'Recreating Katalin Street':

Reenacting a Haunting Past Utopia as Testimony to Trauma in Magda Szabó's *Katalin Street*

Lisa van Straten
Utrecht University, the Netherlands

ABSTRACT

This article brings into dialogue the work of Cathy Caruth, a founding figure of trauma theory, with that of Svetlana Boym, an authority within scholarship on nostalgia. In doing so, it aims to showcase that the study of traumatic experience can benefit from a theoretical approach in which both of their perspectives are understood to be inherently intertwined. Despite being seemingly very much opposed in terms of their conceptualizations of trauma, their theories, when considered in light of each other, can in fact be said to make up a trauma-spectrum that traces the different, interconnected levels on which trauma operates and manifests itself. Therefore, by considering them part of a spectrum, new ways for analyzing traumatic experience open up that allow for it to not only be understood in terms of an individual acting out, as Caruth argues, but also as the shared performance of a haunting past utopia, as suggested by Boym. Such a spectrum, as I will demonstrate, is especially useful as a theoretical tool for analyzing the workings of trauma within small-scale communities in which there is a uniquely intricate mediation between the individual and the community, the past and the present. This will be further illustrated by a discussion of Magda Szabó's novel Katalin Street (1969); a work that explores the complex social dynamics that emerge when an intimate community is traumatized during World War II by the murder of one of their own and the subsequent loss of their shared utopia. As a result, those who survive, as a coping mechanism for as well as symptom of their trauma, continue to reenact their idealized past as if the catastrophic event never occurred. As such, Szabó foregrounds how Boym's nostalgic performance and Caruth's acting out are often fundamentally interwoven in the creation of a never-ending, paradoxical cycle of remembering through forgetting and forgetting through remembrance. Moreover, by emphasizing the layers of witnessing within the text, Szabó underlines the importance of acknowledging this nostalgic reenactment of the past as a form of testimony in its own right, one that calls for new ways of listening to trauma.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of haunting has always been central to memory studies, as it connects well to the field's foundational exploration of how the past is continually ((re)constructed to be) present in the here and now, in our thoughts, bodies and surroundings (Kennedy 2020, 54). As such, it held and still holds a strong connection to trauma theory, whose founding figure, Cathy Caruth, building on Freud, understood haunting predominantly as the effect of the traumatized subject's inability to psychologically assimilate a thoroughly 'shocking and unexpected' event (Caruth

1996, 6). According to her, such traumatic experiences trigger survivors to continually 'act out' the event through PTSD-symptoms as they are unable to wrestle free from the grasp of the past (Caruth 1996, 6). Over the years, however, many scholars began to feel the need for expanding Caruth's understanding of trauma and started to construct alternative conceptual frameworks for analyzing the many ways in which not only individuals but also communities give expression to this sense of being haunted by their history (Balaev 2014, 3). This development gradually created a split in the study of trauma—one that continues to be prevalent in much of recent scholarship on the subject—as scholars either chose to work in the psychoanalytical trauma-tradition of Caruth, or to adopt the broader perspective of cultural memory studies in the exploration of so-called social or cultural trauma. As a result, many shifted their focus away from the individual to analyze large-scale, oftentimes national, commemorative rituals, historical reenactments, practices of mourning, and monuments (see Alexander et al. 2004; Tomann 2019, Newby and Toulson 2019; and Močnik 2019). A particularly interesting scholar adhering to the latter tradition is Svetlana Boym, as she, unlike her fellow theorists, pointed out that communal haunting can manifest itself not just in the shared remembrance of the traumatic event itself, but also as the insistent (re)creation and ritualized performance of a nostalgically idealized past (Boym 2008, xiii-xvii, 42). This obsessive remembrance, as she explains, allows communities to forget the source of their trauma, and, thus, somewhat soothes the pain it causes in the present (Boym 2008, 42). Yet, by focusing explicitly on nostalgia and conceiving of traumatic experience in much looser terms as the diffuse 'sentiment of loss and displacement' that 'is at the very core of the modern condition', Boym clearly departs from the conventional framework of trauma theory (Boym 2008, xiii-xvii, 42). For that reason, her work has not received serious attention from scholars working within the field of traditional trauma studies.[1]

Nevertheless, this article will show that Boym's work can in fact be brought into meaningful dialogue with Caruth's, as both approaches combined—despite seeming totally opposed in terms of their understanding of trauma, its scale, and its manifestations—can be said to map out a multilayered trauma-spectrum. This spectrum, as a theoretical tool, not only foregrounds their fundamental interconnectedness, but is also able to bridge the persistent methodological divide in the study of trauma. As a result, this synthesized approach allows for a more comprehensive way of analyzing the complex reality of traumatic experience; one that is of particular importance for the study of trauma within intimate communities, where there is a continual, ambiguous mediation between the individual and the group, and the acting out can go hand in hand with the shared performance of a haunting utopia. The fruitfulness of considering these theories as extensions of each other, specifically within these communal contexts, will be explored more in-depth by looking at Magda Szabó's novel *Katalin Street* (1969). This novel depicts how the lives of three

neighboring families in Budapest become intertwined and are later torn apart when World War II reaches the city, leading the Jewish Held couple to be deported and their little girl Henriette murdered. Throughout the story, particular emphasis is placed on how those who survived the war are traumatized by Henriette's death, and consequently long, both as individuals and as a community, for the lost, idealized world exemplified by Katalin Street before the disastrous event. Recreating this time and place in their behaviors and surroundings, then, becomes their only source of comfort, an escape from the seeming 'unreality' of the present (Szabó 2020, 20). As a depiction of trauma, the story can thus be situated in the ambivalent space where Caruth's and Boym's theories meet: between the level of the individual and that of the collective, between trauma as a concrete event and trauma as a diffuse experience of displacement, and, thirdly, between PTSD-symptoms and the shared reenactment of a private, past utopia. Moreover, through accentuating the layers of witnessing in the text, Szabó appears to stress that these nostalgic performances can be considered complex forms of testimony, that are in desperate need of a receptive audience that acknowledges them as such. So, I will start by outlining how both Caruth and Boym have theorized trauma and its manifestations as well as how their theories complement each other when considered as part of a spectrum. Afterwards, this analysis will serve as a foundation for a close reading of *Katalin Street* in order to provide a starting point for a more theoretically sophisticated understanding of the workings of trauma in general and within small communities in particular.

PTSD AND NOSTALGIA: CATHY CARUTH AND SVETLANA BOYM ON THE EXPERIENCE OF TRAUMA

As indicated above, Cathy Caruth's conceptualization of trauma as the result of an event that is 'experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known' has been a touchstone within the study of trauma from the 1990s onwards (Caruth 1996, 4; Sütterlin, 18). Within her framework, trauma is located not in 'the simple violent or original event in the individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature … returns to haunt the survivor later on' (Caruth 1996, 4). Because of its 'overwhelming immediacy', Caruth indicates, a traumatic experience defies comprehension and language, which makes it impossible for the traumatized individual to integrate it into his/her life story (Caruth 1996, 4, 17; Caruth 1995, 4, 6; Bond and Craps 2020, 80). Consequently, it can best be understood as a psycholinguistic hole in one's memory and sense of self: its outline is affectively present whilst its true meaning remains cognitively absent and unknown (Caruth 1996, 4; Caruth 1995, 6). Only belatedly, Caruth argues, 'in its repeated *possession*' of the traumatized subject, can the event be fully experienced, leading often to a distortion of the event itself in which both past and present are interwoven (1995, 4-5; 1996, 7).

As such, the experience of trauma reflects both 'the unbearable nature of the event [as well as] … the unbearable nature of its survival' (Caruth 1995, 4-5, 9; 1996, 7).

By making this argument, Caruth stresses not only the psychological dimension of this haunting, but also the essential role of the body, as the body is subject to the involuntary, repetitive remembrance, through PTSD-symptoms, of that which, paradoxically, seems to be forgotten by the conscious mind (1995, 4, 8). Where in the mind the traumatized subject is confronted with 'intrusive hallucinations, dreams [or] thoughts' that relate to the catastrophic event, the body appears to similarly revisit the traumatic experience through specific behaviors and even reenactments of the original, traumatizing situation (Caruth 1996, 2, 139; Caruth 1995, 4). This embodied remembrance, in a sense, pushes the individual to its assimilation, even though this repetition can also perpetuate the traumatization (Caruth 1996, 2, 139; Caruth 1995, 4). Building on the tradition of psychoanalysis, Caruth connects this trauma-response to Freud's concept of 'traumatic neurosis', but elaborates on it by arguing that it is only through this 'reenactment' that the traumatized subject is called to '[bear] witness to the past he has unwittingly repeated' and, consequently, confront what 'resists simple comprehension' in a paradoxical cycle of forgetting and remembering (1996, 2-3, 6).[2]

Even though Caruth's work remains central to many studies on trauma, over the years several scholars began to observe that it rather 'narrowly conceptualizes the psychological dimensions of trauma and the range of traumatic experience and responses' (Balaev 2014, 5). This seemed true especially for how Caruth imposes strict limits on what can be considered a cause of trauma— namely a single, shattering event—as well as for her 'fixation on the symptomatic acting-out of trauma' which deterministically 'collapses the distinction between the past and the present' (Balaev 2014, 5; Bond and Craps 2020, 73, 78). Because of this, Caruth's approach was thought to not sufficiently account for agency in the aftermath of trauma (Balaev 2014, 6; Vickroy 2014, 130). Additionally, her work was considered to overlook the many ways in which 'socio-cultural contexts … shape how a survivor understands a traumatic experience' and how the individual's coping with the trauma is impacted by his/her social circle (Balaev 2014, 6; Vickroy 2014, 130). Furthermore, Caruth's method—which relies principally on psychoanalytical close reading analyses of narratives with a focus on fragmentary narration, aporias and flashbacks—was felt to be inadequate for exploring all 'the subtleties of experience, which are expressed through behaviors, bodies, provisional identities, and survival strategies' after trauma (Vickroy 2014, 130-131). These limitations thus revealed Caruth's approach to be first and foremost a theoretical approach, that is useful for understanding the workings of trauma in a philosophical and psycholinguistic sense, but one that is at the same time much less founded on empirical evidence

and everyday realities, where the individual never exists within a void. For that reason, more and more scholars developed an academic interest in how communities are haunted by the past, leading many to attempt to adapt Caruth's individualistic theoretical framework to analyze trauma more broadly within the context of cultural memory studies (Bond and Craps 2020, 73, 78; Kennedy 2020, 57-58, 62; Alexander et al. 2004, 1-10). This ultimately resulted in 'a set of critical practices that place more focus on the particular social components and cultural contexts of traumatic experience' (Balaev 2014, 3).[3]

As previously mentioned, of particular interest within this development is Svetlana Boym. She argued in her work *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) that 'the modern condition', marked by forced migration, conflict and war, is characterized by a shared traumatic experience of 'loss of community and cohesion', that has created deep-rooted feelings of alienation and unbelonging, a gaping hole in the communal sense of identity (2008, xiii, 42). As a result of this traumatic experience, Boym indicates, so-called 'restorative nostalgia' prompts the (re)creation not of the traumatic event itself, but of a haunting idealized past (2008, xvi-xvii). This reenactment—which is widely observable in art, literature, cityscapes, technology and popular culture—functions as 'a survival strategy, a way of making sense of the impossibility of homecoming' (2008, xvi-xvii). At the same time it sets in motion a process that 'obliterates history and turns it into private or collective mythology', thus allowing one to 'rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps' (2008, 41-42). As such, this nostalgic performance is characterized not just by 'a sentiment of loss and displacement' but also by 'a romance with one's own fantasy' (2008, xiii). Examples of this can be found in 'national and nationalist revivals … which engage in the antimodern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths' or in the 'total reconstructions of monuments', which transform the urban space into an 'alternative cosmos for collective identification, [through a] recovery of other temporalities and reinvention of tradition' (2008, 41-42, 75-76). Even though these highly formalized and ritualized (social) practices oftentimes clearly reflect inaccurate and romanticized visions of a shared past, they give off the illusion of a symbolic bridging of the perceived temporal (and sometimes spatial) distance between past and present, creating a sense of comforting, static, historical continuity (2008, 42, 49). That comfort, however, is never restful, but always marked by an 'anxiety about those who draw attention to historical incongruities between past and present', as such an encounter with reality would reveal their representation of history to be nothing but a mirage (2008, 44-45).

Consequently, these nostalgic, performative actions can be said to be both helpful as well as destructive in terms of healing: on the one hand, they allow for a certain forgetting of the present traumatic experience through a psychological as well as bodily remembrance of a past utopia,

while, on the other hand, they can sustain the harmful fantasy that the past can be simulated in the present. In this regard, Boym's restorative nostalgia mirrors Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of 'monumental history', which refers to a 'mode of history' that similarly describes the past 'as worthy of imitation, as imitable and possible for a second time' and, therefore, likewise increases the risk of representing the past in a way that is 'somewhat distorted, beautified, and coming close to poetic invention' (Nietzsche 2011, 75). Even though this monumental history can thus provide a strong sense of connection to the past, when taken too far, it can also incur a state of being stuck in the past that obstructs any development or, in the case of restorative nostalgia, a working through of the trauma (Nietzsche 2011, 76).[4]

In addition, for Boym, these nostalgic performances are very much rooted in Michael Herzfeld's concept of 'cultural intimacy', which describes 'common frameworks of memory', that 'involve everyday games of hide-and-seek …, unwritten rules of behavior, jokes understood from half a word, a sense of complicity' (2008, 42). According to her, this informal 'common social context' is transformed over time, under the influence of restorative nostalgia, into the foundation of a community's official memory in which the 'space of play with memorial signs [is] reduce[d] to a single [teleological] plot', that affirms a 'national or ethnic homogeneity' and 'incalculate[s] [traditional] values and norms of behavior' (2008, 43, 53). This process is similar to what Aleida Assmann has described as the transition from social memory to political memory, where the 'embodied, implicit, heterogenous and fuzzy bottom-up' individual and social memories are turned into 'an explicit, homogenous, and institutionalized top-down memory' that is further solidified by 'memorial signs, such as symbols, texts, images, rites, ceremonies, places and monuments' (2006, 215-216). However, where for Assmann this process is principally connected to the construction of a communal identity—which entails, in the words of Paul Connerton, 'a forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity'—Boym underlines the importance of nostalgic remembrance in maintaining an *old*, idealized identity (Connerton 2008, 62).

When considering the theories of Caruth and Boym in light of each other, it becomes clear that they approach the concept of traumatic experience in different yet complementing ways: Caruth conceives of it as a repetitive, intrusive 'remembrance' of a particular, shattering event, that has created a hole in the individual's sense of self, and Boym as a recurring, nostalgic remembrance of an idealized past that counters the experience of profound unbelonging in a world marked by mass migration and conflict. Consequently, these theorists can be said to occupy the two sides of a complex, theoretical trauma-spectrum that traces different levels: (i) in terms of *who* is traumatized; from the individual to communal, and (ii) in terms of *what* causes traumatization;

from a concrete and singular event to a diffuse, structural absence. Moreover, this proposed spectrum is characterized by a third dimension, namely (iii) *how* the trauma is *manifested.* This dimension follows an inversion from a focus on PTSD-symptoms that are performed involuntarily by the mind and body to force the remembrance of an incomprehensible event, to a focus on the proactive commemoration and (re)creation of a haunting past utopia through social rituals that enable one to forget the experience of alienated displacement. As such, this manifestation-level of the spectrum also traces a paradoxical continuum from remembrance through forgetting to forgetting through remembrance, both of which seem to simultaneously alleviate as well as perpetuate the traumatic experience that is not or cannot be acknowledged. Thus, this spectrum foregrounds not only the intricate intertwinement of remembering and forgetting, but also how the remembrance of certain events can facilitate the forgetting of others and vice versa; a complicated dynamic that remains largely underrepresented in scholarship on trauma.

In many ways, Caruth's psychological approach and Boym's cultural memory studies perspective can be said to reflect the two main methods that scholars have used in the study of trauma, despite repeated attempts to merge the two. An important example is Kai Erikson, who, in his essay 'Notes on Trauma and Community' (1995), was the first to make a distinction between individual, *psychological* trauma and *social* trauma, which became pivotal for 'subsequent work on collective trauma' (Erikson 1995, 183-185; Bond and Craps 2020, 99). In his analyses, however, Erikson still uses an approach that acts largely as an extension of Caruth's individualistic lens under the assumption that 'the tissues of community can be damaged in much the same way as the tissues of mind and body' (Erikson 1995, 185; Bond and Craps 2020, 74). As a result, despite his apparent attempt to unite the two methodological sides of the spectrum, his work remains primarily rooted in the theoretical framework of traditional trauma theory (Erikson 1995, 185; Bond and Craps 2020, 74). Other theorists, like Jeffrey Alexander and Peter Felix Kellermann, dismissed this method in favor of an emphasis on trauma as socially constructed, but in that sense shot to the other side of the spectrum and began exploring manifestations of trauma within a political context. As such, they focused predominantly on large-scale (national) communities and began analyzing public discourses in mass media as well as communal rituals of commemoration, similar to Boym (Alexander et al. 2004, 2; Kellermann 2007, 33-35; Bond and Craps 2020, 100-102). Yet, in adopting this cultural memory studies framework, they had much less consideration for how these large groups are also made up of traumatized individuals, who navigate continually between their own self and the communal identity, and therefore give expression to their trauma in different ways at the same time (Bond and Craps 2020, 101). In addition, even though the need for bridging these two approaches in trauma scholarship was pointed out more recently by Michelle Balaev in the introduction to the book *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* (2014), the

essay that addresses that problem in the volume still reflects a rather limited understanding of the interaction between individual and community (Balaev 2014, 5; Vickroy 2014, 130-131). This is especially prominent in how the author focuses almost exclusively on the ways in which 'social or cultural environment[s] … may suppress acknowledgment of trauma' and can consequently be 'a force that silences victims out of denial or guilt' (Vickroy 2014, 130-131). Because of this, the analysis ultimately retains its focus on the individual, conceiving of the community as a static source of oppression rather than a complex and dynamic entity made up of individuals. Moreover, this focus fails to acknowledge how those shared coping mechanisms can also serve to sustain the performative recreation of an idealized past as a symptom of trauma in itself.

So, one can see that theories on trauma have largely tended, and continue, to focus on either side of this spectrum with less regard for how these theories might overlap and even be intertwined. Additionally, they appear to largely overlook how such nostalgic reenactments operate within cases between those two extremes, i.e. small-scale communities in which the individual and communal are inextricably connected. In these instances, the (traumatic) memories exist in an obscure sphere where 'social, semantic, political, and economic factors' collide in a movement that is neither really bottom-up or top-down, but dependent on the group's unique social dynamics (Boym 2008, 215-216; Balaev 2014, 6). The type of scholarship that comes closer to what I envision here is psychological research on family dynamics after traumatic events (see Allen 2001; Walsh and McGoldrick 2004). However, even though these scholars do acknowledge the intricate interconnection between individual and group, their analyses of trauma, in line with Caruth, largely retain the narrow focus on PTSD-symptoms without much recognition for the ways in which trauma can also give rise to performances of a shared, past utopia.[5] As such, these examples all reflect, as Juliane Tomann argues, that there does not seem to be 'sufficient insight into the specificity of reenactment as a social phenomenon that addresses and represents the past', particularly within these intimate, communal contexts (2019, 140). Thus, in order to better understand 'the multiple meanings of trauma that may be found within and between the spheres of personal and public worlds' (Balaev 2014, 5), I will explore the interconnection between Caruth's and Boym's theories further by adopting them as conceptual lenses in the analysis of Magda Szabó's novel *Katalin Street,* which will be central to the next part of this article. Doing so will showcase the value of considering their works as part of a spectrum, especially when it comes to analyzing situations where the two meet; that is, the ambiguous space where the traumatized individual is distinct yet part of a community, where the trauma is concrete yet also diffuse, and where the haunting is related to an original, traumatizing event as well as a lost, past utopia in a complex cycle of remembrance through forgetting and forgetting through remembrance.

NOSTALGIC REENACTMENT AFTER TRAUMA IN *KATALIN STREET*

Interestingly, this ambiguous space seems to be exactly where Magda Szabó's *Katalin Street* takes place. Told from different perspectives in fragmentary form over the course of 34 years, the story explores the interconnected social and psychological developments that are set in motion when three close families become traumatized by a catastrophic event that marks the end of a seemingly utopian past.[6] When the Held family, consisting of Mr and Mrs Held and their little daughter Henriette come to live in Katalin Street, they soon become part of the close-knit group occupied by Major Bíró, his mistress and housekeeper Mrs Temes, and his promising son Balint, as well as the Elekes family with sisters Blanka and Irén. The children especially create an entire world amongst themselves, ruled by intricate social dynamics. Growing up together, their days are marked by cheerful bliss, as they invent games, sing songs and celebrate special occasions by dressing up and putting on theater plays. However, the disappearance of the Helds and the subsequent murder of their daughter Henriette in the family's garden by a German soldier put an abrupt stop to this idyll, breaking the sense of security and community that had united them for so long.

Consequently, they are haunted, both in Caruth's as in Boym's sense, by the singular, traumatic event of Henriette's death as well as the more diffuse traumatic experience of a loss of belonging and meaning. Moreover, as I will demonstrate, the ways in which they deal with their trauma reflect a multi-faceted entanglement of the individual and the communal, the past and the present, a traumatic acting-out and nostalgic performances of remembrance. As individuals, the characters remain silent about the death that has so affected them, as well as the feeling of alienation brought on by their present-day situation. In doing so, they clearly exhibit signs of PTSD, as discussed by Caruth: the traumatic loss of the little girl intrudes their psyches again and again, resulting in anxiety, bursts of anger, obsessive thoughts, nightmares, and an all-round oppressive sense of 'despair' (Szabó 2020, 140, 143, 149-151). Yet, at the same time, like Boym has theorized, they act out their trauma as a group through a communal recreation of the old world of Katalin Street, which has become a highly idealized symbol of their shared past.[7] They do so by recreating its spaces and engaging in ritualized behaviors that become commemorative rituals in themselves and consolidate their existence as a mnemonic community. This process enables them to, in a sense, forget their trauma, but simultaneously keeps confronting them with the gap between their idealized representations of the past and reality, as well as with the holes within their own selves.

The individuals' performative reenactment of the past within the metaphoric space of the present is reflected most prominently in how the characters, after a forced relocation, organize the literal space of their new apartment in 'much the same way as the old house': 'they had tried to put their

larger pieces into the same places they had occupied in the much larger premises in Katalin Street… Cicero presided where he always had, above the bookcase behind the desk' (Szabó 2020, 208). This similarity in spatial setting then prompts them to behave in ways that are connected to their old lives. In doing so, they attempt to bridge the temporal and spatial divide between past and present, as Boym emphasized, even though times have clearly changed (2008, 42, 49). This is foregrounded, for instance, in the following quote: 'Mr Elekes continued to sit beneath the bust of Cicero, quite why, he was no longer sure, since the desk and its drawers were now Irén's' (Szabó 2020, 17). Blanka, who has moved to Greece by then, does the same thing, using the space of her new home to perform old behaviors from the past that evoke the presence of their lost community: 'On a shelf above the desk stood a white bust of the Greek father-in-law. From time to time she would sit down beneath it … [and play] at being her father, marking his pupil's essays' (Szabó 2020, 35). Similarly, she plays at being her mother by sewing cushions and 're-create[s] Mrs Temes' presence around her' by cooking her recipes, thereby creating an atmosphere similar to when '[t]he sinuous, faltering childlike tunes … echo[ed] from the walls of the house in Katalin Street' (Szabó 2020, 36). The characters thus seem driven by, what Boym calls, 'a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images—of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life', as they attempt to remake the past 'in the image of the present' in a process of 'mimicry' (2008, xiv, 354). Controlled by this double vision, the characters showcase how traumatic reenactment does not always manifest itself in the involuntary remembrance of PTSD-symptoms, but can also appear, as Boym indicates, as an active, physical recreation of the past that relies on the 'interaction between subjects and objects, between actual landscapes and landscapes of the mind' (2008, 354).

Yet, in mimicking the past, the characters remain continually aware of how these spaces have become 'surreal stage-set[s] of place[s], where strange scenes and locations came and went', that had 'turned out nothing like … Katalin Street' (Szabó 2020, 18, 20). This results from the fact that they are 'permanently conscious of the absence of objects and items of furniture that had either been disposed of or had simply disappeared', which function as a subconscious reminder of the people that had vanished (Szabó 2020, 18, 20, 22). These feelings of unease, however, are never explicitly addressed, but are rather buried under the often-repeated stories of the past that the characters exchange, which are clearly somewhat distorted and romanticized to suit their present-day needs (Szabó 2020, 20, 40). Over the years, these stories have become the formalized 'official memory' of their community, showcasing the close 'relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations', as indicated by Boym (2008, xvi, 43, 53). Still, at the same time, their personal memories and individual narratives, like Caruth discusses, remain riddled with holes and absences, much like their physical environment, as they all seem

psychologically stranded in some sort of shadowland, a place and time that is not really 'the phantom homeland' of their past, nor the reality of the present (Boym 2009, xvi; Caruth 1996, 7). In other words, they are caught in, what Balint calls, 'a tyranny of *somewhere else*', 'a hopeless quest to recover' this past utopia, even though they are aware that what they are searching for seems to have 'been carried off by a bird, to some never-never land' (Szabó 2020, 20, 24).

Nevertheless, they keep observing not only their spaces, but also their mutual relations through a nostalgic lens, despite the fact that they are all fundamentally changed by the traumatic experiences. This is best exemplified by Balint, who can only see Blanka as the small soldier she played during one of their childhood theater performances, even when she gets him dishonorably fired from his job as revenge for his leaving Irén: 'Balint watched her [in the courtroom], with her brave little gun, her plump little body stuffed into those odd-looking trousers and doublet, her hair that had defied Mrs Held's heating tongs, and the cardboard helmet' (Szabó 2020, 181). As the quote showcases, Balint is unable to acknowledge Blanka as an adult woman and the changed nature of their relationship. He simply keeps perceiving her from the affective position he occupied when they were children. The same happens between Balint and Irén, who have difficulty accepting that their love has dissipated, and ultimately stay together merely 'because each harbored the private memory of their first spouse, the true one, whose memory could never be erased: the Bálint Bíró who had died together with Henriette … and the Irén Elekes, with her special smile, who was so loving and who had almost died at the same time' (Szabó 2020, 112). Consequently, Balint keeps seeing Irén as the majestic, angel-like embodiment of Hungary she played in their makeshift theater, whilst Irén keeps regarding him as her courageous defender as if he were still wearing his 'red Hussar's uniform' (Szabó 2020, 102). Thus, by perceiving each other through this veil of nostalgia, they try to convince themselves that they are still the same people, all the while clinging to the notion that 'if they … held one another's hands, and if they could hit upon the right words, then perhaps they might find their way out of the labyrinth and somehow make their way home' (Szabó 2020, 26).

As such, their shared trauma and nostalgic longing binds them together in a way that clearly evokes elements of Boym's discussion of cultural intimacy: 'They tossed coded words at one another in a kind of ball game, allusions incomprehensible to [outsiders]' (Szabó 2020, 24; Boym 2008, 42). By communicating and interacting through this shared language, the characters, as Boym points out, demonstrate the complex dynamics involved in 'social memory, which consists of collective frameworks that mark but do not define the individual memory' (2008, xviii). Additionally, this emphasis on 'play' also again underlines the performative aspect of their traumatic experiences, and symbolizes the seemingly never-ending cycle of reviving the past:

'The game had no resolution, it brought no release … before long they would realize it was pointless—but all too soon they were at it again, because they still hadn't come to terms with it' (Szabó 2020, 25-26). Even though the characters appear to perform these reenactments of the past intentionally, the compulsive nature of their thoughts and movements foregrounds how they are caught in a pattern of (in)voluntary remembrance that much resembles the one discussed by Caruth (1995, 4). At the same time, the characters' behavior clearly indicates how this remembrance of the past is fundamentally influenced by the 'affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, [and the] longing for continuity in a fragmented world', as Boym has shown (2008, xiv). This is also reflected in how, despite being aware that their communal quest for belonging is in vain 'without the ones that had died', they are unable to acknowledge the little Held girl's death as the root cause of their sorrow (Szabó 2020, 245). They are unwilling to accept that the home they are looking for is lost, all the more because doing so would entail confronting the fact that the past they long for is really only 'the shared memory of a collective dream' (Szabó 2020, 245).

Moreover, this dual inability to see reality for what it is and to accept the true source of their pain is further symbolized by the characters' incapability to recognize Henriette, who also quite literally haunts them in the novel as a ghost: 'It hurt her so much when they refused to acknowledge the reality of her presence … that for a time she gave up visiting them in a material form they might recognize' (Szabó 2020, 235-236). Throughout the narrative, she comments on their performance's conflation of real life and dream, and gazes in anxious confusion on their doomed-to-fail efforts to bring the past to life: 'they all seemed as improbable to her as if they were at a fancy-dress ball or had been cast in unsuitable parts in a not very good play' (Szabó 2020, 181). As such, she points attention to, what Boym calls, the 'fundamental ambivalence' of these nostalgic reenactments as they are simultaneously 'about the repetition of the unrepeatable and the materialization of the immaterial' (2008, xvii).

As this analysis showcases, the intricate psychological and social dynamics of traumatic experience depicted in *Katalin Street* cannot be sufficiently understood through either Caruth's psycholinguistic framework or Boym's theory of communal reenactment alone. A united approach is crucial for revealing and understanding the ways in which the incomprehensible traumatic event of Henriette's death is inextricably connected to the characters' obsessive recreation—through stories, spaces and movements—of their lost utopia, which consequently emerges as a never-before-classified PTSD-symptom in itself. Additionally, as shown, such a theoretical framework and conceptual language are necessary for describing the complex interconnection between individual and group, past and present, that impacts these multilayered

coping mechanisms. Failing to see the inherent entanglement of Boym's and Caruth's approaches, then, runs the risk of largely overlooking or grossly underestimating how different modes of remembering and forgetting collide in the aftermath of trauma, thus simplifying the complexity of its nature and the variance of its manifestations.

Lastly, by emphasizing Henriette's role as an onlooker throughout the novel, Szabó herself seems to remind the reader that truly witnessing the characters' performative 'play' requires a willingness to understand the hidden messages of their gestures in all their ambivalence. By doing so, she accentuates another important dimension of the trauma-spectrum; namely that all manifestations of trauma, in this case the characters' reenactments of a haunting utopia, can be considered forms of personal testimony in their own right. As such, Szabó appears to enter into the extensive debates regarding the nature of testimony, which continues to be understood in trauma theory predominantly in terms of a narrative, a speech act, that 'testifies not only to indescribable experiences, but to the impossibility of giving testimony' (Stone 2014, 20; Jensen 2020, 70, 73). Her work can be said to counter this widespread conceptualization, as she points out that traumatic experiences can be expressed in many languages, both verbal and nonverbal. After all, her characters' performances of the past can just as much be considered narratives that present tales of grief and struggle to the world in a way that, to repeat the words of Caruth, tells both of 'the unbearable nature of [the] event [as well as] … of the unbearable nature of its survival' (1996, 7).[8] Consequently, Szabó seems to stress the importance of approaching expressions of trauma not from a judgmental and clinically detached position with a focus on the healing-process, but rather from a position of respectful attention, that acknowledges these embodied stories as intimate accounts of lived traumatic experience. Her novel, then, can be read as a reaction to theorists that are studying trauma primarily with the aim of resolving it without consideration for the many ways in which trauma itself can be said to tell a story worth hearing.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, even though Cathy Caruth's and Svetlana Boym's works on traumatic experience seem to be diametrically opposed to each other at first glance, the parallels between their understandings of trauma as a repetitive experience of un-wholeness make it possible to position them at either end of a complex spectrum that traces the various contexts in which such experiences occur and manifest themselves. In scholarship on trauma, however, theorists have largely remained focused on the extremities of this spectrum, thereby overlooking the various ways in which they are fundamentally interconnected, especially when it comes to small-scale communities. *Katalin Street* provides an excellent object of study in that regard as it showcases

precisely such a complex process of traumatic experience, in which both Boym's and Caruth's theories are represented, by its foregrounding of the intricate mediation between individual and community, traumatic event and sense of alienation, acting out and reenacting, the past and the present, and remembering and forgetting. Moreover, by emphasizing the theme of witnessing in the novel, Magda Szabó stresses another crucial yet often-neglected dimension of these manifestations of trauma, namely that the characters' continual performance of a utopian past is very much a form of testimony in itself, one that calls for a less dogmatic focus on processes of healing, and instead invites new ways of listening. Thus, by receiving these stories without judgment, we might become more attuned to the ways in which this Sisyphean cycle of (re)creating an idealized past in the present as an escape from trauma—despite being doomed to fail from the start—may sometimes provide survivors with the only solace possible. As such, this haunting story can be said to serve as a reminder that even though the journey away from pain towards an illusory past may be futile, hard and never-ending, it may well be better than to have no destination at all.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

REFERENCES

Alexander, Jeffrey et al. 2004. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Allen, Jon G. 2001. *Traumatic Relationships and Serious Mental Disorders.* Chichester: John Wiley and Sons Ltd.

Assmann, Aleida. 2006. 'Memory, Individual and Collective.' In *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, eds. Robert Goodin and Charles Tilly, 210-224. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Balaev, Michelle. 2014. 'Literary Trauma Theory Reconsidered.' In *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory,* ed. Michelle Balaev, 1-14. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Bond, Lucy, and Stef Craps. 2020. *Trauma: The New Critical Idiom.* New York: Routledge. www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780203383063/trauma-stef-craps-lucy-bond.

Boym, Svetlana. 2008. *The Future of Nostalgia.* New York: Basic Books.

Caruth, Cathy. 1995. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. www.archive.org/details/traumaexploratio0000unse.

Caruth, Cathy. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History.* Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

Connerton, Paul. 2008. 'Seven Types of Forgetting.' *Memory Studies,* 1(1): 59-71. www.journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1750698007083889.

Craps, Stef. 2020. 'Climate Trauma.' In *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma,* eds. Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja, 275-284. London: Routledge.

Erikson, Kai. 1995. 'Notes on Trauma and Community.' In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory,* ed. Cathy Caruth, 183-199. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. www.archive.org/details/trauma-exploratio0000unse/page/185/mode/1up.

Freud, Sigmund. (1899) 1966. 'Screen Memories.' In *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* vol. III, trans. J. Strachey, 303-322. London: Hogarth Press.

Hirsch, Marianne. 2008. 'The Generation of Postmemory.' *Poetics Today,* 29 (1): 103-128. www.read.dukeupress.edu/poetics-today/article/29/1/103/20954/The-Generation-of-Postmemory.

Horvat, Gizela. 2018. 'Faces of Nostalgia: Restorative and Reflective Nostalgia in the Fine Arts.' *JEDNAK KSIĄŻKI* 9: 145-156. www.researchgate.net/publication/326212583_Faces_of_nostalgia_Restorative_and_reflective_nostalgia_in_the_fine_arts.

Jeffery, Lucy. 2020. 'Magda Szabó: Finding Home in the Homeland in Post-1956 Hungary.' *Changing Pieces,* 1 (11): 1-23. www.sic-journal.org/Article/Index/641.

Jensen, Meg. 2020. 'Testimony.' In *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma,* eds. Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja, 66-78. London: Routledge.

Kellermann, Peter Felix. 2007. *Sociodrama and Collective Trauma.* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. www.sociodramanetwork.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/017_Peter-Felix-Kellermann-Sociodrama-and-Collective-Trauma-2007.pdf.

Kennedy, Rosanne. 2020. 'Trauma and Cultural Memory Studies.' In *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma,* eds. Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja, 54-65. London: Routledge.

Kilby, Jane, and Antony Rowland, eds. 2014. *The Future of Testimony: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Witnessing.* London: Taylor & Francis Group. www.ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=1715794.

Łaszkiewicz, Weronika, Zbigniew Maszewski, and Jacek Partyka. 2016. *Dwelling in Days Foregone: Nostalgia in American Literature and Culture*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Leitch, Thomas. 2018. 'There's No Nostalgia Like Hollywood Nostalgia.' *Humanities* 7 (4). www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/7/4/101.

Močnik, Nena. 2019. 'Trauma.' In *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field,* eds. Vanessa Agnew, Jonathan Lamb and Juliane Tomann, 219-223. New York: Routledge.

Nelson, Robert, and Margaret Rose Olin. 2003. *Monuments and Memory, Made and Unmade.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2011. 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life.' In *The Collective Memory Reader*, eds. J. Olick et. al., trans. R. J. Hollingdale, 73-79. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Newby, Zahra, and Ruth Toulson, eds. 2019. *The Materiality of Mourning: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives.* New York: Routledge.

Santos, Cristina, Adriana Spahr and Tracy Crow Morey, eds. 2019. *Testimony and Trauma: Engaging Common Ground.* Boston: Brill.

Silverman, Max. 2020. 'Screen Memory.' In *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma,* eds. Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja, 121-130. London: Routledge.

Stone, Dan. 2014. 'History, Memory, Testimony.' In *The Future of Testimony: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Witnessing,* eds. Jane Kilby and Antony Rowland, 17-30. London: Taylor & Francis Group. www.ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=1715794.

Sütterlin, Nicole A. 2020. 'History of Trauma Theory.' In *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma,* eds. Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja, 11-22. London: Routledge.

Szabó, Magda. 2020. *Katalin Street.* Trans. Len Rix. London: Quercus Publishing.

Tomann, Juliane. 2019. 'Memory and Commemoration.' In *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field,* eds. Vanessa Agnew, Jonathan Lamb and Juliane Tomann, 138-141. New York: Routledge.

Vickroy, Laurie. 2014. 'Voices of Survivors in Contemporary Fiction.' In *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory,* ed. Michelle Balaev, 130-151. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Walsh, Froma, and Monica McGoldrick. 2004. 'When a Family Deals With Loss: Adaptational Challenges, Risk, and Resilience.' In *Handbook of Stress, Trauma, and the Family,* ed. Don R. Catherall, 393-415. New York: Brunner-Routledge. www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9780203644157/handbook-stress-trauma-family-catherall.

[1] Many scholars working within the traditional framework of trauma theory have argued vehemently against a broadening of the definition of trauma; they believe that as 'it has gained cultural currency in vernacular parlance, the notion of trauma has been emptied of much of its meaning and [is] indiscriminately applied to a seemingly limitless range of experiences' (Bond and Craps 43). However, as I will showcase in this article, Boym's theory of (social) trauma—despite not engaging with trauma in the strict sense of the word—can provide new and interesting insights into how nostalgia can function as a coping mechanism for trauma, particularly because Boym's analysis is based on an exploration of (communal) experiences of a similar nature. As such, reading her work through a more traditional trauma theory lens opens up new ways for thinking about traumatic experience and its manifestations. In addition, even though her work has not gained much traction among trauma theorists, it has become more popular in the domain of cultural studies with scholars connecting her theory on nostalgia to cinema, literature and the fine arts (see for example Horvat 2018, Łaszkiewicz, Zbigniew and Partyka 2016, and Leitch 2018).

[2] In their emphasis on the interconnection between forgetting and remembering, both Boym and Caruth also seem to implicitly criticize theorists, such as Paul Connerton (2008), who treat them as two largely distinct forces.

[3] In recent scholarship, academics have also increasingly argued for a reframing of the concept of trauma to accommodate non-Western perspectives and cultures, leading many to use and critically evaluate trauma theory within the context of postcolonial studies (Sütterlin 2020, 20-21; Kennedy 2020, 55, 62-63). In addition, theorists, such as Stef Craps, have ventured into new interdisciplinary territory by exploring trauma in relation to the present-day climate crisis, thus likewise underlining the multifaceted nature and flexibility of trauma as a theoretical tool (Craps 2020; Kennedy 2020, 63).

[4] Additionally, Boym discusses a second category of nostalgia called 'reflective nostalgia', which bears a resemblance to Nietzsche's concept of 'critical history' in the sense that it refers to a critical attitude with regard to the way in which the past is (re)constructed in the present, in order to, in Boym's case specifically, limit its nostalgic idealization (Boym 2008, xviii; Nietzsche 2011, 77). However, since this mode of nostalgia explicitly refrains from bringing the past into the present and consequently does not prompt a cycle of traumatic experience in which the past is continually reenacted and performed in the present, it focuses on a different type of experience than outlined by Caruth (Boym 2008, xviii).

[5] Additionally, Marianne Hirsch's work on postmemory, as discussed in her essay 'The Generation of Postmemory' (2008), might be said to explore these dynamics in a similar way. However, since her work is concerned primarily with mediated memory and (familial) communities made up of both primary and secondary witnesses, it does not correspond to what is explored here.

[6] For a more in-depth analysis of the novel's socio-historical context and autobiographical dimension, see Jeffery (2020).

[7] The nostalgically idealized memory of their past lives also resembles Freud's concept of a 'screen memory', which refers to a memory that 'owes its value as a memory not to its own content but to the

relation existing between that content and some other, that has been suppressed' (1966, 320). For a discussion of Freud's theory of the screen memory in relation to trauma theory, see Silverman (2020).

[8] As such, Szabó can be said to go even further than scholars like Michael Bernard-Donals (2009), who, acknowledging the central role of the body to testimony to some degree, asserted that 'details lost in the telling of trauma through verbal testimony can sometimes be found in the gestures of the speaker' (Jensen 2020, 73). For a more in-depth discussion of recent debates about testimony, witnessing and their relation to trauma theory, see Kilby and Rowland (2014) and Santos, Spahr and Morey (2019).