

Queer Temporality And Memory In Contemporary Fiction

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersections of queer temporality and memory in contemporary fiction, focusing on Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House*. These two novels present queer experiences that disrupt normative temporalities, offering alternative narratives of time, memory, and identity. This paper argues that both texts challenge the conventional linear progression of time, using fragmented, cyclical, and non-linear storytelling to represent queer memory and lived experience. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as José Esteban Muñoz's queer futurity, Elizabeth Freeman's chrono-normativity, and Jack Halberstam's queer time, the paper analyzes how these authors reimagine the relationship between past, present, and future. Muñoz's notion of queer futurity highlights how these novels resist heteronormative historical trajectories, envisioning queer lives that exist outside traditional time-bound expectations. Through close readings of Vuong and Machado's texts, the paper demonstrates how queer temporality is not just a thematic concern but a crucial narrative strategy that shapes the characters' emotional landscapes and their resistance to dominant societal norms. Ultimately, the paper argues that these novels propose a new way of understanding queer identity—one that is fluid, fragmented, and resilient in the face of normative temporality, offering rich possibilities for future queer lives and memory-making.

1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary queer literature, temporality plays a pivotal role in reimagining how time, memory, and identity intersect, offering an alternative to the linear progression inherent in heteronormative conceptions of time. Traditional narratives often adhere to linear chronologies that reinforce heteronormative life trajectories—birth, childhood, adolescence, marriage, reproduction, and death. In contrast, queer temporality resists such rigid sequencing, embracing non-linearity, disruption, and simultaneity. Memory, as an act of retrieval and reconstruction, plays a vital role in this temporal resistance, shaping how queer subjects experience and narrate their identities. By unsettling dominant modes of timekeeping, contemporary queer literature foregrounds alternative ways of remembering, relating, and belonging. Queer temporality, as conceptualized by theorists such as José Esteban Muñoz, Elizabeth Freeman, and Jack Halberstam, disrupts dominant narratives that bind identity to normative historical and social timelines. Queer temporality challenges the dominant, linear models of time that structure social life and historical narratives, offering an alternative framework for understanding memory, identity, and history. Within contemporary literature, queer temporality serves as both a narrative strategy and a philosophical critique of heteronormative chronologies that dictate life trajectories—childhood, adolescence, marriage, reproduction, and old age. Instead, queer temporality engages with non-linearity, circularity, disruption, and simultaneity, reflecting the lived experiences of queer subjects whose lives are often shaped by discontinuities, exclusions, and re-imaginings of personal and collective histories.

This paper examines the representation of queer temporality and memory in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong and *In the Dream House* by Carmen Maria Machado, arguing that these texts subvert normative temporalities through their experimental narrative structures and their engagement with trauma, memory, and desire. Both authors utilize non-linear storytelling, fragmented recollection, and anachronistic narrative devices to create a temporal experience that resists traditional notions of progression and resolution. By situating these novels within the critical frameworks of queer theory—drawing on the work of scholars such as José Esteban Muñoz, Elizabeth Freeman, Jack Halberstam, and Carolyn Dinshaw—this paper demonstrates how the interplay of memory and temporality in these texts not only disrupts conventional storytelling but also reconfigures the ways in which queer lives are archived, narrated, and imagined.

The objectives of this study are threefold. First, it seeks to analyze how these novels construct queer temporality through narrative experimentation, resisting teleological closure and linear progression. Second, it investigates the role of memory as an active, dynamic force in shaping queer subjectivities, especially in relation to trauma

and historical erasure. Third, it explores how these texts contribute to a broader discourse on queer historiography, illuminating the ways in which literary form becomes a site of resistance against dominant chrononormative structures.

The significance of queer temporality as a theoretical and literary tool lies in its ability to challenge dominant structures of meaning-making. In his seminal work *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz conceptualizes queer time as an alternative to linear historicity, advocating for a mode of temporality that resists teleological closure and embraces utopian possibilities. Similarly, Freeman's notion of *chrononormativity* critiques the ways in which time disciplines bodies into expected rhythms of life, highlighting how queer subjects often exist in temporalities that defy societal synchronization. Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* extends this analysis by illustrating how queer existence disrupts capitalist time, reproductive futurism, and normative life schedules. These theoretical interventions provide a crucial lens through which to examine how Vuong and Machado construct time in their respective narratives, foregrounding queer memory as an act of resistance and survival.

Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is a coming-of-age novel written in the form of a letter from the protagonist, Little Dog, to his mother, a Vietnamese immigrant who cannot read English. The novel collapses past and present, threading together multiple temporalities to depict Little Dog's navigation of queerness, intergenerational trauma, and cultural displacement. The letter itself functions as a temporal artefact, existing both within and outside of linear time, as Little Dog recalls memories, re-imagines events, and anticipates futures that are both possible and impossible. By disrupting chronological sequencing, Vuong presents memory as an active and recursive process rather than a static recollection of the past. The novel's fragmented structure mirrors the fragmented histories of diasporic and queer subjects, who often lack access to stable, continuous narratives of belonging and identity.

Machado's *In the Dream House*, a memoir about an abusive same-sex relationship, employs an equally experimental approach to time and memory. The memoir is structured as a series of vignettes, each employing a different genre or narrative mode, creating a kaleidoscopic effect that resists singular interpretation. The fragmented nature of the text reflects the disorientation and temporal rupture experienced in abusive relationships, where time becomes cyclical, looping between moments of love, violence, and regret. Machado's deliberate engagement with the archive—or, more precisely, the absence of an archive for queer domestic abuse—further underscores the temporal challenges faced by queer subjects whose histories remain under-documented and marginalized. By constructing a nonlinear, fragmented memoir, Machado not only recounts personal trauma but also critiques the structural erasure of queer suffering from historical records.

Memory, within these texts, does not function as a mere recollection of the past but as an active, living process that shapes the present and future. In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Vuong's protagonist, Little Dog, navigates his queer identity through memories that resurface non-linearly, often triggered by sensory experiences, letters, or intergenerational trauma. The novel refuses closure, instead presenting memory as recursive and ever-evolving. Machado's *In the Dream House* takes this further by explicitly questioning the archival absences in queer history, demonstrating how trauma distorts time, rendering it cyclical rather than progressive. Both novels thus use memory as a tool to resist historical erasure, reaffirming the necessity of storytelling as an act of queer survival. Both novels, in their manipulation of time, memory, and narrative form, enact a queer temporality that resists closure and resolution. This paper argues that Vuong and Machado, by engaging with the interplay of queer time and memory, create textual spaces where the past is never truly past, where histories can be rewritten, and where the future remains open-ended. By doing so, these works not only challenge dominant literary conventions but also offer radical possibilities for rethinking queer experience in relation to time, trauma, and identity. By examining these texts through the lens of queer temporality, this study contributes to broader discussions in literary and queer studies regarding how time structures queer existence. It highlights the ways in which nonlinear storytelling functions as both an aesthetic and political strategy, enabling the articulation of experiences that do not conform to normative life narratives. Ultimately, this paper seeks to demonstrate that in disrupting time, these novels also disrupt dominant frameworks of power, allowing for the emergence of queer histories and futures that resist erasure and demand recognition.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Queer temporality and memory are central theoretical paradigms for understanding contemporary queer fiction, as they challenge dominant historical narratives and disrupt normative constructs of time. This section engages with key theoretical perspectives from José Esteban Muñoz, Jack Halberstam, Elizabeth Freeman, and Ann Cvetkovich, integrating their insights into the analysis of Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House*.

José Esteban Muñoz, in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), argues that “queerness is not yet here” but exists as a horizon of possibility (Muñoz 1). He argues that queer temporality is inherently utopian, rejecting the constraints of the present in favor of imagining alternative futures. He conceptualizes queer temporality as a refusal of the linearity of time imposed by heteronormative structures, instead proposing a future-oriented vision where queerness flourishes beyond the constraints of the present. In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Vuong's protagonist exists within a fragmented temporal framework, where past, present, and future intersect fluidly. The novel's epistolary form itself resists closure, embodying Muñoz's assertion that “queer futurity is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present” (Muñoz 25).

Jack Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005) introduces the concept of queer time as existing outside normative life markers such as birth, marriage, and reproduction. Halberstam suggests that “... queer time disrupts the rhythms of heteronormative life narratives” (Halberstam 4), emphasizing how queerness exists in a temporality that is often unpredictable and improvisational. H/She further interrogates how queer lives unfold outside of reproductive and capitalist time. Halberstam writes that “queer time is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernity” and that it “stretches beyond the limits of conventional time and space” (Halberstam 6). Machado's *In the Dream House* exemplifies this notion by dismantling the conventions of a linear memoir, instead presenting fragmented vignettes that reflect the disorienting experience of trauma. The novel's refusal to adhere to traditional narrative coherence aligns with Halberstam's argument that “queer uses of time and space develop in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction” (Halberstam 10).

Elizabeth Freeman's *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010) introduces the concept of chrononormativity—the regulation of bodies through normative time structures, particularly those that dictate labor, sexuality, and kinship. Freeman argues that literature can “unbind” time, disrupting the disciplinary forces that dictate how individuals should progress through life (Freeman 5). She critiques the way dominant social structures impose regulated timelines onto bodies—particularly through institutions such as marriage, labor, and nationhood. Freeman argues that “chrononormativity uses time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity” (Freeman 3), highlighting the ways in which capitalist and heteronormative systems enforce a rigid life trajectory. Vuong and Machado actively resist chrononormativity through their narratives, where time does not move in a straight trajectory but loops, fractures, and resists containment. Machado's memoir explicitly critiques the erasure of queer history by exposing the archival silences surrounding abusive same-sex relationships, reinforcing Freeman's claim that “queer temporalities disrupt the social contract between time and normativity” (Freeman 21).

Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings* (2003) extends this discussion by examining how trauma is preserved in non-traditional archives. She argues that “trauma is encoded in queer bodies and cultural texts rather than in official historical records” (Cvetkovich 7). Machado's *In the Dream House* directly engages with this idea by crafting a memoir that functions as an alternative archive, addressing the historical absence of narratives about queer domestic abuse. Vuong's novel similarly constructs a personal and collective queer archive, where the protagonist's memories serve as a form of resistance against erasure.

By drawing upon these theorists, this study positions queer temporality and memory as not merely thematic concerns but as integral formal devices in contemporary queer literature. The disruption of linearity, the fragmentation of narrative structure, and the interrogation of historical absence all serve as mechanisms through which these texts challenge normative conceptions of time and identity. Vuong and Machado exemplify how queer fiction not only represents alternative temporalities but also enacts them through experimental narrative forms, reinforcing the idea that literature itself is a site of resistance and possibility.

3. QUEER TEMPORALITY AND MEMORY IN *ON EARTH WE'RE BRIEFLY GORGEOUS*

In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Ocean Vuong's novel delves into the complexities of queer temporality and memory, using an unconventional narrative structure that resists traditional forms of storytelling. Narrated as a series of letters from the protagonist, Little Dog, to his illiterate mother, the text deconstructs conventional notions of time, memory, and identity. Queer temporality, as theorized by scholars such as Jack Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, and Ann Cvetkovich, emphasizes the fluidity of time and the multiplicity of ways in which queer people experience their lives outside the confines of normative expectations. In this framework, the novel examines how queer identity is formed, resisted, and sustained not through a fixed trajectory but through a process of ongoing negotiation and revision. Vuong's exploration of queer temporality and memory offers profound insights into how the past, present, and future intertwine, and how trauma, desire, and history shape queer lives.

3.1 Narrative Structure and the Disruption of Linear Time

The novel's unconventional narrative structure is crucial to its exploration of queer temporality. Little Dog's letters to his mother span across different periods in his life, constructing a non-linear narrative that oscillates between memories, desires, and present-day reflections. Unlike traditional narratives that follow a linear progression toward growth or resolution, Vuong's text refracts time through fragmented recollections that mirror the disruptions of queer existence. As Halberstam (2005) notes, queer temporality is a resistance to the normative structure of linear time, where people progress from childhood to adulthood, from innocence to experience, from loss to healing. Instead, queer temporality offers a space where time is elastic, nonlinear, and defies traditional expectations of progress (Halberstam 6). Little Dog's experience of time is not linear but cyclical, marked by moments of longing, trauma, and survival that are revisited time and again. The novel's structure emphasizes how the past is never truly gone but always informs the present, shaping queer identity in ways that resist clear-cut narratives of closure.

In the opening letter, Little Dog writes, "I am writing to you from the place I was born... I am telling you this story, Mom, because I have no one else to tell it to" (Vuong 3). The act of writing, then, is not simply a recollection of past events but a way for Little Dog to position himself in relation to both his mother and his past. It reflects a desire for connection, but also a need to rewrite and reinterpret his memories. This form of writing transforms time into an ongoing dialogue between past and present. Little Dog's letters allow for the collapse of time, where the boundaries between the present moment and the past are fluid and ever-shifting.

This narrative structure aligns with José Esteban Muñoz's (2009) concept of "queer utopia," which challenges the dominant models of the future that are rooted in heteronormative timelines. Muñoz suggests that queer people are often excluded from the future as it is typically imagined, but queer temporality opens up alternative ways of envisioning the future as a project rather than a destination (Muñoz 12). Vuong's novel embodies this alternative queer temporality by presenting a story that does not unfold toward a specific future or goal. Instead, Little Dog's exploration of his queerness, his trauma, and his love for Trevor is an ongoing process, one that acknowledges the failures, losses, and uncertainties of the past. The past, in this sense, is never fully concluded but always available for reimagining and reworking.

In the novel, the cyclical nature of memory is particularly evident in Little Dog's relationship with Trevor. Their love affair, marked by brief moments of connection and intense passion, does not follow the traditional narrative arc of romance. Their time together is brief and marked by disconnection, but it lingers in Little Dog's memory, constantly revisited as both a source of pain and longing. Little Dog recalls, "We were both leaving behind our only chance at salvation" (Vuong, 125). This line captures the paradox of queer temporality in the novel: the desire for a future that never fully materializes, and the constant return to moments of intimacy and connection that are fleeting yet significant. The repetition of these moments highlights how queer temporality resists linear progression and instead dwells in the tension between memory, loss, and desire.

3.2 Memory and Trauma: The Intergenerational Transmission of Pain

One of the most striking aspects of Vuong's exploration of queer temporality is the way memory and trauma are passed down through generations. Little Dog's mother, who fled the Vietnam War, carries with her the scars of her past, but her trauma remains largely unspoken. She communicates with her son through her silence, through her inability to articulate the horrors she has experienced. Little Dog writes, "She speaks to me in a language I've

never learned, but the love is there. And also, the fear” (Vuong 75). This silence is a form of memory—an unspoken inheritance of pain that Little Dog must navigate and process. His mother’s trauma becomes a part of his own identity, a shadow that shapes his relationship with her and his understanding of himself as a queer person of color.

Ann Cvetkovich (2003) describes queer memory as a “site of loss,” a space in which collective trauma is often unacknowledged, unspoken, or suppressed, but nevertheless shapes the lives of queer individuals. In *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, this idea of queer memory is reflected in the way Little Dog’s mother’s past influences his own present. Her trauma becomes embedded in the ways she relates to him, in the way she withholds affection or speaks to him in ways that convey fear and sorrow. Little Dog’s inability to communicate fully with his mother, due to both language and generational divides, is a reflection of how trauma is often transmitted across time and through silence.

Yet, it is through his letters to his mother that Little Dog begins to process his own trauma and attempt to reconcile with his queerness. The act of writing becomes a means of bridging the gap between the silence of his mother’s past and his own need for connection. Little Dog writes, “I try to explain myself to you but the words always feel like they come from someone else. I wonder sometimes if you can feel me here, writing to you” (Vuong 210). In this passage, writing serves as an act of resistance against the silencing of queer lives and the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Little Dog’s letters are a means of reclaiming his voice and asserting his queer identity, even in the face of the overwhelming silence left by his mother’s past.

The intergenerational transmission of trauma also intersects with the queer temporality of the novel, as the past is never fully left behind but is carried into the present, influencing the way queer individuals experience time. Halberstam’s (2005) concept of “queer failure” is particularly relevant here. Queer people, especially those who are also people of color, are often excluded from the normative trajectories of success and happiness, and their lives are marked by a sense of loss and disconnection. Yet, as Halberstam suggests, queer failure is not necessarily a negative state but a refusal to conform to the expectations of linear time and traditional success. Little Dog’s experiences with his mother, his trauma, and his queerness reflect this queer failure, a failure that is not the result of personal inadequacy but a refusal to fit within normative expectations of time, identity, and fulfillment.

3.3 Desire and Memory: Queering the Past and the Future

Another essential element of *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* is the way the novel queers the relationship between memory and desire. Little Dog’s sexual relationship with Trevor represents a form of queer desire that is not tied to a stable future or normative understanding of love. Their connection is brief and ultimately fractured, yet it is profoundly significant for Little Dog. As Cvetkovich notes, queer desire is often “a force that lingers long after the traumatic event and refuses to be easily comprehended” (Cvetkovich 31). Little Dog’s memories of Trevor are filled with a yearning for something that cannot be recaptured, yet this longing refuses to be extinguished. The cyclical nature of their relationship, with its moments of tenderness followed by distance and separation, mirrors the way queer memory operates—desire is never fully realized but always reimagined and revisited.

The fluidity of time and memory in the novel challenges the idea of closure or resolution in relationships. In *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, queer relationships do not follow the expected arc of growth, conflict, and resolution. Instead, they exist as fragments of longing, moments of connection that never fully come to fruition but are nonetheless significant. This is exemplified in Little Dog’s recollection of his time with Trevor: “You were there, then you weren’t. And the space between us was endless” (Vuong 98). The endless space between them reflects the nature of queer temporality: an ongoing project that is always in flux, always in process. The desire to rewrite the past, to reimagine what could have been, is a central theme in the novel, reflecting the way queer memory resists closure and embraces the possibility of multiple, conflicting narratives.

As Halberstam argues, queer time is often experienced as a failure of fulfillment, as an interruption of the smooth progression of lives’ expected milestones. Little Dog’s queerness, his love for Trevor, and his attempts to reconcile his identity with his family’s silence all represent a refusal of the traditional life path. Yet this refusal is not a mark of failure but of resilience—a form of resistance against the linear, heteronormative trajectories that dominate mainstream narratives.

3.4 Reimagining the Future through Queer Temporality

In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Ocean Vuong crafts a narrative that both critiques and reimagines the normative understandings of time, memory, and identity. Through its use of fragmented narrative structures, the intergenerational transmission of trauma, and the fluidity of queer desire, the novel explores queer temporality as a space where the past is never left behind but is always present, shaping the way queer individuals experience their lives. In doing so, Vuong's work offers a vision of queer existence that resists the conventional, linear progression of time and instead embraces a process of continual becoming. Through memory, desire, and trauma, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* offers a poignant meditation on the complexities of queer temporality and its power to reimagine both the past and the future.

4. QUEER TEMPORALITY AND MEMORY IN *IN THE DREAM HOUSE*

In *In the Dream House*, Carmen Maria Machado presents a novel that disrupts both narrative conventions and conventional understandings of temporality. Carmen Maria Machado employs a radical narrative structure to explore themes of queer temporality and memory. Through its fragmented, non-linear storytelling and a deep dive into the complexities of trauma, desire, and identity, the text redefines how queer lives are remembered and experienced. The book is a hybrid work of memoir and fiction, capturing the intricacies of a toxic, abusive relationship while interrogating broader cultural narratives about love, pain, and queerness. This section examines how Machado's narrative subverts conventional time and memory, reflecting the fluidity of queer temporality and the unique ways in which queer experiences are shaped by non-normative timelines.

4.1 Non-linear Narrative as a Tool for Exploring Queer Temporality

At the core of Machado's narrative is a non-linear structure that resists traditional storytelling techniques. The chapters are organized thematically, rather than chronologically, with each section offering fragmented, disjointed memories of the protagonist's abusive relationship. This non-linear structure itself is a metaphor for the lived experience of queer trauma, where time does not follow a clear-cut trajectory but instead exists in loops and repetitions. Machado's text is not merely a recollection of past events but an active process of remembering, as the protagonist constantly revisits the same memories and emotions, without ever fully escaping them. This recurrence highlights the manner in which traumatic memories resurface in queer lives, where time does not heal but rather keeps returning to unresolved issues.

Machado's manipulation of time reflects Jack Halberstam's theory of queer temporality, which challenges the heteronormative, linear progression of life. As Halberstam asserts in *The Queer Art of Failure*, queer temporality is defined by failure to conform to the prescribed life trajectory: childhood to adulthood, single to partnered, satisfaction to fulfilment. Queer temporalities reject this schema by embracing alternative understandings of progress, stasis, and survival. In *In the Dream House*, time is not structured by achievement or linear growth, but by the cycles of trauma and emotional stagnation. The protagonist's journey does not follow a path of resolution but is instead filled with re-visitations, echoes, and repetitions. This repetitive quality of the narrative illustrates Halberstam's notion of queer temporality as a "disruptive" force, one that defies the idea of closure and embraces a more fluid, circular experience of time.

The novel also engages with José Esteban Muñoz's ideas on queer futurity and memory. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz argues that queerness is not only about the past but also about the potential to imagine alternative futures, to create a world beyond the limiting constraints of heteronormativity. *In the Dream House* resists the idea of moving forward into a utopian future, choosing instead to engage with the painful, haunting memories of the past. The novel suggests that for many queer individuals, the past is not something that can be easily overcome or forgotten. Instead, it is something that continues to shape the present and future. As Machado writes: "... I tell you this story because it is the only one I have. I cannot say I've lived it. I've only ever remembered it. Memory becomes a kind of myth, a kind of making" (Machado 90). This statement reflects the central paradox of queer memory: it is both a means of survival and a source of trauma. The protagonist must constantly return to her past not in search of closure, but in an effort to process and understand the violence that marked her queer experience.

4.2 Memory as a Site of Trauma and Resistance

The memory in *In the Dream House* is inherently linked to trauma, particularly queer trauma. For queer individuals who experience intimate partner violence, the memories of abuse are often interwoven with the struggle for survival. Ann Cvetkovich, in *An Archive of Feelings*, argues that queer memory is not just a passive act of recollection but a crucial means of survival. For Machado's protagonist, memory functions as both a site of pain and a mode of resistance. The protagonist's continual return to her memories of the abusive relationship reflects the fact that trauma is not something that can be easily excised from one's past. Rather, it lingers, reshaping the individual's identity and experience of time. The protagonist writes: "... I did not see it coming, the violence, the change. It was not a matter of sudden eruptions. It was more like time folding over itself, as though the violence had always been there, hidden, folded into the shape of us" (Machado 117). This passage captures the way trauma in the protagonist's life is not a discrete event but a recurring cycle. The experience of violence is not something that can be neatly filed away in the past; it is something that continues to affect the present, folding into the very structure of the protagonist's identity. Memory becomes a tool of survival precisely because it allows the protagonist to understand and process the abuse, to acknowledge its continued impact on her life, and to resist erasure.

The protagonist's engagement with her memories challenges the traditional narrative of trauma recovery. In many narratives, healing is presented as a linear process that moves from suffering to resolution. However, in *In the Dream House*, healing is not an endpoint. Instead, it is a continual process of re-narrating, re-engaging, and re-experiencing the trauma. This cyclical process of remembering suggests that queer survival is not about overcoming trauma, but about learning to live with it, to carry it forward without allowing it to completely define one's future.

4.3 Queer Temporality and the Disruption of Heteronormative Time

The text's non-linear structure also works as a critique of heteronormative time, which assumes that individuals follow a set sequence of life events: birth, marriage, children, and death. Jack Halberstam's concept of "queer failure" is key here, as it allows us to see the protagonist's fragmented experience of time as a refusal of heteronormative expectations. In *In the Dream House*, the protagonist's experience of the abusive relationship does not follow any of the typical trajectories we might expect in a heteronormative romance or trauma narrative. The relationship is not one of growth or progression but one of continual stagnation and emotional devastation. The relationship does not offer the promise of a happy ending, nor does it provide a neat, narrative closure.

Machado's fragmented narrative mirrors the way time is experienced by queer individuals who find themselves outside of the dominant timelines of heterosexuality. The protagonist's inability to move forward in a conventional sense represents the queer refusal to accept the temporal norms set by heterosexual society. Muñoz's idea of queerness as a "temporal drag" becomes evident here, as the protagonist's life resists the forward momentum of heteronormative life scripts. Instead of seeking a final resolution or closure, the protagonist's engagement with time is a refusal to conform to the expectation of progress and completion. As Machado writes: "... We had no house. Not the kind that stays, not the kind you build with brick and mortar. We lived in the kind of house where walls collapse and reassemble themselves when you're not looking" (Machado 135). This metaphor of the house—constantly collapsing and reassembling itself—becomes a representation of the protagonist's relationship with time. Time does not advance in a straight line but collapses in on itself, continually reshaping and reassembling in unexpected ways.

4.4. Queer Survival and Resistance: Reclaiming the Narrative

Despite the constant re-visitation of trauma and the absence of linear healing, *In the Dream House* ultimately suggests that queer survival is possible through the act of re-narrating, reclaiming, and re-imagining one's memories. By refusing to conform to heteronormative understandings of time, memory, and recovery, the protagonist takes control of her own narrative. Ann Cvetkovich's concept of an "archive of feelings" helps illuminate this process, where queer individuals use memory not just to reflect on the past but to imagine alternative ways of existing in the world (Cvetkovich 38). In the case of Machado's protagonist, the act of remembering becomes an act of resistance, a refusal to allow the trauma to define her entirely.

Through this engagement with memory, *In the Dream House* transforms queer trauma from a destructive force into a source of empowerment. The fragmented, non-linear nature of the narrative reflects the protagonist's

struggle to come to terms with her past, but it also highlights the resilience of queer survival. By reclaiming the story of her trauma and survival, the protagonist asserts her agency in a world that often seeks to erase or deny queer experiences of abuse and violence.

Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House* offers a complex, multi-layered exploration of queer temporality, memory, and trauma. Through its non-linear narrative, fragmented time structure, and intimate examination of an abusive queer relationship, the novel interrogates the ways in which queer individuals experience and engage with time. By rejecting linearity and embracing a cyclical, repetitive temporality, Machado's text offers an innovative approach to understanding queer trauma and survival. In doing so, *In the Dream House* not only challenges heteronormative conceptions of time but also provides a nuanced representation of queer identity as a fluid, ever-evolving process. As a text that engages deeply with the emotional residues of trauma and the survival strategies that emerge in its wake, Machado's novel is an essential contribution to queer literature and the ongoing conversation about the intersections of memory, trauma, and temporality.

5. DISRUPTED TIMELINES AND RECLAIMED HISTORIES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF QUEER TEMPORALITY AND MEMORY IN *ON EARTH WE'RE BRIEFLY GORGEOUS* AND *IN THE DREAM HOUSE*

Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) and Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House* (2019) are both ground breaking works that defy traditional narrative conventions. Their use of fragmented time and memory highlights the non-linear experience of queerness, making them vital contributions to queer literary studies. By rejecting a linear, teleological progression of time, both authors explore the ways in which queer identities are formed, altered, and remembered. This section will focus on the role of queer temporality and memory in their constructions of queer subjectivity, by drawing on the theoretical frameworks of José Esteban Muñoz, Jack Halberstam, and Ann Cvetkovich, to demonstrate how both novels employ non-linear narratives to highlight trauma, survival, and the potential for queer futures.

5.1 Queer Temporality and the Disruption of Linear Time

One of the most prominent features of both *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and *In the Dream House* is their rejection of linear temporality, a narrative structure often used to reinforce heteronormative values. In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, the story unfolds as a letter from Little Dog to his mother, whose illiteracy creates an interesting tension between the act of writing and the inability to be read. The letter becomes a space where Little Dog reflects on his fragmented past, navigating his immigrant identity, queerness, and relationship with his mother. Vuong's narrative moves through different temporal planes, fluctuating between the present and various moments of Little Dog's past. This movement between times reflects the fragmented nature of his experiences, particularly his queerness, which does not adhere to a linear path of self-discovery.

Little Dog writes, "... I was always somewhere else. Always ahead of the day, ahead of myself. I was never here, even when I was here" (Vuong, 2019, p. 103). This line encapsulates the disjointed nature of Little Dog's experience, where time itself feels out of sync with his lived reality. As José Esteban Muñoz argues in *Cruising Utopia*, queer temporality resists the normative idea of linear progression. Little Dog's life is not ordered in a way that advances toward a fixed end, but rather exists in a constant state of flux, a reflection of the queer experience that does not conform to traditional timelines of growth or maturity. Muñoz's framework of queer temporality challenges the assumption that time is inherently tied to progress and achievement, instead highlighting the ways in which queer people experience time as fractured and cyclical.

Similarly, in *In the Dream House*, Carmen Maria Machado adopts a fragmented narrative structure that mirrors the protagonist's fragmented sense of self and time. The novel is structured as a series of chapters that focus on different aspects of the protagonist's abusive relationship with her ex-girlfriend, each one unfolding in a nonlinear, thematic order. The protagonist repeatedly returns to the same moments of pain, disillusionment, and confusion, reflecting how trauma, particularly queer trauma, disrupts the continuity of time. Machado writes, "The dream house is an act of remembering, the kind of remembering that comes with the awareness of pain...the dream house is no longer a house but a ruin" (Machado, 2019, p. 48). The repetition of certain memories throughout the narrative mirrors the cyclical nature of abuse and trauma, as the protagonist struggles to move beyond the past. This is a prime example of how Machado's text reflects the ways in which queer temporality refuses to conform to a forward-moving, progressive model of time.

Jack Halberstam's concept of queer time, as explored in *The Queer Art of Failure*, further illuminates how both texts use temporal disjunction to reflect the lived experiences of queer subjects. Halberstam writes, "Queer time might not lead us toward a bright future, but it will teach us how to appreciate a different set of temporalities" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 3). For both Little Dog and the protagonist of *In the Dream House*, time is not a straight path toward an idealized future but a space to be navigated and experienced differently. In both texts, the disjointed and fragmented narratives convey a refusal to be bound by normative ideas of time and identity.

5.2 Memory as a Site of Queer Survival and Trauma

Memory plays a crucial role in both *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and *In the Dream House*, not merely as a record of past events but as a site of survival, trauma, and redefinition. Both authors use memory to explore how queer subjects cope with violence and trauma, reflecting how queer people engage with their pasts in order to survive in a world that seeks to erase or invalidate them.

In Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Little Dog's recollections of his childhood, his mother's struggles, and his relationship with Trevor are inseparable from the trauma of displacement, violence, and queer longing. His memories of his mother's silent suffering are depicted as a way of remembering her pain in order to understand his own. Little Dog writes, "I wonder if it is possible to love someone who is always, unknowingly, destroying you. This is the language of war" (Vuong, 2019, p. 98). This sentiment reveals the depth of trauma in both his mother's life and his own. Memory, for Little Dog, becomes a way of reckoning with the losses that shape his identity. Muñoz's concept of queer memory highlights how queer subjects utilize memory not just to recall past events but as a tool for emotional survival and political resistance. Little Dog's act of writing to his mother, even though she cannot read, becomes an act of reworking the past and re-imagining a future that is not defined by the constraints of violence or heteronormativity.

Machado's *In the Dream House* similarly uses memory as a tool for survival. The protagonist's recollections of her abusive relationship with her ex-girlfriend are fractured and painful, reflecting how trauma distorts one's sense of time and self. Machado's non-linear structure mimics how the protagonist's memories of the relationship do not follow a clear or predictable order. In one moment, she recalls, "The house was not always bad. Sometimes it was just a house, a place to be" (Machado, 2019, p. 37). This shift in memory mirrors the complexities of the abusive relationship, where moments of love and tenderness are juxtaposed with instances of control and violence. The repetition of these moments in the narrative reflects the ongoing process of revisiting and reworking traumatic memories. As Cvetkovich argues in *An Archive of Feelings*, queer memory often involves reinterpreting the past in order to create a sense of agency and survival in the present. In *In the Dream House*, the protagonist's journey through her memories is a process of reclaiming her own narrative and gaining agency over her experiences.

Both texts emphasize that memory is not a simple recollection of events but an active process of reconstruction. The protagonists of both novels navigate the trauma of their pasts not by erasing or forgetting it, but by revisiting and reworking it in order to survive and define their queerness. This aligns with Cvetkovich's idea of queer memory as an ongoing process of redefinition and survival, where past pain becomes a catalyst for future resistance.

5.3 Queer Futures: Reimagining Time and Liberation

The concept of queer futures is another significant theme in both *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and *In the Dream House*. While the novels approach this theme differently, both texts underscore the importance of queerness as a site of resistance, survival, and potential liberation from normative time constraints.

In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Little Dog's reflections on his past and his relationship with Trevor serve as a way of imagining a future where queerness is accepted, even if only in private spaces. The narrative ends with a sense of tentative hope as Little Dog moves toward self-acceptance, despite the trauma and violence that have marked his life. Little Dog's final words in the novel, "I know it's not enough. But it is everything" (Vuong, 2019, p. 247), encapsulate this fragile optimism. The narrative suggests that while the future may be uncertain, the possibility of a queer future is nevertheless real, and it is shaped by the reclamation of queer time and memory. Muñoz's vision of queer utopia as a space where queer time is liberated from the constraints of heteronormative temporality is reflected in Little Dog's refusal to adhere to the conventional timelines of progress or closure.

In contrast, *In the Dream House* presents a more ambivalent view of queer futures. The protagonist's trauma and struggle for self-definition persist throughout the narrative, suggesting that liberation is an ongoing, often difficult process. However, the text's ending offers a sense of tentative self-empowerment. Machado's protagonist writes, "I am no longer the woman who can't leave. I am the woman who can" (Machado, 2019, p. 239). This moment signifies a shift in the protagonist's agency, suggesting that queer futures are not fixed or guaranteed, but must be actively forged through continual resistance to trauma.

Both texts ultimately emphasize that queer futures are not linear or predetermined but are instead shaped by the act of revisiting, reworking, and surviving the past. The potential for queer liberation exists not in escaping the past, but in reconciling with it and using memory as a tool for ongoing resistance and redefinition. The comparative analysis of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and *In the Dream House* illustrates how both novels engage with queer temporality and memory in distinct yet interconnected ways. Through their non-linear, fragmented narratives, Vuong and Machado explore the ways in which queerness resists the normative progression of time. Both novels emphasize memory as a site of survival and trauma, with the protagonists using their pasts as a means of gaining agency and reimagining their futures. By drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Muñoz, Halberstam, and Cvetkovich, this analysis demonstrates that queer temporality and memory offer a vital lens for understanding how queer identities are formed, sustained, and liberated. These texts invite readers to reconsider the nature of time, memory, and identity, offering a queer vision of the future that is not defined by linear progression, but by continual reworking and resistance.

DISCLOSURE OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no competing interests.

FUNDING DECLARATION

No funding was received for this research.

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