

“*P.S. I write to you in stings.*”: An Exploration of the Queer
Epistolary Time-Travel Novel with *This is How You Lose the Time
War*

Rosario Santiago

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The Department of Literatures in English of Bryn Mawr College

Summary:

In the 2019 novel *This is How You Lose the Time War* by Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone, young time-travelers Red and Blue are enemies on opposite ends of a temporal war. As they fall in love with one another through letter-writing correspondence, we see the way the epistolary fiction novel is a home for the creation and malleability of queer time and space, as well as the rewriting of normative measurements of time that are often constricting and constraining. In *This is How You Lose the Time War*, the intersections between queerness, epistolarity, and time-travel all serve to create a futurity that is liberating to queer people.

Dedications/Acknowledgments:

To myself.

To my loved ones: It took a village to raise me. Please wait a bit longer for a proper thank-you. Let's time-travel to a future where I am writing beautiful things for you and I, happily selfishly joyfully and in-love!

“come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.”

- *won't you celebrate with me*, Lucille Clifton

“*P.S. I write to you in stings.*”: An exploration of the Queer Epistolary Time-Travel

Novel with *This is How You Lose the Time War*

By Rosario Santiago

In our modern world, the magic and wonder of receiving a letter is lost to the everyday person. With the rise of modern technology, which is a beautiful thing in itself, we can talk to people easily in the most instantaneous ways. In the twenty-first century, letter-writing now exists as a precious, intimate activity that is shared between two people, where time becomes elongated and space much more familiar and secure through just the simple practice of writing words on paper. The epistolary genre is special because of the modes of communication it allows us to have, creating much deeper conceptions of the self and the other in regards to its timing and location. When you write a letter, it is a present “you” writing to a future “someone.” Not only is the act of writing this letter unique, but so is the transmission of its contents and its experience of time and space. So, because of this, queer readings of fiction find an especially warm home within epistolary works, as queer temporalities and its disruptions and complexities can align with what makes an epistolary work what it is. A “queer” read in this sense would be the idea of disruption of whatever normative conception we have of something, this particular something being time and space. A queer temporality is inherent within the nature of the epistolary, such as letters and diaries, as these are both objects that emphasize subjectivity and its relationship to time, as well as the complex experience that comes from reading epistolary works. Because of this, the medium of epistolary fiction is extremely useful as a medium for disruption in time and space, this disruption which can also be called “queer time and space.” Using the 2019 epistolary

time-travel novel *This is How You Lose the Time War* by Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone, I want to explore the malleability of time by queer subjects through the letters that both protagonists, Red and Blue, exchange with one another in an expansive time-location, as both characters are enemy spies and time-travelers on the opposite ends of a time war. This intimacy between the two characters allows for not only an increased contemplation of what both of their roles are in this war, but as people with the ability to time-travel, a clear image to what it would be like to be a queer person exploring intimacy within a world that is already queer, as normative definitions have already been destroyed to allow for their queer existences. I want to meditate on what this means for queer time, space and queer lives and the epistolary framework being a special place to allow for these kinds of practices, as it is a genre that plays into the imagining of queer, liberating futures.

Theoretical Frameworks

Queering Time and Space

We measure our lives in units of time. From our birth to our death, life is a series of markers we must meet in order to be proven successful or productive. In the book *In a Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, Judith Halberstam explores the importance of transgender bodies within complex ideas of space and time. With these reflection, we are able to come to new definitions of queer time as opposed to straight time. For Halberstam, a “queering” is a reimagining ways of life rather than just sex, with many of these ideas stemming from Michel Foucault’s work on queer relationships. “The ‘queer way of life’ will encompass subcultural practices, alternative methods of alliance, forms of transgender embodiment, and those forms of representation dedicated to capturing these willfully eccentric

modes of being.” (Halberstam 1) Through this definition of the ‘queer way of life,’ we can come to conclusions on what the ideas of straight time versus queer time could be. Further research into these ideas by Halberstam goes to show how queer time is characterized by a certain modality of time that emerges when we supersede what is considered normative, which, in this case, aligns with a cis-hetero-patriarchal chronology of time. In more concise definitions, queer time is an measurement of time that is not defined by markers of capitalism, white supremacy, or patriarchy, such markers being the conventional coming-of-age, amatonormativity (the idea of people prospering in exclusive, romantic relationships) reproduction and family life, or conventional careers. Queer space, in this case, is the creation and practice of location or atmosphere by queer people that exists to counteract the exclusionary straight space, thus a location or atmosphere that thrives on the normative as well. This queer space can also look like the activities we do, which Halberstam considers ‘queer place-making’, as something that creates and adds on to the queer spacehood. In *In a Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, there is a meditation on the production of queer subcultures “allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely birth, marriage, reproduction, and death.” (Halberstam 2) This is an incredibly liberatory practice, as it ultimately dismantles social expectation of queer lives and allows for such people to rewrite the narratives they are living into ones that better suit the people that they are, as well as promoting the health and wellness of queer desires and futurity as something normalized and not in competition with white-cis-heteropatriarchy. I believe another important aspect to emphasize in regards to Halberstam’s claims is that of the already pre-existing ways in which we are living in a queer world. This analysis by Halberstam is incredibly important, because I think it acknowledges

what such hard work queer people have done in regards to representation and the theoretical interpretations of queer life, temporality, spatiality, and the way these topics are conveyed. “If we destabilize the meaning of capitalism using post-structuralist critiques of identity and signification, then we can begin to see the multiplicity of noncapitalist forms that constitute, supplement, and abridge alternatives to capitalism that already exists and are presently under construction.” (Halberstam 12) This destabilization of the meaning of capitalism, and thus the way we are conceiving of productivity and time, is a radical one, as it allows for us to already live in a world that is a queer one, and thus, one that is free from the oppressive constraints of time. Theorist Elizabeth Freeman, in their book *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, calls this “chrononormativity, or the use of time to organize individual human bodies towards maximum productivity.” (Freeman 3) What would it look like for us to completely disregard, or even dismantle, capitalism in this way, disrupting its relationship to time and instead defining it in ways that are much more substantial than the reliance on our productivity? This would be a queer world that is much more accepting of all kinds of people who, in a cis-hetero-patriarchal world are currently living in the margins.

For the sake of INSERT TITLE OF THESIS NAME, the theoretical framework of Halberstam, that which of the difference between queer time and space exist as a counter to straight time and space, will stand in my analysis of *This is How You Lose the Time War* as a work that exemplifies not only the meaning of successful living outside of normative chronology and as a launching pad into imagining radical queer futures where a straight present is something that never looms as a threat, but as a way of viewing a world in which the things that are oppressive are inherently disrupted and are thus defined in ways that take away it’s power to discriminate.

In more accessible terms, in an article for JStor Daily titled “Queer Time: The Alternative to “Adulthood”, writer Sara Jaffe explores the definition of “adult” or “adulthood” through a “queer temporal logic.” The subjective way of life has become a flimsy and nebulous chronology for the post-modern person, allowing for no stretching or breaking free of normative time and space constraints. “Queerness...is inflected by time-warping experiences as diverse as coming out, gender transitions, and generation definite tragedies such as the AIDS epidemic. That is, queerness is constituted by its difference from conventional imperatives of time.” This article is heavily laden with analysis by theorists on queer space and time, including Judith Halberstam’s book that I mention above, but the reason I am including it in my clarification of the theoretical framework of TITLE NAME is because of its accessibility in explaining queer time, something that I personally think is important in our desire to queer life and the destruction of markers that force people into living normative lives that include goals and lifestyles that are not only unusually unattainable, but oppressive in nature and perpetuate the upholding of cis-heteronormative-patriarchy and capitalism.

I find this analysis to be incredibly important in relation to my meditation on *This is How You Lose the Time War*, as with this theoretical framework, we will see the ways in which the novel subverts straight time and space by creating a setting and atmosphere that, by the nature of it, is already very queer. We will also see the ways the protagonists Red and Blue use time as an instrument of manipulation, something that acts as a queer place-making act and ultimately changes the environment in which they are living and existing. It is an important analysis, because it goes to show how these two queer characters are using their identities as time-travelers and as queer subjects to combat the oppressions they are facing within the narrative.

Epistolary Fiction

Epistolary, coming from the word epistle, or letters, is an adjective that describes anything having to do with or the collection of documents. Though epistolarity is often associated with letters and letter-writing, it can also include other forms such as recipes, diaries (see works such as *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank) newspapers, or in modern times, tweets, e-mails, text messages, and voice recordings. Thus, the epistolary novel is when letter-writing is used as a form of storytelling, such is the case of *This is How You Lose the Time War*. What is most magical about epistolary fiction is the sense of realism that comes with reading and writing letters, as this real practice of communication becomes a mode to tell stories. Not only this, but the epistolary format allows for deeper intimacy within storytelling, as it is an instrument where agency and the first-person narrative format takes center stage in plot. In the book *Animate Illusions: Explorations of Narrative Structure* by Harold E. Toliver, "...epistolary narration normally offers the greatest variety of unmediated viewpoints in greatest collision. It is especially useful as a method of setting forth interior feelings as they emerge into action and rhetorical postures. (Toliver 138) Though the epistolary form is a presentational device, according to Toliver, it is also one that "obliges the novelist to not forget tactical strategies and the social stations they presuppose." (Toliver 138-139). These tactical strategies and social stations for letter-writing fiction include the sanctity of a "signed, sealed, delivered" document as an intimacy and an art form, one that "influences the forming of inner societies through a highly selective intelligence, based on privately exchanged information." (Toliver 139) Ultimately, what the epistolary novel can do in terms of its narrative strengths is allowing for the reader to engage with the story in a way that allows more of a recognition for the characters thoughts, feelings, and actions, much more than it would if a book was written normally in first-person prose. The

fictional story written in the epistolary format makes it so that we can feel and relate to the characters in the story, because the writing in itself is very personal and viscerally vulnerable in regards to the internal feelings of who we are reading about. These ideas will have a lot to do in regards to the ways *This is How You Lose the Time War* is read, as both Red and Blue are using letter-writing and correspondence to begin an identification with their respective selves, something that they were not normally able to do. The letters act as a form of agency and autonomy for both main characters, and this is the first time in their life that something like this is happening for them, so it is increasingly unknown territory. This, paired with their own jobs as time-travelers and obligations to their own respective armies within the temporal war, complicates the very space they are existing inside of, as well as the intimacies that they are not only creating with one another, but the vulnerabilities they are beginning to experience about themselves.

Furthermore, in *The Epistolary Renaissance: A Critical Approach to Contemporary Letter Narratives in Anglophone Fiction*, editors Maria Loschnigg and Rebekka Schuh explore the ways epistolary fiction has continued to change and grow since its conception. Beginning in the Renaissance ages, the epistolary form as a medium for communicating fiction became popular. This is an interesting complication of the usage of letters being fiction, as for a very long time letters and other written forms of correspondence that were so easily transferable were relied on for newsworthy and/or other important correspondence. Letters and diaries and other epistolary works were non-fiction. As time changes and the epistolary genre grows, we see the way temporality, spatiality, and the linear narrative structure changes. Toni Bowers, in their essay “The Epistolary Revenant”, speaks on the popular and incredibly important epistolary fiction series by Nick Bantock titled *Griffin and Sabine: An Extraordinary Correspondence*. *Griffin and*

Sabine: An Extraordinary Correspondence, according to Bowers, is special in both its narrative structure and tactility. Being both an art book and a story book, *Griffin and Sabine: An Extraordinary Correspondence* allows the reader to open envelopes, unfold pieces of paper, and pull out postcards to progress through the plot. While the materiality is important, it is the transmission of the letters that serve as a challenge in its analysis, and what interests me in my theoretical framework. “*Griffin and Sabine: An Extraordinary Correspondence*...challenge students to think about the specific material requirements built into the transmission of physical letters at a given time and place - the necessary lapses in time between composition and receipt of letters, the spatial distances that must be abridged for letters delivery, available means of moving mail from one place to another, and the possible interpretive repercussions of such matters of fact both within and outside of the fictional world.” (Bowers 203) Ultimately, this challenges the narrative structure of what we assume stories to be; what becomes linear is no longer such, and stories begin to take shape in ways that might be confusing or contradicting, a sort of “time-travel” if you will, a kind of time-travel that is seemingly reminiscent of the actual components of letter-writing, but is taken a step further in its fictionality. Regarding its materiality, this goes back to the idea of queer-space making raised in Judith Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, and thus the practices and intricacies of epistolarity, which in the case of the story *Griffin and Sabine: An Extraordinary Correspondence* can be the creation of the postcards and letters as well as the locations, whether real or fictional, that make up the story and that allow for this specific fictional world to be a queer one. Bowers finds it is important for students (and I believe, everyone) to engage in epistolary fiction, as it encourages them to “think differently about how they apprehend contemporaneity and their immediate contemporaries.” (Bowers 205) It also allows for, and what

I consider the most important and crucial, the “mixing-up” of chronology, seeing “literary history not as a linear phenomenon but as a circular one.” In this essay, Bowers is only specifically speaking to the epistolary fiction genre in its purest form as something to be praised as it allows for “students themselves to construct new practices of empathetic, materially alert, historical thinking.” (Bowers 207) For its own literary analysis, I think the epistolary form allows us to write new stories in ways that are liberated from a chronological constraint; much like the queer coming-of-age, we can have stories that are complicated and that seemingly break the mold of typical normative storytelling, which often leads characters into “happily ever afters” that are made up of typical growth markers. *Griffin and Sabine: An Extraordinary Correspondence* continues as an important literature within epistolary fiction.

Ames Hawkins’ essay “An Open Letter to Nick Bantock OR Letters and/as Ephemera(l)”, explores how the *Griffin and Sabine* trilogy “impacts the telling of an an epistolary story” through “queer possibility.” (181) What is so magical about Hawkins’ essay in *The Epistolary Renaissance: A Critical Approach to Contemporary Letter Narratives in Anglophone Fiction* is that it is written in the experimental form of a letter to the author of *Griffin and Sabine: An Extraordinary Correspondence*. In this letter, Hawkins’ speaks to the reality and the fiction of the story of the two protagonists, as well as what the writer considers queer form, ephemera, and desire. “I want to tell you what the form of the book, of the letter and the repeated engagement with them has done and can do to and for a queer body; how books and letters with a reader can queerly move.” (Hawkins 183) Hawkins speaks to feelings such as bliss and pleasure, the latter allowing the ephemerality of the letter to be what makes it so unique and special within epistolary fiction, and thus “we move from the physicality of ephemera to the performativity of the ephemeral act...enabling queer readings to occur.” (Hawkins 187) It is the

introduction of desire, not in any way romantic or sexual, but in the yearning that comes with wanting to know the contents of a letter, and for Hawkins, this desire is a queer one, because they are a queer person engaging with these materials. I find that Hawkins speaking towards the dichotomy of bliss/pleasure, as well as their attention to the epistolary form, to be incredibly important and endearing towards my analysis of *This is How You Lost the Time War*, as both Red and Blue in the novel oscillate between being spies in a dangerous and violent temporal war while simultaneously getting to know one and falling in love through the process of their letter-writing correspondence. To speak to the idea of queer spatiality, the creation of this queer-place making can look like the intimacy between the main characters of *Griffin and Sabine: An Extraordinary Correspondence*: “The epistolary form increases a sense of intimacy between characters. In the body of a letter, a writer is able to offer not only that which everyone might be able to see, but also the thoughts and feelings that would reveal a secret, or perhaps even sacred, version of themselves. Through letters, from our hands to theirs, theirs to ours, we present the words as ourselves, we accept their words as them.” (Hawkins 190) This will serve as an incredibly important idea to stand with in regards to the way the transmission of letters works in *This is How You Lose the Time War*. As the already-existing method and practicalities of writing and sending letters is already an intimate one, we will see how the science-fiction and time-travel of *This is How You Lose the Time War* creates for an even deeper queer intimacy between Red and Blue, and thus, the creation of a queer space through queer practices and place-making.

I write extensively about the story of *Griffin and Sabine: An Extraordinary Correspondence* by Nick Bantock because it is an irreplaceable and incredibly important piece of literature when understanding epistolary fiction, not only because it is an epistolary work, but

because of its extreme unconventionality and uniqueness as a mode of storytelling. Writer Amal El-Mohtar, who is one-half of the duo (with Max Gladstone) that wrote *This is How You Lose the Time War*, speaks intimately to what *Griffin and Sabine: An Extraordinary Correspondence* have done with epistolary fiction genre in an article for WFDD, an FM public radio station in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, titled “Reading Between Worlds With *Griffin and Sabine*”. This article by El-Mohtar speaks to the question of why letter-writing and epistolarity is even important when we have the internet to use as a form of communication, which can send a message to someone half-way across the world in just seconds. Regarding a new volume of *Griffin and Sabine: An Extraordinary Correspondence* titled *The Pharos Gate*, El-Mohtar writes: “*The Pharos Gate* addresses letter-writing as a magical act that can bridge worlds, resists the limits of space and time in order to connect one loving heart to another...it neatly folds the pleasures and pains of travel with those of correspondence: two would-be lovers traveling as their letters do, conjuring each other up and chasing each other’s shadows until their worlds align enough to allow an embrace.” This analysis of *Griffin and Sabine: An Extraordinary Correspondence* by El-Mohtar sums up beautifully the intimate and magical ways that the epistolary genre not only acts as something that connects people together, but as something that allows us to conceive of time and space in ways that are different from what we normally subscribe to. These descriptions of the epistolary novel are especially important in my theoretical framework of *This is How You Lose the Time War*, as the letters exchanged between Red and Blue act as the source material of their vulnerable relationship with one another as well as their pathways to their own agency, autonomy, and sense of self.

Queer Time Travel and Utopia

In much of the literature I have worked with in the writing of this thesis, time-travel as an activity and a mechanism for queerness has come up often, whether explicitly stated or implied. This time-travel can be conceived in a science-fiction kind of understanding and interpretation, or in a completely new way in which we rewrite our already pre-conceived notions of time-travel. In *This is How You Lose the Time War*, letters are considered a kind of “time-travel” for the main protagonist, who are already themselves time travelers. As both protagonists are queer, the act of time-travel thus becomes a queer one, and because of the inherent queerness that exists within the epistolary genre, we can look to the queer epistolary time-travel novel, which is not as niche as it may seem to be, in our looking towards freeing, liberatory futures for queer people. A work that I found extremely helpful in this analysis of queer futures is José Esteban Muñoz’s book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. This book, which explores the ways in which queerness is an inherently “future-oriented” mode of living has been a pillar in queer studies since it’s publication. “Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing.” (Muñoz 1) I found this idea of queerness to be interesting, as Muñoz states it to be something that we have not yet reached. There is the idea of “Queerness as Horizon,” which is also a chapter in Muñoz’s book, where “To see queerness as horizon is to perceive it as a modality of ecstatic time in which the temporal stranglehold that I describe as straight time is interrupted or stepped out of. Opening oneself up to such a perception of queerness as manifestation in and of ecstatic time offers queers much more than the meager offerings of pragmatic gay and lesbian politics.” (Muñoz 32) There is not much theory that speaks to the mixture and incredibly unique genre that is queer epistolary

time-travel fiction, but the reason why I chose to write this thesis on *This is How You Lose the Time War* is because it is not only a fantastic story of queer love, but it is also an imagining of queerness in an already queer world. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz warns readers to not imagine utopia as a naive, romantic thing that is free from struggle, and I also believe that it is reductive to imagine that any liberating future will be one that is not without its problems, challenges and limitations. We will see how in *This is How You Lose the Time War*, Red and Blue also face their own struggles within a queer world. Despite this, letter-writing acts as a mode not just of communication but of being for both the girls in the novel. It not only liberates them to write about themselves to each other, but when we see the ways Red and Blue use this as a uniquely portable magic that ultimately changes the schemata in which they live in and travel throughout. In The Desk Set Podcast, authors of *This is How You Lose the Time War* Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone speak about how “letter writing can act as a form of time travel.” El-Mohtar and Gladstone had been handwriting letters to one another for about a year before they had decided to write a book together. El-Mohtar says: “When you sit down and write a letter, it's approximately 10 days' time when they receive the letter, they are receiving a version of you that has been, kind of, encased in the amber of the letter. You may have well moved past the concerns and observations and events that you wrote in that letter but someone is there receiving them and witnessing them in this, sort of, time-slipped way.” This, Gladstone reiterates, is not the normal messages we are accustomed to in the twenty-first century, as we are able to have electronic correspondence through emails, texts, or tweets, but instead physical messages that you can hold. This idea of physicality is important in *This is How You Lose the Time War*, as time becomes an actual queer place-making instrument.

Analysis of *This is How You Lose the Time War*

Time as Instrument

In *This is How You Lose the Time War* by Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone, time exists not only as a marker that situates the main characters Red and Blue, but is also a malleable object that both use to express their existence to each other. Red and Blue are both spies on opposite ends of a temporal war where time-travel is used as a weapon by their respective armies to gain the upperhand; in an attempt to win the Time War, Red and Blue are tasked with time-traveling into the past to erase any instance of the others presences, as well as their respective sides of the war, so that they can ultimately re-write history. Through letters, the spies are able to communicate with each other and create a relationship that literally transcends space and time. “There’s a kind of time travel in letters, isn’t there?...You could leave me for five years, you could return never—and I have to write the rest of this not knowing.” (El-Mohtar & Gladstone 42) In *This is How You Lose the Time War*, the physical letters that Blue and Red begin to exchange with one another become the actual physical environment that they live in; dregs of tea in a tea cup, a letter “waiting” to be “read” by the end of your drink, or the words being hidden within the rings of growth within a centuries-old tree. For both Red and Blue, it is the unexpected ways they find their letters written to each other that serves to show their manipulation of time and space. One may never know what they might find when they time-travel to a different dimension, and what is a seemingly normal object is now magically embedded with the words of a letter. Quite literally, Red finds a letter from Blue when she and her team are exploring a forest that has now become a war-zone. As she surveys the dead bodies of trees around her, on one closer look, she finds something abnormal. “She stops when she finds

the letter...[it] begins in the tree's heart. Rings, thicker here and thinner there, form symbols in an alphabet no one present knows but Red...ten years per line of text, and many lines."

(El-Mohtar & Gladstone 32-34) The actual growth of the tree has been embedded with words by Blue in an attempt to send a secret letter to her. It is a letter with ridges and roots, a message that "must've taken a century to craft." Though the nature of time-travel itself is innate in both of these characters, there is something magnificent to them about what the writing and receiving of letters can do; it allows for a manipulation of time and space in ways that they have never explored before, ones that align closer with their own desires. Because both Red and Blue are actually capable of knowing everything there is to know at anytime, the experience of a concealed letter that contains secrets from its recipient and the idea of the writer not knowing whether or not their secrets have been read allow for a level of liminality and uncertainty that is obscure for the main characters. This manipulation of space within the novel also calls back to Judith Halberstam's *In a Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, as Blue is able to physically use the location to her advantage to express these feelings to Red, which can be defined as a queer place-making activity that ultimately changes the location they are in to be a queer one. Epistolarity in *This is How You Lose the Time War* is used to skew what Blue and Red's notion of time is, making what is already queer even queerer. I think this shaping of time and space also lends itself to new, unconventional ways they are navigating their environments; the "I" in a letter allows a kind of subjectivity that is a profound and deep ownership of one's feelings, thoughts, and emotions. Having to write this in a letter and send it to someone else solidifies this "I" not only to the respective person writing, but to the person who is receiving the letter and the letter as an object of finality. By this I mean, in relation to Red and Blue, the letters are allowing them a mode of expression to find an "I" that means something to them.

“Sometimes when you write, you say things I stopped myself from saying. I wanted to say, *words hurt, but metaphors go between, like hewn from the earth in agony but making a new thing, a shared thing, a thing that is more than one Shift*. But I didn’t, and you spoke of wounds.”

(El- Mohtar and Gladstone 125) The intimacy that is created between the letters Blue and Red write to each other not only strengthen the power each of them has in gaining autonomy in a time war, but it is also the first beginnings of them being able to express themselves in ways they were not able to before. In a world where time-travel exists, the idea of trying and failing is lost; one can easily see the outcomes of how something will turn out if their timeline is not linear. There is a world that exists in the letters of Red and Blue, a world of their own where they are finally able to make mistakes, where there is no mind-reading or secret tricks, but a seemingly more normal world for them where they have the space to explore what it means to be themselves. A lot of these ideas with *This is How You Lose the Time War* speak to the rewriting of cis-hetero-patriarchal worlds, ultimately subverting what Elizabeth Freeman calls “chrononormativity.” For Red and Blue, their roles in life and thus the success of their productivity is measured in how well they are able to time-travel and how good of soldiers they are in erasing the instances of the other in time without leaving a trace. When Red and Blue finally find a new purpose for living, which is each other, it contradicts what is already known and expected of them in their world.

Where Time Falls Apart

Due to rules and regulations of their respective civilizations, Red and Blue are not allowed to be speaking to one another, much less creating an intimate relationship that spans generations of time and a multitude of alternate dimensions, called “strands” in the novel. There is a certain chaotic-ness to these kinds of time-travel stories; chronology is no longer a given and

thus it is left up in the air how we situate events and how they are played out, and thus, as one reviewer of *This is How You Lose the Time War* puts it, “narrative structure, like a doughnut in hot coffee, falls to pieces.” (Sheehan) As readers of stories, we are rightfully trained for novels to be written in order of events, a beginning, middle, and end, but what is inherently built into the time-travel story is a divorce from the linear and instead an embracing of what-ifs and should-haves within a plot, often time without any explanation or clear intention of order of events. The narrative structure, then, falls apart and becomes something confusing and seemingly hard to follow; in *This is How You Lose the Time War*, obscure events will happen that are not clarified until a certain letter is found and read by one of the characters. The dysfunction of this specific narrative structure makes it easy for epistolary novels to perform, however, as there is already a limited amount of information provided in letters that are only meant for one person who is already in the know of what is going on. Epistolary fiction, and specifically fictional letter-writing, can also be out-of-sorts and non-chronological. The form of both the time-travel trope and the epistolary genre as a framework also lends itself to the content of *This is How You Lose the Time War*, as both Red and Blue are unaware of why they should hate each other, just that they are two soldiers who are fighting for their civilization to have the upperhand. In other words, both characters do not have an explicit purpose or reasoning for why they are doing what they are doing, just the knowledge and expectation that what they are doing is right. In *This is How You Lose the Time War*, there is a continuous “why” that hangs over the reader's head; for the first few chapters, we are very unsure of who Red and Blue are, what they are doing, and what business they have being spies in a temporal war. Because of this, a certain amount of suspension of belief is necessary in following the plotline; as time-travel stories are inherently confusing, so will reading letters between two people as an outsider will be. I think speaking to

this confusion and, even more explicitly, chaos, is important in the establishment of the theoretical framework of *This is How You Lose the Time War* as well as an analysis of the novel itself; I believe, maybe in normative ways it is considered chaotic, but because the normative is something we are used to, and the queering of space and time and the lives of queer people is something not yet fully accepted or understood and thus, pushed to the margins, this chaotic nature of not only the theory but the story itself seems out-of-sorts. Though the reader may not understand, it is a perfectly normal world for both main characters Red and Blue. This same withholding of information is similar to the sentiments Red and Blue exchange, as their relationship grows deeper as they get to know each other and complicates what each of them know about participating in a war. Something that is especially telling of the main character's conception of their situations is how they view time. In a letter, Red tells Blue "How strange to uncover things in sequence!" (El-Mohtar & Gladstone 61), and this points to how what we would consider normative or "straight" time is lost to the characters in *This is How You Lose the Time War*, as chronology and certain markers of "growing up" are no longer comprehensive to them as they have the ability to time travel. Ideas of straight and normative time are often socially expected, but this comes with extreme constraints to those whose growth does not match with what is socially acceptable. There is a stronger embracement of the liminal, and thus queer time, within *This is How You Lose the Time War*, as both characters are already living between borders of time and space. What is at stake for Red and Blue is different than anything we can imagine under straight time. Queer time to normative eyes, or to our socially expected timelines in sequence, pigeonholes people to reach certain markers of life and growth. Anything outside of this is often met with judgment of critique; when a baby doesn't meet its "usual" growth patterns at the ages they "should" be reaching them, we see this as an extreme problem and it

comes into question of whether or not something is “wrong” with the baby. This kind of sentiment also follows for people who identify on the LGBT+ spectrum. The coming-out of a queer person is uniquely another kind of coming-of-age, met with it’s own definitions. Suddenly, the sequence of time and how it passes is no longer an objective thing; the coming-out and living of life is something entirely unique to the individual. This kind of “diversion” from the normative is liberating and free of constraints. Queer time and living in queer timelines allows us to live in unique lives where we are not racing against one another. This calls back to the theory of Elizabeth Freeman in *Time Binds*, as well as Judith Halberstam’s idea of time being re-written in order to instead conceptualize worlds that do not exist with oppression ingrained within them; if we re-write time, place, it’s interactions with one another, it will introduce us to a queer futurity that we cannot even imagine. Even though Blue and Red are time travelers, and are naturally living in a queer time of their own with what is inherent in their setting and atmosphere, the experiences they are creating and living through the magic of their correspondence is giving them much more freedom in an already semi-queer world.

Intimacies in This is How You Lose the Time War

Because of the nature of their roles in the Time War, both Red and Blue do not experience typical intimacies or personal relationships. Though the correspondence between Red and Blue begins as a sort of cat-and-mouse game, both girls find solace through letter-writing and navigating different strands of time, being able to find the words to describe themselves and their homes as they get to know each other more. Blue comes from The Garden, which is a civilization that prides itself on community and togetherness. Because of the nature of the story, Blue’s civilization is also one that values time-travel. “We treat the past as trellis...the future harvests us, stomps us into wine, pours us back into the root system in loving libation, and we

grow stronger and more potent together.” (El-Mohtar & Gladstone 72) A common theme for Blue is their ability to set traps and manipulate time, with her descriptions of changing the course of generations as “braiding.” For her, time is something that can and is willfully changed if need be, and her community, The Garden, thrives on this ideology. Blue also has a lot more at stake and much more to learn in *This is How You Lose the Time War*. This is a peculiar characterization of Blue’s home because they live in a community that thrives on being one together; much of Blue’s story in the novel surrounds their needing to follow rules and orders for the sake of the group. This following the group goes as extreme as each person not having a particular identity or agency. Time-travel for Blue is a solitary matter, a kind of solitude that is not so much explored though she yearns for some fragment of knowing who she is without defining herself but anyone else and their expectations of her. In the in-betweens of the letters exchanged, we often see Red in a group of other soldiers attending to their duties; Blue is more often than not alone. “So I go. I travel farther and faster and harder than most, and I read, and I write, and I love cities. To be alone in a crowd, apart and belonging, to have distance between what I see and what I am.” (El-Mohtar & Gladstone 73) Blue’s role in the time war is a messy, lonely, and confusing one, and this is not something she realizes until she begins to compare her life with that of Red. Blue learns much from Red and what she describes as her civilization of “disembodied networks” and begins to desire an individuality that will grant her the ability to know herself much more fundamentally. For Blue, part of this agency looks like the letters she writes to Red, from actions as miniscule as ending her letters with “Yours, Blue,” to risking her life to changing the space that Red inhabits so that their letters are delivered to one another. For example, when Red travels to a certain ancient Roman time, she finds a goose with a pouch tied to its neck. In the pouch are sumac seeds, and when Red takes them into her hand, she can just make out the

words Blue has written to her in this letter. Red becomes the letter herself: “She eats the first three seeds one by one...As each letter unfolds inside her mind, she frames it in the palace of her memory.” (El-Mohtar & Gladstone, 101) These are letters that Blue has written to Red, not only the vulnerable world of the letter itself being depicted between the two girls, but it is something that allows themselves to understand each other in ways not possible through just pen and paper. Early in the novel, Red explains to Blue her enjoyment with eating food, though she technically doesn’t need to, as she “revels in it, as one only revels in pursuits one does not need.” (El-Mohtar & Gladstone 44) These are sensations she enjoys to have, although unnecessary, and she goes into long sentences about eating everything from blueberry pancakes to small rocks that taste of rivers. This opens up a conversation of hunger, and whether or not they want to eat food and try things is for satiation rather than pleasure. Blue straightforwardly asks if Red experiences hunger: “Absent from your mention of food...was any mention of hunger...Hunger, Red--to sate a hunger or to stoke it, to feel hunger as a furnace, to trace its edges like teeth -- is this a thing you, singly, know?” (El-Mohtar & Gladstone 53) Blue’s description of hunger, something whetted, keen, and bright, reminds Red not of consuming food but of time-travel itself. “The hunger you describe...it sounds beautiful and familiar...I left my pod and wandered upthread and far away, far from the chatter and the mutual observation. I found a hilltop in a small world, breathable but barren...and I stood there...weight on one foot, and I did not move...I needed to be seen. That need dug into the heart of me. It felt good...I was light, hollowed, hungry.” (El-Mohtar & Gladstone 62-64) Red retraces these sentiments to childhood memories, being able to experience things in sequence for the first time, and also allowing herself to ask questions of the universe and create an individuality that was unknown to herself at the time. “For the first time, I was alone. I, whatever I was, whatever I am, tumbled first up, into the stars, then down to

the broken land.” (El-Mohtar & Gladstone 63) This intimacy between the two characters exists and thrives in queer timelines; without it, not only would their correspondence and relationship be able to grow, but they also would not have been able to gain autonomy from their respective civilizations. For the two main characters, time is not just something that can be changed but it is something that is played with, pulled apart and put back together again, swallowed and hidden and embedded within their surroundings. This is important because it goes to show how much life can be breathed into queer timelines, the letter acting as an instrument that will liberate both Red and Blue. The idea of hunger comes back later on in the novel, a sudden survival mechanism in which Blue and Red with letters that are hidden as food. In a certain pre-historic time, when the stakes become much higher for the characters, Red eats the letters that Blue has hidden in sumac seeds. “She eats the third letter...The aftertaste stings her tongue and fills her. She weeps, and laughs into her tears, and lets herself fall.” (El-Mohtar & Gladstone, 117) What does it mean to become the physical manifestation of this letter? It is an intimacy that goes beyond what we can conceive in straight timelines or heteronormative worlds, one in which love and triumph can still exist in times of war, even wars that are beyond are fathomable imaginations. Thus, this is an queer intimacy living in an even queerer timeline that is only of Blue and Red’s own making. They are able to contextualize hunger in ways that are unknown to us in normative ways. Even if Red’s descriptions of eating rocks that come from rivers might be unseemly, it is still something that entrances the reader, as the experience of eating these rocks are just as delicious and satisfying as it would be eating a blueberry pie. This metaphor of hunger goes even further, as hunger is not just a feeling of the need for food for survival, but the need for understanding yourself in a world that is just as big and bright as theirs is. Even if Red and Blue are time-travelers, the same things that are unbeknownst to those living in normative

timelines (us) are still unbeknownst to them, but their specific situation enlightens a sort-of even queerer world to what is already queer. It is a vulnerability that begins to be their downfall, as their correspondence with each other and their alteration of time begins to be noticed by their respective civilizations, the persons they have grown to be meshing with the people they should be. Despite this, they continue to use letter-writing as a tool for their own saviorship. When their respective commandants catch on to what Red and Blue are doing, measuring out their travel through generations and seeing that they are crossed in ways they shouldn't be, they are forced to take matters into their own hands. "PS. I write to you in stings, Red, but this is me, the truth of me, as I do so: broken open by the act, in the palm of your hand, dying." (El-Mohtar & Gladstone 142) The letters that Red and Blue begin to exchange in the latter half of the novel act as weapons against each other, some forced by their civilizations, others of their own making. In Red's next letter, she hides it within a poisonous berry. If Blue eats it, she will die, but if she does not, their relationship will be found out. "I have been made a weapon, and they have plunged me into your heart." (El-Mohtar & Gladstone 163)

This is How You Win

For Red and Blue, the intimacy that they have fought so hard to allow to exist and thrive is something that gives them hope for a better future. Instead of using time-travel to rewrite a history in which they no longer exist, they find a way, in an act of rebellion, to instead write a narrative where they can be together. "What would Genghis say if we built a bridge together, Red? Suppose we reached across the burns of threads and tangles, cut through the braid's knots—suppose that we defected, not to each other's sides, but to each other? (El-Mohtar & Gladstone 198) It is a beautiful ending to a story that, although does not end the war, allows for Red and Blue to finally make a decision on who they are and what they will be here on it. I

believe that the ending to *This is How You Lose the Time War* is one in which would fit well within José Esteban Muñoz's idea of queer futurity in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*: when Blue writes her final letter to Red, expressing her desire and willingness to create a future outside of the temporal war, she speaks towards Red's naivety as well as to their mutual clumsiness and seemingly selfish acts that they took in order to save the other in different timelines. In a world that was constantly defined by expectation, Red and Blue finally take it upon themselves to imagine a future without the war and where time-travel is a gift they can give to each other.

I came to choose this topic for my thesis project because I found epistolary works to be a whimsical way to express selfhood, agency, and autonomy. Works like diaries, recipes, text messages, and letters all act to show a correspondence that is intimate, vulnerable, painful, and brave. Because of the nature of it, the written "I" for a queer person is also a courageous act, as this is when, in a world that is defined by cis-heteronormative, white oppressive constraints, we can finally be brave in telling stories that are unapologetic and unashamed. The epistolary genre is a perfect mode for that, and for works from *Griffin and Sabine: An Extraordinary Correspondence*, *This is How You Lose the Time War*, and a multitude of other ones, we see how queerness plays out and allows for a liberatory view of the world and recreation of time and space. In an article for The Guardian titled "Why are there so many new books about time traveling lesbians?" El-Mohtar writes about how stories, similar to *This is How You Lose the Time War*, can rewrite the past. "Women talking to women, women loving each other in the fullness of our differences – women of colour, trans women, queer women, older women and younger women – is a political act, a refusal to accept the erasure of our names, achievements, and lives...everytime we affirm that queer people have always existed and often led happy lives,

we change history.” With the particular and peculiar intersection between queerness, letter-writing, and time-travel fiction, we can see how such individual and priceless things in themselves are very queer, but put together can allow all different kinds of people to imagine an even queerer future that is much farther than our minds could take us, all because we are rewriting preconceived definitions of what exists to include queerness in it inherently.

Ultimately, I wanted to show how such fiction is not only a fun, fantastical, joy to read, but that they are complex stories that can tell us so much about queer personhood, queer bodies in space and time, and just how powerful it can be to be queer and have that ability to manipulate time and space just by virtue of being queer.

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