Filial Estrangement and Figurative Mourning in the Work of Nina Bunjevac

Published by

Comics of the New Europe: Reflections and Intersections.
Leuven University Press, 2023.
Project MUSE. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/book.111923.

Dragana Obradović

Filial Estrangement and Figurative Mourning in the Work of Nina Bunjevac

The Family Album and the Search for the Father

Fatherland, a graphic memoir published in 2015 by Serbian-Canadian artist Nina Bunjevac, which appeared in multiple translations and achieved notable success on the *New York Times* comics bestseller list, is an autobiographical story of emigration and political radicalization among the Serbian diaspora in North America in the 1960s and 70s. It follows Bunjevac's critically acclaimed 2012 collection *Heartless,* in which the subjectivities and complex desires of economically impoverished, socially marginalized migrants takes center stage. The stories of queer and surreal characters in *Heartless* explore alterity (of gender, sexuality, exile) in a visual style that has been described as "a poetics based on a foregrounded citationality" that brings together pop art references, classic Hollywood iconography, and recontextualized pin-up sirens.[1] Indeed, *Heartless* wears its genealogy on its sleeve: it is influenced by the aesthetic register of the underground comix scene of the 1960s and is equally alternative in its political gestures.

Drawn in a black and white pointillist style, *Fatherland* is more realist in its register with significant deviations into the symbolic terrain. The graphic memoir explores how individual agency is conditioned by historical circumstances through a posthumous reconstruction of the life of the author's nationalist, anti-communist father Peter. As the narrative acknowledges, his is an enigmatic portrait that remains only "semi-complete" even as it details his childhood traumas, his orphanhood, eventual exile in Canada, and his turn towards political extremism that results in his violent death from a bomb explosion.[2] This troubled life, narrated in fragments, is the pivot from which *Fatherland* evolves into an exploration of historical contingency, nationalism, and the tyranny of ideologies.

As a material object, *Fatherland* is designed to look like a photo album with a red border on the spine and the father's portrait adorning the front. The graphic memoir

assumes the genre of a family chronicle, though it becomes clear rather quickly how significantly compounded by long-held secrets and suppressed memories the archive actually is. It is almost as if the excess of spectacle that was her father's death produced a vacuum and terrorism usurped his biography. Unlike a family album, which promises a hermetic display of domestic history based on compositional principles of happiness and harmony, *Fatherland* rejects the demands of the genre. Notably, the story opens with Bunjevac reckoning with her mother's induced amnesia when she fails to recognize images of the home she shared with her husband and young children: "It looks awfully familiar—what is it?" she asks upon seeing a satellite image of the home. Bunjevac's response is to interpret her mother's "choosing to forget this little house" as "a desperate attempt to suppress all the memories it once held, good and bad."

The satellite image that does little to trigger the mother's memories draws the reader's attention to the importance of photographic discourse. The photograph is at once an archival source and means of composition for Bunjevac. The book is replete with drawings of photographs—drawn by hand, rather than reproduced as scans—of personal and public origin. Sometimes these images function as documents, as constitutive of the archives. Others, however, are synthesized into the mise-en-scène of the panel so it is impossible to differentiate the present time of narration from old photographs. Bunjevac has discussed in interviews how she relied on photographs and postcards in order to capture period detail of clothes, interiors, cars, and facades. The precision and exactitude of Bunjevac's method is in kinship with Alison Bechdel's own creative process in *Fun Home* (2006): Bechdel's laborious drawing, copying, and replicating, argues Hillary Chute, is a type of embodiment through which the author "reinhabit[s] the elements of her past to re-present them—and to preserve them, to publically rearchive them."[3]

The question then is—to what end? What is *Fatherland*'s "re-archiving" about? The narrative fractures of Bunjevac's story—which are for the most part memory ruptures—are not plumbed in order to undertake a reparative project through the graphic form. Instead, Bunjevac signals the ambiguity of excavating family history for the purposes of facing the traumatic wound on the cover itself. The portrait of the father on the cover references the color scheme of the Nazi flag (black, white, and red), thereby telegraphing the shame of her father's life that continues to leak into the present, beyond the family album. Thus, even before the story begins, 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 the gutter.

My article takes its cue from this ambivalent inscription of the father into the family album. I analyze Bunjevac's memoir as a story of "unsettling fixed subjectivit[ies]," to borrow a phrase from Chute, and note how "conflicting registers and different temporalities" are employed in Bunjevac's self-representations

particularly as they pertain to material "typically relegated to the silence and invisibility of the private."[4] As Deborah James writes, Bunjevac "draws the story out of the gutters and into the present day, destabilizing public memories of Peter Bunjevac as a terrorist/hero by drawing on [her mother's] collaborative, intimate, and personal stories."[5] In *Fatherland*, self-representation principally demands getting to know a father who is both a perpetrator and victim of violence. This is tricky territory to negotiate, particularly as the intimate sphere of female experience is not exclusively a refuge. Eavesdropping, secrecy, and willful forgetfulness within the family dynamic are just as prevalent as female attachment and trust. In a scene depicting a birthday party celebration of Bunjevac's older sister Sarah in the late 1970s, fragments of a family argument—"Tell your daughter never to mention that man [Bunjevac's father] in this house again!" to "Get out of my house!" and "You're worse than Hitler!"—are superimposed over the scenes of kids standing around a cake and Sarah blowing out candles. The sentence "that man" is uttered by her grandmother who also criticized him for being a "cold-blooded murderer" not willing to politically reform for his family. In this contrast between scenes of domestic celebration (enabled by the photograph as document of memory) and scenes of tension and disagreement, Bunjevac foregrounds the challenges posed by the domestic topos for the purposes of recuperation. She complicates the idea that female perspectives and female bonding can remain an unchallenged arena of intimacy that will solve the political and affective dimensions of her own identity and her relationship to past and contemporary political structures.

In my analysis of *Fatherland* and a short companion piece that preceded it titled "August, 2017" (published in 2012), I focus on the visual idiom Bunjevac develops in order to ethically and historically reanimate the father. In my examination of specific scenes, I argue that this involves fictional encounters between individuals (e.g. father and daughter) that foreground small acts of acknowledgment, accountability, and mourning. This task, however, is complicated by the fact that *Fatherland* is not exclusively a personal history. The graphic memoir is also a digest of twentieth-century history: Bunjevac's ancestors were forced to migrate to North America in the early 1900s due to socio-economic deprivation in their Serb-majority village in Croatia; later some members perish in World War II death camps; others—namely her father—witness the German occupation, defeat, and the arrival of Tito's Partisans. Consequently, parts of her family become ideological enemies, split between communism and nationalism. The violent dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s is the ghost of the future that lingers at the margins of the memoir.

The critical reception of Bunjevac's text indicates that *Fatherland's* treatment of this historical material is not simply relegated to a world whose coordinates have been reconfigured since the collapse of state socialism in 1989. However, responses to *Fatherland* depend on where the book is read. Bunjevac has attributed the success

of the graphic narrative in North America to the geopolitical context post-2001 and its fascination with terrorism.[6] Similarly, following the attack on the offices of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015, Bunjevac noticed a shift in the conversation around *Fatherland* while promoting the book in France. *Fatherland* offered, in the aftermath of the attack, a narrative examination of home-grown terrorism which, Bunjevac added, France was starting to face as a society.[7] These particular filters treat Bunjevac's life experience as a universal paradigm from which lessons and knowledge about the psyche of individual terrorists can be extracted. In a radio interview for the Canadian broadcaster CBC, Bunjevac was prompted to reflect on "why young people turn to extremism" and answered that, in her view on the matter, "behind every terrorist there's a genuine feeling of injustice."[8]

These particular ways of framing the narrative empty out the historical thrust of Bunjevac's story and do not engage with the palimpsest of the family biography as a residual, painful testimony of various historical flashpoints of the twentieth century. Nor do these readings address how this past makes claims on Bunjevac's present. This demand is illustrated in an image of her father as a young boy at the end of World War II, where Bunjevac depicts him gazing directly beyond the frame into a space beyond the page, at the reader. Her caption reads: "[m]y father watched history unfold before his bedroom window." By short circuiting the temporal distance between the young boy (her future father) and the reader, the subject position of the reader is to witness what he could only watch: both the reader and Bunjevac (by drawing, composing, writing) have access to ethical and affective contemplation, but the boy did not understand what larger forces were shaping his future.

These forces of her father's past are also integral to contemporary politics and socio-historic dynamics of post-Yugoslav states, a dimension of *Fatherland* that came to full expression after its publication in Serbia, which is, in various ways, still in the shadow of 1990s ethnonationalism and authoritarianism (as of 2019). For all it's pro-EU sloganeering and campaigning, Serbian public discourse has been marked by a high degree of media control since 2014, when Aleksandar Vučić, the President as of 2018, became Prime Minister and governed with a strong monopoly of state and private institutions (namely the media sector).[9] Additionally, there has been a significant push since at least the mid-2000s to rehabilitate World War II collaborators and rescue figures like Draža Mihailović (leader of the Serbian Chetniks, a military collaborationist unit) from the "taint" placed upon them during socialism. This is part of a broader culture of historical revisionism propagated on multiple levels—academic, legal, social.[10] Various commentators who have followed the juridical process around the rehabilitation of individuals like Draža Mihailović and Milan Nedić, the collaborationist leader of Serbia's quisling government between 1941 to 1944, argue that these processes normalize the crimes committed by these historical figures and legitimize their ideological commitments (fascism in the case of Nedić).[11]

Bunjevac's father idolizes Mihailović, calls him a "true hero" and displays his bust in his home—a sequence of pages that I discuss later in this chapter.

In this climate of revisionism in contemporary Serbia, communist history is discussed and exhibited according to one of the following tracks: it is either presented through a critical lens of communist governance (with a focus on authoritarian tendencies of Tito's Communist Party) or it is a celebration of communism as an aesthetic happening (e.g. the exhibit of design during socialist Yugoslavia at the Museum of Yugoslav History). Moreover, post-Yugoslav states, from Serbia to Croatia, have experienced a specific erasure of socialist memory, particularly in the context of its progressive politics and aspirations to social equity. Memories of socialist Yugoslavia circulate in public discourse through ahistoricized, apolitical, and commodified nostalgia, which tends to neutralize revolutionary politics of the left that are at the core of Yugoslavia's existence. Nostalgia for Yugoslavia often takes a commodity-based form: souvenirs, trinkets, clothing, and advertising all mine the socialist past for images and icons of a common, bygone culture. "Stripped from its historical moorings," writes Zala Volčić, "the Yugoslav past has become one more free-floating signifier of consumer desire."[12] Shared experiences—from Yugo disco parties to online forums and sites—provide further means of engagement for individuals seeking to repair the loss of a common culture and history. This nostalgia is never explicitly couched in terms of nostalgia for socialism as a political program even though, as Igor Štiks and Srećko Horvat point out in their volume *Welcome to the Desert of Post-socialism*, contemporary feelings of economic and political disempowerment, should be read precisely as an expression of the loss of "generous socialist politics of the former socialist states."[13] Hindering the reading of nostalgia as a progressive force, add Stiks and Horvat, is the general perception that the post-Yugoslav states are "a lost cause for progressive forces after 1989 and prone only to right-wing politics and extremism, support of pro-US and pro-NATO policies, and unconditional surrender to neoliberalism."[14]

Bunjevac has been explicit in interviews about her left-leaning politics and political identification with Yugoslavia's social model: "I'm a socialist. I am for socialism and self-management. [...] I am against imperialism, against destructive capitalism."[15] Her public declarations about her own ideological beliefs, together with *Fatherland*'s explicit critique of ethnonationalism—as well as the relationship between nationalism and masculinity—is a challenge to Serbia's current self-image. In particular, it is a critique mounted through the genre of comics whose legacy in this particular geographic locale is one of underground "amateurism."[16] Namely, Bunjevac directly links the ideological persuasion of political émigré organizations (such as the one her father belonged to) with Serbian ethnonational politics of the 1990s. Thus, marginal radical figures espoused a politics that became normalized. *Fatherland* gives an account of a group called "Freedom for Serbian

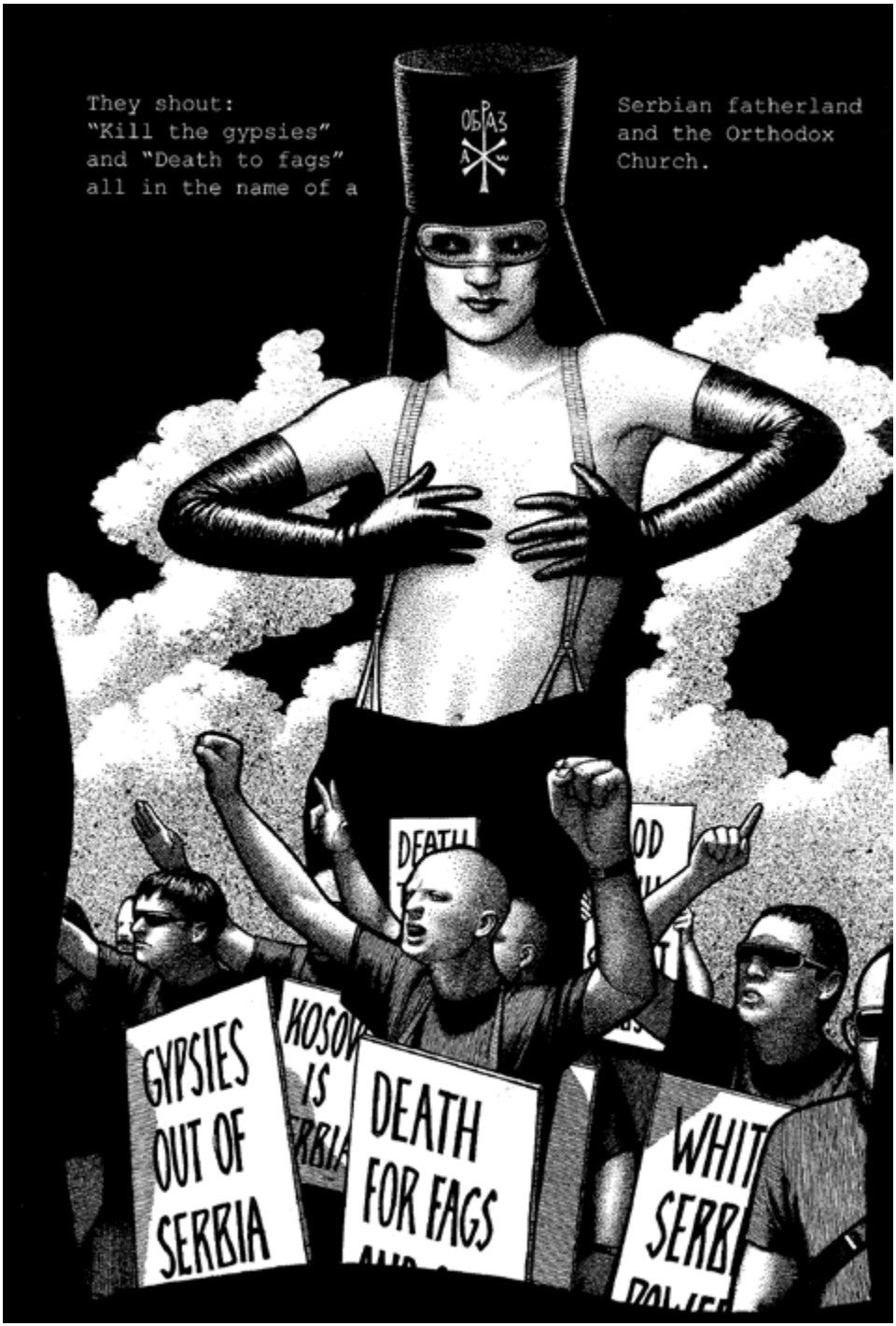

Fig. 1. Nina Bunjevac, "August, 1977."

Fatherland" (*Srpski Oslobodilački pokret Otadžbina*, or SOPO) to which Bunjevac's father belonged while residing in Ontario in the 1970s.[17] SOPO is described in the graphic narrative as "the first secret Serbian terrorist organization" loyal to the Chetnik leader Draža Mihailović and that gave prominent leadership roles to Orthodox priests.[18] The young men of SOPO were Serbian nationalist émigrés united in their aim, says Bunjevac, of taking down the Yugoslav government, namely through "propaganda literature in the diaspora, then attacks on the homes of prominent Yugoslavs and diplomatic folks. The third way was to infiltrate the military in Yugoslavia."[19] The peak of their activity occurred in the early 1970s with attacks on Yugoslav consulates and embassies in North America.[20] Their activities spawned many myths and legends. Bunjevac believes that after Tito's death, stories about SOPO and other members of the political emigration were popularized: "They were our Cosa Nostra or something like that, our bad boys on the outside."[21]

Bunjevac makes the case in *Fatherland* and the shorter piece "August, 1977" that these radical organizations are prototypes to right-wing nationalist groups in Serbia, especially those of para-military formation that participated in the break-up of Yugoslavia. From that perspective, their legacy is far more destructive and virulent because the radical and marginal beliefs of the father gained some form of legitimacy in contemporary Serbia. Yet Bunjevac's graphic memoir moves beyond this political division and complicates the image of her father and his legacy.

Father as Traumatized Subject

"August, 1977" begins with a symbolic depiction of the illicit, underground nature of her father's life, suggested by the appearance of a predatory cat that ominously looks through the windows of a basement apartment. Told in a claustrophobic sequence of panels, this strip is an account of the final hours of his life. With the first image of a bomb kit in preparation, it becomes clear that the space of the apartment functions as a tomb. The silence of the image is contrasted by the narrative voice resting outside of the frame: it belongs to an estranged wife, whose absence is signaled by the mediating form of a letter and a family photograph. Notably, she uses "Dear husband" as the form of address to foreground that the only remaining commitment they have to each other is legal;[22] otherwise, all intimacy and warmth has been evacuated. When the bomb's timer reads 2:38, the narrative voice switches and is taken over by a grown daughter who speaks from a future that the father will never experience. Yet it is a future he has had a part in creating: the daughter speaks of victorious "patriots" who "have the blood of the innocent on their hands" and who are "terrorizing their own people" and who represent the ideological and historical extension of her father's political convictions.[23] August, 1977 as a specific time stamp is abandoned here for a representation of post-Yugoslav Serbia gripped by a clerical ethnonationalism that, in Bunjevac's

depiction, authorizes racism and xenophobia as a constituent part of its identity. In the caption, the daughter bitterly laments, "They shout 'Kill the Gypsies!' and 'Death to fags' all in the name of a Serbian fatherland and the Orthodox Church"[24] (Fig. 1).

This text is accompanied by a deeply layered visual plane. The page shows a female figure, young and seductive, towering over a group of protesting young men, all of whom belong to a right-wing Christian group called "Obraz," who were banned by the Constitutional Court of Serbia in 2012. The young woman is modeled on the character of Lucia (played by Charlotte Rampling) in Liliana Cavani's 1974 film *The Night Porter*. In the first two illustrations, this figure wears a hat initially deocrated with the insignia of the Orthodox Church and then of "Obraz." More specifically, the image is taken from the scene in the deportation camp where Lucia, a young Jewish woman, performs a song by Marlene Dietrich for Nazi officers as she dons an SS cap. "The reference to *The Night Porter,*" writes Mihaela Precup, "spells out the connection between German fascism and Serbian ultranationalism."[25] This is, indeed, the overarching political critique that Bunjevac is leveling at contemporary Serbia. Yet other valences are in play, since the depiction of the young woman as a spectre of Cavani's Lucia is deeply ambiguous: her identity is unknown, her relationship to the young men of Obraz unclear (though she is obviously dressed in their garb), and the relevance of her gender in the context of nationalism is obscure. In this intentionally provocative two-page spread, it is obvious that the young woman is performing a seduction through the recognizable gestures of the cabaret dancer.[26] Here it seems that Bunjevac is translating the allure of ideology into the figure of an erotic female. In this reading, nationalism as ideology takes on the aspect of gender: ideology as the female body is an object of fantasy and fascination.

This characterization calls to mind the exposition on "fascist aesthetics" by Susan Sontag who argues that the performativity of "fascist dramaturgy" involves the exaltation of "two seemingly opposite, states," including "the relations of domination and enslavement," familiar to us from Nazi pageantry.[27] The depiction of enslavement in "August, 1977" appears in the third and final sequence, when the body is in the position of suffering and humiliation. This image is less explicitly feminized and the face is entirely covered by a hood, again with a hat that bears the cross of the Christian Orthodox Church. The figure is at once vulnerable and subservient—as Bunjevac visually represents it—to the clerical-fascism of the Christian Orthodox Church. Signs of humiliation and shame are undeniable: the figure is standing in a puddle, perhaps urine, and is caught in the act by a spotlight that forces them against the wall. This "exposure" of a subject of ideology discloses a shameful set of beliefs (a point driven home by the textual accompaniment, "the church preaches intolerance") but more importantly, it reveals a traumatized subject.[28] The hooded figure is clearly a victim of nationalist ideology and Bunjevac raises the possibility of violence perpetrated on individuals within particular belief systems.

The final image of "August, 1977" is of a flock of birds is unleashed into flight by the explosion of the bomb which, argues Precup, represents the symbolic translation of the daughter's liberation from the father.[29] This reading is borne out by the text on the page: "I have rejected your beliefs, suppressed your rebellious spirit and I found peace. Your battles are not my battles, the chain stops here."[30] However, the barred windows are the father's prison—introduced in the first two pages—and so this liberation is equally his, though only in death. Curiously, while Bunjevac's father died in a bomb explosion, the circumstances surrounding his death and those of two other men from his cell remain shrouded in mystery. Reimagining the death as a suicide in "August, 1977" is the daughter's creative repositioning of the father as a guilty subject who seeks forgiveness through his own self-destruction. This particular rendition of his death restores a degree of affective and psychological—though not historical—agency to the father, who would otherwise remain static as the hooded, traumatized figure so deeply embedded in the phantasm of nationalism.

Father as Child, Father as Monument

"August, 1977" begins the job of creating the narrative space for conceiving the father as a traumatized subject. *Fatherland* continues this pursuit but does so in tandem with Bunjevac's own condensed *Bildungsroman.* Attempting to figure out the parameters of her father's identity, (though she has no memory of him, nor any emotional attachment), offers the simultaneous crystallization of Bunjevac's own subjectivity.[31] Subsequently, her own experiences act as a mode of reflection for her father's life: it is a mirror that ultimately fails to offer a unified reflection of two lives and two trajectories. The juxtaposition is thematic but, more crucially, reinforced by the layout and rhythm of *Fatherland*'s panels.

Half-way through *Fatherland* in a chapter titled "Childhood," Bunjevac details how her father's early years were marked by tragedy such that the verbal signifier of "childhood" becomes an ironic declaration, one of many examples where the image is undermined by the text. Born in 1936, Peter Bunjevac lost his mother to tuberculosis and his father in Jasenovac, a death camp run by the Ustaše, the Croatian fascist forces. When he began exhibiting symptoms of trauma after the war, including inexplicably torturing animals, Peter's grandparents sent him to military school hoping that it would instill him with discipline and order. Sometime in the mid-1950s, Peter expresses his support for Milovan Đilas following Đilas's (hushed) fall from grace in Tito's Communist Party and is imprisoned on false pretenses of espionage. Released after three years, he realizes he has no future in Yugoslavia. Thus, in *Fatherland*'s storytelling, Peter's childhood and adolescence never had a chance.

At the end of this section detailing Peter's life, a black page announces "The Dissident Years." Instead of continuing the sequence of the father's life in purgatory and

final migration to Canada, this story is delayed by an intermezzo about Bunjevac's own childhood—a short, connecting movement that serves to relate Bunjevac's experiences as a child and adolescent with that of her father. Thus, the black page has a dual function. It represents the compression of time, thereby separating the reader from Peter's story chronologically, but it also acts as a mirror. Namely, I see the page with intertitles as a gutter that separates two identical periods—childhood of father and that of daughter—which could be seen as mirror images of each other. Ultimately, however, they do not correspond to one another given their separate historical circumstances. Unlike the father's experience of childhood, the daughter's life is free of tyranny and anxiety. She is free to buy Western comics, sing Abba songs, and talk about American TV shows in Tito's Yugoslavia.[32] The daughter is the beneficiary of contentment in a system that "punished" and made an enemy of him. By juxtaposing their experiences and including humor in the scenes of girlhood, Bunjevac signals her compassion and understanding of the poverty of the father's experience. By collapsing the chasm separating the time-space of their respective childhoods through the grammar of the comic (the gutter as a spatial and temporal device), Bunjevac stresses the rupture between their psychic and physical lives even further.

Importantly for the political thrust of *Fatherland*, this filial correspondence is followed by a graphic estrangement from the father through a departure from the realist register. In the pages where Bunjevac narrates the circumstances surrounding the father's burgeoning nationalism, she depicts him as a bust modeled on sculptures of political or national leaders. In fact, she makes that comparison obvious by drawing the bust of Draža Mihailović kept in the family home in Ontario. Even when the father is animated as a bust who speaks and interacts with other characters, it is clear that his ideas are ossified, static, and unchanging: this is dead, stony history. The (political) father, however, can still be powerful even if he is dead.[33]

Modeling her father after a monument is an ambivalent choice in *Fatherland*: it strongly suggests the internalization of paternal authority as a means of continuing historical legacy. It is a legacy that we cannot reject even though we desire to do so. Bunjevac here stages the father in a manner that corresponds with Freud's conception of the family romance. In Freud's conceit, a young child fantasizes that the parents have far more significant social roles than in actuality, which might even include nobility at birth. The child, in order to assemble a coherent psychological sense of themselves, replaces the image of the father with a grander figure, concludes Freud, not in order to kill the father, but to exalt him.[34] Bunjevac's own merging of political father with her mortal father suggests that any such exaltation immediately exceeds the confines of a bourgeois family (which was Freud's unit of analysis): rather, it reproduces the wider social structure and re-legitimizes the father's claim to authority. Though she wants to give up the father's legacy, his continuity is socially mandated, legitimized, and reaffirmed.

This reading complicates precisely those themes of recuperation and redemption in which Bunjevac simply casts off her father's politics as a rite of passage towards establishing her own (creative and political) agency. *Fatherland* communicates that this process is not as simple as a verbal utterance—the "I have rejected your beliefs" stated in "August, 1977"—because the cultural and social frames function subconsciously as traps to keep subjects within a particular range of representations. The heroic bust of the father-leader is archetypal in that regard: it is part and parcel of what Tatjana Rosić calls the "patriarchal Serbian cultural matrix" that keeps reproducing mythical male figures as subject of the perfect biography.[35] In other words, there is some inevitability to the vision in which the father is a monument: Bunjevac cannot but represent the father—a frustrated, lonely man—in a monumental form.

While in "August, 1977" Bunjevac signaled the possibility of reinstating some sort of agency to the father beyond the straitjacketing of the terms terrorist and nationalist, *Fatherland* attempts a rapprochement between daughter and father only to signal the complications that lie therein. This is particularly evident in the impossibility of separating the image of the father from the social and political authority with which paternal figures are imbued. The only proximity between Bunjevac's and the father's subject positions happens within the temporal parameters of childhood. In the next section, I explore how the departure from a realist visual mode enables Bunjevac to circumnavigate the legacies of paternal authority in order to end *Fatherland* in a mode of mourning.

Father as Subject of Mourning

The narrative arc of *Fatherland* ends with the father's death, the ultimate parting for the daughter and father. Unlike "August, 1977," *Fatherland* avoids the visual excess of the bomb explosion but nonetheless introduces a dramatic visual gesture. This rejection of violent spectacle is not an idle choice in the context of the contemporary mass media landscape where evocations of terrorism have very specific valences. A spectacle functions as a psychological numbing, as a deep freeze of cognition, as possible voyeurism.[36] Instead, the final pages are devoted to the work of mourning through a number of abstract pages, presided over by the symbol of a bird. This type of code switching—what Chute calls "representational collision" in her discussion of Art Spiegelman and Joe Sacco—produces a "refusal of synthesis" whereby the comic "holds in tensions 'realism' and what would seem to be its other: 'cartooning'."[37] Realism denotes veracity, while cartooning conveys exaggeration, caricature, fantasy, and surrealism. Opting for the latter, however, is not to automatically align the comic with levity, frivolity, comedy. Instead, this figurative sequence, which is exclusively wordless, suggests mourning without pathos, without sentimentalism.

The second page of *Fatherland* shows a nest of three coot eggs that Bunjevac is

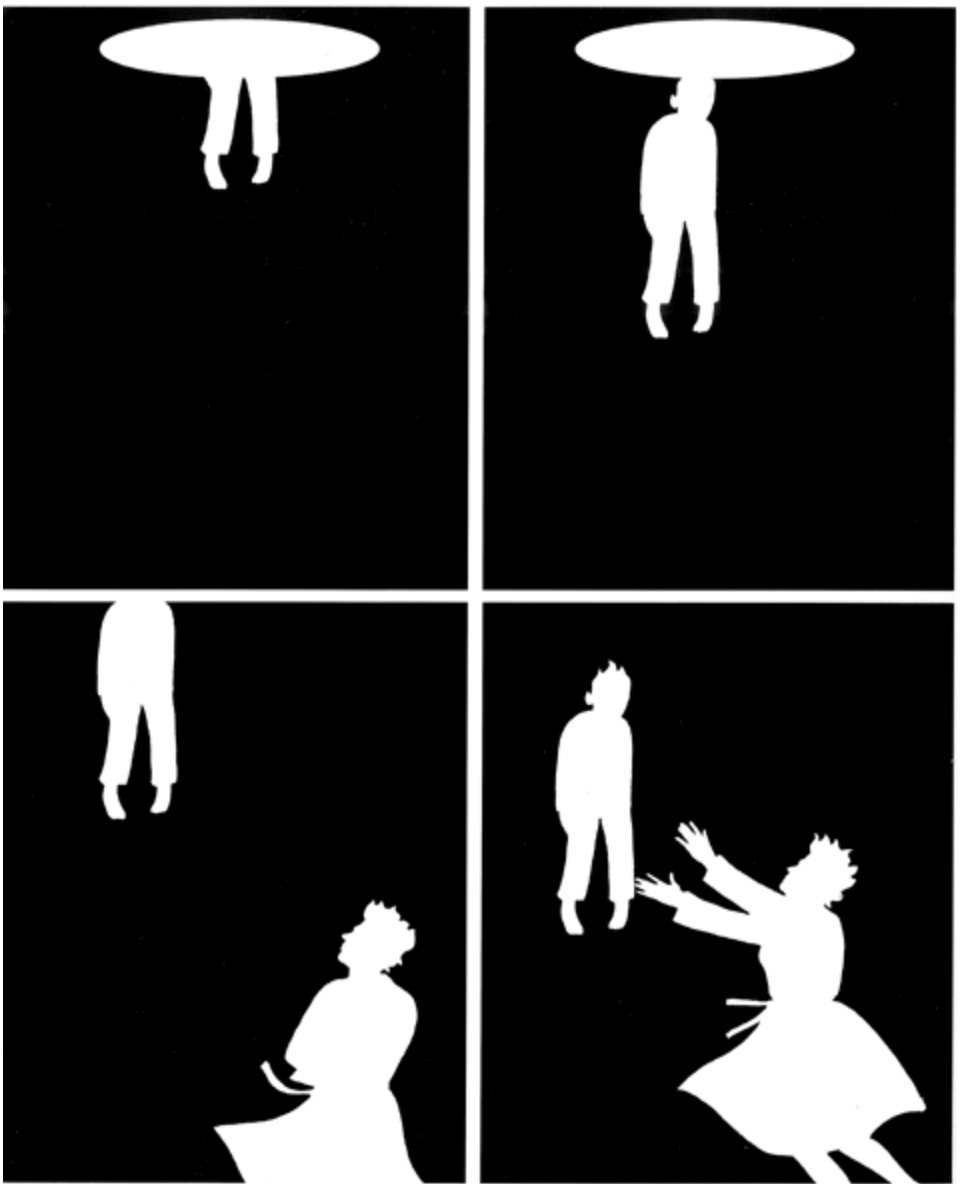

Fig. 2. Nina Bunjevac, *Fatherland.*

drawing as she watches a TV documentary about bird life. The image of the nested eggs is the image of bare, vulnerable life: "The food supply is scarce yet in high demand as there are just too many mouths to feed," says the documentary narrator, "Hungry chicks beg for food and are in turn punished by the parents... Eventually they will stop begging altogether and starve to death. Out of the roost of nine only two or three coot chicks will survive and make it to adulthood." The eggs thus come to symbolize the

progeny that needs to survive and that needs nurture and warmth: the three eggs are most likely a reference to the three Bunjevac children, an image that is duplicated a few pages later.[38] Indeed, at one point her father is drawn as a new-born child with his umbilical cord still attached inside a circle, creating visual homology across the memoir. However, between these images of vulnerable subjects encased are narratives of unfulfilled or broken maternal and paternal duties. There is always an element of contingency (i.e. no one sets out to abandon their child, but rather does so in order to survive) and that survival, Bunjevac argues, demands psychic, emotional, or geographical distance. Thus, the final sequence of the novel can be read as addressing this cumulative suffering of parents who lost their children and children who were left behind. Over four pages, exclusively in black and white silhouettes, Bunjevac shows a woman and a young boy in a vertiginous fall through dark tunnels[39] (Fig. 2). Though they embrace, their white silhouettes nonetheless remain suspended in a black symbolic plane. This enigmatic epilogue could represent the father in his youth, traumatized and orphaned, or the son that Bunjevac's mother had to leave behind in Canada in her escape from a volatile domestic environment and her husband. The absence of any index of the real enables a collapse of these generational distinctions, and so multiple losses of the family are considered alongside each other in a suggestive simultaneity. Broken family relationships are ultimately the subject of grief and they bypass the exclusive focus on the authoritative figure of the father.

Folklore and Pagan Rituals as a Political Intervention

The idea of the figurative mode bypassing principles of precision and exactness reverberates on a broader level in *Fatherland.* Bunjevac's visual style is, on the whole, constructed upon elements of photography and photographic discourse that undergird her illustrations with a material referent. But, as exemplified by the final section of *Fatherland*, departure from the realist mode introduces new ways of understanding relationships, history, and the world. Folkloric signs and esoteric symbols that belong to a more figurative realm point to the limits of what can be depicted and known through realism. Balkan dream interpretation, for example, is treated as a discourse of veracity, as a concrete means of navigating life. This is evident in a section where illustrations of dreams are inserted into a "photo album" comprising conventional snapshots of Bunjevac and her sister. Taken in 1976 in Yugoslavia, the photographs were meant "to show my father that we were well taken care of, and happy." As the reader leafs through this "album," it ends not with the photos of the girls but with a strange image of crows lining up on power lines. This seems like a photograph, but is subsequently revealed to be Bunjevac's depiction of a dream. Specifically: before news arrives of Bunjevac's father's death, her grandma dreams of a murder of crows perched on a line and of a man slaughtering a pig. Bunjevac adds: "In the Balkan tradition of

dream interpretation, to dream of birds signifies that the dreamer is about to receive news. Dreaming of raw meat is often seen as a sign of death." Ultimately, the dream conveys the message as much as the telegram that arrives a few days later. Given that the dream slips into the album—the genre of authentication, of corroboration—means that it is as significant as materialized history.

Related to this episode is a digression into Slavic mythology that appears in a chapter about World War II history in the Balkans, meticulously researched by Bunjevac. This foray into a Pagan history should not be dismissed as esoteric digression because it plays a role in a political intervention. Bunjevac's accounts and illustrations of Pagan gods and myths—such as the stories of Mokosh, "the protector of women" and Perun, "the god of thunder"—offer a different way of understanding the common heritage of the South Slavs. Bunjevac also offers an alternative visual repertoire since these Pagan deities do not have fixed depictions nor do their images circulate broadly in contemporary culture. That is to say, it is a history within which there is no propagation of ethnic difference and separation precisely because it predates the historical forces that, in a way, created those differences and that, writes Bunjevac in *Fatherland*, "have been exacerbated or further influenced by the invading powers such as Rome, the Byzantine Empire, Venice, Austria, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire." The rise of the modern nation state in the period of romantic nationalism helped frame anti-colonial uprisings in the Balkans but also drove a wedge between populations in the region. By recounting the numerous pagan deities once feared and respected, Bunjevac foregrounds Slavic mythology as the common root and ancestry of South Slavs who now identify through ethnic separation (e.g. Serbian as distinct from Croatian). It is very telling that these pages—which also function as a lament for a more peaceful past—come after Bunjevac's harrowing account of Jasenovac, a World War II death camp in Croatia that was run by the Ustaše, a militia group that governed Croatia as a satellite state of Nazi Germany. The Ustaše, under the leadership of Ante Pavelić, pursued a discriminatory policy against the Jewish, Serbian, and Roma populations as well as communists that resulted in mass deportations and killings. The juxtaposition between the atrocities of Jasenovac (that represents the apogee of murder on xenophobic and racist grounds during World War II on Yugoslav territory) and forgotten Slavic mythology enables Bunjevac to displace arguments about the inevitability of history that can occasionally emerge in a chronological rendition of events.

More importantly, there is a correspondence between Bunjevac's interest in Pagan deities and some of the hybrid characters in *Heartless,* her first comics collection, insofar as these gods are neither fully human nor fully animal but have features of both. They are outside the historical "norm," much like figures of *Heartless*, whose presence, argues Laura Pearson, raises ethical and theoretical questions about alterity and otherness especially in the context of

gender, sexuality, and agency. She argues that depictions of the "abnormal" often function in problematic ways within discourses and texts: they can be employed in order "to be pathologized or demonized and used as a justified means towards marginalizing and "othering" people, populations, and indeed "things" in themselves. Within a discourse of alterity the challenge becomes, then, finding the means to articulate "otherness" without reinforcing the binaries that underpin hegemony in the first place."[40] These concerns are relevant for *Fatherland* which performs its own "potential destabilizations" vis-à-vis history and the phantasm of nationalism.[41] The history of Slavic mythology is alternative in relation to empirical, scientific history and is thus marginalized in the hierarchies of conventional knowledge. Bunjevac's intention in *Fatherland* is not to suggest that her alternative vision can derail contemporary views of Balkan ethnic structures or political schisms. It does send an important warning, however, that—as in the case of her father's nationalism—historical convictions, in their reified form, can end up as instruments that work against common goals and communal practices.

Conclusion

Between "August, 1977" and *Fatherland*, the father appears in multiple guises—in various subject positions—demonstrating Bunjevac's need to experiment with his figure in order to better understand the personal and public impact of his paternity. The graphic memoir, as I have argued, illustrates how these two are integrated: namely, how familial dynamics are transformed by social structures but also how those very same dynamics reinforce lineages of authority. This is what makes Bunjevac's search for the father so thwarted: she inhabits a present damaged by those who fought for particularized nationalisms—those who are the ideological progeny of her father's generation. She ultimately locates a space and time of grieving in a figurative language that bypasses his adulthood. She even evokes long-forgotten paradigms of Slavic history that contribute to a more inclusive vision for the region. Even though this vision of communal co-habitation is more idealistic than pragmatic, Bunjevac is led there by the search for the father. The discovery would not have been made without navigating the "fatherland," its projections, and its fantasies.

Notes

1 Ivana Mance, "Pod navodnicima: ženski strip na Balkanu", *Ženski strip na Balkanu, ed.* Jukić Pranjić, Irena Jukić Pranjić (Zagreb: Fibra, 2010) 375.

2 Nina Bunjevac, *Fatherland* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2014), no page number. All subsequent references to the graphic narrative will be placed in the main body of

the text inside quotation marks.

3 Hillary Chute, *Graphic Women: life narrative and contemporary comics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 186.

4 *ibid.*, 5.

5 Deborah James, "Drawn Out of the Gutters: Nina Bunjevac's Fatherland, a Collaborative Memory." *Feminist Media Studies* 15.3 (2015), 532.

6 Nina Bunjevac, an interview, "Nina Bunjevac u CZKD, promocija romana u stripu OTADŽBINA" https://102tube.com/video/uzhL1EKdIBs/nina-bunjevac-u-czkd-promocija-romana-u-stripu-ota.html. Accessed 10 December 2017.

7 Bunjevac, "Nina Bunjevca u CZKD."

8 Anna Maria Tremonti, "Graphic novelist Nina Bunjevac recalls how her father was blown up bringing terror to Toronto in 'Fatherland'", an interview with Nina Bunjevac, http://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/isis-vote-fatherland-and-bird-friendly-architecture-1.2907445/graphic-novelist-nina-bunjevac-recalls-how-her-father-was-blown-up-bringing-terror-to-toronto-in-fatherland-1.2907448. Accessed 18 January 2018.

9 Goran Mišić, "Kako je Evropa zbog medija oborila Vučića na popravni", *Al Jazeera Balkans,* 03 May 2018, http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/kako-je-evropa-zbog-medija-oborila-vucica-na-popravni

10 When socialist history is mounted by government-funded initiatives it is to recover the sins of the partisans as in the controversial exhibit "In the name of the people" (*U ime naroda)* which was criticized for gross factual and historical inaccuracies, as well as its portrayal of communism as equivalent to fascism.

11 See, for example, Jelena Đureinović, "Normalizacija Milana Nedića," *Peščanik,* 10 Decembar 2016, https://pescanik.net/normalizacija-milana-nedica, and Milivoj Bešlin, "Miland Nedić – rehabilitacija fašizma", 6 Feb 2016, *Peščanik,* https://pescanik.net/milan-nedic-rehabilitacija-fasizma/

12 Zala Volčić, "Yugo-Nostalgia: Cultural Memory and Media in the Former Yugoslavia," *Critical Studies in Media Communications,* 24:1 (2007), 22.

13 Igor Štiks and Srećko Horvat, "Radical Politics in the Desert of Transition", in *Welcome to the Desert of Post-Socialism: Radical Politics after Yugoslavia,* eds. Štiks and Horvat (London: Verso, 2015), 7.

14 *ibid.*, 3.

15 Agata Tomažić, "Nina Bunjevac in njen oče, terorist", *Delo*, https://www.delo.si/sobotna/ljudje-ki-so-obticali-v-dvajsetem-stoletju-in-ki-se-vedno-zivijo-za-enega-cloveka.html. Accessed 01 May 2018.

16 Aleksandra Sekulić and Radovan Popović, *The Invisible Comics: Alternative Comics in Serbia, 1980-2010* (Belgrade: National Library of Serbia, 2011), 10.

17 By the 1970s, around 230,000 individuals residing in North America and Western Europe were considered political émigrés by the Yugoslav socialist government. Of

this number, historians estimate that only one percent were members of organizations promulgating terrorist methods. They represented, in the lexicon of the Yugoslav State Security Services (the state's police apparatus), "extreme" or "hostile" emigrants among whom Chetnik and Ustaše supporters were the most numerous. The aim of these organizations was to overthrow President Tito, destabilize Yugoslavia, and vanquish state socialism. The Yugoslav State Security Services took this percentage seriously and attempted to curb attacks on buildings and institutions, as well as on citizens and embassies; they sought to neutralize emigrant communities and prevent the formation of new organizations.

18 This is recounted in the section titled "Exile."

19 Dragana Obradović, ""I Only Belong to One Tribe: The Displaced Children of Yugoslavia," an interview, *Balkanist*, 14 May 2015. https://balkanist.net/profile-nina-bunjevac-author-of-fatherland/ Accessed 01 January 2018.

20 SOPO was never detained by security forces in Canada or the US, most likely—speculate historians—because the organization's terrorist activity did not include many fatalities or significant material damage. Disbanded after a 1977 plane hijacking in the US orchestrated by Nikola Kavaja (a pivotal figure in Serbian nationalist diaspora circles) and his associates, members of SOPO were arrested and put on trial. Cvetković, "Terorizam i jugoslovenska politička emigracija," *Istorija 20. veka* 2 (2014), 186-7.

21 Obradović, *Balkanist* interview.

22 Bunjevac, "August, 1977" in *Heartless Comics* (Wolfville, N.S.: Conundrum Press, 2012), 97.

23 *ibid.*, 103

24 *ibid.*, 104.

25 Mihaela Precup, "To Dream of Birds: Autobiography, Photography, and Memory in Nina Bunjevac's 'August, 1977' and Fatherland", in *The Canadian Alternative: Cartoonists, Comics, and Graphic Novels,* eds. Dominick Grace and Eric Hoffman (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017) 213.

26 Cavani's Lucia and Bunjevac's unidentified figure are both channeling performative aspects of Marlene Dietrich's cabaret persona.

27 Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism,"*New York Review of Books,* 06 February 1975. http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1975/02/06/fascinating-fascism/. Accessed 30 April 2018.

28 Bunjevac, "August, 1977," 105.

29 Precup, 213.

30 Bunjevac, "August, 1977," 107.

31 Tremonti, CBC interview.

32 Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000), a graphic memoir of the author's coming of age in pre-revolutionary Iran, is the precusor to these scenes of girlhood.

33 This characterization of fathers as monuments is extensive in literary and cinematic culture including, for example, Theo Angelopoulos' *Ulysses' Gaze'* in which pieces of a Lenin statue are dragged downriver.

34 Sigmund Freud (1909), "Family Romances", in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume IX (1906-1908)* (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 239-240.

35 Tatjana Rosić, *Mit o savršenoj biografiji: Danilo Kiš i figure pisca u srpskoj kulturi* (Beograd : Institut za književnost i umetnost, 2008) 184.

36 See for example, Susan Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others,* where she discusses images of suffering and violence, "As objects of contemplation, images of the atrocious can answer to several different needs. To steel oneself against weakness. To make oneself more numb. To acknowledge the existence of the incorrigible" (Sontag 98).

37 Chute, *Disaster Drawn: Visual witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (Cambridge: University of Harvard Press, 2016) 214.

38 In the Serbian edition of *Fatherland,* this image is repeated with only two eggs in the circle—possibly signalling the absence of Peter, Bunjevac's brother, who stayed behind in Canada with the father.

39 This is a reoccurring motif in Bunjevac's visual poetics. In *Bezimena* (Fantagraphics Books, 2019), which deals with sexual assault from the perspective of the predator, Bunjevac employs analogous sequences of individuals falling through spirals that relocate them to a different space-time and to a different body. In *Bezimena,* it is the myth of Artemis and Siproites in which Siproites is transformed into a woman after witnessing Artemis bathing (or, in some accounts, attempting to rape her) that offers the background framing for the surreal and symbolic transformation. The opening pages of Bunjevac's work depict a young woman—a follower of the priestess Bezimena—being submerged by Bezimena into water that initiates her physical transformation. Like in *Fatherland*, the fall of this young woman and her birth into a different world as a baby boy (who grows up to be Benny, the sexual predator) is conveyed visually by the shapes of circles and ovals.

40 Laura A. Pearson, "Alternative Paradoxes in *Heartless*: Reading (Un-)Love in Nina Bunjevac's 'Bitter Tears of Zorka Petrovic,'" *Comics Forum,* ed. Ian Hague, 27 May, 2014. Web 11 Feb. 2015, no page number. Accessed 01 May 2018.

41 *ibid.*, no page number.

References

Bošković, Milo. *Antijugoslovenska fašistička emigracija.* Belgrade: Sloboda, 1980.
Bunjevac, Nina. *Fatherland.* London: Jonathan Cape, 2014.

———. *Heartless Comics*. Wolfville, N.S.: Conundrum Press, 2012.

———. Book panel. "Nina Bunjevac u CZKD, promocija romana u stripu OTADŽBINA" https://102tube.com/video/uzhL1EKdIBs/nina-bunjevac-u-czkd-promocija-romana-u-stripu-ota.html.

Chute, Hillary. *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form.* Cambridge: University of Harvard Press, 2016.

———. *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

Cvetković, Srđan. *Između srpa i čekića: Oblici otpora komunističkom režimu u Srbiji 1944-1991*. Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2013.

———. "Terorizam i jugoslovenska politička emigracija." *Istorija 20. veka* 2 (2014).

Freud, Sigmund. (1909) "Family Romances," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume IX (1906-1908)*. London: Hogarth Press, 1955.

Hatfield, Charles. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005.

James, Deborah. "Drawn Out of the Gutters: Nina Bunjevac's Fatherland, a Collaborative Memory." *Feminist Media Studies* 15.3 (2015). 527-532.

Mance, Ivana. "Pod navodnicima: ženski strip na Balkanu," *Ženski strip na Balkanu, ed.* Jukić Pranjić, Irena Jukić Pranjić. Zagreb: Fibra, 2010.

Obradović, Dragana. Interview with Bunjevac. "I Only Belong to One Tribe: The Displaced Children of Yugoslavia," an interview, *Balkanist*. Web. 14 May 2015.

Pearson, Laura A. "Alternative Paradoxes in Heartless: Reading (Un-)Love in Nina Bunjevac's 'Bitter Tears of Zorka Petrovic,'" *Comics Forum*, ed. Ian Hague, 27 May, 2014. 11 Feb. 2015. Web. 1 May 2018.

Precup, Mihaela. "To Dream of Birds: Autobiography, Photography, and Memory in Nina Bunjevac's 'August, 1977' and Fatherland," *The Canadian Alternative: Cartoonists, Comics, and Graphic Novels.* eds. Dominick Grace and Eric Hoffman. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018. 207-223.

Rosić, Tatjana. *Mit o savršenoj biografiji: Danilo Kiš i figure pisca u srpskoj kulturi.* Beograd : Institut za književnost i umetnost, 2008.

Sekulić, Aleksandra and Popović, Radovan, eds. *The Invisible Comics: Alternative Comics in Serbia, 1980-2010.* Belgrade: National Library of Serbia, 2011.

Sontag, Susan. "Fascinating Fascism." *New York Review of Books.* 06 February 1975. Web. 30 April 2018.

———. *Regarding the Pain of Others.* London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003.

Štiks, Igor and Horvat, Srećko, eds. *Welcome to the Desert of Post-Socialism: Radical Politics after Yugoslavia.* London: Verso, 2015.

Tomažić, Agata. "Nina Bunjevac in njen oče, terorist." *Delo*. Web. 1 May 2018.

Tremonti, Anna Maria. Interview with Nina Bunjevac, "Graphic novelist Nina

Bunjevac recalls how her father was blown up bringing terror to Toronto in 'Fatherland.'" *CBC Radio*. Web. 1 May 2018.

Volčić, Zala. "Yugo-Nostalgia: Cultural Memory and Media in the Former Yugoslavia," *Critical Studies in Media Communications.* 24:1 (2007): 21-38.