

Out of Date: Time Travel as Regression for Women in Lauren Beukes' *The Shining Girls*

Fuera de fecha: El viaje en el tiempo como retroceso para las mujeres en *The Shining Girls*, de Lauren Beukes

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Abstract: This paper examines Lauren Beukes' *The Shining Girls* (2013) as a reflection on recurrent obstacles to women's rights. Beukes geometrizes her characters' temporalities as either linear or circular to convey the conflict between women who fight for equality and the enduring socio-economic forces that block their development as full human beings. Contrary to traditional genderings of time, in Beukes' work the male chrononaut time-travels in circles to kill promising women, thus embodying backlash discourse and practices that repeatedly jeopardize feminist advances made across time. In contrast, his victims are set in chrononormative linear time to represent women's struggles for advances in reproductive rights, sexual freedom, and career opportunities.

Keywords: Time travel; chrononormativity; women's rights; backlash; Lauren Beukes; *The Shining Girls*.

Summary: Introduction. Time Travel as Disrupted Advancement in *The Shining Girls*. The Embodiment of Backlash in the Chrononaut. The Normative Temporality of the "Shining Girls" as Progress. Conclusions.

Resumen: Este artículo analiza *The Shining Girls* (2013) de Lauren Beukes como una reflexión sobre los impedimentos recurrentes que sufren los derechos de las mujeres. Beukes geometriza las temporalidades de sus personajes como lineales o circulares para transmitir el conflicto entre las mujeres que luchan por la igualdad y las fuerzas socioeconómicas que impiden su evolución como seres humanos plenos. Contradiendo generacizaciones tradicionales del tiempo, en la obra de Beukes el crononauta viaja en círculos en el tiempo para matar a mujeres prometedoras, encarnando así discursos y prácticas de retroceso que ponen en peligro constante los logros

feministas conquistados a lo largo del tiempo. Por el contrario, sus víctimas se sitúan en una línea temporal crononormativa para representar los esfuerzos de las mujeres por conseguir avances en derechos reproductivos, carreras profesionales y libertad sexual.

Palabras clave: Viaje en el tiempo; crononormatividad; derechos de las mujeres; retroceso; Lauren Beukes; *The Shining Girls*.

Sumario: Introducción. El viaje en el tiempo como avance truncado en *The Shining Girls*. La encarnación del retroceso en el crononauta. Progreso en la temporalidad normativa de las “Shining Girls.” Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION

Time has a sociocultural dimension. Because temporality is not a universal, uniform concept it has undergone profound revision and debate for over a century in several ways, from Henri Bergson’s time philosophy to feminist, queer or postcolonial approaches to time. The prevailing model at present is the goal-oriented and productive clock time of capitalism (Bryson 23) where the sequential chain of events is the normative representation of time.¹

Broadly speaking, two-time cultures have traditionally been outlined:

[T]he linear/cyclical distinction sees the former as the goal-oriented time of history and production in the public sphere, in which events and processes unfold one after another and time’s arrow points irrevocably to the future and to each individual’s death. Cyclical time, in contrast, is seen as the time of reproduction and caring in the private sphere, characterised by repetition and the here and now as the wheel of time endlessly revolves. (Bryson 136–137)

Assuming this basic distinction, some feminist thinkers have tackled time as gendered—as lived, understood or constructed differently by the genders. Such opposition between circular and linear time lies at the core of several feminist approaches given that, in Fanny Söderbäck’s words, it “structures the very regime of patriarchy” (304). As the mathematical quantification of time improved, patriarchal time-keeping replaced

¹ In this paper my use of the term “chrononormativity” has been inspired by Elizabeth Freeman’s critique of the linear organization of time in capitalism and heterosexuality. “Chrononormativity” will be employed to refer to the dominant conception of time as linear and future-oriented that endorses developmental life courses.

matriarchal astronomical models, favoring the measurement of human—that is, mostly masculine—linear progress (Göttner-Abendroth 113–14).

Among those studies that have argued for the existence of a particular women's time resulting from traditional gender roles, Simone de Beauvoir wrote that men's lives connect with the linearity of history ("to mould the future") while women's lives ("biologically destined for the repetition of Life") relate to the circularity of reproduction (90–91). In her well-known essay "Women's Time," Julia Kristeva hoped for a triumph over the dichotomy between the feminine "cyclical time" (of repetition and biological rhythms) and the masculine and patriarchal linear time (of development, history, language and politics) (16–17). In the volume edited by Frieda Johles Forman and Caoron Sowton *Taking Our Time: Feminist Perspectives on Temporality* the governing idea is that linear time is phallogentric, hostile and deterministic, replacing women's subjective experience of recurrent temporality.

This dualistic approach has been criticized for the essentialism implied in the equation of women's time with biological or natural time. Furthermore, it has been found flawed "for its failure to acknowledge the ways that 'linear time' is lived by women as well as men" (Browne 23n45). Valerie Bryson warns against "any simple identification of 'men's time' and 'women's time'," although she remarks that "there are identifiable gender differences in time use, that these will generate different ways of relating to and understanding time, and that those associated with men will be privileged" (118–19). As Rita Felski puts it,

those who believe that linear time is masculine and cyclical time feminine usually point to the dramatic contrast between the grand narratives of male historical time and the repetitive everyday time of women. This difference then serves as evidence of a vast gendered gulf in temporal experience. . . . The perception that cyclical time is a uniquely female province is highly misleading. Such a perception arises from the fact that cyclical time is often seen as natural time, and hence the sphere of women. (*Doing Time* 20)

Although the polarity "women's time" and "men's time" is not categorical and can be subject to much debate, it provides a valid methodological instrument to approach Lauren Beukes' *The Shining Girls*, a novel that reverses these time models to portray women in linear, historical time and so deal with feminist issues like gender violence, women's independence, and social justice.

Connecting the fight for women's rights and linear time is necessary here. To quote Felski's words again, "feminism cannot do without an orientation to the future. . . . We have a powerful urge to organize things in an upward curve" ("Telling Time" 23). Women's progress regarding social equality has in fact been narrated in specific geometrical ways. We are by now familiar with the four *waves* of feminism, which is a forward-looking narrative of accomplishment and cyclical advance. Some feminist thinkers have opposed such teleological model of feminism that assumes a linear progression and some sort of final goal (e.g., Grosz; Hemmings; Browne; McBean). These critiques of the evolutionary model of the feminist movement perceive that the waves or phases model tends to leave out the multiplicity of women's experiences and the recurrence of certain discriminatory phenomena that have not receded with the emergence of successive new waves. Furthermore,

the treatment of the past as a complete story that has led up to the present can also lead to a "closedness to the future," as it encourages us to think that the identified direction will necessarily continue, and hence can prevent us from considering the future in terms of unpredictability, or a range of possibilities. (Browne 11)

In other words, the linear narrative constructed around progress, with its associated idea of inevitable advance, might overshadow the signs of regression. Although women's rights and gender equality have experienced recurring backlashes over the years, a wide-reaching reversion of equality policies has recently been observed in Europe and the United States, fueled by nostalgic discourses. This backsliding of gender equality involves a serious attack against women's rights regarding birth control, sexuality, and all types of violence against them. However problematic the terms "progress" and "backlash" may be² when we discuss such regressive discourses, the narrative of linear advance still constitutes a powerful image that metaphorizes feminists' fight for social change.

This paper aims to explore the ways in which Lauren Beukes' novel applies the time-travel device to address endangered women's rights, especially through the contrast between the circular time-traveling of its male main character and the linear life course of its female protagonist.

² See for instance "Backlashes Then and Now" in Faludi, and the special issue of *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* edited by Piscopo and Walsh.

The novel's main plotline happens to be set two years after the publication of Susan Faludi's *Backlash* in 1991, and serves to illustrate those occurrences in history

triggered by the perception—accurate or not—that women are making great strides. These outbreaks are backlashes because they have always arisen in reaction to women's 'progress', caused not simply by a bedrock of misogyny but by the specific efforts of contemporary women to improve their status, efforts that have been interpreted time and again by men—especially men grappling with real threats to their economic and social well-being on other fronts—as spelling their own masculine doom. (Faludi 10)

In the novel, the geometrization of time as circular and ahistorical by means of the time-travel metaphor creates a powerful image for the recurring resistance to change in matters that concern women's identity and agency. Counter-progress and backlash have persistently impregnated the public discourse to jeopardize advances regarding gender relations and social justice, as Lauren Beukes explains:

I didn't want to do a Bill and Ted and go back to the dinosaurs and Shakespeare, Hitler and all the rest of it. I was interested in how the 20th century shaped us and how much has changed and how much has stayed the same. . . . The whole book is a time travel loop but I also get to look at loops of history—the Depression, the fact that women's rights are still an issue today. (qtd. in Black)

Therefore, by presenting masculine regression as opposed to women's progress(ion), the novel showcases the gender asymmetries of decades ago that nevertheless resound as eerily familiar to twenty-first century readers.

1. TIME TRAVEL AS DISRUPTED ADVANCEMENT IN *THE SHINING GIRLS*

The graphic representation of history as an ongoing line mirrors the thermodynamic concept of the unidirectionality of time ("time's arrow"). This concept has frequently been revised or openly challenged in time-travel fiction—a genre that interrogates constructions of the past and our sense of the future by revising dominant representations of history, usually

linear, and offering alternative geometrizations³ of human experience. In 1970, Joanna Russ declared that time travel was “out of fashion” (“The Image of Women” 200). Russ would be wrong now if one is to judge by the remarkable presence of time traveling in recent popular media (there is even a popular board game called “That Time You Killed Me”). Time-travel fiction is not new by any means but has lately populated our streaming media services with time-travel movies and TV series, many of which have been based on novels.⁴ Rüdiger Heinze quotes from a study by Andrew Gordon to claim that the proliferation of time-travel stories and films may be explained by a “pervasive uneasiness about our present and uncertainty about our future, along with a concurrent nostalgia about our past” (Heinze 225–26). In time-travel plots, disturbances in physical chrononormativity connote deep commotions of established orders and of the very basic parameters (time and space) that define identity, allowing for other non-normative experiences of time. In agreement with David Wittenberg, in time-travel fiction “many of the most basic theoretical questions about storytelling, and by extension about the philosophy of temporality, history, and subjectivity, are represented in the form of literal devices and plots, at once both convenient for criticism and fruitfully complex” (150). However consistent with physical theories or internally coherent they may be, all these stories “show us a deeply unsettling, ‘unreliable’ universe, where time is ‘out of joint’, and where notions of free will, control, and autonomous agency are highly questionable or at least problematic” (Heinze 225).

Fictions that employ time-disruptive strategies prove extremely effective to spotlight concepts like progress or nostalgia. In particular, non-linear narrative timelines have been useful to represent women’s own experience of time as well as gender inequalities experienced in their participation in the public and private domains. By way of examples, Joanna Russ’ *The Female Man*, Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, Jeanette Winterson’s *Sexing the Cherry* and, more recently, Ted Chiang’s “Story of Your Life” question linear time models and introduce alternative temporalities for women to subvert chrononormativity and to unfold their subjectivities out of “patrilinear

³ I borrow the term from George Slusser and Danièle Chatelain, who analyze the geometrization of human experience into narrative forms “that, when contrasted to the old sense of a linear life-line, are paradoxical in nature” (162).

⁴ Beukes’ novel itself has been adapted into a TV series, now streaming on AppleTV+.

time” (to borrow the term from Donaldson). While the premise of Beukes’ *The Shining Girls* is science fantasy, the novel raises questions regarding gender (in)equality and social (counter-)progress. This paper will analyze how the novum⁵ (Suvin 117) of time traveling allows us to explore masculine power over women in light of the shapes of time discussed above.

The Shining Girls is Beukes’ third novel, following *Moxyland* and *Zoo City*, for which she won the Arthur C. Clark Award in 2012. Set in Chicago,⁶ the novel spans from 1929 to 1993, traveling from the Great Depression to the narrative present and through the postwar of the 1940s, the Red Scare of the 1950s, and other historic milestones. It tells the story of a time-traveling serial killer, Harper Curtis, who has been hunting Chicago women for sixty years. In 1931, he finds a key in a coat he has just stolen, which opens the door to a fanciful house with an extraordinary room in it, where names of women and strange objects glow on the walls. Harper somehow knows he must start a mission to kill all these women to extinguish the “glow” (the potential) they already show as little girls. He finds out he can travel through time by simply leaving “the House,” to which he returns after every crime. Harper gives the young versions of his victims some of the artifacts of “the Room” to mark them as targets, and to kill them years later. However, one of his victims, Kirby Mazrachi, survives the terrible assault. In 1993, she starts her internship in a newspaper with a reporter (Dan Velasquez) who is now covering sports but reported on her story back in 1989. As they investigate her own and similar crimes, they track Harper through the connecting objects the killer has been leaving on his victims as some sort of chronological breadcrumbs.

In Beukes’ story, chrono-traveling is employed to murder women who struggle for independence, outstanding careers or sexual freedom—that is, undesired gender performance in the patriarchal order. At first, the novel appears to be one more instance of time-travel romance of the kind which has proliferated since the 1980s, but we soon discover how Beukes revises the genre. The attractive chrononaut does look for women through time—only not to love them but to kill them. Sex is still present in the formula, for Harper “revisits the [crime] scenes years later or before, skipping

⁵ Suvin defines the novum as a “strange newness” (116–17) that is nevertheless scientifically plausible, like androids or the meeting with aliens.

⁶ The Chicago River had its flux reversed at the beginning of the twentieth century. Rivers have traditionally symbolized the flow of time, so the novel’s setting suits the time-travel trope.

decades, to jerk off over the place a girl died” (Beukes 209). Yet, his desire involves the aggressive attitude of the dominant male who refuses to change his prejudiced worldview. He is thus determined to protect it with violence,⁷ as his typical batterer talk betrays: “‘It’s not my fault, sweetheart,’ he says. ‘It’s yours. You shouldn’t shine. You shouldn’t make me do this’” (Beukes 167).

2. THE EMBODIMENT OF BACKLASH IN THE CHRONONAUT

In Lauren Beukes’ novel, Harper’s dominion over time is a figurative representation of power structures where man not only prevails but also executes those that threaten his prerogative. This section will address the circular, ahistorical time of the chrononaut against the linear time of the other characters—mainly Harper’s victims. *The Shining Girls* geometrizes femininity and hegemonic masculinity in a peculiar way that reverses standard, though questionable, gendered shapes of time. In contrast with other stories that employ the time-travel novum to create alternative chronologies that defy patrilinear time, this novel keeps women characters aligned with time’s arrow while Harper travels to the future to hunt down his victims and then returns “home” (that is, his own timeline in the late 1920s): “Here we go. Round and round, like your Ferris wheel” (Beukes 6).

Among the organizational and narrative possibilities of time traveling⁸ (like the causal loop, the journey backwards to alter the past, or the journey onwards to discover the consequences of the present) Beukes chooses to apply a circular structure whereby events are consistently organized around a closed time loop. The central character inside this loop is a man with time to kill—sixty years, to be precise. Harper “can’t push

⁷ Lauren Beukes has written novels about post-apartheid South Africa (*Zoo City*; *Moxyland*), which is her birth country. It is easy to see a connection between *The Shining Girls* and its author’s sociopolitical background in terms of violent erasure and oppression of the Other, “the legacy of apartheid: the arbitrary and artificially applied divides between people” (Beukes qtd. in Caraivan 217).

⁸ As with other physical, logical or epistemological matters in the novel, Beukes does not include the idea of reverse causality (effect before cause) in the loop she creates for Harper, which is relevant to the plot. For an extended explanation of causal loops in closed time cycles in science, philosophy and narrative, see Lewis, Nahin (ch. 4), Hanley, or Dowe.

past 1929” and “the farthest he can go into the future is 1993” (Beukes 90), while the female protagonist and the other characters move forward into their future in compliance with time’s arrow and conforming to normative temporality. Harper’s loop journeying is a symbolical ring that encloses his victims, similar to the flea circus that Kirby is setting up when she first meets him at the age of six (Beukes 4). Apparently, like the bugs captured for training under an inverted cup, women cannot escape this circular structure of predetermined events that entraps them and makes them easy to seek out, more so because they stay in or around Chicago when they become adults. Harper’s murdering cycle provides him with power and pleasure and affirms his sense of masculine superiority: “It’s a game. To find the girls through different times and places. They’re playing along, ready and waiting for the destiny he’s writing for them” (Beukes 127).

The Shining Girls introduces some milestones to place characters in history, such as the Great Depression, the aftermath of WWII, the Red Scare, the Vietnam War, and the construction of the Sears Tower. While linear time provides the “shining girls” with opportunities to evolve and prosper, as will be further explained in the following section, in Harper’s eyes it only brings entropy and destruction. For instance, the novel constantly alludes to the deterioration of a city that “has changed its color, from dirty whites and cream to a hundred shades of brown. Like rust. Like shit” (Beukes 62) and “keeps expanding its reaches further and further into the countryside, like mould laying claim to a piece of bread” (Beukes 281). In 1934, he derides the banners of the World’s Fair that proclaim a “Century of Progress”: “It is pathetic . . . , the future painted up all gaudy like a cheap whore, when he has seen the reality of it, fast and dense and ugly” (Beukes 276). In fact, no matter how far into the future he travels to commit his murders, he “always returns home” (Beukes 91) to a house that resists entropy and change, keeping its 1930s splendor alive despite the crumbling neighborhood that surrounds it. Not only does he lament the changes he witnesses with every journey to the future, but his very body defies age and remains intact throughout his 60-year-long vital loop, which makes us perceive him as an emblem of immutability. Unlike other time-travel stories, where “the malleability of time and history” allows for the exploration of counterfactuals, alternative histories or futures, or altering the past (Heinze 213–14), the nostalgic chrononaut in this novel abhors change and displays a conservationist intention.

The Shining Girls follows the Wellsian tradition “based on pre-existing hierarchies relating to gender, race and class that benefit the white

male time traveler” (Bussi re 33). Harper is a destitute, unstable, and lame ex-soldier struggling through the Great Depression. Violence, especially against women, is his escape valve for his anger and wounded sense of manhood. Ironically, domesticity empowers him when he finds “the House” (a realm traditionally associated with women) and “the Room” (a powerful symbol of female subjectivity and agency since Virginia Woolf) that enable him to move through time at will. Only two men are seen operating this time machine of sorts in the novel: “You need the key. And the will to shift the time to where it needs to be” (Beukes 303). Harper merely willpowers the gate to other points of the loop: “He only has to think of a time and the door will open onto it, although he can’t always tell if his thoughts are his own or if the House is deciding for him” (Beukes 89). Either way, the system works with or for him to support his masculine power and control over events to the point of believing the House “was always his. Always him” (Beukes 380).

Beukes never explains why or how the time travel occurs in the novel beyond the fact that the House serves some pre-established design, “setting the gears in motion for something that has already happened” (Beukes 194). When Harper enters the room for the first time, he sees the names of some women written on the wall. Although the names are unknown to him, they are written in his own handwriting:

It's enough. The realization. Like a door opening up inside. The fever peaks and something howls through him, full of contempt and wrath and fire. He sees the faces of the shining girls and knows how they must die. The screaming inside his head: *Kill her. Stop her.* (Beukes 37)

Harper’s predetermined actions mirror the self-justifying arguments of abusers, in particular those men who are violent to women on account of their (the women’s) transgressions within the patriarchal system. Many are the scenes in the story where Harper mentions that things should stay as they are meant to be. His own frame of reference (white and male) discerns what or what not is “in place”:

Everything is as it has to be. (Beukes 6)
 Everything happens for a reason. (Beukes 14)
 She’s here, somewhere. As it is meant to be. (Beukes 63)
 All the pieces must be put into place. (Beukes 66)
 Everything is as it is meant to be. As he determines it. (Beukes 308)

Readers progressively realize he intends to destroy the potential of outstanding women who may have a future impact on their communities or occupations. While the historical background of the novel shows great advances in the lives of the underprivileged, the white male acts as the controlling center of the story, with time-traveling at the service of his masculine insecurities when confronting women's power.

He therefore feels he must kill these women to make things fit into place and time. When he first visits the Room, he does not know the glowing objects are the souvenirs he took from the scenes of the crimes he has already—and not yet—committed: a toy pony, a baseball card, a contraceptive blister-pack, a lighter, a cassette tape, a tennis ball, a bunny clip, a pair of costume butterfly wings and a lab ID badge. Harper trades the objects across times, taking one from a crime scene and then leaving it on another woman's body. They stand for quantum entanglements (see Nahin 294–04) for women who, like a kind of Schrödinger's cat, “are not dead yet, who are perpetually dying or marked to die” (Beukes 356). These mementoes obviously become anachronistic when taken out of their own time, which infuses them with considerable power: not only are they key elements in the perpetrating of the crimes, but they also symbolize out-of-date discourses and practices regarding women.

Harper links his victims through time with these tokens, making women somewhat interchangeable and thus consolidating his perception of womanhood as a monolithic concept. Indeed, to his eyes all the girls are the same, which in part enables Kirby to finally track him down: he is not able to envision the glitches in his plan, the malfunctions, basically derived from the singularities of the women he attacks. All his victims, regardless of their occupation, race or sexuality, are independent women without men to support them, therefore understood in their own times as “deviant and subversive” (Beukes 143), as Willy Rose, the lesbian architect, words it. Harper's pattern, where nothing can deviate, must destroy deviants.

Although only men seem to be capable of operating the gate to other times, Harper Curtis acts as the only backlashing, repressing and obstructing agent in the story. In fact, Beukes is careful to offer an array of masculinity types to parallel the diversity of her “shining girls.” For example, when Harper cannot pay for his hospital stay when he breaks his foot in 1931 the doctor answers: “Pity [you don't have syphilis]. There's a study starting in Alabama that would have paid for all your medical care if you did. Although you'd have to be a Negro” (Beukes 24). Dan

Velasquez, Kirby's mentor at the *Chicago Sun* and assistant to her hunt, is a different type of man from Harper, one "not interested in playing the alpha male" (Beukes 177). Abandoned by his wife, he is insecure about his own seductive abilities, balding, and hates traveling. As a frequent flyer to cover games, he "changes planes" in another sense. He is aware of the advances made by women in public spaces and discourses but is happy to move in the same direction. Harper, on the contrary, embodies the cultural and socio-economic forces that suffocate women's advancement; the recurrent counter-progressive narratives that resent changes in power relations; the cyclical suspicion of women's participation in culture, economy and politics; and the structural, physical and symbolical violence against women. By traveling back and forth to stop women's progress he personifies the hostility of repeated backlashing against gender equality across time.

3. THE NORMATIVE TEMPORALITY OF THE "SHINING GIRLS" AS PROGRESS

In *The Shining Girls*, Harper exerts violence towards both men and women, although it is the "shine" (i.e., their latent talents) of small girls that triggers his murdering instinct: "The House . . . wants *potential*—to claim the fire in their eyes and snuff it out" (Beukes 63–64). Harper spots them early on their lifelines, while they are blooming and moving forward with projects and goals. He murders them when they have already become grownups, but by always referring to them as *girls* he symbolically freezes them in a pre-adult stage, hence doubly interrupting their process towards full womanhood and autonomy.

These women are not represented as members of a uniform category, despite Harper's perception of them. His ten victims—nine murdered plus Kirby, who gets away—epitomize the less favored participants in the progress narrative via class (most are poor), ethnicity (African American, Asian American, Latina), sexuality (lesbian, transgendered) and health (drug addict). However unprivileged, the gains of earlier feminist struggles have enabled them to be independent, participate in their communities and hold paid jobs. They are intensely individualized and shine in their own ways and times (in parentheses the time of their deaths in the hands of or attributable to Harper): Jeanette (1931) is a dancer who covers her body in radium glow for her show, to rise "above the competitive mediocrity" (Beukes 74) she observes in other dancers; Zora (1943) lost her husband

during WWII and now welds “gun turrets that will tear those Nazi shits into mincemeat” (108); Alice (1951) is a trans woman who jumps off a roof before Harper can kill her; Willy (1954) is a lesbian architect and a suspected Communist—she is not—who “had to fight for this job like she fought to get a place at MIT” (139); Margot (1972) is a teacher who volunteers with the Jane abortionist group, “real good at holding hands and explaining what’s happening” (258); Julia (1984) is an economics student who “always said she was going to be the first woman CEO of Goldman Sachs” (42); Jin-Sook Au (1993) is a “passionate housing worker” who “made a real impact” (287–88) in the community; Mysha (1993) is a biologist on the verge of an important discovery; Catherine (1993) is an artist “brighter than the [fireworks] that boomed in the sky” (284) who is losing her glow to drugs.

The only survivor to Harper’s assault, Kirby Mazrachi, is aware of the male design of society that her attacker embodies and determined to play a part in social change. For instance, to prosper as a sports reporter she insists on entering the room where a hand-turned scoreboard is operated, despite the opposition she faces: “I think it’s really a gentleman’s club where the most powerful men in America plan the future of the country, with cocktails and strippers, while an innocent baseball game plays out below” (Beukes 150). Harper manages to dim her glow for a while but does not extinguish it completely.

While Harper incarnates chronological mobility, the girls represent social mobility. The novel depicts them as historic subjects in the process of becoming meaningful women, in contrast to the man who time-travels in circles and always returns to the same point. All the “shining girls” are single and economically independent, thus escaping the repetitive cyclical “women’s time” defined by the womb or the home. Instead, Beukes embeds them within a historical narrative of sociocultural and political action. Only Zora has children and could therefore be perceived in relation to domestic life, but as a proficient African American welder she is clearly opening doors for others in the public sphere. These characters undergo backlashing experiences due to their sexuality or their jobs, or because they simply want to, and will, make a difference. Interestingly, the “masculinist” linearity of history plays as an advantage in this novel. It allows for the visibility of women’s contribution to social progress, presents them as agents of historical change, and values women outside the essentialist inscription in cyclical time. As summarized by Bryson, “recalling women’s past achievements and/or giving gender relations a

history can provide a political weapon that undermines claims about women's inferiority or the inevitability of contemporary arrangements and encourages the exploration of alternatives" (104). By counterbalancing Harper's loop, the characters of the "shining girls" draw attention to the role of women in history and also underline the value of time's arrow in the feminist project. In short, Beukes depicts

how history changed individual women on a very normal level, and these women shine, they are bright sparks in the darkness but in a way that's achievable. None of the shining girls was going to be the next president of the United States, or stop the financial crash, but they made a difference in their contexts. (qtd. in Caraivan 226)

Despite Harper's equalizing effort, the narrative highlights these women—makes them "shine"—against their historical background. For these women time and history are important, for they provide the dimension where they can develop their sense of themselves, their projects and their right to carry them out. The individualization of their characters avoids the anonymity of statistics or the transience of media treatment of gender violence which usually involves the attitude "[g]irls get murdered all the fucking time" (Beukes 121), as Kirby verbalizes it. Harper extinguishes the spark in these women, preventing them from reaching their full potential as active members of artistic, social and political life. However, Harper is only the time-traveling instrument that physically takes their life away. Throughout the novel we come across several instances of women finding obstacles to their personal and collective growth, from prejudices and stereotypes to oppressive legislations and sexual harassment. Each of Harper's "shining girls" personify some small but significant contribution to women's advances throughout the twentieth century. Due to space limitations, only two examples will be provided here. The first one relates to abortion rights. In the novel we can observe the furtive activities of the Jane organization in the 1970s:

The service is listed in the phone book, under 'Jane How', but how would you know if you didn't? Ditto the ads in the alternative newspapers or pasted up at the laundromat. There's no way for a girl like Jemmie to find them except by personal referral, and that took three and a half months and a replacement social worker who was sympathetic to the cause. (Beukes 256)

Harper's journey to 1972 to kill Margot, a Jane activist, echoes present-day maneuvers to diminish abortion rights and return to bleaker times in women's history. His chrono-traveling thus metaphorizes regressive attitudes while it validates women's achievements through time, alerting readers of impending backlashes.

The second example concerns assumptions about the bodily and behavioral features of "true" womanhood. Harper first meets Alice (formerly Lucas) in 1940 while she is a teenager working in a road show. There is "a new prudishness in the air lately" (Beukes 221) so the owner of this girly show has adapted the act, which now warns about

"the dangers of decadence and desire and how easily the fairer sex may be led astray. Or do the leading . . . The strumpet! The hussy. The harlot. The wicked temptress! The ambitious young office girl with her eye on the boss. Intent on coming between husband and wife. Women, learn how to spot her. Men, learn how to resist her. This lascivious predator in lipstick is a danger to society!" (Beukes 224–25)

When the show owner sees Alice's body under the Fallen Woman outfit, he asks her to leave and suggests she find some specialty show:

"Or join a carnival. Some of them still do he-she-it. Or be a bearded lady. Can you grow a beard?"

"I'm not a freak."

"You are in this world, princess." (Beukes 229)

Alice's character causes a turning-point in the novel. When she is first presented to us, she is playing the Fallen Woman, figuratively the only performance she is allowed as a trans—not "standard" or "satisfactory"—woman. In 1951, her adult self is working for Sears telephone sales and has had a few bad love affairs, but "Alice wants more. She wants it all," so she intends to go to San Francisco "where it's easier, the rumors say, for women like her" (Beukes 307). She would have become one of the forerunners of the San Francisco LGTBI community if she had not chosen to jump off a roof instead of letting Harper murder her. This event takes place nearing the denouement of the novel and defies Harper's governing discourse about predetermined outcomes: "This is not the way it is supposed to be" (Beukes 312). The fact that she chose how to die, like she chose how to live, is a crack in Harper's pattern because the loop is now

open by the sheer will of a woman. When he leaves a pill blister by Alice's body, the closed chain of anachronistic tokens has lost its power as a symbol of confinement: "He takes the contraceptive packet out of his pocket and stares at it, as if the *circle* of colored pills marked by the days of the week might be an omen he could not read. But it tells him nothing" (Beukes 312, my emphasis).

Alice's death episode connects with Kirby's detective work in the narrative structure of the novel. Three pages (although twenty-two years) later, when Harper reads in the paper that Kirby has survived his attack and is in intensive care, he thinks "[t]he words are not right" (Beukes 216). At this point in the plot Harper starts realizing his scheme may be at risk, but by now we have already read that Kirby is after him. He travels back to the past to "unravel where he has gone wrong [because] the stars must realign" (Beukes 351), but he cannot fix past events because he does not travel in a causal loop. Now that the cycle has been broken, "his control slipping, like a truck's axle out of jack" (Beukes 323), it will be a woman—Kirby—who will realign things.

At the outset of the story, Beukes portrays her as tragically disjointed both in anatomical and chronological terms. Her chrononormative body should move forward from childhood to adulthood and (ideally, in a patriarchal order) reproduce, but Harper's attack caused severe injuries to her body with lingering aftereffects. "Her stomach bulged, like she was going to give birth to an alien" (Beukes 50–51), which mocks the gestation she is now capable of, but not experiencing as an adult woman. When Dan Velasquez first meets Kirby, she is 25 but looks like "a girl barely out of kindergarten, surely, with crazy kindergarten hair sticking up all over the place" (Beukes 70). The traumatic assault blocks her development and sends her to a space of stagnation:

She tried running for a while, after it happened. Dumped her studies—even though they offered her a sympathetic leave of absence—sold her car, packed up and went. Didn't get very far. Although California felt as strange and foreign as Japan. Like something out of a TV show, but with the laugh track out of sync. Or she was; too dark and fucked up for San Diego and not fucked up enough, or in the wrong ways, for LA. . . . She should have kept moving, gone to Seattle or New York. But she ended up back where she started . . . stuck in here, a hostage in her head. (Beukes 50–51)

The excerpt above implies that Kirby is as misplaced as Harper is mistimed. Nevertheless, she restarts her process of maturing thanks to her investigation. She transcends her own death and those of the “shining girls,” whose linear life courses have been tragically ended. Dan’s words help us understand that, instead of peacefully drifting to death, she returns to life against all odds:

“I’m a *grotesque*.”

...

“You’re no shrinking Ophelia, that’s for sure.” (Beukes 132)

She begins her own hunt of the man she suspects is a serial killer by searching through past crimes for “out of place artifacts” (Beukes 236). Browsing through photographs in the newspapers that covered Harper’s crimes over the years, Kirby recognizes a toy that a mysterious stranger gave her as a child (one of the anachronistic items she has been hunting for, which triggers the destruction of Harper’s loop existence and the resolution of the case). Her mother keeps the plastic pony of Kirby’s childhood in a “broken freezer” (Beukes 320) used for storage. Being out of order, the freezer suggests that, after her symbolical return to pre-adulthood, she is no longer congealed in time now that she has found the impulse to recommence her development. Moreover, the freezer stands by a “spinning wheel” (Beukes 321), the instrument used by the Moirai to spin the linear thread of life, here figuratively ready to spin Kirby’s thread further on.

Beukes’ novel is organized around the tensions between the cycle and the line, representing the tortuous but onwards movement of women towards equality, which is consistent with the “corkscrew” image proposed by Faludi:

An accurate charting of American women's progress through history might look more like a corkscrew tilted slightly to one side, its loops inching closer to the line of freedom with the passage of time—but, like a mathematical curve approaching infinity, never touching its goal. Woman is trapped on this asymptotic spiral, turning endlessly through the generations, drawing ever nearer to her destination without ever arriving. Each revolution promises to be “*the* revolution” that will free her from the orbit that will grant her, finally, a full measure of human justice and dignity. But, each time, the spiral turns her back just short of the finish line. (Faludi 61–62)

Although she succeeds in ending Harper's crimes, Kirby represents the struggling motion of the spiral, the painful going back and then further out again—like women's ceaseless fight for their rights in the face of obstacles. Far from ending the novel on the positive note of Harper's death, the Postscript describes how another man finds the key to the House, "waiting for him on the front porch" (Beukes 386), ready to hinder progress again.

CONCLUSIONS

In *The Shining Girls*, Beukes proposes a look into the future by engaging with the past by means of the time-travel trope. The novel holds a mirror to reflect on our present political and sociocultural situation, and to discuss progress in terms of causes and effects. It also compels readers to reconsider advances in women's rights by modeling time in unusual patterns, whereby the man lives in circular time and the "shining girls" in linear, chrononormative time. As the story implies, women's contact with regressive discourses has fatal consequences.

Harper Curtis' circular time traveling epitomizes backlashing attempts to deny women their right to have a future, to own their bodies, to earn a living, and to pursue successful careers. Kirby's detective work is not only an exercise in justice and healing but also a feminist one against recurrent inequality, that is, "a work of recovery, of anamnesis, of unearthing a forgotten history and silenced stories . . . to change structures and patterns that have been repeated for generations" (Söderbäck 303–04). By identifying the entangled objects as anachronisms, Kirby finally breaks Harper's cycle and shows that predetermined logic can be subverted if agents involved in it take action. We can interpret the novel's anachronistic items as an invitation to reflect on outdated discourses and impending counter-progressive policies, and also as a symbol of genealogical connection, that is, the legacies that women leave to others after them to dismantle repressive and violent structures that, unfortunately, seem to be timeless.

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