

Out of Time: Queer Temporality and the Black Lesbian Experience

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Introduction

At nineteen, I finally saw myself for who I truly was, feeling as if I'd arrived late to my own life. This sense of being "out of time" perpetually appears in queer narratives, especially those of Black lesbians. The concept of queer temporality offers a framework to grapple with these nonlinear—and often disrupted—conceptions of time, which ultimately challenge the heteronormative life trajectory that society expects us to follow. In this piece, I contend with queer temporality in lesbian narratives as a reflection of the complex, non-linear experiences of Black queer women. As I describe, these women are forced to navigate homophobic backgrounds, delayed self-expression, and the search for authenticity—just as I have. Through an analysis of Carmen Maria Machado's memoir *In the Dream House*, the 'Black Mirror' episode "San Junipero," Dee Rees' film, *Pariah*, and my personal reflections, we will explore how these diverse contemporary narratives capture the unique temporal experiences of Black lesbian lives.

Theoretical Framework of Queer Temporality

Queer temporality, popularized by Jack Halberstam, suggests that queer subjectivity engenders new ways of understanding time, space, and maturity. For Black lesbian experiences, this concept has additional significance due to the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. Black queer women often find themselves 'out of sync' with the heteronormative expectations and cultural timelines of their communities. Ultimately, the relevance of queer temporality to Black lesbian experiences lies in its ability to validate the fragmented, circular, or suspended nature of our journeys. It allows us to conceptualize our lives not as "delayed" nor "off-track" but as following a different yet equally valid temporal logic.

The Portrayal of Trauma *In the DreamHouse*

Carmen Machado's memoir offers a poignant exploration of queer temporality through its innovative structure and content matter. The memoir's non-linear narrative structure mirrors the fragmented nature of trauma, particularly the experiences in abusive queer relationships. Throughout, Machado's utilization of vignettes creates a kaleidoscopic view of her experiences, further challenging traditional notions of time in storytelling. This structure reflects how trauma disrupts our perception of temporal continuity—specifically, how the past intrudes on the present, and the future becomes a space of fear and possibility. The book's format also illustrates the cyclical nature of abuse and healing. Machado revisits experiences and themes throughout, which mirrors how humans process and reprocess traumatic experiences over time. While my personal experiences differ from Machado's, I empathize with the book's portrayal of time as fluid and subjective. Like Machado, I have revisited my past traumas, understanding them differently each time.

“San Junipero” and the Constraint-Free Timeline

In the highly successful Netflix series, 'Black Mirror,' the episode “San Junipero” explores queer temporality through science fiction. The episode occurs in a virtual afterlife where people can select their age and time, allowing for an exploration of queer love across eras. The ability to choose one's age and time-period serves as an incredibly moving metaphor for queer self-discovery and expression. This allows characters, particularly Kelly and Yorkie, to grapple with their identities without the constraints of their original timelines. This portrayal of temporality resonates deeply with the experiences of many queer individuals who feel they must 'go back in time' to rediscover and express the suppressed facets of their identities. The

episode's portrayal of love across history illustrates the temporal transcendency of queer love, challenging the notion that there is a "right time" for love and self-discovery; this message is particularly moving for queer individuals who came out later in life. My own experiences with delayed self-expression mirror those of Yorkie's journey. Like her, I felt like I was experiencing a youth and freedom in my early twenties that I should have had years before.

***Pariah* and the Chosen Family**

Dee Rees' film *Pariah* explores queer temporality from a young Black lesbian's perspective. The film follows Alike, a 17-year-old African-American girl from Brooklyn who embraces her identity as a lesbian. *Pariah* is particularly relevant to my experiences as a young Black queer woman, especially its navigation of family expectations, cultural pressures, and desires. Through this film, Rees captures the sense of being out of sync with one's surroundings, a key facet of queer temporality. While more linear-structured than *In the DreamHouse*, the film still subtly experiments with time. Alike's growth does not follow a straight path; instead, she moves forward and backward, 'trying on' different versions of herself. This experimentation reflects the cyclical nature of queer self-discovery, particularly for those who grew up in homophobic environments. *Pariah* also explores the concept of a 'chosen family' and its relation to queer temporality. Alike's relationship with her biological family is strained, yet she finds support in her queer community. This creation of alternative kinship is a common theme in queer narratives and often involves reimagining life's timeline.

To be Young, Queer, and Black: My Personal Reflection

Reflecting on these narratives, I find connections and divergences with my own experiences. Like Machado, I have grappled with the nonlinear nature of processing trauma. I understand the cyclical revisiting of past events, each time with a new understanding, as it has

been crucial to my journey. The concept of “queer time” has been particularly relevant in my coming out process and family dynamics. Growing up in a homophobic African household created a temporal dissonance, I perpetually felt like I was living in a different time than my peers, unable to explore my identity freely. This delay in self-expression meant that when I did start to come out at nineteen, I felt behind and ahead of my time.

I’ve realized that the impact of cultural and familial homophobia on my perception of time and self has been profound. It created a sense of suspended animation, where part of me remained ‘frozen in time’ while the world continued. The process of thawing—of allowing myself to grow and change—has been both liberating yet disorienting. My sibling’s experience of being disowned after coming out as transgenders creates another layer to this temporal complexity. Their journey has run parallel to mine, yet on a different time, illustrating how even within the same family, queer experiences of time vary dramatically.

Conclusion

Queer temporality in lesbian narratives, as explored through works like *In the DreamHouse*, “San Junipero,” and *Pariah* reflects the complex realities of Black lesbian experiences. These stories capture our journeys' nonlinear, often disrupted nature, validating experiences that cannot neatly conform to heteronormative timelines. These narratives provide mirrors for those navigating similar journeys and windows for others to understand our experiences. By challenging traditional notions of time and progress, these narratives create space for a multiplicity of queer experiences. As we continue to write our stories, we redefine not just what it means to be queer, but what it means to exist in time. Our narratives, with all their complexities and nonlinearities, are not just valid—they are vital because they offer new ways of conceptualizing love, identity, and the human experience.

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