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Article:

Poore, Benjamin (2026) Exploding History: Queer Temporalities and Chronobiopolitics in Contemporary Playwriting. *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*. pp. 216-231. ISSN: 2195-0164

<https://doi.org/10.1515/jcde-2026-2014>

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CDE Paper Exploding History

Queer Temporalities and Forging Queer Connections in Contemporary Playwriting

Introduction

In the last six years, history plays have exploded. The book I published last year, tried to grapple with the idea of the contemporary history play: a play that has a historical setting, but which is written now, for now, and in a sense, about now. In writing the book, I realised that one way of explaining how the most exciting contemporary history plays work is through queer temporalities. Here I use the term in the broadest possible sense, as meaning when time in history plays doesn't proceed in a single, linear, forward motion. To borrow Jaclyn Pryor's formulation, I understand queer temporality as what happens when 'time is given permission to do those deviant things it is not supposed to — move backward, lunge forward, loop, jump, stack, stop, pause, linger, elongate, pulsate, slip' (Pryor 9). The three examples I'm going to briefly highlight today are *Shed: Exploded View* by Phoebe Eclair-Powell (2024), and *The Flea* by James Fritz (2023), and *Family Tree* by Mojisola Adebayo (2023).

What I want to argue in this paper is that a play may have a queer temporality as part of its dramaturgical form, even when its direct subject matter — its content — is not queer history.

To make this argument, I return to Elizabeth Freeman's influential 2010 book *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Freeman's critical vocabulary seems like an apt set of tools for analysing what is happening in these three plays. There is also a strain in her figurative language that repeatedly references explosions, and I want to pick up on this to explain and elaborate on my title, 'exploding history'. Freeman's book focuses on writers and filmmakers, and in the book's Introduction she asserts, 'the queerness of

these artists consists in mining the present for signs of undetonated energy from past revolutions' (xvi). She later refers to the book's chapters as exploring 'the shrapnel of failed revolutions' (p.xxii). I propose that in these three plays, we can see three of the key ideas that Freeman alludes to and works with: temporal drag, the antikinship diagram, and (un)detonated energy.

Shed: Exploded View

Particularly alert members of the audience may anticipate where this is going, because one of the plays I've already named is Phoebe Eclair-Powell's *Shed: Exploded View*, staged at Manchester Royal Exchange in 2024.

Eclair-Powell's play explicitly takes as its point of inspiration Cornelia Parker's *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View*, a 1991 artwork on display at the Tate Gallery in London. The Tate's website explains that the artwork consists of the 'restored contents of a garden shed exploded by the British Army at the request of the artist Cornelia Parker. The surviving pieces have been used by Parker to create an installation suspended from the ceiling as if held mid-explosion. Lit by a single lightbulb the fragments cast dramatic shadows on the gallery's walls'. Of particular interest, for me, is the way that the contents of the shed were collected and curated by Parker herself, including tools, children's toys, and books from her own collection. Yet the aim was for it to be 'an archetypal shed' because 'if you blew up somebody's specific shed it became too biographical'. Parker also recollects of the reconstruction work after the explosion: 'As the objects were suspended one by one, they began to lose their aura of death and appeared reanimated, in limbo. The light on inside the installation created huge shadows on the wall, so the shed look[ed] like it was re-exploding or perhaps coming back together again'. It's this limbo state, where the manipulation of time makes the exploded objects look

as if they're either exploding or reassembling, that I think resonates with the queer temporalities that Freeman defines and investigates.

Eclair-Powell's play *Shed: Exploded View* follows three heterosexual partnerships over a thirty-year period: Lil and Tony, who are middle-aged in 1993/4, Naomi and Frank, who meet aged 26 and 30 respectively, and Abi, Naomi and Frank's daughter, who is born around 1996 and who is murdered by her husband, Mark, in 2024. The scenes skip backwards and forwards through time, with some scenes between different characters being performed simultaneously, two or even three at once. In all three couples, the male partner is violent (though in Tony's case it's implied that this is a result of dementia), and certain lines and speeches are repeated across relationships. In her grief for her daughter, Naomi builds and explodes a shed containing Abi's belongings (and various other items too, p.74). For a moment, she is able to hold Abi's hand again. The last stage directions read, *'The tablecloth is wiped clean. Time rewrites itself. None of it ever happened'*; and yet, *'A shed sits on a stage'*. It never happened, and yet the shed that is a monument to what happened is still standing; and yet the shed has been exploded. The timeline simply can't be set straight.

The script also contains a series of additional scenes — thirteen in all — that were not used in the first production but that companies are invited to select from. So, there is something postdramatic about this offer to re-edit the play for each production.

Dramaturgically, then, *Shed: Exploded View* is the most 'exploded' of the plays I'm considering here, because of its fragmentary treatment of time, its unfinished and unsettled form, all of which it has in common with Cornelia Parker's installation on which it is based. But the title of Parker's artwork is based on a pun, since an 'exploded view', in technical drawing, is not really a view of an explosion, but an illustration that opens out the different layers of

an item to show how it's constructed. It's in that sense that the other two plays 'explode' the history play, queering our perspective on historical connections and causalities.

The Flea

The Flea by James Fritz was staged at the Yard Theatre in Hackney, East London, in 2023, and revived there the following year. Of these three plays, it is both the most explicitly queer in subject matter, and the most conventionally plotted. We mostly stay in the same period, London in 1889 at the time of the Cleveland Street scandal, when a brothel in Fitzrovia, 19 Cleveland Street, staffed by moonlighting telegraph boys, was almost exposed, until Queen Victoria and the Prince of Wales got involved in preventing prosecutions when it became clear that the Queen's grandson, Prince Eddy, was one of the brothel's most regular visitors. Queen Victoria herself is played as a mendacious grotesque by Breffni Houlihan, who doubles as the play's central figure and narrator, Emily Swinscow.

The Flea is queer in its presentation as well as thematically. Characters march onstage to techno beats, wearing combinations of late-Victorian costume, clone outfits and fetish gear. Costume designer Lambdog1066 introduces gashes and rips to the period clothes, while upper-class characters in particular wear ghoulish makeup, white-green faces and red, drooling lips. This unsettling play world, made more disturbing still by the use of extremely high seats and uneven levels in Naomi Kuyck-Cohen's set design, reminded me of Freeman's concept of temporal drag. Freeman posits that 'drag can be seen as the act of plastering the body with outdated rather than just cross-gendered accessories, whose resurrection seems to exceed the axis of gender and begins to talk about, indeed talk back to, history' (p.xxi). In *The Flea*, character dress is not cross-gendered, but it has the strange air of

having been designed as drag and then reassigned to the 'correct' gender. Hence, the Victorians were queered through their excessive performance of 'appropriate' gender roles, and costumes that evoked not only Victorian history but an underground queer history of the 20th century.

The 'explosion' that the play charts is the chain of chance events that leads a flea to bite a rat, which bites a horse, which kicks a tannery worker in the head, killing him. This is Emily Swinscow's husband. Emily's son Charlie now has to work to make ends meet, and gets a job at the post office, where he is soon recruited to the Cleveland Street brothel by the clerk, Henry Newlove. In a sense, the idea is the chaos-theory trope of the flap of a butterfly's wings. The ripples of one action spread outwards, small actions accumulate and lead to national consequences. Like *Cold Dark Matter*, however, the chain goes backwards as well as forwards; it explodes but reassembles several times as the case is explained by our narrator, Emily, and as Inspector Abberline - he of the Whitechapel murders - pieces together the links in the chain. At the far end of the chain is Queen Victoria herself, the ultimate flea, a parasite and bloodsucker on a global scale. But the investigation rebounds back down the chain, settling on Charlie, who is scapegoated for the activities of those who exploited him and sentenced to hard labour. Fritz's play is, again, overt in its rewinding, replaying and reorganising of time.

Family Tree

Mojisola Adebayo's play *Family Tree* was produced by Actors Touring Company and toured England in 2023. In many ways it takes the most queered approach to time of the three plays here. The central figure is Henrietta Lacks, an African-American woman who in 1951 was operated upon for cervical cancer at the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. It was discovered that her cells were able to reproduce outside her body; this

became known as the first ‘immortalized cell line’ that could reproduce indefinitely. The cells were taken without permission and without Henrietta or the family’s knowledge. As Henrietta says in the play, the cells ‘helped develop chemotherapy, cloning, gene mapping/ What we know about chromosomes and disability/ Artificial intelligence - starts with me!’ (p. 28). In *Family Tree*, Henrietta Lacks finds herself in a ‘cemetery which is also a garden’ (p.3).

The setting, it is gradually revealed, is the Garden of Black Death. Passing through the garden are three NHS nurses, Ain, Bibi and Lyn, all friends, each of whom apparently died during the COVID pandemic. The actors playing these roles also double as Anarcha, Betsey and Lucy, three enslaved African-American women from the 1840s who are both nurses and patients to Dr Sims, who performs gynaecological experiments on them. There’s a Smoking Man, ‘inspired by the Marlboro Man from classic cigarette advertising’ (p.2), who gets weaker and weaker as he wanders through the garden, eventually being buried and his grave tended and planted by the 1840s nurses who are also the 2020 nurses. Oh, and there’s a talking tree, who helps Henrietta realise the significance of her cells and makes a comparison to trees’ own uses in science: ‘Nail polish. Ice cream, Chewing gum, Cigarettes. All from my cells. All from my *cellulose*.’ (p.49).

As will be clear, Adebayo is exploring metaphor, analogy, and an expanded idea of what connects us (and in particular, what connects the experiences of women of the African diaspora). In one sequence, Henrietta ‘dances exuberantly, celebrating her miraculous existence’, and is joined by a Black Woman dressed exactly like her, and then another and another, drawn from the Community Choir that is part of the production; they are ‘like multiplying cells’ (p.22).

The connections that Adebayo draws seem to correspond closely to Elizabeth Freeman's commentary on antikinship diagrams. In her book, Freeman discusses Bertha Harris's novel, *Lover*, and draws attention to the novel's frontispiece, a hand-drawn 'family tree of sorts' (p.37). She goes on to observe of the diagram, 'Rather than situating characters above and below one another to indicate generations, this tree shows six fronds shooting out centrifugally from its center. ... In a sense, this is an antikinship diagram [...] a kin diagram turned rhizomatic: collapsing the generational scaffolding' (pp.37-38).

The play's title, *Family Tree*, seems to make this 'centrifugal' intention explicit, and Adebayo, as a playwright and academic, and longtime advocate and practitioner of what she has called 'Afriquia Theatre' (2015, p.131) is no doubt very aware of how she is queering the play's dramaturgy. Not that actual kinship is unimportant in the play: Henrietta, recalls that she is the 'Great-great-granddaughter of a slave called Mourning (as in grief, not the opposite of night)', and the enslaved women from the 1840s have heartrending stories of separation from mothers and children. These origins are key to the play's sense of history. But in this garden that exists outside of earthly temporalities. Time is viewed biologically, ecologically, and religiously, so that Henrietta's cells connect with diaspora stories and plant cells and eventually Oshun, the Yoruba deity who welcomes Henrietta to the Pantheon as the Orisha of Cells (p.59).

Conclusion

In revisiting queer temporalities after having written the book, several points come to light. Firstly, each one of my book's dramaturgical categories can be queered, and on a general level, that's what I've been demonstrating today.

Shed: Exploded View is a queering of the intergenerational play. *The Flea* is, among other things, a queer group biography centered on mother and son, Emily and Charlie Swinscow. *Family Tree* is a queered fantastic history play. So, queer temporalities cut across each of these chapters and categories in the book.

The Exploded History Play is a more specific pattern, however. There are lots of ways for a history play to use queer temporalities, but Exploded History Plays are a particular subset of queered-temporality history plays. Put another way, all Exploded History Plays use queer temporalities, but not all plays that use queer temporalities are Exploded History Plays.

What sets the Exploded History Play apart is that, firstly, they are polychronic: set in two or more different timelines. Sometimes this involves fragmented, episodic and splintered narratives that span disparate historical periods. Sometimes, conversely, it blends eras and histories that are usually kept on separate timelines. Secondly, with the Exploded History Play there is no way to rearrange the narrative to bring closure, to make everything fit or to clean up the mess. What's done cannot be undone. Like Cornelia Parker's *shed*, the content of the play and the structure that used to hold it in place are both exploded. The Exploded History Play challenges us to make sense of what has happened from the remnants, and to trace that back to the propulsive act that sets them in motion. The Exploded History Play therefore explicitly plays with time, suspending reconstructed moments for our inspection and reflection.

Finally, to return to Elizabeth Freeman: on a meta level, I'm here offering this exposition of the Exploded History Play as a kind of antikinship map of playwriting. I've aimed to show how playtexts from the last six years are related, even though they don't share a common subject matter, historical period, or provenance.