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Queering Time through Queer Desire. Futurity in Two Post-Yugoslav Novels

Abstract: The present article approaches two post-Yugoslav literary texts, *Zovite me Esteban* (*Call Me Esteban*) by Lejla Kalamujić (2015) and *U zoni* (*In the Zone*) by Lamija Begagić (2016), through the conceptual lens of queer utopian hermeneutics by José Esteban Muñoz. Focusing closely on a few moments/chapters from the texts, it aims to sketch out one way of recognizing futurity and hope in post-Yugoslav literary narratives. At the beginning, the article explores how queer desire produces ecstatic moments in the chapter/story “Bella Ciao” from *Zovite me Esteban*. Remembering the ecstatic moments further nurtures the narrator’s utopic imagination, as well as her emotional recovery, propelling the narrative forward. In the next section, the article analyzes how queer desire generates joys of gender dissidence and the pleasures of collective belonging, serving as glimpses of future in the present in the novel *U zoni*. Ultimately, the analysis reveals that both texts suggest queer futurity is inextricably linked to the knowledge of the past, specifically of the local anti-fascist heritage, offering a distinct regional perspective on the concept of queer time.

Keywords: futurity; queer time; post-Yugoslav hope; post-Yugoslav literature; Lejla Kalamujić; Lamija Begagić.

In this article, I draw on José Esteban Muñoz’s seminal work, *Cruising Utopia. The Then and There of Queer Futurity* in approaching two post-Yugoslav literary texts, the prose collection *Zovite me Esteban* by Lejla Kalamujić (2015) and the novel *U zoni* by Lamija Begagić (2016). The impetus for this analysis is a broader shift towards studying futurity¹ and ‘positivity’, for example positive remembrance in memory studies,² and a recognition of the analytical and political value of reparative approaches, specifically to post-Yugoslav literary texts. In her famous essay on paranoid and reparative reading, Sedgwick had criticized the dominance of the ‘hermeneutics of

¹ For example: Amir Eshel, *Futurity. Contemporary Literature and the Quest for the Past* (The University of Chicago Press, 2013); Arjun Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (Verso Books, 2013); Terry Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism* (Yale University Press, 2015).

² For example: Ann Rigney, “Remembering Hope: Transnational Activism beyond the Traumatic,” *Memory Studies* 11, no. 3 (2018): 368–80; Dijana Jelača, Danijela Lugarić Vukas, and John Frederick Bailyn, eds. *The Future of (Post)Socialism: Eastern European Perspectives* (State University of New York Press, 2018); Tea Sindbæk Andersen and Jessica Ortner, “Introduction: Memories of Joy,” *Memory Studies* 12, no. 1 (2019): 5–10.

suspicion' in scholarly work and its equation with critical inquiry as such.³ Paranoid readings, Sedgwick argued, are practices in cultural studies marked by a suspicion towards the object of study, characterized by "subversive parody" and "an anticipation of hidden patterns of violence".⁴ As such, they are just *one* way of seeking and organizing knowledge and are thus limited and sometimes misleading.⁵ For starters, paranoid approaches will obscure the reparative aspects of cultural practices.⁶ Translated into my two examples, without the reparative approach, the hopeful and the future-oriented aspects of the two texts would remain insufficiently acknowledged, obscured by the narratives' despair or relegated to the sidelines.

Dijana Simić has shown the fruitfulness of the reparative approach to the same two texts.⁷ Relying on Sedgwick and Felski, she argues that the two queer narratives offer readers a space for recognizing and understanding their own queer identity, and that they, at the same time, thematize recognition within the text. Thus, she claims further, they are "breaking the silences" about marginalized queer lives in Bosnia and Herzegovina and are establishing a queer counterpublic, the process being deeply reparative to the (queer) readers. The present article builds upon these insights, focusing more narrowly on what is *within* texts, and specifically on their utopic imagination, rather than concepts of recognition and reparation.

Other than Simić's essay, there are only a handful of articles in post-Yugoslav literary studies that employ a form of reparative reading (even if they do not refer to this concept) or focus on futurity in literary works.⁸ Apart from discussing different authors than I do here, they all rely on concepts that predominantly belong to memory studies (such as nostalgia and trauma) and do not engage with queerness. This does not render them irrelevant to my research; on the contrary, I propose that there is an interpretative treasure to be found in bringing together memory studies and theories of queer temporality. However, the scope of this article does not allow for tapping into this analysis.

A recent study that reparatively approaches queer literary texts through the concepts of mourning and melancholia is Vladislav Beronja's article on Dino Pešut's *Daddy Issues* and Espi Tomić's *Your Love is King*.⁹ Beronja examines how these texts

³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003).

⁴ Ibid., 143.

⁵ Ibid., 130.

⁶ Ibid., 147.

⁷ Dijana Simić, "Recognizing Better Selves: A Reparative Reading of Contemporary Bosnian-Herzegovinian Queer Literature," in *Affective Worldmaking: Narrative Counterpublics of Gender and Sexuality*, edited by Silvia Schultermantl, Jana Aresin, Si Sophie Pages Whybrew, and Dijana Simić (Transcript Verlag, 2022).

⁸ Ajla Demiragić, "What Remains of Mostar? Archive and Witness in Marsela Sunjić's Goodnight, City," in *Post-Yugoslav Constellations*, edited by Vlad Beronja and Stijn Vervaeke (De Gruyter, 2016), 129–48; Maria Mayr, "The European Future of Postsocialist Nostalgia in German-Language Literature about Former Yugoslavia," *Colloquia Germanica* 51, no. 3/4 (2020): 325–44; Sanja Ivanov and Michel Mallet, "Recollecting Fragments, Rethinking the Future: Saša Stanišić's Assemblages of a Transnational Europe," in *Postsocialist Memory in Contemporary German Culture*, edited by Michel Mallet, Maria Mayr, and Kristin Rebien (De Gruyter, 2024).

⁹ Vladislav Beronja, "The Drama of the Queer Child: Melancholia and Mourning in Contemporary Queer Narrative in Croatia," *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 2 (2022).

shift the politics of queer mourning to social class (and not only sexuality) as a category of historical injury, inflected with the post-Yugoslav and post-war context.¹⁰ The successful *Bildungs*, and the openness to the future, come with the intergenerational working through historical trauma, which happens by an integration of difference and (national/ethnic and class, and not only sexual) otherness into a new self.¹¹ The same framework could be productively applied to *Zovite me Esteban* and *U zoni*, and the results would be complementary to the results I aim to reach in this article, particularly concerning the reimagining of an unstable subjectivity. However, while Beronja focuses on melancholia and mourning to end up in recognizing text's futurity, I aim to focus on the positive in the text, on the hopeful or ecstatic – even if it is never disconnected from the negative and mournful – to show how structurally important the hopeful moments are to these texts.

My article also partly joins Mijatović and Willems's call for the temporal turn in post-Yugoslav (literary) studies as the best way to counter sequential temporality – linear chronology that purposefully confuses causality and succession – imposed by ethno-nationalist and neoliberal elites. The authors propose exploring the co-existence of multiple post-Yugoslav timelines and thus a recognition of the post-Yugoslav condition as an ongoing process.¹² In a separate study, Mijatović proposes a temporal structure of post-Yugoslav literature as “asynchronous simultaneity”, which would entail engaging with the fragmented, overlapping, heterogeneous temporal layers.¹³ To a certain degree, their conceptualization of post-Yugoslav time is similar to queer time, not simply because it is non-linear, as not every non-linear time is queer time, but because at its center is the goal of deconstructing stable subjectivity and reimagining relationality.¹⁴ The goal of critical (post)-Yugoslav studies, according to Mijatović, is not to explicate a common identity across national/cultural/linguistic borders nor to create a new hybrid identity, but to recognize and explore “a non-coalescing mutuality, a crosscutting of switching-points, and adjacency without adherence”.¹⁵ This view of subjectivity and relationality aligns with Beronja's above argument that openness to the future comes from an integration of otherness into the self in a way that resists closure or fixed belonging. Even though it also aligns with my interpretation of the two texts, I do not extensively rely on these insights due to my narrowed focus on the processes of queering time, specifically through queer desire, and on locating *hope* in the narratives.

¹⁰ He relies here on Natalija Iva Stepanović's argument that in Croatian queer *Bildungsroman*, the queer protagonist's marginality does not depend solely on non-normative sexuality, but also on other categories such as national/ethnic origin or class. Natalija Iva Stepanović, “Iz ormara na police: o odrastanju i izlasku iz ormara u hrvatskoj Književnosti,” *Umjetnost riječi* 64, no. 1–2 (2020): 52.

¹¹ Beronja, “The Drama of the Queer Child,” 20, 25.

¹² Aleksandar Mijatović and Brian Willems (eds.), *Reconsidering (Post-)Yugoslav Time. Towards the Temporal Turn in the Critical Study of (Post)-Yugoslav Literatures* (Brill, 2022), 1–17.

¹³ Aleksandar Mijatović, *Temporalities of Post-Yugoslav Literature. The Politics of Time* (Lexington Books, 2020), 6–8.

¹⁴ Also suggested in the Carolyn Dinshaw, et al., “Theorizing Queer Temporalities,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2–3 (2007): 187.

¹⁵ Mijatović, *Temporalities*, 7.

Muñoz presents a case for a utopian reading that aligns with Sedgwick's reparative hermeneutics.¹⁶ He claims that the present time, *straight time*, is toxic and impoverished for queers and other people who do not have the privilege of a majoritarian belonging, normative tastes, and "rational" expectations.¹⁷ The present state is a state of siege.¹⁸ Muñoz argues that hope as a critical methodology is a necessary tool in countering this present state of siege and the disabling force of political pessimism.¹⁹ A critical mode of hope for Muñoz is "a backward glance that enacts a future vision", which is putting the past into play with the present, and thus calling into question the tautological nature of the present, enabling us to see what is not yet here.²⁰ A critical mode of hope is double-layered: it is Muñoz's approach to objects of study, but it is also the temporal movement that these objects themselves exhibit. In other words, the interpreter uses this methodology to show it (the method of hope) at play inside the artwork. Relying on Ernst Bloch, Muñoz argues that hope can and often is disappointed, and is thus "vulnerable to charges of naivete, impracticality, or lack of rigor", but that is no reason to abandon it "as a critical thought process".²¹ He formulates the concept of queer utopian hermeneutics as a much-needed counternarrative to political nihilism, which is dominating the academic climate and bringing critical imagination into peril.

By political nihilism, Muñoz refers broadly to Sedgwick's take on paranoid readings, but more specifically, and primarily, he relates to queer negativity that had taken hold in queer studies. The most influential work on the antisocial thesis, and Muñoz's primary interlocutor, is Lee Edelman's *No Future*, which argues for embracing queerness' disruptiveness and negativity and rejecting all futurity, symbolically tied to the figure or the cult of the Child, which is always necessarily reproductive and hetero/homonormative. Queer negativity thus represents not an oppositional identity or a stable position, as queerness can never possess an essence, but an opposition to the politics of reproductive futurism, to which mainstream gay politics subscribe as well.²² Muñoz is equally critical of the "identitarian logic" of the pragmatic LGBT agendas, which aim solely for queer community's assimilation into "a corrupt and bankrupt social order", but he also argues that the antisocial approach ended up in "a

¹⁶ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York University Press, 2009), 12.

¹⁷ Ibid., 27. Muñoz here takes the concept of straight time from Jack Halberstam and is in general indebted to Halberstam's understanding of queer time as time outside of the heteronormative logic of paradigmatic markers of life experience, such as birth, marriage, reproduction, death; time which contains potentiality of a life unscripted by these markers. Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005), 1, 2, 6.

¹⁸ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 48.

¹⁹ Ibid., 4.

²⁰ Ibid., 4, 28, 86.

²¹ Ibid., 9, 10.

²² Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press, 2004), 17.

romance of singularity and negativity”.²³ Iva Dimovska points out that an important difference between the two conceptualizations of queer temporality is precisely in the issue of subjectivity (Edelman’s focus) versus collectivity (Muñoz’s focus).²⁴ Dimovska, however, also makes an insightful point that both models of queer time ultimately share a utopian understanding of queerness as a rejection of normativity and linear temporality. For Edelman, queerness is embedded in the present and its enrichment, and its ability to reject the passing of time, while for Muñoz queerness is precisely in the movement between past, present and future.²⁵ The following analysis will show how these temporal movements, as well as the aspect of collectivity, are crucial for *Zovite me Esteban* and *U zoni*. This is why Muñoz’s queer utopian hope speaks to the two narratives more than queer negativity, but also more than related takes on optimism in conjunction with temporality, such as Lauren Berlant’s *cruel optimism* or Michael Snediker’s *queer optimism*. Both concepts reject futurity in a nuanced way, though differently: cruel optimism posits desiring for something unattainable (variations of ‘a good life’) as an obstacle to one’s flourishing in the current “impasse” moment, in the stuck present marked by perpetual crises,²⁶ while queer optimism is equally non-promissory, embedded in the present, yet arguing against queer pessimism.²⁷ Snediker’s queer optimism, even though non-futural, is complementary to Muñoz, as it emphasizes affirmative and sustaining optimism, present amidst and along much more recognized and recognizable loss and despair, as key to queerness’ survival.

The political and cultural nihilism in the post-Yugoslav context, against which I am arguing for a Muñozian approach, encompasses wider long-lasting disappointments with the transition to capitalism and democracy and post-war reconciliation processes, political apathy and distrust in political systems, as well as a pervading sense of loss of values and ideals.²⁸ Narrowing down to the immediate context of my analysis, and identifying the primary incentive for this analysis, nihilism is saturating the post-Yugoslav literary field. It weighs heavily on the literary imagination in the region. “The dramatization of loss and despair”, to rely on Muñoz’s words, is still the dominant approach of post-Yugoslav authors, without any “critical modality of hope”.²⁹ The two texts I am focusing on in this article are rare examples of, while incorporating loss and despair, trying to move beyond it. They seek an opening, a step

²³ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 10.

²⁴ Iva Dimovska, “Queering Time in Modernism and How to Read it: James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*” (PhD diss., Central European University, 2021). Dimovska’s thesis examines how queerness produces particular temporality of the modernist narrative (*Ulysses* and *The Waves*), and how an ambiguous modernist temporality in turn participates in the construction and representation of a queer sexuality.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 41–43.

²⁶ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), 1–4.

²⁷ Michael Snediker, *Queer Optimism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 16, 23.

²⁸ For more on this, see Igor Štiks and Srećko Horvat, “Introduction: Radical Politics in the Desert of Transition,” in *Welcome to the Desert of Post-Socialism. Radical Politics After Yugoslavia*, ed. Igor Štiks and Srećko Horvat (Verso, 2015).

²⁹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 111.

beyond representing the dystopian present. In this way, they “nourish our sense of potentiality and [do] not reinforce our feeling of disappointment”.³⁰

The two texts are further selected because they narrate queer love and are formally alike. Although *Zovite me Esteban* is officially a short story collection, it can be read as a coming-of-age novel due to the significant narrative and character progression throughout the stories or chapters, as will be clear from the following analysis. *U zoni* is officially a first-person coming-of-age novel, made up of 24 short chapters; however, the chapters can function as relatively independent short stories.³¹ This provides a basis for my approach, which focuses closely on one specific story/chapter from each book to explore the possibility of more comprehensive readings of the two narratives through utopian hermeneutics. The thematic aspect makes the texts additionally well-suited for Muñoz’s queer utopian hermeneutics, though I would argue this approach applies to literary texts that do not thematize queer relationships and/or identities. Likewise, both novels can arguably be approached through a critical methodology of hope that does not center on queer identities, even though they should never be ignored. While focusing on the queerness in the two texts, my interest is primarily in the futurity of the narratives.

This aspect has already been recognized and briefly discussed in relation to *Zovite me Esteban*. In his overview of innovative themes and styles that seven women writers introduced in contemporary B&H literature, Ivan Šunjić portrays *Zovite me Esteban*’s narrator as a “spokesperson for an entire generation” in her thematization of losses which are felt as both personal and collective, and in her unique use of Yugoslonostalgia as “mourning for the future”.³² Lamija Begagić, further, connects the issue of futurity with queerness, claiming that the hopeful ending of the novel arrives through the narrator’s reconciliation of separated halves of her identity, which is inextricably linked to her queer identity.³³ In “Notes sur Lejla Kalamujić”, Slaven Crnić similarly claims that *Zovite me Esteban* transforms symbols of personal and collective loss, such as the typewriter that belonged to the narrator’s mother and is a socialist remnant, into objects of hope. Queerness is not insignificant in this constellation, because it is queer love and resistance to patriarchal norms that are nurturing hopefulness.³⁴ In this article, I aim to further explore these insights by applying Muñoz’s framework to the analysis of the two books.

Finally, I chose the two novels because they are relatively ignored, particularly in academic writing, and especially *U zoni*. Begagić’s book has yet to be translated into English, and even in the post-Yugoslav region, it has remained marginally recognized,

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Simić has already made this claim. Simić, “Recognizing Better Selves,” 153.

³² Ivan Šunjić, “Narrative Strategies in the Works of Contemporary Female Writers of Bosnia & Herzegovina,” *Transcultural Studies* 14, no. 1 (2018): 51–53.

³³ Lamija Begagić, “Prikaz knjige ‘Zovite me Esteban’: Šta je meni moj život?,” *Lgbti.ba*, July 24, 2016.

³⁴ Slaven Crnić, “Recouvrer l’insaisissable: notes sur Lejla Kalamujić,” *Balkanologie* 18, no. 2 (2023).

mainly within the local queer cultural sphere.³⁵ Kalamujić's *Zovite me Esteban* has garnered international attention, receiving numerous positive literary reviews;³⁶ however, a more comprehensive analysis is still lacking.

Queering time through ecstasy

Straight time, Muñoz argues, is the autonaturalizing temporality; it is a closed-off here and now, a linear time. Queer time, on the other hand, is stepping out of that linearity, it is a sort of temporal unity of the past, present and future. Very often, this unity is established through ecstatic moments – queerness's time is the time of ecstasy.³⁷ Ecstasy represents a specific type of “affective excess” that is present in the quotidian, in the everyday, and that opens up the space for futurity. Analyzing James Schuyler's poem titled *A Photograph*, Muñoz recognizes the importance of moments of ecstasy recounted in the poem as central to its meaning and its utopic dimension. Schuyler's recounting of moments of queer relational bliss, ecstasies, represent an affective enclave that staves off the perils of the present.³⁸ The anxiousness and fear that characterize straight time for subjects without majoritarian belonging are denaturalized and overcome by an invocation of a future without the feelings of nervousness and fear. Desire is central to Muñoz's understanding of queer time, as it is through desire experienced in the past and recalled in the present that queer futurity is brought up.³⁹ Asking for and longing for another space and time while living inside straight time, claims Muñoz, “is to represent and perform a desire that is both utopian and queer”.⁴⁰ We can speak of a very similar utopian impulse present in *Zovite me Esteban*, particularly in the chapter titled “Bella Ciao”.

Zovite me Esteban lyrically recounts the narrator's losses in pre- and postwar Sarajevo, from the personal loss of her mother to the degradation in and ensuing from the Yugoslav wars: the collapse of industry (the symbol of the typewriter in the first chapter) and public infrastructure (“From Locomotive to Locomotive”), the splitting of family through wars (“The Four Seasons”), and the loss of solidarity (“Das ist Walter”). In “Bella Ciao”, the narrator remembers a woman (Bella) from her neighborhood in Sarajevo who aroused new feelings in the narrator as a girl and helped her feel less lonely. The narrator's memory is filled with ecstatic moments. For example, the moment of meeting her immediately strikes the narrator; Bella becomes almost like an obsession for the girl: “I couldn't shake the memory of you: the next day, the day

³⁵ Nera Mešinović, “Roman ‘U zoni’: Lezbejska ljubavna priča sa zeničkih ulica, oživljena u sjećanju,” *Lgbti.ba*, March 31, 2017.

³⁶ Begagić, “Prikaz knjige”; Carola Ebeling, “Die Kunst des Verlierens,” *Zeit Online*, September 22, 2020; Tobias Kraus, “Prägender Zerfall,” *Untergrund-Blättle*. July 27, 2021.

³⁷ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 187.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 24–26.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

after that, the days that followed.”⁴¹ Some years later, when they meet again, and Bella greets the eager and shy narrator, “Something had thawed in me,” she writes.⁴² “I emphatically proclaimed the sunset beyond compare.”⁴³ Filled with self-aware humor, the narrator describes her unmatched excitement and happiness that night, all the more striking for the seemingly banal interaction that transpired between Bella and her.

Why is Bella so important to the narrator, or why are these ecstatic moments important for the narrative? The narrator herself gives a response at the end of the chapter, speaking to Bella: “Bella, ciao! [...] I swear to you I’ll remember you madly [...] Because you must know, you being there made it easier for me. Know this, too: people will pass by. They’ll come better and braver than I”.⁴⁴ Similarly as in Muñoz’s interpretation of Schuyler’s poem, we have here an invocation of a future “without nervousness and fear,”⁴⁵ a future of “better and braver” people. It is the memory of the past happiness and past desire, the memory of Bella, that gives grounds for and fosters this hope for the future. An additional aspect is present in Kalamujić’s chapter: the memory of “queer relational bliss” is here at the same time a memory of both a *predecessor* and a *comrade*. Bella is a predecessor to the narrator, a lesbian woman⁴⁶ whose presence in the narrator’s life made the world slightly easier for the young narrator. There is also a sense of comradeship: the chapter title signals it quite explicitly – “Bella ciao” is the title of an old Italian song widely famous contemporarily as a song of resistance against oppression. Queer relational bliss here transforms into or merges with a sense of comradeship. A sense of comradeship staves off the perils of the present and subverts the straight time, pointing towards and calling for another space and time.

This aspect does closely relate to an important part of Muñoz’s thinking. According to Muñoz, queer desire is not and could not be a desire for an isolated future for the individual, but a desire for “a collective futurity”, a collective *we* beyond the existing forms, a social order that is not-yet-here, as it could be and should be.⁴⁷ In “Ciao Bella,” the narrator’s personal and intimate ecstatic feelings towards Bella are inextricably linked to imagining a future of “better and braver” people. The desire for Bella fuels the desire for a collective that is not-yet-conscious. Likewise, the narrator’s

⁴¹ Lejla Kalamujić, *Zovite me Esteban* (Sandorf, 2017), 57. “Ne mogu te zaboraviti: sutra, prekosutra, dani prolaze.” Lejla Kalamujić, *Call me Esteban* (Sandorf Passage, 2021), 63.

⁴² Kalamujić, *Zovite me Esteban*, 58. “Nešto se u meni otopilo.” Kalamujić, *Call me Esteban*, 65.

⁴³ Kalamujić, *Zovite me Esteban*, 58. “Pričam na sav glas kako je večerašnji zalazak sunca bio ravan spektaklu.” Kalamujić, *Call me Esteban*, 65.

⁴⁴ Kalamujić, *Zovite me Esteban*, 60. “Ciao, moja Bella! [...] Kunem se da ću te ludo pamti. [...] Jer moraš znati: zato što si ti bila tu, meni je bilo lakše. A znaj i ovo: prolazit će ljudi. Doći će bolje i hrabrije od mene.” Kalamujić, *Call me Esteban*, 67.

⁴⁵ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 25.

⁴⁶ Kalamujić’s narrator does not explicitly identify Bella as a lesbian woman, but this can be assumed from her identification with Bella and the identification of Bella with queer subjects the narrator recognizes on the streets of Sarajevo. I also rely on Simić’s interpretation that the narrator uses the language of silence to signal Bella’s lesbian identity (“Recognizing Better Selves,” 152, 161).

⁴⁷ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 20, 26.

anxiousness and fear, though deeply personal, are still considered shared, not hers exclusively. The narrator encounters people on the streets of Sarajevo in whom she recognizes both Bella and herself, in whom she recognizes loneliness and fear.⁴⁸ At the same time, as Simić has argued for the same point in Kalamujić's text, encountering and recognizing oneself in other queer lives is deeply reparative.⁴⁹ Queer hope emerges from these affirmative feelings of reparation, and vice versa; reparation is fostered by queer hope. Snediker similarly recognizes the affirmative powers of queer desire and the ecstatic, even though he frames ecstasy as a sustaining and enduring ardor in the present, and not a transient and transcendent moment, which corresponds to his non-futural orientation.⁵⁰ Such a reading of *Zovite me Esteban* would underscore the reparative dimension of the queer desire; however, it would also render invisible the chapter's very crucial orientation to the future and collectivity.

A futural orientation of the chapter through the ecstatic moments further stands out in the context of the whole novel. Almost precisely in the middle of the book is a chapter titled "Molba za Elizabeth" ("An Appeal to Elizabeth"), where the narrator recounts the escalation of her depression and its tipping point, leading to her hospitalization. After this chapter, a process of recovery begins with a romantic relationship and culminates in the narrator's ultimate acceptance of loss, free from feelings of guilt or overwhelming sadness. "Bella Ciao" comes near the beginning of this recovery process, right after the two chapters on the romantic relationship. In other words, remembering this "queer relational bliss" in remembering Bella represents one of the key moments of the narrator's recovery. The utopic impulse pushes the narrative forward.

The utopian impulse of "Bella Ciao" and *Zovite me Esteban* does not have much to do with banal optimism or cheerfulness. The narrator "writes from a depressive position [...] but reaches beyond the affective force-field of the present".⁵¹ This understanding of the utopian impulse is aligned with Terry Eagleton's definition of hope as "complex, able to recognize nuances in the world",⁵² as opposed to optimism. Hope arises from a profound understanding of the situation's severity; it is filled with reason, recognizing bleakness, desiring what is yet not there but is attainable.⁵³ Lisa Duggan and Muñoz have also argued that *educated* hope comprehends fear and risk and exists in close dialectical relation with hopelessness.⁵⁴ This double-layered hope is what I argue characterizes Kalamujić's narrative – it is neither pure optimism nor melancholia.

⁴⁸ Kalamujić, *Zovite me Esteban*, 59.

⁴⁹ Simić, "Recognizing Better Selves," 154.

⁵⁰ Snediker, *Queer Optimism*, 65.

⁵¹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 25.

⁵² Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*, 33.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵⁴ Lisa Duggan and José Esteban Muñoz, "Hope and Hopelessness: A Dialogue," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 19, no. 2 (2009): 275–83.

“Our spaces of freedom.” Glimpses of queer future

The protagonist-narrator of Lamija Begagić's *U zoni* recounts growing up in Zenica during the breakup of Yugoslavia, the rise of nationalism, the repatriarchalization of the society, violence, and economic collapse. The city is filled with ghosts of the past “which stride through this city as if through a postapocalyptic set of a cheap Hollywood production”.⁵⁵ She remembers one summer during her youth in Zenica when “Mujahedeens” appeared in the town and policed the teenagers who were kissing in public, chasing them away with stones and shouts.⁵⁶ She recounts her homophobic cousin's violence that almost broke apart the extended family.⁵⁷ Going to the doctor's office brings back the memory of a Serbian doctor who was taken away and executed during the war.⁵⁸ This then further brings up memories of her Serbian school friends leaving the town and Muslim refugees arriving.⁵⁹ Throughout the novel, the narrator paints a picture of the collapsed industry and economic hardship. For the young narrator and her girlfriend, the city's reach was “ubitačan” or murderous: “Zenica would always catch up with us that year, no matter where we ran”.⁶⁰ The narrator eventually gets the chance through her sports career and runs away from Zenica, “This suffocating city that [...] counts our touches as traffic violations”.⁶¹ In the midst of this world, the narrator and her teenage love would hike up to the mountain Smetovi next to Zenica, hiding away from the city. “That whole summer Smetovi were our only space of freedom.”⁶² “We licked the sweat as wounds [...] secretly dreaming of walls [...] one room and one bed.”⁶³

Stepping out of Zenica for the young lovers is stepping out of straight time, out of the stultifying here and now. Spaces of freedom are also actively conquered – Smetovi turned into spaces of freedom through the young lovers' practice of freedom, through their defiance to the majoritarian heteronormative culture. “The queerness of queer futurity, like the blackness of a black radical tradition, is a relational and collective modality of endurance and support”.⁶⁴ A utopian impulse or a surplus that functions as an illumination of utopic (of the not-yet-here) can be present in the

⁵⁵ “[...] kakvi ovim gradom koračaju kao kakvim postapokaliptičnim setom jeftine holivudske produkcije.” *U zoni* is not translated into English, therefore all translations are mine. Lamija Begagić, *U zoni* (Fabrika knjiga, 2016), 96.

⁵⁶ Begagić, *U zoni*, 63–68.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 117.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 97–102.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 103–109.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 84. “Znala nas je Zenica te godine sustizati, ma gdje bježale.”

⁶¹ Ibid., 94. “Učmali grad što [...] broji nam dodire kao saobraćajne prestupe.”

⁶² Ibid., 84. “Cijelo su to ljeto Smetovi bili naš jedini prostor slobode.”

⁶³ Ibid. “Lizale smo znoj kao rane [...] potajno sanjajući zidove [...] jednu sobu i jedan krevet.”

⁶⁴ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 91.

quotidian. The ordinary, the everyday, can be laden with potentiality.⁶⁵ Small gestures, such as sharing joy and love despite a hostile environment, speak to what is not-yet-here and point out that the present state is not all there is. These small gestures represent glimpses of the whole, i.e., glimpses of queer future in the present.⁶⁶ The utopian function of art for Muñoz is precisely in these glimpses, in moments of “anticipatory illumination” that “cut through fragmenting darkness and allow us to see the politically enabling whole.”⁶⁷ The teenage story in the novel does not have a happy ending, as it concludes with the narrator leaving Zenica and her lover ultimately too afraid to defy the conventions. “[...] I am also running away from Aida and her no, no, Alma, I can’t, family is more important than us”.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the story is ultimately also about a moment containing a relational potential worth holding onto. The story is about the desire itself, the daring of it, and the performing of it, which is, despite loss or disappointment, a utopian and queer desire. It is “a desire for another way of being in both the world and time, a desire that resists mandates to accept that which is not enough.”⁶⁹ Even if Aida ultimately comes to accept that which is not enough, Alma, the narrator, indeed does not.

Muñoz’s queer futurity is “not an end but an opening or a horizon.”⁷⁰ Utopia is not a fixed schema; it is not and can never be prescriptive of futurity.⁷¹ Here, Muñoz primarily relies on Giorgio Agamben’s concept of the gesture, which he relates to Bloch’s idea of the not-yet-here. The gesture is not the coherence or totality of movement, nor a monolithic act directed toward an “end”. As such, it is exemplary of the politics of ‘means without ends.’⁷² “The gesture is utopian in that it resists the goal-oriented tautological present.”⁷³ The moments of intimacy that the lovers share in the mountains above the city are *gestures* laden with potentiality, illuminating a possibility of a different world, and moments that step out of straight time.

Queering of time in this scene, similarly as in *Zovite me Esteban*, contains an additional layer through the reference to the partisan monument in the mountain. The lovers would lay down at the foot of the Monument to the Fallen Partisan Detachment from Zenica. “All we had was the pale yellowness of the burnt grass beneath us and the washed-out redness of the once bright five-pointed star that looked down on us from the tall monument, the only witness to the consummation of our love. We

⁶⁵ Ibid., 22.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 55, 61.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 64.

⁶⁸ “[...] bježim i od Aide i njenog Ne, ne, Alma, ne mogu, preča mi je porodica od nas,” Begagić, *U zoni*, 94.

⁶⁹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 96. Muñoz here relies on Adorno’s understanding of utopia as intimately close to critique or negation. For Adorno, utopia is a firm negation of things as they are, as the negation points to how things should or could be. Ibid., 27.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 91

⁷¹ Ibid., 97, 100.

⁷² Ibid., 89, 91.

⁷³ Ibid., 162.

looked, when we weren't eating each other with our eyes, at that star, keeping our eyes high, trying to ignore the city below us."⁷⁴

Queer desire and moments of joy are linked to the defiant remembering of local and regional anti-fascist struggle. The monument and the red star are symbols of the past that the majoritarian society in the here and now wants to erase. "Queer time disrupts the forward flow of time in the narrative, and usually this forward flow is represented by an inevitable social progression towards marriage and reproduction", claims Iva Dimovska.⁷⁵ We see in this scene that the inevitable social progression that the narrator is problematizing is not just towards marriage and reproduction, but also to the post-socialist transition to capitalism and the post-Yugoslav transition to (ethno-nationalist) nation-states. The present time, straight time, is inflected not only by patriarchal gender and sexual norms, but also by, and in connection to, the rejection of the anti-fascist heritage and a "normative force of the neoliberal progress".⁷⁶ Queer time redefines future "as something that does not simply lie ahead, understood as a linear extension of the past and the present."⁷⁷ Beronja argues that Yugonostalgia can be coded as queer insofar as it disrupts "the homogeneity and inevitability of the post-socialist present" and opens up alternative modes of living with difference.⁷⁸

Gestures or moments similar to the one above are dispersed throughout the novel. Daydreaming about a space of freedom for queer love is thematized in another chapter detailing the narrator's later relationship. This time, the two lovers have their private space, but it is precarious: small, lacking in heating.⁷⁹ It is also costly for them, as suggested by the opening sentence of the novel, which refers to electricity bills.⁸⁰ "Space of freedom" is also a collective of fellow table tennis sportswomen who are all either gay or gay allies. The narrator remembers the feeling of community and freedom they all shared in the tennis club, growing up in the 1990s in Zenica. It was the seemingly tedious chores, such as folding and unfolding tables, that specifically brought up these feelings of communality and ownership of their own space. It is a subtle yet suggestive contrast to straight time, which is the time of ethno-nationalist tensions and economic and industrial collapse amid wide-scale privatizations.⁸¹ Close

⁷⁴ "Sve što smo imale bilo je blijedo žutilo od spaljene trave pod nama i isprano crvenilo nekad jarke zvijezde petokrake što nas je gledala sa visokog spomenika, jedina nazočivši konzumaciji naše ljubavi. Gledale smo, kad ne bismo pogledima jele jedna drugu, u tu zvijezdu, držeći pogled visoko, trudeći se ignorisati grad pod nama." Begagić, *U zoni*, 84.

⁷⁵ Dimovska, "Queering Time in Modernism," 238.

⁷⁶ Vladislav Beronja, "Yugoslavia with Strings Attached. Boris Kralj's *My Belgrade* (2011) and Dubravka Ugrešić and Davor Konjikišić's *There's Nothing Here!* (2020)," *ARTMargins and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology* (2023), 53, 54. Beronja here analyzes two photography collections as unique approaches to the past critical of practices of historicizing and musealizing socialist heritage and thus consigning it to the past and stripping it of its subversive powers in the present.

⁷⁷ Dimovska, "Queering Time in Modernism," 238.

⁷⁸ Beronja, "Yugoslavia with Strings Attached," 54, 61.

⁷⁹ Begagić, *U zoni*, 89.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 30, 38.

to the novel's end, there is another gesture of queer desire that is queering straight time. The narrator and her partner, Ivona, share an intimate moment in public, invisible to everyone else. Alma reads desire in Ivona's eyes, and Alma communicates it back to her. They exchange a secret language of looks, a communicative physical gesture that Muñoz argues throughout his study "signals a refusal of a certain kind of finitude".⁸²

"In her thoughts, her lips descend on my shoulder, kiss it, then bite it, here and now, in the midst of this already full garden. [...] She smiles and winks at me. She knows everything, she understood everything [...] Ivona still understands well that secret language."⁸³

The gesture does not erase the reality of having to hide their love in public, nor is it an explicit, full-fledged fight against the conventions of those around them. A gesture is not a coherence or totality of movement, nor a monolithic act directed toward an "end".⁸⁴ However, it does "transmit and amplify the pleasures of queerness, the joys of gender dissidence", in the exact moment as it transmits the pains of queerness. As with queer futurity and radical hope in general, a gesture can contain "both positive and negative polarities simultaneously".⁸⁵

The scene preceding this one highlights the significance of the described moment of intimacy. Shortly before this exchange occurred, the narrator was reminded of an event that had taken place two and a half decades earlier, next to the same sports hall. She vividly remembers two boys, fellow sportsmen, whose father was beating them in full view of everyone.⁸⁶ The moment of warmth and care between the two lovers contrasts with the one from Alma's memory, highlighting the queer gesture as a kernel of utopia in the present, as an anticipatory illumination of another world, outside of "the crushing heteronormative tide".⁸⁷ There is arguably a certain distancing, if not an outright critique of reproductive futurism, suggested by the juxtaposition of scenes which underscores the patriarchal heteronormative violence against children. Still, I would argue that the narrative critiques heteronormativity on the basis of its *harm* to the Child, thus demonstrating a particular investment in the future. This is further evident in the narrator's hopefulness attached to her friend's teenage daughter, whose rebelliousness and resistance to the mainstream values recall Kalamujić's hope (here even realized!) for "better and braver" people to come. The teenage girl, symbolizing a newer generation, fosters the narrator's and ultimately the narrative's hope.⁸⁸

⁸² Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 200, 65.

⁸³ "U mislima se njene usne spuštaju na moje rame, ljube ga, pa grizu, ovdje i sada, u sred ove već sasvim pune bašte. [...] Smiješi mi se i namiguje. Sve zna, sve je shvatila [...] Ivona još kako razumije taj tajni jezik pogleda." Begagić, *U zoni*, 125, 126.

⁸⁴ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 89, 91.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁸⁶ Begagić, *U zoni*, 124.

⁸⁷ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 74.

⁸⁸ Begagić, *U zoni*, 75–79, 125.

Conclusion

Zovite me Esteban and *U zoni* in many ways start from dismantling cruel optimism, the optimism which the ethno-nationalist elites have been selling to the (post-) Yugoslav peoples since the 1990s: that finally ‘good life’ is available in capitalism, in nurturing religious ‘family values’ and sticking with one’s own ethnic group. They poignantly express the impasse of the present moment and the futility of all hopes for progress that were promised with the fall of socialism and the independence of national states. What I hoped to have shown in the analysis, however, is that the narratives look for optimism acutely aware of its’ *cruel* trappings. In the stuck present, thus, hope can only appear through glimpses, ecstatic moments, gestures. They are exceptional, Muñozian moments which open up the present to the not-yet-here, however there is permanence to them in the way Snediker understands ecstasy: they foster a sustainable, enduring vision of the past-present-future, deeply tied to “knowledge” and “rigorous thinking”.⁸⁹ It is knowledge that for Snediker distinguishes queer optimism from utopian optimism, and perhaps it can be seen as a distinguishing marker between cruel optimism and hope. In the two novels, this knowledge —the component that makes the optimism complex and nuanced —seems to be the knowledge of history, of queer ancestors, of the local anti-fascist struggle, industrial heritage, and of the process of its destruction. However, it is precisely this knowledge that is not only the source of despair that disrupts cruel optimism, but also a source of futural orientation, of hope that things might be better, as they used to be or could have been. The knowledge of queer ancestors and their resilience, inflected with the knowledge of anti-fascist ancestors’ resilience, provides courage to the narrators, and from this courage grow relational potentials in the present and thus hopes for even “better and braver” people. Hope in the novels, similarly to how Dimovska understands Muñoz’s utopia, “is not the antithesis of negation, but rather it is the critical means of working through and with negation”.⁹⁰

The knowledge is not a simplistic rationality, as it comes inextricably from queer desire – queer desire propels the utopian impulse, arousing ecstatic moments and generating joys of dissidence, which are in turn strengthened and sustained by knowledge. This doubleness of utopic imagination, matched by the doubleness or ambivalence of hope itself (hope-despair, hope-negation), is related to the narrators’ multivalent otherness. The narrators’ queer closets are multiplied, as Stepanović and Beronja notice in other post-Yugoslav queer narratives – their marginalization is due to other categories next to gender and sexuality, in this case national identity, ideological identity and, to an extent, class identity. It is from this multilayered position of otherness that the future is conceived of, the future built upon the heritage of the past. Queer desire for non-normative love spills into a desire for a different future, inflected by (forbidden) memories of the past.

⁸⁹ Snediker, *Queer Optimism*, 2, 3.

⁹⁰ Dimovska, “Queering Time in Modernism,” 43.

Symmetrically to the otherness and queer desire, the reparative potential of the two literary texts is multilayered. It is, as Simić has sharply argued, in the recognition of queer life stories through queer perspectives, but it is also in their utopic imagination and nourishment against the impasse.

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Article received: March 25, 2025

Article accepted: September 15, 2025

Original scholarly paper