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Research Article

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# The Drama of the Queer Child: Melancholia and Mourning in Contemporary Queer Narrative in Croatia

Vladislav Beronja\*

**Abstract:** This article examines Dino Pešut's novel *Tatin sin* (Daddy's Boy, 2020) and Espi Tomičić's monodrama *Your Love Is King* (2020) in the context of Croatian queer coming-of-age narrative and post-Yugoslav literary culture more broadly. In particular, I focus on the theme of mourning for the ailing, working-class parent in order to explore the intersection of sexuality, class, and national/ethnic origin in the literary and rhetorical staging of queer selfhood in contemporary Croatian literature. Drawing on psychoanalytical frameworks, specifically as elaborated and revised by queer and affect theory, I argue that mourning in these works should be seen as both a psychic and political "drama" of negotiating a future for a queer subject—a process characterized by ambivalence, uncertainty, and interminability that is often attributed to melancholia. While both Pešut and Tomičić initially cast the working-class parent as a melancholy object, enveloped in shame and silence, they also inscribe familial as well as one's own sexual/gender "otherness" within the broader space of Croatian literary culture, thereby transforming the muteness of melancholia into textual and performative sites of public mourning. The article concludes by examining the figure of nesting—sexual, gender, class, and national/ethnic—"closets" in contemporary Croatian literature and the possibility of their cultural disassembling.

**Keywords:** Croatian literature, queer, class shame, mourning, Bildungsroman

## The Drama of the Queer Child

In her pioneering analysis of queer narrative in Croatia, aptly titled "Out of the Closet onto the Bookshelves," Natalija Iva Stepanović notes that non-heterosexual characters and motifs have a longstanding presence in Croatian literature (despite the equally longstanding interpretive silence around them.)<sup>1</sup> Stepanović singles out

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<sup>1</sup> Stepanović, Natalija Iva. 2020. *Iz ormara na police: o odrastanju i izlasku iz ormara u hrvatskoj književnosti*, in *Umjetnost riječi LXIV*, 1-2, 51-71.

the *Bildungsroman*, or the coming-of-age novel, as a dominant genre within this wider corpus, in which the themes of growing up and discovering one's sexual otherness within the wider social, political, and historical milieu predominate.<sup>2</sup> In the classical 20<sup>th</sup> century western lesbian and gay *Bildungsroman*, this process is usually structured as a “coming out” narrative: after struggling with sexual shame and ostracization imposed by a conformist environment, the main protagonist eventually accepts and internalizes their sexuality into a stable and coherent identity, often through initiation into a newly-discovered gay and lesbian community.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, the genre comes with the political demands of visibility and community-building that inevitably accompany coming out of the closet as a process of sexual and social maturation. While queer narrative in Croatian literature has largely stayed within the generic boundaries of the gay coming-of-age novel, it has also frequently subverted the genre's tendency toward narrative closure as much as the closet's stability and its perceived parameters of enclosure. In other words, queer narrative in Croatia represents sexual maturation and identity-formation “as processes with uncertain outcomes.”<sup>4</sup> Stepanović therefore insists on its waywardness and *queerness* in opposition to the linear narratives of sexual liberation found in the western gay *Bildungsroman*:

*Croatian queer prose writes queer, not gay scripts; its future is uncertain like that of the characters in coming-of-age stories, because the meaning of “queerness” and of the poetics through which we try to approach this term is ever-shifting. Consequently, the markers which we recognize as “queer” in literary texts are also unstable [...] The main character's marginality and their conflict with the environment, the foundations of the coming-of-age novel's critical potential, do not depend exclusively on non-normative sexuality, but [...] engage a variety of other categories such as [national/ethnic] origin, class, and mental illness.*<sup>5</sup>

Expanding on Stepanović's analysis, this article examines Dino Pešut's novel *Tatin sin* (Daddy's Boy, 2020) and Espi Tomičić's monodrama *Your Love Is King* (2020), two recent examples of queer coming-of-age narratives from Croatia, in which “coming out” stories are suspended or embedded within the broader fabric of

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<sup>2</sup> Stepanović examines a wide range of literary works from the late 20<sup>th</sup> to early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries—such as Goran Bujić's *Zlatni šut* (Hot Shot, 1983); the thematic anthology *Poqueerene priče* (Queered Stories, 2004); Gordan Duhaček's *Destruktivna kritika i druge pederske priče* (Destructive Criticism and Other Queer Stories, 2009); and Nora Verde's *Posudi mi smajl* (Lend me a Smile, 2010), to name just a few, but she also refers to some predecessors in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in which queer themes are not as explicit.

<sup>3</sup> The “western” label for the coming out novel should come with a caveat, since the first paradigmatic instance of the genre is arguably Mikhail Kuzmin's *Wings* (1906), written in revolutionary Russia, even though Kuzmin drew heavily on philhellenic and homophobic British texts. It was followed by Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) and E.M. Forrester's *Maurice*, written in 1913-14 and published posthumously in 1971. See Bershtein, Evgenii. 2011. *An Englishman in the Russian Bathhouse: Mikhail Kuzmin's Wings and the Russian Tradition of Homoerotic Writing*, in *The Many Facets of Mikhail Kuzmin: A Miscellany / Кузмин многогранный. Сборник статей и материалов*, edited by Panova, Lada and Sarah Pratt. Bloomington, IN: Slavica, 75-87.

<sup>4</sup> Stepanović, *Iz ormara na police*, 52. All translations from Croatian, including the quotations from *Daddy's Boy* and *Your Love Is King*, are my own.

<sup>5</sup> Stepanović, *Iz ormara na police*, 69.

working-class environments and family life.<sup>6</sup> *Daddy's Boy* tells the story of a young gay millennial from the Croatian provinces whose life is upended by the grave illness of his distant, working-class father. Similarly, *Your Love Is King* follows the fraught relationship between a trans man and his dying mother, whose impending loss opens up painful questions around the sustainability of the narrator's continued attachment to his working-class family and milieu. Like examples offered by Stepanović, *Daddy's Boy* and *Your Love Is King* stage the proverbial closet as a complex, nesting figure, where class shame and ethno-national otherness intersect with or even take precedence over issues of non-normative sexuality and gender identity.

In particular, I take up the theme of ambivalent mourning for a working-class parent as a key process in the psychic and political negotiation of a sustainable, if not happy queer life in the context of postsocialist and rapidly Europeanizing Croatia.<sup>7</sup> To this end, my analysis is governed by the following questions: what kinds of identifications are at work in the process of mourning for the socially denigrated and potentially shameful parental figure and how do they intersect with queerness? Are these losses and identifications worked through and psychically integrated in a way that lends meaning, agency, and temporal orientation to queer life; or, conversely, do they have to be abandoned, sacrificed, and disavowed so that the queer subject can have a future in the first place? These essentially open-ended questions are part and parcel of what can be termed, drawing on Kathrine Bond Stockton's work, the psychic drama of the queer child, which I see as paradigmatic for *Daddy's Boy* and *Your Love Is King*, if not the contemporary queer narrative in Croatia more broadly.<sup>8</sup> Indicatively, both Pešut and Tomičić come from a theater background, so here the "drama" should additionally evoke the public stage, "in which mourning is featured as performance and plays a central role in the performative construction of identity."<sup>9</sup> As Adrian Kear and Deborah Lynn Steinberg put it, "theater evokes multiple losses, restaging past events and resuscitating voices of those who are no longer there. At the same time, it enables an 'acting out' of projective losses, those phantasmatic griefs that remain unspoken within the performance of everyday

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<sup>6</sup> Both Pešut and Tomičić are graduates of the Academy of Dramatic Art in Zagreb and award-winning playwrights.

<sup>7</sup> My use of the term "Europeanization" refers here primarily to the increased visibility of LGBTQ+ identities and their integration into the legal frameworks of sexual citizenship and human rights discourses in postsocialist Croatia, based largely on the EU political and cultural models. For a description as well as a critique of these processes, see Kahlina, Katja. 2015. Local Histories, European LGBT designs: Sexual citizenship, nationalism, and 'Europeanization' in post-Yugoslav Croatia and Serbia. *Women's Studies International Forum* 49, 73-83.

<sup>8</sup> Stockton, Kathryne Bond. 2009. *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Stockton uses a rather wonderful phrase "growing up sideways" to describe the queer coming of age process, which could very easily apply to the characters in *Daddy's Boy* and *Your Love is King*. For a different analysis of the "queer child" in contemporary Croatian narrative, one that does not necessarily center their voice but deploys them as a figure of difference and social panic, see the MA Thesis of my former student Farmer, Samantha. 2021. *Croatian, Dalmatian, queer: new Post-Yugoslav film and literature*. MA Thesis. Austin: University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>9</sup> Kear, Adrian and Deborah Lynn Steinberg. 1999. *Ghost Writing*, in *Mourning Diana: Nation, Culture and the Performance of Grief*, edited by Kear, Adrian and D.L. Steinberg. London: Routledge 6.

life.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Pešut and Tomičić exteriorize the interior mourning dramas of the queer child into a public textual and verbal performance within the Croatian cultural space. Indeed, these works of mourning should be situated within a wider context of Croatian and post-Yugoslav literary culture, in which intergenerational legacies of violence and questions of working through a traumatic past, especially against the background of the wars of the 1990s and the postsocialist transition, have served as a scholarly and critical touchstone.<sup>11</sup> Thus, rather than viewing mourning exclusively as a psychic process of maturation and identity-formation, I frame it here also a *political* drama of negotiating a future—a process characterized by ambivalence, uncertainty, and interminability that is often attributed to melancholia.

### The Parent as a Melancholy Object

In the classical Freudian formulation, melancholia is seen as a protracted, ambivalent, and unresolved process of mourning.<sup>12</sup> Whereas in “normal” mourning, the bereaved subject eventually accepts the loss of a person or an ideal and is therefore freed up to form new attachments, the melancholic tenaciously dwells on the lost object, refusing to let it go. Freud suggests that loss in melancholia remains unacknowledged and disavowed. This is so despite the intensity of the *unconscious* identification with the lost object, where the boundaries between the grieving self and the absent other virtually disappear. Expanding on the Freudian framework, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok contend that, in essence, the melancholic secretly entombs the lost object at the very core of the self, sealing it with silence.<sup>13</sup> In opposition to mourning, the melancholic’s faithful attachment to the absent other is attended by muteness and negative affect, such as paralyzing guilt and shame, which exceeds the boundaries of “normal” grief and can lead to protracted depression. Contemporary queer and affect theorists, such as Douglas Crimp, Judith Butler, Ann Cvetkovich, and others, have challenged the pathological connotations and social stigma that still cling to melancholia.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, they have shown that the boundaries between melancholia and mourning are not only fluid, but are underpinned by broader social and political structures in which some losses are deemed worthy of being publicly grieved while others are disavowed. The political

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<sup>10</sup> Kear and Steinberg, *Ghost Writing*, 6.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Crnković, Gordana. 2012. *Post-Yugoslav Literature and Film: Fires, Foundations, Flourishes*. New York: Continuum; and Beronja, Vlad and Stijn Vervaet. (eds.). 2016. *Post-Yugoslav Constellations: Archive, Memory, and Trauma in Contemporary Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian Literature and Culture*. Berlin: Walter De Gruyter.

<sup>12</sup> Freud, Sigmund. 1957. *Mourning and Melancholia*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey et al. London: Hogarth Press, 237-258.

<sup>13</sup> Abraham, Nicolas and Maria Torok. 1994. *The Shell and the Kernel*, trans. Nicholas Rand, Vol. 1. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>14</sup> See Crimp, Douglas. 1989. Mourning and Militancy. *October* 51(2), 3-18; Butler, Judith. 1995. Melancholy Gender—Refused Identifications. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* (5)2, 165-180; and Cvetkovich, Ann. 2003. *Legacies of Trauma, Legacies of Activism: ACT UP’s Lesbians*, in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, edited by Eng, David L. and David Kazanjian. Berkeley: University of California Press, 427-457.

struggles of marginalized and minoritarian groups, including lesbians and gays, offer many examples of collective attachment to losses that await broader public recognition—from the structural abandonment of the gay community in the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s to the historical and contemporary state violence against black and brown lives. The melancholic emerges here not as a depressive, but as someone who militantly insists on historical and collective losses that are, time and again, erased from public consciousness. Queer theory thus places melancholia at the center of contemporary politics of mourning, whose “aim,” to quote Heather Love, “is to *turn grief into grievance*—to address the larger social structures, the regimes of domination, that are at the root of such [historical] pain.”<sup>15</sup>

In the European context, the politics of queer mourning have shifted in recent years to social class as a category of historical and contemporary injury that is bound up with shame and therefore—like queer desire—remains largely unspoken. An especially powerful intervention, in this regard, is Didier Eribon’s *Returning to Reims*, written as “a historical and theoretical analysis that is grounded in personal experience” of both gay sexuality and working-class origins.<sup>16</sup> Like *Daddy’s Boy* and *Your Love Is King*, Eribon’s memoir is structured as a work of politicized mourning for an estranged parent, in this case, a working-class father. Here it is the father who emerges as a melancholy object, “associated with an unavoidable mourning of the various possibilities one sets aside, the various identifications one rejects.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Eribon describes the melancholy process whereby lesbians and gays have to abandon their attachments to their blue-collar families—here powerfully embodied in the difficult and violent father—to produce themselves as sexually liberated and self-realized subjects. The familial ties have to be severed not only because of the homophobia prevalent in working-class milieus, such as the one in which Eribon grew up, but also because of lingering class shame that sticks even to those who are on an upwardly mobile trajectory. As Eribon puts it, “it doesn’t seem exaggerated to assert that my coming out of the sexual closet, my desire to assume and assert my homosexuality, coincided within my personal trajectory with my shutting myself up inside what I might call a class closet.”<sup>18</sup> Consequently, he draws a powerful parallel between sexual and class shame as processes “of domination and of resistance, of subjection and subjectivation” that underpin both the construction of the sexual and class closet as well as their dismantling.<sup>19</sup> The return of the memoir’s title therefore refers to Eribon’s metaphorical and long-delayed homecoming to his working-class origins. As a form of politicized mourning, this process entails not only reclaiming the melancholy object of the working-class father, by recognizing how his behavior and homophobia is shaped by broader structures of class and sexual domination, but also healing the rift between the sexual and class *habitus* as a reparative act. We could even say that Eribon’s melancholic is a “closeted” mourner; for him, the loss of and, indeed, the persistent albeit ambivalent love for the lost other is inflected by

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<sup>15</sup> Love, Heather. 2009. *Looking Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 151.

<sup>16</sup> Eribon, Didier. 2013. *Returning to Reims*, translated by Michael Lucey. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 26.

<sup>17</sup> Eribon, *Returning to Reims*, 17.

<sup>18</sup> Eribon, *Returning to Reims*, 26.

<sup>19</sup> Eribon, *Returning to Reims*, 27.

feelings of guilt and shame and therefore remains unspoken and confined within the private recesses of the self. At the same time, articulating this loss and coming out of the “class closet” opens up the space for linking sexual and class oppression and forging bonds of solidarity between sexual minorities and the working classes, especially because these bonds have been severed by neoliberal culture wars.<sup>20</sup>

Both Pešut and Tomičić have acknowledged Eribon’s *Returning to Reims* as an important intertextual and intellectual influence on their work.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, both authors situate their respective narratives in the “split habitus” described by Eribon; and both works also engage the question of class shame through the mourning for an ailing and emotionally unavailable working-class parent, figured as a melancholy object. However, I propose that the social category of class—and the shame and silence that accompanies it—is inevitably inflected by the post-Yugoslav and post-war context of *Daddy’s Boy*, on the one hand, and the questions of embodied queerness and depathologization of trans lives more broadly in the case of Tomičić’s *Your Love Is King*. Moreover, in both works the story of queer *Bildung* also doubles as a *Kunstlerroman*, a narrative about artistic maturation, in which the potential or real loss of a working-class parent is aesthetically objectified and textually inscribed within the space of Croatian literary culture, thereby transforming the muteness of melancholia into a visible site of public mourning. Finally, in contrast to increasingly globalized and commodified queer politics based on abstract and therefore placeless human rights discourse, both Pešut and Tomičić attempt to rearticulate queer identities and experiences by placing them within the local textures of social and cultural life, including its class dimension.

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<sup>20</sup> Eribon’s memoir also provides an account of the increasing identification of the French working-class with the nationalist far-right and the decreasing influence of the socialist and communist left in France in the wake of 1989. While Eribon criticizes the masculinist ideals of his working-class milieu, he also faults queer liberation for abandoning class as an important category of analysis and a ground for progressive coalition politics. To be sure, class configurations in the Croatian and post-Yugoslav context are different than those in France, not in the least because of the historical experience of the socialist-communist state in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, followed by the violent break-up of Yugoslavia and the transition to market capitalism, all of which have radically restructured social relations and created a new post-communist elite. In available scholarship, homophobia and hyper-masculinist ideology in the Western Balkans have been associated more with ethnic-nationalism and the militarization of society during the 1990s wars rather than class attitudes. Dumančić, Marko and Krešimir Krol. 2017. Dehexing Postwar West Balkan Masculinities: The Case of Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia, 1998-2015. *Masculinities* 20(2), 154-180. While a comprehensive analysis of homophobic and hyper-masculinist ideologies among the Croatian working classes goes beyond the scope and methodology of this essay, both narratives I examine suggest that queer subjectivity in Croatia is often experienced as a rift between one’s sexual and working-class family *habitus*, and that class consciousness itself is shaped not only by internal class divisions within Croatia but also by its economically peripheral position vis-à-vis Western Europe in the expanded E.U..

<sup>21</sup> Eribon’s *Returning to Reims* has had a prominent and productive reception in the Croatian cultural space ever since it was translated into Croatian in 2019, as evidenced by Pešut’s novel and Tomičić’s play, which both draw heavily on Eribon’s memoir. In the same year, Eribon also delivered a lecture at the 12<sup>th</sup> Subversive Festival, titled “Has the Time Come for a Class-Based Coming Out?” Both the memoir and the lecture represent a return of class as a prominent category of analysis in European LGBTQ+ politics.

### Dino Pešut's *Daddy's Boy* (2020)

Dino Pešut is an award-winning playwright and novelist belonging to the younger generation of writers in Croatia who came of age after the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s.<sup>22</sup> Critics have noted a distinct generational sensibility in his work, featuring protagonists who occupy the transitional space between adolescence and adulthood and who share the cultural codes and structures of feeling specific to the urban millennials. As Pešut states in his debut novel, *Poderana koljena* (Scraped Knees, 2018), this is a “lost generation raised by parents whose hopes were dashed by the false promises inherent in the ideological cocktail of nationalism and capitalism [...] a generation which makes use of the free market only to be exploited by it, unemployed, on the edge of poverty, and grateful for the opportunity to work—without pay.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the question of maintaining hope and securing a future against increasingly global uncertainty, neoliberal precarity, and disillusionment with inherited scripts about the “good life” constitutes one of the major themes of Pešut’s work. In his plays, such as *(Pret)posljednja panda ili statika* ((Pen)ultimate Panda or Static, 2015) and *H.E.J.T.E.R.I* (H.A.T.E.R.S., 2020), the characters stem the tide of resigned cynicism about the possibilities of social and political change by forming “chosen families” composed of friends and lovers and premised on queer forms of kinship in opposition to the social atomization of the capitalist marketplace as well as the compulsory bonds of blood and national belonging. Pešut’s second novel, *Daddy's Boy* (2020), elaborates on these themes of coming-of-age in uncertain times and searching for alternative forms of queer community and solidarity in the cracks of heteronormative social structures. However, here Pešut places the father-son relationship at the center of his narrative in order to explore inherited historical trauma that requires working through a difficult intergenerational past. The novel thus switches to the confessional first-person narration, in contrast to the free indirect discourse of *Scraped Knees*, and shows a more mature authorial voice attuned to the nuances and complexities of family and class dynamics.

In *Daddy's Boy*, contemporary life in Croatia is shown through the eyes of a gay, educated millennial who has left the economically-depressed town of his childhood—along with his working-class origins—in order to seek a better life in a more urban and sexually tolerant environment. The reader first encounters the novel’s nameless narrator settled in a menial job as a hotel-receptionist in Zagreb, after his failed stint in Berlin, a gay mecca that continues to attract many young queer Croats “after the homophobic referendum against same-sex marriage.”<sup>24</sup> Luka, whose name we learn only at the very end of the novel, presents a cynical and savvy façade to the

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<sup>22</sup> Dino Pešut is the winner of six Marin Držić Awards—given by the Croatian Ministry of Culture—for the following plays: *L.O.S.E.R.S.* (2014); *(Pen)Ultimate Panda or Static* (2015); *Grand Hotel Abyss* (2016); *Stella, the flood* (2017); *Olympia Stadium* (2018); and *Bombing Raid* (2019). *(Pen)Ultimate Panda* was also awarded the Deutschen Jugendtheaterpreis in 2018. In 2019, he was a resident fellow at The Royal Court Theater in London. *Daddy's Boy* is his second novel.

<sup>23</sup> Pešut, Dino. 2018. *Poderana koljena*. Zaprešić: Fraktura, 7.

<sup>24</sup> Pešut, Dino. 2020. *Tatin sin*. Zaprešić: Fraktura, 15.



outside world, seemingly reconciled with the lack of opportunities in Croatia for someone of his class background. Secretly, however, he writes poetry and stashes it in a folder labeled “Hotel Farewell,” nursing artistic and cultural ambitions that remain unrealized because of self-denying feelings of guilt and shame rooted in his estranged relationship with his ailing working-class father.

Drawing on the dominant tradition of the modernist Croatian *Bildungsroman*,<sup>25</sup> the novel is structured around Luka’s double homecoming: as a frame story of prodigal son’s return from Western Europe back to Croatia, on the one hand; and as the real and metaphorical return from Croatia’s capital to the provincial origins associated with his “bad father,” which forms the novel’s narrative backbone. Pešut’s national imaginary—his literary construction of national space—is therefore strongly inflected by categories of sexual and class otherness in the context of postsocialist Croatia. The former invites the comparison between the sexual liberties visible in Western European metropolitan centers and the homophobic violence that persists in “a country, where,” as the narrator puts it, “showing a small token of affection in a public place could cost me my collar bone, a fractured skull, or death.”<sup>26</sup> The category of class, on the other hand, is most powerfully represented by Pešut as a split between the son’s urbane and cultivated *habitus* and the father’s patent lack of cultural capital. As the narrator characteristically reflects at the beginning of the novel: “My father, until I came along, had never met anyone who watches art house movies and attends gallery openings. He’d never been friends with a man who is a self-proclaimed feminist.”<sup>27</sup> Despite these differences in social *habitus*, however, the father in the novel is not easily fixed into a social stereotype of blue-collar “toxic masculinity” and entrenched homophobia. In fact, the father is surprisingly supportive of the son’s secret artistic ambitions to become a writer. Moreover, both are ideologically aligned in open protest against “the country’s rising fascism and corrupt political elites,” a rare point of commonality in an otherwise emotionally frozen and distant relationship.<sup>28</sup> This reserve particularly comes to the fore when the narrator receives the news of his father’s cancer diagnosis, which is accompanied by latent feelings of guilt and shame. Pešut stages this emotional distance as a series of missed phone calls: “Each missed call would leave me with a small pang of guilt. The same remorse I feel now because I can’t seem to call him and ask him how he’s doing. I’m a bad son of a bad father.”<sup>29</sup> The question then becomes: despite the

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<sup>25</sup> See Jambrešić-Kirin, Renata. 2008. *Dom i svijet: o ženskoj kulturi pamćenja*. Zagreb: Centar za ženske studije. Jambrešić-Kirin compares this masculine and “heroic” tradition of exile writing with the feminine and feminist one, instantiated in Dubravka Ugrešić’s polemical dialog with the Croatian novel of return—the “failed,” melancholy *Bildungsroman* masterfully deconstructed in her novel *The Ministry of Pain* (2004). We can say that *Daddy’s Boy* seeks to overcome the melancholy, embattled, and frequently self-defeating protagonist of the Croatian modernist *Bildungsroman*, exemplified in Miroslav Krleža’s Filip Latinovicz. Pešut, however, is not the first to “queer” this tradition, but has a predecessor in Goran Ferčec’s *Ovdje neće biti čuda* (There Will Be No Miracles Here, 2014), which aligns itself even more explicitly with Krleža’s modernist masterpiece, *The Return of Filip Latinovicz* (1932), in its melancholy refusal of narrative and psychic closure.

<sup>26</sup> Pešut, *Tatin sin*, 31.

<sup>27</sup> Pešut, *Tatin sin*, 11.

<sup>28</sup> Pešut, *Tatin sin*, 19.

<sup>29</sup> Pešut, *Tatin sin*, 13.

father's acceptance of the narrator's homosexuality and his artistic talent, why is he cast as a melancholy object—at least until the very end of the novel?

This question can be answered by examining in greater detail the layered and complex figure of the father, through whom *class* shame additionally intersects with *national/ethnic* otherness specific to the context of post-war Croatia. The novel has even been criticized for its somewhat superficial treatment of class, refracted through the self-consciously urbane narrator versed in the finesses of social distinctions, from fashion and food to art and real estate.<sup>30</sup> These distinctions permeate the increasingly stratified post-war society in transition to global capitalism and structure access to a desired lifestyle, a neoliberal and increasingly globalized version of the gay “good life” from which the narrator feels excluded due to his provincial and working-class origins—embodied here in the “shameful” father figure. However, by exclusively focusing on Luka's thwarted social and artistic aspirations, most reviewers have missed the real political and emotional focus of Pešut's narrative centered around the complicated and historically inflected father-son relationship, which exceeds the novel's polemical intent around class. The rare exception is Gordan Duhaček's review, which identifies precisely the nuanced representation of the father as the novel's affective and subversive center:

*Luka's father is a fascinatingly complex character, a man whose life was split in half because of his Serbian origin, a man who has distanced himself from his own child, among other things, so as not to transfer onto his son the stigma of being a Serb that still persists in contemporary Croatia.*<sup>31</sup>

Here, Duhaček is referring to the loss of status and social stigma that still sticks to many Serbs even after the so-called “Homeland War” of the 1990s, which resulted in an independent Croatia.<sup>32</sup> With the collapse of multinational and socialist Yugoslavia, this community found itself excluded from the full citizenship in the new Croatian state and labeled as national “enemies” and “others.” Indeed, much like homosexuality, Serbian origin in the context of post-war Croatia remains a social label shaped by insult, shame, and silence around historical experience—so that we could even speak here of the father inhabiting a type of national “closet.”<sup>33</sup> Father's status as the “other,” I propose, accounts not only for the shame and silence that

<sup>30</sup> Tomašić, Ivan. 2021. *Avokado književnost* (accessed: 15 September 2022). The publication of *Daddy's Boy* was accompanied by controversy, when the prominent critic Igor Mandić wrote a negative review of the novel, which exposed not so much any literary failings on Pešut's part but Mandić's own gay panic. For an excellent analysis of the controversy and the homophobic underpinnings of Mandić's review see Dejanović, Marija. *Truli zub provokacije i šala koja nije smiješna* (accessed: 15 September 2022).

<sup>31</sup> Duhaček, Gordan. *'Tatin sin' Dine Pešuta: pronijeljiv i duhovit roman o gej milenijalcima u Hrvata* (accessed: 15 September 2022).

<sup>32</sup> In *Daddy's Boy*, the father's working-class credentials are tied both to his experience as a *Gastarbeiter* or guest worker laboring in the construction industry in Western Europe as well as to the depressed industrial town in the Croatian provinces where the novel is partially set.

<sup>33</sup> Didier Eribon sees the “insult” as constitutive for the construction of the homosexual closet and modern gay identity, more broadly; but here, it could be extended to other categories of social otherness laden with stigma and shaped by insult, such as Serbian origin in the context of Croatia's Homeland War. See Eribon, Didier. 2004. *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*, trans. Michael Lucey. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

structure his relationship with his son, but it also opens up a discursive space for the father and son to recognize and reconcile their shared “otherness” in an intergenerational work of mourning.

Indeed, Pešut reveals the full extent of father’s national “otherness” only at the end of the novel as a type of delayed and transgenerational “coming out” narrative. In this lengthy and concluding monologue, the father tells a complex family story of intergenerational wartime trauma, dating to the Second World War, which has been passed from father to son as a lasting legacy of fear and silence.<sup>34</sup> The story begins with the great-grandfather who had fallen as a Partisan in the Battle of Sutjeska during the Second World War and thus became an unwilling Yugoslav national hero while leaving his son, Luka’s grandfather, to live a rudderless life in the looming shadow of a new war. These old fears of military mobilization and ethno-national hatred resurface once again with collapse of Yugoslavia, when the grandfather decides to leave the newly-independent Croatia to escape persecution while his son stays behind with his new family. The Homeland War thus becomes a traumatic turning point in the father’s life, which cuts his life in half and results in his effectively *becoming* a “Serb” in Croatia. That is to say, he is suddenly branded as an enemy “other” and exposed to social ostracization and insult. At a key point in the monologue, the father reveals his experience of “otherness” precisely because he sees the same fear and silence governing the life of his gay son, preventing him from fully realizing himself:

*And that’s why I want to tell you everything. I, too, was afraid. When they left, when I became a Serb, an enemy. Their departure was the proof that I was a Serb. And what did I know about that? What measures they use? All of that—it’s measured by others. The hate is doled out by those who hate. And so, all of a sudden, my life became defined by fear. Fear that something will happen to me, that something will happen to your mother or to you. In war, there’s no room for humor. A joke is a threat. And people threaten you like they’re joking, casually, in passing. My life had become worthless. And I started believing in it myself. It was just a matter of time and a matter of me keeping my mouth shut.<sup>35</sup>*

Eventually, the father establishes a powerful parallel between the ostracization he had experienced as a “Serb” during the 1990s and the terror with which his gay son grew up in a small Croatian town, embodied in the ubiquity of the insult “peder” (faggot). However, insofar as the father’s narrative is a type of “coming out” story, it is one that does not result in a stable identity and a fixed location of speech—an unambiguous reclaiming of Serbian nationality/ethnicity. Rather, his story points to the frequently denied fluidity of national/ethnic identifications in post-war Croatia and the complexity of historical experience defined by changing borders and political systems in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The father therefore insists that the label “Serb” was

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<sup>34</sup> In this sense, the traumas of the Second World War and, to lesser degree, the Homeland War are staged in Pešut’s novel as a “postmemory,” to use Marianne Hirsch’s term for powerful traumatic memories that are intergenerationally transmitted to the “generation after,” which has no direct or very limited experience of the traumatic event. See Hirsch, Marianne. 2012. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>35</sup> Pešut, *Tatin sin*, 181.

something that was *imposed* on him from the outside, just as he is reluctant to transfer this stigma onto his gay son, even as he sees identical processes of “othering” at work in his son’s life with regard to sexuality.

The father’s monologue represents a turning point in the novel’s narrative. The father-son relationship, which had been distant and emotionally frozen despite the similarities in experience between the two characters, is transformed once the father breaks the seal of melancholy silence and tells the story of his origins and his “otherness.” At the same time, the father’s narrative “coming out” coincides with Luka’s own self-realization as a young writer. He not only publishes his first collection of poems, but as we learn at the end of the novel, the structure of *Daddy’s Boy* is circular, ending with Luka writing the very novel the reader has before them. Here, the muteness of melancholia has given way to mourning as a political and symbolic activity of shaping one’s own story in opposition to the dominant and socially imposed categories of otherness in contemporary Croatia. Such mourning is premised on the integration of the father as a disavowed and melancholy object into the renewed and reconfigured conception of the self, a process that the psychoanalyst Norman Doidge has called “turning ghosts into ancestors.”<sup>36</sup> Pešut stages this moment as a political and emotional act of reclaiming one’s name as a marker of difference, which has the power to interrupt the repetitive cycle of fear, shame, and silence, thereby inaugurating the possibility of a different future. As the father puts it at the end of his monologue:

*Everything stops with you. You’re the first one out in our family line who stood behind his first and last name and said this is me, motherfuckers, this is me. This is what I think. This is what I feel. This is how I love and this is my way of falling in love. That’s a big thing. Because then, they can’t do anything to you, they can’t decide for you who you are and how much hate you have to swallow.*<sup>37</sup>

Indeed, the father’s words mark a passage from melancholia to mourning characterized not only by termination of ambivalence, in which the transference emotions of fear, guilt, and shame compete with the feelings of love, but also by a narrative resolution typical of a successful *Bildungsroman*.<sup>38</sup> By the end of the novel, we see both the father and the son forming new emotional attachments as a testament to the open future before them. Pešut’s Croatia is therefore a place where such a future is possible, though only after a collective and intergenerational *Bildung*, or emotional education, where the ghosts of the past can be laid to rest. As already stated, this does not mean disavowing or abandoning otherness and difference, but integrating them into a new self, as evidenced by the reclaiming of

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<sup>36</sup> Doidge, Norman. 2007. *The Brain that Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science*. New York: Penguin Books, 243.

<sup>37</sup> Pešut, *Tatin sin*, 183.

<sup>38</sup> Due to this conciliatory nature of a successful *Bildungsroman*, Franco Moretti calls it the paradigmatic genre of “compromise” as opposed to revolutionary change. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the genre became dominant, this was often staged as the “healing” of the rupture between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy created by the French Revolution through a successful marriage plot. See Moretti, Franco. 1987. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, trans. Albert Sbragia. London: Verso.

the narrator's name at the end of *Daddy's Boy*. Pešut's inscription of the father's national otherness into the text of his novel—and therefore into the broader text of Croatian culture—thus serves as a public instantiation of this collective process of mourning. In this sense, we can place *Daddy's Boy* in the even wider context of working through traumatic and intergenerational legacies of violence, which is one of the defining marks of the post-Yugoslav literary narrative.

### **Espi Tomičić's *Your Love Is King* (2020)**

Like in *Daddy's Boy*, the homecoming in *Your Love Is King*—a 2020 monodrama by Espi Tomičić—is filled with pervasive silence and shame on part of the dying parent as well as the queer child. As the narrator states in the play: “i've been ashamed of myself and of you for so long/ we used to step out of the apartment building a lot/ one-on-one/ we never talked at the dinner table/ and only said things behind each other's/ back.”<sup>39</sup> There are many reasons for this familial estrangement in *Your Love Is King*. At a certain point in the drama, we are informed about the violent death of the narrator's father, shrouded in secrecy but indicative of his criminal past; then there is the mother's breast cancer diagnosis, denied and hushed up along with the history of terminal illness in the family; and finally, the narrator himself is a trans man going through the process of transition—a reality that his family can neither face nor acknowledge, so that any contact with them keeps forcing him back into the gender closet. Drawing on the tradition of lyrical drama while simultaneously giving it a generational twist, Tomičić foregrounds this estranged family dynamic as a series of text messages exchanged over WhatsApp with his mother when he hears about her breast cancer diagnosis: “before that we'd exchanged 73 text messages/ every word in a new message/ hit enter—breathe in/ 73 more than in the last ten years/ more than ever before.”<sup>40</sup>

The piece was written by Tomičić during the “Budućnost je ovdje” (The Future Is Here) workshop for young writers and read as a performance by the actor Mateo Vidak with musical accompaniment at the Zagreb Youth Theater (ZKM) on February 10, 2020, to great public and critical acclaim. As the theater critic Nataša Govedić has written, “while constantly erasing the boundaries between autobiographical and lyrical drama,” Tomičić's work “draws its power from his virtuosic use of language.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, *Your Love Is King* not only introduces the topic of the gender closet and the related drama of trans visibility into the Croatian literary space, but it textually and verbally stages the queer and trans body as a powerful and public site of political mourning. Here the control over one's body and one's voice becomes a guarantee of a different future against the heteronormative repression and violence that structure both family life and social relations more

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<sup>39</sup> Tomičić, Espi. 2020. *Your Love Is King*. Zagreb: Multimedijalni institute, 30. Tomičić uses all lower-case letters, even for toponyms where capitalization is grammatically required in standard Croatian. In order to keep this formal feature, replicating the generational style of textual communication over social media, I have decided to keep the first-person pronoun in the lower-case in my translations.

<sup>40</sup> Tomičić, *Your Love*, 5.

<sup>41</sup> Govedić, Nataša. 2020. *Your Love Is King' Espija Tomičića: Jezik otvaranja crne kutije* (accessed: 15 September 2022).

broadly. To quote Govedić: “Every word of this text in each case had to be won in a struggle, a struggle for breath itself, because the narrator barely has a right to his own existence, if not to a voice that keeps a witness account of this struggle.”<sup>42</sup> In what follows, I will contextualize Tomičić’s piece within a broader struggle for trans lives, that is to say, for a future that would not just accommodate but even celebrate embodied experiences and trajectories of self-actualization that fall outside of the cis gender norm. In particular, I propose that the process of mourning in *Your Love Is King* entails potentially letting go of harmful familial and social attachments—though not entirely—for the queer subject to have a chance at such a future in the first place. Thus, in contrast to *Daddy’s Boy*, the working-class parent in Tomičić’s play remains a melancholy object until the end, who can only be partially integrated into the new and actualized self.

The emerging field of trans studies has insisted on the centrality of the “embodied experience of the speaking subject” as a privileged site of knowledge against the broader history of objectifying, mainly medical and scientific discourses that have constructed trans bodies and lives as exterior to the human gender norm.<sup>43</sup> Specifically writing about the experiences of trans men, Jamison Green powerfully outlines the “dilemma of visibility” that accompanies coming out of the closet for many men who have undergone transition.<sup>44</sup> Since most trans men can pass undetected in the mainstream society given the increasing “tolerance for a wide variety of adult male ‘looks’ (appearance styles) and behaviors,”<sup>45</sup> publicly revealing one’s identity risks turning one’s own body into an object of public scrutiny or—on a larger stage—a vicious and uncontrollable media spectacle. Thus, many trans men opt for invisibility of the gender closet since it protects them from public shame and the threat of violence—from “the scarlet T” that marks the trans individual “as a pretender, as other, as not normal.”<sup>46</sup> At the same time, this “burden of secrecy” erases frequently complex histories of transition for many trans men and reinforces the cis male body as a social and cultural standard of reference. As Green writes:

*We are supposed to pretend we never spent 15, 20, 30, 40 or more years in female bodies, pretend that the vestigial female parts some of us never lose were never there. In short, in order to be a good—or successful—[trans] person, one is not supposed to be a [trans] person at all. This puts a massive burden of secrecy on the [trans] individual: the most intimate and human aspects of our lives are constantly at risk of disclosure.*<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Govedić, *Your Love*.

<sup>43</sup> Stryker, Susan. 2006. *(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies*, in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Stryker, Susan and Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge, 12.

<sup>44</sup> Green, Jamison. 2006. *Look! Don’t Look: The Visibility Dilemma for Transexual Men*, in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Stryker, Susan and Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge, 499-508.

<sup>45</sup> Green, *Look*, 499.

<sup>46</sup> Green, *Look*, 503.

<sup>47</sup> Green, *Look*, 501.

*Your Love Is King* takes precisely such a risk of visibility, opening up a space of intimacy and vulnerability between Tomičić and his audience by speaking about his transition as a process of self-actualization alongside the difficult and painful process of mourning for his dying mother. These parallel processes especially come to the fore in the narrator's comparison of his mother's mastectomy and his own approaching top surgery, which frames mourning as a universally somatic and not just psychic experience; although the body, as Tomičić suggests, is often kept out of public discourse due to its unacknowledged mutability and vulnerability to illness:<sup>48</sup>

*once a person talked to me about their/ experience/ in the context of my trans identity/ and breast removal/ and she said she'd thought about it/ even though she's not trans/ because her grandma and mother had died of breast cancer/ how honest of her/ and brave/ i thought*<sup>49</sup>

Through shared experience of bodily transformation, Tomičić textually rehearses a lost and interrupted intimacy between the parent and the child, a propinquity with the maternal body that the play's narrator yearns for and which becomes an occasion for writing as a process of mourning for the absent "other": "but i can write about her/ about what she told me/ about us/about how i got to know her again/ and closed my eyes shut/ i'm trying to remember when we last/ *slept next to each other*/ the bed fits two."<sup>50</sup> Significantly, Tomičić uses the feminine plural verb endings (*slept next to each other/spavale skupa*) in the scenes that recollect the rare and brief moments of physical togetherness—sharing a bed, eating together, washing the dishes—against the broader background of familial estrangement and neglect. One can read this gesture not only as the narrator's refusal to completely disavow his female-embodied past, but also as a melancholy faithfulness to the lost maternal object and his class position, despite the mother's persistent denial of the narrator's gender identity.

Ultimately, however, the narrator's continued attachment to his family proves unsustainable and self-denying, pushing him back into the depression and the enforced silence of the gender closet. Tomičić shows this in the second act of *Your Love Is King*, when the narrator goes to Germany to visit his mother in the hospital and even contemplates at one point abandoning his studies and his supportive circle of friends in Zagreb to take care of her. The visit requires that the narrator not only hide his identity as a man by looking and sounding more feminine, but it also brings back memories of homophobic violence in the family, as in the following scene with his brother:

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<sup>48</sup> To be sure, *Your Love Is King* displaces the cis body as a cultural norm, but it also stages the processes of mourning and self-actualization as bodily experiences more broadly, for both trans and non-trans individuals. In this sense, as Govedić points out, the play is aligned with a broader dramatic tradition that questions the social construction of the body—and not just social roles—as fixed and natural once and for all: "[t]heater has long ceased to believe in the 'natural essence' of the body in which we perform, claiming that every visible manifestation of gender is a type of mask, a "straitjacket" imposed by force, which we have a right to cast off. In other words, trans identity (transrodnost) and theater are in very close critical alliance." See Govedić., *Your Love*.

<sup>49</sup> Tomičić, *Your Love*, 17.

<sup>50</sup> Tomičić, *Your Love*, 7.

*last time you wanted to hit the person who you/ assumed was gay (peder)/ i locked myself in the bathroom for my birthday and/ cried/ I wanted everyone to leave/ and you first of all/ i'll never contact him again/ i kept saying to myself leaning against the bathroom door.<sup>51</sup>*

Eventually, this experience culminates in the narrator's realization that he does not want everything "to be like it was before,"<sup>52</sup> since that would involve perpetuating melancholy silence and self-denial. The final reckoning happens in the third and final act of *Your Love Is King*, with the recognition that the narrator's trajectory is separate from that of his family. Indeed, for the narrator to have any sort of future at all, he first must let go of the melancholy maternal object, but only after he textually lays her to rest in a final act of mourning:

*mom/ i dedicated this text to you/ because you know that silence has special weight/ because silence destroyed our life once before/ because you know that our time together has run out/ mom you taught me how to take a chance/ what i'm doing is taking a chance/ writing about you/ because you taught me/ to teach myself that/ breathe in/ healthy tissue /breathe out<sup>53</sup>*

Here, the last breath coincides with both the end of the play and mother's death, but it also indicates the possibility of a different life and a different future for the narrator in the "healthy tissue" that queerly interrupts the body's—and time's—regular rhythm. Unlike in *Daddy's Boy*, however, the paternal figure in *Your Love Is King* refuses to be wholly integrated into the new self. And, like the breast, which has to be grieved for the new body and the new self to be born, the mother adamantly remains a "partial object," partially reclaimed through the gift that she has left to her son as an unexpected inheritance: the incredible will to go on—to survive—against all odds.

### **The Nesting Closets in Croatian Literature**

*Daddy's Boy* and *Your Love Is King* stage the closet as a complex, nesting figure that exceeds its traditional parameters of enclosure around same-sex desire, pointing toward the closet's multiplication in contemporary Croatian narrative as well as its potential textual and cultural undoing. In *Daddy's Boy*, the primary silence is not that of the sexual or the class closet but that of the father's national closet, a space haunted by the ghosts of violent history and passed down along the male line as a largely unconscious and traumatic inheritance, which bears heavily on the present. For Pešut, the grip that the silence, guilt, and shame have on the individual can only be unfastened through the intergenerational work of mourning, in which the father and the son acknowledge their shared "otherness," thereby reclaiming their name, their story, and their future against the violence and paralysis of imposed social categories. *Your Love Is King*, on the other hand, explores the fraught intersection

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<sup>51</sup> Tomičić, *Your Love*, 29.

<sup>52</sup> Tomičić, *Your Love*, 35.

<sup>53</sup> Tomičić, *Your Love*, 63.



of the class and gender closet without, however, offering an easy solution for their mutual disassembling. Indeed, while Tomičić manages to rescue the queer body and the self from the repetitive cycle of social and family violence, he does so at the cost of a painful cut from the family origins, which can only be symbolically healed within the space of the dramatic text. Both works therefore engage the closet as a powerful and persistent discursive and social construction, whose undoing is only partial if it is not attended by other forms of collective liberation, recognition, and reparation. In other words, however much we want to wish the closet away through destigmatization and aestheticization of “queerness” into a personal style, in much of the Croatian contemporary narrative at least—albeit not limited to it—queer history, to borrow from Frederick Jameson, “is what hurts.”<sup>54</sup> Moreover, while both works foreground a unique generational voice and sensibility, they remain formally and thematically embedded within a broader Croatian and (post-)Yugoslav literary culture. Pešut leans into the tradition of the modernist *Bildungsroman* while simultaneously queering it, offering a rare example of a successful homecoming and emotional reconciliation with one’s origins. Tomičić, on the other hand, draws on the feminist postmodern tradition of confessional and autobiographical writing, inscribing the classed, queer body into this wider corpus in a gesture that is nothing short of paradigm-shifting.<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, these works also partake in a wider trend in queer writing that attempts to grapple with the fluid and ever-changing configurations of gender and sexuality in an increasingly globalized literary marketplace. Rather than a fixed marker of marginality, queerness in *Daddy’s Boy* and *Your Love Is King* is deeply inflected by other social categories—such as class, gender, and ethno-national origin—and, as a shifting location of speech, it can both reproduce and call into question existing power relations and hierarchies. Finally, in their layered interiority and engagement with the broader social context, these two works emphatically exhibit what Christopher Lloyd has called narrative “density,” “a mode of attending to some of the ways in which queer lives are rendered substantial and fleshed-out, as opposed to thin and lifeless (as is so often the case when queer characters are inserted into normative mainstream culture).”<sup>56</sup> In *Daddy’s Boy* and *Your Love Is King*, the struggle for the one’s voice and one’s future is waged against the background of a traumatic family inheritance and collective melancholy silence that shapes the complex contours of the queer psyche as much as the queer body.

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<sup>54</sup> Jameson, Fredric. 1981. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act*. New York: Cornell UP, 102.

<sup>55</sup> For an analysis of this tradition in Croatian literature, which was the first to introduce the themes of illness, trauma, and historical witnessing from a situated and embodied feminist perspective, see Zlatar, Andrea. 2004. *Tekst, tijelo, trauma: ogledi o suvremenoj ženskoj književnosti*. Zagreb: Naklada Ljevak.

<sup>56</sup> Lloyd, Christopher. 2020. Queer densities in Garth Greenwell’s *What Belongs to You*: Narrative, Memory, Corporeality. *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal* 17(1), 41.

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