RECLAIMING QUEER TIME: QUEER TEMPORALITIES IN ALI SMITH'S "HOW TO BE BOTH"

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Corpus Navalón Guzmán
ORCID: 0000-0002-5951-3842

University of Murcia

Abstract

This article examines the different manifestations of alternative temporalities in Ali Smith's Goldsmiths Award novel *How to be Both* (2014). My argument is that the novel 'queers' understandings of time in two significant ways: by highlighting new possibilities of narrative structure that challenge linear conceptions of time and by questioning regulated notions of developmental temporalities in terms of progression from childhood to heteronormative adulthood. Hence, by drawing on the compelling framework of queer temporalities, the main goal of this article is to analyze the mechanisms deployed by Ali Smith to generate unprecedented configurations of queer time.

Key words

queer temporalities, queer time, non-linearity, queer narrative, queer studies, LGBTQIA+ identity

Introduction[1]

Ali Smith is characterized as a writer whose style is marked by playfulness and disruption. As a result, she has situated herself at the front line of the contemporary literary panorama with works such as *The Seasonal Quartet* (2021), *Artful* (2012), *The Accidental* (2005), and *Hotel World* (2001). Scholars have primarily considered Smith a postmodern author, given that her writing exhibits "linguistic self-consciousness, generic experiment, representations of time and subjectivity, and narrative construction" (Gérmana and Horton 2013, 5). *Hotel World* and *The Accidental*, published between 2001 and 2005, have been the focus of critical attention due to the combination of postmodern techniques with spectrality and hyperreality. Smith's sixth novel, *How to be Both* (2014), also encapsulates this style but represents a transcendent shift, which Sophie Gilbert interprets as an attempt to "push the themes, and the formal invention, to new extremes" (2014). This transformation takes

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the form of "aleatory fiction", setting the tone for the rest of the novel: the reversible stories of the Italian Renaissance Painter Francescho del Cossa[2] and 21st-century teenager George challenge fixed literary assumptions by unfolding depending on the version the reader obtains.

In an interview for the Baileys women's international prize for fiction, Ali Smith describes her experimental undertaking in *How to be Both* as a reflection of "our dualities, our multiplicities as people, how we live in time [...] and how time itself is not as sequential as we imagine" (2005). This unparalleled approach to time situates Smith among many other writers and academics within queer theory whose works "deconstruct linear time and development narratives, [...] to reconstruct and reconceptualize the present in new ways" (Haffey 2019, 8). These "development narratives", encompassed within the interventionist project of queer temporalities, push against the dominant paradigm through which time is understood and explore how queer individuals alternatively experience politics, history, relationships, and development. Thus, as malleability and the possibility of "being both" are central themes in *How to be Both*, my intention in this essay is to complicate the novel's critical reception as a playful, postmodern fiction by also framing it as a project that subtly queers both society's fixation with linearity and the sequential, heteronormative temporal logics of development.

Full of "inconsistencies and breaking points in temporality" (Bennett 2018, 83), *How to be Both* is set in-between the Renaissance and the 21st century. The novel, divided into two parts, tells a story that defies time and narrative conventions in different ways. At the beginning of each section, there is a drawing of a security camera and a hand with two eyes, foreshadowing the historical period that will be adopted by each story. In my copy, the first half, "Eyes", immerses readers in the fictionalized life story of Francescho del Cossa, who reappears as a ghost behind one of their frescoes in the 21st century in a disembodied state. After observing George contemplating one of their paintings in Ferrara's Palazzo Schifanoia, Francescho decides to follow her and reveal their life's journey along the way. In "Camera", readers meet 16-year-old George amidst a mourning process. Her mother has left her unexpectedly with her absent father and her brother. That is why George's 21st-century life in Cambridge is just physical, as she is constantly involved in a psychic process of remembering a trip with her mother to see the frescoes of Francescho del Cossa. This memory prompts George to unearth Francescho's past and reevaluate her fixed beliefs about life, ultimately showcasing the potentialities of "being both".

[2] Francesco Del Cossa is not a fictional character, as they were a famous painter during the Enlightenment period. Nonetheless, while Smith constantly mentions some of their artworks, little is actually known about the painter. By positioning an epigraph quote in the narrative as the only historical document available to show their existence, Ali Smith imagines part of Del Cossa's biography and adds the h to their name to emphasize its fictional aspects.

1. Ali Smith's Queer Temporalities

1.1. Time out of Joint? Queering Identity, Queering Temporalities

Freeman et al.'s argument that "queer temporality is a way of apprehending being-in-the-world that, [...], insists on a 'refusal of linear historicism" (2007, 178) is analogous to Smith's representation of Francescho del Cossa[3]. Francescho's story starts with their allegorical resurrection in the 21st century, represented graphically through a spiral layout of fragmented words and sentences. Suddenly, the motion stops, and the narrative situates Francescho Del Cossa in the National Museum, looking at "a boy in front of a painting" (Smith 2014, 12) who turns out to be George. Inspired by the ambivalent identity of George, Francescho decides to embark on the task of telling their life story. Smith's use of an auto-diegetic narrator initially prevents the reader from discovering some aspects of Francescho's reality, such as their gender identity. However, after some digressions, Francescho reveals the link between George's ambiguous identity with theirs. Born female, Francescho decides to pass as a male, which illustrates a "refusal of linear historicism" and establishes a productive dialogue between the novel and the field of queer temporalities.

Nonetheless, Francescho's identity is initially established to comply with heteronormative time. In a retrospective narration of a childhood memory, Francescho describes how they developed a tendency to wear their deceased mother's clothes, and this act led their father to "orient" them toward linear structures of time:

> If you agree to put these clothes away. I mean stop wearing them. [...]. And if you were to put, say, breeches on, or these leggings I've here, instead –, he said. [...] – then I can get you a job and a schooling, he said. [...] Cause maybe. Maybe. If you were to stop wearing these too-big clothes and were to wear, let's say, these boys' clothes instead. [...] If you were, he said. Then we might find someone to train you up in the making and using of colours on Wood and on walls, you being so good with your pictures (Smith 2014, 35-36).

Not only are short-lived Francescho's chances to honor their mother but also to evade heteronormativity. Francescho's father, recognizing Francescho's talent for painting, tries to align Francescho with the markers that directly correlate with manly heterosexuality to provide them with a career in painting. Yet, the change would only be complete if Francescho works with their father and brothers to be established by society as a man: "when it is clearly established in others' eyes as to who you have *become* [...] we will get you into a painters' workshop" (Smith 2014, 37). As the story progresses, this act of gender performativity is achieved since people unquestioningly

[3] I have opted to use the pronoun 'their' to refer to Francescho. While Ali Smith does not explicitly assign a pronoun to this character, I consider 'they/them' as the most appropriate way of referring to this character given the nature of their gender identity and how it is treated in the novel.

accept Francescho as a man regardless of their physiological attributes. Thus, Franchesco is positioned as an individual who conforms to both the hegemonic institutions that enforce compulsory heterosexuality and the constraints of linear time in order to achieve success in life.

The prospects of Francescho's life seem to fit within a productivity ideal rooted in heteronormative norms. In an attempt to "synchronize" Francescho's lifetime with those who enjoyed a better present during the 15th century, their father actively distances them from femininity. Consequently, Francescho becomes enmeshed in what Elizabeth Freeman describes as chrononormativity. This concept refers to the dominant organization of time and bodies for maximum productivity which only recognizes those bodies who adhere to society's regulatory norms (Freeman 2010, 3). In accordance with the mechanisms of chrononormativity, Francescho can only be deemed as a "productive" individual in the 15th century if they present themselves as a male painter. That is why the novel represents how, once the protagonist assumes the identity of Francescho through cross-dressing, they gain access to education in painting and eventually secure a place to work in Ferrara's Palazzo. In this sense, the social acceptance of Francescho as a painter exemplifies how conforming to chrononormativity leads to a social approval based on the "[...] notions of the normal" imposed by the "[...] middle-class logic of reproductive temporality" (Halberstam 2005, 4).

The novel begins to problematize heteronormative time schemes when Francescho's assigned sex at birth is discovered. This takes place when Barto, Francescho's colleague, feels ashamed upon learning this fact: "[...] Barto had been challenged by someone, concerning me, and he had been humiliated by the challenge. You are other than I thought, he said. I nodded" (Smith 2014, 95). As I have said elsewhere, operating under the regimes of "chrononormativity" only makes certain ways of living legible since these regimes are rooted in the cultural realm of normativity. Consequently, upon this revelation, Francescho would irremediably situate themselves in an "a-synchronous" relation to the preferred social mechanisms of 15th-century society. This idea begins to gain deeper meaning shortly after this finding when Francescho admits that "[...] there are certain things that, said out loud, will change the hues of the picture" (Smith 2014, 95). Revealing their gender identity could lead to prosecution for cross-dressing, lower payment for their paintings, and perhaps most importantly, lose their well-deserved status as an Italian artist. However, Francescho decides to turn away from their future-oriented chrononormativity in favor of queer time since, as they hold, "the general acceptance of [their] painter self, had always meant I'd be left to be exactly that–[themselves]" (Smith 2014, 95).

From this moment on, the novel engages in a description of how Francescho resisted heteronormative, linear narratives after their self-proclamation. Although opposing to 15th century heteronormative social norms would have left a traumatic imprint on Francescho, Francescho's emancipation from the constraints of straight time potentially refuses this dictum: "[...] cause although it seemed to be the end of the

world to me – it wasn't. There was a lot more world: cause roads that look set to take you in one direction will sometimes twist back on themselves without ever seeming anything other than straight" (Smith 2014, 98). Instead of abiding by heteronormative power structures, Francescho embraces the "twist" of queer temporalities, finding social agency in being their "[own] particular both" (Smith 2014, 54). This is reflected when, after an impasse, Francescho is again commissioned to work for Mr. Priciano of Ferrara and even pursues sexual encounters with men who understand their fluid identity. Moreover, Francescho successfully manages to bypass the "[...] the markers of life experience, namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death" (Halberstam 2005, 2). The painter neither marries nor has descendants, even when the novel subtly suggests their romantic relationship with Barto. With these events, Smith depicts Francescho's destabilization of chrononormativity not only as a subversive way of resisting straight time but also as an appraisal of a life "[...] unscripted by conventions" (Halberstam 2005, 2).

Moreover, Smith reimagines a space for lives "unscripted by conventions" in the 15th century by engaging with Francescho's art production after their queer self--proclamation. In doing so, her undertaking can be interpreted as an effort to illuminate alternatives for queer-identified subjects, envisioning a future outside of "the narrative coherence" (Halberstam 2005, 2) of heteronormativity. Although discovered by Mr. Priciano de Ferrara's workshop workers, who "let [Francescho] know they knew [their] reputation" (Smith 2014, 107), Francescho chooses to use art as a celebration of their out-of-synch existence. Through the premise that "the life of a painting and making is a matter of double knowledge" (Smith 2014, 128), Francescho's artworks begin to tap into non-binarity and fluidity through dual interpretations. Reflecting on the paintings of Alberti, Francescho questions why "it would not be suitable to dress Venus or Minerva in the rough wool cloak of a soldier" and reinterprets myths such as that of Apollo and Marsyas, portraying the latter as a "travesty" (Smith 2014, 92). This perspective aligns with Fatma Bilge and Holly Ranger's argument that images, artworks, and stories within Smith's narrative conceal double meanings that hint at an in-between position in light of society's rigid dichotomies (2019, 117-118; 2019, 414). By using queerness as a common motif of Francescho's life and artworks, Smith envisions a future for queer bodies that would otherwise be "destined to pass beneath any discourse and disappear" (Foucault 2000, 161).

1.2. "To Tell it in more than One Way" and still, Tell it Right: Ali Smith's Queer Narrative

If Francescho's section is notable for deconstructing the binaries of heteronormative time, "Camera" outstands for loosening the strictures of fixed narratives in favor of queer temporalities. At the beginning of "Camera," we encounter 16-year-old George mourning her mother, who unexpectedly passed away four months earlier. The story

unfolds during New Year's Eve of 2013 in George's home, which is pervaded by a disturbing atmosphere: her father is coping with the pain of losing his wife through alcohol, and her little brother remains oblivious to the situation. Throughout the narrative, an extradiegetic narrator describes George's struggles to come to terms with Carol's death and how this leads her to engage in "a simultaneous combination of a retrospective and a simultaneous present" (Huber 2016, 98). The novel primarily illustrates this combination through the interweaving of flashbacks with present events. For instance, while George befriends Helena Fisker, she also recollects memories from a family's trip to Ferrara, where they saw Francescho del Cossa's frescoes. This narrative structure, which aligns with Freccero's argument that queer temporalities disrupt "the past-present-future march of time" (2015, 22), invites comparison with queer understandings of time.

The introduction of Francescho Del Cossa in "Camera" initiates a nuanced exploration of time and identity through the asynchronous relationship that both protagonists develop. Early in the narrative, George recounts how her mother encouraged her to scrutinize artworks and stories for hidden meanings and interpretations. A pivotal moment occurs during their visit to Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara when they play "what's-the-point-of-art game" (Smith 2014, 228). Carol tries to instruct George about the importance of refusing either/or explanations by emphasizing the ambiguity within Francescho's painting, which depicts a figure that could be either a young man or a young woman dressed in rich clothing. Unknowingly, George begins to question time and identity, pondering: "Is it happening now or in the past? [...] Is the artist a woman or a man?" (Smith 2014, 191). Although the discussion of Francescho's identity in what seems like an ordinary conversation may seem insignificant, it shows how George's mother creates what Carolyn Dinshaw describes as a queer asynchrony. Queer asynchrony occurs when there is a "collision of different time frames or temporal systems" (2012, 5), like Francescho's 15th-century temporality clashing with George's temporality in the present. Dinshaw further asserts that this asynchronicity leads to a new configuration of the present that is far from static (Freeman et al. 2007, 185). In the case of "Camera," this translates into the a-temporal and somewhat co-causal relation between Francescho and George, which suspends the present and how it is narrated as the novel advances.

By contrast, George rejects the "fluid" nature of the present, favoring fixed heteronormative structures of time at first. Further delving into the conversation about Francescho's identity, George describes her refusal to accept the possibility of dual interpretations, bluntly asserting that "It can't be both. It must be one or the other. [...]AUGH" (Smith 2014, 191). Despite Carol's efforts to underscore that these rigid either/or notions are arbitrary constructs enforced by heteronormativity, George remains resistant to embrace this particular outlook. George is determined to perceive the present world for what it is without searching for hidden meanings.

Following Lee Edelman, George's behavior is a result of society's obsession with viewing every aspect in a periodic order imposed by time's continuity. Therefore, in Edelman's words, George intrinsically has a "[...] familiar demand for narrative accountings of "how and why" (Freeman et al. 2007, 180). This periodic order even shapes George's opinion on textual linearity, as she is unable to accept the concurrence of multiple timelines: "if things really did happen simultaneously, it'd be like reading a book but one in which all the lines of the text have been overprinted, like each page is actually two pages but with one superimposed on the other to make it unreadable" (Smith 2014, 194).

George's derangement of synchronicity begins when she meets her classmate, Helena Fisker (H). H enters the narrative unexpectedly by reaching out to George on the night of the 1st of January. Although George and H did not have a strong friendship then, she tried to cheer George, making her "laugh in an undeniable present tense" (Smith 2014, 260). In the following months, George and H become inseparable, for the latter becomes a pivotal figure in George's grieving process. As Sonya Andermahr signals, George is a figure in transit who, apart from being amidst a process of healing, "[...] is between the states of child and adult, between girl and boy in terms of identification and desire [...]" (2018, 14). Partly because of her intermedial state, George has to construct a sense of self without subject positions to reflect on. Therefore, George's connection with H aids her in overcoming the ordeal caused by the absence of her mother and dismantling her preconceived ideas about life values, identity, and her place in the world.

As the relationship between George and H becomes more intimate, the narrative entertains the possibility that more than one story is simultaneously happening. This complexity becomes apparent when George introduces H to the paintings of Francescho del Cossa. Together, they explore the ambivalent meanings of the myths depicted in Francescho's frescoes, such as the one of Phaethon and the sun chariot. In "Eyes", Francescho recalls a childhood memory in which their mother, in an intimate moment, tells them the myth: "she held me on her knee after my bath and told me the terrifying stories like the one about the boy whose father, Apollo the sun-god, forbade him from driving the horses who drew the sun across the sky" (Smith 2014, 66). Inspired by this memory, Francescho creates an artwork that reinterprets this scene. In what may be understood as happening concurrently, H takes George in a shopping cart, imagining that they are "chariot-driving" (Smith 2015, 265), and they perform their particular version of the Phaethon myth: "The next thing George knows is the way she's forced backwards by a forward shove so strong that for a moment it's like she's going in two directions at once" (Smith 2015, 267). Contrary to George's previous arguments against simultaneity, when she is with H, she frequently shifts between past and present, creating a narrative superimposed by multiple stories and time frames.

The potential possibility of George's engagement with asynchronicity may be worked out more thoroughly when she and H join to do a school project. Following a brainstorming session, they decide to focus on the enigmatic figure of Francescho del Cossa for their assignment on empathy. Despite H's discovery that "[...] very little is known about him" (Smith 2014, 314), they contemplate the idea of illuminating Francescho's life through a careful study of their artworks. H and George are particularly captivated by three unknown paintings characterized by double meanings and subtle queer symbols: "It can just be rocks and landscape if that's what you want it to be – but there's always more to see if you look" (Smith 2014, 321). As George develops her interpretations of Francescho's paintings, the painter begins to embody a role that resonates with Elizabeth Freeman's concept of temporal drag. Freeman defines temporal drag as "the pull of the past on the present" through elements/acts/individuals that have been overlooked in forward-thinking (Freeman 2010, 62). By dissecting gaps and inaccuracies in Francescho's artworks, George attains self-determination and turns the temporal drag figure of Francescho into a "point of retrospective identification" (Freeman 2010, 67):

> Now when she comes into Room 55, it's weird, but it's like she is meeting an old friend, albeit one who won't look her in the eye because the saint is always looking off to the side. But that's good too. It's good, to be seen past, as if you're not the only one, as if everything isn't happening just to you. Because you're not. And it isn't (Smith 2014, 335).

This quote, which describes George's interpretation of Francescho del Cossa's St Vicent of Ferrer, reveals a complete rupture of sequential time. George realizes that she cannot deny the pulling presence of the past, as she identifies herself in this Renaissance painting. In other words, George inevitably recognizes her gender-non-conforming identity by identifying with the figures depicted in Francescho's frescoes. Therefore, George's cross-temporal identification affiliates her identity and that of Francescho across time (Freeman 2022).

According to Irmtraud Huber, this section's employment of entangled temporalities tries to depict that "events and narratives can be past and present and even future all at the same time" (2016, 99). As previously noted, "Camera" shows how linearity can be interrupted through George's iterations of Francescho's queer past. After George embraces queer asynchronicity, however, the narrative mode changes to illuminate how the future can also suspend the present. This idea is represented when H moves to Denmark because of her father's job, and they have to maintain contact through text messages. Instead of keeping a usual teenage conversation, H sends George facts about Francescho del Cossa. Although George does not reply to H for days, H continues to reach out with texts in Latin and songs that make George realize that "H is trying to find a language that will make personal sense to George's ears" (Smith 2014, 346). Suddenly, there is a narrative shift from analepsis to

prolepsis, as verbs are conjugated in the future tense when George realizes that there is more than friendship between them: "halfway through writing this e-mail George noticed that she'd used, in its first sentence, the future tense, like there might be such a thing as a future" (Smith 2014, 350). In this respect, George's subtle queer self--identification allows her to envision a future that ruptures traditional narrative structures, revealing new narrative modes for storytelling.

When George visits the National Gallery in London near the end of the narrative, prolepses become even more evident. Suddenly, the narrator switches from using the present tense through a prolepsis to foreshadow George's near future before returning quickly to the present tense when George is seated in front of Francescho's portrait. This interruption resonates with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's notion of "the queer moment." Unlike other queer scholars such as Dinshaw, Freccero, and Freeman, who investigate the potentialities of the past in the present, Sedgwick's queer moment extends into the future, for it is "continuing" and "extinguishable" (Sedgwick 1993, xii). Although Sedgwick uses queer moments to define disruptions in heteronormative developmental stages, Barber and Clark argue that these moments also illustrate how the present tense can be projected into an unknown future, creating a sense of continuity (2002, 19). Barber and Clark's interpretation of the "queer moment" clarifies the narrator's sudden shift to the future tense, announcing George's upcoming experience: George will see Lisa Goliard, her mother's former lover, standing in front of Del Cossa's paintings in the National Gallery, George will follow her, and although "she will have no idea what to do next or even where she is in London anymore" every time she will come back to London, she will take pictures "in honour of her mother's eyes [...]" (Smith 2014, 360-361). However, nothing of the above has yet transpired: "For now, in the present tense, George sits in the gallery and looks at one of the old paintings on the wall. It's definitely something to do. For the foreseeable" (Smith 2014, 362). This open ending presents quite a strange temporality in which the dichotomy of present/future is dissolved for a moment, manifesting George's belief in an ambiguous queer future.

Conclusion

As this article has shown, Ali Smith's *How to be Both* holds significant potential to contest traditional notions of linear time. Significantly, the novel engages with the "turn towards time" (Freeman 2010, 117) prompted by the field of queer temporalities. Through the novel's reversed halves, Ali Smith interweaves two queer narratives that disrupt the conventions of heteronormative time and favor the potentialities of alternative time frames. In "Eyes," Smith depicts the workings of chrononormativity during the Renaissance period, where individuals were expected to adhere to a predetermined forward-moving trajectory. This societal expectation is exemplified in the character of Francescho who is born female but must cross-dress themselves

as male to fit into the constraints of straight time. However, Francescho's acceptance of their fluid identity indicates a potential reclamation of queer time in the novel. This lack of temporal conformity still gives Francescho a sense of agency on a social level. Smith's celebration of out-of-synch existence is also evident in Del Cossa's artworks, as they trace the existence of queer identities back to the 15th century by challenging hegemonic depictions of gender in their myths. In the other half of the novel, "Camera", Smith explores queer relational possibilities through time. George's mother's creation of a queer asynchronicity connects the protagonist's timeline with that of Del Cossa. This manipulation of linear narratives foregrounds two implications. Firstly, it brings to the fore how the figure of the temporal drag can be deployed in the present to foster a sense of queer identification. By carefully dissecting the multiple layers of meaning within Francescho's paintings, George constructs a new interpretation of her identity. Secondly, and more importantly, it evinces that looking backwards also holds the possibility of a queer future. In this sense, due to the complication of linear time at many levels, *How to be Both* can be read as a text that creates a queer configuration of time, one that responds to queer temporalities' invitation to rethink time constructions in less restrictive and more liberating ways.

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