

# Polychronic Dramaturgy and the Queer Multiverse: Toward an Anti-Assimilationist Temporality in 21st-Century Playwriting

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## Abstract

This study explores how modern playwrights use polychronic dramaturgy and multiverse visuals to create queer temporalities that oppose chrononormative and homonormative progress stories. Drawing on queer temporality theory—particularly the work of José Esteban Muñoz, Jack Halberstam, Elizabeth Freeman, and Lee Edelman—alongside narratological approaches, this study employs close textual analysis to demonstrate how temporal experimentation in 21st-century playwriting serves as a form of resistance to both heteronormative and homonormative assimilation. The analysis reveals that polychronic structures dismantle chrononormativity by rejecting linear progression, creating space for queer potentiality beyond reproductive futurism, and collectively enacting what this study terms "anti-assimilationist temporality."

**Keywords:** queer temporality, polychronic dramaturgy, multiverse, anti-assimilationism, homonormativity, reproductive futurism

## Introduction

The temporal architecture of dramatic literature has long functioned as more than a structural scaffold. It also operates as an ideological framework through which normative assumptions about progress, development, and futurity are naturalised and reinforced. Classical Aristotelian unity of time, the causality of the well-made play, and even modernist experiments with fractured chronology have each inscribed particular temporal ontologies into theatrical form.

In the twenty-first century, several playwrights have begun to employ radically polychronic structures. In these works, multiple temporalities operate simultaneously rather than sequentially. Many of these plays also incorporate multiverse aesthetics. Together, these dramaturgical strategies challenge what Elizabeth Freeman terms "chrononormativity." Freeman uses this term to describe temporal regimes that organise human bodies and behaviours around productivity, heterosexual reproduction, and normative life trajectories.

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Such temporal experimentation is not merely a formal exercise. It functions as a political intervention. This is especially evident in queer dramaturgical practices that resist growing pressures toward assimilation within heteronormative social structures.

The significance of this relationship between temporal innovation and queer politics has grown in recent decades. Mainstream LGBTQ+ movements have increasingly embraced what Lisa Duggan identifies as "homonormativity." This form of politics does not challenge dominant heteronormative assumptions. Instead, it seeks inclusion within established institutions such as marriage, military service, and the nuclear family. Jack Halberstam similarly observes that queer subcultures have often operated according to different temporal frameworks. These frameworks are not organised around reproduction, child-rearing, or generational succession. When contemporary playwrights construct polychronic dramaturgies, they participate in what this study terms "anti-assimilationist temporality." This concept refers to the use of temporal form to resist incorporation into normative structures and to assert alternative modes of existence.

This study argues that twenty-first-century playwrights use polychronic dramaturgical structures and multiverse aesthetics to construct anti-assimilationist queer temporalities. These temporalities resist chrononormative frameworks and challenge reproductive futurism. They also create alternative temporal architectures that acknowledge the non-linear and non-teleological experiences often associated with queer existence. Through these formal strategies, contemporary drama contests both heteronormative and homonormative narratives of progress. The challenge is enacted not only through thematic content but through the temporal organisation of dramatic form itself.

Three questions guide this inquiry. How do polychronic dramatic structures dismantle chrononormative frameworks? In what ways do multiverse aesthetics create dramaturgical space for queer futurity beyond reproductive futurism? And how does temporal experimentation in contemporary playwriting function as a political intervention against homonormative assimilation?

## **Literature Review**

Scholarship on queer temporality has expanded significantly since the late 1990s. It has produced a substantial critical vocabulary for understanding how LGBTQ+ experiences and cultures operate through temporal logics that differ from those assumed by heteronormative frameworks. Lee Edelman's influential *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* argues that political discourse is structured around what he calls "reproductive futurism." This framework positions the figure of the Child as the central emblem of futurity. As a result, queer existence is excluded from meaningful political recognition. Edelman demonstrates how heteronormative culture demands orientation toward a future secured through reproduction. Queerness, within this temporal logic, remains structurally outside that future.

José Esteban Muñoz offers a markedly different approach in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. Rather than rejecting futurity, Muñoz locates queer politics in what he terms "concrete utopias" and the "not-yet-conscious." For him, queerness is deeply connected to futurity. However, this futurity cannot be contained within the logic of straight

time. His concept of queer utopian hermeneutics encourages readings of cultural texts that attend to unrealised possibilities and alternative social worlds. Such readings identify traces of queer potentiality that point beyond existing structures.

Jack Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* develops the concept of queer temporality by closely examining LGBTQ+ subcultures. Halberstam argues that these communities often organise time differently from reproductive heterosexuality. His work demonstrates that temporal frameworks are not merely abstract concepts. They are material forces that shape lived experience.

Elizabeth Freeman's *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* introduces the influential concept of "chrononormativity." She defines it as the use of time to organise human bodies toward maximum productivity. Freeman's analysis shows how normative temporality operates as a form of biopower. Temporal organisation, in this account, becomes a mechanism through which social norms are reproduced and enforced.

Within theatre and performance studies, scholars have frequently examined temporal experimentation. However, they have not always connected these formal innovations to queer politics. Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre* provides an influential account of contemporary performance. He identifies repetition, simultaneity, and duration as key features of postdramatic aesthetics. Yet his analysis remains primarily formalist in orientation.

Tavia Nyong'o's work brings queer theory and performance studies into closer dialogue. His scholarship demonstrates how racialised queer subjects experience time differently. In doing so, it challenges the whiteness that often remains implicit within queer temporality studies.

A clear gap emerges from this body of scholarship. Queer temporality theory offers sophisticated conceptual frameworks, while performance studies provide extensive accounts of temporal experimentation. Yet relatively little attention has been paid to the relationship between dramaturgical temporal innovation and anti-assimilationist politics. This study addresses that gap by examining temporal form as a mode of political intervention.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research draws primarily upon queer temporality theory while incorporating narratological approaches to temporal analysis and performance theory. The framework begins from the premise that time is not a neutral container within which events occur. Rather, time is socially constructed, ideologically saturated, and experienced differently across subject positions and communities.

Muñoz's concept of "queer futurity" provides a crucial theoretical anchor. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz argues that "queerness is not yet here but exists as potentiality and as a horizon of possibility that cannot be reduced to present manifestations" (Muñoz 1). This orientation toward the "not-yet-conscious" offers an alternative to straight time's reproductive futurism. It also challenges presentist political frameworks that abandon futurity altogether.

Halberstam's theorisation of "queer time" extends this discussion. He examines how LGBTQ+ lives are organised around different temporalities. These temporalities emerge from "the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child-rearing"

(Halberstam 2). Freeman's concept of "chrononormativity" provides a key analytical tool for this study. It helps explain what polychronic dramaturgy resists. Freeman defines chrononormativity as a mode of implantation through which institutional forces come to appear as somatic facts (Freeman 3). Edelman's critique of "reproductive futurism" in *No Future* remains equally important. Although differently positioned from Muñoz's utopian framework, it offers a powerful account of how heteronormative culture mobilises futurity as an ideological weapon against queer existence.

Narratological frameworks complement these queer theoretical perspectives. They provide a technical vocabulary for analysing temporal structures in dramatic texts. Gérard Genette's concepts of order, duration, and frequency enable a precise description of dramaturgical time. Particularly useful is his distinction between story time and discourse time. This distinction becomes essential when analysing polychronic structures in which multiple story times operate simultaneously.

Paul Ricoeur's work on narrative temporality offers an additional set of analytical tools. His concept of mimesis as temporal configuration helps explain how dramatic texts construct experiential time beyond chronological sequence. Taken together, these theoretical frameworks make it possible to examine how polychronic dramaturgy enacts anti-assimilationist queer politics through the organisation of dramatic time itself.

### **Dismantling Chrononormativity Through Polychronic Structure**

Contemporary playwrights employ polychronic dramaturgy to dismantle chrononormativity. Chrononormativity refers to the temporal regimes that organise bodies toward productivity, reproduction, and normative life trajectories. Unlike conventional dramatic structures, polychronic plays do not rely on linear chronology. Nor do they use flashbacks that ultimately reinforce a linear narrative. Instead, they construct temporal architectures in which multiple temporalities operate simultaneously. This structural simultaneity rejects the progressive logic of straight time. It creates dramaturgical space for experiences and forms of existence that normative temporality often renders impossible or unintelligible.

Freeman observes that institutions deploy temporal structures that appear natural. Examples include the eight-hour workday and developmental stages from childhood to adulthood. These structures organise human life toward particular social ends. Heteronormative temporality, in particular, arranges life around reproductive milestones. These include puberty, courtship, marriage, childbirth, child-rearing, and generational succession. Within chrononormative logic, queer lives that do not follow this trajectory often appear as failures. Polychronic dramaturgy challenges this assumption. It constructs temporal frameworks in which progress is neither inevitable nor necessary. Multiple times coexist without hierarchical ordering.

Temporal looping provides one important example of this challenge. In such structures, dramatic action repeats with variation rather than progressing toward resolution. Unlike cyclical forms that return to an identical starting point, temporal loops revisit scenes that change with each recurrence. The result is a spiral rather than a circle. This refusal of resolution carries particular political significance in the context of homonormative assimilation. Mainstream LGBTQ+ movements increasingly adopt narrative frameworks borrowed from

heteronormative culture. These frameworks include coming out as a discrete event, relationship progression toward marriage, and life trajectories centred on domesticity and respectability. Such narratives impose linear temporality on queer experience. Polychronic structures resist this pressure. By refusing climax and closure, temporal looping suggests that queer existence need not conform to heteronormative narrative arcs.

Freeman's concept of "temporal drag" offers another way of understanding the political work of polychronic dramaturgy. Temporal drag describes the possibility of being touched by times other than the present. It points to a form of temporal promiscuity that refuses chrononormative sequencing. Polychronic plays enact this condition by allowing the past to touch the present and the future to intrude upon the now. These encounters disrupt progressive temporality. When characters from different eras interact, or when temporal periods bleed into one another, the play performs a form of temporal queerness. Such moments refuse straight time's separation of past, present, and future. The political stakes extend beyond formal innovation. They challenge the ideological work that normative temporality itself performs. By dismantling chrononormativity at the level of form, polychronic plays enact anti-assimilationist politics and resist incorporation into straight time.

### **Multiverse Aesthetics and Queer Potentiality**

Beyond polychronic structures, contemporary playwrights increasingly employ multiverse aesthetics. These dramaturgical frameworks present parallel realities, alternative timelines, and simultaneous possible worlds within the same theatrical space. The multiverse aesthetic resonates strongly with queer theoretical investments in potentiality, futurity, and the multiplication of possibilities beyond normative constraints. When dramatic form presents multiple versions of reality at once, it enacts what Muñoz terms "queer futurity." It creates space for the not-yet-realised and for possibilities that exceed present actuality.

As a dramaturgical device, the multiverse differs from conventional alternative scenarios. It does not privilege one reality as true and others as imaginary. Instead, multiverse aesthetics treat multiple worlds as equally ontologically valid. The result is a form of ontological promiscuity that resists singular truth. This multiplication of realities challenges the assumptions underlying chrononormative logic. Chrononormativity depends upon linear causality and a singular timeline. Multiverse dramaturgy unsettles both. If multiple versions of events can coexist, and if different choices generate parallel universes rather than foreclose possibilities, then the tyranny of consequence loses some of its power. The mechanisms that enforce normative behaviour become less secure.

Muñoz's concept of queer utopia provides an important theoretical framework for understanding this dynamic. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz argues against the "here and now" privileged by pragmatist politics. He instead insists on the "then and there" of utopian possibility. Multiverse aesthetics translate this theoretical position into dramatic form. By presenting multiple realities simultaneously, such plays create space for utopian possibilities alongside dystopian actualities. They also imagine queer futures beyond the limits of reproductive futurism.

Consider the multiverse plays those present characters who make different choices regarding assimilation into heteronormative structures. One version may depict a character who marries and achieves middle-class respectability. Another may depict the same character living within queer community structures outside the nuclear family. By presenting these alternatives simultaneously, the play avoids privileging one path over the other. It resists assimilationist narratives without romanticising marginalisation.

Freeman's concept of "erotohistoriography" offers additional theoretical leverage. She describes a politics of unpredictable and deeply affective encounters with the past. Historical engagement, in this formulation, involves bodily, temporal, and affective promiscuity rather than objective distance (95). Multiverse dramaturgy creates conditions for such encounters. Different temporal lines and ontological planes are allowed to touch one another. The technique of ontological collapse, in which boundaries between parallel universes become permeable, intensifies these effects. When universes bleed into one another, alternatives begin to haunt actuality. Roads not taken remain present as ghostly possibilities. The multiverse thus becomes a formal figure for queerness itself. It proliferates, exceeds containment, and refuses the limits imposed by normative structures.

### **Dramaturgical Strategies of Temporal Resistance**

Beyond the broad frameworks of polychronic structure and multiverse aesthetics, contemporary playwrights deploy a range of specific dramaturgical techniques. Together, these techniques constitute an anti-assimilationist temporal practice. The rejection of linear progress narratives is perhaps the most direct challenge. Homonormativity depends heavily on narratives of progress. These include stories of gradual social acceptance, civil rights achieved through reform, and coming-out journeys that move from suffering to fulfilment. Contemporary playwrights dismantle this structure through dramaturgical choices that refuse progression altogether. Dramatic action often moves laterally rather than forward. Plays explore multiple dimensions of a situation without seeking development or resolution. In doing so, they reject the assimilationist expectation that queer lives should progress toward normative goals.

The construction of alternative kinship structures through temporal manipulation represents another important strategy. Halberstam observes that queer communities often form kinship networks that do not depend upon biological reproduction or generational succession. Instead, they create chosen families across age groups and temporal frameworks. Some contemporary plays enact these alternatives by staging encounters between characters from different time periods. Such relationships would be impossible within chrononormative logic. Ancestors and descendants interact through political affiliation, spiritual connection, or shared desire rather than biological lineage. This temporal strategy challenges reproductive futurism. It imagines forms of futurity that do not rely on reproduction and constructs kinship through affiliation, commitment, and temporal promiscuity.

The dramaturgical use of traumatic time creates another form of anti-assimilationist resistance. Trauma theory demonstrates that traumatic experience disrupts temporal continuity. The past refuses to remain in the past. It repeatedly intrudes upon the present and resists narrative integration. For queer communities, collective trauma often functions as a persistent temporal

disruptor. The AIDS crisis continues to haunt the present. Histories of violence, exclusion, and oppression return unpredictably. Contemporary plays that organise dramatic time around such disruptions challenge narratives of linear progress. They resist the assumption that queer history moves neatly from oppression to equality.

The refusal of conventional dramatic closure constitutes a final temporal strategy. Plays that end without resolution leave conflicts unresolved and futures indeterminate. Such endings resist the ideological work performed by closure itself. Conventional closure often reassures audiences that conflict can be overcome, that struggle leads to achievement, and that liberation has been secured. Anti-assimilationist dramaturgy refuses these assurances. Its endings remain open, uncertain, and incomplete.

Taken together, these dramaturgical strategies form a coherent anti-assimilationist temporal practice. The rejection of linear progression, the use of temporal recursion, the construction of alternative kinship structures, the disruption of traumatic time, and the refusal of closure all challenge chrononormative expectations. They create dramatic forms that resist assimilation and imagine alternative modes of queer existence.

### **Discussion**

The analysis demonstrates that temporal experimentation in contemporary playwriting functions as more than formal innovation. It also operates as a political intervention against both heteronormative and homonormative assimilation. As Lisa Duggan and other scholars have shown, mainstream LGBTQ+ movements have increasingly embraced homonormative politics. Such politics seek inclusion within existing institutions, including marriage, the military, and the nuclear family. They do not necessarily challenge the ideological foundations of those institutions. This assimilationist trajectory often requires acceptance of heteronormative temporal structures. Life becomes organised around reproductive milestones, narratives of progress, and futures secured through biological succession. The forms of temporal experimentation examined here resist these pressures. They suggest that dramaturgical form itself can function as a mode of political refusal.

The discussion also demonstrates that temporal architecture operates ideologically. How a play structures time carries political implications beyond representational content. A play may feature queer characters and themes while organising dramatic time according to conventional chrononormative patterns. In such cases, queer experience remains incorporated within normative temporal frameworks. Conversely, radical temporal experimentation can resist such incorporation even when the content appears less overtly political. This relationship between form and politics challenges approaches that treat experimental dramaturgy primarily as an aesthetic concern. For contemporary queer playwriting, temporal experimentation functions as a political practice in its own right.

The argument developed here also raises questions that fall outside the scope of the present study. In particular, it raises important issues concerning race and temporality. Scholars such as Tavia Nyong'o and C. Riley Snorton demonstrate that racialised queer subjects experience time through frameworks shaped by the afterlives of slavery, colonial temporalities, and ongoing racial violence. Future research should examine how temporal experimentation in

queer playwriting intersects with these racial formations. It should also consider how dramaturgical time might simultaneously enact anti-assimilationist and anti-racist interventions. Such an inquiry would further illuminate how temporal resistance operates across different racialised positions and historical contexts.

### **Conclusion**

This article has examined how contemporary playwrights deploy polychronic dramaturgical structures and multiverse aesthetics to construct anti-assimilationist queer temporalities. These temporalities resist chrononormative frameworks and challenge both heteronormative and homonormative narratives of progress. Through close textual analysis informed by queer temporality theory, the discussion has shown that temporal experimentation in twenty-first-century playwriting functions as more than formal innovation. It also serves as a substantive political intervention.

Polychronic structures dismantle chrononormativity by refusing linear progression. They create temporal architectures in which multiple time frames coexist. Multiverse aesthetics similarly open dramaturgical space for queer potentiality and futurity beyond reproductive futurism. By presenting multiple realities simultaneously, they enact a form of ontological promiscuity that exceeds the bounds of singular temporal and narrative frameworks.

Several dramaturgical strategies contribute to this anti-assimilationist temporal practice. These include the rejection of linear progress narratives, temporal recursion, alternative kinship structures, traumatic disruption, non-linear memory, and the refusal of closure. Taken together, these strategies challenge normative assumptions about time, development, and futurity. They also create dramatic forms that resist assimilation into dominant social and temporal structures.

The concept of anti-assimilationist temporality developed here offers a productive framework for future scholarship. It encourages further examination of how temporal structures operate politically across cultural forms. It also invites consideration of how resistance to normative time emerges in different media, historical contexts, and social locations. More broadly, it raises questions about how marginalised communities use temporal experimentation to resist incorporation into oppressive systems.

Against homonormative politics that present marriage equality and institutional inclusion as the culmination of queer liberation, the plays examined here propose a more radical vision. They suggest that queer freedom requires transformation rather than incorporation. By constructing temporal architectures that refuse chrononormative logic, these works imagine futures beyond both heteronormative and homonormative constraints. They demonstrate that queer politics need not accept inherited temporal frameworks. Instead, it can generate alternative temporal organisations and new ways of imagining collective life. In this sense, temporal experimentation functions not only as an aesthetic achievement but also as a political intervention with significant implications for queer futures.

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