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The Traumatic Foundation of Queer Identity in Pajtim Statovci's *Crossing*

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Abstract

Since trauma engenders instabilities, it has the potential to disrupt one's sense of identity, rendering it queer. Given that there is no singular definition of 'queer'—a term that has undergone multiple iterations since its emergence in the literary landscape—there is no clear consensus on how queer identities are formed. In recent literature, queerness is often positioned as an 'other', damaged identity shaped by various traumatic experiences, rather than one that naturally emerges through positive individual choice, independent of external factors. Pajtim Statovci's 2016 novel *Crossing* (translated by David Hackston, 2019) suggests that trauma can play a crucial role in the queering process of identity. In the novel, the protagonist Bujar experiences various traumas—ranging from the collapse of his nation to personal abuse and profound loss—that are intricately woven into the fabric of his queer identity. By drawing on different facets of trauma theory and queer theory, this paper examines the significance of trauma and its detrimental effects on the development of Bujar's queer identity throughout the novel.

Keywords: Trauma, queer identity, experiences, *Crossing*, loss

Introduction

Trauma disrupts how we view the world, how we experience the world, and how we come to (un)know ourselves and others. It engenders instabilities, prompting us to rethink our previous conceptions of self, while threatening and disintegrating our identity. Although this argument that trauma is enmeshed in identity politics is not new, the specific impact of trauma on queer identity is often overlooked. Literary studies tend to focus on how queer identity can lead to traumatic experiences, rather than how trauma can influence queer identity itself. In this light, trauma can be construed as queer, as it often becomes an unwanted part of the experiences and identities of many queer individuals. Pajtim Statovci's 2016 novel *Crossing*, originally published in Finnish and translated into English by David Hackston in 2019, demonstrates how traumatic episodes shape the development of an individual's queer identity. The various traumas that the protagonist Bujar endures as an adolescent in post-communist Albania unfavorably color his life. Additionally, his friendship with Agim, a cross-dressing boy grappling with his own gender and sexuality, complicates Bujar's own sense of identity. It is impossible to disconnect Bujar's troubled sense of queer subjectivity from the adverse experiences he alternately recounts and obscures. The damaging effects of such experiences become apparent when he suffers from suicidal ideation, sabotages his own relationships, and appropriates the identities of others. This paper traces the significance of trauma and its detrimental effects on the configuration of Bujar's queer identity across the novel. It also examines how Bujar attempts, and ultimately fails, to come to terms with his own trauma while learning how to embody a coherent sense of self.

It is necessary to clarify the specific deployment of the term 'queer identity' within the context of this paper. The term 'queer identity' extends beyond homosexuality or lesbianism, both of which are generally limited to an understanding of stigmatized sexual acts and relationships with members of the same sex. 'Queer' functions as an umbrella term inclusive of a wide range of behavior patterns that do

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not fit within society's index of acceptability. Queerness, therefore, is not limited to gender, sexuality, and desire; it can also be anchored in a person's inadaptability, incompatibility, and irreconcilability with the prevailing social expectations. Since the late twentieth century, the queer literary landscape has been growing more vibrant, revelatory, and expansive by the year. Although the concept of 'queer' remains contentious and its specific resonances in literary studies have yet to be consistently defined, works such as *Running with Scissors* (2002) by Augusten Burroughs, *The End of Eddy* (2014) by Édouard Louis, and *A Little Life* (2015) by Hanya Yanagihara portray the pervasive nature of queer suffering and how queer identity is often mortgaged to misery. These texts reveal a contemporary trend toward centering queer narratives around themes of homophobic or transphobic violence, emotional abuse, self-loathing, and trauma. Due to entrenched societal stigma and prejudice, queer individuals often face discrimination, persecution, and emotional or physical harm. They are frequently subjected to "repeated, recurrent experiences of trauma and loss that may play a part in some of the social pathologies present in our communities" (Brown, 2003, pp. 56–57). While Statovci's *Crossing* (2016/2019) delves into this queer suffering, it goes beyond merely depicting trauma as a byproduct of queer identity. The novel also explores how trauma intersects with and influences the development of queer identity. Although this paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how trauma and queerness inform each other, it is worth noting that a wide range of factors beyond traumatic experiences shape queerness.

Crossing (2016/2019) tells the story of Bujar and Agim, two young inseparable friends who flee their traumatized homeland of Tirana, Albania, in the wake of Enver Hoxha's dictatorship and communism; their escape attempt to Italy results in a tragedy– Agim's sudden death. In the wake of this tragedy, Bujar seeks a sense of belonging and a place called home in foreign countries—Italy, Spain, the United States, and Finland—while dealing with the fragmentation of his identity. Bujar attempts to negotiate the trauma that he experienced in Albania by denying his past and his nationality and by taking on the personas of Agim and other individuals he encounters. In doing so, his identity becomes multiply refracted, revealing the inconsistencies in his stories and performances. One way of approaching the novel is to see Bujar's behavior as symptomatic of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Although Bujar tries to grapple with his trauma, queerness, and identity diffusion, he ultimately loses his authentic self in the process.

The novel attempts to answer various questions about gender, sexuality, and identity, including: Who has the right to define or label you? Whose life are you living – your own or someone else's? Is identity natural and fixed or fluid and constructed? How does past personal tragedy affect the identity of an individual? Through Agim's character, Statovci challenges the binary notion of gender by asking, "Do you realize how narrow-minded it is to think that there are only two genders in the world, two types of people, men and women?" (Statovci, 2016/2019, p. 26). In addressing these questions, Statovci draws on some pertinent concepts of trauma theory and queer theory. Thus, to explore the answers to these questions, it is necessary to examine how various traumatic experiences affect and shape Bujar's queer identity.

Intersection of Trauma and Queer Studies

Trauma theory owes its theoretical roots to the Freudian concept of trauma. In his essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", Freud (1920/2015) discusses the human tendency to relive trauma. Since then, the field of trauma studies has evolved to address the various origins and manifestations of trauma. Today, trauma, like sexuality, gender, and identity, is considered to be a conflicted and unstable phenomenon. Caruth (1996), one of the most prominent scholars of trauma theory, posits that trauma can result from confronting death or distressing events and from

surviving when others have perished. More specifically, she states that "trauma consists not only in having confronted death but in having survived, precisely, without knowing it" (p. 64). She expands on the concept of trauma's belatedness by stating that the lingering effects of past trauma continue to haunt the traumatized individual in the present. She introduces the idea of the "crisis of life", which refers to the ongoing struggle to live and make sense of life after the initial "crisis of death" caused by trauma (p. 7). Her framework emphasizes that trauma is not a singular event but a continuous process that has enduring effects on individuals' lives.

In his book *The Broken Connection: On Death and the Continuity of Life*, Lifton (1996) discusses the notion of survivor's guilt within trauma studies. According to him, survivor's guilt has a significant impact on traumatized individuals, who often feel remorse for having survived while their loved ones have not:

> The traumatized person seems to have to endure the additional internal trauma of self-blame…This guilt seems to subsume the individual victim-survivor rather harshly to the evolutionary function of guilt in rendering us accountable for our relationship to others' physical and psychological existence. This experience of guilt around one's own trauma suggests the moral dimension inherent in all conflict and suffering. (Lifton, p. 172)

Lifton's view on trauma and guilt suggests that self-blame has various consequences and moral implications in one's relationships with others. This raises the question of whether or not trauma is a threat to an individual's identity. Moreover, in his essay "Scars and Stigmata: Trauma, Identity and Theology", Ganzevoort (2008) asserts that a person's identity is at stake after being traumatized. According to him, "When our identity seeks to maintain a sense of continuity through all the vicissitudes of life, traumatization represents the kind of discontinuity that cannot be integrated" (p. 21). This assertion highlights the inherent challenge trauma poses to the continuity of personal identity. Normally, an individual's identity helps them to differentiate themselves from others, allowing for meaningful interactions. However, trauma introduces a profound rupture in this continuity. Consequently, those who experience trauma often isolate themselves from others. This isolation stems from the fragmentation of their sense of self, which not only alienates them from their previous identity but also impedes their capacity to forge new connections and maintain existing relationships.

The stress resulting from traumatic experiences can lead to sudden and marked alterations in mental state, including anxiety and dissociation. These effects can be considered symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) which is induced by a "psychologically distressing event that is outside the range of usual human experience" (American Psychiatric Association, 1987, p. 247). According to Classen et al. (1993), people who have a series of traumatic experiences are "especially vulnerable to a variety of dissociative states, including amnesia, fugue, depersonalization, and multiple personality disorder" (p. 178). Thus, trauma can be manifested in various ways. It affects the mental health of the traumatized person significantly. In bringing attention to the ideas of guilt, identity, and mental health of traumatized individuals, all of the aforementioned scholars and theorists have managed to show that trauma is something outside of the 'normal' experience.

The exploration of trauma has been taken up by various scholars in other disciplines, including queer studies. Although the term 'queer' was once a pejorative slur for homosexuals, it has come to be used differently due to the emergence of queer theory. Emerging in the 1990s, queer theory is a field of study that challenges the strict limits that heteronormativity and heterosexism set on the possible configurations of genders, sexualities, bodies, desires, identities, and so on. Queer

theory also deconstructs established binaries and sexual classifications such as man-woman, masculine-feminine, heterosexual-homosexual, and fixity-fluidity. The term 'queer' can be defined as "an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications" (Jagose, 1996, p. 1). Today, the use of 'queer' is often associated with the rejection of heterosexual, heteronormative, and binary gender norms. Queer, in its broadest sense, refers to sexual otherness.

Sedgwick (1993) describes queer as "a continuing moment, movement, motive – recurrent, eddying, troublantn . . . Keenly, it is relational, and strange" (p. xii). She postulates that queer refers to identification that falls "across genders, across sexualities, across genres, across 'perversions'" (p. xii). This broad conceptualization of queerness is not confined to a singular dimension of identity but rather embraces a spectrum of experiences and categories. She further argues that the term queer spans outward and interacts with "race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality" alongside gender, sexuality, and "other identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses" (p. 8). According to her, queer is "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (p. 8). Thus, the term embodies a multitude of meanings and interpretations that continuously shift and interact, reflecting the dynamic and diverse nature of human identity.

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler (2011) challenges the binary nature of gender and sex. She also talks about a "perpetual displacement" constituting "a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization" (p. 176). According to her, "gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always doing, though not doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed" (p. 34). Butler claims that gender is flexible, unstable, and performative. This contradicts the commonly believed notion that gender is an inherent or biologically determined quality that remains fixed. As Butler states, gender comes into being through being performed or enacted in various ways within society. In other words, by acting or performing as men and women, individuals create the categories of men and women. Moreover, failing to conform to expected gender performances can lead to social consequences.

It is important to recognize the necessity for intersectionality in queer studies. In their attempt to define 'queer', Eng et al. (2005) write:

> It was a term that challenged normalizing mechanisms of state power to name its sexual subjects: male or female, married or single, heterosexual or homosexual, natural or perverse. Given its commitment to interrogating the social processes that not only produced and recognized but also normalized and sustained identity, the political promise of the term resided specifically in its broad critique of multiple social antagonisms, including race, gender, class, nationality, and religion, in addition to sexuality. (p. 1)

In considering this definition of 'queer', one can argue that anything that challenges the normative and the prescribed qualifies as queer. Whittington (2012) claims that the vagueness of the term 'queer' can be harnessed by extending "its range past the realm of the sexual" (p. 158). He also mentions how some scholars like David Halperin have worked to "move 'queer' away from being a term that defined any particular person or thing, preferring it as a position" (p. 158). Queerness can be thought of extensively since anything and anyone that challenges the "normal" can be considered queer. As a result, trauma, which similarly disrupts and subverts conventional experiences and identities, can also be regarded as queer. Both trauma and queerness, therefore, contribute to shaping and denaturalizing individual identities.

Origins of Trauma in *Crossing*

In Statovci's *Crossing* (2016/2019), Bujar's adolescence is an acute iteration of the isolation, violence, and suffering that remains endemic in the experiences of queer people. His trauma stems from a series of painful experiences in Albania, including the death of his father, the apathy of his depressed mother, the disappearance of his sister, and the sexual assault by his employer. The death of his best friend Agim serves as the breaking point that throws him into a state of destabilization. These devastating experiences in Bujar's adolescence continue to haunt him as an adult, resulting in suicidal thoughts and intense self-loathing.

Bujar's socio-cultural milieu must be taken into account in the analysis of his gender and sexual identity. As a biological male in Albania, Bujar is subjected to certain cultural and familial expectations that dictate specific behaviors and roles. For instance, from a young age, he hears tales of Albanian history and mythology from his father, and these stories reinforce traditional notions of masculinity and heteronormativity. In one of the tales, a father tells his son of "Albanian man's self-respect, which must be defended to his final breath, of Albanian man's honor, the offending of which was the greatest sin of all, and of the responsibility an Albanian man must shoulder for the dignity of his family" (Statovci, 2016/2019, p. 34). These Albanian myths about masculinity have been passed on to boys like Bujar as absolute truths, carrying the implication that failure to conform to these rigid standards will lead to severe consequences. Moreover, Bujar's father recounts a story about a girl who disguises herself as a boy to fight in a battle. Although she later physically transforms into a man, he is not accepted back into his family because he did not "die like a man" during the battle (Statovci, p. 101). This story reveals Albania's intolerance toward those who deviate from heteronormative standards and serves as a cautionary tale about the repercussions of non-conformity. Although the stories imparted to Bujar may not be traumatic on their own, they illuminate the cultural context of Albania and the conditions of his upbringing, which are crucial for understanding why various traumas are constantly superimposed on him. The heteropatriarchal society in which he lives serves as the locus for constructing normative ideas of gender, sexuality, and identity.

In the novel, Bujar's first traumatic experience is the death of his father due to cancer. After his father passes away, Bujar has an epiphany: "I realized that my father was a liar, just like all storytellers" (Statovci, 2016/2019, p. 40). This becomes especially important later in the novel when Bujar himself also becomes a liar and a storyteller to cope with his numerous traumas. Furthermore, following his father's death, Bujar's mother falls into a deep depression, becoming bedridden and indifferent to Bujar's needs. This lack of maternal support drives Bujar to run away from home with Agim. The death of Bujar's father and the subsequent grief-stricken state of Bujar's mother set the stage for the more horrendous traumas Bujar will face in the future. It is from this point on in the novel that Bujar's identity gradually begins to collapse.

As the novel progresses, it becomes evident that the intensity of Bujar's trauma is largely intertwined with issues of nationality. As a person from a politically and socially distressed post-communist Albania, Bujar compares his trauma, as well as his nation's trauma, to that of people in Italy who are traumatized by seemingly inconsequential issues:

> People [in Italy] have time to lick their wounds, to be traumatized for years about something utterly trivial…while in my homeland newborn babies die of a fever and malnourishment, men die of shots fired to uphold the family honor, and women fleeing their husbands are killed by the bullets given to their husbands by family during their wedding celebrations. (Statovci, 2016/2019, p. 13)

Thus, his trauma stems not only from the personal and the familial but also from the sociopolitical. His family's dissolution is followed by the sociopolitical dissolution of

his country. Growing up in Albania at a time when the country was gradually moving toward capitalism in the aftermath of communist leader Enver Hoxha's death, Bujar is acutely aware of the dire conditions surrounding him. He recognizes that "poverty had broken families, split the bonds between husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, children and parents. Hunger drove many people to suicide or forced them to sell everything they owned for a pittance" (Statovci, 2016/2019, p. 114). This desperation is starkly illustrated by the story Agim hears about a man who plans to sell his daughter to smugglers for a chance at a better life in Italy. The most tragic aspect of this story is not the father's actions but the daughter's willingness to be sold in order to escape Albania. This underscores the devastating impact of Albania' socio-political turmoil on individual lives. Bujar's firsthand experiences in a nation beset by extreme distress give him a deep understanding of trauma. Unlike the more privileged people in places like Italy, he knows what it is like to live as a beggar and to constantly worry about human traffickers who prey on vulnerable children. It is even insinuated in the novel that Bujar's sister, Ana, may have been abducted by human traffickers. Thus, the sociopolitical climate of Albania fractures Bujar's sense of a 'normal' life.

Moreover, Bujar's trauma is significantly compounded by the repeated sexual assaults by his employer, Mr. Selim, which occur over several months. This experience is formative to his queer gender and sexual identity as an adult. Although the novel depicts this trauma in a deeply disturbing manner, it is never mentioned again once Bujar and Agim leave Tirana for Durrës. This omission raises questions about how the trauma of rape affects Bujar psychologically and emotionally, and whether it influences his sexual orientation to solidify as same-sex attraction. It must be noted that attempting to find an external 'cause' of homosexuality is problematic as it risks reinforcing harmful discourses that pathologize homosexuality and seek to find its 'root' for eradication. Although the idea that Bujar's gender and sexual identity has been solely and entirely queered by rape is debatable, it is undeniable that the event causes him to feel stigmatized and different from others. Consequently, as an adult, he is more inclined to engage in socially stigmatized performances, including cross-dressing and same-sex attraction. These performances are not merely responses to his trauma but also manifestations of his struggle to reclaim control and autonomy over his own body and identity following the repeated sexual assaults by Mr. Selim. Thus, Bujar's experience of sexual violation introduces elements of fluidity and complexity to his identity performance, reflecting Butler's notion that identity is continuously shaped and reshaped through performative acts.

The traumatic experience with the most powerful effect on Bujar is Agim's death. In Bujar's pre-trauma life (the life before his father's death and all the events that follow), his friendship with Agim is portrayed as childish and innocent. However, once Albania is in political ruins and the two of them run away from their homes, their friendship, while still childish, becomes nonetheless coded as queer. This is especially evident when they engage in sexual activities together. For example, Bujar reflects on a moment of intimacy when Agim "turned his head and started to kiss my neck, and how wonderful it felt when he slid his hand into my trousers and started to rub, and I closed my eyes and it didn't occur to me for a second to ask him to stop" (Statovci, 2016/2019, p. 131). Agim's actions and Bujar's own pleasure highlight how their once innocent friendship is now imbued with sexual intimacy and emotional complexity. Their exploration of this newly ambiguous and semi-erotic relationship, however, is halted by Agim's death, which represents an acute instance of Caruth's (1996) "crisis of death" (p. 7). In the aftermath of Agim's passing, Bujar's vulnerability is glaringly exposed as he grapples with intense survivor's guilt stemming from his trauma. Bujar is thrust into an existential crisis as he realizes that the world is not unquestionably safe and secure and that there is no end to suffering – especially for those who are queer. In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and*

Violence, Butler (2004) discusses the effect that loss has on the mourners: "When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do. On one level I think I have lost 'you', only to discover that 'I' have gone missing as well" (p. 22). This observation underscores how losing important relationships can profoundly disorient one's sense of self, leading to an unsettling crisis of identity and purpose. Bujar's state of mind and sense of self after Agim's death strongly resonates with Buter's discussion of loss. Agim's death is a turning point in Bujar's life, damaging and compromising his queer subjectivity.

Adolescent Bujar is inundated by trauma. His prolonged exposure to trauma, both in private (personal and familial) and public (sociopolitical) forms, affects him psychologically and emotionally. Bujar's multiple traumatic experiences dismantle his sense of normalcy and contribute to the development of his queer identity. Confronted with the collapse of his nation, the breakdown of his family unit, and his experience of sexual assault, he is compelled to reassess his sense of self and seek solace in a relationship with Agim. When this queer-coded relationship is cut short by Agim's death, Bujar's queerness becomes fragmented. The story of Bujar's past comes to an end when he leaves Albania for Italy. By leaving Albania, Bujar hopes to leave behind the part of his life that was tainted by poverty, misery, abuse, and trauma. However, as will be discussed in the following section, fleeing to new countries only seems to cause Bujar to manifest his trauma in multiple ways, further complicating his understanding of his queer identity.

Manifestations of Trauma in *Crossing*

Even after leaving Albania, Bujar bears the wounds of his trauma in his memories. The construction of his identity remains incomplete unless it is framed within his past. In Italy, he breaks under the burden of the trauma from the harrowing events he endured in Albania. He is consumed by an all-prevailing sense of disorientation and displacement. Due to his numerous traumas, Bujar is deprived of a consistent sense of identity and belonging. This causes him to become suicidal. While in Italy, he attempts to end his life by jumping in front of a van. After his suicide attempt fails, he states: "There isn't a day that goes by when I don't think about it, about how inevitable it is that all life will eventually end" (Statovci, 2016/2019, p. 62). Bujar's struggle with his survivor's guilt and the relentless nature of his trauma exemplify Caruth's concept of the "crisis of life", a state of existential turmoil that follows the initial "crisis of death" experienced through trauma (1996, p. 7). His suicide attempt further demonstrates his difficulties in navigating this crisis. The pain of losing a loved one and the self-loathing that accumulates from the years of survivor's guilt drive Bujar to seek death as an escape from his persistent suffering.

Traumatized and alone after fleeing Albania, Bujar struggles to find his true identity as well as a hint of happiness that seems ever more elusive. Statovci demonstrates how Bujar's performances of gender and sexual identity are constantly changing and becoming more fragmented over time. This resonates with Butler's 1988 concept of gender performativity, where gender identity is not fixed but continuously enacted through behavior and social interactions. At one point in the novel, the adolescent Bujar asks Agim if he is "peder" or gay. Before Agim can reply, Bujar adds, "It doesn't matter if you are…But I'm not" (Statovci, 2016/2019, p. 132). Agim, who identifies as a girl despite being born a boy, responds that he is not gay and remarks "A girl can can't be a peder" (Statovci, p. 132). This exchange reveals Bujar's fears about his own queerness and the potential self-loathing and social rejection he anticipates if he admits to being gay. However, later on in the novel, when his Finnish girlfriend Tanja asks him if he is gay, adult Bujar replies "Yes…among other things" (Statovci, p. 148). This change in Bujar's response shows that his sense of self and sexuality, influenced by his trauma, is not static but continually evolving. In addition, upon arriving in Italy, Bujar seeks asylum on the

basis of persecution as a homosexual in Albania. He suddenly changes his sexual orientation as part of his strategy to avoid being sent back to Albania. The readers are constantly left to question the true nature of Bujar's sexuality, but it appears that Bujar himself is uncertain. Therefore, Bujar's sexual typology seems to be surrounded by ambiguity. He expresses contradictory views regarding his sexuality, as seen in his reflection:

> I don't know whether I'm gay or straight…I've never thought that I might like men who like men, only men who like women and who could therefore never like me, but I've been with women too […] I find it impossible to become aroused, but I have still had sex with both men and women when the men and women in my life have wanted it. (Statovci, 2016/2019, p. 148)

This passage underscores Bujar's amorphous and unstable sense of self. The novel, in not textually specifying Bujar's sexual orientation, invites the readers to examine the open-ended potentialities of queerness.

Bujar's constantly changing gender performance and sexuality demonstrate the complexities of choosing an acceptable and comfortable embodiment of gender and sexuality across different countries and social spaces, each laden with its own standards and norms. Bujar offers each new person he encounters in these countries a different account of his past and his identity. He performs, and this is noteworthy because according to Butler (1988), gender identity is "a compelling illusion, an object of belief" that is retroactively produced by one's performance (p. 520). Bujar claims various identities, such as a Bosnian medical student in Germany, an Italian immigrant in Spain, a Spanish actress in New York, and a Turkish man in Finland. In these countries, sometimes he is a student, sometimes he is an actor, and sometimes he is a singer. Most importantly, sometimes he identifies as a woman, sometimes as a man. The slippery nature of his identity can be seen whenever he assumes a new identity after crossing a border. Instead of integrating the various traumatic incidents of his life into his stories about the past, he tries to exclude them. However, even if he tries to exclude them, he cannot conceive of himself without those experiences. The novel prompts several speculative inquiries, including: How might Bujar's identity have evolved had he not endured the traumas he experienced in Albania? How might Bujar's character have developed had Agim not died? Would he still have been characterized as queer if these events had not occurred? Regardless of the answers, what is evident is that Bujar's identity is based on the pathological lies he tells others to try to escape his haunting past.

Bujar's queerness lies not only in his gender and sexuality but in his mutability as well. It is made abundantly clear that Bujar experiences a kind of dissociative break. His traumatic dissociation from himself serves as a coping mechanism for his suffocating reality. His trauma fragments his sense of identity, causing him to assume the personas of others. Bujar's dissociation is evident when his description of his own past seems inconsistent. For instance, Bujar recalls that when he was a child, his father was violent towards him. He states: "I was ashamed of my sister and the inability of my aggressive father to deal with his emotions in any other way but through violence" (Statovci, 2016/2019, p. 68). However, the readers have seen that Bujar's father generally treated his son with affection. In fact, it was Agim who was scolded and beaten by his father for wearing his mother's dress and jewelry. Furthermore, when reflecting on his past, Bujar states: "I hated how obsessed I became with studying, how I walked, the sound of my voice, the smell of my sweat, and the color of my urine, hated how I starved myself" (Statovci, pp. 67–68). Again, it was Agim, not Bujar, who was studious and prone to starving himself. Thus, it becomes clear that Bujar's current identity—encompassing his sexuality, gender, attire (sometimes feminine, sometimes masculine), attitude toward his homeland, and overall behavior—is deeply influenced by Agim or, more precisely, by the absence of Agim. The trauma of Agim's death is so overwhelming that Bujar finds himself

unable to return to his former self. Instead, he adopts aspects of Agim's personality as a way to cope with the loss and navigate his altered sense of identity. Bujar mourns for his friend but also for his own past self, the person he was before the intrusion of trauma and death in his life. Thus, his queer identity becomes a canvas on which the absence of Agim is expressed.

In addition, Bujar's fragmented identity is rendered in the novel's fragmented style. There are times when Bujar's name is not mentioned for dozens of pages and it feels as though his identity has been dissolved or merged with Agim's identity. This stylistic choice underscores the difficulty of distinguishing between Bujar and Agim, as the former frequently appropriates the identity of the latter. Bujar is not living his own life but is instead living the queer life that Agim might have led had he survived. By assuming an appropriative identity, he attempts to quell his survivor's guilt and cope with his trauma. However, this strategy leads him to become a pathological liar. By showing how Bujar changes identity at a whim, Statovci conveys the message that identity does not have to be set in stone. As Sedgwick (1993) states, queerness is an all-inclusive space, an "open mesh of possibilities" (p. 8). In Bujar's case, this fluidity manifests in the overlapping and mutable aspects of his gender, sexuality, and nationality, reflecting the dynamic nature of queer identity. By taking on the personality traits and the identity of people he encounters, Bujar attempts to deny his past and this would also mean that he wants to deny all the trauma that he has lived through. His action of "absorbing", borrowing, or stealing other people's stories for himself can be considered as queer.

Bujar's relational patterns, like his gender identity and sexuality, are fragmented and queer. Bujar's journey from Tirana to Rome, Madrid, New York, and Helsinki is characterized by a series of (ill-fated) relationships, each altering his self-perception. As mentioned earlier, in these places, he selectively constructs his identity based on how he wishes to represent himself at any given time and place. Bujar even states "I can choose what I am, I can choose my gender, choose my nationality and my name, my place of birth, all simply by opening my mouth. Nobody has to remain the person they were born; we can put ourselves together like a jigsaw" (Statovci, 2016/2019, p. 11). Although he effortlessly fabricates elaborate stories about his past and identity, his deceptions only lead to negative consequences and varying degrees of intolerance from others. For example, in Berlin, Bujar identifies himself as a woman and meets a man named Anton in a creative writing class. When Anton discovers that Bujar is a biological man, the former verbally abuses Bujar and attempts to sodomize the latter with a peppermill. The fear and powerlessness Bujar feels at this moment are magnified by his past experience of being raped by Mr. Selim. Bujar's experience with Anton demonstrates that cruelty and violence are inflicted upon Bujar because of his gender and sexuality. Even in the present, trauma is superimposed on the already traumatized Bujar. This aligns with Freud (1920/2015) and Caruth's (1996) emphasis on the persistent re-experiencing of traumatic events. Individuals like Bujar, who have experienced trauma, are particularly vulnerable to further traumatic experiences due to their already compromised psychological and emotional states.

While in Madrid, Bujar identifies as a man and begins a relationship with a woman named Rosa. When Rosa finds out that he cross-dresses, she ridicules and humiliates him, causing him to strike her. This incident shows that Bujar, while a victim of abuse, is also capable of inflicting harm on others. He is not just a victim but also a victimizer. Bujar's past trauma not only influences his gender, sexuality, and identity but also his queer relational dynamics. His unresolved trauma complicates his relationships, revealing a pattern where past trauma influences present behavior. Moreover, in his struggle to leave the past behind, Bujar commits morally dubious actions. For instance, when Bujar begins a relationship with a transitioning transgender woman named Tanja in Finland, he appropriates her identity

in a manner similar to how he previously appropriated Agim's identity. Bujar wears Tanja's clothes, sits in on her university lectures, and even auditions for a singing competition as Tanja. During a conversation with Tanja about identity, Bujar tells her that "Anyone could lie and say they've felt like they belong to the other gender their whole life, and give them the answer they want to hear" (Statovci, 2016/2019, p. 149). Here, he seems to be subtly confessing the fact that he is lying about his sexual identity. By lying about his identity throughout the novel, Bujar sabotages himself and ends up engaging in ill-fated encounters or relationships – with Anton in Germany, with Rosa in Spain, and with Tanja in Finland. The way Bujar's relationships end attests to the fact that denying and negating one's past is harmful for healthy relationships. Tanja's character is particularly illustrative of this harm; her tragic end through suicide reveals the destructive consequences of Bujar's unresolved traumas. However, it is also important to acknowledge that Tanja has her own traumatic history, including a "difficult childhood" marked by "the name-calling, the bullying, the violence" (Statovci, p. 147). Her unresolved trauma, coupled with Bujar's, exacerbates their emotional disconnection, culminating in Tanja's tragic end. Moreover, earlier in the novel, Bujar questions how one can build a relationship while wanting to forget their origins:

> How can you establish a relationship with someone if you want to deny your past, your nationality, if you don't want to tell anyone anything about yourself, if what you most want to do is forget where you've come from, wipe your past away like a smudge of dirt from a shoe? (Statovci, p. 70)

This passage highlights Bujar's inability to form meaningful relationships. His constant lying and self-sabotage perpetuate a cycle of self-destructive behavior.

Bujar's attempt to bury his traumatic past does not erase the trauma itself. As the story unfolds, it becomes evident that Bujar harbors a deep fear of confronting his past. At the end of the novel, he attempts to face his past by returning to Tirana. The circularity and ambiguity of this ending raises questions like: is Bujar caught within a circuit defined by his sufferings, one that cannot be broken no matter what, or does his mobility suggest a new sense of self-determination in working through his trauma, embracing his queer identity, and forging a path toward happiness? The readers are left to interpret the ending in their own ways.

Conclusion

Crossing (2016/2019) is a complex queer narrative that explores various facets of a traumatized queer individual's life. Despite the disturbing accounts of trauma and violence experienced by Bujar, Statovci's novel presents a powerful subversion of heteronormative categories in terms of gender, sexuality, relationships, and identity in general. Bujar's multiple traumas inform his queerness and serve as the driving force behind his actions as an adult. The novel suggests a significant interplay between trauma and queerness, as both are vital dimensions of Bujar's existence. Neither trauma nor queerness is monolithic. Bujar's ever-shifting self-representation, sexuality, and gender performance are shaped by his trauma. The scars he bears influence how he negotiates his queer identity.

While trauma undoubtedly plays a pivotal role in Bujar's life, this does not mean that queer sensibilities are exclusive to those with traumatic experiences. Queer identities can exist independently of trauma. However, through his portrayal of Bujar, Statovci shows that what Bujar imbibes from various traumatic experiences becomes indelibly a part of his queer identity. In doing so, Statovci produces different ways of looking at trauma that resist simple narratives of victimization. Both the fields of trauma studies and queer studies can be enriched by a more critical engagement with one another. There is a significant need to examine how other contemporary queer literature reflects and contributes to the research on the intersection between trauma and queerness.

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