

**Fragmented Selves: Trauma and Queer Identity in Pajtim
Statovei's *Crossing***

**Dissertation
in
English Language and Literature**

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PREFACE

This dissertation analyses the ways in which trauma, violence, and desire are written and disrupted in Pajtim Statovci's *Crossing* through the intersecting prisms of trauma theory and queer theory. Informing itself by Freud's deferred action and Janet's dissociation, Caruth's crisis of representation, Butler's performativity, and Sedgwick's closet epistemology, it uncovers the novel's formal devices of disruption, haunting, and witnessing.

The research is structured into four chapters. The first chapter titled “Introduction” establishes the research questions, scope, and methodological premises—close reading, theoretical synthesis, and archival context—and maps out the current research on migration, memory, and nonnormative identities.

The second chapter titled “The Intersection of Trauma and Queer Theories” follows psychoanalytic and narrative origins of trauma theory, and charts queer theory's post-structuralist and intersectional critiques, noting their mutual interest in opacity, bodily memory, and temporal dislocation.

The third chapter brings these frameworks into action through Statovci's *Crossing*, providing a close reading of its disjointed chronology, ghostly spaces, body flashbacks, and testimonial instances. It demonstrates how the novel queerly queers borders—physical, corporeal, linguistic—and commits acts of ethical witnessing that interrupt institutional silences.

The fourth chapter synthesizes conclusions drawn from the analysis, reflects on the contribution of the research to the study of trauma, queer studies, and migration criticism, and proposes areas for future research—digital queer testimonies, comparative postcolonial narratives, and trauma-informed pedagogy.

Through the interlacing of theory and text, this project is part of the nascent "queer trauma studies," shedding light on how fiction enacts and subverts power structures, memory, and belonging. Its interdisciplinary nature highlights the political investment in representation and the redemptive power of literature to form solidarities in difference.

Chapter One

Introduction

Sexual, affectional, and gender minority people are at increased risk of experiencing many forms of mental illness, and are more likely to develop severe and persistent mental illness compared to heterosexual counterpart. Through a complex interconnection of minority-based stress and stigma, reduced social supports, and mental illness, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other sexual and gender minority people (LGBT+) face risks of suicide in excess of ten times the national average. Evidence suggests that such disparities persist even after receiving mental healthcare. LGBT+ people are more likely to report dissatisfaction with their mental health professional and unmet mental health needs, with at times, 50% of samples reporting a variety of concerns unaddressed by therapy.

LGBT+ people — also referred to as queer people — possess affectional and/or sexual attractions and/or gender identities that are deemed by dominant narratives to deviate from a limited socially imposed norm of “typical” expressions (i.e., a cisgender, heterosexual identity and expression). Because they are minoritized by the dominant culture, LGBT+ people experience instances of discrimination and oppression that can be traumatic and result in physical and mental health disparities that can pervade across the life.

The queer narratives read through the intersecting lenses of queer theory and trauma theory expose a terrain of staggering complexity, in which individual traumas converge with cultural violence to shape understandings of identity, belonging, and resilience. Across a range of narrative modes, from novel and memoir to film and autobiographical prose, queer subjects negotiate experiences

of dislocation—either in bodily presence, memory, or social recognition, and thus illustrate how psychological disturbances and normative forms recursively inform one another. This research project seeks to map that intersection: to analyze the processes by which traumatic events—whether moments of individual violence, state violence, or the quotidian erasure of queerness interrupt narrative continuity, and how queer theory can illuminate the ways in which marginalized subjects appropriate, remake, and narrate their pathologies of self-making.

Trauma theory holds a key in literary studies, providing depth of understanding of how narratives negotiate the psychic, affective, and structural breaks produced by violence, loss, exile, and repression. From its psychoanalytic beginnings in Freudian scholarship to its more recent forms that are guided by cultural, feminist, and postcolonial critiques, trauma theory – illuminated by critic like Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, and Dominick LaCapra – has unveiled the ways trauma upsets memory, defies coherence, and taints language with discontinuity.

In its most basic form, trauma theory is concerned with how intense events fall outside of immediate psychological processing, getting stuck in the body and the unconscious as unprocessed residues. Trauma, in psychological terms, is an overwhelming event or series of events that shatter one's sense of safety, identity, and continuity. In literary contexts, trauma is often manifested through narrative disruptions – such as fragmentation, repetition, silence, and temporal disorientation – that reflect survivor's fractured consciousness.

Compared to that, queer theory resists the assumption of stable sex and gender categories. Building on Michel Foucault's genealogical critiques of sexual identity, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's epistemology of the closet theory, and Judith Butler's performativity theory, queer theory scholars have shown that the terms "man" and "woman" and "heterosexual" and "homosexual" are discursive fictions upheld by normative power relations. Queer desires and expressions evade capture under these binaristic sex and gender categories, performing acts of "disidentification" which engage and subvert dominant discourses. Queerness thus exists as a form of instability—a set of relational orientations which refuse final closure.

In their conceptual underpinnings and formal structures, these two critical approaches converge in queer fiction. The uninhibited effect on speech and memory is reflected in queer fragmentation of narrative coherence. Discontinuous temporal structures, broken identities, or sensorial perceptions are transformed into modes of artistic production that express both psychic trauma and sexualized or gendered resistance. Concurrently, queer theory's emphasis on performance and resistance offers valuable explanations of the ways in which survivors of trauma build temporary identities as survival strategies—embodied in acts of cross-dressing, border-crossing, or reimagining national or family origin myths.

Pajtim Statovci's novel *Crossing* (2016) is a novel that resists easy classification, both in its narrative and thematic preoccupations. It is a migration novel, a gender fluidity novel, a novel of memory and myth, but above all, it is a survival novel. Central to this survival novel is a complicated conjunction of

trauma and queerness, two of the most significant factors that constitute the shattered identity of the protagonist and his resolute quest for home. This book analyzes *Crossing* in the context of trauma theory and queer theory and argues that Statovci's novel not only tells the psychological and social traumas inflicted by displacement and marginalization but also transgresses the very form of trauma itself.

Pajtim Statovci was born in 1990 in Kosovo to Albanian parents whose lives were soon unsettled by the bloodshed of the Yugoslav Wars. In 1992, during government-inspired persecution of Kosovar Albanians reached a peak, his family moved to Finland, the tiny town of Porvoo being their new home. At an early age, Statovci lived in the tense in-between space between his parents' oral tradition—speaking of dragons, revenant princesses, and borderland ghosts—and the Scandinavian childhood that enveloped him. Shuttled between two worlds, he learned Finnish language skills as instinctively as he learned the folktales that his grandmother told him, and by early adolescence he was spinning tales that wove Albanian mythology together with the uncertainties of migrant life. This bicultural life would be the foundation of his unique literary voice: one that blended both the bare simplicity of Nordic realism with the dreamlike potential held in Balkan folklore. As he wrote his dissertation on narrative and otherness, Statovci developed a unique style which was lean but rich in lyricism. As he wrote his dissertation on narrative and otherness, Statovci developed a unique style rich in lyricism that would later translate into his fiction as exact in its filmic quality and otherworldly in its evocative power.

Statovci's debut novel, *Kissani Jugoslavia*, was published in Finnish in 2014 by Otava. Titled *My Cat Yugoslavia* in English (Pantheon Books, 2017; translated by David Hackston), it established him as a prominent literary voice. The novel traces Bekim, a young man who inherits a talking boa constrictor and a muse cat; both become symbols of exile, shame, and queer identity construction. Statovci's uncompromising blend of magical realism and the experience of immigration was welcomed by critics. The Helsingin Sanomat gave him its Prize for Best Debut in Literature, and in 2018, the novel was staged at the Finnish National Theatre, further attesting to its deep cultural resonance.

Statovci's second book, *Tiranan sydän* (2016), translated into English in 2019 as *Crossing* (Pantheon Books; translated by Hackston), further developed his engagement with themes of dislocation, trauma, and gender fluidity. The story oscillates among the difficult boyhood of the narrator Bujar in post-communist Albania, with ghostly readings of the legend of Doruntina, and his adulthoods in several European cities and personae. In each setting, Bujar takes on new national identities, genders, and biographies as shields against the unassimilable atrocities of war and diaspora. Statovci's paratactic, economical narrative style approximates the compulsion to reproduce—a notion at the heart of Sigmund Freud's definition of traumatic neurosis and latency of memory, a central concept of Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma. *Crossing* was a recipient of Finland's Toisinkoinen Literature Prize in 2016, and its English translation was a finalist for the 2019 National Book Award for Translated Literature and a finalist for the Oxford–Weidenfeld Translation Prize. With *Crossing*, Statovci made explicit the intersection of trauma theory and queer theory in literary form,

offering identity as a performative survival strategy and the body as a site of profound violence.

In 2019 Statovci's third book, *Bolla* (Otava; English trans. Pantheon 2021), was awarded Finland's highest literary honor, the Finlandia Prize. *Bolla* weaves queer love on the eve of the Kosovo War with the Albanian myth of the serpent-dragon Bolla, a monster that emerges once a year and devours flesh of the first living creature it encounters. Through the juxtaposition of intimate and collective violence, Statovci once more depicted how political and personal injuries cross generation to generation, and queer bodies write national and family violence onto flesh and psyche. *Bolla* was longlisted for the International Dublin Literary Award and shortlisted for the Kirkus Prize, making Statovci Finland's youngest Finlandia laureate at age twenty-nine.

In September 2024, Statovci published his fourth novel, *Lehmän Synnyttää Yöllä* ('*A Cow Gives Birth at Night*'), which won him a second Finlandia Prize. Though stylistically different from his earlier work, this novel further follows his investigation of embodied trauma, liminal selfhood, and folkloric echoes, refracting these preoccupations through the interior lives of a female subject against a rural Finnish landscape. The acquisition of a second Finlandia Prize makes Statovci one of the most globally recognized authors of contemporary Nordic literature, with his commitment to re-conceptualizing the narrative possibilities invested in myth, gender, and memory becoming increasingly deep in each successive publication.

In his prose, Statovci's literary style is one of spectral minimalism. He uses short, declarative sentences that hum like resonance beneath the surface, at

times supplemented by brief and suggestive metaphors—blood as “tamed fire”, flesh as “parchment that won't fold”. Paratactic form reflects the immediacy of traumatic memory and the performative alienation in the lives of his protagonists. The filmic texture of his prose skilfully controls the dialogue between space and body: cityscapes become affect topographies—sterile hospital corridors in Rome, graffiti-daubed underpasses in Milan, and the whitewashed Helsinki mornings—corresponding to inner states of disruption and desire. His narratives meanwhile engage with Balkan folktale and ghostly presence, regarding myth not as escapist ornament but as psychological underpinning that haunts and facilitates marginalized figures. In this conflation of the clinical, the poetic, and the uncanny, Statovci rewrites the classical form of the novel itself, expanding its capacity to record both historical and psychological varieties of violence.

In interviews, Statovci defines the concept of fiction as “a cocoon of absolute freedom”, a realm in which he can transcend—even if momentarily—the constraints of war, nationalism, and heteronormativity. He recalls his childhood visits to the “book park” of the Porvoo library, where sneaking in reading was a gesture of freedom, attributing Imre Kertész's *Fatelessness* as the novel that awakened his literary consciousness of having witnessed violence. Statovci has openly written of the weight of multiple labels—refugee, immigrant, Kosovar Albanian and how his writing attempts to “write himself into the world” as a solid yet fluid being. In *Crossing* and beyond, he inscribes narrative into the conflicting energies of shame and grace, exile and return, erasure and appearance, asserting narratives of suffering have the potential to

become paths to imaginative survival and solidarity. Outside of fiction, Statovci has written essays, short stories, and a widely acclaimed article, “Notes on Craft”, in *Granta*, where he discusses the potential of queer and survivor fiction to subvert violence discourse.

As a scholar and author, he leads workshops on trauma and narrative, works with translators to preserve the “pleasantly odd” sound of his own Finnish language, and mentors new writers in migrant and queer literature. Pajtim Statovci's path—from refugee Albanian to two-time Finlandia Award recipient—demonstrates the redemptive power of narrative in the intersection of trauma and queerness. His writing requires an ethical reading attuned to the subtleties of both history and the psyche, and the performative acts that both cover and lay bare, and unearth the radical potentialities of identity in excess of fixity and opposites. As *Crossing* and its follow-ups continue to win international recognition, Statovci is revealed as a necessary voice in 21st-century writing: a master wordsmith whose incandescent sparsity and mythic reach maps uncharted paths through the intricacies and wonders of human becoming.

Ultimately, Statovci's continued mentoring of beginning writers—through trauma and narrative workshops, queer literary journal writing, and public forums, solidifies his position as a bridge between mainstream academic scholarship and grass-roots queer art. He has articulated a need for additional narratives that “write the unassimilated violences” of Balkan history, transposing these narratives into “avenues toward imaginative survival and solidarity”. By putting queer migrant voices front and center, Statovci brings

voices typically marginalized from both national literatures and the international queer discussion, ensuring his work continues to be effective across community-based festivals, pedagogic readings, and activist literary networks.

With multiple modalities—experimental narrative techniques, trans-institutional development work, critical scholarship, and pedagogy—Pajtim Statovci has become a major voice in the queer book project of cartographing the transnational complexities of desire, trauma, and resistance. His novels are not just depictions of queer life; they are involved in the making of queer community, offering new modes of language for fluid identities and witnessing to the transgressive potential of narrative in healing individual wounds and self-perceptions.

By reading *Crossing* through this double lens, the current research contributes to a widening pool of scholarly work that attempts to examine how queer fictions tell trauma not as pathology but as a space of resistance and creativity. The reading argues that Statovci's novel subverts traditional conceptions of trauma by resisting domestication, thus rendering it unruly, broken, and embodied. At the same time, it describes the way trauma makes queer subjectivity, demonstrating how family and historical wounds are inscribed on body and voice. In their intersection, *Crossing* is not just an exile narrative; it becomes an interrogation of the possibilities of survival, self-creation, and narration in the aftermath of violence.

By contextualizing *Crossing* within the conceptual paradigms of trauma theory and queer studies, this research endeavor seeks to elucidate the novel's aesthetic and ethical aspects. It examines the ways in which Statovci's narrative

techniques both mirror and distort the lived experiences of queer migrants, how his characters traverse the liminal spaces of identity and memory, and how literature can serve as a medium for bearing witness to that which is often unutterable. In this process, it asserts the capacity of fiction not merely to depict trauma and queerness but to transmute them—into language, into structure, and into a framework of radical empathy.

While there is a considerable body of research on queer narratives and trauma separately, their intersection has not been investigated with the depth it deserves. There have been many studies that have more or less trauma as a standalone phenomenon, explained in psychological or historical terms; fewer, however, have sought to investigate the specific features of its representation in queer literature. Similarly, while queer theory has successfully deconstructed fixed identity and conventional social forms, it has only just begun to address the narrative strategies that represent traumatic experience. In filling this gap, the present study considers Statovci's *Crossing* a paradigmatic example of these general tendencies – a model text in which the disturbances created by trauma and the undermining of queer identity become entwined in provocative combinations.

The questions animating this research are multi-layered and complex. First, in what ways does *Crossing* challenge traditional narrative structures to describe the intrusive and cynical nature of traumatic memory? Second, how does the novel describe queer temporalities and identities that dismantle traditional definitions? Third, how do elements such as fragmentation, non-linear narrative, and silence work to describe the ineffable nature of trauma?

Finally, what does the convergence of trauma theory and queer theory say about the potential of narratives to serve as spaces of healing and re-definition of the self? These questions are not simply of interest to scholars – these questions are of interest to wider societal issues of communities remember, forget, and re-construct their understanding of both contemporary and historical contexts.

Methodologically, this research is based on close and careful reading of Statovci's text and critical syntheses of relevant theoretical texts. The research uses qualitative and interpretive methodology, drawing on established protocols of literary criticism, trauma studies, and queer theory. Through careful tracking of the disruptions of the narrative in terms of temporality, language, and identity. The analysis attempts to understand how these textual events not only symbolize but also build the expressions of trauma. For instance, moments of narrative fragmentation will not only be analyzed as matters of style but as figural performance of a fractured self trying to make sense of fragmented memories. Similarly, the use of silence, and the deliberate refusal of closure within the narrative will be understood as a resistance to a reductionist portrayal of suffering, and hence an expression of the complexity and strength of queer subjectivity.

Finally, this project also critiques the political and ethical stakes of queer trauma narratives. It examines how these narratives subvert reductionist victimhood tropes, resist the assimilationist pressures of homonormativity, and construct spaces of collective solidarity that exceed individual experience. In addition, it also considers the limits and possible risks of trauma figuration, such as the risk of re-traumatization, voyeuristic impulse, and erasure of

intersectional differences. Through the critical examination of these normative concerns, the project strives to open up spaces for a productive and ethically responsible queer trauma studies that remains attuned to future trajectories, such as non-Western archives, transnational theories, and collective storytelling practices. Central to this research is an interdisciplinary focus. The project draws on cultural studies, psychoanalytic theory, literary criticism, performance theory, and disability studies, combining their elements in an integrated analysis of queer narrative form. It also takes into account the methodological implications of its own stance: by prioritizing the ethics of testimony, it recognizes the coconstitutive character of author, text, and reader. Interpretation is therefore an essay in ethics—one that requires humility, reflexivity, and ongoing sensitivity to the testimony of the unassimilatedly violent. In the endeavor of mapping the intersection of queer theory and trauma theory in queer testimonies, this research aims to move beyond the nuance of the intersectional academy. Its aim is to amplify the creative and subversive energies that accrue when marginalized subjects speak, act, and navigate their lives outside the register of normative knowledge. Queer testimonies of trauma not only replicate pain; they make new forms of belonging, alternative temporalities of becoming, and new solidarities that transcend the register of identity and violence. Through close reading of these testimonies with theoretical consciousness and ethical vigilance, this research adds to the growing scholarship that honors the resilience of queer lives and the transformatory potentialities of trauma testimonies.

Chapter Two

The Intersection of Trauma and Queer Theories

Traditionally, theory on trauma has been deployed in contexts including Holocaust witness testimony, accounts of wartime experience, and postcolonial atrocity. However, it is being seen more and more as equally important for the examination of marginalized identities - of queer lives - where trauma is not only a result of individual assault but from structural erasure, systematic violence, and migratory dislocation. Recent theory highlights that trauma frequently fulfils a consecutive role within queer identity construction, underscoring that queerness is not a site of desire or resistance but a psychic terrain of fractures resulting from historical and social trauma.

Queer narratives take place at the uncomfortable interface between individual memory and social expulsion, where bodily traumas resist the tidy closure that dominant discourses aim to impose. By bringing trauma theory into conversation with queer theory, writers and critics have elaborated a rich hermeneutic for mapping how violence—psychic and structural—gets written onto bodies and texts that refuse heteronormative incorporation. Trauma theory, rooted in clinical psychiatry and psychoanalysis, is concerned with the unassimilated event, the unnameable rupture that circulates as flashback, symptom, or ghostly absence in speech. Queer theory, developed out of post-structuralist and feminist challenges, dismantles the identities and norms that render certain lives unlivable. Transposed to queer narratives—memoir, film, fiction, drama, graphic text—this intersectional perspective shows how

traumatic experience and normatively produced trauma configure one another, producing forms of representation that both testify to suffering and subvert the very categories that render queer lives vulnerable.

Clinical identification of trauma as a distinct psychic wound started in mid-nineteenth century, as European doctors treated railway accident survivors with enigmatic physical and mental symptoms lacking obvious organic etiology. Jean-Martin Charcot, French neurologist and professor of anatomical pathology treated "hysterical paralysis" and dissociative seizures, forcing a reexamination of presuppositions of somatic and psychic integrity. Around the same time, Pierre Janet in Paris developed the theory of dissociation: traumatic experience could fragment consciousness into sub systemic "fixed ideas" that resisted integration into the remainder of the self. Janet's latency insisted that trauma may not appear until later stimuli reactivated the unprocessed event, anticipating the contemporary idea of deferred action or belated response. His clinical work placed great emphasis on careful observation of lapses, compulsive gestures, and somatic disturbance, paving the way for trauma as a break in temporal and somatic continuity.

Trauma theory owes its theoretical roots to the Freudian concept of trauma. In his essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", Freud discusses the human tendency to relive trauma. Sigmund Freud's initial interest in trauma arose in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), co-authored with Joseph Breuer, in which they attributed neurotic symptoms to pathogenic memories—painful recollections made unconscious. Freud's later investigation in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle"(1920) introduced the repetition compulsion: a force urging the

subject to relive the traumatic scene in dreams, enactments, or compulsive acts, even though painful. Freud hypothesized that when a terrifying stimulus occurs without the preparatory anxiety mediated by the protective shield of the ego, the psyche is unable to mobilize its normal defense and the traumatic imprint takes permanent residence. Recovery, he suggested, demands narrative—converting the elliptical trauma into discursive form using recollection and abreaction.

Post-Second World War psychiatry's encounter with combatants experiencing "shell shock" and "battle fatigue" further increased clinical interest in trauma's long-term impact. The Vietnam War era spurred even more research, leading to the American Psychiatric Association's formal recognition of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in DSM-III (1980). Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) applies this clinical model to chronic interpersonal violence from acute trauma and introduces the term complex PTSD, with particular focus on the relational aspects of trauma: safety, memory, and connection. Herman's model, which has had significant influence, situates trauma recovery as a three-step procedure—creating safety, telling the trauma, and reconnecting to community—emphasizing how attention to sociopolitical context is essential for recovery. Judith Herman elaborates on this knowledge by showing how trauma interferes with essential human abilities: creating relationships, preserving autonomy, and creative cohesive identity. Herman highlights survivor's experience of being silenced by social systems that do not validate their pain.

At the same time, Bessel van der Kolk's early work in neurobiology and body-based treatments, as described in *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014),

uncovered the manner in which trauma interferes with integration of prefrontal cortex, limbic system, and autonomic nervous system. Van der Kolk's work with Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), yoga, and theater underscored the importance of somatically treating trauma, witnessing body memory and the residues that words cannot capture. These neuroscientific and clinical breakthroughs placed trauma not just as an intrapsychic injury but as an event that occurs in brain, body, and social world.

At the center of trauma theory is a perception that trauma disarticulates the capacity of a subject to incorporate experience, particularly when the experience outstrips the field of consciousness. The 1990s saw a fearless exodus of trauma from clinic to culture. One of the most prominent scholars of trauma theory- Cathy Caruth's foundational texts, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), redefine trauma within the terms of deconstruction. Caruth insists that the very essence of trauma is its irrepresentability: the event resists immediate symbolization and returns belatedly as haunting fissures in narrative. Caruth posits that trauma can result from confronting death or distressing event and from surviving when others have perished. More specifically, she states that “trauma consists not only in Caruth’s influential book contends having confronted death but in having survived, precisely, without knowing it”. that trauma is “not locatable in the simple violent event” but appears later in the form of repetition, flashback, and speech that is unable to fully encompass what occurred. This “belatedness” renders trauma narrative unstable and fractured. 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. Her framework emphasizes that trauma is not a singular event but a continuous process that has enduring effects on individual's lives. In drawing on Freud, Nietzsche, and Derrida, she defines trauma as an experience of unassimilated history, and insists that literature and art are privileged sites for witnessing the unspeakable.

In his book *The Broken Connection: On Death and the Continuity of Life*, Robert Jay Lifton – prominent psychiatrist and author (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. (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 discontinuity that cannot be integrated.(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.

Dominick LaCapra's work pushes further the critique of both the risk of fetishizing suffering and the risk of collective amnesia, calling for a trauma studies that maintains empathy but not at the expense of critical distance. Through such interventions, trauma theory is an interdisciplinary endeavor, weaving together psychoanalysis, literary theory, history, and ethics. LaCapra makes a vital distinction between "acting out" - trauma's compulsive reliving and "working through"- striving to comprehend and incorporate it. His critique finds equilibrium between recognizing the need for narrative engagement with trauma and avoiding fetishizing its instability or simplism of resolution.

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 1900s, queer theory is a field of study that challenges the strict limits 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. Annamarie Jagose defined the term 'queer' as an "umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications".

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.

It is important to recognize the necessity for intersectionality in queer studies. In their attempt to define 'queer' David L Eng in his essay "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?" (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 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.(3)

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". 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". 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.

Queer theory began in the early 1990s as a break with identity politics. The stage was set by Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1976–84), which showed that contemporary notions of sexuality are socially constructed by power discourses and not as natural desires to be liberated. Foucault's theory of biopower—regulatory powers exercised over bodies and populations—demonstrates how institutions like psychiatry, education, and law normalize sexual acts and make certain desires pathological.

In 1990, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* broke with received history of homosexuality, disclosing the ways in which Western culture's intrigue with subtext and secrets about same-sex desire functions as a structuring absence. The closet, for Sedgwick, is not merely a metaphor for concealment, but a pervasive epistemic form that dictates what may be known, uttered, and seen. Her close readings of literary texts illustrate how repression and revelation co-constitute each other to create deep anxieties that have ramifications far beyond the field of sexuality. Sedgwick (1993) describes queer

as “continuing moment, movement, motive – recurrent, eddying, trouble...Keenly, it is relational, and strange”. She postulates that queer refers to identification that falls “across genders, across sexualities, across genres, across ‘pervasions’”. 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”.

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”. Thus, the term embodies a multitude of meanings and interpretations that continuously shift and interact, reflecting the dynamic and diverse nature of human identity.

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) offers the most powerful theoretical intervention queer studies has ever known. 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 recontextualization”. 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 by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed.(25)

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. Butler reworks Austin's theory of speech acts in order to insist that gender is performative: not an in-advance identity but a constant series of stylized acts generating the illusion of a coherent self. Gender instability, so understood, is then a site of constraint and possibility; parodic hyperboles of gender norms or subversive repetitions of them can produce fissures in the social architecture of heteronormativity. Butler's work places at center stage the vulnerability of bodies and identities, a vulnerability that trauma makes worse by disrupting temporal and affective continuity. 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.

Queer theory's turn to postcolonial, transnational, and trans studies complicates it further with trauma. Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), pre-dating the term "queer theory," is an example of this practice of a mestiza consciousness straddling multiple violences—imperial, heterosexist, linguistic. José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* (2009) explores the idea of disidentification, a process in which queer subjects in hostile environments rework dominant representations to create spaces of survival. Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) illuminates how orientation towards normative spaces—home, family, nation—produces exclusions of LGBTQ subjects and

new orientations towards resistance. These intersectional additions require trauma and queerness to always be placed in larger matrices of race, class, gender, and empire.

Trauma obliterates the linearity of time. Flashbacks, intrusions, and loops of queer temporality echo queer theory's deconstruction of teleological development. In queer fiction influenced by trauma theory, linear narrative yields to fractured form: scenes repeat with little variation, digressions proliferate, and focalization breaks. These narrative tactics enact trauma's latency and lateness, precluding the integration of a unified, coherent self. The nonlinearity of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, however, predating current trauma theory, addresses the same desire: a protagonist who exists over centuries, genders, and selves, testifying to the impossibility of narrative mastery over time.

The application of trauma theory to queer stories consists of understanding how psychic wound and social displacement intersect. Teresa Caprioglio's work, uncovers how queer characters tend to be presented as "traumatized queer identities", in which the acknowledgement of trauma serves as a precondition for queer visibility. These representational tendencies indicate that trauma tends to be intertwined with the cultural construction of queer identity as tragic. Additionally, texts on queer migrants, refugees, and racialized queer indicate a type of chrononormative violence, wherein not having coherent historical memory increases trauma and invisibility. Trauma in such contexts is both generative and erasing, generating fragmentation but also new ways of expression and communal resilience.

In contemporary literary theory, the intersection of queer studies and trauma theory has coalesced into a powerful arena – one that examines how queer subjectivities are affected by repeated violence, structural marginality, and narrative ruptures. Existing models of trauma, particularly those based on PTSD, pinpoint isolated catastrophic events. Queer theory, on the other hand, brings into relief the slow-burning cumulative trauma of heteronormative prejudice, family rejection, and political displacement.

Trauma is most often imprinted in the body. Critics like Elaine Scarry have discussed how bodily pain resists figuration, and Caruth contends that the trace of the wound might etch more forcefully in the registers of the body than of language. Queer books borrow this to describe bodies carrying the traces of remedial violence—prison rape, medical "normalization," intimate partner violence. Critics like Christine Levecq have discussed how embodiment in trans memoirs lays bare trauma's somatic archives: the mismatch between remedial surgery and psychic scar tissue, the awkward co-presence of relief and haunting. Such books require a reading practice that is not just aware of language but also of gesture, affect, and the materiality of flesh.

Queer memoirs and testimonies put the reader in the position of witness, recapitulating Felman and Laub's paradigm. Testimony is a revolutionary refusal: refusal to be silent, to be erased, to be pathologized. But testimony is also retraumatizing, for narrator and reader, and provokes what LaCapra terms "empathic unsettlement"—an engagement that recognizes difference without appropriating suffering as spectacle. The ethics of queer testimony therefore depend on balancing the imperative to speak with the imperative to listen

without appropriation. In the scholarship of scholars such as Ann Cvetkovich, who analyzes affective archives of depression and trauma in lesbian culture, testimony becomes collective, allowing queer publics to cohere around shared but differentiated wounds.

The intersection of queer theory and trauma requires a subversion of the politics of representation. Queer suffering is figured by dominant media in the terms of tragic exceptionality, queerness mapped onto pathos for the consumption of heteronormativity. Such representations are questioned by critical scholars in order to call for narratives that embody resilience, pleasure, desire, and erotic joy alongside pain. Authors like Jasbir Puar, in *The Right to Maim* (2017), explore how gay death in the AIDS epidemic was deployed in biopolitical regimes of sacrifice and security. Lesbian theorist Deborah Britzman has questioned how pedagogy can be a site for queer mourning and memory. These interventions require queer trauma narratives to refuse scripts of reductive victimhood, rather the co-constitutive relation between suffering and communal care.

Late-stage trauma theory's focus on relational and community recovery aligns with queer theory's interest in collective kinship and radical hospitality. Judith Herman's survivorship narratives highlighted the importance of mutual support and solidarity in recovery, a model replicated in queer chosen-family structures that developed in the wake of the AIDS epidemic and persist with current practices of mutual care. Eve Sedgwick's reparative reading—a form of engagement that is not simply a matter of unmasking oppression but of connection—aligns with current community arts projects that use performance,

film, and digital media to work through traumatic histories. In locating recovery in collective practice, the overlap between queer and trauma theories directs towards transformative praxis.

The exchange between trauma theory and queer theory provides a rich analytic vocabulary for queer narrative, one that respects the thickness of both psychic and sociopolitical harm. Through clinical, psychoanalytic, deconstructive, and phenomenological understanding, trauma theory explains how unassimilated experience disrupts temporal and bodily continuity. Queer theory, by contrast, discloses the discursive regimes that make bodies vulnerable and make some desires that cannot be grieved. Their intersection in narrative form—characterized by fragmentation, somatic imagery, testimonial demand, and ethical witnessing, provides a space for both mourning and radical remaking. As future scholarship turns to non-Western repositories of queer suffering and survival, the intersectional legacy of trauma and queer thought will continue to produce critical knowledge and aesthetic innovation, building communities that witness, cultivate joy, and verify the resilience of lives once deemed unlivable.

Chapter Three

Fractured Memories and Silent Longings

In *Crossing*, Pajtim Statovci choreographs a temporality of narrative that makes queerness and trauma productive forces conditioning all narrative elements of the novel. The fractured temporality of the novel, the shifting identities, and the somatic imagery inscribes queer theory and trauma into its very syntax. Trauma theory does its work here by performing the ways in which unrepresentable violence—of war, displacement, loss of family—breaks consciousness and infects the body long after the original event. Queer theory does its work here by showing how gender and national identity are discursive performativities, regulatory fictions that wound and empower. This chapter returns to the novel's most significant scenes and structures, demonstrating how trauma theory drives the narrative's oscillations of memory and repression, and how queer theory brings to life the protagonist's shifting embodiments and strategic misrecognitions.

Crossing 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 behaviour 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?(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.

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.(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. 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.(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.(74)

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". 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's 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.(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 "crisis of death". 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.(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 Butler'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.

Statovci's introduction to trauma theory starts with the novel's first suicide attempt in a Roman hospital—a moment of bodily failure that reenacts Pierre Janet's doctrine of dissociation. Bujar wakes up with no coherent history, tied only to the plastic restraints of the bed and the constant beep of monitors. This clinical tableau reenacts Janet's "fixed ideas," memories of violence so strong that they cannot be assimilated into linear consciousness. From these anesthetized origins, the text loops back to adolescence in Tirana, when Bujar first hears whispers of ethnic massacre and watches the slow dissolution of his father. These flashbacks are not backstory; they are delayed trauma symptoms, in Cathy Caruth's sense, refusing to stay latent.

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.(62)

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". Agim, who identifies as a girl despite being born a boy, responds that he is not gay and remarks "A girl can't be a peder". 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”. 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.(15)

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. 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”. 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. (67)

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". 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.(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 and Caruth's 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 hit 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. (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". 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.

The novel follows the repetition compulsion—Freud's signature symptom of traumatic neurosis—along Bujar's relentless tour of cities. Each successive city, from Milan's subway tunnels to Berlin's asylum stations, is a

theater on which the narrator re-stages his flight, re-revisits his exposure, and re-performs the same fear in new guises. It is only by retracing these loops—Rome, Madrid, Helsinki, New York, that the novel enables readers to see the accretion of unprocessed shocks: shudders at the sound of sirens, panic attacks in public cafés, night sweats replaying visions of his father's funeral pyre.

Statovci also literalizes Bessel van der Kolk's dictum that "the body keeps the score." The shakily held hands of the protagonist, his stiff walk through Helsinki's ultra-cold weather, and the impressions of bruises acquired in German detention camps are testimonials to violence that cannot be communicated solely through language. The prose of the novel when called upon around these scene becomes visceral minimalism—blood as "domesticated fire," flesh as "parchment that will not fold"—in which the body becomes a repository for trauma. Through such reminders of the body, the text operates as a trauma narrative: it eschews narrative mastery and closure, instead enacting repetitions of wounding that only partial disclosure can assuage.

While trauma theory offers *Crossing* its cadences of body and time, queer theory bestows it with its kinetic energy of identity performance. Referencing Judith Butler's gender performativity theory, Statovci acts out Bujar's self-fashioning as a series of stylized performances undertaken both defensively and defiantly. In Madrid, he outfits himself in powder and high heels, muttering the cadences of a fantasized Italy; in Germany, he performs as Bosnian Amina to ward off xenophobic surveillance. These are not costume drama but necessary accommodations to the somatic vulnerability of a queer

migrant. Each performance rehearses Butler's claim that gender is not an ontology but a repeatable set of norms—norms that Bujar inhabits and subverts. Queer theory also operates via the disidentification logic of José Esteban Muñoz. Faced with Italian tabloids presenting Albanian migrants as "hordes of criminals," Bujar and his childhood buddy Agim appropriate these stereotypes, slipping under their emanating hostilities. They misidentify as Turks or Bosnians, warping the dominant narrative's homogeneity to create corridors of flight. This recourse to disidentification underscores the manner in which minoritarian subjects endure by occupying and refusing the roles allocated to them by biopolitical regimes.

Sara Ahmed's 'queer phenomenology' also shapes the novel's understanding of space. Cities in *Crossing* are not backgrounds but orientation fields that stumble with affect: Rome's antiseptic corridors double despair, and Helsinki's wan dawns stir repressed longings. Bujar's body—orients against such spaces, mapping aversion and attraction to reveal what Ahmed calls the "stickiness" of social norms. Public toilets, refugee-center corridors, cafe terraces are charged spaces where normative gazes test the edges of his performative selves.

What is specific to *Crossing* is not so much its thematic engagement with trauma and queerness, but rather the way these theories function as active motors driving plot, character, and style. The novel's non-linear temporality is a result of trauma theory's focus on latency and belatedness; its somatic imagery is a result of clinical accounts of dissociation and body memory. Meanwhile, the

fluid embodiments and strategic misrepresentations of the protagonist characterize queer theory's notions of performativity and disidentification.

These two positions intersect in the climactic moment of Agim's fate. When Bujar eventually confesses his friend's death—found washed up on the shore after their Adriatic trip—it is an act of testimonial witnessing in Felman and Laub's sense. But this witnessing is inscribed with queer ethics: the confession avoids the redemptive routes of the norm and demands instead the openness of loss. Trauma theory supplies the demand to remember, and queer theory prescribes the form of remembering as an act of performative naming and un-naming.

Statovci's innovations in form are a debt to the operation of these theories in the text. His lyric minimalism—a torrent of brief, declarative sentences—is an echo of trauma's muteness and Butler's thesis of discursive repetition. The spatial poetics of the narrative—its invocation of each city as a body-politic—is an extension of Ahmed's phenomenology, positioning Bujar's queer orientations within contested social architectures. Even the frugal dialogues, in which Bujar invents accents or conceals his Albanian origins, demonstrate the operation of stigma and survival exposed by queer theory.

But *Crossing* eschews getting bogged down in theoretical representation. Its humor—like the in-joke on Finnish insomnia or the silliness of tabloid representation of Albanians as anthills—operates as reparative release, in accordance with Eve Sedgwick's appeal for affirmative readings that generate pleasure as much as criticism. These flashes of humor counter the

pathologizing of queerness and trauma into deviance, affirming the resilience of the protagonist in the face of intransigent precarity.

By queering the lexicon of trauma, Statovci also queers queer narrative possibility. He shows that trauma is not necessarily contained within heteronormative therapeutics but can instead generate aesthetic forms that refuse closure, fracture ossified identity, and require active witness.

In *Crossing*, queer theory and trauma theory are not far-off critical perspectives but cut through each line, bringing to life a novel of shape-shifting visibility and unhealed wounding.

In rewriting the reading of *Crossing* to bring to the fore how trauma theory and queer theory operate in the novel, we reveal the text's architectural brilliance. Trauma theory drives structural breaks, somatic ghostings, and the ethical responsibility of testimony, while queer theory infuses performative self-fashioning, strategic disidentification, and embodied orientation. Statovci combines these paradigms into a narrative motor that eschews stasis, insisting instead on constant crossing—of borders, genders, time, and memory. The outcome is a text that not only bears witness to the scars of displacement and marginalization but queers the very grammar of survival, inviting readers into an active, unsettled dialogue with identity's relentless becoming.

Chapter Four

Conclusion

Crossing 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.

From the opening pages of *Crossing*, in which Bujar wakes in a Roman hospital, his body hooked up to machines and his memories pilfered by trauma, to his final steps on Tirana's broken pavement, Pajtim Statovci has constructed a narrative that defies resolution. Rather than offering a tidy resolution between past and present, he plunges readers into the vertiginous disorientation of delayed memory, corporeal wounding, and ongoing self-transformation. In this research, I have outlined four interconnected movements: an introduction to queer narratives under pressure from heteronormative forces and state violence; a genealogical tracing of trauma theory against queer theory, through a synthetic framework of latency, performativity, somatic archive, and testimonial ethics; an intense application of that framework to the formal practices and ethical stakes offered in *Crossing*; and now, in this final chapter, a full reflection on the conclusions of these findings for literary studies, cultural politics, and the ongoing struggles toward solidarity.

The first chapter established queer narratives as important sites where queerness's wounds—erasure, shame, forced hiding—intersect with greater political violences of state, family, and history. The second chapter followed the intersection of trauma theory's clinical roots (Janet's dissociation, Freud's repetition compulsion, Herman's group cure, Caruth's deconstructive memory, Van der Kolk's somatic neuroscience) with queer theory's deconstruction of identity (Foucault's discursive genealogies, Sedgwick's closet, Butler's performativity, Muñoz's disidentification, Ahmed's orientation). Together, they created a conceptual window that resists the reading of trauma or queerness as subjects, rather revealing a very reciprocal relation: trauma sets the stakes of

queer embodiment and speech, and queerness reveals the regimes of normativity that govern traumatic legibility.

The third chapter saw applying the above analytical model to *Crossing*, showing how all narrative strategy—its non-linearity, paratactic simplicity, mythic digressions, and dramatic persona shifts—is a material expression of the interrelation between queerness and trauma. Bujar's relentless performances of nationality and gender are Butlerian performativity in practice but also repeat Freud's traumatic repetition compulsion; his insomnia and shaking resonate with van der Kolk's assertion that "the body keeps the score" in a language marked by lyric fragments and highly charged scenes. The self-conscious withholding of major revelations in the novel—most vividly, Agim's fate—demonstrates an ethical practice of testimony that echoes Felman and Laub's insistence on the responsibility of the listener.

By re-mapping theory and textual critique in this manner, the project has made clear the specific dynamics of *Crossing* and attested the productive potential in the intersection of trauma and queer models of theory. Both theoretical models reinforce one another: trauma studies develops an enhanced awareness of how regimes of normative power organize psychological damage, and queer theory is further empowered by trauma's emphasis on the body's unresolvable memory.

Statovci's formal decisions in *Crossing* are the prime example of how form may bear theory in its bones. The novel's broken temporality—alternating between hospital ward and childhood memory, bazaar of Tirana and white nights of Helsinki—embodies the latency Caruth theorizes as the delayed return

of trauma. These bits of time elude narrative control: they never come together to form a single origin story but instead live in constant tension, proposing that trauma is incommensurable with possession or containment.

The paratactic prose style, with its staccato rhythm and abrupt cuts, mimics the fracturedness of traumatic memory. Sentences are often autonomous from each other, their brevity emphasizing the truncated: a solitary detached clause—"He opened his eyes"—can bear the heavy freight of a lifetime of sorrow. There are, however, moments of poetic intensity—blood as "domesticated fire," memory as "a song without a voice"—that evoke the dreamlike nature of dissociative flashbacks. This tension between restraint and lyricism is one that subverts conventional narrative forms: it resists both the excess of realist description and the plainness of unadorned reportage, and therefore produces a hybrid form that is peculiarly responsive to the irreconcilability of trauma and the aesthetic uncertainty of queerness.

The register of the text becomes more elaborate with mythic digressions. Doruntina's story, taken from Albanian folk tradition and integrated into Bujar's nightmares, is an otherworldly interlocutor. Such moments of uncanny invocation serve a dual purpose: they underscore the crushing weight of collective violence, but at the same time create temporary release in the imagination. By blurring the distinction between history and myth, Statovci insists that survival is as much a function of the reworking of narrative traditions as of corporeal flight across the border.

Where *Crossing's* experimental form sets the mechanisms of queer trauma in motion, its ethical requirements compel that reading is never a neutral

act. Through calculated withholding of Bujar's birth name, of the circumstances of his father's death, of Agim's disappearance, the novel enacts what Laub calls "bearing witness in the presence of the unspeakable."

The reader is compelled to listen actively: to stay in silence, to stitch together fragmented hints, and to recognize the violence of imposing coherence upon another's suffering.

The ethical risk of unresolved witnessing has profound political stakes. In contesting the containment of trauma into tidily closed-up conclusions, *Crossing* resists narratives that reduce refugees' lives to tradable tragedies or queer subjects to symbols of salvation. Instead, it demands a recognition of queer-traumatized subjects in their particularity—seeing the intersection of war, homophobia, state marginalization, and familial violence that structures their lives. In this sense, the novel becomes a practice of solidarity that is not an act of compassion, but a persistent seeing, a commitment to look without turning away, and an openness to being altered by what we see.

The case of *Crossing* makes a number of contributions to literary and cultural studies. It first provides a more nuanced understanding of trauma narratives by underscoring the importance of normative power relations—particularly those of gender and nationality—on reception and articulation of psychological injury. Trauma theory is better informed about the challenges queer subjects encounter in attempting testimony. Meanwhile, queer theory is enriched by a more thorough exploration of the corporeal aspects of trauma, beyond discursive performativity of trauma to the neurological, somatic, and affective registers of memory.

Second, *Crossing* breaks new ground in migrant literature. Instead of dreaming of migration as a straight line from home to sanctuary, Statovci reveals migration as an infinite circle of crossing: of borders, of identities, of genres. This infinite movement reimagines refuge not as destination but as constant toil—of reinvention, of negotiating loss, of forming kinship in the spaces in between.

Third, the novel's mixing of mythic detail, lyricism, and clinical accuracy points toward new paths of structural innovation in trauma and queer fictions. By blurring generic expectations—moving from realism, magic realism, mythic evocation, and poetry clips, *Crossing* is a template for writers and critics intent on developing forms that house, not just describe, queerness and trauma.

This research has relied most heavily on close textual examination and the application of theoretical models. Although these methods have yielded rich accounts of the formal and ethical aspects of *Crossing*, they are necessarily constrained by the text and by dominant critical models. Subsequent research could expand this methodology by including empirical methods—such as survivor interviews, queer refugee co-creative workshops, or participatory research in partnership with trauma-informed organizations—to ground theoretical claims in lived reality.

In addition, the one case study of *Crossing* has its boundaries. While the novel is a brilliant exemplar of queer-trauma poetics potential, comparison across other genres of the period—fiction, memoir, graphic narrative,

performance—would further our knowledge of how such poetics works across modalities and cultures.

Several possible avenues are worthy of exploration. Comparative scholarship can explore queer-trauma narratives within postcolonial paradigms—considering, for instance, Southeast Asian queer refugees or queer diasporic communities of African descent—and explore how different historical sites of violence impact both bodies and stories. In the multimodal sphere, questions about film, graphic memoirs, and digital media can reveal how visual and sonic modes engage with latency and performance differently than written language. From an educational standpoint, trauma-informed and queer-affirmative curricula could model ways to teach these narratives in ways that center student well-being and promote community engagement.

Lastly, the convergence of queer-trauma literature and activism deserves scrutiny. How does literature incite asylum policy debate, initiate mental health activism for LGBTQ+ survivors, or foster grassroots unity between queer and immigrant movements? The line between scholarship and advocacy, between reading and witnessing, inevitably dissolves when stories entail the gravity of actual lives.

Pajtim Statovci's *Crossing* has been recognized as a significant twenty-first-century novel, simultaneously exploring the complications of trauma while respecting its long-lasting impact. Through the application of a complicated temporal structure, a focus on bodily expression, evocative mythological imagery, and a space of uneasy witnessing, the novel establishes the template for how stories can hold our darkest wounds without resolution and our most

vulnerable selves without adherence to traditional expectations. As engaged readers, scholars, and allies, it is our work to create these intersections: to hear for underlying nuances rather than insisting on logical coherence, to respect performative identities rather than imposing fixity, and to look at the act of revelation not as spectacle but as place of convergence. In the intersections of queerness and trauma, we do not only find the map of suffering but the architecture of resilience—places where creative expressions of kinship, resistance, and transformational imagination can be forged. This project comes full circle in the claim that literature's main strength lies in its capacity to maintain tensions in a condition of fruitful suspense: between past and present, between hurt and speech, and between self-formation and disclosure. In these tensions, one finds the tremors of potentiality—the promise that every crossing, no matter how challenging, opens up to new territories of growth.

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