



## **REAFFIRMING THE QUEER TRAUMATIZED SELF THROUGH HOME: AN ANALYSIS OF THE POTENTIAL OF TRAUMASCAPES IN JOHN ELIZABETH STINTZI'S *VANISHING MONUMENTS* (2021).**

Corpus Navalón-Guzmán

To cite this article: Corpus Navalón-Guzmán, 'Reaffirming the Queer Traumatized Self Through Home: An Analysis of the Potential of Traumascesapes In John Elizabeth Stintzi's *Vanishing Monuments* (2021)', *Intersectional Perspectives: Identity, Culture, and Society*, 3:2 (2024), pp. 32-51, <<https://doi.org/10.18573/ipics.123>>



Cardiff University Press  
Gwasg Prifysgol Caerdydd

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International Licence. To view a copy of this licence, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Date accepted: 7 March 2023

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.18573/ipics.123>

Published online: 15 April 2024

To submit your article to our journal, and view related articles, please visit: <https://ipics.cardiffuniversitypress.org>

## **REAFFIRMING THE QUEER TRAUMATIZED SELF THROUGH HOME: AN ANALYSIS OF THE POTENTIAL OF TRAUMASCAPES IN JOHN ELIZABETH STINTZI'S *VANISHING MONUMENTS* (2021).**

**Corpus Navalón-Guzmán**

University of Murcia

### **ABSTRACT**

This article examines John Elizabeth Stintzi's novel *Vanishing Monuments* (2021) and its potential discussions around place and trauma. The central concern in *Vanishing Monuments* revolves around how returning home implies navigating an overwhelming number of traumatic memories related to gender identity. Drawing on Maria Tumarkin's concept of traumascapes and connecting it to Cvetkovich's notion of queer trauma, this article aims at disclosing the potential impact that physical spaces can have on the traumatized queer subject. This exploration unfolds in two main dimensions. Firstly, this article will delve into the connection between trauma and place to lay the groundwork for understanding how the protagonist's house can function as a traumascap. Secondly, it will analyze how the main character embeds queer trauma into the narrative thanks to a conscious revisitation of their childhood home. This article concludes by evaluating the role that traumascapes might play for the queer subject in productively responding to trauma outside pathological boundaries.

**KEYWORDS:** *queer trauma, traumascapes, place, trauma, queer, LGBTQIA+*

## Introduction

The last decades have witnessed a noticeable surge in literary outputs addressing the multifaceted nature of trauma. This increase underscores how literature continues to function as a conduit for illuminating the intricacies of trauma, which often remain silenced and enigmatic due to their convoluted nature. The notion of trauma has historically been viewed as a solely psychological, unrepresentable, and irresolvable phenomenon caused by an overwhelming event. Despite this, Caruth, alongside other literary scholars such as Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, and Geoffrey Hartman, emphasize that trauma creates a psychic wound that places the memory of the event at the crossroads between 'the knowing and the not knowing', but this does not prevent the registration of its specific nature.<sup>1</sup> Caruth et al. claim that literary works can effectively convey both the comprehensible aspects of trauma and its elusive dimensions. Therefore, many literary and cultural theorists within trauma theory have delved into how literature can bear witness to trauma through fragmented narratives, and other artistic and discursive strategies of modernism and deconstruction.

Nonetheless, recent scholars in the field of trauma studies have challenged Caruth's initial theories. Michelle Balaev, Gert Buelens, and Stef Craps advocate for a revaluation of the monocular, Western perspective through which trauma is analyzed in literary mediums.<sup>2</sup> Their overarching argument is that the exhaustive focus on the psychic reality of trauma through literature has overlooked how this phenomenon can impact minorities and non-Westerners. With the increasing number of dissenting voices aligning with Buelens *et al.*, Craps, and Balaev's arguments, a more pluralistic model for understanding trauma has emerged.<sup>3</sup> Following Robert Eaglestone, this stance seeks to 'look closely and more carefully not simply at the trauma, but at the structure of experience within which trauma is manifested'.<sup>4</sup> Academics adopting this perspective, therefore, consider how experiencing trauma is a fluid process of remembering open to creation, alteration, and significantly influenced by the socio-political, spatial, and temporal circumstances that shape the traumatized subject.

Within this analytical framework, I propose to examine *Vanishing Monuments* (2021) by Canadian author John Elizabeth Stintzi. As the recipient of the 2019 RBC Bronwen Wallace Award

---

<sup>1</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Stef Craps, 'Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma Theory in the Global Age,' in *The Future of Trauma Theory*, 2014, p. 46.

<sup>3</sup> Michelle Balaev, *Contemporary Approaches in Literature Trauma Theory* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. xv.

<sup>4</sup> Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant, and Robert Eaglestone, *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literature and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 18.

for emerging writers, Stintzi has garnered recognition in the contemporary literary field through their meticulously crafted pieces in both prose and verse. Their narratives unfold as journeys of self-discovery and identity affirmation. A notable example is *Vanishing Monuments*, where Stintzi uses the Monument Against Fascism of Hamburg<sup>5</sup> as a metaphor for ‘look[ing] at how a person is their own sort of monument and then at the mortality of memory’.<sup>6</sup> Through this creative inspiration, Stintzi shapes *Vanishing Monuments* to chronicle the fictional life of Alani Baum, a photographer and professor at the University of Minnesota, who revisits their childhood home upon their mother’s worsening dementia. Drawing on Tumarkin’s concept of traumascapes and combining it with Cvetkovich’s notion of queer trauma, my intention in this essay is to analyze how places or locations inscribed with trauma can actively influence the enunciation and processing of this experience.

### **‘No Place like Home!’: The Memory Palace as a Traumascape**

While some scholars in trauma studies have shown interest in exploring the effects of revisiting places associated with trauma, this specific area of scholarly research is not as prominent as analyses centered on the notion of time.<sup>7</sup> Due to the strong link between trauma and memory, and how one affects the other, time becomes crucial in trying to decipher trauma’s ‘unclaimed experience’.<sup>8</sup> As Dominick LaCapra holds, traumatic experiences ‘distort memory in the ‘ordinary’ sense’, rendering memory processes inadequate in accounting for specific overwhelming events’.<sup>9</sup> Trauma may modify survivors’ perception of chronology, and trigger a set of symptoms that keep them trapped in the past. By contrast, physical places have been regarded as simple settings with little influence on the emergence of trauma. Thus, scholars have focused on the pivotal role that time-fractured experiences embedded in flashbacks, nightmares, and hallucinations play in revealing trauma’s essence.

---

<sup>5</sup> This monument is a conceptual art project carried out by Jochen Gerz in Hamburg, Germany, from the years 1986 to 1993. Throughout these years, the monument’s pillar was gradually reduced into the ground until disappeared.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Cavar, ‘F Answering the Questions’: A Conversation with John Elizabeth Stintzi, *The Adroit Journal*, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> See Ruth Ginsburg, ‘Ida Fink’s Scraps and Traces: Forms of Space and the Chronotope of Trauma Narratives’, *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 4.2 (2006), pp. 205–18; Maria Tumarkin, ‘Twenty Years of Thinking about Traumascapes’, *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand*, 29.1 (2019), pp. 4–20.

<sup>8</sup> Caruth 1996, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *History and Its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), p. 61.

Despite this, literary and cultural trauma theory has not entirely neglected the concept of place. In 1984, Pierre Nora developed the notion of sites of memory in his work *Les Lieux de Mémoire*<sup>10</sup> by tracing how memory shaped institutions, and memorials in French historical culture. Nora claimed that *lieux de mémoire*— sites of memory —constitute a history highly infused with emotions, wherein language combines with place to construct a collective identity. Departing from Nora's body of work, many trauma scholars have recognized the interconnectedness of place and memory in the context of traumatic experiences. As Dominick LaCapra notes, sites of memory can also become 'sites of trauma' since they are often marked by the trauma of impossible mourning.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Geoffrey Hartman's work, *The Longest Shadow*, has acknowledged the role of landscapes as illustrative sites of memory that can effectively evoke traumatic pasts.<sup>12</sup> Yet, although these contributions provide a starting point for exploring how places can reveal trauma, they problematically focus on the psychological aftereffects triggered by these locations rather than the potential of places to compel individuals to express their trauma in non-pathological ways.

This critical engagement has led the sociologist Maria Tumarkin to advocate for a 'distinctive category of place' to explore trauma.<sup>13</sup> In her seminal work, *Traumascapes: The Power and Fate of Places Transformed by Tragedy*, Tumarkin contends that if we move beyond the pathological processes of trauma, we can identify this phenomenon located in places. Similar to an individual dealing with deep traumatic experiences and struggling to get back to 'normal' life, places that have experienced repeated traumatic episodes cannot function in the same way as before. Instead, they transform into what she terms traumascapes. Tumarkin broadly defines traumascapes as physical spaces marked by the lingering impact of violence and suffering, where the significance of trauma shapes its interpretation to extract meaning for the present.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, the notion of traumascapes provides a compelling framework for understanding the enduring impact of trauma beyond pathology. By recognizing that manifestations of trauma are not just confined to individual psyches but also embedded in the environment around them, it is possible to gain a deeper appreciation of how human beings respond to past tragedies and how they navigate them in the present.

---

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, 1 ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Cornell University Press, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

<sup>13</sup> Maria Tumarkin, *Traumascapes: The Power and Fate of Places Transformed by Tragedy* (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2005), p. 53.

<sup>14</sup> Tumarkin 2005, p. 49.

The notion of traumascape is captured in *Vanishing Monuments*, as the protagonist's childhood home in Winnipeg functions as a transformative space laden with memories of trauma. The novel begins by introducing readers to Alani Baum, who seems happy with their professional and personal life. Suddenly, however, the plot takes a drastic turn when Alani receives a phone call from a doctor, notifying them that their mother's dementia has worsened. This call serves as a significant motivator for Alani to return to their house in Winnipeg before putting it up for sale. It also prompts them to directly face the pain associated with this place, as the house holds memories of Alani's turbulent relationship with their mother. Since Alani's departure, their interactions have been sparse, and therefore, the house symbolizes the various reasons that led Alani's decision to leave her. By choosing to spend their mother's last days in this house, Alani emphasizes their determination to address the trauma embedded in this location while simultaneously revealing the potential of interpreting their childhood home as a traumascape.

As a site carrying emotional weight, Alani's childhood home becomes a traumascape that embodies 'everything in *their* life that *they* need to remember'.<sup>15</sup> When Alani learns about their mother's dementia, they promptly decide to compile all their memories in a single place, driven by the fear of losing them. Employing Cicero's mnemonic technique of 'the memory palace',<sup>16</sup> Alani engages in this memory process, as 'the mind becomes capable of incredible feats of memory'.<sup>17</sup> Although this is a mental endeavor at first, it eventually materializes into a physical space:

For a long time, I tried different houses—from Tom's to mine in Minneapolis—but ended up using Mother's, despite it being a bit small for all the things I needed to remember. I didn't want to use it, but after a while I knew that it was a place whose walls I could trust would always be standing in my head.<sup>18</sup>

The decision to use their childhood home as their memory palace transforms it into a traumascape where 'events get experienced and re-experienced across time'.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the memory palace mnemonic technique serves to recall memories that Alani might not have disclosed otherwise. As elucidated by Maria Tumarkin, traumascape function as physical locations that

---

<sup>15</sup> John E. Stintzi, *Vanishing Monuments* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2021), p. 12; own emphasis.

<sup>16</sup> This name originally started with Cicero, who used it to give long speeches without a script. The orator did this by connecting different parts of a speech to the rooms in his mansion. Likewise, in the novel, Alani links memories to the areas of their childhood home and reveals them as they move through.

<sup>17</sup> Stintzi 2021, p. 53.

<sup>18</sup> Stintzi 2021, p. 53.

<sup>19</sup> Tumarkin 2005, p. 31.

‘transfer and externalize the burden of memory carried by survivors’.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, the dilapidated state of the house does not discourage Alani from transforming it into a traumascap, providing a link not only between past and present, but also between place, memory, and trauma.

It is tempting to confuse traumascapes with uniformed monuments or public memorials. However, Tumarkin clarifies that while memorials utilize mythic narratives, typically rooted in trauma, to publicly shape national memories and aid in the healing process of a nation, traumascapes can ‘anchor public and private expressions of grief’.<sup>21</sup> For some individuals, the site wherein a personal trauma takes place triggers verbal and visual memorialization to ease the trauma. One simple but powerful way to regain psychic constitution after a traumatic event is to take a traumatic space, such as a house, a sidewalk, or a road, and turn it into a personal space to confront a traumatic ordeal. The life story of Alani in *Vanishing Monuments* exemplifies this transformative process, where the act of entering a traumatic space, such as a childhood home, is coupled with the intentional rearrangement for memorialization. Alani promptly readjusts the memory palace by taking pictures of different rooms, exhibiting them, and displaying objects such as their mother’s old camera and a crowbar. This metamorphosis turns the previously destroyed space into a traumascap ‘materially implicated in the production and reproduction of mourning, remembering, and meaning-making [...]’.<sup>22</sup> For Alani, some of the objects placed in the house evoke fond memories, but most of them trigger flashbacks that traumatically rekindle their struggle. Therefore, through the memories attached to the domestic objects and photographs, Alani’s childhood home becomes a tangible but private space that encapsulates the complex interplay between trauma and identity that characterizes their suffering.

However, Alani’s engagement with this traumascap to confront some of the most traumatic aspects of their past, including their gender dysphoria and their mother’s dementia, has not always been their primary intention. Returning to locations associated with trauma can evoke intense symptoms in traumatized individuals. Yet, this return can also function as an ‘identifiable source to explicate the multiple meanings of the [traumatic] event and the specificity of emotional responses’.<sup>23</sup> That is why trauma survivors, who, like Alani, can verbalize their traumatic experiences, should be at ease when revisiting these locations. Nonetheless, Alani has not always

---

<sup>20</sup> Maria Tumarkin, ‘Twenty Years of Thinking about Traumascapes’, *Twenty Years of Thinking about Traumascapes*, *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand*, 29.1 (2019), 4–20 (p. 11).

<sup>21</sup> Tumarkin 2019, p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> Tumarkin 2019, p. 9

<sup>23</sup> Michelle Balaev, *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2012), p. 39.

felt entirely prepared to come back to the memory palace. Tumarkin stresses that traumascapes continuously evoke traumatic memories upon revisitation, signifying that trauma remains an ‘unfinished business’.<sup>24</sup> In the case of *Vanishing Monuments*, this translates into Alani’s initial hesitation to revisit their childhood home. This decision is based on the realization that returning to Winnipeg serves as a reminder that their trauma is open-ended and will cause them further distress. Thus, Alani has taken every possible measure to avoid revisiting their house during some stopovers at Winnipeg’s airport, as it will destabilize a life that ‘had gotten into a steady routine’.<sup>25</sup>

When Alani ponders their decision to go to the memory palace in the present, they gesture toward the urgency of visiting it to achieve closure: ‘If it’s going to close any of the windows to my past, if I’m going to fight against the drafts, I have to go back right away’.<sup>26</sup> This idea connects with another central characteristic of traumascapes: the possibility of revisiting them to gain a deeper understanding of the traumatic experience. Tumarkin emphasizes that the return to a traumascap ‘compels memories, crystallizes identities and meanings and exudes power and enchantment’.<sup>27</sup> Hence, revisiting the memory palace holds crucial importance for Alani, providing a pathway to not only understand the traumatic events that transpired within its walls but also reconcile with their present shattered self.

### **A Tour around Alani’s Traumascap: The Memory Palace as the Loci of Queer Trauma**

Despite going unnoticed in the purview of trauma scholars, a multifaceted version of the protagonist’s trauma becomes apparent when viewed through Tumarkin’s notion of traumascapes. Alani’s disclosure of their traumatic experience may initially be interpreted as stemming from them abandoning their mother and her subsequent mental illness: ‘Some ancient signal has been sent up to rally me back. Some signal has told me that the road to Winnipeg, to Mother, will be too overgrown if I stay away any longer’.<sup>28</sup> Inevitably, the anguish that Alani carries for not having spoken to their mother before she fell ill is palpable throughout the narrative. In contrast, when the main character physically confronts the memory palace, the narrative’s overtone shifts toward another source of trauma connected with Alani’s queer identity.

Like the historical conceptualization of trauma, the history of the LGBTQIA+ community has been one of pathologization and recurrent wounding. From the early social and clinical framing of same-sex desire as a perverse pathology to more recent times, the queer community

---

<sup>24</sup> Tumarkin 2019, p. 49.

<sup>25</sup> Stintzi 2021, p. 14.

<sup>26</sup> Stintzi 2021, p. 10.

<sup>27</sup> Tumarkin 2019, p. 54.

<sup>28</sup> Stintzi 2021, p. 10.



has endured the traumatic consequences of public indifference, stigma, homophobia, and social disempowerment. This situation mirrors, to some extent, the experiences of traumatized survivors who, under psychoanalytical assumptions, are often stigmatized and labeled as mentally ill. The clinical approach to trauma, which transforms survivors into patients requiring clinical intervention, further disempowers them and limits the attention to other extended forms of trauma, including those endured by the queer community. Despite the classic model's suitability for helping restore damaged psyches, newer perspectives like Ann Cvetkovich's notion of queer trauma aim to forge 'ways of thinking about trauma that do not pathologize it'.<sup>29</sup> Given the persistent pathologization faced by both the queer community and traumatized individuals, this concept seeks to redress histories of trauma within the queer community through a socio-cultural lens. In this way, this approach allows for an examination of how experiences of queer trauma have prompted new adaptive responses and distinctive public cultures resulting from trauma within the same heteronormative systems that have historically stigmatized them.

In *Vanishing Monuments*, Alani challenges the conventional understanding of trauma as a solely pathological phenomenon through a conscious shift between narrative points of view upon arriving at the memory palace. Growing up as an adult in Minnesota, Alani grapples with a profound traumatic hold for having abandoned their mother, which ultimately plunges them into prolonged body dissociation. Aligned with Bessel Van der Kolk's assertion that 'dissociation is the essence of trauma', which hampers the ability to engage in daily tasks, Alani confesses that they have become an emotional automaton, unable to excel in photography or establish emotional and social connections.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, their return to the memory palace forges a link with trauma that transcends the boundaries of post-traumatic pathology. This anti-pathological stance is primarily represented through a conscious shift between first-person and second-person points of view. Alternating between these two narrative voices enables the protagonist to create a sense of separation from their pain and articulate the source of their emotional distress, which is rooted in gender dysphoria. As Alani embarks on the exploration of their memory palace, the 'I' voice shifts to a second person 'you' to acknowledge that their distress began 'the moment *they* came home from *their* first day of school crying to mother because [their] teacher had informed [them] that [they were] actually a girl'.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), pp. 153-154.

<sup>31</sup> Stintzi 2021, p. 20.

Without displaying any symptomatic reaction, the revelation of the details of Alani's queer trauma reaches its peak when they recall a conversation with one of their Ph.D. students, Ess. A walk through the memory palace's backyard and a printed document informing that a girl went missing leads Alani to remember their response to Ess's questions regarding their gender identity and growing up queer in Winnipeg. Through an internal monologue that conveys Alani's unease upon this question, they reveal 'they didn't realize they were [queer]' during their childhood.<sup>32</sup> As readers further learn through this recollection, Alani's lack of self-identification stems from their mother's failure to acknowledge their queer identity, as she only used the pronoun you to address them. Communication, or the apparent lack thereof, is the primary justification for Alani's queer trauma, which, according to this disclosure, firstly originates at an intimate, individual level. Drawing from Kathryn Bond Stockton's assertion that queerness may already begin in childhood, but linguistic markers to name it arrive later in adulthood, Alani implicitly suggests that the absence of a clear linguistic reference point from which they could identify their queer identity was inherently traumatic at an early age.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, this postponed self-recognition turns Alani's development into an experience of queer trauma that aggravates as soon as they attend school.

By further delving into the intricacies of this conversation with their Ph.D. student, Stintzi challenges the neat distinction between individual and collective traumas in *Vanishing Monuments*. While Alani does not consciously establish a contrast between these two forms of trauma in their narration, they unknowingly put their ordeal against the backdrop of LGBTQIA+ collective history. This nuanced connection mirrors Cvetkovich's idea that the workings of an individual trauma should be examined without overlooking its collective significance, for it helps to understand trauma's emergence at the structural level.<sup>34</sup> Navigating through memories, Alani recalls their first day of school when their teacher's amusement at their 'gender confusion' left an indelible, traumatic mark on them: 'I remember it like it was fucking five minutes ago—and she laughed and said to me, 'No, no, the girls are lined up over there!' and pointed to the other line. [...] She looked at me like I was stupid'.<sup>35</sup> Although Alani did not experience the same social punishment as those who openly identified as queer during the late twentieth century, they candidly confess that after this public ridicule, the social incongruity of 'feeling different from how

---

<sup>32</sup> Stintzi 2021, p. 33.

<sup>33</sup> Kathryn Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 55.

<sup>35</sup> Stintzi 2021, p. 33.

[they] are seen' became unbearable.<sup>36</sup> Alani holds that their gender dysphoria traumatically placed them in a hidden, helpless, and lonely territory because 'people were afraid of *them*. Of whom [they were] and who [they] could be'.<sup>37</sup> In this sense, just like many members of the LGBTQIA+ community, Alani experienced an individual form of trauma that connects with a collective experience due to social rejection.

Having spent almost seven days in the memory palace, Alani has a nightmare that brings the 'everyday' nature of their queer trauma into sharp focus. Engaged in cleaning the house and recalling the burdensome aspects of their childhood, Alani begins to feel dizzy and overcome by a heavy flu. Seeking comfort in their mother's bed, they are eventually plagued by sleep paralysis and nightmares. In one of their dreams, they inhabit their mother's body due to being on her bed:

"I am not Hedy Baum. I'm not, no. I am Alani. I'm in Hedy's bed, but I am not her. [...] I got here a few days ago. Hedy is my mother, not me. I am in Winnipeg," I talk myself out of her and back into my skin.<sup>38</sup>

Awake, but unable to move, Alani continues imagining how this body drags them throughout the memory palace. As Caruth highlights, nightmares, hallucinations, and splitting have been considered trauma's hallmark symptoms, often emerging as responses to the 'deathlike break' stage of trauma. Traditionally, this stage occurs when individuals remain unable to process the traumatic event and constantly relive it through symptoms.<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, Alani's nightmare diverges in one crucial aspect: it does not render them speechless. After recalling this nightmare, Alani links the distress of feeling in their mother's body with the traumatic aftereffects of gender dysphoria: 'I woke up in the house every day to less of myself, but no fewer versions of me'.<sup>40</sup> In this way, the protagonist underscores how their gender dysphoria magnifies as the feeling of inhabiting multiple bodies that do not accurately reflect themselves becomes pervasive. This insight into Alani's struggle underscores the ongoing challenges faced by individuals dealing with trauma and gender dysphoria and the lasting effects it has on their lives.

The narration of queer trauma's everydayness continues in the following pages, where Alani describes their mother's episode of depression. Hedwig's depression settled in after coming back from a working trip in Selkirk when Alani was only seventeen. Alani admits losing themselves

---

<sup>36</sup> Stintzi 2021, p. 33.

<sup>37</sup> Stintzi 2021, p. 94.

<sup>38</sup> Stintzi 2021, p. 91.

<sup>39</sup> Caruth 1996, p. 87.

<sup>40</sup> Stintzi 2021, p. 91.

due to queer trauma as their mother slowly fell into the pits of depression: ‘when I would have to drag Mother out of her bed [...]—I felt a generalized sensation of lessening. I got smaller. [...] I was a collection of frayed ends, ends that had no communication with their roots’.<sup>41</sup> Unable to be helped by their mother, Alani could only remain silent, and hide in a body that did not represent them. Likewise, this entrapment also interfered with societal unrecognition of their traumatic ordeal. According to Cvetkovich, quotidian traumas such as homophobia, racism, xenophobia, or stigma often fall outside the radar of trauma theorist’s analyses as these issues ‘leave no sign of a problem’.<sup>42</sup> Alani’s queer trauma can be conceptualized under this argument, as it magnified day by day since ‘nobody knew how to address [them], to reach out to [them], without making [them] angry’.<sup>43</sup> Given this lack of comprehension, Alani’s experience of trauma became closer to a ‘continuing background noise rather than an unusual event’ that eventually manifested through less overt side effects,<sup>44</sup> as Alani confesses: ‘I started to drink more. [...] I did less and less at school,’ and even ‘thought about jumping off Hennepin Avenue Bridge’.<sup>45</sup>

Due to queer trauma’s open-endedness, Alani’s memories of their overwhelming teenage years illustrate how their impact ‘is felt in the textures of experience of everyday life’.<sup>46</sup> Suffering from emotional numbness is one possible symptom triggered by places, but for Alani, the memory palace is ‘full of visual and sensory triggers’ that elicit ‘a whole palette of emotions’.<sup>47</sup> Once Alani crosses the door of the dark room, described as a ‘swollen room of fluxing sensations and fragments you’ve lost access to’, they point to the feeling of shame as their main affective response to trauma.<sup>48</sup> Sarah Ahmed emphasizes that this affect is prevalent among queer individuals, as the departure from the scripts of normativity may be seen as a source of shame, emphasized by the repudiation of the queer subject.<sup>49</sup> The dark room, used as a substitute name for their mother’s bedroom, is coincidentally described as a place where ‘you go and feel shame’.<sup>50</sup> Conveying their angst through short sentences in a lengthy paragraph, Alani recalls the shame of disclosing their non-binary identity to their mother. This revelation caused their mother to turn away from Alani, forcing them to internalize a feeling of self-repudiation because she ‘can’t stand

---

<sup>41</sup> Stintzi 2021, p. 91.

<sup>42</sup> Cvetkovich 2003, p. 36.

<sup>43</sup> Stintzi 2021, p. 93.

<sup>44</sup> Laura S. Brown, ‘Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma’, in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 103.

<sup>45</sup> Stintzi 2021, pp. 93-99.

<sup>46</sup> Cvetkovich 2003, p. 60.

<sup>47</sup> Tumarkin 2005, p. 49.

<sup>48</sup> Stintzi 2021, p. 86.

<sup>49</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2004), p. 107.

<sup>50</sup> Stintzi 2021, p. 166.

the sight of [them] anymore'.<sup>51</sup> Overwhelmed by shame and rejection, Alani ultimately chooses to run away from their mother, leaving behind the house they once considered home.

In summary, while Alani's trauma initially gestures toward their absence during their mother's illness, an inquiry into this novel's portrayal of traumascapes reveals Alani's queer trauma. In particular, a detailed examination of Alani's queer trauma shows how their individual experience of trauma exists in a continuum with a collective one. Alani's dysphoria goes initially unnoticed not only by their mother but also by the wider twentieth-century population that casts non-normative identities as shameful. Inevitably, this identifies the reasons behind the protagonist's traumatic status that becomes routinely perpetual instead of diminishing over time. Due to the possibility of traumascapes for exploring emotions attached to places, the novel also offers a harsh depiction of the feelings associated with queer trauma. While affective experiences of trauma have often been approached as the origins of trauma's symptomatology, the novel illustrates that emotions are not necessarily pathological.

### **On the Healing Potentialities of Queer Trauma and Place**

If Alani's traumatic status is analyzed concerning the traditional trauma paradigm, a practical resolution to their trauma cannot be identified. The classical model of trauma understands this overwhelming experience as evoking a set of symptoms requiring therapeutic help to enable reintegration into society. Nonetheless, overcoming traumatic distress is not a linear process. Neither the period of post-traumatic symptoms, known as 'acting-out', nor that of 'working-through', or working toward resolution, function in a continuum. Given the initial incapacity of trauma survivors to assimilate the overwhelming experience, healing becomes a complicated task. Individuals who try to overcome trauma may fall into a spiral of repetition compulsion whereby they reproduce the trauma as it was initially experienced. At the same time, while working-through tries to counteract the acting-out force, it does not imply 'cure, consolidation, uplift, or closure, and normalization'.<sup>52</sup> However, *Vanishing Monuments* refrains from offering a depiction of the complementary role of these two processes in the path toward psychic restoration.

In Alani's case, queer trauma does not explicitly follow the pattern that unfolds from 'unspeakability' to healing. As I have shown above, when the protagonist begins to revisit the memory palace, they do not clearly display symptoms related to trauma's unknowable status, as their recollection of memories avoids any pathological distress. For instance, fragmented

---

<sup>51</sup> Stintzi 2021, p. 167.

<sup>52</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. xxiii.

memories or gaps in the narrative are practically absent. And although Alani experiences nightmares and body dissociation, these are not intrinsically associated with trauma's aftermath, given that revisiting their traumascape is a controlled experience. While the novel's revelation of queer trauma through Alani's traumascape may imply that Alani has come to terms with trauma, it also demonstrates that the protagonist remains incapable of assimilating their traumatic experience. This becomes particularly evident when Alani reaches the final destination of their journey through the house—their room, characterized as a space where 'history enters to be sorted' but 'you find nothing, because you never get to the end'.<sup>53</sup> Unable to find any clear resolution to their revisitation of memories, Alani does not achieve the healing outcome that pervades trauma narratives, as they will always carry the burden of queer trauma's open-endedness.

Nonetheless, by distancing from Alani's quest for 'a semblance of who [they] are, with no foreknowledge of the way forward through the fog', it is possible to illuminate the transformative, and healing potential of queer trauma and traumasapes.<sup>54</sup> Cvetkovich's central aim of detaching queer trauma from its clinical nature also entails refusing quick solutions to trauma. For the scholar, trying to solve trauma through legal compensation or therapeutic help does not provide complete relief for those suffering from everyday traumas. That is why she emphasizes that through creative expressions, trauma can be revaluated: activism, drawing, art exhibitions, and a myriad of other creative expressions are empowering methods not only for processing traumatic experiences but also for forging connections with those with shared struggles.<sup>55</sup> In line with these ideas, Tumarkin also stresses the healing possibilities of traumasapes at the cultural level. Traumasapes become generative sites of meaning that can crystallize identity while also serving as platforms to reconfigure experiences of shame and loss into socially shared ones.<sup>56</sup> Thus, Stintzi's depiction of Alani's impossibility to achieve closure, while considered as a failure within traditional trauma frameworks, it is potentially reflective of these implications.

The establishment of the memory palace can be interpreted as the protagonist's creative response to queer trauma. Alani admits that creating the memory palace was initially a desperate attempt to remember due to the distress after discovering their mother's imminent mental illness: 'I began attempting to compose a memory palace that could contain all the remembrances that I

---

<sup>53</sup> Stintzi 2021, p. 210.

<sup>54</sup> Stintzi 2021, p. 109.

<sup>55</sup> Cvetkovich 2003, p. 16.

<sup>56</sup> Tumarkin 2019, p. 11

felt made up my life, made up myself, out of the terror of eventually losing them'.<sup>57</sup> The protagonist even confesses their obsession with losing memory, which may be read as a superficial reason to sketch the contours of their traumascape. Nevertheless, in the last pages of the novel, Alani recalls the project of the memory palace to conclude that:

You curated the palace to fit an impression of everything—of you—perhaps because you knew that you didn't actually want to remember everything. You built it because you wanted a sense of control over these moments that you lacked at the time they occurred.<sup>58</sup>

By inviting readers again into their consciousness with this sudden shift to a second-person narrator, Alani admits how the memory palace functions both as a reaction to the experience of queer trauma and as a way of shaping its confrontation. That is, Alani's fixation with having 'a sense of control' translates into the constitution of a safe space where they can handle the feelings attached to queer trauma and thus revisit them whenever they return to this location.

This creative response to queer trauma also gives symbolic knowledge to the protagonist. As shown above, Tumarkin highlights how traumascape can not only carry meaning but also provide new insights to individuals. This idea implicitly connects with the core principles of Cvetkovich's queer trauma since traumatic experiences can also lead to new knowledge that traumatized individuals can use in the present.<sup>59</sup> Aligning with Cvetkovich's and Tumarkin's arguments, *Vanishing Monuments* underscores how Alani develops a new understanding of their queer trauma from revisiting their traumascape at the end of the story. By pondering the malleable nature of existence due to the story of the Monument against Fascism, Alani realizes that the memories tied to this traumascape will provide them strength in facing future ordeals despite 'vanishing' due to trauma. Although this traumascape has not completely healed their trauma, it serves to 'keep the memories [they] want alive' and reorient the present toward those memories.<sup>60</sup>

In line with Tumarkin's and Cvetkovich's arguments that creative responses to trauma can forge public cultures around it, Stintzi's novel can also be ontologically viewed as a queer healing practice that offers relational possibilities. That is, I contend that the book contributes to creating a culture centered around queer trauma. Through the description of how Alani curates their

---

<sup>57</sup> Stintzi 2021, p. 53.

<sup>58</sup> Stintzi 2021, p. 214.

<sup>59</sup> Cvetkovich 2003, p. 47.

<sup>60</sup> Stintzi 2021, p. 215.

traumascape to disclose their queer trauma, this fictional work assumes a real-world impact since this experience of queer trauma transforms into a socially shared one, particularly for the LGBTQIA+ community. By elaborating on the protagonist's impulses to confront trauma, their reactions to the different traumatic experiences, and the reflection of its open-ended status, Stintzi exposes a particular form of queer trauma that readers can relate to and, above all, reflect upon. In this sense, *Vanishing Monuments* invites readers to engage with new approaches to trauma for LGBTQIA+ individuals that may turn negative traumatic experiences into spaces full of queer possibility.

## Conclusion

As this article has attempted to show, places may be regarded as potential sites to analyze trauma. More important, perhaps, is how *Vanishing Monuments* engages with the turn toward pluralistic frameworks of trauma due to the role played by the protagonist's house. By emphasizing the significance of the memory palace, the novel underscores the active role a location can play in signaling traumatic experiences and regulating the affects that arise during this process. In doing so, the narrative makes a case for interpreting this specific place through Maria Tumarkin's concept of traumascape. When the protagonist revisits their childhood home, the construction of the memory palace aligns with Tumarkin's notion. Instead of evolving into a site of memorialization or a monument, the protagonist transforms this location into a traumascape where overwhelming traumatic memories persist.

Thanks to the construction of this traumascape, Stintzi's narrative appears to pinpoint a particular traumatic experience that engages in direct conversation with Ann Cvetkovich's concept of queer trauma. The revelation of Alani's queer trauma, arising from their return to their traumascape and the memories evoked by this location, highlights two relevant implications. First, it underscores that the trauma of LGBTQIA+ individuals, stemming from stigma and lack of understanding, is positioned at the intersection of individual and collective dimensions. Second, and most notably, it illustrates how Alani's memories can shed light on the affects associated with forms of everyday trauma, particularly shame.

The novel also portrays the main character's apparent struggle to overcome trauma due to the complexity of their memories. However, examining this novel through the lens of Tumarkin's and Cvetkovich's ideas opens up space for a positive concluding note. By curating their traumascape, the protagonist demonstrates that responses to trauma can be navigated outside the realm of therapy. At the same time, the novel suggests the possibility of evaluating this traumascape as a generative site of meaning. Even though Alani acknowledges that they have not



overcome their distress, the tour around the memory palace has helped them recover a sense of queer identification that proves valuable for the present. In this regard, thanks to its potential link between trauma and place, *Vanishing Monuments* is a text that responds to the pluralistic model of trauma. That is, it invites readers to reconsider both the relational possibilities of trauma and its restrictive boundaries, ultimately creating a liberating space for alternative narratives.

*The research for this article has been funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy, Industry, and Competitiveness (Ref. PRE2019-090044) as well as the research project (MINECO): “Queer Temporalities in Contemporary Anglophone Cultures”.*

**WORKS CITED**

Ahmed, Sara, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2004)

Balaev, Michelle, *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2012), <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv4cbg44>>  
PMid:22724364

Balaev, Michelle, *Contemporary Approaches in Literature Trauma Theory* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv4cbg44>>  
PMid:22724364

Bond Stockton, Kathryn, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), <<https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822390268>>

Brown, Laura S., 'Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma,' in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 100–112

Buelens, Gert, Durrant, Sam, and Eaglestone, Robert, *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literature and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 2014), <<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203493106>>

Caruth, Cathy, 'Introduction to Psychoanalysis, Culture and Trauma I,' *American Imago*, 48.1 (1991), pp. 1–12

Caruth, Cathy, *Unclaimed Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), <<https://doi.org/10.1353/book.20656>>

Cavar, Sarah, 'F Answering the Questions': A Conversation with John Elizabeth Stintzi,' *The Adroit Journal*, 2021

Craps, Stef, 'Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma Theory in the Global Age,' in *The Future of Trauma Theory*, 2014

- Cvetkovich, Ann, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv113139r>>
- Ginsburg, Ruth, 'Ida Fink's Scraps and Traces: Forms of Space and the Chronotope of Trauma Narratives,' *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 4.2 (2006), pp. 205–18, <<https://doi.org/10.1353/pan.0.0111>>
- Hartman, Geoffrey H., *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996)
- Van der Kolk, Bessel, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (London: Penguin Books, 2014)
- LaCapra, Dominick, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Cornell University Press, 1998), <<https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501727450>>
- LaCapra, Dominick, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001)
- LaCapra, Dominick, *History and Its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009)
- Nora, Pierre, *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, 1 ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1997)
- Stintzi, John E., *Vanishing Monuments* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2021)
- Tumarkin, Maria, *Traumascapes: The Power and Fate of Places Transformed by Tragedy* (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2005)
- Tumarkin, Maria, 'Twenty Years of Thinking about Traumascapes,' *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand*, 29.1 (2019), pp. 4–20, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10331867.2018.1540077>>