

## Queer Waiting in Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*

### ABSTRACT

This article explores entanglements of waiting and queerness in Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (1998). It asks if waiting, a universal human activity and an unavoidable aspect of life, can be understood as a queer cultural phenomenon. In answering that question, the article proposes and conceptualizes a new concept in queer theory called "queer waiting." Although the phenomenon of waiting connotes queerness in the sense that experiences of waiting tend to be perceived as strange, drawn-out, awkward, and tedious sort of "temporal breaks" in which time is somehow suspended, queer waiting is waiting experienced by queer people. More specifically, queer waiting is a form of waiting that is entwined with what makes people queer, like gender nonconformity, norm-challenging sexualities, and forms of kinship that challenge heteronormative relationality. Through close textual analysis, the article investigates if – and if so how – depictions of waiting structure experiences for *The Hours*' queer characters, who are waiting in various ways. They wait, for example, to escape heteronormativity, to die from AIDS-related complications, or to relive a "queer utopia" that only exists in the past. Theoretically, a combination of José Esteban Muñoz's theories about "utopian queer futurity" (an incentive for queers when dealing with the imperfect present) and Martin Heidegger's *Gelassenheit* (releasement, which can be understood as a sort of "letting-it-be attitude") are drawn on. By interpreting *The Hours*, the article suggests that while waiting, to all, can make the present seem static, boring, or unbearable, queers experience it, and handle it, in unique ways. Cunningham's novel illustrates that releasement can be a

temporary strategy for queers to deal with challenges while they, in Muñoz's conception, envision (and await) a better future. But it also includes examples of queer characters forcefully resisting releasement as a solution, thereby refusing to let things be as they are.

**Keywords:** Queer waiting, releasement, *The Hours*, Virginia Woolf, the AIDS epidemic, queer temporality

**IN MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM'S** novel *The Hours* (1998), one of the main characters, pregnant housewife Laura Brown, is in a peculiar state of waiting.<sup>1</sup> To the outside world she is happily married and a devoted mother, but on the inside, she feels trapped. On her way down the stairs to face her family in the morning, she “pauses several treads from the bottom, listening, waiting; she is again possessed (it seems to be getting worse) by a dream-like feeling, as if she is standing in the wings, about to go onstage and perform in a play for which she is not appropriately dressed, and for which she has not adequately rehearsed” (Cunningham 1998/2006, 43).<sup>2</sup> Laura, we come to understand, harbors lesbian longings but calmly composes herself and performs her role as a wife and mother. To get through each day she lets go of the things she finds difficult. Throughout the novel, however, Laura secretly bides her time, waiting to break free from her heteronormative life with the hope of expressing herself authentically. Laura's arc in *The Hours* – how her suburban 1950s life is shaped by a waiting to escape – indicates that waiting structures queer experiences in specific ways.

By drawing on Cunningham's novel and exploring its entanglements of waiting and queerness, this article proposes and conceptualizes a new concept in queer theory called “queer waiting.” To begin with, however, we should try to define waiting in a general sense. What is waiting but a universal human activity and an unavoidable aspect of life? At times, everyone must wait for something in the tangible sense. Moreover, waiting can be understood conceptually as a phenomenon that is experienced when one waits.<sup>3</sup> Whether one waits in line at the grocery store or is waiting for a response after a job interview, waiting also involves a variety of emotions, such as boredom, anxiety, hope, excitement, impatience, and nervousness. But even more so, in the mod-

ern world, waiting is commonly perceived as “wasted time.” As Jason Farman notes, waiting “signals a loss of time that could be used in productive ways” and therefore “we hate waiting in all its forms” (2018, 12).

Waiting, as we can see, has a “bad rap” that derives from the awkwardness we experience when we wait. “Obscured by its ordinariness as much as by its alleged uselessness,” Harold Schweizer writes, “waiting seems to be almost universally denigrated” (2008, 1). When we wait, we anticipate what lies ahead while also feeling anxious about how long we must wait. When we wait for something fun, we want time to speed up so that the thing we are anticipating can happen. When we wait for something awful – with dread – we want to stop time altogether. Either way, waiting can be seen as a sort of in-betweenness, an activity characterized by both anticipation and ambivalence. Oftentimes, we want to escape it completely, as demonstrated by Martin Heidegger, who, in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (1983), recounts an instance when he waits for a train. To overcome the boredom that ensues from time being “stretched out” while waiting, he “passes” time by reading a book as well as pacing back and forth on the platform while repeatedly looking at his watch (Heidegger 1983/1995, 93–95). In essence, to wait is to want to “move past” the experience of waiting, Heidegger conveys.

Furthermore, since waiting is “slow and thick,” as Schweizer puts it (2008, 2), it interrupts the natural progression of time. When one waits for something, the present becomes elongated, drawn-out in a peculiar sense, “space and time expand to flat, tedious dimensions” and one becomes “out of sync with time” (Schweizer 2008, 8). Or, as Farman underscores: “Wait times are the moments of breakdown when we become aware of time in distinct ways” (2018, 14). Essentially, being aware that one waits for something – either waiting actively or experiencing waiting as a phenomenon in a metaphysical sense – makes waiting a “weird” experience, which brings us to our primary query: Can waiting be understood as a queer cultural phenomenon?

When one begins contemplating that question, intersections of queerness and waiting turn out to be plenty. To a queer person, waiting can encapsulate everything from waiting for “Mr. Right” in a hook-

up app like Grindr to waiting to be approved as an adoptive parent. Historically, queers have waited for social and political recognition like marriage equality and anti-discrimination laws (many still do). Following reactionary right-wing political projects in countries around the world, queers today wait, with fear, for their hard-won legal rights to be taken away. Oftentimes, queers wait to be seen for who they truly are by parents and relatives. For trans people, the longing to be able to express one's authentic self (sometimes by means of gender confirmation surgery) tends to involve various forms of waiting (see e.g., Bremer 2011). Lesbian, gay, and transgender refugees are frequently forced to wait for asylum while dreading being sent back to countries where their lives are at stake (see e.g., Tschalaer 2023).

Furthermore, in majority culture, the entwining of queerness and waiting manifests itself in the fact that lesbians, gays, and trans people (and sometimes bisexuals) must “come out” (a process that has no heterosexual equivalent). There is, before leaving the closet, an imminent threat of being suspected as deviant or outed. Those types of waiting – either to build up the courage to come out on one's own terms or waiting to be exposed in heteronormative culture – as well as the examples above underscore the centrality of waiting in the lives of queer people. With the hitherto-mentioned intersections of queerness and waiting as starting points, the aim of the subsequent reading is to investigate if – and if so how – depictions of waiting structures experiences for queer characters in *The Hours*. Drawing on *The Hours*, a novel in which queer subjectivity is vividly portrayed, the article ponders if waiting can be understood as a queer cultural phenomenon? Throughout the article, I understand queer characters as individuals who challenge normative conceptions of identity and sexuality.

Although the phenomenon of waiting, in broad terms, connotes queerness in the sense that experiences of waiting tend to be perceived as strange, drawn-out, awkward, and tedious sort of “temporal breaks” in which time is somehow suspended, queer waiting is waiting experienced by queer people. More specifically, queer waiting is a form of waiting that is entwined with what makes people queer, like gender

nonconformity, norm-challenging sexualities, and forms of kinship that challenge heteronormative relationality. The concept is further developed below.

### **Theorizing queer waiting**

Since waiting is a temporal circumstance, queer waiting belongs within the framework of “queer temporality.” Studies in queer temporality mostly describe the concept of “queer time” as temporal contexts in which heteronormative life patterns do not have hegemonic status (see e.g., Halberstam 2005; Freeman 2010). In this academic field, queer time contrasts with “straight time,” which refers to a temporal framework that elevates heterosexual/reproductive relationships as the only natural option. José Esteban Muñoz, for example, writes: “Queerness’s time is a stepping out of the linearity of straight time” (2009, 25).

When theorizing queer waiting, Muñoz’s thinking on queerness and time helps us recognize the temporal aspect of the concept. In *Cruising Utopia* (2009), Muñoz uses Ernst Bloch’s reflections on hope and utopia to develop a vision of a queer future: “Queerness,” he writes, “is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (2009, 1). Muñoz’s thesis is that queerness is “not yet here” but can be felt “as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality” (ibid.). Also, by envisioning “utopian queer futurity” as an incentive for queers when dealing with the imperfect present, Muñoz’s queer-temporal thinking exemplifies *why* and *for what* queer characters might wait. Essentially, because of the common conditions for queer literary characters (marginalization, stigma, loneliness, violence, and the like) their hopes for the future are oftentimes ample (as argued by, e.g., Nealon 2001; Love 2007). They wait, essentially (if not always for an articulated queer-utopian future), for “something better.”

To conceptualize queer waiting we must also investigate in what ways queer characters’ hopes for the future affect *how* they wait. Let us therefore turn to Martin Heidegger’s *Gelassenheit* (releasement) and put that concept in dialogue with Muñoz’s ideas (Muñoz too refers to some Hei-

deggerian philosophy in *Cruising Utopia*).<sup>4</sup> Releasement, which is at the center of Heidegger's *Discourse on Thinking* (1959), is a concept that has not yet been thoroughly made use of within a queer-theoretical context, but which, we will see, is productive when examining queer characters' experiences of waiting. Heidegger conveys the idea that if one is to have an authentic and meaningful relationship with the world the concept of releasement is crucial. Essentially, releasement means "calmness" or "composure" and it is commonly described as a sort of "letting-it-be attitude." Heidegger's application of releasement – *Gelassenheit* – draws on the German verb *lassen*, which means to "allow" or "let something happen." It does not, however, imply that one is passive. Releasement, Heidegger writes, "is in no way a matter of weakly allowing things to slide and drift along" but it lies, in fact, "beyond the distinction between activity and passivity" (1959/1966, 61). As such, it can be interpreted as "leaving it up to chance" or as openness to whatever might occur.

Furthermore, regarding the intertwinement of releasement and waiting, Heidegger makes a distinction between waiting "for" and waiting "upon." Waiting for something specific (like your turn in line at the grocery store) is a different sort of waiting than to wait *upon* something, an existential form of waiting without a fixed outcome. In a sense, waiting upon means opening oneself up to the risk that waiting will not lead anywhere at all: "In waiting [upon] we leave open what we are waiting for," Heidegger writes (1966, 68). As we shall see throughout this article, Heidegger's thoughts on releasement are helpful to interpret what I designate as queer waiting. There are, beyond Muñoz's and Heidegger's ideas, other theoretical concepts referenced throughout the article that help me theorize queer waiting (Edelman 2004; Halberstam 2011; Baraitser 2017; and more), but those concepts are introduced and explained where they are relevant in the interpretation.

Under the next headings, close textual analysis of *The Hours* is carried out, in which I examine how entanglements of waiting and queerness are portrayed. It should be noted that the field of queer literature studies (in which this article can be said to belong) is too vast to be summarized here. Still, it is worth emphasizing that many seminal texts within queer

theory employed literary narratives as means of reflecting on questions pertaining to sexuality and gender – Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s body of work being an obvious reference point. Also, in queer literature studies (and beyond), there is an ongoing discussion about queer reading practices and methodologies (see e.g., Sedgwick 1997; Kubowitz 2012; Moi 2017; Björklund & Lönngren 2020). Since queerness in *The Hours* is neither obfuscated nor to be found “between the lines” (i.e., it is a novel that openly deals with queer forms of sexuality), this article’s methodological approach follows Jenny Björklund and Ann-Sofie Lönngren’s (2020) notions of queer “surface reading.”<sup>5</sup> In contrast to the “queer readings” of the 1990s and early 2000s, in which the hegemony of heterosexuality in canonized literary work was challenged by emphasizing hidden queer meanings beneath the surface of texts, queer “surface reading” is to “focus on understanding what is present in the text and what it tries to communicate, rather than reading it against the grain, with suspicion and an aim to reveal its hidden ideological content” (Björklund & Lönngren 2020, 197). Queer surface reading allows me to circumvent having to “prove” that *The Hours* is a queer text. Instead, I can focus on recognizing and interpreting its many complex entanglements of queerness and waiting. In the following, portrayals of waiting are traced throughout *The Hours*. The article emphasizes one character at a time and ponders how waiting is rendered in the text. It asks questions like: What are the characters waiting “for” (something specific) or “upon” (in a more existential sense)? How do they perceive temporality while waiting? And do they rely on – or resist – releasement?

### **Passing time**

Before commencing the analysis, let us note that as a narrative motif waiting is a somewhat curious activity. For instance, as it is largely devoid of “action,” portrayals of waiting can result in rather uneventful storytelling. Therefore, it is interesting that narratives populated by queer characters often involve waiting.<sup>6</sup> In *The Hours*, for example, waiting as a motif is implied already in the title since it refers to the passing of time.

The novel consists of three parallel, sometimes overlapping, narratives in different time periods and centers on four main queer characters. We have author Virginia Woolf (in the 1920s) whose queerness (although not especially pronounced in Cunningham's novel) consists of having had romantic relationships with both men and women in real life (Woolf, Sackville-West & Bechdel 2021). We also have pregnant housewife Laura Brown (in the 1950s), Laura's grown son Richard who is dying of AIDS-related complications (in the 1990s), and his loyal friend and caretaker Clarissa who lives openly as a lesbian in New York. As we shall see in the following, these characters wait in various ways, for different reasons, but their respective experiences of waiting all correspond with expressions of queerness, in general that they challenge heteronormative conceptions of sexuality, identity, and relationality.

*The Hours* opens in 1941 with Virginia's suicide. At this point in Virginia's life, she has suffered from headaches for years, headaches made up of ominous voices: "Sometimes they are low, disembodied grumbings that coalesce out of the air itself; sometimes they emanate from behind the furniture or inside the walls. They are indistinct but full of meaning," Virginia conveys, "angry, accusatory, disillusioned" (71). Because of the voices, Virginia is determined to drown herself in a river. She simply cannot wait any longer: "The headache is always there, waiting, and her periods of freedom, however long, always feel provisional" (70). As the headaches show, Virginia's life is shaped by queer waiting in an awkward, strange, and even threatening sense. Living, in her case, means waiting – with dread – for the voices to return. Thus, on the one hand, her suicide can be seen as refusing to "let them be." On the other hand, by acknowledging her psychological challenges, conceding to them, and allowing death to claim her she is "releasing" herself in the ultimate way. Therefore, Virginia both contradicts and confirms Heidegger's definition of releasement. While allowing herself to die and not fight the voices anymore can be interpreted as somehow passive, taking her own life comes across as more of an active choice. The fact that Virginia's suicide can be seen from both angles expresses Heidegger's notion that releasement lies beyond the active/passive binary.

The majority of Virginia's arc takes place in 1923 when she waits for her husband Leonard to agree to move back to London from Richmond where the couple has lived for the past eight years. Their residency in Richmond's countryside is due to Virginia's fragile mental state. Her daily life involves waiting in various ways. For one, she is bored and waits for inspiration to come, as she is in the process of writing *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). But even more so, Virginia is constantly aware of her mortality and anticipates her own demise – she waits, in essence, for death. During an improvised bird burial in the garden with her niece, Virginia even expresses a longing for it. Surrounded by thorny roses the bird rests on its deathbed: “[Virginia] would like to lie down in its place. No denying it, she would like that” (121). In having such a definitive endgame as death in sight, Heidegger's notion of waiting “upon” is contradicted here. Waiting upon, as we have noted, means surrendering yourself to the fact that waiting might not lead anywhere at all, but Virginia awaits death specifically – and fervently.

Another form of waiting in Virginia's case is that she “acts healthy” for Leonard's sake because she does not want him to worry: “She knows how suddenly the headache can return but she discounts it in Leonard's presence, acts more firmly healthy than she sometimes feels” (71). Also: “She has learned over the years that sanity involves a certain measure of impersonation” (83). Living with angst of being exposed as someone who deviates from norms of sanity can, in Virginia's arc, be seen as a queer form of waiting.

Overall, for Virginia, queer waiting consists of a pervasive sense of strangeness (the voices, the “acting”) entwined with waiting to return to London: “all she desires is a return to the dangers of city life” (83). Interestingly, in a scene when Virginia attempts an escape from Richmond and waits at the train station, Heidegger's own experience (mentioned in the introduction) is mirrored in a literal sense: “[Virginia] had imagined (foolish!) stepping straight onto a train or, at most, waiting five or ten minutes. She stands impatiently before the clock, then walks a few slow paces down the platform” (168). Like Heidegger, Virginia attempts to pass time while waiting – albeit impatiently – for a train to

arrive. As Heidegger explains, however: “We cannot, after all, shake time off. To pass [...] means to make it pass by, to propel it, drive it on so that it passes” (1995, 93), which refers to, as I have noted, actively trying to overcome the boredom that waiting entails. In Virginia’s case though, it is not the state of waiting per se that is boring. The whole residency in Richmond is what is tiresome to her and that is what she would really like to “move past.” Dreaming of something better (“the dangers of city life”) as a way of passing time means that Virginia, in a sense, exists in a state of queer waiting that gives her the strength to endure.

### **Falling out of time**

Passing time and dreaming of something better also characterizes the parts of *The Hours* involving Clarissa. Her story begins when she is on her way to buy flowers one morning, one of several aspects of *The Hours* that mirror Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (e.g., the protagonist in Woolf’s novel is also named Clarissa). *The Hours*’ Clarissa, who is the main character in the 1990s segment, is buying flowers for a party she will host for her dying friend Richard, a poet suffering from AIDS-related complications who is receiving a lifetime achievement award for his work. The introductory paragraphs of Clarissa’s arc show that waiting figures on a tangible level. For instance, she is in a hurry to finish her party preparations but still “waits patiently for the light” (13), a statement that although it does not imply anything particularly queer suggests that waiting will figure as a motif. Even more so, Clarissa’s life is shaped by an intense waiting to re-experience the happiness of her youth, primarily a summer spent in Wellfleet as an eighteen-year-old when she was in a passionate relationship with Richard.

At present, Clarissa is fifty-two and lives openly as a lesbian with her girlfriend Sally. On the surface Clarissa is satisfied with life, but beneath her façade of an organized, reliable, and professional New York woman her memories of the happier past invade her present and create “a sense of dislocation” (91). Clarissa does not recognize her life and neither Sally nor Richard appears to be able to give her what she needs:

She could simply leave it and return to her other home, where neither Sally nor Richard exists; where there is only the essence of Clarissa, a girl grown into a woman, still full of hope, still capable of anything. It is revealed to her that all her sorrow and loneliness, the whole creaking scaffold of it, stems simply from pretending to live in this apartment among these objects, with kind, nervous Sally, and that if she leaves she'll be happy, or better than happy. She'll be herself. She feels briefly, wonderfully alone, with everything ahead of her. (92)

As the quote shows, Clarissa impersonates being happy, similar to Virginia. We also see that she harbors a longing to be free, both from the memories of the past and the pretending in the present. Interestingly, despite living openly as a lesbian with Sally, "utopian queerness," in Clarissa's case, is a thing of the past, more specifically when she and Richard – two sexually non-conforming people – were young lovers in Wellfleet. At the same time, however, Clarissa's possible happiness, the quote tells us, is in the future, "on the horizon" as Muñoz would describe it. Happiness, evidently, is ahead of her, but illusive, always out of reach. She longs both backward and forward and is constantly on the move but simultaneously "stuck," a term that although it is not used in Cunningham's novel, characterizes the lives of all four main characters. In Stephen Daldry's movie version (2002) the term is utilized when Meryl Streep, who plays Clarissa, has a nervous breakdown on her kitchen floor while remembering a beautiful morning in Wellfleet with Richard: "From that moment," she says, "I've been stuck." Although the novel does not include the term, both the text and the film demonstrate that Clarissa's attitude toward life does not align with release-ment. When Clarissa is not having a nervous breakdown, her outward appearance indicates a sort of coolness or composure (characteristics of release-ment in Heidegger's view), but on the inside she is far from calm. She tries to get ahold of her life and convince herself that she is not a failure: "It isn't failure, she tells herself [...] but it requires more from you, the whole effort does; just being present and grateful; being happy (terrible word)" (94).

In Clarissa's case, queer waiting transpires in the sense that she desperately awaits happiness. She longs for a happiness of the past, a happiness that has slipped through her fingers, and desires a future happiness that is equally illusive. She is inhabited by a pervasive "sense of missed opportunity" that derives from having loved Richard "at her most optimistic moment" (97), which can be seen as an expression of what Lauren Berlant (2011) calls "cruel optimism," in essence, "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (1). *The Hours*, in fact, puts forth a complex notion that it is Richard – and his deadly illness – that are keeping Clarissa from achieving happiness for herself.

Clarissa's ambivalent longing backward and forward results in strangeness ("dislocation") permeating her arc. Furthermore, beyond being a phenomenon that Clarissa experiences within – that is, something metaphysical – waiting also occurs in a tangible sense. The tangible aspect of waiting is exemplified when Sally comes home and finds her "sitting on the sofa, just sitting there, as if she were waiting in a doctor's waiting room" (184). When Clarissa looks up at Sally the queerness of her waiting is brought forth because she looks "peculiar [...] more disoriented than stricken, as if she is not quite sure who she is" (184).

Most of all though, Clarissa's queer waiting is linked with Richard, and Richard is also waiting in a queer sense because he is dying. Let us note that waiting for death (one's own release or the release of a loved one, when life can go "back to normal") is not exclusive to queer people – it characterizes all forms of life. However, within the framework of the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 90s – and in queer life overall – death can be seen as a more definitive end than for straight people, whose lives, in a sense, "continue" through the children and grandchildren they often leave behind (cf. Edelman 2004, to be explained momentarily). Alongside being a defining and haunting part of queer history, the AIDS epidemic is, I argue, a particularly descriptive example of queer waiting. The era portrayed in Cunningham's novel was one when antiretroviral drugs like AZT were hard to come by and not as effective as today's PrEP (a drug that can reduce one's risk of contracting HIV).<sup>7</sup>

Back then, contracting the virus meant an oftentimes slow and painful waiting for death, which Richard embodies in the novel.

Richard's queer waiting for death can be identified in that he exists in what reminds us of a state of decomposition. He spends his days in an old chair that is described as "the chair of someone who, if not actually insane, has let things slide so far, has gone such a long way toward the exhausted relinquishment of ordinary caretaking—simple hygiene, regular nourishment—that the difference between insanity and hopelessness is difficult to pinpoint" (58). Because Richard anticipates death with absolute certainty (which echoes Virginia's knowledge of her mortality), his daily life has an awkwardness to it. We see the awkwardness in Richard's reality being characterized by a sense of time "interrupted." He explains: "I seem to have fallen out of time" (62), a statement implying that he sees himself as already dead. Also, as noted in the introduction, waiting interrupts the flow of time and in that regard Richard's statement is a description of waiting. Having "fallen out of time" demonstrates that Richard, like Clarissa, is stuck somehow and exists outside of the conventional conception of time, that is, that time's natural progression is forward-flowing and "straight" (Muñoz 2009, 25). Although being part of the forward flow of time would mean not having to endure waiting any longer, for Richard it would also mean death. "I've failed," he says repeatedly (65, 199), which in contrast to Clarissa's failure signifies something deeper: Not really living but still not dead, Richard regards himself as having failed both in life and in death, and that awkward experience of in-betweenness exemplifies the queer waiting that is his whole existence. Both Richard and Clarissa demonstrate that waiting for something and not reaching the endpoint of one's wait can involve feelings of failure for queer people. Failure, in fact, is a recurring theme among the characters in *The Hours*. Therefore, Jack Halberstam's concept "the queer art of failure" (2011) functions as a reference point henceforth. In Halberstam's conception, failing to live up to heteronormative and capitalist conceptions of what constitutes a "successful life" (like monogamy, a happy marriage, children of one's own, and the like) is a common characteristic in the lives of queer

people: “Failing,” Halberstam writes, “is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well” (2011, 3). Like failing, waiting is a phenomenon that characterizes queer lives, and in *The Hours*, queer characters’ experiences of failing and waiting are often entwined.

Apart from Richard’s AIDS-related complications, *The Hours* makes it evident that queer waiting to die during the AIDS epidemic not only affected those who had contracted the virus, but also those who cared for the ill, something that is underlined in a scene when Clarissa runs into an old friend, Walter, who is caring for his sick lover. Although Walter compassionately cares for his lover, Evan, he longs for normalcy. He explains that Evan is “feeling so much better on this new cocktail [the antiretroviral medication], he says he wants to go dancing tonight” (16). Slightly skeptical, Clarissa wonders if dancing is not “a little much,” but Walter assures her he will “keep an eye on him,” not “let him overdo it,” and concludes: “He just wants to be out in the world again” (ibid.). Walter’s testimony conveys that both he and Evan want to be free from waiting for the dreadful inevitability of death. “These days, Clarissa believes, you measure people first by their kindness and their capacity for devotion” (18), a quote that casts light on an entanglement of queerness, illness, caring, and waiting during the days of the AIDS crisis. Additionally, as David Caron (2021) has theorized, experiences of waiting are particularly noticeable within the framework of care, which we can see exemplified in *The Hours*. “At a basic level,” Caron writes, “care, like waiting, involves duration (of the caring relationship, which unfolds not just in space but also in time) and a degree of uncertainty [...] regarding the outcome or progression of the condition involved” (2021, 13). In the context of the AIDS epidemic, we can identify the distinct conditions of the relationship between caring and waiting. On the one hand, because of *uncertainty* (like Caron states), but even more so, on the other hand, because of *certainty* of death. For many who were waiting queerly to die from AIDS-related complications back then there was no future to look forward to, neither in Muñoz’s “queer-utopian” sense nor otherwise.

In Richard’s case, queer waiting can be identified in two primary ways: first, by him anticipating death from AIDS-related complications and

second, in a sense of strangeness in his daily life because he, like Virginia, hears voices: “The voices are always here,” he explains (198). “The fact that I sometimes don’t hear them or see them doesn’t mean they’re gone” (59). The presence of the voices does not make Richard any less lonely, however. Apart from the visits from Clarissa he is mostly by himself (something which tends to make time move slower) and his perception of having “fallen out of time” manifests in a tangible way for Clarissa as well. When she enters Richard’s apartment “she feels, always, as if she has passed through a dimensional warp—through the looking glass, as it were; as if the lobby, stairwell, and hallway exist in another realm altogether; another time” (56). As we can see, the temporal aspect of queer waiting is particularly noticeable in Richard’s arc. For him, time plays a significant role since he hardly has any time left. In fact, queer waiting has characterized his entire life because alongside waiting to die in the 1990s, Richard has, since childhood, waited for his mother Laura (who abandoned him) to return, or to provide an answer as to why she left.

### **Enduring time**

In *Enduring Time* (2017), Lisa Baraitser examines (among other things) experiences of waiting and caregiving as “suspended” or “endured” temporalities. In the following, Baraitser’s reflections on *gendered* experiences of time – particularly how caregiving roles disproportionately fall to women – form the backdrop to my interpretation of Laura Brown. Although it might be tempting to demonize Laura (who abandons her family), she is, we will see, far from a one-note storybook monster. Stuck in a heteronormative 1950s existence in the suburbs while longing to live another life, Laura’s arc in *The Hours* involves expressions of profound despair and ambivalence. At first glance, she appears to not know exactly what she longs for – just that she is not living the way she is supposed to – and thus appears to rely more on release than the other characters. In Heidegger’s terminology, Laura is waiting “upon” something she cannot fully articulate.

In general, in Laura’s arc, queer waiting consists of an entwinement of dread and endurance. As mentioned previously, she is hesitant to face her

family and the reality they represent. Rather, she wants to stay in bed in the morning, reading: “One more page, she decides; just one more. She isn’t ready yet [...] She will permit herself another minute here, in bed, before entering the day. She will allow herself just a little more time” (40). Still, she convinces herself to face her family, although it creates a profound sense of awkwardness and contradiction within her. Sometimes she reflects on why she chose her boxed-in life, why she married her husband when he came back from the war: “She married him out of love. She married him out of guilt; out of fear of being alone; out of patriotism. He was simply too good, too kind, too earnest, too sweet-smelling not to marry. He had suffered so much. He wanted her” (106). The quote demonstrates that Laura’s own desires are neglected in favor of her husband’s, but she persuades herself to keep going: “She does not dislike her child, does not dislike her husband. She will rise and be cheerful” (41).

Although Laura tries to persuade herself that her life is filled with happiness (cf. Ahmed 2010, 65–78), she suffers in silence. Her pregnancy, for example, represents a sort of waiting that under other circumstances could signify happiness, but in Laura’s case, being pregnant means waiting, with fear, to become “trapped here forever, posing as a wife” (205). Like Virginia and Clarissa in the parallel narratives, Laura works hard not to be unhappy: “She *will* want this second child,” she tells herself (79, my emphasis). Motherhood, as reflected on in Baraitser’s (2017) work, is a temporality characterized by heteronormativity and chronicity, “a time that is alive to the potentials of *not* moving on, whilst at the same time maintaining its link with the ethical principle of one’s own future being bound up with the future of another” (2017, 181, emphasis in original). Although Laura is stuck as a housewife and mother (bound up with the future of her children) and “can’t always remember how a mother would act” (47), suggesting that she is unfit to be a parent is unfair. It is possible to argue that 1950s society forces her to perform a heteronormative role, and that heteronormativity is to blame for her actions.

Additionally, Laura’s relationship with young Richard (who is called “Richie” in the 1950s segment) demonstrates an awkwardness that relates

to queer waiting. Since Laura is a stay-at-home mother, she and Richie spend a lot of time together and wait for the other one to “act their part,” that is, to play the role of the parent or the child: “Alone with Richie, she sometimes feels unmoored [...] He seems, almost always, to be waiting to see what she will do next” (47). They observe each other, almost skeptically, and wait for something to happen. But the queerness of Laura’s waiting extends the awkward relationship with Richie since she appears to be in love with her neighbor Kitty. Kitty is an outgoing attractive woman who is “deeply, almost profoundly, popular” (105), in essence, everything Laura is not. Laura’s feelings for Kitty are labelled “desire” (143) but can be interpreted as more than an infatuation (or a flight from reality) since Kitty’s presence, when she knocks at Laura’s door, result in inner conflict: “Laura swallows a pang of excitement and something stronger than excitement, something that resembles panic. [...] She wants to rush to the door and she wants to stand here, immobile, at the sink, until Kitty gives up and goes away” (101). When Kitty enters and breaks down during the ensuing conversation, disclosing that she must go to the hospital to have an operation, Laura comforts her with a tentative kiss: “They both know what they are doing. They rest their mouths, each on the other. They touch their lips together, but do not quite kiss” (110). The scene depicts ambivalence and anticipation. For Laura, the encounter (kiss or no kiss) represents the peak of waiting queerly to find out if her feelings are reciprocated. At the same time, she dreads finding out because if Kitty likes her back, they will have mutually acknowledged a desire that cannot be forgotten or ignored. The hopefulness embedded in waiting is noticeable here. Essentially, the outcome of waiting might be worse than waiting itself. When one waits, anything can still happen. To Laura, the kiss is as thrilling as awkward, an awkwardness heightened by Richie’s presence in the room: “Laura glances over at Richie. He is still holding the red truck. He is still watching” (110).

Overall, Laura’s queer waiting, which manifests in dread and enduring time, overpowers her and she contemplates taking her own life, “a course of action that [is] waiting for her” (145), which mirrors Virginia’s

arc. Laura is not *as* determined to kill herself as Virginia but when she checks into a hotel by herself and lies on the bed, she imagines it: “She is somehow like a newlywed, reclining in her chamber, waiting for [...] not her husband, or any other man. For someone. For something” (150). Laura’s pregnancy makes suicide a particularly morbid choice. In a way, she embodies Lee Edelman’s (2004) theories about queerness and “the death drive,” a psychoanalytic concept describing the impulse toward undoing and destruction, as opposed to the life-affirming forces of reproduction and growth. In his influential queer polemic, Edelman argues that contemporary politics, regardless of ideological affiliation, is fundamentally oriented around “the Child,” a symbolic figure that represents the promise of a better future, sustained by reproduction and heteronormative social structures. Edelman critiques this logic and writes that queerness “names the side of those not ‘fighting for the children,’ the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism” (2004, 3). Instead of adhering to imperatives of social order and heteronormative continuity, queerness, Edelman argues, should embrace its association with negativity, opposition, and refusal. Drawing on Edelman’s notions, Laura embodies a contradiction. Although she is a mother in a heteronormative marriage (someone who is expected to “fight for the children”), she expresses, by abandoning her family, queer negativity and undoing. It should be underlined that Laura does not embody the death drive in any tangible sense. Lying on the bed in the hotel room, “[s]he strokes her belly” and says “I would never” out loud (152). Laura is painfully aware that ending her life would be reprehensible but at the same time, “she is glad to know (for somehow, suddenly, she knows) that it is possible to stop living” (152). The knowledge that it is “possible to stop living” comes across as a strange comfort that gives Laura (like Virginia) the strength to endure a little longer. It does not, however, take away her longing to leave and like Clarissa and Richard, Laura embodies Halberstam’s queer art of failure. For one, she feels like a “failure” (144, 193) and, in a sense, until she actually leaves (an event that is not depicted in Cunningham’s novel), she “fails” to leave. And finally, by leaving, she could be seen as “failing” as a mother.

**“But there are still the hours, aren’t there?”**

Contrary to Laura, Richard does not fail to kill himself. In fact, dying by his own hand can be seen as his way of beating AIDS to the punch – that is, not letting AIDS claim him – and Richard’s death is thus perceivable as anything but a failure. It is not, however, devoid of emotional trauma since it is witnessed by Clarissa. When she arrives to pick Richard up for the ceremony and party, she enters the apartment and finds him sitting on the windowsill. Clarissa immediately grasps the gravity of the situation and its inevitable outcome: “She is surprisingly calm—she can feel herself acting well in a difficult situation—but at the same time is removed from herself, from the room, as if she is witnessing something that’s already happened” (197). She can see it all before her: he will let go, he will fall, and it is only a matter of time. Richard’s determination (which mirrors Virginia’s) can, in the shadow of his deadly illness, be understood as an expression of autonomy. Also, his suicide signifies the culmination of a drawn-out queer waiting to die, a terrible ordeal he wants to escape:

He says, “I don’t know if I can face this. You know. The party and the ceremony, and then the hour after that, and the hour after that.”

“You don’t have to go to the party. You don’t have to go to the ceremony. You don’t have to do anything at all.”

“But there are still the hours, aren’t there? One and then another, and you get through that one and then, my god, there’s another. I’m so sick.”

“You have good days still. You know you do.”

“Not really.” (197–198)

Richard’s refusal to *wait* for death, instead taking his own life, is an example of how queer waiting – especially in the context of the AIDS crisis – is characterized by resistance. When faced with one’s inevitable demise, a queer man like Richard has a limited number of options. One is to fight for his life, while at the same time knowing all too well that it is hopeless. Another is to take control of his destiny through suicide. While neither constitutes a particularly “happy ending,” the latter involves a larger degree of autonomy.

As the above-quoted scene shows, Richard's arc in *The Hours* does not just revolve around him waiting to die from AIDS-related complications but waiting to build up the courage to take his own life before his ailments claim him. Like his mother, Richard thus exercises immense willpower. Although he holds on to life as by a thin thread, he simultaneously longs to truly let go. On the one hand, the novel portrays Richard's acceptance that he *will* die, which can be interpreted as an expression of releasement; on the other hand, Richard expresses that he wants to choose himself when and in what way he dies. Releasement, in Richard's case, affects his queer waiting, but the solution to his problems (death) lies beyond both Heidegger's concept and Muñoz's utopian queer futurity.

### Conclusion

On the one hand, *The Hours* demonstrates that releasement can be a temporary strategy for queers to deal with challenges while they, in Muñoz's conception, envision (and await) a better future. On the other hand, Cunningham's novel includes examples of queer characters forcefully *resisting* releasement as a solution, thereby refusing to let things be as they are. Overall, the ways with which queer characters in *The Hours* relate to releasement casts light on the difference between "happy" and "livable" lives, a contrast that begs the question: When one, as a queer person, constantly waits for things to get better, is one then living a happy life or merely enduring time?

In my analysis, Heidegger's definition of releasement aids in identifying the difference between merely surviving and actually being happy. Laura's queer waiting, for example, is recognized both by having the willpower to "let things be" and perform her heteronormative role, and by not being able to *fully* let things go, which leads to her abandoning her family. Her arc thus proposes that releasement is not a solution to queer suffering, but it can, at times, be a means to an end, a way of living while waiting for a better life.

*The Hours* ends with Laura, now an old woman, turning up at Clarissa's house for Richard's (now cancelled) party. Clarissa, who is painfully

aware of the suffering Laura caused Richard when she abandoned him, feels resentment toward her, but not entirely. Being face-to-face with Richard's mother is an encounter filled with a variety of conflicting emotions – guilt, blame, grief, even compassion – because Laura, Clarissa understands, is still enduring: “She is, Clarissa thinks, just waiting for this hour to end” (220). A noteworthy contrast emerges here. Clarissa, who lives openly as a lesbian in the 1990s, appears to empathize with Laura (albeit somewhat reluctantly), who was never able to “come out” in the 1950s. The tragedy of Laura's life is further heightened by the fact that she has survived her entire family. She, Clarissa thinks, “is alive when all the others, all those who struggled to survive in her wake, have passed away. She is alive now, after her ex-husband has been carried off by liver cancer, after her daughter has been killed by a drunk driver. She is alive after Richard has jumped from a window” (222). Even though Laura has survived, her life has been characterized by guilt over leaving. After having given birth to her second child, her two choices stood in stark contrast to one another, they were equally impossible: staying and dying or abandoning her family to save herself. There is a lesson to be learned here: Had Laura been able to lead another life to begin with – that is, not being socialized into marriage, not having children, not being forced to conform to heteronormative expectations – she might have been happier.

The aim of this article has been to investigate if – and if so how – depictions of waiting structures experiences for queer characters in *The Hours*. The article has demonstrated some ways that queer individuals must deal with waiting, rooted in their queerness. Temporal expressions like “passing time” (Virginia), “falling out of time” (Richard and Clarissa), and “enduring time” (Laura), as well as experiences of being “stuck” in time emphasize not only waiting as a key theme in *The Hours*, but also, with Cunningham's novel as an example, the article designates the state of waiting as a queer cultural phenomenon. Often, for queers, waiting is “a way of life” that is forced upon us by heteronormativity. Other times, we choose to wait ourselves; to not come out until we are ready, for instance. As the characters in *The Hours* make evident, waiting structures queer experiences in specific ways. Before concluding, it should be

emphasized that although *The Hours* teaches us that there are ways to deal with queer forms of waiting, the novel conveys that enduring time, or pretending that one is happy, or taking one's life as far from ideal solutions. Rather, *The Hours* – and my interpretation of it – can function as motivators to uproot the social structures (like the closet) that make waiting a central feature of the queer experience to begin with.

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**OSCAR VON SETH** is a postdoctoral fellow at the Centre for Gender Research, Uppsala University and a Visiting Research Fellow at the Department of History, King's College London. His research interests are at the intersection of literature, cinema, and queer theories. In his dissertation, *Outsiders and Others: Queer Friendships in Novels by Hermann Hesse* (2022), it is argued that the male friendships at the center of Hesse's stories are “queer friendships” that challenge heteronormative conceptions of relationality, sexuality, and desire. His postdoc project, “Queer Waiting in Literature and Film” (funded by the Swedish Research Council), examines if waiting, a universal human activity and an unavoidable aspect of life, can be understood as a queer cultural phenomenon.

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## NOTES

1. Previous research on *The Hours* has neither emphasized waiting as a key motif, nor analyzed the entanglements of waiting and queerness that are the focus of this article. It should be mentioned, though, that in queer scholarship, Cunningham's novel has been referred to as a "formulation of queer temporality" (Halberstam 2005, 3).
2. Henceforth, references to Cunningham's novel will be given with page number only.
3. Philosophical works about waiting exist in large quantities, far too many to be summarized here. It is important to note, however, that they rarely (if ever) include reflections on waiting and *queerness* (or even waiting and *sexuality*).
4. It is important to emphasize that Martin Heidegger was affiliated with the Nazis, whose beliefs are far from aligned with queer ideals. Nevertheless, Heidegger's philosophical concepts (releasement and others) can be fruitfully appropriated in queer-focused scholarship (see e.g., Ahmed 2005; Muñoz 2009). Muñoz, for instance, writes: "Although I [...] have a great disdain for what Heidegger's writing became [in terms of conveying right-wing political ideas], I nonetheless look on it as failure worth knowing, a potential that faltered but can be nonetheless reworked in the service of a different politics and understanding of the world" (2009, 16), a statement with which this author agrees. For further reading on Heidegger and Nazism, see e.g., Richard Wolin, ed., *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader* (1991).
5. Reading "between the lines" was a more common approach in early queer reading styles, as exemplified by e.g., Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1997) in her influential essay on "paranoid reading."
6. For queer narratives relying on waiting as a theme, see e.g., Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), wherein the main character, Stephen, waits desperately to be recognized as his true self, and for companionship and romance; Annie Proulx's *Brokeback Mountain* (1997), in which the gay cowboys Jack and Ennis are only able to endure their day-to-day closeted lives as married men because they wait to reconnect with one another; and Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* (2015), wherein the protagonist, Jude, waits his entire life to experience intimacy and love, and to overcome the sexual trauma of his childhood.
7. Alongside a large number of novels, autobiographies, films, and dramatic texts portraying the AIDS epidemic, the research field on HIV and AIDS is vast. See, for example, Susan Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989).