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Looking at the Perpetrator in Nina Bunjevac's *Fatherland*

Olga Michael

Abstract: Nina Bunjevac's graphic memoir, *Fatherland* (2014), tells the story of her father, Peter Bunjevac, who died when she was a year old while preparing a bomb to attack the Yugoslavian Consulate in Toronto as part of his activities as a member of the Serbian terrorist group 'Freedom for the Serbian Fatherland'. This man is depicted as a distant, elusive father, through an account that is marked by gaps and aporias, and which is based on historical and newspaper accounts, portrait photographs, and testimonies told primarily by Nina's mother and maternal grandmother. In this article, I take *Fatherland* as a case study to explore the perpetrator portrayals that are enabled by the comics form. I investigate how the figure of the perpetrator becomes structured through the perspective of a daughter who did not know him and I demonstrate that the technique of braiding, bird-related imagery, and visual as well as textual circles become instrumental in foregrounding inter-generational traumatic bonds that seem to have triggered abusive and violent behaviours. Furthermore, I argue that the narrative's oscillation between the macro-level of the nation and the micro-level of the family, on the one hand, and between public and private histories, on the other, enriches and complicates the graphic display of this otherwise elusive, 'monstrous' perpetrator. In so doing, I showcase the value of graphic perpetrator narratives in facilitating more nuanced understandings of the figure of the terrorist, particularly in the post-09/11 context.

Keywords: perpetrator, terrorism, graphic narrative, *Fatherland*, Nina Bunjevac

Introduction

In her article 'Of Monsters and Men: Perpetrator Trauma and Mass Atrocity', Saira Mohamed refers to 'the all-too-common perception of perpetrators as cartoonish monsters' and explains how engagement with 'perpetrator trauma' may help counter such mono-dimensional perceptions.[1] Discussing Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem for the crimes against humanity he committed in his role as

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1 Saira Mohamed, 'Of Monsters and Men: Perpetrator Trauma and Mass Atrocity', *Columbia Law Association*, 115.5 (2015), 1157–1216 (p. 1157).

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an SS officer, she notes that throughout the proceedings, he was 'caged in a glass cage'.[2] While this cage was supposed to protect him from potential attacks, she continues, it 'ultimately […] served to put him on conspicuous display – to make him a spectacle'.[3] Later, Mohamed describes how 'people stared' through the glass to identify the traits that rendered this man a monster.[4] James Dawes also connects male perpetration with monstrosity when asking in *Evil Men* how 'societies turn men into monsters' and what 'the individual psychological process and felt experience of becoming a monster' feels like.[5] The perpetrator who is perceived as a monster becomes understood, first and foremost, as a terrifying spectacle – something to be deciphered upon being looked at – as also indicated by the Latin root of the term, 'mōnstrā́re', which means 'to show' or 'to be an object of note', inter alia.[6] Being a perpetrator, then, becomes peculiarly linked to the visual.

This link between the 'monstrous' perpetrator and the visual may suggest that comics could constitute a productive space for nuanced negotiations of this figure because of their visual/verbal hybridity and their 'gappiness', a term used to describe 'the blank spaces in-between the panels, and […] the potential disparities between verbal and visual meaning'.[7] While the use of literary works for unsettling mono-dimensional understandings of this persona has been extensively discussed, 'the representation of the perpetrator or accomplice in comics or graphic narratives […] remains largely unexplored', as Mihaela Precup and Dragoș Manea write.[8] Thus, in keeping with

2 Mohamed, p. 1157.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 1159.

5 James Dawes, *Evil Men* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. xi.

6 *The Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. by Peter G. W. Glare, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 1244.

7 Elizabeth el Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures* (Jackson: Mississippi University Press, 2012), p. 183.

8 Mihaela Precup and Dragoș Manea, '"Who Were You Crying for?": Empathy, Fantasy and the Framing of the Perpetrator in Nina Bunjevac's Bezimena', *Studies in Comics*, 11.2 (2020), 373-386 (p. 376). For a nuanced analysis of representations of perpetrators in graphic novels depicting genocides, see Laurike in 't Veld, *The Representation of Genocide in Graphic Novels: Considering the Role of Kitsch* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 83-126. For examinations of the perpetrator in literature, se Robert Eaglestone, 'Reading Perpetrator Testimony', in *The Future of Memory*, ed. by Richard Crownshaw, Jane Kilby, and Antony Rowland (New York: Berghahn, 2010), pp. 123–34; Richard Crownshaw, 'Perpetrator Fictions and Transcultural Memory', *Parallax*, 17.4 (2011), 75-89; Joanne Pettitt, *Perpetrators in Holocaust Narratives: Encountering the Nazi Beast* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Stephanie Bird, 'Perpetrators and Perpetration in Literature', in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (London: Routledge, 2020),

the other contributions in this special issue, my aim is to address this gap in comics scholarship by looking into how this persona becomes structured in Nina Bunjevac's *Fatherland* (2014). To this end, I focus on the book's displays of braiding that, as further explained below, concerns the repetition of visual items across panels and pages through a graphic narrative. Particularly, I investigate the implications of *Fatherland*'s repetitions of bird-related imagery and circles. At the same time, I look into the echoes between visual and narrative circularity in the text, whereby as the story develops it returns to the beginning, to enrich its articulation and to thus also complicate and nuance the depiction of the male terrorist. In so doing, I show that the contextualization of this male spectacle in the sequential graphic narrative can unsettle his mono-dimensional depiction as a monster. This visual/verbal contextualization foregrounds the suitability of the comics form and its attributes for the depiction of such difficult figures.

Departing from a focus on perpetrators of genocide, I investigate the perpetrator that is embodied through the figure of the terrorist who appeared in the context of Serbian diasporic nationalism in the US and Canada during the Cold War. My analysis explores the potential of graphic narrative to trigger a reconsideration of the 'monstrous' terrorist in the wake of 9/11, the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris, and other similar events that occurred at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Indeed, as *Fatherland* accounts for Peter's becoming a perpetrator, longer histories of world wars, national and ideological conflict, as well as of domestic abuse and trauma, enter the frame of representation through the affordances of comics, adding depth and complexity to his life story. In addition, and importantly, these histories foreground realities and perpetrators that often conveniently remain outside the frame of representation in mono-dimensional media depictions of 'monstrous' terrorists.

Peter died in 1977, when the cartoonist herself was a year old, while preparing a bomb targeting the Yugoslavian Consulate in Toronto as part of his activities as a member of the Serbian terrorist group 'Freedom for the Serbian Fatherland.'[9] Dragana Obradović explains that this group 'was loyal to the Chetnik leader Draža Mihailović.'[10]

pp. 301-301; Erin McGlothlin, *The Mind of the Holocaust Perpetrator in Fiction and Nonfiction* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2021).

9 Nina Bunjevac, *Fatherland* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2014), np. Bunjevac's graphic memoir does not include page numbers. For this reason, the following references to this text will not include page numbers.

10 Dragana Obradović, '"I Only Belong to One Tribe:" The Displaced Children of Yugoslavia', *Balkanist*, 14 May 2015, <http://balkanist.net/profile-nina-bunjevac-fatherland/> [accessed 20 March 2022].

Its young male members 'were Serbian nationalist émigrés united in their aim […] of taking down the Yugoslav government' by spreading propaganda across the Serbian diaspora, by attacking diplomats and other prominent Yugoslavs, and through military infiltration.[11] 'The peak of their activity', Obradović further relates, 'occurred in the early 1970s with attacks on Yugoslav consulates and embassies in North America.'[12] Peter's participation therein seems to have deeply influenced his role as a father in the domestic sphere. Indeed, he is constructed as distant and elusive, through an account that is marked by gaps and aporias, and which is based on historical and newspaper accounts, portrait photographs, and testimonies told primarily by Bunjevac's mother and maternal grandmother. The narrative also brings to the fore the ways in which the ideological conflict maintained by the autobiographical subject's father and grandmother, who fought as a Partisan during WWII, divides the Bunjevac family.

My analysis of the graphic narrativization of this male perpetrator, who is also an absent father, has two aims. The first is to examine the kinds of perpetrator portrayals enabled by the comics form. Specifically, I argue that *Fatherland*'s braiding, its visual and narrative circles, and its bird-related imagery constitute examples of 'nuancing gestures', which, according to Laurike in 't Veld, refer to 'visual and verbal strategies in comics that are aimed at presenting a more complex, nuanced, and morally ambiguous view of perpetrator characters'.[13] Such strategies, in 't Veld further explains, 'do not absolve perpetrator characters of guilt, nor are aimed at creating stories of redemption'.[14] Rather, they unsettle 'homogeneous view[s] of perpetrators as singularly depraved in favour of [their] consideration […] as humans with a variety of motivations'.[15] My second aim is to investigate how Peter becomes structured through the perspective of a daughter who did not know him, given that he died when she was one, and via the narrative's oscillation between the macro-level of the nation and the micro-level of the family, on the one hand, and between public and private histories, on the other.

11 Obradović, '"I Only Belong to One Tribe."'

12 Ibid.

13 Laurike in 't Veld, 'Nuancing Gestures: Perpetrators and Victims in Reinhard Kleist's *The Boxer*', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 3.1 (2019), 1-26 (p. 2).

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

The Graphic 'Patriography' of an Elusive Perpetrator

Mihaela Precup embeds *Fatherland* in a sub-genre of autobiographical comics about fathers and describes it as a daughter's attempt to write and draw 'a memoir about an absent father', which is, at the same time, 'a levelheaded investigation into the making of a perpetrator'.[16] This, she continues, is 'less a book about identity than it is about cause and effect; less a portrait of a father who is missed in spite of his problematic conduct […] and more a deliberately unemotional mediation of the effects of history on the individual and the power of ideology to separate a man from his family'.[17] Discussing the memoir in terms of its display of postmemory, Precup also situates it in the German literary tradition of '*Väterliteratur*, or *the literature of fathers*',[18] a term that illustrates, as she notes, 'the male-dominated Nazi culture of perpetration' as well as 'the deeply personal family connection of those who chose to write about this experience'.[19] According to Marianne Hirsch, postmemory refers to a 'belated or inherited memory' that has been acquired by the children of Holocaust survivors, primarily through photographs and the narration of stories, which become transmitted from one generation to the next.[20] In her analysis of the photographs incorporated in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, the seminal graphic memoir that accounts for his father's experiences as an Auschwitz survivor, Hirsch explains that 'post-memory should reflect back on memory, revealing it as equally constructed, equally mediated by the processes of narration and imagination'.[21] That narration in Bunjevac's *Fatherland* also depends on photographs illustrates the book's status as a work of postmemory, which nevertheless concerns the child of the perpetrator and not that of the victim and survivor of mass violence. Indeed, Obradović also observes that 'as a material object *Fatherland* is designed to look like a

16 Mihaela Precup, *The Graphic Lives of Fathers: Memory, Representation, and Fatherhood in North American Autobiographical Comics* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 108.

17 Ibid.

18 Erin McGlothlin, *Second-Generation Holocaust Literature: Legacies of Survival and Perpetration* (New York: Camden, 2006), p. 14. Italics in original.

19 Precup, *Graphic Lives*, p. 110.

20 Marianne Hirsch, 'The Generation of Postmemory', *Poetics Today*, 29.1 (2008), 103-128 (p. 107).

21 Marianne Hirsch, 'Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning, and Post-Memory', *Discourse*, 15.2 (1992/93), 3-29 (pp. 8-9).

photo album',[22] and it is precisely through stories and photographs that Bunjevac herself tries to decipher her absent father.

Väterliteratur, the tradition in which Precup embeds this text, constitutes a core segment of second-generation Holocaust literature that has been written by the children of perpetrators according to Erin McGlothlin, who also notes that the consideration of its implications has been 'largely avoided' in literary studies.[23] As it highlights the trauma and postmemory that mark the life of a perpetrator's daughter, *Fatherland* also foregrounds the role of the visual in the structuring of her inherited, aporetic memory of an absent father. As such, it also belongs in the life writing sub-genre of 'patriographies' that 'emerge from relationships that were experienced (by the writers) as deficient', and which constitute 'attempts to claim or even fashion a relationship with a father who is absent – because of death, geographical distance, or emotional reserve'.[24] Such 'filial narratives' about fathers display the ways in which these parental figures are absent from their children's lives in patriarchal contexts that relegate them outside the domestic sphere due to a number of reasons; for instance, because of their role as bread winners.[25] In *Fatherland*, Peter's absence from his daughters' lives is linked to his masculinist ideological stance and his terrorist activities, which eventually led to his undoing. While Nina herself does not remember him, given his early death and prior abandonment by his wife and daughters, her mother tells her that 'he was emotionally abusive, drank every day [and] talked politics incessantly'.[26] His familial bonds are displayed as haunted by emotional and physical distance and as strained through his involvement in 'Freedom of the Serbian Fatherland'.

The graphic memoir implicitly suggests the daughter cartoonist's trans-generationally transmitted trauma and shame. At the same time, however, it refrains from presenting Peter as a monster and from engaging in hagiography by attempting to justify or to minimize his actions. As such, it forces the reader to ponder in discomfort upon how and why a victim and witness of domestic and public, large-scale violence can turn into a perpetrator, and what it is like to be a perpetrator's

22 Dragana Obradović, 'Filial Estrangement and Figurative Mourning in the Work of Nina Bunjevac', in *Comics of the New Europe: Reflections and Intersections*, ed. by Martha Kuhlman and José Alaniz (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020), pp. 47-66 (p. 47).

23 McGlothlin, *Second-Generation Holocaust Literature*, p. 14.

24 Thomas G. Couser, 'Paper Orphans: Writers' Children Write their Lives', *Life Writing*, 11.1 (2014), 21-37 (p. 21).

25 Thomas G. Couser, *Memoir: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 154.

26 Bunjevac, *Fatherland*.

child. Through its displays of the adult daughter cartoonist's attempt to work through trauma, to make sense of, and come closer to, her father precisely through the crafting of the memoir itself, *Fatherland* presents an instance of what I introduce elsewhere as a filial act of 'graphic healing'.[27] In so doing, it also asks that we rethink Peter not as an extraordinary individual in isolation, but rather as a human being who navigates relational, familial, national, and other contexts. As a result, it brings to the fore what becomes erased through the label of the 'perpetrator', unsettling what Scott Straus describes as the oversimplification that the term causes in its capacity to '*blind* us to th[e] range of action' a person may pursue in a context of genocide, among others, thus 'leading the analysis to focus only on the act of violence'.[28] Comics, I argue in this article, can be a medium that enables the structuring of perpetrator narratives, which may potentially undo this blindness. Indeed, as Diana I. Popescu also writes in her analysis of perpetrator representations in visual arts, while 'images of perpetrators in public spaces continue to haunt, disturb, and trigger reactions', they also 'fulfil a crucial function as reminders of the fact that non-engagement with difficult questions about human nature raised by perpetrators is not acceptable'.[29] This is also what *Fatherland* does via Bunjevac's attempt to piece together the fragments of her father's life story.

Prior to accounting for the past of Peter's familial ancestors, the narrator explains that 'when [she] was a child [her] father's name was rarely mentioned in [their] household. The semi-complete picture I now have of him', she continues, 'took many years and much effort to put together'.[30] In the visual register, we see a repetition, albeit with a difference, of Peter's portrait photograph, which is initially presented on the cover page of the graphic memoir (Figure 1). In that first iteration, Peter smiles while looking away from the reader, avoiding their gaze while adhering to the conventions of portrait photography, the subject of which becomes, precisely because of, and through his/her staging, elusive. The black background of the cover page, the red of the book's

27 Olga Michael, 'Queer Trauma, Paternal Loss and Graphic Healing in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*', in *Arts of Healing: Cultural Narratives of Trauma*, ed. by Arleen Ionescu and Maria Margaroni (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), pp. 187–210 (p. 188).

28 Scott Straus, 'Studying Perpetrators: A Reflection', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 1.1 (2017), 28–38 (p. 29). Italics added.

29 Diana I. Popescu, 'Representing Infamous Others: Perpetrator Imagery in Visual Art', in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 321–331 (p. 328).

30 Bunjevac, *Fatherland*.

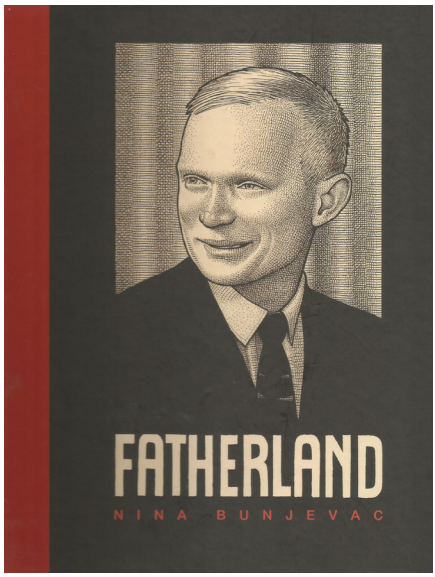

Figure 1: Peter's portrait photograph, *Fatherland*. © Nina Bunjevac.

spine, and the white of the title's lettering reference 'the colour scheme of the Nazi flag (black, white, and red), thereby telegraphing the shame of [Peter's] life that continues to leak into the present, beyond the family album', according to Dragana Obradović.[31] Thus, 'even before the story begins', Obradović aptly observes, 'the reader is introduced to an inherent tension between the father as a subject of grief *and* betrayal, an ambivalence created by the opportunities of the comics medium with its unique idiom of text, image and gutter'.[32] Peter's extremist ideologies indeed embody a repetition, albeit with a difference, of 'monstrous' Nazi ones. Nevertheless, as one reads through *Fatherland*, the impact of the Holocaust on determining his ideological stance becomes clear in the book's account of the constant fear in which he and his family lived concerning their potential transportation to the notorious Jasenovac concentration camp, since Serbs living in Croatia were added to the list of undesirables that had to be exterminated during WWII. Indeed, this is where his father died by being burnt in a gas chamber. Peter lives through this terror and brutality and his adult

31 Obradović, 'Filial Estrangement', in *Comics of the New Europe: Reflections and Intersections*, ed. by Martha Kuhlman and José Alaniz, p. 48.

32 Ibid. Italics in original.

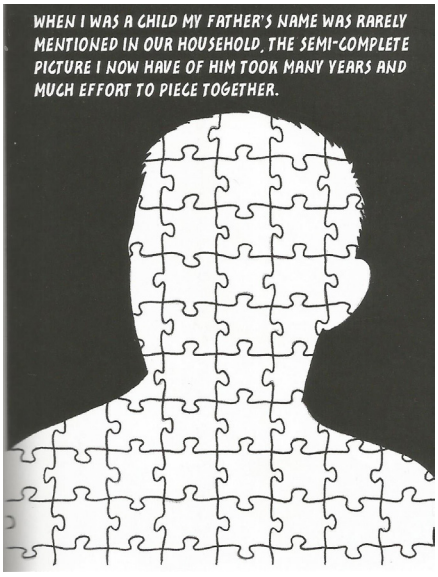

Figure 2: Peter's portrait as a jigsaw puzzle image, *Fatherland*. © Nina Bunjevac.

actions can be read as the outcome of this traumatic experience. Thus, in addition to Obradović's interpretation of the cover page, I would suggest that it also displays adult Peter, the elusive perpetrator, as the outcome of his childhood victimization and witnessing of horror in the context of WWII, as well as the events that followed it with the 'liberation' of Yugoslavia by the Soviet Army. In this sense, the cover, and, to a different extent, the narrative as a whole, trigger a plurality of ambivalent perspectives on Peter's becoming a perpetrator in the broader context of WWII and the Cold War.

In its repetition, albeit with a difference, in the *mise-en-scène* of the narrative, Peter's portrait photograph is presented as a jigsaw puzzle comprised of white pieces that literally erase his characteristics. Nina, the autobiographical subject, seems to have connected these pieces, completing the puzzle, in order to have access to her father's image, but, even as she does so, he still remains elusive (Figure 2). This visual metaphor embodies Peter's aporetic presence in his daughter's life, and the work Bunjevac does in the graphic memoir in her effort to fill in the gaps caused by his elusiveness. In explaining that Peter's name was hardly ever mentioned in the domestic domain and visually depicting him in this way, *Fatherland* illustrates, both visually and verbally, the

ways in which 'family memory has been manipulated, directed, and distorted to protect […] secrets',[33] and how in deciding to expose them, the author/cartoonist becomes charged with immense responsibility and vulnerability. Her responsibility lies in completing the difficult task of representing an accurate picture of her father, as best as she can, by voicing the silences of her familial past. Correspondingly, her vulnerability lies in how by doing so she is forced to metaphorically expose both her own and her family's wounds and shameful past. Indeed, while focusing on the macro-level of WWII and the Holocaust seems crucial in terms of tracing the steps that lead up to Peter's transformation into a terrorist, looking into the micro-level of the family highlights the injurious impact of his being seen and described as a mono-dimensional incomprehensible 'monster' in the domestic sphere. Abuse, in this sense, emerges as both explicit and implicit and it becomes displayed via both Peter and Momirka, Nina's grandmother. Because of this, to merely look into public history and the macro-level of WWII carries the risk of ignoring the perpetrator of domestic emotional abuse and the ways in which this is not only linked to the *male* Nazi 'monster'. In what follows, I examine how braiding, bird-related imagery and circularity become crucial in connecting the otherwise distant perpetrator father figure with Nina and her sister, Sarah.

Ruptured Families, Circles and Nests

Jan Baetens and Pascal Lefèvre write that comics narratives require readings 'capable of searching, beyond linear relations, to the aspects or fragments of panels susceptible to being networked with certain aspects or fragments of other panels'.[34] For Thierry Groensteen, 'braiding' is precisely what 'programs and carries out this sort of bridging', by working 'synchronically', thus demanding that we look into 'the co-presence of panels on the surface of the same page; and diachronically', requiring that we recognize 'in each new term of a series a recollection or an echo of an anterior term'.[35] It thus leads to the

33 Roger J. Porter, *Bureau of Missing Persons: Writing the Secret Lives of Fathers* (Ithaka, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 2.

34 Jan Baetens and Pascal Lefèvre quoted in Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, trans. by Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: Mississippi University Press, 2007), p. 146.

35 Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, trans. by Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: Mississippi University Press, 2007), p. 146-247.

'semantic enrichment and […] densification' of the text.[36] As it 'charges layout with meaning', braiding forces 'readers to re-evaluate previous'[37] conceptions of narrative fragments in relation to the whole. In other words, while reading a graphic narrative, one can identify how meaning formation becomes modified precisely because of, and through, the repetition of particular visual motifs. In *Fatherland*, braiding appears not only in relation to Peter's portrait photographs, but also in regard to circles and bird-related imagery, which have an important role in the narrative of the family's ruptures and Peter's transformation into a terrorist. Circularity is also core in how the story develops. It thus becomes literal, as manifested through visual circles that enrich the depiction of Peter's narratively structured relation to his two otherwise distanced daughters, both of whom were taken away from him after their mother decided to flee from Canada to Yugoslavia to protect them from the dangers caused by his terrorist activities. Further to this, circularity becomes displayed in the narrative's development. Its ending returns to the beginning, to repeat, albeit with differences (that add further detail to), the initial staging of the Bunjevac family dynamics in Canada, the mother's decision to escape with her daughters, and her life with her parents and the girls in Yugoslavia. This narratively structured circularity highlights the injurious impact of the ideological conflict between Peter and the girls' grandmother in the domestic domain, which led to the former being described by the latter as a monstrous perpetrator – 'a cold-blooded killer'.[38] The implicit and explicit violence of familial relations is also mirrored through Bunjevac's negotiation of birds and nests as symbolic of the domestic space and the familial bonds this space both implies and contains.

On a page that functions as a prelude to the beginning of the graphic memoir, the reader is presented with a circular shape that zooms in on the contents of a nest, which breaks into a background of blackness (Figure 3). As the narrative starts, we see adult Nina in the process of drawing the nest while listening to information about coot chicks. The depiction of the eggs in the nest on the wordless page highlights the vulnerability of the former and the safety offered by the latter. On the next page, a voiceover relates that as eggs turn into birds, 'food supply is scarce' and 'hungry chicks beg for food and are in turn punished by

36 Groensteen, p. 147.

37 Silke Horstkotte and Nancy Pedri, 'Focalization in Graphic Narrative', *Narrative*, 19.3 (2011), 330-357 (p. 336-337).

38 Bunjevac, *Fatherland*.

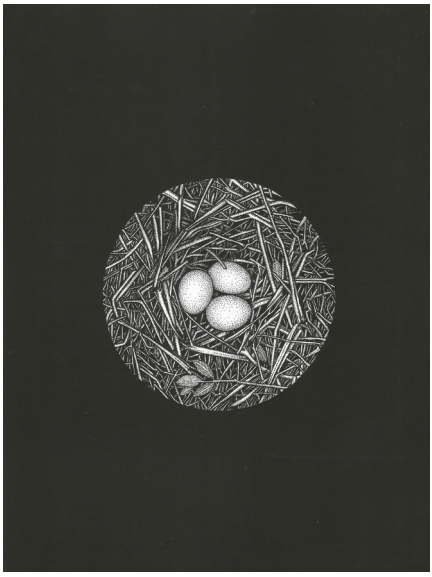

Figure 3: A nest including three eggs, *Fatherland*. © Nina Bunjevac.

the parents', ultimately having to abandon their efforts to survive, thus 'starv[ing] to death', so much so that 'out of a roost of nine only two or three' reach adulthood.[39] Visually, the parent bird is shown grabbing a chick by the neck in an image that displays parental brutality against one's offspring. This short narrative account of the young birds' survival struggles can be read as a graphic metaphor that demonstrates how external environment combined with parental brutality may lead to the literal or metaphorical death of one's offspring. In immediately following the wordless page (Figure 3), it enables a juxtaposition between the relative security of the nest (as family home), which provides shelter and protection, and the violence that characterizes the first stages of the chicks' lives. The depiction of Bunjevac's autobiographical avatar in the process of drawing this secure space among panels that recount brutal parental punishment invites readers to understand her family story through the lens of this metaphor.

As she tries to force her mother to remember details about their home in Welland, which they abandoned when she was a baby, the narrator explains that it was only in adulthood that she understood

39 Bunjevac, *Fatherland*.

'how crucial […] selective memory [had] been for her [mother's] survival' and that 'choosing to forget […] was a desperate attempt to suppress all the memories' their home 'once held […], of a life removed by more than three and a half years of trying desperately not to look back'.[40] Her mother's mnemonic repression becomes structured through the metaphor of not looking back. Such a spectral mnemonic recognition of the past entails injurious implications that stem from admitting to Peter's inability (or unwillingness) to abandon his terrorist activities, which eventually led to his undoing. They also derive from Nina's decision to unearth and expose, both visually and textually, this unspeakable familial life story in *Fatherland*, a graphic memoir that illustrates the injurious impact of such haunting legacies on relationships between parents and children. Gabriele Schwab writes that 'haunting legacies' refer to 'the things [that are too] hard to recount or even to remember [and to] the results of a[n unspeakable] violence that holds an unrelenting grip on memory'.[41] She further notes that 'the psychic core of violent histories [,which] includes what has been repressed or buried in unreachable psychic recesses', becomes passed on from the actual victims and perpetrators to future generations.[42] *Fatherland* displays the difficult heritage that Bunjevac inherited through her parents' traumas and her father's involvement in terrorism, as well as her attempt to artistically navigate a past that was marked by it. As such, it constitutes the artist's means of delving into these 'psychic recesses', where intergenerational trauma lies silenced and repressed, in an attempt to artistically repeat and articulate it, in the process of moving beyond it and towards reconciliation.

Reflecting on her own experiences as a child of Germans who lived through the Holocaust, Schwab writes that whenever she attempted to bring this topic up in the domestic sphere, her parents would call her 'a "*Nestbeschmutzer*", a term referring to a bird that soils its own nest'.[43] This characterization indicates that the attempt of a perpetrator's or even a bystander's child to come to terms with the past is perceived an act of familial betrayal. The figurative use of the 'nest' is noteworthy here, because it allows its re-interpretation in *Fatherland* as potentially 'soiled' or 'betrayed' through Bunjevac's decision to 'out' her family's

40 Bunjevac, *Fatherland*.

41 Gabriele Schwab, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 1.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid., p. 5.

secrets through her graphic memoir. Indeed, the narrator considers the 'potential repercussions of' asking her mother to remember and of writing the book. 'How will she cope?' she wonders, 'will she float? Will she sink?' continuing to note that 'the ability to float does not necessarily guarantee survival' as shown by the 'poor coot chicks'.[44] In the visual register, the final panel of this narrative fragment depicts the image of the chick and its parent prior to its punishment, figuratively mirroring Nina's relationship with her mother. This visual/verbal combination suggests a role reversal, whereby Nina herself becomes the punishing figure precariously injuring her mother by exposing her to the 'repercussions' of her own actions in what seems like an ambivalent form of necessary filial punishment in the telling of Peter's life story.

The image of the nest that precedes this narrative section is repeated, in an instance of braiding, prior to the account of familial bliss that is unsettled through Peter's activities. In contrast to her initial happiness, Nina's mother later starts proofing the windows of their family home with furniture and unsuccessfully tries to run away 'guided by an overwhelming sense of dread and paralyzing fear'.[45] The security of the domestic space – the nest – becomes ruptured precisely because of Peter's involvement in Serbian terrorist circles. Feeling that her domestic security is threatened and upon learning that a 'nearby Croatian Community Centre' was bombed, Nina's mother takes Nina and her sister, Sarah, to Yugoslavia, thus abandoning their home and rupturing the family by leaving Peter and Petey (her son) behind.[46] For Precup, in addition to his otherwise absent connection with his children, Peter's insistence on keeping the boy with him reflects his adherence to 'an older model of [hegemonic] masculinity' that exists alongside the one that characterizes Nazi perpetration.[47] Prior to the description of their arrival in Yugoslavia, the circle previously including the nest and the eggs is repeated, albeit with a difference. In this case, after its destruction, the nest is replaced by an airplane flying over a cloud from which two lightning bolts emanate. While this ominously foreshadows the further disruption and trauma that will follow, a speech bubble includes Sarah's questions about whether 'they

44 Bunjevac, *Fatherland*.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Precup, *Graphic Lives*, p. 116.

have chocolate' and 'cornflakes' in Yugoslavia, thus highlighting her ignorance in the midst of this difficult family story.[48]

The circle is also repeated with a twist twice in the narrative account of Peter's childhood. After referring to how Peter's grandparents migrated to the US at the turn of the century in order for Pepo, his grandfather, to work for Thomson Steel, the narrator explains how their son, Djuro was 'diagnosed with tuberculosis' and how his parents decided to return to their 'native village', Bogićevci, in Croatia.[49] 'I often wonder how Djuro felt at this point, having been raised in an American city and then, all of a sudden … finding himself knee-deep in the old world mud … homesick and isolated, on the long road to recovery', the narrator mentions.[50] While he did manage to survive his illness, 'unable to cope with emotional pain', he turned to alcohol as shown in the visual register.[51] After marrying Nina's grandmother, Stana, he became abusive. 'The beatings', the narrator explains, 'were something of a daily occurrence and more frequent after my father was born'.[52] During the sixth month of her pregnancy with their second child, Djuro threw Stana 'off the hay loft in a fit of rage' leaving her 'unable to conceive again'.[53] The circle that previously included the eggs in the nest and then the airplane travelling through a storm, now captures a crying unborn child with the umbilical cord that links its body to that of its mother as she falls off the hayloft, illustrating its precarious intra-uterine existence that violently came to an end. The graphic narrative thus offers readers access to an otherwise invisible consequence of the domestic, spousal abuse that Peter witnesses as a child, by visually capturing the infant that was doomed to death prior to its birth due to paternal violence. The children in this memoir, then, become linked through braiding and visual circles, which underscore their precarity in the midst of gendered domestic abuse. At the same time, preconceived ideas about the safety of the familial nest become undone. *Fatherland* thus highlights the micro-dynamics of physical as well as emotional violence in relation to the making of the perpetrator and regarding the damage his terrorist and abusive acts caused his own children.

48 Bunjevac, *Fatherland*.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.

In its final repetition with a twist, the circle becomes ruptured and displaced from the position in the centre of the page it previously held (Figure 4). Immediately after recounting the domestic abuse that Peter witnessed as a child, the narrative turns to the macro-dynamics of violence in the context of WWII, the invasion of Yugoslavia by Axis forces, and the subsequent dismantling of the country. 'Already exhausted by preexisting ethnic tension the country was occupied within 11 days and sectioned off into a number of satellite states ruled by Germany, Italy and Bulgaria', the narrator explains.[54] Croatia was under the rule of the 'exiled politician Ante Pavelic and the Ustashe militia,' while 'in Serbia, a Nazi-backed puppet government was established'.[55] Immediately, the narrator continues, 'a network of detention and concentration camps begun sprouting throughout the territory of former Yugoslavia'.[56] This information is also topographically marked on a map, with Pavelic and Milan Bedic, the man who oversaw the puppet government imposed in Serbia, being visually embodied in graphically reproduced portrait photographs similar to that of Peter. The narrative thus zooms out to territorially mark the geopolitical developments of WWII, with the two men metonymically embodying the bio- and necro-political operations of the Axis enacted through the local puppet governments in the territory that now became former Yugoslavia. 'Belgrade', the narrator continues, 'became one of the first Judenfrei cities in Europe'.[57] Via this comment, she refuses to neatly place Serbia in the position of the victim, even as *Fatherland* focuses on the harms suffered by Serbians during WWII.

In this context, David Bruce MacDonald writes that in the Serbo-Croatian conflict, the 'success of nationalist regimes depended on their ability to present national history as one of righteous struggle against persecution'.[58] WWII embodied the 'the apogee of [this] conflict, four years when each side supposedly unleashed full-scale genocidal terror against the other'.[59] For each side, 'the revision of the history of the Second World War provided a wealth of myths of heroism and persecution' and for this reason 'descriptions of perpetrators and

54 Bunjevac, *Fatherland*.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 David Bruce MacDonald, *Balkan Holocausts? Serbian and Croatian Victim-Centred Propaganda and the War in Yugoslavia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 132.
59 Ibid.

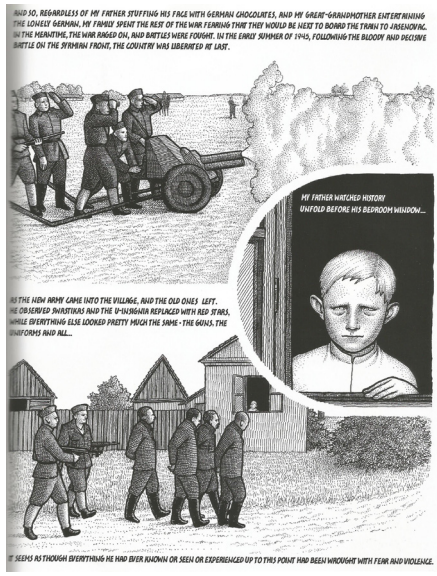

Figure 4: Peter looking through his bedroom window, *Fatherland*. © Nina Bunjevac.

victims […] became incredibly important' in illustrating how Croats and Serbs, respectively, 'magnified the evils of the others in an attempt to whitewash their own crimes'.[60] In referring to how Belgrade became one of the first 'Jew-free' cities in Europe, Bunjevac highlights Serbian complicities in the genocidal extermination of the Jews during the Holocaust, unsettling the myth of the country's pure victimization. She further accounts in detail for the horrors of Jasenovac, which 'left a lasting mark in the collective memory of the Serbian minority' that 'was to fuel the uprising of Croatian Serbs in the early 1990s and to serve as a tool of manipulation and fear-mongering in the decades to follow'.[61] Thus, the narrative also demonstrates how this painful part of history was exploited to facilitate the continuation of conflict and bloodshed in the years to come.

Nina also juxtaposes Nazi and Ustasha extermination practices. The latter were based on a 'hands-on approach to systematic slaughter […] going as far as to invent a handy strap-on weapon called "Serbosek", which roughly translates as "Serbocut"'.[62] This type of slaughter was in

60 MacDonald, 133.
61 Bunjevac, *Fatherland*.
62 Ibid.

stark contrast with the 'sinister and void of emotion […] way [in which] the Germans eliminated their undesirables'.[63] Visually, the narrative presents a man's decapitation by Ustasha soldiers facilitated by the use of a saw. Most of the soldiers are depicted looking at the implied reader, as if in recognition of being watched/photographed, underscoring the spectacle of gruesome violence, with the final panel zooming in on a hand wearing a 'Serbosek'. These two panels at the bottom of the page are placed in contradistinction to the one at the top, which evokes neater, more 'scientific' and 'experimental' approaches to mass murder enacted by the Germans. Six boys are depicted nude, standing in line, with their gaze directed towards a Nazi official, as indicated by his uniform, who measures, with the use of an instrument, the size of a man's head. As such, while death remains neatly off-scene, the visual contents of this panel eerily evoke Nazi experimentation on human anatomy, as well as on mass sterilization and extermination, which occurred in the camps and led to the death of millions of children and adults alike.[64]

Moving from the mid-twentieth century further into the past, Bunjevac offers a historical overview of all the powers that occupied the region of former Yugoslavia and the ethnic and religious divisions these conquerors imposed on the local population that had previously co-existed peacefully. Explaining that both Croats and Serbs forgot their common past during WWII, something that led to the extermination of many, including Peter's father in the Jasenovac camp, the narrator notes that Peter and his family survived because of a German soldier. 'I've learned only recently', she mentions, 'that I may owe my existence to a lonely German officer stationed in my father's village' who spoke 'a bit of basic English' like 'my great grandmother'.[65] The officer 'would sit and chat' with her 'over coffee and chocolates, brought as a gift for my young father'.[66] In the visual register, Peter is shown sitting in the officer's lap, and the panel that follows offers readers visual access from the boy's viewpoint, zooming in on the officer's hat with the Nazi insignia lying on the table. In this sense, this Nazi 'perpetrator' becomes humanized through his interaction with Peter and his family, whom he potentially had saved. It is precisely at this narrative point

63 Bunjevac, *Fatherland*.

64 For further information on medical perpetration during the Holocaust see 'Medical Experiments', *Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum*, n.d., <http://www.auschwitz.org/en/history/medical-experiments/> [accessed 28 March 2022].

65 Bunjevac, *Fatherland*.

66 Ibid.

that the circular shape becomes repeated, with a twist, in this final display of visual circularity and braiding.

The circle is now ruptured and displaced from its previously central position, in a page that shows Axis soldiers in battle at the top part, and Soviet soldiers holding weapons as they walk with hostages at the bottom part (Figure 4). 'In the early summer of 1945', Bunjevac writes, 'following the bloody and decisive battle of the Syrmian Front, the country was liberated at last. As the new army came into the village, and the old ones left', she continues, Peter 'observed Swastikas and the U-Insignia replaced with red stars, while everything else looked pretty much the same – the guns, the uniforms and all'.[67] The two large panels seem to function as reflections of one another. In being far-removed from the soldiers, the perspective they mediate seems to purposefully hide the visual symbols that (ideologically) distinguish the two armies thus highlighting their commonly traumatic impact on Peter. 'My father', the narrator explains, 'watched history unfold before his bedroom window. It seems as though everything he had ever known or seen or experienced up to this point had been wrought with fear and violence'.[68] In paying close attention to the visual contents of the panel depicting the Soviet army's entry into Peter's village, one can notice him in the background watching from inside his home. The ruptured half-circle, which remains open, symbolically illustrates the uncontainability of the trauma which seems to have influenced his later life and constitutes a close-up on the child that is almost unnoticeable in the larger scale of events. It is precisely through this nuancing gesture, to use in 't Veld's words, that *Fatherland* complicates the narrative of Peter's 'monstrosity' by bringing to the surface a lineage of other perpetrators, both implicit and explicit, who seem to have impacted his growing up and his transformation into a terrorist.

Wounding Words and Birds

With his mother having died of tuberculosis and his father having been killed in Jasenovac, Peter suffers the consequences of trauma and loss but has no support, familial or otherwise, that would help him recover from them. As his mother is carried to the graveyard in a coffin, women

67 Bunjevac, *Fatherland*.
68 Ibid.

comment upon his abusive behaviour against animals. 'Something is seriously wrong with that kid', one of the women notes, as she recounts how he 'wrung' the goslings' necks, while another demands that they leave him alone given how much he has suffered with his father having been burnt 'in the ovens' and his mother having died from tuberculosis.[69] Peter is shown listening to these conversations in a framing that foregrounds the injurious effect of these words on him, foregrounding his othering and the discursive formation of his boyish 'monstrosity' in the local community. Having heard about how his father was burnt to death in the inhumanity of Jasenovac, he seems to repeat this crime, albeit on a cat, which he too throws in an oven, abandoning it there to die, becoming, thus, a perpetrator. Unable to treat his grandson's trauma, Peter's grandfather beats him up using a stick in an attempt at discipline that is doomed to failure, and he then sends him off to military school to prevent him from further delinquency. *Fatherland* thus highlights the ways in which collective and private stories of trauma, on the one hand, and the macro- as well as the micro-dynamics of violence, on the other, seem to have shaped the route Peter was to take in his adulthood, which also deeply marked his own children's lives.

While Nina is depicted in *Fatherland* as unaware of the trauma that occurred around her, her older sister, Sarah, seems to have suffered more from the loss of her father during her childhood, which was inflicted by both his abandonment in Canada with Petey and through his death. Living with an authoritative matriarch in Yugoslavia in the 1970s, Sarah was the one to experience the injurious impact of the ideological conflict that positioned her father and grandmother on opposing sides. The fights between Momirka, who fought as a Partisan during the war, and Peter, an extremist nationalist, who was involved in terrorist activities, were frequent when she visited her daughter's family in Canada. At her home in Yugoslavia, an incident on Sarah's birthday reflects the injurious impact of her grandmother's take on her father, and like the incident with Peter and the women at his mother's funeral, this one also demonstrates the wounding impact of her words. In Sarah's presence, Momirka tells her daughter that it is not that Peter cannot come and join his family but that he does not want to. 'What else would you expect from a cold-blooded killer?' she asks while decorating the girl's birthday cake.[70]

69 Bunjevac, *Fatherland*.
70 Ibid.

At this point, the visual narrative frame zooms in on Sarah, reminding us that she witnesses her grandmother's discursive framing of her father as a monstrous perpetrator who does not wish to reunite with his family. 'The sooner she learns who her father really is', Momirka tells her son, Nina and Sarah's uncle, 'the better she'll be', continuing to clarify, as the girls later enter the house, that she 'won't have [them] raised by a lunatic'.[71] When Sarah is asked by her mother whether she is having fun, she expresses her wish for her father and brother to have been there and Momirka intervenes forbidding her to ever 'mention that man in [her] house again'.[72] Later, as she blows out her birthday candles, her uncle begins a fight with her grandmother and yells at her that she is 'worse than Hitler'.[73] As the narrative frame moves from the past to the present and Nina's conversation with her mother at her flat in Canada, we see the latter recounting her feelings upon receiving the news of her husband's death. 'The hardest thing', she notes, 'was seeing how Sarah took the news. She was quiet for most of the day', and when the two were alone she asked for permission to cry over the loss of her father.[74] Nina's mother further relates that Momirka 'hated Peter so much, [they] weren't allowed to mention his name, let alone show sadness over his passing. Imagine living like that', she tells Nina, 'leaving one prison only to find you're living inside another'.[75]

In *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Judith Butler describes the ways in which language injures individuals because we are 'linguistic beings, […] who require language in order to exist. If we are formed in language', she continues, 'then that formative power precedes and conditions any decision we might make about it, insulting us from the start, as it were, by its prior power'.[76] While being called a name forms 'one of the conditions by which a subject is constituted in language', it can also mean that one becomes wounded, in their insulting, injurious interpellation.[77] *Fatherland* shows that Peter's injurious interpellation as a 'monstrous' perpetrator since his childhood wounds both him and his children. His continuous discursive formation and understanding as such and his untreated trauma seem to have, at least

71 Bunjevac, *Fatherland*.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
76 Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 2.
77 Ibid.

partly, predetermined his undoing. His terrorist involvement, and Momirka's linguistic construction of his perpetrator 'monstrosity', as witnessed primarily by Sarah, illustrates how ideological conflict seems to supersede familial stability and security, with the children's affective bonds with their parents becoming strained and their psychological state being side-lined. This indeed seems to be a commonality between Peter's and his children's childhoods.

The decisive role that Momirka had in the family's rupture in her own attempt to protect her daughter and grandchildren from the consequences of Peter's actions becomes clear in the closing part of *Fatherland*, which revisits the beginning, thus structuring a narrative circle. Differentiations in the text and image enrich narrative development, highlighting the ways in which the textual informs the reading of the visual in a comics text and vice versa. For instance, the panel that visually captures the fear of Nina's mother concerning their home being attacked and which follows the depictions of her safeguarding of the windows with furniture, initially explains that her actions were 'guided by an overwhelming sense of dread and paralyzing fear'.[78] In its repetition with a twist, at the end, it informs the reader that Nina's mother was 'gripped by paralysing fear that someone may throw a bomb through the window and kill us all'.[79] In the first case, this narrative fragment is positioned prior to that which refers to the bombing of a Croatian community centre nearby. In the second, it is positioned after it, thus presenting this fear as the outcome of this event, in which Peter's direct or indirect involvement remains only to be speculated.

Further to this, early in the narrative, Nina's mother refers to a letter Peter sent her, pleading with her to return to Canada, to which Momirka responds, as witnessed by Sarah, that 'it's not that he can't but he won't' come to Yugoslavia, because he is 'a cold-blooded killer'.[80] In the end, the account of Peter's letter exchange with his wife shifts to his home in Canada. 'Dad's reaction […] goes from denial to rage, from accusation to pleading. The truth is', the narrator mentions, 'there's nothing he wouldn't do for his family'.[81] As he writes of his inability to leave the organisation because this 'would have lethal consequences [as] he's already done too much and he already knows too much', we

78 Bunjevac, *Fatherland*.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid.

see Peter smoking and heavily drinking in the visual register.[82] 'Mom replies with: "It's not that you can't, but you won't! I am not coming back"', the narrator relates, indicating how Momirka's words become reproduced in her daughter's letter to her husband.[83] A year into their departure, Peter is depicted as an emotional wreck, experiencing auditory delusions such as hearing Nina crying. Unable to cope with the emotional and psychological pressure, he unsuccessfully attempts to commit suicide and writes the names of his children on the bathroom wall with his blood after having slashed his wrists. Subsequently, he dies in an explosion with two others, while preparing a bomb to blow up the Yugoslavian Consulate in Toronto in revenge for the murder of Dragisa Kasikovic and his stepdaughter. Like Peter himself, Kasikovic, 'the editor of the Serbian *émigré* newspaper *Liberty*',[84] was also involved in terrorist attacks organised by 'Freedom for Serbian Fatherland'. As Bunjevac writes, after his arrest in 1967, he was 'given immunity in exchange for [his] testimony', and declared, upon his release, that 'history will reveal that the six-bomb attack carried out on January 27th was a just deed'.[85] Ten years later, he and his stepdaughter suffered multiple stab-wounds in a crime that remains unresolved but connected with the Yugoslav Intelligence Service.[86] In this sense, what happens in the larger scale of events concerning the nation once again opens up the path for Peter's undoing, thus further harming his family too.

In its circular narrative development, and in the repetition, with a twist, of visual and textual elements, *Fatherland* complicates and enriches mono-dimensional understandings of Peter as a 'monstrous' incomprehensible perpetrator, as well as of his death, since it allows room for speculation that it might also have been another, successful, on this occasion, suicidal act. The circle is therefore both a theme and a motif, and the echoes between visual and textual circularity have a crucial narrative role in terms of structuring Peter's relational subjectivity, as well as in highlighting the potential offered by comics for nuanced articulations of perpetrator life stories. In his analysis of braiding in *Watchmen*, Groensteen points out that the comic 'is notably structured by a declension of the figure of a circle, used both as a

82 Bunjevac, *Fatherland*.

83 Ibid.

84 Andrew B. Spiegel, 'Human Rights Versus National Security', *Houston Journal of International Law*, 4.133 (1981), 148-156 (p. 153-154).

85 Bunjevac, *Fatherland*.

86 Spiegel, 'Human Rights Versus National Security', p. 153.

recurrent geometric motif that lends itself to plastic rhymes, and for its symbolic connotations', which include 'eternal recommencement'.[87] In *Fatherland*, narrative and visual circles foreground the eternal recommencement of violence that causes precarity and vulnerability, it renders trauma inescapable, it leads to perpetration of further violence, it creates 'haunting legacies', and it ruptures inter-generational family bonds. In so doing, the narrative's circularity also links Peter's childhood with that of his daughters.

Prior to describing her mother receiving the news of Peter's death in the summer of 1977, the narrator informs readers that 'in the Balkan tradition of dream interpretation, to dream of birds signified that the dreamer is about to receive news' and that 'dreaming of raw meat is often seen as a sign of death. On the night between August 27 and 28', she continues, 'my grandmother' dreamt of 'a murder of crows perched along the powerline [and of] a man slaughtering a pig. She could not see the man's face but she somehow knew that it belonged to my father'.[88] Crows perched along a powerline during stormy weather, as manifested by dark clouds and lightning bolts, are visually depicted prior to this piece of textual information. The reappearance of braiding in regard to lightning bolts at this temporal point seems to ominously highlight the permanence of Peter's absence from the girls' lives, and to connect this narrative fragment with the circle that previously illustrated the initiation of this rupture upon Sarah and Nina's flight to Serbia with their mother, and his abandonment in Canada. In the *mise-en-scène* narrative, Nina is depicted accompanied by her uncle, who is teaching her how to draw birds when they learn that Peter has died. Momirka tells her daughter, in the presence of the children, that the telegraph informing her about this is a trap because it asks that she returns to Canada. 'Mark my words', she tells her, 'you go back and you are as good as dead'.[89] In the visual register, she crushes the remains of her cigarette in an ashtray, itself drawn in a circular shape, in an image that can be read as a metaphor that visually displays the injurious impact of her attitude towards Peter on the children and her daughter. The subsequent wordless page shows the flock of birds flying away from the tree branches, on which they had previously been perching (Figure 5).

Fear is a contaminating emotion, and it can spread from one bird and human being to another. Jacek Debiec writes that 'fear contagion

87 Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, p. 155.
88 Bunjevac, *Fatherland*.
89 Ibid.

Figure 5: Birds in flight, *Fatherland*. © Nina Bunjevac.

is an evolutionarily old phenomenon that researchers observe in many animal species'.[90] Brains, he explains, 'are hardwired to respond to threats in the environment. Sight, smell or sound cues that signal the presence of [a] predator automatically trigger […] survival responses' in animals and humans alike'.[91] 'The amygdala, a structure buried deep within the side of the head in the brain's temporal lobe', Debiec further relates, 'is key for responding to threats. It receives sensory information and quickly detects stimuli associated with danger. Then [it] forwards the signal to other brain areas, including the hypothalamus and brain stem areas, to further coordinate specific defence responses'.[92] Responses to threat such as 'fright, freeze, flight or fight', are common in humans and animals alike.[93] In *Fatherland*, the narrative function of the birds, in this case, in addition to their being

90 Jacek Debiec, 'Fear Can Spread from Person to Person Faster than the Coronavirus – But There Are Ways to Slow it Down', *The Conversation*, 16 March 2020, <https://theconversation.com/fear-can-spread-from-person-to-person-faster-than-the-coronavirus-but-there-are-ways-to-slow-it-down-133129> [accessed 4 August 2021].

91 Ibid.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid.

omens of bad news, concerns their mirroring of human responses to the figure of the 'monstrous' perpetrator. The flock of birds flies away as a response to a stimulus that may have provided a cue for the presence of a predator or another threat. Likewise, at the presence of a person perceived as a perpetrator, people may display various responses similar to those that exist in the animal kingdom.

Indeed, Peter himself is depicted at an emotional and spatial distance from others, thus remaining largely unapproachable and incomprehensible. Human responses to perpetrator threat, however, unlike those displayed by animals, may also include insulting the person perceived as threatening, and injuriously interpellating them as an incomprehensible 'monster' that needs to be contained, controlled, and/or even exterminated, both literally and metaphorically. In this sense, at the same time as highlighting the insecurity of the domestic space, the nest, and mirroring parental brutality, the bird-related imagery of *Fatherland* also metaphorically depicts human attitudes towards the figure of the threatening perpetrator. Ironically, the fact that the autobiographical subject is being taught how to draw birds at the temporal point when she learns the news of her father's death, and that as an adult cartoonist Bunjevac makes the artistic decision to use them as figurative devices that enrich and complicate her father's relational life story, illustrates how this elusive perpetrator father figure became a source of artistic inspiration for his daughter. This inspiration resulted in a graphic memoir that constitutes a daughter cartoonist's attempt to untangle the difficult, 'haunting legacies' she inherited, and to reconceptualize and re-cast family bonds, members, and secrets in an attempt of filial graphic healing.

Coda

Fatherland closes with Mara, Peter's aunt, receiving the news of his death. Since she is the only person who has cared for him since his childhood, and who has remained close to him, she is devastated upon learning of his death. Her devastation is displayed in a series of wordless panels which depict her silhouette, first, in a position that indicates physical pain, and then, as she falls into the void. A boyish figure follows her, and she is thus there to catch him when he falls. For Precup, this 'is an image of postmortem protection, belated and useless, testifying in fact to the inability of mourners to protect their dead, and – in this case

– the adults' inability of extending their protection over the children once in their care'.[94] That it is Mara who is drawn holding Peter, ineffectively protecting him as they fall, points to the inadequacy of the care she showed for him in the midst of the suffering he experienced as a child and an adult. In the centre of the final page of the narrative, a bird can be seen standing at a window frame, figuratively alluding, for the last time, to the ambivalent links between the elusive father and his children as it also symbolically seals the end of Peter and the narrative.

Obradović writes that 'Bunjevac has attributed the success of the graphic narrative in North America to the geopolitical context post-2001 and its fascination with terrorism'.[95] She further mentions a noticeable 'shift in the conversation around *Fatherland*' after the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, and quotes Bunjevac herself who explains when asked 'why young people turn to extremism' that 'behind every terrorist, there's a genuine feeling of injustice.'[96] Echoing this notion, Dawes, in *The Novel of Human Rights*, points out that 'we live in a world of compromised options and unforeseen consequences' and that 'justice urgently calls us to decisive action'.[97] In a given context, then, where a person perceives an act or a state of things as one of injustice, they may be forced into decisive actions, which can be perceived as 'monstrous', given how one person's injustice is another's justice and *vice versa*. In the post-*Charlie Hebdo* French context, *Fatherland*'s 'exploration of one man's radicalization [had] a far more localized resonance', as Bunjevac points out.[98] People saw the shootings as an outcome of deep structural problems in French society and turned to the book to 'understand the world […] they [found] themselves in'.[99] Contrary to Eichmann's glass cage in the court in Jerusalem, through which people had access to a silent, incomprehensible monster, because of its form, *Fatherland* casts a complex take on the injustices both experienced and perpetrated by Peter.

Discussing the role of literature in relation to understanding the figure of the perpetrator, Elizabeth Swanson asks the following questions:

94 Mihaela Precup,'"To Dream of Birds:" Autobiography, Photography, and Memory in Nina Bunjevac's "August, 1997" and *Fatherland*', in *The Canadian Graphic: Cartoonists, Comics, and Graphic Novels from the North*, ed. by Dominick Grace and Eric Hoffman (Jackson: Mississippi University Press, 2017), pp. 207-223 (p. 217).

95 Obradović, 'Filial Estrangement', in *Comics of the New Europe: Reflections and Intersections*, ed. by Martha Kuhlman and José Alaniz, pp. 49-50.

96 Ibid., p. 50.

97 James Dawes, *The Novel of Human Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 202.

98 Obradović, '"I Only Belong to One Tribe"', np.

99 Ibid.

> How can ties to nation, ethnicity, or religion – sources of strength, comfort, safety, and identity –morph into wellsprings of hatred, violence, and atrocity? How can we prevent the solidification of identities and ideologies formed in opposition to others and informing violent or even genocidal impulses against them? What can we learn about the deep structure of subjectivity as it manifests in creating the various subjects –perpetrators, victims, and beneficiaries –who appear before the law? What is the relationship between individuals and institutions in the perpetration of atrocity and survival in its aftermath? And how can we continue to prevent the creation of "little Eichmanns" [...] who leave so many victims in their wake?[100]

Literary and graphic perpetrator narratives cannot, of course, help prevent the formation of such individuals. Like other types of human rights literature, when it comes to triggering substantial political action, they seem doomed to reach an impasse. They can, however, provide insights into the workings of all the institutional, ideological, and other factors that may lead one to becoming a perpetrator, as shown by *Fatherland*'s narrative account of Peter's transformation into a terrorist. While media coverage of terrorist attacks presents such phenomena as symptoms of the present moment, and terrorists as incomprehensible, threatening 'monsters', thus failing to link their actions to longer histories of oppression and violence, *Fatherland,* via its 'proliferation of frames',[101] foregrounds the ways in which the macro- and micro-dynamics of geopolitical and other forms of violence can influence, at least to an extent, the emergence of a perpetrator. Bunjevac's use of braiding, bird-related imagery, and circularity presents a complex, insightful take on the relational figure of the otherwise elusive 'monstrous' father, it undoes the 'blindness' caused by the label of the 'perpetrator', and it enables further examination, both scholarly and otherwise, of his acts.

100 Elizabeth Swanson, 'Perpetrators, Victims, and Beneficiaries: The Subjects of Human Rights', in *The Cambridge Companion to Human Rights and Literature*, ed. by Crystal Parikh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 193-205 (p. 203-204).

101 Hillary L. Chute, *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics and Documentary Form* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), p. 16. For a discussion on how the 'othering' of Middle-Eastern, mostly Muslim men who are perceived as terrorists becomes produced through their media representations causing these men's aggressive biopolitical control see Lilie Chouliaraki and Myria Georgiou, 'Hospitability: The Communicative Architecture of Humanitarian Securitization at Europe's Borders', *Journal of Communication*, 67.2 (2017), 159–80.

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Olga Michael is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of English, University of Cyprus. Her research interests include representations of trauma, gender, human rights, death, and perpetration in graphic life narratives. She is currently working on two monographs entitled *Human Rights in Graphic Life Narrative: Reading and Witnessing Violations of Others in Anglophone Texts* and *Migration Stories and The New European Literary Canon: The Rise of the Ethno-Topographic Narrative in 21st-Century Europe* (Bloomsbury Academic).