



**“YOU CAN’T HAVE IT ALL, SISTER”: DUAL TIMELINES AND ALTERNATE
(HI)STORIES IN CYNTHIA SWANSON’S *THE BOOKSELLER* AND JO WALTON’S
*MY REAL CHILDREN***

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ABSTRACT. In this paper I will argue that the dual temporalities featured in Cynthia Swanson’s *The Bookseller* and in Jo Walton’s *My Real Children* convey the fragmented selves of their protagonists and reveal the economic, political, and sociocultural constraints that shape their life as women. The similarities between both novels deserve a comparative analysis that investigates the ontological implications of a split self apparently living in two different timelines at once, where the figure of the double does not menace the original self but motivates an empowering reevaluation of her choices. These alternate and alternative (hi)stories are a form of gender resistance to the limited, and often conflicting, options available to women and the sacrifices involved in each act of choosing. The novels’ dual timelines serve the purpose of examining women’s subjectivity as well as traditional understandings of gender attributes and roles.

Keywords: timelines, women, dual self, alternate history, *The Bookseller*, *My Real Children*.

“NO PUEDES TENERLO TODO, HERMANA”: TEMPORALIDADES DUALES E HISTORIAS ALTERNATIVAS EN *THE BOOKSELLER* DE CYNTHIA SWANSON Y *MY REAL CHILDREN* DE JO WALTON

RESUMEN. En este artículo se propone que las temporalidades duales que aparecen en *The Bookseller* de Cynthia Swanson y en *My Real Children* de Jo Walton expresan la identidad fragmentada de sus protagonistas y revelan las presiones económicas, políticas y socioculturales que articulan sus vidas como mujeres. Las similitudes entre ambas novelas merecen un análisis comparativo que investigue las implicaciones ontológicas de una identidad escindida que aparentemente habita en dos líneas temporales diferentes a la vez, en las que su doble no supone una amenaza para el sujeto original, sino que motiva una reevaluación empoderadora de sus decisiones. Estas historias ucrónicas y alternativas constituyen una forma de resistencia de género a las limitadas (y a menudo incompatibles) opciones al alcance de las mujeres y a los sacrificios que implica cada elección. Las líneas temporales duales de las novelas permiten examinar la subjetividad de las mujeres, así como nociones tradicionales sobre los atributos y roles de género.

Palabras clave: líneas temporales, mujeres, identidad dual, ucronía, *The Bookseller*, *My Real Children*.

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1. INTRODUCTION: CONTESTING GENDERED TIME

Literature has explored the idea of bifurcating timelines and its inspiring potential in many ways.¹ Chronotropic shifts have proliferated in the last decades to convey the lack of stable and reliable frames of thought, our fragmentary sense of being and our problematic engagement with sociohistorical and economic space-times:

In this postmodern age, deprived of foundational, securing assumptions about progress about the future ... [t]ime, obviously, continued to pass in daily life, but not, any longer, in ways readily conceivable as progressive, coherent, or meaningful ... This postmodern skepticism ... [is] evident both in challenges to narrative conventions of temporality and representation, and in more general questions about the powers of reason to comprehend and control the world. (Stevenson 168)

Space and time are among the factors that constitute identity (like gender, ethnicity, age, or class), imbued with the same ideological aspects as the other constituents. We are spatiotemporal creatures, defined by the space and time we

¹ Readers are encouraged to contemplate the idea of branching universes from three standpoints: Rubenstein (2014) for an exhaustive overview of parallel worlds in religion and philosophy, Wittenberg (2013) for a comprehensive physical explanation, and Hellekson (2022) for an overview of alternate histories in televisual narratives.

inhabit. The dislocated/dis-located self that cannot be unequivocally inscribed in one specific space or time is condemned to ontological imprecision because unclear spatiotemporal coordinates cannot define nor contain subjectivities. As shown in the sections that follow, the two female characters examined here often fail to recognize who they are or how they came to be, as they navigate between different names and memories. Moreover, as a cultural construction time is gendered and its arrow (the unidirectionality of productive work, public activity, cause and effect, history and progress) is male.² In this regard, West-Pavlov contends:

From antiquity, time and space have been gendered masculine and feminine respectively. Masculine action occurs within a temporalized framework of historical cause and effect; feminine generativity is reduced to the space ... of the fertile womb, and in more recent formulations of the same notion, to the domestic realm. (101)

As argued by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* and developed by Julia Kristeva in "Women's Time", the linear time of the public, social and industrial sphere can be labeled masculine, while the repetitive and cyclical time of reproduction, domestic work and care can be defined as feminine. The linear time of history and traditional narratives demarcate women's lives, set boundaries to what they do and are as "properly temporalized bodies" (Freeman 4). By challenging the sequential narrative line, rooted in a unique, linear, masculine, and unidirectional sense of time, the two novels I address challenge as well the social architectures that shape women's roles and expectations.

Unnatural³ chronological disruptions in literature (such as time travelling) have traditionally been a masculine domain given their connotations of power and agency. Yet, women have also employed unconventional chronologies to examine their sense of self in a constricting patriarchal order, a task for which non-linear or non-singular timelines prove very suitable. The complexities of women's lives welcome *sideways journeys*, in other words, jumping off the linear patriarchal chronology and exploring alternative, uncharted space-times. The multiverse⁴—or the possibility of other worlds—offers women options beyond the limits of a binary set of possibilities (either love and family or career) dictated by the patriarchal logic of production or reproduction. Cynthia Swanson's *The Bookseller* and Jo Walton's *My*

² A more complete critical framework about the gendering of time would go beyond the space limits of this paper, but the catalogue would certainly include Forman and Sowton (1989), Felski (2000), Bryson (2007) and Browne (2014).

³ The two novels analyzed in this paper are unnatural narratives because they break "the mimetic illusion" (Richardson 93), containing "physical or logical impossibilities that concern the represented world's temporal or spatial organization" and "physically, logically, mnemonically, or psychologically impossible enunciations" (Alber et al. 116, 124).

⁴ Although the concept can be traced back to the Classical Age, the multiverse or metaverse is currently under investigation in contemporary physics. It derives from physicist Hugh Everett's many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics whereby the universe splits into multiple copies of itself.

Real Children deal with the empowering possibilities of alternate timelines and parallel worlds to expose women's constraints and frustrations in patrilineal time. Thus, they go "beyond the boundaries of here and now" (Winterson 99).

The central characters in the novels under analysis experience or remember time in non-normative ways. Chrononormativity refers to the normative life course that subjects are expected to follow according to societal pressures involving age-determined milestones "like marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproduction, childrearing, and death" (Freeman 4). We organize our lives, work, and sense of self around a notion of time that Freeman describes as universal, chronological, progressive, and goal-oriented (5). Although originally theorized to discuss queer subjectivities, Freeman's concept of chrononormativity can easily be applied to female characters who do not align to conventional chronologies and to unique and stable notions of identity, but instead perceive time (and themselves) as multiple and hence non-normative.

According to Ellen Peel, "it makes sense to relate the feminist unnatural to the narratological unnatural, since both question what is comfortable, conventional, or taken for granted" (83). The "natural" conventions subverted by the two novels analyzed here are the linearity of time, as above-mentioned, and the unity of the self. As Judith K. Gardiner points out, "[t]he word 'identity' is paradoxical in itself, meaning both sameness and distinctiveness" (347), which implies that subjectivity is constructed on the self and its Other. The two novels under inquiry complicate such tensions between "being like" and "being different from" by including a duplicate version of the protagonists in parallel fictive worlds and temporalities where they become their own Other. Although disturbing, these alternate selves diverge from traditional representations of the ominous double in order to raise complex questions about the unified self in a patriarchal order that forces demanding choices upon women. Still in Gardiner's words, "[t]he model of the integrated individual was predominantly male, and women writers show that this model of characterization is inappropriate to their experience" (355).

The use of unnatural temporalities stands out as a prominent and up-to-date vehicle to represent women's perception that their lives are inscribed between their sense of themselves and the societal impositions upon them—similar to the double consciousness of minority groups struggling to reconcile what they perceive as multiple identities. Such split consciousness leads to feelings of dislocation (or dislocation), alienation, or fragmentation of identity that literature has often thematized as, for example, trauma, diasporic rupture, insanity, or hauntings to question the notion of a unified and stable self. The attempts to reconcile women's aspirations and cultural norms are fictionalized in Swanson's *The Bookseller* and in Walton's *My Real Children* through plots that divide their central characters' stories into two different narrative timelines, thus offering alternate, alternating, and alternative⁵ versions of their

⁵ In this paper I will use *alternate* in the sense defined later in relation to the alternate history genre, *alternative* as "other" and *alternating* as "taking turns".

lives and identities. Duplicate timelines allow for the reconciliation of the apparently diverging senses of themselves and overcome the traditional opposition.

In summary, this paper will address the subversion of unidirectional and universal time as a metaphor for women's complex sense of subjecthood. I will examine how the use of alternate and alternative timelines comprises a feminist strategy to disrupt conventional narrative and chronological sequences, and to provide the central characters with exploratory ways that expand the limited options they find in the patriarchal order. As is the case with Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (with which *The Bookseller* and *My Real Children* somehow converge) the split subjecthood of the protagonists "represents the divided consciousness of contemporary women" (Richardson 158). My analysis will now move on to a brief theoretical outline to frame the presence of non-normative chronologies and contradictory worlds in both novels to "critique the conflicts that fragment women and the forces that instill false consciousness" (Peel 100).

2. CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW OF ALTERNATIVE WORLDS IN FICTION

After explaining how time has been understood as gendered and its implications for women's sense of identity, this section provides a concise theoretical background to understand *The Bookseller* and *My Real Children* in the context of counterfactual worlds and alternative realities. These categories are not exclusive to literature (several disciplines like historiography, political science, and philosophy have also entertained thoughts of other possible worlds) but my focus here will be their expression in fiction.

Some literary forms subvert the notions of "a common 'now' for the whole universe" (Front 17) and of a single-universe cosmology to expose the crisis of representation of a multiple and fluid reality. In the twentieth century, Newtonian conceptions of time as linear were revolutionized by Einstein's special theory of relativity and further problematized by quantum physics, whose many-worlds interpretation of particles' behavior has inspired multiverse narratives to address the conflicting aspects of human experience. Quantum fictions—as Front labels those narratives that feature disrupted temporalities—serve "to render the characters' experience of quantum reality, such as parallel worldlines in the multiverse" (29). Although the two novels under examination in this paper do not refer to quantum mechanics explicitly, they readily call to mind popularized concepts like *superposition of states* and *simultaneous realization of possibilities*:

For literary scholars, who do not really care whether many-worlds cosmology is the best explanation of quantum mechanics, the interest of the theory is wide-ranging: it provides a powerful way to dramatize the "what if" mode of thinking that makes us marvel at the major consequences of events for our destinies ...; it offers new points of view on such fundamental questions as identity, ethical responsibility, and free will; it encourages questions regarding the nature of space and time; it rejuvenates the old theme of the double; and it creates narrative situations which would not be possible in a system of reality limited to one world. (Ryan 668)

The “what-if mode” allows for the exploration of unrealized alternative courses that never took place but could. It provides writers with a narrative instrument to speculate on an array of possibilities related to selfhood, agency, and cause and effect that happen in an alternative—not factual—timeline. Put simply, what-if scenarios require an altered world in a substitute timestream that contrasts with a reference world and timeline that may be real (i.e., the actual world of the readers) or fictive (the characters’ diegetic world). This basic scheme encompasses many genres and styles, from fantasy and science fiction to mainstream and realistic works,⁶ and may include such tropes as forking paths, time traveling, and parallel worlds.

When offering an altered version of the past (counterfactual to a reference version considered real), this multifaceted literary type is generally designated as “alternate history” by anglophone scholars, yet some regard it as almost equivalent to “uchronia” (Singles 16-17; Hellekson *Alternate History* 14). Some researchers, though, are careful to underline the particular nuances of each term. Alkon, for instance, termed uchronia those utopias set in futuristic or alternate pasts (115-116), while Ransom makes a point of distinguishing any alternate timeline (*ou-chronos* or no-time) from alternate histories, which refer to the reader’s past (259). *Parahistory*, *allobistory* and *counterfactual history* are commonly used as well, but in this paper I will adhere to the Anglo-American label of *alternate histories* (see Morgan & Palmer-Patel 19–20) to refer to texts featuring variations of our actual, consensual past, and *uchronias* as an umbrella term for all departures from a real or fictive referential space-time. For the past forty years, critical discussions over uchronian texts have provided diverse perspectives on their configuration and classification. For example, while Collins classifies uchronias attending to the space-time position of a subject (as cited in Hellekson *Alternate History* 11), Hellekson considers the historical point where the divergence occurred (5) and Rosenfeld pays attention to the positive or negative assessment of historical events and their resulting present (90).

In the case of alternate history fiction, some basic components can be agreed upon. Alternate histories are fantasy, science fiction, or speculative stories that comprise “the branch of literature that concerns itself with history’s turning out differently than what we know to be true” (Hellekson *Alternate History* 248). Its central idea is that history turned out differently because of the causal relationships developing from a moment of bifurcation generally called “point of divergence” (Ransom 259; Vogt 112) or “nexus event” (Hellekson *Alternate History* 5), among other terms (Singles 23). At these diverging points, the course of history develops contrarily to what we accept as real. Thus, the “*normalized narrative of the real past*” which is “*a culture- and time-specific construct*” is altered (Singles 6; italics in the original). Alternate histories focus on speculations of what could have happened but never did, thus presenting a counterfactual version of history. Nexus events are usually related to major historical facts, like Germany and Japan conquering the

⁶ Readers can find in Robert Schmunk’s www.uchronia.com a comprehensive and updated bibliography of fiction and non-fiction works about alternate history.

United States after World War II (Phillip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*) or the Confederates winning the battle of Gettysburg (Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee*).

My analysis will concentrate on two uchronian novels that share the use of the what-if and forking-path structures where a diverging event bifurcates the narrative universe and the life courses of their protagonists. However, they do not engage in the conventions of alternate history in a similar manner. As explained below, both stories reveal an altered version of the past, but the point of reference with which to identify such alteration varies. In *The Bookseller*, the protagonist experiences an alternative timeline where her present results from a stream of personal episodes that differs from—is counterfactual to—the past she remembers. Therefore, the readers' consensual past is not modified. In *My Real Children*, on the contrary, the readers can identify substantial changes to history with worldwide consequences, which is closer to the conventions of the alternate history genre.

Although history is an important factor in both novels, my point in this paper is to emphasize their use of temporal estrangement and uchronian worlds to propose alternative temporalities for women, as addressed in the next section.

3. DUAL TIMELINES, DUAL SELVES

This section turns to the effects of manipulating narrative time in Swanson's and Walton's works. *The Bookseller* (2015) was the first novel published by the American writer Cynthia Swanson. It tells the story of Kitty Miller, an unmarried bookseller in Denver who starts waking up in a strange house, some weeks ahead of her own timeline. In that alternate space-time, she goes by the name of Katharyn, is married to Lars Andersson,⁷ and has triplets. She does not co-own a library with her best friend Frieda,⁸ who seems to have vanished from Kitty's life, and only dedicates her time to domestic chores, caring, and suburban social life. Each time Kitty wakes up in her other timeline, she suffers space-time dislocation and memory loss:

This is not my bedroom.

Where am I? ... The last thing I remember, it was Wednesday evening and I was painting my bedroom a bright, saturated yellow. ... Oughtn't I to remember what happened next? Oddly, I do not ... And given that here is not my home, evidently I am still asleep. (Swanson 1)

The allusion to a yellow room can immediately be read as a nod to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper", where the protagonist's

⁷ Poul Anderson (the author of the *Time Patrol* stories about a police force that prevents unauthorized time traveling) echoes in Katharyn's married name.

⁸ Frieda's name may be a reference to the feminist writer Betty Friedan. *The Bookseller* is set between late 1962 and early 1963, just before or around the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* in February 1963. Friedan's much-debated essay illuminates this novel as a critique of the limited roles and expectations of American suburban housewives in the 1960s.

collapsing mind projects an uncanny figure upon the wall that becomes the narrator's figurative double. The idea of a dual consciousness is thus evoked from the onset of Swanson's novel through this literary reference and through Kitty's own sense of being somewhere else, somewhen else, and someone else.

British Jo Walton's *My Real Children* was published in 2014. In it, Patricia (Patty) Cowan, a recent Oxford graduate with an English degree, is urged by her fiancé Mark to make a life-shaping decision in 1949: "[Y]ou'll have to marry me now or never!" (Walton 54). From that point on, the novel bifurcates into alternating chapters about Tricia (the Patricia who married Mark) and Pat (the Patricia who did not). The two timelines are contemplated from the viewpoint of an aged and dementia-stricken Patricia, struggling to remember the facts of her life but only able to recall contradictory events pertaining to two parallel chronologies:

It was when she thought of her children that she was most truly confused. Sometimes she knew with solid certainty that she had four children, and five more stillborns: nine times giving birth in floods of blood and pain, and of those, four surviving. And other times she knew equally well that she had two children, both born by caesarian section late in her life after she had given up hope. Two children of her body, and another, a stepchild, dearest to them all. When any of them visited she knew them, knew how many of them there were, and the other knowledge felt like a dream. (Walton 10–11)

Kitty and Patricia confabulate—namely, they generate false memories of past events they did not experience. Confabulation is common among psychiatric patients affected by Alzheimer's disease, schizophrenia, and other syndromes involving memory disorders. In *The Bookseller*, Kitty undergoes a mental collapse due to trauma, guilt, a stressful family life, and the nuclear menace of a geopolitical crisis. In *My Real Children*, Patricia suffers from dementia and lives in a nursing home where her mental condition ranges from "less confused" to "very confused" (Walton 9). Therefore, both characters construct contradictory life courses in uchronian worlds in contestation of conventional representations of an embodied subjectivity dwelling in one single timestream. It is relevant to mention, however, that the difficulty of identifying an "original" story against its confabulated "version" is a meaningful element in the novels. The denouement of *The Bookseller* discloses that Kitty has imagined what she has taken for her "real life" or narrative factual world all along, while in *My Real Children* Patricia can never be sure which of the two timelines she remembers is factual (if any of them is factual at all).

As happens with the thought experiment of Schrödinger's cat, where the universes split generating a "cat-alive universe, and a cat-dead universe" (Frederik Pohl, as cited in Hellekson *Alternate History* 48–49), Swanson's main character duplicates into Kitty Miller and Katharyn Andersson, while Walton's Patricia Cowan duplicates into Tricia Anston and Pat Cowan. The discussion that follows rests on the idea that the narrative technique of parallel storyworlds in alternate timelines serves the purpose of showcasing women's sense of self as incomplete members of society and history. By stepping out of their spatiotemporal frameworks, these

characters and their "analogues" (Hellekson *Alternate History* 51) explore the possibilities denied to them in other temporalities, and become observers of their own counter-lives that function as facilitators of self-consciousness.

The stories of Kitty/Katharyn and Pat/Tricia are told in alternating chapters in their respective novels, where their names fluctuate to identify the specific timeline they are living through. In *The Bookseller*, Kitty remembers she once considered de-infantilizing her name and so changed it to Katharyn when she entered the business world because "it was simply time to grow up" (Swanson 13). Her false memories as an independent woman have kept her as the carefree, unencumbered "Kitty" but in her real timeline she did become Katharyn, which suits the responsibilities of marriage and three children. Patricia's case in *My Real Children* is similar, although complicated by her two sets of memories. Before Mark urged her to choose, she was "Patty" (which made her "sound like a little pie"; Walton 58), but after the turning-point event she became Tricia (a name her husband gave her) and Trish (when she joined a group of women who shortened their names "as part of their reimagination of themselves") in her married timeline, or Pat ("a more grown-up form of her name") in her not-married timeline (Walton 186, 84).

The Bookseller is narrated by a first-person narrator: "Examining myself in the mirror over the dresser, I half expect to see some entirely different person—who knows who this Katharyn is? But I look exactly like myself" (Swanson 5-6). Kitty feels she is herself and another woman at once, conveyed through spatial and temporal dislocation every time she wakes up in an unfamiliar place and perceives time in a non-normative way: "Who knows how time flows here?" (Swanson 289). By contrast, in Walton's work there is a third-person narrative voice focalizing on Pat/Trish in the alternating chapters and in those sections—set at the nursing home—where Patricia remembers two different life courses. Patricia's feelings are very similar to Kitty's regarding spatiotemporal dislocation and duality: "Her brain couldn't be trusted. Now she imagined that she was living in two different realities, drifting between them; but it must be her brain that was at fault" (Walton 15). Once their unusual involvement in time is introduced, the plots unfold to present how duplication operates and what limitations these characters experience, as women, in each story.

For most part of *The Bookseller*, Kitty cannot share her conscience with her analogue's: "Why is it winter here and autumn in the real world? I cannot reconcile this" (Swanson 128). Not only does Katharyn live some months ahead of Kitty, but she also misses whole days every time she awakens in her alternate timeline:

I wonder ... how I got from Monday to Wednesday. Again—as was the case a few days ago, when I didn't remember getting from the middle of last week to the beginning of this week—I don't remember a lot of details. I can't recall transitioning from my last dream, from bicycling with the children, back to the safety of my own bed. I don't remember waking up on Tuesday morning. Indeed, I must have arisen and made breakfast and fed Aslan. I must have gone to the shop and worked. (Swanson 210)

Her fractured memory accentuates the ontological disorder that follows her temporal displacement. She cannot understand who she is because she cannot remember *when* she is. In her other timeline, Kitty often finds herself doing and saying things totally alien to her. She does not remember knowing how to cook, raise children, or shop efficiently—but does: “Who is this woman saying these things? It can’t be me.... I can’t believe how easily these words, these motherly actions, are coming to me. I feel like an old pro” (Swanson 6-7).

In the timeline Kitty remembers, her life is full of literature, music, and engaging conversations with Frieda about politics, business, and social matters. They are independent women who once rejected traditional gender roles:

[N]o one ... would have a hand in determining who Frieda and I were going to be. Nobody would decide that for us, nobody save for each other.... Who needs men? Frieda and I ask each other. Who needs children? We smirk at our station-wagon-driving counterparts, feeling relief that we never fell into *that* trap. (Swanson 20–21; emphasis in the original)

However, Kitty has imagined her “real” life and is actually Katharyn, one of those “trapped” women. Katharyn lives an apparently ideal life with a kind, supportive husband and three children in a suburban neighborhood—the epitome of *true* womanhood in the American 1950s and 1960s. The house where Kitty wakes up has an up-to-date appearance with quality finishes, and the clothes of her analogue look expensive but rather conventional and unimaginative (Swanson 38). Yet, she progressively realizes that this life is by no means perfect: Katharyn has an autistic child (Michael), her parents are dead, and she is no longer on speaking terms with her best friend and business partner. Kitty finds this timeline so challenging that she tells Frieda after one of her dreams: “I’m terrified that one of these nights I’m going to fall asleep and end up there permanently. And I will not be able to get back here again.’ There. I’ve said it” (Swanson 252). As the novel nears its denouement the readers learn that this difficult life is set in a real timeline that Katharyn’s mind has conveniently forgotten. Instead of engaging in the ongoing course of culture and politics like Kitty does, Katharyn seems to live what Freeman defines as the timelessness of domesticity, which “inculcated and validated a set of feelings—love, security, harmony, peace, romance, sexual satisfaction, motherly instincts” (5), all of them present, though unsatisfactory, in Katharyn’s life. The fact that the novel is narrated in the present tense increases such timelessness.

Katharyn’s grief after the death of her parents in a plane crash adds up to the dissatisfactions of housewifery and the stress of raising an autistic child, for whose illness she feels guilty (Swanson 136), without institutional help. Her mind has blocked her demanding and unfulfilling life to create an alternative version of herself that never existed (a Kitty who never married and could therefore escape her current misery):

I was not sleeping. I know this now. I was right here, making up stories in my head, stories that helped me cope. I was here –and yet, I wasn’t here. I must have been completely absent to those around me. (Swanson 302)

Until she discovers which of her versions is fabricated, she sticks to the idea that her life course as Katharyn Andersson is just a figment of her imagination, thus preserving Kitty's ideal world as her reference universe and Katharyn's as the alternate one.

Conformity prevails in Katharyn's timeline: "Whether it be real or not, I should be happy for what I have" (Swanson 269). Still, her alternating memories compel her to reflect on the effects of choosing, both in the past and in the present. Before she realizes she and Katharyn are the same person, Kitty believes she is experiencing a series of what-if dreams: "[I]t could have happened. My whole life, in these dreams, turns on an event that happened eight years ago" (Swanson 250). This point of divergence that triggers the bifurcation between Katharyn and her analogue took place when she agreed on a date with a man (actually Lars) that answered a personal ad she had placed in a newspaper in 1954. Katharyn remembers that she saved Lars' life when she heard him having a heart attack over the phone, when they were planning to meet. But Kitty's memory has erased this last episode to favor a version where no one showed up for the date because the man had just died of a stroke, which frees her from her present family issues and dissolves her grief. Kitty is amazed by how "events turn so easily on a dime" (Swanson 154) or, to quote Singles, "the underlying 'it-could-have-been-different' attitude of alternate histories, a much more 'loose' approach to cause and effect governed by contingency" (131).

Although contingency rules at the point of divergence, options are nevertheless present in the paramount choices Katharyn had to make in the past, the most important of which was leaving her business to take care of her family, exhorted by Frieda:

"You just need to decide," she'd said more than once —hands on hips, lips pressed together in exasperation— when I was yet again being summoned home from the shop early by one family crisis or another. "You just need to figure it out, Kitty. What do you want? Because here's a news flash —you can't have it all, sister". (Swanson 218)

Like Swanson's *The Bookseller*, Walton's *My Real Children* is constructed upon a what-if model. The forking-paths structure brings to light similar pressures on women and the difficult choices they are pushed to make, symbolized in Mark's marriage proposal at the outset of the novel. Patricia's alternate and alternating identities in her doubled-up memories convey, like Kitty/Katharyn's dual timelines, a wish to *have it all* that societal forces hardly allow. The versions that branch out in inconsistent worlds and memories, the factual and the counterfactual, represent excluding options that expose women's negotiations between private and public, family and career, love and friendship—that is, incompatible or highly conflicting elements impossible to experience simultaneously, unless imagined. As Sylvia Plath would put it, "I can never be all the people I want and live all the lives I want" (43).

Similarly to Swanson's novel, Walton's alternate timelines and identities provide the way to enjoy what one single self cannot, even though it puzzles Patricia:

If there were two worlds, then what caused her to slide between them? ... It was the same year, whichever year it was. It was just that things were different, things that shouldn't have been different. She had four children, or three.... She could remember things that couldn't simultaneously be true. She remembered Kennedy being assassinated and she remembered him declining to run again after the Cuban missile exchange. They couldn't both have happened, yet she remembered them both happening. (Walton 17)

One single consciousness opens and closes the novel, but splits into two versions of Patricia: "She was herself, whether she was Pat or Trish. They knew different things and cared about different people, but she was the same person she had always been" (Walton 315). Like Kitty/Katharyn's clashing timelines, Patricia's complement each other. Pat's life is far more fulfilling than Trish's: teaching at Cambridge, writing travel and art books, and deeply loving and being loved by a woman. Yet,

Trish's world was so much better than Pat's. Trish's world was peaceful. Eastern and Western Europe had open frontiers. There had been no nuclear bombs dropped after Hiroshima, no clusters of thyroid cancer. There had been very little terrorism. The world had become quietly socialist, quietly less racist, less homophobic. In Pat's world it had all gone the other way. (Walton 314)

Pat's private world is a haven against her terrifying background, while Trish's domestic life is a nightmare. She soon discovers she has married an abusive man but remains stuck in a loveless marriage for two decades. In this timeline she must leave her teaching job to take care of her four children, while Mark favors his unpromising academic career over fatherhood. Her life is lonely and dull, especially during the first years: "We have to move into town. I can't stay there in the village where there's nothing. It's driving me mad. I never talk to an adult. I'm completely trapped" (Walton 93). Trish often forgives and justifies Mark's cruel behavior, even though her conformity implies that she feels "like a child, with her future being decided for her" (Walton 58). She always tries to please Mark to recover the warm feelings he once expressed for her but only receives exacting and sarcastic reactions: "[He] had extremely firm ideas of what to expect in a wife. He wanted her to wash clothes and keep the house clean and provide food, to bear children and not complain" (Walton 76). The Anstons' sex life is dreadful—a heteronormative act he needs to perform to hide he is gay. Mark's need of offspring to mask his homosexuality almost kills Trish, who after several births and stillbirths decides to take the pill behind his back.

In her timeline, Pat starts a teaching career in Cambridge and visits Italy, envisioning "a possibility of a life where she taught all year and spent her summers in sunlight with beautiful art" (Walton 69), which she later achieves. Her days are full of culture, politics, and inspiring conversations with an interesting variety of people. When she finds herself in love with a woman, she cannot help comparing this love to Mark's: "There she had felt Mark was above her, but also that he had chosen her. She had felt privileged to be the object of his choice. With Bee ... she

was the one who had chosen" (86). Walton's emphasis on choice, like Swanson's, can be inscribed into critical discussions of the tensions between structural models of history (where large sociocultural and political forces determine events) and others where individual free will and agency, mainly that of "great men", shape how history unfolds (Morgan & Palmer-Patel 18–19; Singles 9). Departures from actual history, either global (as observed in Walton's work) or personal (in Swanson's) constitute effective narrative resources to expand women's opportunities against a demanding system that limits their options.

Clearly, both timelines in *My Real Children* are as divergent as the ones in Swanson's novel. Katharyn and Patricia experience nexus events in their storyworlds and present alternate stories of their central characters, making use of the device to "reflect and respond to the key changes in the cultural and social position of women" (Dannenberg 8) after World War II. However, only *My Real Children* can be said to present counterfactual versions of normalized history. Although Patricia's choice is not a relevant historical moment per se, it will cause wide-ranging changes in history. Walton appropriates the point of divergence to transform it into a private matter, thus giving her protagonist an agency and a central position in history that women have frequently lacked.

The reader recognizes deviations from historical records in Patricia's two chronologies. In Pat's timeline, Spain and Portugal join the European Economic Community in the 1960s, the Russians claim possession of the Moon, there's one President Rockefeller and the United States has left the United Nations. As a result of Patricia's choice, the outcome in Pat's version of history is a geopolitical, social, and environmental abyss, always on the verge of an all-out war. In 1963 there is a nuclear exchange between the United States and the USSR resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths and a poisonous fallout carried out into the Atlantic (Walton 125-126), to be followed by others in the novel. Although Pat's personal life is happier and more rewarding than Trish's, her timeline is a concatenation of international conflicts, terrorist attacks, and overall uncertainty.

Trish's timeline includes alternate historical episodes as well. For instance, Fidel Castro is assassinated (presumably by the CIA), and President Kennedy dies when a bomb explodes at a reception in Dallas. "Bobby Kennedy's investigation into his brother's death found evidence implicating [Vice-President] Johnson in the purchase of the explosives", after which Bobby Kennedy was elected (Walton 114, 116). However, in general terms, Trish's world is quite stable, the nuclear Armageddon seems to have been neutralized, and there is a huge international space station (called "Hope") devoted to collaborative scientific research.

Although not an alternate history in the canonical sense of the term (because historical events are left unchanged), *The Bookseller* makes use of the genre's basic elements (a nexus point and a substitute past) to configure an alternate story at a personal level. The outset of Kitty/Katharyn's story seems to announce an alternate history due to its temporal setting (during the Cuban Missile Crisis, which is excellent material for historical counterfactuals), but such expectations are obliquely met

when only Katharyn's particular life presents an alternate version. Her individual life course is intertwined with broader world events that do not alter our understanding of an established historical record. Swanson's focus on the private does not reduce the significance of women's choices and actions in her novel; quite on the contrary, it places Katharyn's agency center stage and puts *The Bookseller* and *My Real Children* in conversation regarding the empowering potential of dual timelines, as the next section will describe.

4. RECONCILING SELVES

So far, my analysis has explored the purposes of dual timelines and identities in *The Bookseller* and in *My Real Children*. In the narrative structure, the female characters' lives and counterlives are presented in alternating versions to suggest that women cannot *have it all* because some sort of loss or sacrifice is always involved when women choose among their limited options. Moreover, these alternate (hi)stories reveal different sociopolitical timelines whose drawbacks and inequities predominantly befall women. In consequence, they often perceive a narrowing of their chances for personal growth and a restriction on their available options. In this section, however, I will argue that both novels include reconciling strategies to empower their protagonists, derived from the same non-normative chronologies that reveal their sense of fracture. When Swanson's Katharyn discovers her imaginary life is not imaginary at all, her counterfactual becomes factual and vice versa. She then reassesses her past, which she used to interpret as a set of determining and uncontrollable circumstances. Patricia, on her part, finds value and meaning when she remembers her two life courses simultaneously as an old woman. This section will inquire into both women's creation of themselves as fuller and conscious beings by engaging in women's struggles for equality and by making significant contributions to their communities. In Adrienne Rich's more poetic terms, "[w]e must use what we have to invent what we desire" (215).

The dual timelines in *The Bookseller* serve the purpose of confronting two life models that women of the 1950s and 1960s usually found irreconcilable:

I wish I could go back and tell my fifteen-year-old self that the passage was right. All would be well. I would grow up to be happy. Someday, I would have everything I wanted.

But do I? I am not so sure anymore about this "everything" business. Yes, I am content. I've had to face some heartache, some loss, but what I have —the shop, Frieda, my parents, Aslan, my uncomplicated life— it feels like enough.

And in the other life? (Swanson 199)

Kitty's world dissolves while Katharyn's takes shape and settles down on her mind. As she starts remembering the actual episodes of her past—in other words, what she can declare is factual—she also re-members herself by bringing together

false and real recollections of her two selves⁹: "And then something comes to me. A memory, or a thought, or something I made up. I have no idea where it comes from, but when I know it, I know it" (Swanson 212). Katharyn gains knowledge of her real timeline as she remembers it and understands the circumstances that led her to choose her present life. She had to leave Sisters' Bookshop when she realized that her family, mostly her autistic son Michael, needed her even though it "is *not* what I always wanted. It's just what happened. It's just how things turned out" (Swanson 327; emphasis in the original). But she also gains insight: "[I]t had been the right thing to do, the only thing to do. I can see that now, having spent time there, having seen what I've seen and remembered what I remember" (Swanson 282-283).

Deterministic as they may sound, these recollections give her the chance to contemplate her past in contrast with the alternate version created by her stressed mind when it produced a bifurcation, namely Lars either surviving or dying of his stroke. Kitty's life allows Katharyn to understand she has shouldered the conventionalities and injustices of bourgeois life and has lost the social values she learnt from her parents: "I would have preferred my persona in this dream world to be a bit more enlightened.... I could at least have the decency to let [my maid] wear street clothes, especially when she's babysitting after hours" (Swanson 62). She embodies the gender and ethnic awareness that will develop during the 1960s in the United States, as the revision of her two lives draws her attention to some awkward facts. For instance, she realizes single women need a man to cosign their loans to start a business, disability is considered shameful and unattended to by the institutions, and suburban life largely depends on non-white people working for white people, which makes Katharyn quite uncomfortable as a suburban wife and mother: "I do believe in conducting myself equally toward anyone" (Swanson 91).

In her non-factual timeline, Kitty is tutoring Greg, her neighbors' son. Greg is nine but seems to have fallen behind at school, so he can barely read. Like Katharyn's autistic son, this boy needs help, but the system seems incapable of providing it. During their tutoring sessions, Kitty gathers that Greg would benefit from personalized stories about topics of interest to him, like baseball. When he tells her that his favorite baseball player is "colored, and some kids at school say you shouldn't like him because he's colored" (Swanson 85), she decides to write a story herself about Greg and the African American player, two second-class members of society that she brings to the center of discourse. This confabulated memory inspires Katharyn to fill the emptiness left by her gone business and to create herself anew with her analogue's experiences, encouraged by Lars:

He actually seems impressed. "Tutoring. And writing. These are things you'd really like to do?"

⁹ Reviews of the novel (*Publishers Weekly*; *USA Today*) drew attention to the *what if* trope and the mystery of "distinguish[ing] which life is truly hers, and which one is ... the path not taken" (Ciuraru) but failed to notice the restitutive power of considering both paths in unison.

I shrug. “I don’t know. Here, in this world, they don’t seem possible, do they?”

“Why not?” (Swanson 296)

Katharyn can finally accept her painful present as part of her true self, nevertheless acknowledging the healing power of her confabulated timeline and all its false memories: “They are an extraordinary gift that my mind has bequeathed me. With the help of my active imagination, I have been given the opportunity to [learn] who I want to be, what I want for myself” (Swanson 295). Therefore, Katharyn starts a construction process of subjecthood to become the kind of woman she has not been able to be so far: “A part of me is desperate to know what that feels like. What it feels like to truly be me —the me who resides all the time in this world” (Swanson 293).

In both novels, women’s decisions are shaped by constraining options and involve sacrifices. Katharyn feels that “there ought to be more. Not just your husband, not even just your children Family is ... the most important thing. But it can’t be everything” (Swanson 281), while Pat and Trish live opposite alternate (hi)stories that satisfy and harm them on equal terms. Also similar to *The Bookseller* is Patricia’s reconciliation of dualities in *My Real Children*, since her ailing mind has generated two sets of conflicting memories that ultimately create a fulfilling sense of self when brought together. Whereas in *The Bookseller* Kathryn gains agency and transcends the private/public divide in the denouement of the novel, Patricia’s sustained combination of memories empowers her from the start. To begin with, Patricia’s forked timelines underscore women’s often obscured but valuable participation in world events, as well as “the lives of all those who are pushed to the margins of history: the disabled, the disenfranchised, the queer, the lower middle class” (Grossman), like Swanson’s novel does. The narrative of alternate history fictions, Hellekson claims,

takes at its most fundamental base the notion that human agency is important enough to result in dramatically different histories. This results in a sense of personal importance, as even the slightest action has world-shattering consequences. Parallel world novels ... are the kind of fantasy stories that are one expression of this belief that we are important and can make a difference in the world and in the unfolding of events that make up what someone later will call history. (*Alternate History* 57–58)

However, Patricia’s relevance is not solely based on the “world-shattering consequences” of her choosing—in other words, the alternate versions of historical records. The timelines of her two analogues show women’s own perspective of world affairs and how these affect their private lives as women. Alternate history further highlights this approach to the gender issues raised by the novel and provide “a countermovement to the traditional pressure for plot convergence powered both by intertextual traditions and other patriarchal cultural pressures”, as Hilary Dannenberg remarks (228). In their respective timelines, neither Trish nor Pat enjoys fully rewarding lives, conditioned by geopolitical and sociocultural forces that place

disproportionate burdens on them because of their sex. Nonetheless, both will find ways to resist structural pressures and violence.

The Patricia who married Mark lives a frustrating domestic life and is a victim of psychological violence. Her only solace is her participation in the Peace Pledge Union and later the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (despite Mark's objections) whose "aim was nothing less than complete nuclear disarmament and a new era of world peace.... She began to make friends and feel as if she was making a difference" (Walton 111). In addition to her efforts to improve global affairs, she increasingly gets involved in the feminist cause to fight gender-based insecurity and inequality. She joins a Women's Consciousness Raising Group with

women like her, mostly housewives or women returned to work after children, women who had read *The Feminine Mystique* and *The Female Eunuch*, and wanted something better than the lives they were offered.... But listening to these women talk she did feel that they were, as they said, sisters.... And she wanted things to be better for the next generation, for Helen and Cathy to have the chances she had not had. (Walton 152–153)

She also supports her daughter Helen when she decides to become a single mother, and so "they filled out the birth certificate, with the blank for 'father' marked defiantly 'unknown'" (Walton 189), thus challenging heteropatriarchal models. After she divorces Mark in 1972, Trish starts teaching an evening class to adult students in Feminist Literature to "demonstrate that women have achieved great things over and over again, but they've been patronized and ignored whenever they have" (Walton 173). Reinscribing women in history to acknowledge their contributions to progress participates in the genre's efforts to "reenthroned the individual actor in a history too often studied in terms of impersonal forces" (Evans 41). Thus, Swanson and Walton adapt the genre by displacing the (usually male) historical figures or military confrontations that frequently configure alternate histories (Schneider-Mayerson 72). Although key names in world history (like J.F. Kennedy, a recurrent presence in uchronic texts) and warfare are mentioned in both novels, these redirect attention to the figurative battles women fight for their own and for others' sociopolitical survival, as agents that contribute to historical transformations too.

By the 1980s Trish has constructed herself a busy, though lonely, life: "[She] taught full time, served as a councillor, taught two evening classes, was secretary of the two preservation societies, and attended her women's group" (Walton 220). Her activism in peace and preservationist movements is a small but significant contribution to improving her world, but on a personal level she must always see to the needs of others. Not only does she look after her children throughout her life, but she must also take care of her sick mother and her ex-husband, who she attends to after he suffers a stroke: "Mark –paralyzed, incontinent, bellowing– was a burden she had to deal with.... She fed him and cleaned him up, like a huge baby" (Walton 243). The novel makes clear that women's time and energies compensate for the system's deficiencies.

The Patricia who did not marry Mark becomes a travel writer and falls in love with Beatrice, a scientist, with whom she will form a non-normative family with the help (and biological material) of a close friend, Michael. Pat fights her own battles concerning women's homosexuality, nonstandard families, and physical and mental disabilities. Although her relationship with Bee is not illegal, their three children are instructed not to say they have two mothers (Walton 198), and their birth certificates must recognize Michael as their father. They are watchful for social workers because "[t]his isn't a situation they'll have space for on their forms" (Walton 215). Like Trish, Pat is involved in a family model that defies heteropatriarchal schemes. Bee and Pat must cope with the misinterpretations on the part of others who take them for sisters or friends that they never correct, but they resist LGTBI intolerance in their own way when they decide to institutionalize their family as far as the legal system allows them:

What we need to do is get a lawyer and sort out powers of attorney and all of that. Whatever we need to do to become next of kin.... And about the children too, to name each other as guardians.... Each other and Michael. (Walton 197–198)

Disability constitutes another form of personal and collective fight. Bee finds herself in a wheelchair when her legs get shattered in an IRA bomb attack, so "[e]very year [she] had to fight the administration to have her classes scheduled in the rooms she could reach" (Walton 211). Moreover, in this timeline too dementia is represented as a problem with financial, legal, and familiar repercussions that Trish and Pat must painfully face as their mother grows old—and which they will eventually embody. In short, both versions of history reveal the struggles of women to construct themselves as dignified beings despite systemic obstacles and celebrate their partial gains.

At this point, one reviewer's comments on the options presented by the novel deserve consideration:

Did feminism take a wrong turn? Are women who grasp at personal happiness betraying the cause? Was it somehow right for Trish to say yes, and endure that horrible marriage? Are women who evade the struggle for gender equality letting the world go to hell? (Jones)

While I concur with Jones's point that the alternating life courses of Trish and Pat present extreme and opposite options for women, it would be unfair to ignore Patricia's reflections at the nursery home: "You'd be amazed how much I've done since I was your age, how much *difference I've made*. You can do whatever you want to, make yourself whatever you want to be", she tells her nurse (Walton 13; emphasis added). However, being the same self, "both Patricias are valid, fully realized women with stories worth knowing" (Jemisin 14–15) and worth regarding as complementary and relevant, as the character herself realizes:

She couldn't imagine that anything she had done had changed anything.... She had marched for peace in both worlds. She had written more letters as Trish, but

surely that couldn't have achieved anything? She hadn't been important, in either world, she hadn't been somebody whose choices could have changed worlds.

But what if she had been?

What if everyone was? (Walton 314)

5. CONCLUSIONS

The two novels discussed here are deeply ingrained in historical events to highlight women's participation in social and cultural changes and their struggles to have it all against the limiting options available to them in the patriarchal order. In *The Bookseller* and in *My Real Children*, the main characters are aware of the meanings of the choices they make because of their life-shaping outcomes.

Swanson and Walton translate the trauma of choosing into the narratological and chronological splitting of the self. The novels provide their protagonists with alternative courses of events, either private or world-wide, where the characters may stage alternative forms of female subjectivity. Alterity and ipseity converge in these novels to interrogate notions of selfhood by challenging chrononormativity as well as uniqueness and individuality of experience. Also, by deforming an apparently universal and unidirectional temporality Swanson and Walton question other traditionally female referential frames like family or romance. Katharyn's and Patricia's alternate paths, taken and not taken at once, are presented as mutually exclusive within the sociocultural norms they inhabit.

Nevertheless, their dual timelines are acts of resistance that allow them to escape gendered narratives of private and public life and reveal how demanding it is for women to fully enjoy both spheres. For that purpose, the two authors rely on conventions proper to the alternate history genre (like points of divergence and counterfactual pasts) that they adjust to foreground women's agency. The traditional focus on crucial historical figures or events shifts to ordinary women and their capacity to make a difference too. However, their use of counterfactuals presents differences, specifically in the temporal frames of reference: in Swanson's novel, Kitty's life is an individual uchronic time where the readers' shared history remains unchanged, whereas, in Walton's, Patricia's two lives unfold along two alternate histories, counterfactual with respect to the readers' temporal frame.

Their alternate (hi)stories empower them because they provide insights into other lives that reveal inequalities—the ones already defeated and those still in dispute. They remember and re-member themselves as well as the sick, the disabled, and the silenced in the process. The novels visibilize them all as actors with agency in the course of history, still with goals to achieve.

Although set after the Second World War, when read against our 21st-century context these novels make us rethink our advances and gains—as Patricia Cowan says, “[y]ou’ve got no idea of the battles we’ve already won, especially when you’re

busy looking ahead to the battles we still have to fight” (Walton 205). In the present time of upheaval and fast-changing world order, they invite us to reflect on what we would consider unacceptable worlds to inhabit, especially in view of those ideologies that repeatedly try to restrict women’s options.

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