

# Summertime: Time, Narrative and Queer Futures in Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name*



ANN CATHERINE HOAG   
University of Groningen

**Abstract:** André Aciman's acclaimed first novel, *Call Me by Your Name*, retrospectively depicts the love affair between Elio and Oliver in an idyllic Italian 1980s summer. Setting a story saturated with longing and nostalgia in the summertime seems to play with the chronotope of the summer as a period ripe for romantic experimentation. What sets Aciman's text apart, though, is its deep concern with the phenomenology of time. Applying Paul Ricœur's observations expounded in his *Time and Narrative* to the novel helps illuminate how Aciman employs emplotment, where the present is punctuated with references to the past and to the future, to destabilize the stubborn boundaries of time. The result is that Elio's recounting of a distant past becomes a relevant present, never fully passed. The comingling of the past and present relates to Elizabeth Grosz's explanations of Bergson's reconsideration of chronology where the past and present 'function in simultaneity.' Grosz argues that Bergson's sense of duration has consequences for the virtual possibilities not fully predicted by the past. As can be seen in *Call Me by Your Name*, the representation of time where the past is reworked in the present offers untimely ruptures of new potentials 'later' beyond the boundaries of the narrative. Thus, Aciman's text is not simply a nostalgic work for a time of innocent yearning, but it is a reformulation of the past to create a virtual future where the queer pleasures of the summer are not limited by time.

**Keywords:** Aciman, emplotment, futures, summer, temporality, queer narratives.

**Résumé :** *Call Me by Your Name*, premier roman, acclamé par la critique, d'André Aciman, dépeint rétrospectivement l'histoire d'amour d'Elio et Oliver dans l'Italie paradisiaque des années 1980. Le choix de situer ce récit éminemment nostalgique pendant les vacances estivales semble exploiter le chronotope de l'été comme période propice à l'expérimentation romantique. Ce qui distingue le texte d'Aciman, cependant, c'est sa profonde préoccupation pour la phénoménologie du temps. En s'appuyant sur

les observations de Paul Ricœur dans *Temps et Récit*, il est possible de comprendre comment Aciman utilise une « mise-en-intrigue » dans laquelle le présent est ponctué de références au passé et à l'avenir, afin de déstabiliser les frontières obstinées du temps. Il en résulte que le récit fait par Elio d'un passé lointain devient un présent pertinent, jamais complètement dépassé. Cette intrication du passé et du présent peut être interprétée à l'aune du travail d'Elizabeth Grosz sur la reconsidération de la chronologie par Bergson, pour qui passé et présent « fonctionnent en simultané ». Grosz soutient que le sens de la durée chez Bergson a des conséquences sur les possibilités virtuelles qui ne sont pas entièrement prévues par le passé. Comme on peut le voir dans *Call Me by Your Name*, cette représentation du temps qui montre un passé retravaillé dans/par le présent permet le surgissement intempestif de nouveaux potentiels, situés « plus tard », au-delà des marges du récit. Ainsi, le texte d'Aciman n'est pas simplement une œuvre nostalgique recréant une époque innocente, il s'agit aussi d'une reformulation du passé qui permet de créer un avenir virtuel où les plaisirs homosexuels de l'été ne sont pas limités par le temps.

**Mots-clés :** Aciman, mise-en-intrigue, futurs, été, temporalité, récits *queer*.

**A**NDRÉ ACIMAN'S sensuous debut novel, *Call Me by Your Name*, captures the rapturous longing of first love in the depiction of the affair between Elio and Oliver during a summer in the 1980s. Elio's opening description of Oliver's arrival in Italy, which he recalls in some distant future, exudes a romantic wistfulness for the transient heat of summer; the first page is replete with references to frayed espadrilles, straw hats, hot gravel, and beaches, setting the scene for a golden period of pleasurable pursuits. Indeed, the sexual tension between Elio and Oliver is heightened by the temperature of the languorous summer months and the portended doom of autumn's approach when Oliver must return to America. Aciman's text thus seems to engage tropes of summertime as an 'other' temporal mode where Elio and Oliver can yield to their amorous pursuits outside the social pressures of their expected heteronormative futures. In this way, Aciman borrows the chronotopic space of the summer Italian villa as a site for nostalgia and desire from novels like Giorgio Bassani's 1962 *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*. In the classic work, Bassani depicts an unnamed narrator reminiscing about the halcyon days of his young Jewish community's formation of a tennis club on the enchanting grounds of the Finzi-Continis' estate, when their lives are irrevocably changed by Mussolini's Italian racial laws of 1938 and the imminent Holocaust. Bassani's narrator purportedly pines with an unrequited passion for Micòl, the daughter of the esteemed family, although John Champagne proffers a queer reading of the work where the narrator's love for Micòl is a transferred desire for her brother, Alberto, who is coded as queer (Champagne, 2010: 6). Juxtaposing the thematic parallels between the two novels helps illuminate the play in both works with the memory and longing of lost, idyllic summers. In reference to *The Garden*

of *the Finzi-Continis*, Champagne examines how the narrator's post-war visit to Etruscan tombs and subsequent reminiscence about the destruction of the Jewish community and nostalgia for his own innocence solidifies Bassani's work as a contemplation of time: 'the desire to freeze time, via memory, and to hold in abeyance loss, to ward off an inevitable sorrow that is not only inevitable psychically, [...] but also a sorrow that is historically inevitable, given the reality of the Italian Shoah' (Champagne, 2010: 4). Like this reading of Bassani, I argue that *Call Me by Your Name* underscores the utmost importance of the experience and perception of time. The first word of the book is Oliver's articulated 'later' that Elio describes as 'the first thing I remember about him, and I can hear it still today,' indicating how not only the word but the events of the hallowed period of the summer will reverberate throughout both characters' lives (Aciman, 2007: 3). The narrative play with time in the text functions to, in Champagne's words, 'hold in abeyance' the finite abortive ecstasies of the heady summer months.

*Call Me by Your Name* certainly employs the associations of the summer as a period breaking from the ritual and strictures of the prosaic; the text uses the chronotope to both heighten the intensity of the feverish passion between Elio and Oliver and to underscore the sense of Elio's innocence in this moment of youthful exploration before the winds of autumn return. As Colm Tóibín notes in his review of the novel, the sensory experience of the heat of summer radiates off the pages of the romance: 'Elio's sensual antennae are not merely directed toward the possibilities of sex, however, but toward the credences of summer, toward the heat and the food, toward the sounds in the garden, the richness of the night air, the abundance of the orchard' (Tóibín, 2007: 3). The Edenic qualities of the summer, cast in a golden hue, accentuate the unprecedented effulgence of the period while foreshadowing the melancholy and loss of the impending fall. Setting the novel in the summer heightens the nostalgic tone as the story borrows from classic representations of summer as the final chance for an expression of love seen in *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* and *Death in Venice*. Unlike these texts, however, *Call Me by Your Name* does not end in death or even hint at the end of life. The absence of any shadow of death is striking in a novel that takes place in the 1980s at the height of the AIDS epidemic and when works like Paul Monette's *Borrowed Time* were published. Although Elio contemplates how 'time is always borrowed,' the only looming loss is that of the relationship (Aciman, 2007: 162). In this respect, the summer depicted in the text seems to exist within its own temporality, outside of any broader cultural chronologies. In a manner, *Call Me by Your Name* evokes Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library* where any shadow of AIDS is absent in Beckwith's celebration of the summer of 1983 as the 'last summer of its kind there was ever to be' (Hollinghurst, 1988: 4). Arguably, Aciman's novel offers a typical narrative

of pre-AIDS literature, the terms of which scholar Monica B. Pearl has outlined. She describes how the genre produced a *bildungsroman* where the first-person confessional narrator depicts the experience of gay acceptance, and that the works are characterised by a loss and mourning that later AIDS literature would reference: ‘the grief of the coming out novels is tied to a longing that even before it can be defined is best articulated as a kind of nostalgia’ (Pearl, 2019: 9). *Call Me by Your Name* is a text unquestionably saturated with nostalgia, in part because Elio’s retrospective narrative indicates that the halcyon days of the summer are irrevocably past. In this regard, the work can be understood as engaging with prescribed generic expectations, casting the relationship between Elio and Oliver as a consummate summer of innocence.

Yet I argue that examining the complex interplay of time within the text and in the narrative structure illuminates how *Call Me by Your Name* offers a re-evaluation of temporal strictures and reformulates the distinctions between the past and the present, ultimately offering a hopeful rendering of queer futures. Applying Paul Ricœur’s observations expounded in *Time and Narrative* to an examination of tenses within Aciman’s text exposes his intricate imbrication of temporal modes. The result of the play with time is a blurring of temporal differences where the past and the present coexist and where the sense of linear chronology is dismantled. Using Elizabeth Grosz’s considerations of the political potentials of reconstituted time reveals how Aciman’s untimely textual ruptures render new possibilities for futures beyond the borders of the narrative and the summer period. Aciman’s text, thus, is not simply a nostalgic work for a halcyon time before the darkening storm of the HIV epidemic or before Elio’s awareness of the corrupting realities of heteronormative pressures. Rather, the text offers a reformulation of the past to extend the sense of the present and to reconfigure a virtual future where the queer pleasures of the summer are not bounded by time. By virtue of the narrative structure of Aciman’s work, the spectacular summer becomes eternal—never fully passed—suspended in the possibility of an unwritten future.

Aciman frequently meditates on the experience of time in his writing. In his most recent collection of essays, *Homo Irrealis*, he explicitly considers temporal modes, adding another dimension to his thoughts on space and identity seen in works like ‘Shadow Cities’ and *Out of Egypt*. Traces of Aciman’s interest in plays with time are already detectable in his earlier writing and in his interest in Proust and in memory as his concern with a particular location is often determined by a longing for a particular time spent there (Aciman, 2013: 39). In ‘The Last Time I Saw Paris,’ Aciman explains how his sustained sorrow at the prospect of leaving the French capital engendered a strategy to minimize the loss; he would examine his present in Paris with a future eye of nostalgia in the hopes that anticipating

the forthcoming sorrow could mollify the pain of loss. As he recounts, he would pre-empt ‘tomorrow’s worries by making tomorrow seem yesterday’ (Aciman, 1999: 51). Aciman’s recalling his past self’s manipulation of his contemporary outlook to minimise that self’s future memories demonstrates the complex infaces of temporal modes, and the inextricable entanglement of the past, present and future. Similarly, in the ‘Afterword’ to his essay collection *Alibis: Essays on Elsewhere*, Aciman expands upon the contemplation of elsewheres and introduces the notion of the *irrealis mood* which provides the motif for his subsequent book of essays. The ‘Afterword’ considers the experience of doubleness when the self is divided between two locations, but also between two periods of a life: ‘It is not just about displacement or a feeling adrift *both* in time and space, it is a fundamental misalignment between who we are, might have been, could still be, can’t accept we’ve become, or may never be’ (Aciman, 2011: 189). The sense of internal displacement is doubly arduous as the location fomenting nostalgia may no longer exist. The enmeshment of nostalgia for places visited and yearning for those not yet seen exposes the porosity of the boundary separating supposedly rigid temporal distinctions.

*Homo Irrealis*, expanding upon and affirming the sentiments expressed in *Alibis*, considers how the longing for other locations is intertwined with the experience of temporal displacement, and how art can function to unify the seeming paradoxes of discordant timelines. In the introduction, Aciman looks back upon his former self eagerly awaiting departure from Alexandria to go to Paris, a self who is already nostalgically collecting memories about Egypt and his youth in anticipation of his future life. Aciman even returns to some of his sentences from the ‘Afterword’ of *Alibis* revisiting the significance of his words in retrospect in much the same way that he revisits his former self, suggesting that his publications are an evolving meditation, each work echoing the previous. He explains in *Alibis* that the particular present of his adolescent self cannot be understood without context of his yearning for future lives elsewhere. In those moments, the past Aciman was experiencing was an *irrealis* identity, caught in the disruptive linguistics of the *irrealis mood* which does not correspond to linear conceptions of time. Aciman’s inspection of modalities of the *irrealis moods* is the prevailing endeavour of each essay as the collection offers variations on the theme of ‘a might-have been that hadn’t happened yet but wasn’t unreal for not happening and might still happen, though I feared it never would and sometimes wish it wouldn’t happen just yet’ (Aciman, 2021: 10). The *irrealis moods*, as defined in the epigraph to *Homo Irrealis*, are counterfactual linguistic moods of alternative realities, including the subjunctive and the conditional. They exist outside the realm of the clear temporal delineations of the past, present and future tenses, and they complicate the certainty of what was, what might have been, and what might still come to be. Aciman’s scrutiny of the

irrealis moods in the compilation of essays published fourteen years after *Call Me by Your Name* offers a useful metric for examining the approach to time in the fictive work.

In *Call Me by Your Name*, Elio's language occasionally echoes Aciman's descriptions in his essays, exposing the irrealis moods of the text and underscoring the reconfiguration of temporal modes that permeate the fiction. For a fleeting moment, Elio awakens to the atmosphere of autumn and is reminded that the ecstasies of the summer romance cannot outlive the change of scene and season. The passing 'dark clouds' that quickly sweep across the sky are a warning of an impending autumn and the heartache that will accompany Oliver's departure at the end of summer. Elio suddenly:

realized that we were on borrowed time, that time is always borrowed, and that the lending agency exacts its premium precisely when we are least prepared to pay and need to borrow more. Suddenly, I began to take mental snapshots of him [...] I squirreled away small things so that in the lean days ahead glimmers from the past might bring back the warmth. I began, reluctantly, to steal from the present to pay off debts I knew I'd incur in the future.' (Aciman, 2007: 162-163)

At the height of the pleasures of his love affair, Elio contemplates his future nostalgia for the present moments, and he works to crystallise memories of the current summer days for consumption in the gloom of winter. Just as Aciman expressed his attempts to control the tide of pain that leaving Paris induced by 'making tomorrow seem yesterday,' Elio reflects an irrealis mood and invokes temporal distortions that intermingle past, present, and future (Aciman, 1999: 51). Playing with the consideration of the term 'borrowed time,' Elio casts time as a currency that can be exchanged, saved, and transferred. The possibility of stealing time from the present to spend in the future indicates a sense of time more intricate than a simple, plodding chronology. Reading Aciman's own personal experience highlights the representation of Elio's strategies to manipulate time, and both texts articulate an interest in how the past and the future can be bartered or traded. Just as Oliver reminds Elio in the early morning hours of their visit to Rome that 'tomorrow is today,' blurring the lines between present and future, *Call Me by Your Name* experiments with the collapse of temporal distinctions and the irreality of the remembrance of the things past and the yearning for what might still be (Aciman, 2007: 207).

In fact, various conversations within the novel make explicit the characters' cyclical experience of time, underscoring the importance of the temporal within this text and the general theme of time's plasticity. When Elio

and Oliver are in Rome for a poet's book launch, Elio says that his favourite poem from the collection is about San Clemente. The poet corrects Elio and claims that the work compares love to the palimpsest of architectural styles that contributed to the construction of the Roman basilica. The poet expounds upon what he terms the 'San Clemente Syndrome,' reflective of the subconscious or 'like time itself' (Aciman, 2007: 192). Since the church is 'built on the ruins of subsequent restorations, there is no rock bottom, there is no first anything, no last anything, just layers and secret passages and interlocking chambers' (Aciman, 2007: 192). The definition of San Clemente Syndrome suggests that the phenomenological experience of time is bereft of chronological order, and that the layers of the past are forever implicated in the experience of the present. From this exchange Elio extracts a new consideration of temporality specifically applying the perception of a more cyclical sense of a present time infused with concerns of the past and future to his wandering around Rome with Oliver:

I began to wonder what all this talk of San Clemente had to do with us—how we move through time, how time moves through us, how we change and keep changing and come back to the same. One could grow old and not learn a thing but this...He came. He left. Nothing else had changed. I had not changed. The world hadn't changed. Yet nothing would be the same. All that remains is dreammaking and strange remembrance.' (Aciman, 2007: 199)

Elio's preoccupation with Oliver's future departure and his anticipation of reflecting on his past self not only makes explicit the temporal concerns that pervade the text, but it presents a version of perceived time as cyclical, changing and yet returning to an undefined moment of origin and departure. Even though the narrative unfolds during the specific period of the summer, and Elio is contemplating temporality in his current time, his reduction of life to nothing more than 'dreammaking' and 'remembrance' reformulates the sense of the present to moments infused with the past and projections of the future. That the story is about the past told from a future perspective only highlights the slipperiness between what is past and what continues to be present. *Call Me by Your Name*, like many of Aciman's work, is clearly infused with considerations of temporal experiences, and Elio indicates how his present time with Oliver in the exalted summer months decades ago continues to return cyclically.

In other instances, the past punctures the present of Elio's and Oliver's summer together, further emphasising the porous barrier between the past and the present. Frederick S. Roden crafts a convincing argument that the text integrates themes of Jewish memory alongside a play with signifiers of queer desire with its pervading references to classical love. Roden sees in Aciman's writing an echo of Foucault's view that

a nineteenth-century homosexual identity originated from the translation of perceived ancient ideals (Roden, 2019: 198). The memory of previous generations is alive within the summer's present, minimising temporal distances. While contemplating approaching Oliver on the night of their first sexual encounter, Elio hears his grandfather's voice warning him against the pursuit: '*The years are watching you now, every star you see tonight already knows your torment, your ancestors are gathered here and have nothing to give or say*' (Aciman, 2007: 127). The use of italics suggests an 'other' voice that Elio carries within him. The concurrent existence of Elio's ancestors in the present moment of the summer underscore how the past latently exists within the present. Similarly, Oliver describes the long history of generations that led to Elio's corporeal self in his exultation of Elio's sperm that he ejaculated into the summer peach:

Just think of the number of people who've come before you—you, your grandfather, your great-grandfather, and all the skipped generations of Elios before you, and those from places far away, all squeezed into this trickle that makes you who you are. Now may I taste it? (Aciman, 2007: 148)

Oliver's worship of Elio's bodily fluids is intertwined with his appreciation for Elio's past stretching back beyond his own life. As Oliver points out, Elio's body is the culmination of a long history, and the traces of his ancestors are present in Elio's DNA, which has the potential to generate future life. The present experience is inextricable from 'remembrance' and intricately bound up with the long chain of familial history as well as referencing the virtual potential of life to come. Time and again, the text plays with the presumed distinctions between past, present and future, collapsing the stubborn temporal boundaries.

The complex coexistence between the past and the present integrated in *Call Me by Your Name* resonates with some of the considerations of Bergson's views of temporality that Elizabeth Grosz's describes in *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution and the Untimely*. Later, I will ultimately use Grosz to suggest that there are political implications to the temporal play in Aciman's novel. In her study, Grosz examines how reconfigurations in the perception of time that Darwin, Nietzsche, and Bergson initiated, and what Nietzsche described as the 'untimely,' had a meaningful impact on the relationship between the sense of the past and the present, as well as significance for future potentials. Grosz considers Bergson's contributions to changes in the perception of the present experience that his examination of memory and duration influences, and she explains how Bergson reconceives the past as a series of planes, a 'cone of the past,' converging towards the point of relevance to the present, represented by sensory functions (Grosz, 2004: 182). In Bergson's vision, Grosz details, duration is not



strictly linear or a spatialised ‘arrow of time,’ but can render the past and the present simultaneous:

The past and the present are not two modalities of the present, the past a receded or former present, a present that has moved out of the limelight. Rather, the past and the present fundamentally coexist; they function in simultaneity. Bergson suggests that the whole of the past is contained, in contracted form, in each moment of the present. (Grosz, 2004: 183)

The traditional distinction between the past and the present is reconceived in Bergson’s concept of memory; the past is never wholly passed as it is always implicated in the experience of the present, and the present is riven by memory as well as by the anticipation of the future. Bergson undercuts the usual sense of temporal difference and offers a perception of the past and the present as inextricably linked and contemporaneous. Deleuze’s reading of Bergson reiterates this sentiment as he explains that ‘the past and the present do not denote two successive moments, but two elements which coexist’ (Deleuze, 1991: 59). The formulation resonates, of course, with the intermingling of past and present that emerges in Elio’s recounting of experience of the summer in *Call Me by Your Name*.

Grosz’s work highlights Bergson’s view of a lengthened present, a perception of which can be traced in the novel’s reference to the coexistence of the past and the present; this sense of an extended present can be recognised in Aciman’s novel, which arguably reflects Elio’s own expressed desire to halt the passage of time and exist in a perpetual state of suspension. Elio articulates his project to extend the present of his summertime in order to stave off the future of Oliver’s departure: while sitting companionably with Oliver in the villa garden on the summer mornings, he perceives that ‘on those mornings [...] all I prayed for was for time to stop. Let summer never end, let him never go away’ (Aciman, 2007: 30). On the next page, Elio reinforces this sentiment by contemplating how ‘perhaps this was what I had wanted all along. To wait forever’ (Aciman, 2007: 31). Elio’s reference to waiting for his lover calls to mind some of Roland Barthes’s explorations of love expressed in the scattered fragments of *A Lover’s Discourse*; Barthes also describes the lover’s strategy of negotiating the pain of the present when faced with the absence of the object of desire. The echoes of Barthes that reverberate through *Call Me by Your Name* are unsurprising considering that Aciman himself uncovers Barthes’s deep analysis of subjects such as love (Aciman, 1984: 115). At some moments, Aciman seems to reference postulations from *A Lover’s Discourse* when he reconfigures Barthes insistence on the gendered dynamics of women who are forced to wait as rooted, passive recipients of wandering men’s affections (Barthes, 2002: 13-14). Unlike Barthes’s imagined feminine

lover who feels a restless desperation of longing for the absent or distant beloved, Elio finds pleasure in the thought of endlessly extending the present moment of unconsummated desire if it would ensure that autumn would never arrive, and that Oliver would never depart. Elio's yearning to suspend time resonates with Barthes's suggestion of a lover's manipulation of the anxiety-laden present in order to endure the agony of a beloved's absence. Barthes writes how the object of love is always absent, even when they are near, creating a paradox of longing that complicates the experience of the present moment as the lover is:

wedged between two tenses...you have gone (which I lament), you are here (since I am addressing you). Whereupon I know what the present, that difficult tense, is: a pure portion of anxiety.

Absence persists—I must endure it. Hence I will *manipulate* it: transform the distortion of time into oscillation, produce rhythm, make an entrance onto the stage of language. (Barthes, 2002: 15–16)

The pervasive threat of the beloved's absence, as Barthes describes, initiates lovers' temporal manipulations which help them endure the overwhelming anxiety of potential loss. To negotiate the painful straits of the present, 'that difficult tense,' the lover works to distort the experience of time. Elio, like Barthes's rendering of a pained lover, desires to manipulate the sense of temporality. While Barthes's description of the excruciating task of waiting resonates with other moments when Elio deliberates his response to Oliver's note, waiting offers Elio a haven for extant potentialities. Elio's reflection on the nature of time leads to an unreal mood where time itself can be reconfigured and reconstructed, as Bergson theorised, and where the present of that summer in the 1980s can be lengthened and can continue in a state of perpetual potentiality.

Elio's endeavour to redefine and reconstitute the present is also evident in the play with narrative tenses in the text itself. Although told in the past tense, the work is dedicated to the experiences of the extraordinary summer, tracing the unfolding relationship. The result is a sense that the events in the 1980s are still in existence and constituting the present. Rather than employing a narrative framework seen in *The Garden of The Finzi-Continis* and *Brideshead Revisited* which begins with an aged narrator of the present casting his mind back into memory, *Call Me by Your Name* quickly launches into the dominating storyline of the summer, but includes temporal punctuations as reminders that the text is retrospective. Throughout the novel, the storyteller Elio intimates his presence recounting the events of the landmark summer. In this way, the narrative structure of the novel echoes Aciman's description of Proust's play with time where 'he looks back to a time when what he looked forward to

was perhaps nothing more than sitting down and writing...and therefore looking back' (Aciman, 2001: 35). Elio describes how '[w]hen I think back to that summer, I can never sort the sequence of events. There are a few key scenes. Otherwise, all I remember are the "repeat" moments' (Aciman, 2007: 57). The uncertainty about events hints at a narrative unreliability and reaffirms the retrospective nature of the storytelling. One consequence of the interweaving of narrative tenses is arguably a weighted tone of nostalgia for an era already ended, yet the effect also destabilises any sense of ordered time and undercuts the perception of uniform chronology, casting the present of the summer as enduring. In this regard, the emphasis on the developing affair functions as the present preoccupation; apart from the coda in Part Four where Elio and Oliver continue to weave through each other's lives, the novel takes place in the time of their romance together in Italy during that fateful summer which is made eternal through the textual rendering.

Analysis of the ubiquitous play with narrative time in the novel helps highlight the text's deconstruction of temporal difference and illuminates how Aciman reconstitutes the present. *Call Me by Your Name* begins with a tense-less observation of Oliver's arrival: "'Later!' The word, the voice, the attitude" (Aciman, 2007: 3). The text quickly launches into the past tense as Elio recounts the sensations of that summer day when he promises that 'it was the first thing I remember about him' (Aciman, 2007: 3). Elio claims that merely saying the word 'later' will transport him back in Italy at the moment of his initial encounter with Oliver and he will be 'walking down the tree-lined driveway, watching him step out of the cab, billowy blue shirt, wide-open collar, sunglasses, straw hat, skin everywhere' (Aciman, 2007: 3). The opening page signals the play with time, as the present, which is the past in narrative time, is at once completed and yet also easily recoverable as a sensory experience. Naturally, Elio is describing his memory of the summer in Italy when he indicates how he is transported back, yet the clarity of his vision bleeds into the narrative movement back into the present tense of Oliver's entrance when Elio observes how 'he waves the back of his free hand and utters a careless Later! to another passenger in the car' (Aciman, 2019: 3). The text travels across tenses, moving from the present to the past, and then projects into the future. When Elio is in the present, attracted to the spectacle of Oliver but disappointed in the reality, he considers how he 'could grow to like him, though. From rounded chin to rounded heel. Then, within days, I would learn to hate him' (Aciman, 2007: 4). The use of 'could' suggests that the certainty is yet unseen, but he expresses immediately his conviction that he 'would' hate Oliver. Between the dizzying transition between temporal modes, it is not fully clear if Elio's described hatred of Oliver is anticipated and promised, or if he is relaying his attitude with the knowledge of hindsight. Aciman's use of narrative time demonstrates a seamless passage

between the temporal modes and subtly indicates a permeable boundary between the past, present and the future.

Another example of Aciman's braiding of tenses can be observed when Vimini explains her leukemia diagnosis to Oliver. Shocked by the sullen detachment of such a tragic pronouncement coming from a young, seemingly healthy girl, Oliver is deeply moved:

Oliver, who was now kneeling on the grass, had literally dropped his book on the ground [...] We spoke about her all afternoon [...] Soon they became friends [...] I shall never forget how she would give him her hand once they'd opened the gate to the stairway leading to the rocks. (Aciman, 2007: 56–57)

The extracts from the short passage demonstrate the chain of temporal links in the recounting of the exchange and the influence of the news on Oliver. In a quick transition, the recollection of the past—which functions as the novel's present—springs into the present tense of 'now kneeling,' before moving back into the reporting of the past. Finally, Elio expresses a promise for a future beyond even his current voice as storyteller. The complex interplay between temporal modes in the narrative reveals Aciman's fascination for the elements of time which he expands upon in *Homo Irrealis*. The declaration of 'I shall never forget' could be seen as a statement, or a pledge, or a hope and gestures towards the irrealis mood. The nature of time, as Aciman explores in his novel is malleable, mercurial, and subject to transformation.

Of course, much of Aciman's play with time is a function of narrative construction, an idea thoroughly examined by Paul Ricœur. Examining the interplay of temporalities in *Call Me by Your Name* through the lens of Ricœur's postulations helps illuminate how the text subverts the sense of a strict order of time and dismantles temporal expectations. Paul Ricœur's three-volume *Time and Narrative* offers a simultaneously broad and detailed study of the nature of time, arguing that the temporal paradoxes considered by philosophers such as Aristotle and Augustine can find resolution in the construction of narrative form. Since the recounting of experience, be it fictional or historical, is told with a memory informed by the present knowledge and need not maintain chronological integrity, narratives can amalgamate the seemingly contradictory phenomenological and cosmological perceptions of time. Echoing Aristotle's description of 'mimesis,' Ricœur proposes three stages of representation in narrative's construction, each differently engaging with various temporal modes. As Ricœur explains in the first volume of *Time and Narrative*, *mimesis*<sub>2</sub> is the creation of a narrative through *emplotment* and the configuration of the form; the story is produced and crafted through the choices of narrative

structure. The plot is mediated, Ricoeur argues, through the formulation of a ‘meaningful story from a diversity of events or incidents’ (Ricoeur I, 1983: 65). Ricoeur describes how the emplotment of the story need not follow the chronological order to reach the chosen ending: ‘To follow a story is to move forward in the midst of contingencies and peripeteia under the guidance of an expectation that finds its fulfilment in the “conclusion” of the story’ (Ricoeur I, 1983: 66). Ricoeur references Frank Kermode’s ‘sense of an ending’ that emerges from retelling the affairs that might start at the end and disrupts the linearity of a chronological ‘arrow of time.’ Narrative plays such as repetition and recollection invert ‘the so-called “natural” order of time. In reading the ending in the beginning and the beginning in the ending, we also learn to read time itself backwards, as the recapitulation of the initial conditions of a course of action in its terminal consequences’ (Ricoeur I, 1983: 67-68). Ricoeur’s work is valuable in relation to Aciman as the philosopher argues that the constructions of narrative forms and relay of stories offers evidence of how seemingly paradoxical perceptions of chronological and phenomenological temporal modes can coexist. Aciman’s play with time in his novel and his intermingling of tenses contributes to the sense of time in the story as contemporaneous: the past is still in existence and the present extends beyond an instantaneous moment.

The emplotment of *Call Me by Your Name*, with its interplay of time seen in the use of retrospective present and its future intimations from the past, invites the reader to experience an incongruent perception of uniform time and helps to concretise the significance of the depicted summer. The complex narrative time of Elio’s recounting is testament to his own bewildering experience of his time in the summer holiday. That summer becomes crystalized for Elio as tremendously important, and the consequences of the encounter with Oliver radiate out into his future life. With the intricate interweaving of time in the narrative, Elio’s present experience of that summer, waiting uncertainly for Oliver, becomes central, and it seems to exist in an almost timeless experience. As he quotes Paul Celan, he exists in that summer ‘[b]etween always and never’ (Aciman, 2007: 70). The Elio narrating *Call Me by Your Name* becomes what Aciman describes in another essay as a ‘temporizer,’ or someone who ‘moves from the past to the present, from the present to the past, or, as I’ve already suggested in my essay “Arbitrage” in *False Papers*, he “firms up the present by experiencing it from the future as a moment in the past”’ (Aciman, 2011: 62). In an earlier version of the essay, given as a speech, Aciman emphasises that the temporizer ‘forfeits the present and he moves elsewhere in time’ (Aciman, 2001: 32, italics his own). The movement of time, the existence of numerous temporal modes, the blurring of boundaries between past, present, and future in the narrative ‘firms up the present’ of Elio’s rarefied

summer experience, and casts it as timeless and ongoing rather than a transitory period.

Without question, *Call Me by Your Name* is a veritable mosaic of overlapping tenses, including Elio's predictions of future sensations without the certainty of foresight. For example, moving towards Oliver while sitting on his own bed that Oliver was occupying for the summer, Elio notices that '[n]ow here I was. In a few weeks, I'd be back here on this very same bed' (Aciman, 2007: 130). The past tense of the events told in retrospect become the present tense of 'now,' and the Elio of that time imagines his future in Oliver's absence with a vision untainted by the older Elio's knowledge. Similarly, the younger Elio considers that any connection with Oliver is impossible and that the most intimacy he can hope for is a candid declaration of his attraction and a perfunctory liaison. He imagines a dispassionate scene, declaring that 'I knew there was no future in this' (Aciman, 2007: 86). At that moment in time, Elio is convinced that nothing will ever happen between him and Oliver, and that their love affair is doomed before it even began. The succeeding events prove him wrong, of course, but his present perspective of the future remains uninfluenced by the older Elio's retrospective knowledge. Elio's error in his future forecasting underscores how the future may have already passed, but it can still be unpredictable. There are still yet unknown virtual futures available.

In this way, the textual play with time in *Call Me by Your Name* has more potential implications than an inquiry into the nature of the temporal. Returning to Grosz's theories on time in *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely*, she extrapolates from Bergson's consideration of the coexistence of the past and the present to offer claims about the virtual possibilities of the future. As Grosz explains, '[t]he future is that over which the past and the present have no control: the future is that openness of becoming that enables divergence from what exists' (Grosz, 2004: 184). Although informed by the past, the future offers a multiplicity of profound potentialities, not yet determined, with the potential to reorganise and reanimate new avenues of becoming. Grosz argues that the temporal reframing ushered in by Darwin, Nietzsche and Bergson not only restructured the sense of time, but they consequently reformulated the significance of the future. In other words, the deconstruction of linear, chronological, and cosmological time reorientates the emphasis of the temporal on virtual possibilities: The future is open, ripe for change, transformation, and new potentials.

Grosz's articulation of future significance can be traced in *Call Me by Your Name* where the potential of future possibilities radiate out from the present. Returning to opening lines describing Oliver's arrival to the Italian villa in that fateful summer, the text begins with his insouciant

pronouncement of “Later”! The word, the voice, the attitude (Aciman, 2007: 3). The incipient sentence gives no indication of a tense, and the expression becomes timeless, even while accentuating the sense of a future juncture; the present moment of Elio’s first impression of Oliver as he bursts onto the scene is consecrated and immortalised with the tenseless catalogue of Oliver’s immediate attractions. Elio consistently comes back to an analysis of Oliver’s term ‘later,’ interpreting it as a promise of return in addition to offering a curt, unsentimental dismissal. The recurring references to Elio’s concern with ‘later’ form almost temporal fugue in the first section entitled ‘If Not Later, When?’ As pointed out in text, the section refers to Oliver’s adaptation of Rabbi Hillel’s reminder of ‘If not now, when?’ meant to incite immediate action. Oliver’s transformation of the maxim moves the emphasis from the present to the future, offering not only a deferral of deeds but a shift towards the significance of future potential. From the very beginning of the novel, the present moment of the eventful summer is imbued with the ripe possibilities of a future. The play with future time that permeates the first section reinforces the prospect of a potential ‘later’ for the two lovers even after summer’s passing.

As previously mentioned, applying Grosz’s articulation of the future’s significance to *Call Me by Your Name*, a text that deeply engages with the experience of time and employs punctuations of narrative tenses which complicate any distinction between temporal modes, suggests a radical reading of the work. Even while the presumed future of the story is one of melancholy and loss as the golden summer draws to a close and Oliver is set to leave in the autumn, the narrative telling which intermingles the past, present and future both reconstitutes the sense of the present summer and intimates the possibility for the yet-unrealised future connection between Oliver and Elio. Certainly, the narrative ruptures of Elio’s older voice recollecting the past signal that the future is known and established, and that the relationship between Elio and Oliver is cemented as a moment of history. Yet the narrative storytelling and the mixture of narrative tenses recasts the importance of that summer as still fundamental to Elio’s present life, diminishing the difference between the past and the present in Bergson’s terms. The experiences of the summer are still vibrant and pulsing, not yet passed, which, engaging Grosz’s theory, indicates that there are still ripe potentialities for positive futures. Indeed, *Call Me by Your Name*, a queer romance that takes place during the AIDS epidemic, remains unburdened by the health concerns of the gay community. Taking place in a period when queer futures were unpromised, Aciman’s work thus offers a defiant revisiting of the past, reconstituting the present to offer new avenues for the future. In contrast to the perception of futureless queer identities that Lee Edelman describes in *No Futures: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Aciman offers a story where the experiences of a gay romance in the past reverberate through the present and

into the unformulated future. Edelman describes how queer subjectivities, demonised as narcissistically concerned with the pleasures of the present, are frequently marginalised by the cultural discourse that emphasises reproduction and the image of The Child as the only factors determining the political future. Although Edelman provocatively questions the necessity of emphasising futurity, Aciman's novel offers an alternative timeline through its narrative revisiting of the past to revise the present to reformulate new potentialities in the future.

And in fact, Aciman's sequel to *Call Me by Your Name*, *Find Me*, published in 2019, offers the satisfaction of reunion as Elio and Oliver find their way back to each other after decades of separation; the promise of 'later' that initiates the romance between the two men in *Call Me by Your Name* finally materialises when Oliver reconciles himself to act upon his abeyant desire for Elio. *Find Me* explores the three romantic encounters that Elio, his father, and Oliver each experience in the aftermath of the fateful summer. The three stories are set as a musical movement, and the symphonic novel produces a crescendo of yearning that culminates in Oliver and Elio's return to the villa in Italy. Each section depicts a different protagonist's perspective on their own romantic lives unfolding in three different cultural centres. Elio's movement, entitled 'Cadenza,' is replete with autumnal scenes. One November, he and his lover Michel return to the Frenchman's childhood chateau, where Elio plays music that 'suited autumn,' and the two take brisk walks through the lugubrious countryside (Aciman, 2019: 172). The atmosphere of mellow mistiness and snug interiors is a sharp contrast to the heat of the Edenic Italian summer. The sequel, thus, seems to resume Elio's and Oliver's story at the very moment that it left off despite the passing years. The season dominating the mood of Elio's section of *Find Me* is precisely the autumn that Elio dreaded in *Call Me by Your Name* as it is the period following Oliver's departure and the marked end to their romance. Aciman's sequel, thus, provides the glimpse into a potentiality to which the first novel alludes. Any sense of Elio's and Oliver's melancholic future spent in regretful loneliness in the autumns of their lives is dismissed as they come back to their romantic origins at the height of another summer. Even the title of the final section, 'Da Capo,' is the musical term signalling a cyclical return to the start of the piece, a repetition, or a revisiting of the beginning. Having decided to seek out Elio, Oliver imagines his re-entrance into the garden in Italy:

It will be hot and there'll be no shade. But the scent of rosemary will be everywhere [...] and behind the house there'll be a field of wild lavender and sunflowers raising their befuddled big heads at the sun. The swimming pool, the belfry nick-named To-Die-For, the monument to the dead soldiers of the Piave, the tennis court, the rickety gate that leads down to the rocky beach. (Aciman, 2019: 246)



Oliver's vision of the Italian villa in summer is both 'remembrance' and 'dreammaking,' informed by a memory of the past, and prophesising the future of his return. The passage is written in the future tense, promising a resumption of the summer months. The villa in his imagination is untouched and waiting, primed for re-entry; the swimming pool and tennis courts are unaffected by any ravage of time, the 'rickety gate' yet unrepaired. The image of blazing heat and unforgiving sun, of the heavy scent of lavender and vivid sunflowers suggests a perpetual summertime, a dormant, world where autumn never comes. The prospect of a future where the everlasting present that the narrative structure of *Call Me by Your Name* suggests is made manifest in the sequel where Oliver and Elio reunite and recreate the exultant time of their summer experience.

Aciman's positive vision of a future for queer relationships reconstitutes and restructures the pessimistic forecasts of 1980s queer romances and the hopeless 'death drive' of Lee Edelman's theories. The romance between Samuel and Miranda described in the first section of *Find Me* produces a son named Oliver who is depicted as belonging to the original Oliver and Elio after Samuel's death. Elio's realisation of the completion of his family sounds out like 'a final chord resolving an unfinished melodic air' (Aciman, 2019: 254). He recognises how '[t]he child was like our child' (Aciman, 2019: 254). Instead of the resignation to a heteronormative life, Oliver finally chooses an alternative possibility where he and Elio are bound together in love and will contribute to the care of the next generation. Returning to the space of the Italian villa, recapturing the time of their first summer together, Elio and Oliver rescript the possibilities for jubilant queer futures. Elio and Oliver seem to exist in that 'Happier Year' to which Forster dedicated *Maurice* (Forster, 2005: 2). In a similar vein, Aciman's romantic ending in *Find Me*, which sees the revisitation and progression of Elio and Oliver's love, reworks Bassani's doomed tale in *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*. Oliver's wife, for whom he left Elio at the end of that 1980's summer is revealed as Micol, a nod, perhaps, to the heroine of the Italian novel. The undercurrent of homosexual desire that finds no outlet in Bassani's work alternatively achieves resolution in Aciman's writing. The loss, death and destruction that underpin the nostalgic representation of an irrecoverable world of Jewish lives before World War II in *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* is reconstituted in *Find Me*, where the characters are not only able to revisit and recapture the halcyon period of their formative years, but they are able to craft a life for themselves together that extends the contentment of their shared summer out into an illimitable future.

Although the arcadian summer of the 1980s presented in *Call Me by Your Name* is a memory, the feverish intensity still exists for both Elio and Oliver. The romantic holiday encounter, seemingly bounded by the

limits of the season, reverberates with other narratives that cast past summer periods as an ephemeral paradise lost, fixed in golden tones. Aciman's text, in contrast, recalibrates the sense of melancholic doom as the rapid movement through temporal modes creates an unreal mood where the past exists in the present and can be reconstituted to create alternative futures. The narrative play in the novel yields what Aciman notices in a poem by Patrick Phillips printed on the New York Subway:

What the poet is describing is a time in the future when the past will have become an everlasting present. [...] There is no name for this melding of past, present and future tenses. Which should not be surprising, since what the poet wishes here is to transcend, to undo, to overcome time altogether. (Aciman, 2021: 23)

Using Paul Ricœur's and Elizabeth Grosz's theories that consider time and narration and how chronological destabilization offers new potential futures helps illuminate Aciman's own attempts to 'overcome time altogether' in his fiction. *Call Me by Your Name* blurs the distinctions of time to offer a narration where the past and present are intertwined, which has the effect of elongating the present and of opening out virtual potentials. Revisiting the past to create an 'everlasting' present offers a radical alternative to other narratives where the passions of the summer succumb to the chill of autumn and can never be recaptured. In Aciman's writing, the summer's heat never dissipates.

**Ann Catherine Hoag** is a lecturer in the Department of English Language and Culture at the University of Groningen, teaching classes on travel writing and migrant fiction. Her publications include studies on travel, and she is currently working on a book entitled *Women, Travel and Writing: Changing Times, Changing Spaces*, to be published by Routledge, which examines time, space and women's narrative identities in travel from the interwar era.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4032-7668>

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