Whose Time is it, Anyway?  An Analysis and Synthesis of ‘Women’s Time’ and Reproductive Futurism

In this project, I evaluate and combine two competing conceptions of time: Julia Kristeva’s women’s time which is circular and Lee Edelman’s description of reproductive futurism, which is linear, and which he rejects in favor of queer opposition. Although Kristeva sets up women’s time as outside phallocentric teleology, its cyclical nature leads to a repetition of cultural norms which results in the perpetuation of heteronormativity, which is a metaphorical extension of Edelman’s theory of reproductive futurism. Jeanette Winterson’s Sexing the Cherry provides excellent examples of these contradictory themes, and helps contrast each of these theories with queer time as defined by Judith Halberstam. I propose a new hybrid of cyclical and linear temporalities by forming a theory of social reproductive futurism using Winterson to describe the intersections of these theories and to illustrate how they work in literature.

I. Postmodern Time: Squiggles and Lines

For hundreds of years, literary temporalities have gone largely unexamined: Aristotle’s established Unity of Time hovers in the background of most writing, and although not often limited to 24 hours, plays, poems, and most novels progress through linear time. Certainly, some authors experimented with things like temporally distant frame stories, long lapses in time, and flashback, but these techniques can ultimately be lined up neatly in order of time. It has only been recently, in the postmodern age, that authors have taken real liberties with linear time and new theories of temporality and history-making have sprung up. Deconstructionism provided the tools and the urge to evaluate past, present, and future, and modernity, with its emphasis on the individual and subjective experience, validates many conflicting theories.
Postmodernism is characterized by an acute awareness of structures and operations, and then, usually, a rejection of those structures or a revelation of those structures which are generally meant to be invisible. In literature, this often leads to the breaking down of the ‘fourth wall’ or metafiction, which serves to reiterate postmodernism’s emphasis on individual experience and interpretation. By drawing a reader’s attention to the machinations underlying a novel, for example, the postmodern author allows the reader to experience the novel in a new and more aware way: the reader may read the novel for plot and narrative as traditionally done, but the reader may also read the novel knowing about and searching for the underlying literary structures present. In a way, then, this attention drawn to the fourth wall actually reinforces the constructed and contrived nature of fiction and so the fourth wall merely becomes visible, but still stands. Metafictional awareness also applies to new uses and constructions of temporal realities. Time, in other words, becomes a focal point and a space for experimentation in sight of the reader.

Joseph Francese posits that temporal reconstruction is based on twentieth century advances, which, partnered with the rise of deconstructionism, has led to new lived experience of time reflected in literary depictions and explorations of time. He points out that assembly lines and information technology have led to an instant-gratification obsession which condenses time into only the present moment. Traditional pasts and slowly approaching futures are forgotten, leading to a period in which “the loss of temporal bearings supervenes the individual who is now made to live more intensively in the present: the present is all there is” (Francese 3). He goes on to explain the ramifications of the perpetual present, saying that the “loss of a sense of living and participating in a historical continuity” and the “collapse of future expectations” leads to the focus on the present which leaves the moment hollowed out in a Derridean sense (Francese 3).
Inherent in this past-less and future-less experience of time is a sense of disorientation and unfixedness. Such an extreme focus on the individual and subjectivity leads to disturbingly nihilistic selfishness; because society and cultural structures are a necessary part of the human existence I believe a new and re-unified understanding of time and social structure is necessary.

Francese sums up many theorists’ projects when he describes the impetus for his own work: “The reciprocal effects of the grand social, economic, and intellectual forces on a historically conditioned individual can and must be measured” (9). So, instead of lamenting the unhinged postmodern condition as infinitely multiplicitous and therefore impossible to define, a variety of theories spring up to re-connect the self to the world and the individual life to past and present. For the current project, I focus on several competing conceptions of time: Julia Kristeva’s women’s time which is circular, and Lee Edelman’s description of reproductive futurism, which is linear, and which he rejects in favor of queer opposition. Additionally, Judith Halberstam’s queer time helps draw out the focus on the perpetual present in opposition to either women’s time or futurism. I propose a new hybrid of cyclical and linear temporalities by forming a theory of social reproductive futurism using Jeanette Winterson’s Sexing the Cherry to describe the intersections of these theories and to illustrate how they work in literature.

II. Kristeva: “Women’s Time” and the Body

The rise of Modernism and Postmodernism coincide with the spread and development of the feminist movement in the twentieth century. It is no surprise, then, that part of the feminist concern is not only related to trends of discourse in general (i.e. women ‘finding a voice’) but also with particular issues taken up by the two cultural movements. In her article “Women’s
Time.” Kristeva responds to the postmodern question of temporality and history-writing through the lens of her own well-developed feminist theories.

Kristeva begins her discussion by describing a climate which allowed a single “symbolic denominator” to begin operating: a post-Marxist world where “economic homogeneity gave way to interdependence […] while historical tradition and linguistic unity were recast as a broader and deeper determinant” (188 emphasis original). Industrialization and globalization led to generalizing and homogenizing which made it increasingly important to focus on the individual’s role in society, since cultural trends were already identifying what individuals had in common. In this new conception of commonality, ‘determinant’ or ‘symbolic denominator’ relies on cultural (group) memory and especially centers around “reproduction, survival of the species, life and death, the body, sex and symbol” rather than production of material commodities (189 emphasis original). The broad application and implementation of this shift from material production to biological and cultural reproduction ensures that it is a common denominator as well as a symbolic one. This universality leads to what Kristeva describes as a “double problematic”: that identity is created and compiled based on memory and “historical sedimentation,” and is thus subjective and individual, and yet there is also a lack of identity as related to the grander scheme of universal time. The first, small scale temporal theory is our general conception of linear time (Kristeva also uses Nietzsche’s term *cursive time*) and for the grander “anthropological” time scheme Kristeva borrows Nietzsche’s term *monumental time* (189). I find that each of these schemas has its issues: cursive time without monumental time is necessarily limited to a short span and subjective interpretation. But it is equally problematic to consider monumental time without including cursive time: monumental time cannot have any content without individual incident.
Returning to Kristeva’s mathematical metaphor, we are found with multiple conceptions of fractional time. Kristeva’s description of the common symbolic denominator stands; it is a cultural representation of norms held up by the greater community. However, despite her focus on the theme, she does not address that the fraction requires a numerator as well: the particular, the individual, the subjective. To use a numerical example, let us say that the cultural norm is 10, but an individual performs a 4. The result is the fraction 4/10. In cursive time, this fraction is visible in its parts: we can see or remember the 4, and we can acknowledge the 10 as ‘normal’. However, the fraction also reduces to 2/5, which may be its connection to monumental time: a pattern to which many other particular narratives reduce. In the mathematics of temporal conceptions, I believe prime numbers become the Barthesian mythologies which span monumental time and are merely completed, mad-lib style, by our short and individual cursive times. Kristeva’s main aim, however, is not to debate either linear time or monumental time: rather, she seems to be searching for a denominator other than this common symbolic ‘10’.

More specifically, Kristeva sets out to define a way groups (especially and specifically women) who operate “diagonal to” the dominant, hegemonic cultural denominator fit into these temporal conceptions (190, emphasis mine).

Kristeva argues quite clearly that “women’s time” is repetitive, cyclical, and eternal (191). Rather than phallocentric linear cursive time, women’s time is infinite and rhythmic (191). Because of her emphasis on the nature of women’s time, Kristeva acknowledges its ties to monumental time. But monumental time is still grounded in the common symbolic denominator and myth of hegemony; women’s time, on the other hand, is grounded in the body. This allows Kristeva’s conception of the large-scale time implied by women’s time to apply to individuals as well as operate in infinity, because women’s bodies are a marker both as particulars and as
metonym. Indeed, Kristeva’s explanation of the female body as a new denominator indicates individuals made universal: she uses the Virgin Mary to demonstrate the universal concept of the “myth of resurrection which, in all religious beliefs, perpetuates the vestige of an anterior or concomitant maternal cult” (191). She explains that this example of a woman’s body is a signifier: the body is a site of reproduction (motherhood) and does not die. The resulting sign is of the embodied women’s time, linked to memory and individual, but also eternal and infinite.

The issue with this is, of course, the culturally established common symbolic denominator Kristeva acknowledges from the beginning. This ‘diagonal’ temporal theory must be diagonal in relation to something and so women’s time depends on phallocentric time to define itself. However, since the symbolic denominator is culturally defined, Kristeva also points out that cyclical time is hegemonic in certain societies. Additionally, “the fact that certain currents of modern feminism recognize themselves here [in women’s time] does not render them fundamentally incompatible with ‘masculine’ values” (192). Here, mathematics becomes important again: we must remember that Kristeva is not arguing for a parallel conception of time (which would never intersect with linear time, like second generation feminism which argues for a female discourse outside phallocentric discourse) nor is she arguing for a perpendicular time (which would be in direct opposition to linear time, like queer theories discussed below which necessarily oppose heteronormativity); instead, she is arguing for a diagonal women’s time: a time which intersects and moves toward and away from masculine time. Additionally, a pivotal part of women’s time is embodiment in the physical realities of women, thus linear time and
women’s time inhabit the same physical space and must be capable of interacting to some degree for the conception of women’s time to be feasible.¹

This sense of inclusion is pivotal to the greater trends of feminism and gender and sexuality movements, and Kristeva’s larger concerns as well. She says, “the struggle is no longer concerned with the quest for equality, but, rather, with difference and specificity” (196). Instead of creating a new symbolic denominator, Kristeva is arguing for the inclusion of many different denominators. Rather than merely responding to the symbolic dominance of heteronormativity, Kristeva suggests that we undo the phallogocentric symbolic order and re-define relationships “situated on the terrain of the inseparable conjunction of the sexual and the symbolic” (196). This would place new emphasis on women as generators of power through language, reproduction, and socially constructed meaning.

To approach from a different angle, Kristeva’s discussions of Lacanian ‘name of the father’ serves to lament that women are largely left out of consideration of the symbolic order and, in fact, are unwilling sacrifices to it. She says, “it is difficult to evaluate what in the relationship of women to the symbolic as it reveals itself now arises from a socio-historical conjuncture (patriarchal ideology, whether Christian, humanist, socialist or so forth), and what arises from a structure” (199). With these structures already in place, women are trying to own the system in order to subvert it (which merely reverses the binary leaving the structure intact as discussed below) or women are trying to understand the system and approach it as an individual (which Kristeva favors).

¹ This willingness to interact with hegemony is characteristic of what Kristeva describes as the third generation of feminism, which will be used throughout as the assumed model.
My issue with Kristeva’s women’s time, this focus on the individual, and sex as a transcendental signifier is that the schema still uses heteronormative structures. Although Kristeva preaches an inclusive and multiplicitous denominator, hierarchies will always exist where there is difference; if we define power by an individual’s impact on the symbolic order and culture, the patriarchy will continue to hold top ranks. The contrasting outcome still leaves us with an unchanged world structure: if matriarchy and cyclical time would become the dominant paradigm, it would be a mere reversal of a problematic binary opposition. Although she attempts to correct for these issues by placing the emphasis on the individual, so far Kristeva is moving the signifier but not changing the myth.

The only salvation I see in women’s time is Kristeva’s solution to Lacan’s great search for the Ideal Ich: the figure of the mother. Motherhood undoes the separation of the self from the world, and pregnancy’s “splitting of the subject” which allows for a “separation and coexistence of the self and of an other” trumps the father’s nom and non, both of which are alienating (206). Now here is something myth-busting. Kristeva’s embodied women’s time, based on maternity, undoes the signifying order in that the figure of the mother is a sort of natural being which coexists with a linguistic being. Kelly Oliver describes this as “maternity call[ing] into question the boundary between culture and nature” (100). Thus, her cycles (menstrual, gestational, etc.) echo the connection to a pre-linguistic, infinite world, and her time is marked by individual experiences within the eternal. This works hand-in-hand with her feminist agenda; as Ewa Ziarek says, Kristeva’s mother figure transcendental signifier “opens a specifically feminine point of resistance to the phallocentric models of culture” (91).

Kristeva’s conception of motherhood falls outside the normal realm of the established cultural norms of heteronormativity. It privileges the embodied female figure instead of the
historically-situated male, and rather than a progress-focused teleology, Kristeva proposes a cyclical time. Instead of focusing on the movements of the whole, she argues that we must remember individuals; we must resist homogenizing and recognize the value in subjectivity. Each of these aspects of Kristeva’s feminism sits outside the dominant paradigm, and so these conceptions of value are queer. As Carla Freccero reminds us, anything that puts pressure on cultural norms, the in-betweens, the along-sides, and the subversions—these are all queer. She says ‘queer’ is “ungrounded” and “immaterial” and, in a way, indefinable (13). These tensions in the liminal spaces help bring each side into focus. Kristeva nods toward the necessity of operating outside dominant culture when she says that for any change, any progress for the feminist agenda to be made, a “counter-society” must exist (202). This counter-society is the pressure against heteronormativity; it is outside and queer. Edelman also encourages counter-societal queer pressure, but situates the pressure as opposing a specific myth, the myth of the child.

III. Edelman: The Future is Babies or Queers

While Kristeva opposes the general myth of patriarchal teleology, Edelman describes heteronormativity in terms of biological reproduction which he rejects in favor of queer opposition. Indeed, Kristeva’s privileged motherhood even falls into this category and is rejected by Edelman. “Reproductive futurism” is the norm which saturates all other political (and so, cultural) activities, in Edelman’s formulation; it enforces “the absolute privilege of heteronormativity” and is the “organizing principle of communal relations” (2). Michael Warner agrees, saying, “the family form has functioned as a mediator and metaphor of national existence” and is well-established as the cultural norm (189). Although I agree that
heteronormativity and homogeneity are problematic, “communal relations” are a necessary part of society and the “organizing principle” of forward-looking futurism is an effective mode of lived experience. Edelman seems overly hasty to get rid of unifying structures which facilitate most human experience.

This conservative (‘affirming’, ‘authenticating’) practice of reproductive futurism is inherently linear and phallocentric, so we can understand why Edelman would oppose it: his formulation of futurism allows for very little progress (Edelman 3). The Child operates as a transcendental signifier; it indicates truth and a connection between the real and language in a similar way to Kristeva’s motherhood. It also operates as the common symbolic denominator, the thing that everyone agrees on and society revolves around: Warner says that the heteronormative focus on parenting “guarantees the monocultural nation” (Warner 189). “The Child,” Edelman says, “[is] the preeminent emblem of the motivating end, though one endlessly postponed, of every political vision as a vision of futurity” (13, emphasis original). Thus, the figure of the child is inherently not past nor present, but only in the future, and so the child stands in for a conception of time which is teleological and always forward-looking.

The Child synecdoche operates for heteronormativity in both the short-term and long-term future. Heterosexuality is implicit, but so is marriage, homeownership, economic stability, and so on. Judith Halberstam defines “repro-time” as a set of “strict bourgeois rules of respectability” and “natural and desirable” and, like Edelman, Halberstam rejects these concepts in favor of the queer (5). Politically, though, “repro-tine” or reproductive futurism rationalizes and normalizes almost any policy as ‘for the children’, which is to say, to improve the general conditions of the future ‘the children’ will be living in: “the time of inheritance” (Halberstam 5). The emphasis on perpetual forward motion in time is thus inseparable from heteronormativity,
which is patriarchal. This line of thought helps specify why futurism is inherently phallocentric just as Kristeva’s embodied femininity helps determine cyclical time as belonging to women.

Kristeva proposes motherhood as allowing escape from heteronormativity and suggests queer subversions in the form of counter-society movements like feminism. Edelman also rejects heteronormativity, and says we should throw all the babies out with all the bathwater: he says that a queer response to such a manipulative, political ‘reality’ of the child is the only logical (or really, illogical) option. This queer response essentially negates or rejects the value system inherent in the child and reproductive futurism. Edelman does not mince words: Impossibly, against all reason, my project stakes its claim to the very space that “politics” makes unthinkable: the space outside the framework within which politics as we know it appears and so outside the conflict of visions that share as their presupposition that the body politic must survive. […] Queerness names the side of those not “fighting for the children.” […] It is] the place of the social order’s death drive. (3)

The child, and thus reproductive futurism, has become a myth so normalized that to question their value is “impossible,” unreasonable, “unthinkable,” and outside, but Edelman recognizes the value in the line of question. Because any resistance to the child is essentially resistance to a cultural reproduction and perpetuation, this queer opposition is the death drive which strives for Lacanian reunion with the real via extinction.

Certainly, Edelman recognizes the limitations of this queer which “promises, in more than one sense of the phrase, absolutely nothing” (5). But he says that the value lies in the challenge of the social norms established by and in reproductive futurism, and indeed, the challenge of having social norms at all (6). This is valuable, according to Edelman, because it reveals the false Ideal-Ich that culture attempts to create: the fantasy is that ‘lived history’ creates
a sense of unity between subjects—indicating, perhaps, the misrecognition of the common
symbolic denominator as a unifying force rather than a coincidental shared ideology. Queer
opposition to this misrecognition brings us awareness of the fantasy, but Edelman insists that this
awareness will drive us to “a will to undo” the fantasy and “begin again ex nihilo” (9). His
phrasing here betrays what he denies earlier, however—to “begin again” implies a certain
futurism.

Edelman’s aim to deconstruct social signs via queer opposition and then “begin again”
implies both teleology (“begin” implies an end goal) and reproduction (“again” implies
repetition). This is a similar impulse to the one he identifies as motivating and perpetuating the
myth of the child: it is a projection of perfection onto the future of a fantasy past of “Imaginary
wholeness” (10). Edelman falls prey to his own reproductive futurism, including himself in
“we”: “we are no more able to conceive of a politics without fantasy of the future than we are
able to conceive of a future without the figure of the child” (11). Even the queer cannot help but
“conceive.” Edelman throws around phrases like “conceive,” “marriage of identity to futurity,”
and “each moment [is] pregnant with the Child of our Imaginary identifications” to reinforce
how truly normalized reproductive futurism is (11, 14-15, emphasis mine).

By evaluating the language surrounding the debate, I identify what Edelman means when
he discusses sexuality: “sexual practice will continue to allegorize the vicissitudes of meaning so
long as the specifically heterosexual alibi of reproductive necessity obscures the drive beyond
meaning driving the machinery of sexual meaningfulness” (13). Although the meaning of
‘queer’ has evolved to indicate more than just homosexuality, the linguistic connections are
worth mentioning in this context. These ties between sexual reproduction and heteronormativity
help define what queer opposes and how queer subversion can operate. The binary is challenged
when Edelman discusses homosexuals as queer and yet some also desire to participate in heteronormative sacraments like marriage and raising children, which would make them “comrades in reproductive futurism” (19). Although this combination of ideologies seems difficult to grasp, this is precisely the reason Freccero’s (re-)definition of queer is helpful. Edelman also identifies the queer as more than just non-normative sexuality, echoing Freccero’s theory that the queer is merely outside or ‘other’. Edelman’s queer operates in opposition to futurism and the image of the child.

IV. The Hybrid: Social Reproductive Futurism

Kristeva’s problem is that, in fighting with the singular, homogenizing myth of culture, she instead substitutes a reproductive practice which reiterates that culture with each new birth. Although she briefly discusses counter-societies, she does not trace the eventualities of her theory: that biological reproduction yields cultural reproduction (through indoctrination by hegemony). Additionally, her emphasis on motherhood is problematic in two ways: first, that it is exclusionary (no non-mothers allowed) and second that it falls victim to the very generalizing she is so adamantly against—the theory very much makes it seem like mothers are all interchangeable and similar. Ziarek points out this same issue, saying, “any attempt to transform the maternal body into a coherent signifying position is a fraud, precisely because it is a heterogeneous site” (99). By identifying motherhood as the transcendental signifier, Kristeva unifies and generalizes an experience she herself characterizes as multiplicitous in that it is symbolic and real. Additionally, this characterization of motherhood is complicated by the (literal or metaphorical) end of pregnancy and the birth of the child, which is similar to a
repetition of the separation and alienation which occur during the initial shift to a signifying consciousness (Ziarek 103).

Edelman, likewise, has some irreconcilable contradictions in his theory. If, as he says, queer counter-society is the solution to hegemony, he will always lose. Queer is necessarily not dominant culture. If dominant culture requires a queer to subvert it, then queer likewise requires a dominant culture to resist: “queerness attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it accedes to that place [of social order’s death drive], accepting its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure” (Edelman 3). Edelman recognizes this conundrum as a strength of the queer, but it does undermine its ability to enact change in its purest form of opposition. He says that we can embrace the queer, but “not in the hope of forging thereby some more perfect social order—such a hope, after all, would only reproduce the constraining mandate of futurism” despite the conversation above about ‘beginning again’ (4). This conundrum makes us wonder what the application of the queer could be; to be contrarian just for the sake of providing some ethical resistance to hegemony (but with no intention of enacting change) seems a bit masturbatory, in the sense that it is not productive and in the sense that it is only an exercise in self-satisfaction. Queer resistance, then, can only be meaningful if it does have an impact.

I propose, counter to Edelman, that reproductive futurism is necessary for a culture to function, but, counter to Kristeva, that we must generalize it to the big picture. However, each theorist’s conceptions of resistance are also necessary to generate progress and change, so that although culture is maintained and moves in cycles, it also shows progress over the long term, making monumental time teleological. My theory, social reproductive futurism, attempts to
account for the role of the individual but also situates the subjective experience within the wider social world of cultural movements.

The necessity of futurism is perhaps my most shocking claim in this postmodern moment, but to create a system which can unify multiple theories it is necessary. I propose a system which encompasses all time and grafts past to future at the seam of the present—perhaps the seam is unstable, like the Derridean hollowed-out present, but it is experienced as ‘real’. If, as Kristeva argues, we must consider the individual and lived experience, we cannot deny the future because we must admit the present and have memory of the past. Thus, the entirety of the temporal continuity exists in harmony. As in her considerations of feminism and motherhood, though, I believe Kristeva would be concerned with the discourse surrounding temporal elements even more than the past, present, and future themselves. This may be what Edelman is getting at, too: that to place any special emphasis on any part is to neglect experiences based in other parts. Futurism, then, is dangerous in that it does leave a hollowed-out present because energy is applied to constant forward movement. Focus on the past and present are equally troublesome, though, as they do not provide for perpetuation of species or culture. This conundrum is why I believe in the importance of past, present, and future as subjective and individual, but that they are united in larger contexts of cultural tradition, experience, and reproduction, and that these larger trends build up to monumental time.

Including the theory of futurism means I must establish how it is constructed and its ramifications. Since the dominant cultural mode is patriarchal, men do much of the reproducing of culture so as to maintain their own power. This is what Kristeva is putting pressure on: if men are generally considered ‘fathers’ of culture, then “she encourages women to take up their rightful places within the Symbolic order” (Oliver 103). This is why Kristeva emphasizes the
concept of motherhood: a metaphorical matriarchy allows anyone to reproduce cultural norms. Thus, as Oliver points out, “the maternal operates as a *function* that, in principle, can be performed by both men and women” (105, emphasis original). To extend this line of reasoning, Kristeva seems to be saying that anyone can transcend the signifying order by reproducing culture. In its most simple, direct, and cyclical way, this reproduction would lead to mere duplication of cultural norms, thus defeating the progressive aims of feminism.

As Warner points out, however, “hegemonies are nothing if not elastic alliances,” and so there is always room for change (193). Because social reproductive futurism is on the large-scale cultural level, it generalizes individual contributions as related to overarching cultural movements related to the economy, forms of political power, hierarchical structures (such as patriarchy), religion, etc. Thus, the set of characteristics which make up a culture are building blocks which can (and are) occasionally replaced by different elements. For example, in the early ages of man, in many cultures matriarchy was replaced by patriarchy. Later, in the Classical age, polytheism was replaced by monotheism, and so on. This ‘building block’ feature is the main feature of the system: individuals and their lived experiences make up cultural groups (Warnerian publics and countercultures) which interact and change over time. The interaction of the different parts is the social nature of the system: social alliances build cultural movements. Social reproductive futurism thus allows for particular cultural shifts while repeating other cultural norms.

Because of this ability to change, opposition to heteronormativity is necessary as both Kristeva and Edelman (and many others) argue. As Ziarek identifies, “Kristeva is concerned with the forms of otherness and multiplicity excluded by unifying orders of discourse” (93). Any new theory should indeed take into account Warnerian countercultures and individual resistance;
The ability for the individual or counter-societal group to enact change makes social reproductive futurism much more optimistic than Edelman, and it aligns them with Kristeva’s overarching project of preventing homogeneity. Indeed, both Edelman and Kristeva seem to be getting at the issue of discourse and not only the way we perceive cultural construction and identity, but also the way we react to it. What comes to the forefront is not the work that Kristeva’s theory can do in this case, but rather the fact that the “task of unraveling patriarchal history [and] our ways of thinking about feminism are already over-determined; that they are based—sometimes consciously, more often unconsciously—on systems of inherited thought” (Jardine 8). Elaine Showalter agrees, saying that attempting to work within or around normal discourses “squeeze[s] feminist criticism into an androcentric frame, distorting and devaluing its meaning” (31). These systems are what Kristeva wants to question with her maternal signifier, and what Edelman seems to want to operate outside of with the queer. Because of the building block structure of social reproductive futurism, discourses have the potential to adapt.

The pressures to change even the dominant discourse mean any temporal theory must accommodate maintenance of the status quo and shifts both radical and gradual. So, monumental time is linear and forward-reaching overall, but, just as Kristeva urges, we must acknowledge the individual forces working for change within the larger schema. Thus, social reproductive futurism allows for a cyclical pattern of perpetuation of culture while remaining flexible enough to accommodate change and adaptation to facilitate forward movement. To use Kristeva’s phrase again, the common symbolic denominator is not the mother or the child, rather it is an Althusserian participation in culture or counter-culture. This restricts the use of “queer” to mean against or outside normal rather than against or outside the whole system, as the system is universal and infinite.
How does this apply to the signifying order? Because of our use of signs, we are alienated from experiencing the world directly, thus we participate in culture via language and language shapes our understanding and our roles in culture and cultural reproduction. Social reproductive futurism does not propose a new transcendental signifier to replace the mother or the child; it reaffirms semiotic denial of the transcendental and asserts that everything is constructed and cultural (language), however, the theory also emphasizes the importance of the individual or subjective in the greater scope of society (speech acts). Thus, the converse could also be said of social reproductive futurism: because there are no transcendental truths, all cultural and subjective truths are real to those who experience them.

With my emphasis on the future development of culture and its cyclical relationship with the past, one may ask what has happened to the postmodern focus on the perpetual present. As briefly explained above, social reproductive futurism includes within it the ability to acknowledge—indeed, the *impulse* to acknowledge the junction of the past and future, which is specifically the space of the present. The theory involves a looking back and a looking forward, but thereby also inherently includes the location of the looker as the present moment. Additionally, the flexibility of cultural heterogeneous composition (a generalization of many individuals) necessarily includes queer experiences including what Halberstam calls ‘queer time’ or the perpetual present focus.

Halberstam’s queer time, which he defines as “a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance,” delineates a sub-set of society which can help us understand different experiences which accumulate to define the macrocosmic shifts visible in social reproductive futurism (3). Looking at perpetual moments as resistance to
futurism is, in a way, what shows us the limits and uses of futurism itself: the two define each other by contrast. Queer time opposes social reproductive futurism in two important ways: its denial of the past means cyclical time cannot function, and its refusal of the future aborts reproduction. Social reproductive futurism includes both past and present, while queer time denies both.

However, queer time allows us to examine the impact of those individuals who live queer lifestyles according to the perpetual present, who are often also subverting dominant culture in other ways. Halberstam explains that queer is “not only about compression and annihilation; it is also about the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing” (2). Warner defines this cultural subset in similar terms: “making a queer world has required the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation” (197). These participants in queer time are often not heterosexual, work odd hours, live in liminal spaces, etc.: Halberstam describes queer lifestyles as “willfully eccentric modes of being” but specifies that “oppositional cultures […] are not symmetrical to the authority they oppose” (1, 13). Thus, queer time gives us access to a counter-culture which could impact the configuration of larger cultural transitions within the cycles of reproduced society. Likewise, Kristeva’s theory of women’s time allows us access to a particular conception of time and experience related to another counter-culture: feminism.

Evaluating and including counter-cultures in our consideration of time and the postmodern condition are important: “the relations between sexuality and time and space provide immense insight into the flows of power and subversion within postmodernism” (Halberstam 13). Neither queer time nor women’s time, nor even basic (heterosexual) reproductive futurism
can explain the complexity of the modern experience. This is precisely why social reproductive futurism views larger trends and follows a general cultural progression, but still acknowledges the roles of individuals in facilitating that progression. We can thus trace the perpetuation of a cultural mode (reproduction) on the larger scale of social ideology while including individual participation and/or subversion.

V. Timing the Cherry: Winterson’s Application

*Sexing the Cherry* is at times a romance and at times a bildungsroman, at times a travelogue and at times it defies definition. It seems, though, that the novel is less about its plot and more concerned with the way the plot is delivered: *Sexing the Cherry* experiments with temporalities in a way that precisely fits within the postmodern schema. Winterson experiments with many aspects of narration and reading experience. Given the definitions posed above, I conclude that the structure of *Sexing the Cherry* is women’s time, the overarching progression is reproductive futurism, and the reading experience of the audience is queer. Additionally, there are particular passages within the text which indicate Winterson’s own theories on time and temporality. Some of her characters and episodes indicate Winterson’s conceptions of historiography, such as the Twelve Dancing Princesses, and some serve as metafictional commentary on literature’s place within temporal constructs. Finally, a key element of

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2 As E.M. Forster says in “Pattern and Rhythm,” the pattern must suit the content, and the overall rhythm is what creates the ‘symphony’ of general impression. Winterson’s structure of ungrounded temporality succeeds admirably in this conception of narrative.
Winterson’s text is the jump from the seventeenth century to 1990, a jump which I will use to illustrate social reproductive futurism.

Perhaps the first thing a reader notices is Winterson’s strangely disordered passages and shifting points of view. These aspects of the text show how Kristeva’s women’s time can work: the reader cycles between narrators and spaces, and travels forward and backward in time because of the un-ordered snippets of story. Jardine describes Kristeva, saying that her thoughts are a “complex stratification of predictions and echoes, progressions and regressions,” all characteristics which perfectly describe Winterson’s novel as well (5). These cycles of time are based on the movement away from and return to certain characters and tropes such as journeys, cities, fruit, and civil unrest. The emphasis on the individual experience is key for Kristeva, and the shifting narrator and unreliability of order indicate the subjectivity of events in the novel.

Certain characters identify the focus on the individual directly. For example, the ecologist goes on at length about her subjective experience of time. She says, “I have a calendar and a watch, and so rationally I can tell where I am in this thing called a year. My own experience is different. […] And so my strongest instinct is to abandon the common-sense approach and accept what is actually happening to me; that time has slowed down” (128). So-called ‘objective time’, the time of calendars and watches she names here, is culturally-established as “common-sense.” But she is compelled to differentiate her own experience as “what is actually happening,” thus implying that individual lived time is more ‘real’ than measured time. This indicates the importance of the individual within the larger scheme of society and subjective experience as meaningful.

The Twelve Dancing Princesses interlude also illustrates this emphasis on the individual and women’s time as beyond phallocentric time because the twelve stories go ‘beyond the
ending’ of the typical (heteronormative) romance plot. Traditionally, the story of the twelve sisters generalizes the princesses as interchangeable and ends with their marriages. Although their stories leave the reader with a new appreciation for their individuality, the princesses still participate in the story-telling linear temporality: their stories are queered in that they go on ‘beyond the ending’, but they do indeed have a past, present, and future. The same can be said for the story at large.

Despite its shifting progress, *Sexing the Cherry* does have a specific beginning and end, and there are certain temporal markers within the text (for example, chapters titled “1649” and “1990”) which situate the text along a greater continuum. Events like the Restoration and cultural indicators like pollution provide additional firm footing for the time of the novel. Because of these anchors in time, I argue that the novel participates in monumental time as well as women’s time. The combination of circular, individual time and large-scale forward movement is what characterizes social reproductive futurism as well.

In addition to the text’s participation in monumental time (which is linear) and women’s time (which is translatable since it operates diagonal to phallocentric time) I believe that the reading experience forces the reader to dwell in queer time as well. Winterson’s shifting narrator and unfixed order of events forces the reader to suspend building a history of each character because the reader cannot anticipate when or if a new piece of the history will be revealed. Likewise, the reader is unable to construct a future for the characters or predict the plot because the reader cannot account for which parts of the story have not happened yet in relation to the part being currently read. Jordan as narrator directly addresses this:
The scene I have just described to you [of meeting Fortunata] may lie in the future or in the past. Either I have found Fortunata or I will find her. I cannot be sure. Either I am remembering her or I am still imagining her. But she is somewhere in the grid of time, a co-ordinate, as I am. (92) Thus, for each section, the reader must stay in only and exactly the time depicted; the reader has no ability to build historiography and no ability to project futurism. This reading experience is queer time, where the focus is on the perpetual present.

Although the reader is constantly suspended, Winterson provides clues to her own theories of temporality occasionally throughout the text. Some of it supports queer time; Jordan says, “time has no meaning, space and place have no meaning, on this journey. All times can be inhabited, all places visited. In a single day the mind can make a millpond of the oceans” but, in the same monologue, Jordan narrates a support for women’s time as well: “The journey is not linear, it is always back and forth, denying the calendar, the wrinkles and lines of the body” (76). So, although time is condensed into the present of a “single day,” time is also “not linear” and embodied in “wrinkles and lines” just as feminists would have it.

Just after these lines narrated by Jordan, a nameless narrator outlines “The Flat Earth Theory” which describes maps as increasingly detailed but also increasingly personally meaningless. This section urges individual discovery and experience. I mention it because another of Winterson’s direct addresses of temporal theory is written in a similar style with an unnamed narrator and begins, “My experience of time is mostly like my experience with maps. Flat, moving in a more or less straight line from one point to another” (87). But this section goes on to complicate the idea in much the same way as the maps section:

[Our] inward lives are governed by something much less regular [than the seasons or a clock]—an imaginative impulse cutting through the dictates of daily time, and leaving us free to ignore
the boundaries of here and now and pass like lightning along the coil of pure time, that is, the circle of the universe and whatever it does or does not contain. (87)

So, Winterson continues to support Kristeva’s women’s time—not only in her emphasis on the individual and experienced subjective time, but also in its circularity. The “coil of pure time” which is “the circle of the universe” indicates the same repeating mode as women’s time and stands in direct opposition to the linear ‘map time’.

Finally, at the very end of the novel, an unnamed narrator (who is perhaps Jordan, but perhaps the same nameless narrator who proposes the above temporal theories) describes a version of subjective futurism. The paragraph looks ahead to an uncertain future, with both “sadness” and then “hope,” saying, “We speak of it with longing and with love. The future. But the city is a fake. The future and the present and the past exist only in our minds, and from a distance the borders of each shrink and fade” (149, emphasis original). This final thought, the absolute last page of the book, breaks down constructed, objective time, and although it implies a futurism, it makes past, present, and future coexist in a queer moment. Winterson’s struggle to settle within one temporal theory is representative of postmodern trends, and illustrates that even the theories she includes (women’s time, queer time, subjective futurism) are not flexible enough to encompass her ideas. As I illustrate below, I believe Winterson’s overarching themes do fit social reproductive futurism.

Certain characters and plot points illustrate both Winterson’s specific temporal theories and the theories of women’s time, reproductive futurism and Edelman’s queer opposition, and my unified theory of social reproductive futurism. Women’s time, as I have argued, is present in the overall structure and emphasis on the individual. Edelman’s resistance to reproductive futurism can also be readily seen in some of the details of the text: there are no biological births
depicted in the story, there is a distinct death-drive for some of the characters, and the Dog-Woman and ecologist in particular are distinctly queer in many of the ways Edelman describes. Edelamn’s queer opposition is situated as distinctly against reproductive futurism, so birth, biological birth, is especially important. The Dog-Woman adopts Jordan. Her other “children” are dogs. The twelve dancing princesses each have a marriage which ends in divorce instead of family. Each of these plot points is queer by itself, but together they serve to magnify one another to make the novel seem even more subversive.

The titular cherry tree, for example, is not born of seed, but grafted together. In this way, it defies natural birth and is a queer representation of reproduction: “Grafting,” Jordan explains, “is the means whereby a plant, perhaps tender or uncertain, is fused into a hardier member of its strain, and so the two take advantage of each other and produce a third kind, without seed or parent” (73-4). This non-biological reproduction certainly subverts true reproductive futurism as Edelman describes it, but I doubt Edelman would be satisfied by this metaphorical birth because a “third kind” is still ‘produced’. This is also how my theory of social productive futurism works: individuals (a ‘tender plant’) join together and socially ‘produce’ culture. Hegemony, favoring biological reproductive futurism, may cry “let the world mate of its own accord […] or not at all” (as does Dog-Woman, despite her own queerness outlined below) but just like the cherry, social reproduction will occur, and it will adapt.

If the queer Edelman supports is opposition to hegemony, the feminist portrayals of Dog-Woman and the ecologist, who are mirrored images of each other, are doubly expressions of queer resistance. They seek to undo male-dominated discourse: both women also fit perfectly within Kristeva’s description of female terrorists: she says that the terrorist woman is “the inevitable product of what we have called a denial of the socio-symbolic contract and its counter-
investment as the only means of self-defense in the struggle to safeguard an identity” (203). The Dog-Woman plays a very politicized role supporting the monarchy, burning pamphlets and even killing the two protestants (one a Preacher!) who were Cromwell supporters. Similarly, the ecologist fights against large corporations, who are essentially also rulers of the world without technically holding that title. They are even emphasized as embodied female figures, both described in similar terms. The ecologist describes herself as “huge, raw, a giant,” just as the Dog-Woman continually describes herself as enormous (123).

There are also episodes which align the two women via a specific incident, both of which relate to their resistance against phallocentric hegemonic powers. The Dog-Woman returns to her house with Jordan only to find it “requisitioned […] for Jesus and Oliver Cromwell” and full of broadsheets. When Dog-Woman begins fighting Preacher Scroggs and Neighbor Firebrace (the two she later kills), one of them shoots her but she “plucked the musket ball out of [her] cleavage” (59). Supposedly because of mercury poisoning, the ecologist has a hallucination about fighting world leaders and politicians. She becomes a giant and “men shoot at [her], but [she] take[s] the bullets out of [her] cleavage” (123). Both women resist the dominant paradigm to the extent that the other main echo involves taking a man’s power via his phallus: The Dog-Woman actually does bite of a man’s penis (38), and the ecologist merely narrates her desire to do so: “I’d like to swallow you,” she says to a man, who misunderstands: “Adventurous, eh?” he replies, but she corrects his innuendo in her narration: “Whole, I meant, every single bit” (130). Both women, then, are queer subversions fighting phallocentric cultural reproduction; their feminist discourse protests patriarchal hegemony. These direct echoes between the women are one of the clearest signs of the repeated or reproduced nature of the characters.
The ecologist as an echo of the Dog-Woman is representative of the key part of Winterson’s novel which illustrates my theory of social reproductive futurism: although the focus is distinctly on individuals and particular actions, as shown above, the jump from the mid-seventeenth century to the late twentieth century allows for a broad view of how culture has changed or reproduced in three hundred years. The parallels between the two sections show us how, despite the lack of biological reproduction, society reproduces culture. The differences that are evident are highlighted by their situation immediately next to each other in the narration. That is, the structure of the novel helps delineate both perpetuation and adaptation. Because similarities between the early and late temporalities in the novel are mixed together, we as readers are extra sensitive to continuities (similarities between the cultures, like the patriarchal structure) and differences (changes that occurred over the 300 years, like the ecologist’s status as an educated working woman). These cultural changes prove the forward movement of social reproductive futurism and its participation in monumental time.

Another important parallel to identify between the two time periods is that of the male characters: Jordan is clearly Nicolas Jordan. Both Jordans are fascinated by boats and sailing, and each takes up a career related to those interests. The early Jordan is a key player in bringing a pineapple to England and the later Jordan becomes so fascinated by the story (which he sees in a painting) that he keeps a pineapple in his room until it spoils. While Jordan of the seventeenth century is restless and leaves home alone, Nicolas Jordan also seems to have antisocial tendencies; both are discontent with staying where they are, both crave the unknown and the journey.

In addition to these character traits and echoes of function or role, there are a few key passages in which Winterson indicates quite clearly that the 1990 episodes are directly related to
the seventeenth century. Indeed, these passages not only identify the connections between the two, but cause an overlap. There are two direct echo sections, one each one tying the past to the future: one puts Tradescant and Nicolas Jordan together, and the other ties the ecologist to Jordan. Each one is presented early in the text from one point of view and then again later in the text from the opposite point of view. While these different perspectives emphasize the individuals involved, the fact that they are experiencing the same cross-time echo creates a looping connection between the different time periods.

The first of these overlaps is a scene labeled “Time 1” in which Nicolas Jordan is standing on a ship with Tradescant: in the first iteration of the scene, only Tradescant is named, but in the second iteration the narrator is Nicolas and it becomes clear that he is the unnamed “young man” of the first portrayal (78, 122). The second scene comes immediately after the first iteration and is labeled “Time 2”: in this scene, an anonymous girl is being bullied (78-9). Waterloo Bridge and St. Paul’s are named as landmarks as she runs away from her tormenters, and at the end of the scene, she anticipates Jordan waiting for her at home. In the second iteration of the scene, the anonymous is again revealed, this time as the ecologist girl (130-1). From her point of view, the scene is a dream and she does not know who will be waiting for her at home, but the landmarks of Waterloo Bridge and St. Paul’s are named again. Although a direct overlap like this is no doubt a product of the magical realism Winterson is using, it is also a metaphorical depiction of the cyclical nature of reproduction: ghostly traces of the past are present in the future.

Likewise, representative reproduction is a characteristic of postmodernist literature: just as Nicolas echoes Jordan and the ecologist echoes the Dog-Woman, postmodern pastiche, parody, and adaptation all echo original texts. In Winterson, there are reproduced literary tropes
like the Blazon in the third dancing princess’s story and certain predictable plot lines like the romance or the travelogue. In each echo, though, the postmodern changes and twists the source material to suit individual needs and new modes. Thus, fairy tales like the Twelve Dancing Princesses are queered versions or updated feminist stories to suit Winterson’s need. This overarching technique of postmodern literature is yet another illustration of social reproductive futurism: it is cyclical in that it re-uses past modes and content, it is individual in that each work is particular to its author and repurposed use; each reproduction yields a perpetuation or adaptation. Overall, then, even though postmodern literature cycles back to previous material, it moves forward on the larger scale of monumental time.\(^3\)

VI. Whose Time is It?

So, whose time is it, anyway? Women? Queers? Babies? Postmodernism is at the site of a certain clash of temporalities: traditional phallocentric time and its tag-along heteronormativity are being increasingly challenged by feminism and queer theories. Francese says, “inherent in our condition of postmodernity is the proclivity to undermine modernism’s faith in a unified reality” (5). So our postmodern conceptions of time must therefore also be multiplicitous. I believe that by combining cyclical women’s time and reproductive futurism, then considering large-scale shifts in culture, we can begin to form a new conception of social reproductive time which is flexible enough to encompass many options, but still provides a

\(^3\) Indeed, we must acknowledge that even postmodernism may be on its way out, and a new literary era will soon begin—social reproduction and adaptation caused by the individual causes changes in cultural movements.
livable ‘unified reality’. This reality is made up of individuals, but focuses on big-picture cultural cycles and movements within the linear framework of monumental time.

Social reproductive futurism addresses identifiable trends of postmodernity: we are still a forward-looking society, but many counter-cultural movements have taken emphasis off biological reproduction. Instead, we focus on cultural reproduction and repetition. In postmodern literature, parody and pastiche serve as metafictional techniques which echo these larger cultural trends. Indeed, this movement can be seen across disciplines: although I have illustrated it here using literature, there is a growing pool of research that argues for the importance of memes (learned traits) instead of genes (physical traits) in the evolution of humankind. This shift is largely due to the same increase in technology and information that impacts postmodern time.

Cultural reproduction thus transplants biological reproduction as the focus of futurism: Kristeva’s mother and Edelman’s child are both replaced by cyclical repetitions of cultural norms and hegemonies. However, Kristeva’s feminism, Edelman’s queer, and Halberstam’s queer time provide necessary counter-cultural pressure which can change society and move even social reproduction forward in time. Thus, the theory is a spiral and building narrative: individuals each play a role in creating a society, which reproduces itself but has the capacity to change, and changing cultures string together to form linear monumental time. Social

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4 For more, see *The Selfish Gene* by Richard Dawkins (Oxford UP, 1976). Essentially, because of medical advances, many genes that would have caused early death and removal from the breeding pool are surviving and reproducing. Thus, evolution is increasingly based on cultural navigation and survival via the passing on of memes rather than physical passing on of genes.
reproductive futurism returns time to constructed and subjective truths which gives the individual a privileged role but also maintains the importance of generalized, shared culture.
Works Cited


