

the marginalised queer subject a higher level of agency through which they can manipulate time in ways that otherwise would not be possible—as opposed to being controlled and manipulated themselves by these normative temporalities (*Queer Time* 1-6; Peck 314). However, whilst David spends the night's expanded timeframe in *Giovanni's Room* preparing for his journey to Paris and recalling the past in order to establish the narrative foundations of the novel's plot in the present; Peck's protagonist instead spends this expanded timeframe quite literally 'do[ing] nothing' but 'languishing' in bed (315, 314). As Halberstam asserts in *The Queer Art of Failure*, this act of 'unbecoming', or 'do[ing] nothing' in Peck's words, serves as a radical rejection of the heteronormative and capitalistic modes of time and productivity which, for the queer subject, can only be escaped through the construction of an alternate queer temporality (Halberstam 2; Peck 315). Hence, this wilful decision to not 'focu[s] on anything as definite as a thought', to not respond to the body's cries of 'hunger', to not even relieve the 'pressure from [the] bladder' is then in fact a reassertion of queer agency achieved through the queering of time (Peck 314).

Moreover, this queer manipulation of temporal frameworks as a way to reclaim agency in *Giovanni's Room* and 'Thirteen Ecstasies of the Soul' then also ties into Halberstam's notion of the 'queer subject' (*Queer Time* 10). Both David and Peck's protagonist can be seen as representations of this 'queer subject', defined as those who 'live (deliberately, accidentally, or of necessity) during the hours when others sleep and in the spaces (physical, metaphysical, and economic) that others have abandoned' (Halberstam, *Queer Time* 10). This is evident throughout the novel in how David spends much of his time out in bars until the sun begins to rise, such as on the day he first meets Giovanni (45-47). The same can be said for Peck's short story, with segments such as 'Dreams', 'Epilogue: Almost Closed', and the '*Winter*' subsection of the 'Love' segment being narrated after nightfall, when the narrator is alone and awake while the rest of the world sleeps. Although

the section of the story most explicitly aligned with Halberstam's notion of queer subjecthood is the epilogue, where the narrator recalls waking up as a child at 'three AM' to ensure the house's heating system was still functioning properly, I propose instead that the 'Sloth' section embodies a more compelling and nuanced portrayal of Halberstam's 'queer subject' with regard to its queering of time (Peck 339, *Queer Time* 10). This is because, in the 'Epilogue', the narrator 'pause[s]' time with these 'rhapsodic [...] moment[s]' of nocturnal ecstasy, representing a queer subversion of normative diurnal temporalities (339). Whereas in the 'Sloth' section, he is instead 'eras[ing]' time altogether rather than simply inverting it (315). Thus, despite not technically being awake at night while everyone else remains asleep, even the narrator's simple acts of 'reset[ting] the alarm', 'push[ing] it back another hour', 'turn[ing] the clock around', and 'turn[ing] off the ringer on the bedside phone' still deeply emphasise the queer subject's physical imposition of authority over objects of time, whose functions are then rendered entirely useless (314).

This erasure of time and its objects is especially compelling because it allows the story's queer subject to exist in a state of suspended liminality—whereby they are neither fully asleep nor awake. Although 'the rainy day passes' before 'inevitably, it's black again', time has still not progressed forward and the moment is still not part of the past, the future, nor even the present (Peck 314). The liminality of the queer subject freezing time so that they are 'no closer to death than [they] were yesterday' can then be read as a radical reworking of Halberstam's framing of queer subjectivity (Peck 315). In this reworking, the queer subject is not simply queering time by inhabiting the spaces and time periods 'abandoned' by others—they are instead abandoning time itself, and in doing so, are embracing the very liminality and incongruency that queerness was traditionally marginalised for in the first place (Halberstam, *Queer Time* 10).

These ideas regarding the liminality of queer subjecthood can then also be mapped onto Woolf's queering of time in *Orlando*. I argue that the novel's queered temporalities are inextricably intertwined with Woolf's queering of the body and of the textual form, with both epitomising the essence of queer liminality in their subversion of heteronormative constructs. The liminality of the queer body is expressed through Orlando's sex/gender transition from male to female and man to woman, in spite of which their identity 'remained precisely as [it] had been' before (Woolf 83). Orlando is therefore both changed and still the same, embodying both the masculine and the feminine but still neither in their entirety. As Pooja Biswas stipulates, Orlando's body becomes its own 'living time-space' that is both 'gendered and gender-altering' and that 'travels across time' but still holds 'its own non-linear, non-binary, non-heteronormative chronology' (39). The queered body therefore becomes a vehicle for the queering of time because it functions as a 'figure for relations between bodies past and present', simultaneously rupturing and yet still reconciling Orlando's 'male (past) and female (present)' (Freeman quoted in Biswas 39). This is then compounded by Woolf's textual manipulation of heteronormative temporal progression, whereby Orlando lives through nearly 'three hundred years' and yet only acknowledges that she 'is growing up' in the eighteenth century (137). This manipulation of time—also another hallmark of the modernist tradition—is reflected further in how she becomes engaged to Shelmerdine just 'a few minutes' after they first meet, but only learns his name 'the morning after' (137, 102, 145). The queered body thus reflects the very contradictions that queered time poses to heteronormative time, just as the heteronormative body measures and contains the passage of linear time.

Similarly to Woolf, Peck's protagonist in 'Thirteen Ecstasies of the Soul' also engages with these ideas of the queered body locating itself as the site of disruption for normative temporalities and a site of creation for queered temporalities. Whereas Woolf primarily

depicts this via the liminality of Orlando's body in terms of gender, Peck instead focuses on sex as the instrument through which both time and the body are queered in the text. This is evident in the 'Sex' subsection of the story, when the narrator engages in a group sexual activity with other men in the basement of a bar. Male homosexual activity can already be said to problematise normative conceptions of time and the body because, unlike heterosexual sex, gay sex does not offer the possibility of reproducing life in the future. Instead, it was often seen as the harbinger of death due to its historically inaccurate framing as the reason behind the AIDS crisis (Buso 1). Peck's presentation of gay sex thus complicates this notion of the futureless queer body because he describes sex as 'a perfect suspended state of contained motion' resulting in 'the obliteration of the murdering world by a self made temporarily all-powerful' (323). He builds on this in the '*Spring*' subsection of the story's subsequent 'Love' segment, with the narrator claiming that while heterosexual sex 'give[s] birth to babies', queer men having sex 'give birth to each other' (324). Peck therefore suggests that during gay sex, the queer body is 'suspended' in liminality because it freezes and elongates the present moment, whilst still transcending and 'obliterat[ing]' its present reality altogether (323). The queer body's homosexual activity then also queers time by challenging its threats to queer futurity, instead creating an expanded present moment centred around queer connection as opposed to queer alienation. In this queering of time via the queering of the body, Peck thus dismantles binaries of self and other, present and future, and life and death through the liminality of gay sexual activity.

Returning to Woolf's queering of the textual form as a means of queering time in *Orlando*, I will highlight how the liminal status of a novel both fictional and biographical in nature subverts the normative constructs of both the text and its linear temporalities. Melanie Micir describes the biographical genre as 'the gatekeeper *par excellence* of [heteronormative] reproductive time', thus highlighting Woolf's parodic approach and her dismantling of

standardised generic conventions as her ‘unseating the keystone of normativity itself’ (11, 12). We see this in how the novel’s narrator breaks down the fourth wall and repeatedly alludes to the impossibility of the biographer’s task in documenting the linear progression of human life—‘but what can the biographer do’, ‘it is a difficult business, this time-keeping’, ‘the true length of a person’s life, whatever the *Dictionary of National Biography* may say, is always a matter of dispute’ (155, 177). Just as with the gendering of the queer body, Woolf also places the text in a liminal state between fact and fiction, and thereby queers time by queering the textual genre geared specifically towards upholding standard linear temporalities. The queered biographical narrative in *Orlando* is then either startlingly specific in its ‘time-keeping’, such as in the novel’s final line identifying ‘the twelfth stroke of midnight, Thursday, the eleventh of October, Nineteen hundred and Twenty Eight’, or it is entirely dismissive of the passage of time, documenting it instead as:

It was now November. After November, comes December. Then January, February, March, and April. After April comes May. June, July, August follow. Next is September. Then October, and so behold [...] a whole year accomplished. (177, 191, 155)

The queered biography’s juxtaposition of conventional, moment-specific temporalities with its simultaneous presentation of time as an inadequate, almost irrelevant record of human experience thus ruptures the notion of linear temporal progression. Instead, it alludes to a queered ‘model of the human lifetime [...] bound by the limits of imagination rather than [...] facts’ (Micir 12).

Both Baldwin and Peck also adopt a similar framework in their queering of the textual structure as a means to reaffirm their queering of time. Peck’s choice of the short story form was an especially popular one for queer writers writing about AIDS, primarily due to its

brevity suiting the thematic concerns of AIDS patients' 'constantly diminishing futures' (Halberstam, *Queer Time 2*; Dean 715). His further fragmentation of the short story form into an episodic, almost picaresque structure, also resonates with a larger shift towards 'resisting the totalising narrative of irreversible decline' with 'nonlinear form[s] suggest[ing] how foreshortened time amplifies the life of every moment' (Dean 715). This queering of the text's structure therefore ruptures its narrative continuity and evokes a sense of disorientation—mimicking the 'disorienting effects of the AIDS epidemic on the individual' queer subject—as both the narrator and the reader are displaced into different fragments of time and space with each subsequent section of the text (Buso 82).

In *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin also disrupts the narrative continuity of linear time by constantly fluctuating between David's memories of the past, his anxieties about the future, and his experiences in the present. As Valerie Rohy puts it, the novel 'presents its own narrative as retrospection by beginning at the story's end, with Giovanni condemned to death' before his character has even been introduced (220). This queered conflation of beginnings with endings is also visible in how the novel begins at 'night' and ends with the arrival of 'morning', thus subverting the forward-moving trajectories of both linear time and narrative progression in the text (9, 159). Peck's story similarly opens with an ending, presented through the protagonist's departure from 'Home', and ends by going back to the beginnings of their childhood memories and recalling the 'house in Kansas' that they grew up in (313, 339). Moreover, Peck and Baldwin's shared pattern of invoking death as a motif associated with childhood also further supplements this claim—with David's mother dying 'when [he] was five' years old, and Peck's protagonist stating that 'children leave their parents this way' when using water as a metaphor for death in the final sentence preceding the story's epilogue (Baldwin 28; Peck 338).

What makes this especially striking is how this queering of form then also maps further onto the queering of language in these texts. Baldwin, for instance, concludes his final chapter with the repetition of phrases such as ‘it is only *beginning*’, ‘the journey *begins*’, ‘the journey to the grave is already *begun*’, ‘his journey *begins*’, but opens his first chapter with lines such as ‘it was *too late* by that time’, ‘the very *last* night [...] the very *last* time’, ‘my *final* bed’ (157, 158, 159, 9, 10, 11, my own italics). This powerful use of diction to evoke the sense of an ending rather than a beginning (and vice versa) therefore fuels the writer’s queering of time with an inversion of traditional temporal associations—hence, also queering language itself. Furthermore, Woolf’s queering of language also plays a key role in her queering of form *and* of time in the text, with Orlando attempting to bridge the gaps between the ‘seventy-six different times all ticking in [her] mind’ by calling on the ‘many thousand[s]’ of selves that each one represents (178-9). The result is an extended series of nonsensical words and phrases that Orlando speaks out loud to herself, described by even the narrator as ‘rambling [...] disconnected [...] and sometimes unintelligible’ (179). This destabilisation of normative temporalities via the language used to contain them thereby restates the writers’ quests to queer time; a quest achieved through their interwoven, collective queering of language and the textual forms used to contain it. In conjunction with the aforementioned manifestations of queer temporalities in each text, these radical innovations then function as a means to reorient the queer subject and reassert their right to temporal agency.

In conclusion, this essay has set out to prove that Woolf, Baldwin, and Peck queer time by expanding and compressing it beyond its normative limits, by challenging the temporal associations and societal expectations policing queer identities, by fragmenting narrative structures and their linear temporal progressions, by repurposing language and renegotiating the possibilities contained within textual forms, and by locating the queer body as a site of spatio-temporal liminality with the radical potential to deconstruct

heteronormative binaries and temporalities. I have argued that each writer's queering of time, although achieved in various different (yet overlapping) ways, converges in its collective queering of the text itself, and its shared goal of reclaiming queer agency over the hegemonic temporalities governing the heteronormative world.

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