

Visualizing Violence: Representations of the Female Body and Female Trauma in Nina

Bunjevac's *Bezimena*

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Introduction

Bezimena (Serbian): Nameless

What does it mean to be nameless? This is the question that lingers throughout Nina Bunjevac's graphic narrative *Bezimena* (2019). To be without a name is, in large part, to exist without identity, agency, or power. The process of naming is a political one, bound by power dynamics and structures. The paratext of *Bezimena* plays a vital role in this comic. In the Author's Afterword, Bunjevac dedicates the graphic narrative "to all forgotten and nameless victims of sexual violence" (Bunjevac 2019). This positions the graphic narrative as one directly confronting the violence of sexual trauma and a traumatic past. In fact, one of the nameless victims at the center of the story is Bunjevac herself.

In the Author's Afterword, Bunjevac recalls her own experiences with sexual assault as a young teenager in Serbia, positioning *Bezimena* as autobiographical. However, to say this work is only the retelling of a traumatic event would be to do it a great injustice. *Bezimena* is a graphic story that refuses to abide by the conventions of narrative or genre. Told through the perspective of the perpetrator, Bunjevac's graphic text explores the psyche and mind of a sexual predator. It is a story of a man named Benny who begins losing his grip on reality as he pursues an obsession with a former classmate. Many reviews of the comic highlighted the controversial and unsettling manner in which Bunjevac chose to tell a story of sexual violence. One review draws attention to its dismaying approach to depicting rape in particular, stating that, "*Bezimena* is clearly Bunjevac's attempt to dispel her own darkness, but her tactics may baffle, even alarm, the reader" (Lehoczky 2019). It is by understanding these alarming tactics that Bunjevac's artistry and story-telling materializes a new perspective on the ways in which women confront their

trauma. *Bezimena* is by no means an easy read, as Bunjevac explicitly confronts the morally grotesque both through narrative and visual tactics. It is this hybrid form of storytelling that positions the graphic narrative as unique and especially vital in our understanding of trauma. This essay explores the representation of female bodies, sex, and trauma. Central to my essay is comic scholar Hillary Chute's argument that female comics continually undertake what she calls "the risk of representation" which refers to the "complex visualizing it takes [in order to] rethink the dominant tropes of unspeakability, invisibility, and inaudibility that have tended to characterize trauma theory as well as current censorship-driven culture." The "it" that Chute refers to encompasses the delicate and intricate work undertaken by the cartoonist who creates and constructs a series of visual images that challenge the status-quo (*Graphic Women* 3). I argue that Bunjevac confronts this risk of representation by utilizing the hybridity of the comic form to challenge the ways sexual violence and trauma can be depicted. This hybridity highlights the complex and contentious process of emotional survival following sexual assault.

Bunjevac is a Canadian-born artist, who was primarily raised in the former Yugoslavia, but returned to Canada at the start of the wars in the early 1990's. Her second comic, *Fatherland*, propelled her into the spotlight, and earned her a spot on the *New York Times* best-seller lists. *Bezimena* is her third publication and earned her the Artemisia prize in the category of best drawing at the Angoulême International Comics Festival in 2019 (Bunjevac 2016).

In her comics, Bunjevac explores contentious and harrowing topics; from her complex family history and intergenerational trauma in *Fatherland*, to sexual violence and female trauma in *Bezimena*. Bunjevac is an artist that takes topics and ideas that "belong" in the private realm, and brings them out from under the shadows and into the public. In terms of theme and content, *Bezimena* is more similar to *Heartless*, her collection of comics dealing largely with female

sexuality, sexual assault, and trauma, in comparison to *Fatherland's* focus on complex family histories. Visually, however, its style echoes its direct predecessor *Fatherland*, with a strikingly haunting and realistic stippled technique that “resembles woodcuts or intaglio . . . [that] creates a stagey tableau . . . [with] frozen pictures that suggest carefully posed selfies” (Lehoczky 2019). *Bezimena* is a complex story to digest, both on the narrative and visual level.

In this paper, I wish to focus specifically on the ways in which *Bezimena* sheds light on taboo topics, bringing them into the realm of public discourse. The main research questions that this essay seeks to answer are how does Bunjevac undertake this risk, and through what visual and written language does she aim to achieve her goals? Applying Chute’s scholarship to *Bezimena*, I analyze the ways in which the hybrid form of comics allows Bunjevac to destabilize and rethink the female body and female space as highly hybridized. This is important as it challenges the ways in which women have traditionally been able to represent their lived experience and opens a new door to the way in which women’s trauma can be expressed and witnessed. The genre of the memoir and autobiography across many different mediums has, and continues to be, gendered. Within this genre, female writers face heightened scrutiny and criticism, predominantly at the hands of male critics. Carolyn G. Heilbrun elaborates on this point:

men prominent in the intellectual or literary world largely eschew the memoir form for reasons arising from both past and present. The autobiographies and autobiographical novels of an earlier generation had colonized and exhausted the form; in the present, it appears that men find that the genre has become feminized, sounding plaintive and excessively personal, and therefore threatening. (35)

Heilbrun highlights an important point: the criticism female life-writers face against the “excessively personal, and therefore threatening” (35). This connection between the personal and threatening is crucial as it demonstrates the ways in which female subjectivity and female emotion and trauma, destabilize societal norms and challenge the modern crusade against females documenting and bearing witness to their lived experience. For these reasons, I wish to analyze how Bunjevac reclaims this space, within the genre of the comic. By merging the written and visual, Bunjevac’s comic operates on a hybrid narrative track that challenges the ways in which women represent their lived experience, specifically within the context of trauma and sexual assault. In *Graphic Women*, Hillary Chute emphasizes the “gendered suspicion of memoir, and especially of the supposedly ‘extreme’ or too divulging memoirs of women,” stating that “the visual register itself is often seen as ‘excessive’” (5). Thus, the comic form allows females to engage with these “extremities” in a way that liberates, rather than confines, their lived subjectivity. As Dominic Davies and Candida Rifkind emphasize in *Documenting Trauma in Comics: Traumatic Pasts, Embodied Histories, and Graphic Reportage*, “graphic narratives do not simply reflect the culturally dominant of trauma as it is rendered in often modernist or anti-realist narrative forms; they also invoke it, play with it, revise it, challenge it, and in their most innovate moments, move beyond it” (8). Bunjevac challenges culturally dominant portrayals of trauma most evidently by upending the assumption that these stories can only be told through the lens of the victim. She moves beyond this assumption by telling her story through the eyes of the predator. She then takes it one step further by blurring the lines between victim and predator, forcing readers to wrestle with taxing and complex questions about morality, violence, and the darkness that may linger deep within all of us.

On the Fringe: Paratextuality and Reading Outside the Lines

Before delving into Bunjevac's actual story, it is important to consider the visual and narrative impact of the comic's paratext, as it plays a significant role in shaping our understanding of the comic itself. French literary critic Gérard Genette coined the term paratext in order to highlight the fact that, "text rarely appears in its naked state, without the reinforcement and accompaniment of a certain number of productions, themselves verbal or not, like an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations [. . .] the paratext is for us the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers, and more generally to the public (Genette 263). The hybridity of comics is paralleled by Bunjevac's hybrid reliance on both visual and written paratextuality that functions as a framing device for the story inside.

I would like to focus on three particular paratextual elements: the cover, the title page and the Author's Afterword. The cover is a black and muted chartreuse. The black part occupies most of the space. In the blackness, there are little specks of white stars. In the center is a drawing of a woman, seemingly in nude, encapsulated in an oval. The woman has large curls and is wearing dark lipstick with a thick layer of mascara across her eyelashes. Her eyes are closed, and her mouth is open in an expression of what appears to be erotic ecstasy. The title page is white, in contrast to the previous darkness. Here, another drawing appears encapsulated in an oval. The drawing of the woman has been replaced by a drawing of two figures: a male and a female are seen on some sort of rock surrounded by water in the moonlight. Both figures are nude, and the male is aggressively undoing the woman's dress, which she is desperately trying to hold on to and cover her exposed body. The woman is clearly attempting to escape the grip of the male, who is using her dress to pull her toward him. His hand is gripping the woman's wrist.

His face is one marked by roughness and aggression, as well as a certain frustration. The woman's face is horrified. It is clear that the drawing depicts a sexual assault in progress.

The Author's Afterword is Bunjevac's personal reflection on her experience as a victim of sexual assault in Belgrade, Serbia. In it, she details her and her friend Jasmine's encounter with Snezana, an eighteen-year-old who forges a close bond with Jasmine. As Snezana and Jasmine's friendship grows, Bunjevac recalls her attempt to get closer to Snezana. In the end, it turned out Snezana was serving as a sort of pimp for older men, luring younger girls to remote and secret forest locations in order to film their sexual assaults on tape. One of these tapes is of Bunjevac herself, who describes the assault in which a man named Kristijan was "groping my breasts and face closing in for a kiss" and "desperately trying to block my way to the door and pushing me onto the bed" (Bunjevac 2019). In the afterword, Bunjevac also reveals a later rape attempt by a legal guardian in Canada, and how when she attempted to talk about her experience to select people, she wound up "discouraged by the sudden change in their behaviour, a weary look in their eyes, or just plain disgust". "No wonder so many victims of sexual abuse choose to keep their pain a secret" she writes (Bunjevac 2019). The Afterword is vital as it frames the comic as semi-autobiographical. In narrative theory, there is a typical distinction between the author, narrator, and protagonist of a story; however, "in life writing, the sense of self can be said to be tacitly plural, including a divergence between, at the very least, the *real-life I* (the author), the *narrating I* (the self who tells), and the *experiencing I* (the self-told about)" (Refaie 53). Bunjevac's decision to include an afterword explicitly dealing with the content of the comic complicates the presumed fictitious nature of the comic and the divergence between Bunjevac the author, and Bunjevac the "experiencing I" whose memory of sexual assault is explored in the story. I located this book in the "Graphic Novel" section of a local bookstore, as opposed to the

“Autobiography/Memoir” section. What does this signal to readers? It is not advertised as a memoir or as a piece of autobiographical work. Yet, the Afterword makes it clear that Bunjevac does not want her comic to be read as a piece of fiction. James Phelan states that fictionality refers to “any rhetorical act in which somebody on some occasion intentionally signals his or her use of a discursive invention to someone else for some purpose(s)” and that “a rhetorical approach to fictionality in life writing can productively complicate our understanding of the relation between referential truth and subjective truth” (235). Phelan’s remarks illuminate Bunjevac’s text as her Afterward serves as an inverse of the type of rhetorical act Phelan discusses; instead of using the Afterward as a place to signal to discursive invention, her rhetorical act signals to her lived experience, and therefore, highlights the truth of the comic, rather than the fictional aspects.

Bunjevac’s decision to tell her story in an afterword, as opposed to a foreword, is peculiar in that it results in a distortion of the readers’ expectations. In choosing to first feature a woman who appears to be in a state of erotic bliss on the cover, Bunjevac urges readers to form a certain assumption, likely one that assumes the story of consensual, satisfying sex for women. However, the next drawing suggests a more ominous foreshadowing, one that implies a looming danger and potential assault. These juxtaposing assumptions complicate the story about to unfold. Bunjevac further plays with this notion of assumed paradox by choosing to tell her autobiographical account of assault and abuse, only *after* telling the story of sexual violence from the perpetrator’s eyes, in a way that at first glance may appear as a troubling attempt to “understand” sexual violence. However, by revealing her own assault, Bunjevac effectively complicates this reading. This type of complication is evident throughout the entirety of her

comic, in which she challenges the ways in which women are allowed to present and process grief and trauma following sexual violence.

Graphic Realism: Depicting the Disturbing

Bezimena opens with a two-page spread: the left side is black with the same speckles of stars that appear on the cover. The right side features the same background, with two white speech bubbles. The bubbles are wide and oval in shape. Instead of fully enclosing the speech bubbles, Bunjevac makes the artistic decision to position them one on top of the other, the top one merging into the bottom, connected by a flowing contrail-esque shape. This rendition of the speech bubble amplifies the surreal and dream-like tone of the narrative. In expressing the verbal features of the comic in this manner, Bunjevac induces a certain effect in which the narrative voice “sounds” dreamy and hazy, almost as if inducing the reader into a type of trance. This trance-like mood is enhanced as the comic begins with an encounter between two characters: a young Priestess and an elderly woman called “Bezimena, the old”—a mystical and witch-like figure. The dialogue explains the Priestess’ cry for help following the desecration of her temple and idols. “Oh, will my suffering ever cease? I have wept and wept... I have no tears left to shed” she states (Bunjevac 2019). Despite the distress of the Priestess, Bezimena remains “calm, and seemingly undisturbed” which causes the Priestess to cry out: “how can you just lie there, so indifferent to my pain? Don’t you care, have you no heart?” (Bunjevac 2019). Bezimena then takes the Priestess and plunges her into a body of water—akin to an aggressive baptism. This is where the comic takes its surreal turn.

Over the span of the next ten pages, readers are taken on a visual journey of reincarnation that culminates in the Priestess' rebirth as a young boy. The story of *Bezimena* and the Priestess offers direct parallels to the Greek myth of Artemis and Siproites in which Siproites, after seeing Artemis naked, is punished and turned into a girl. However, in *Bezimena* this myth is inverted, and it is the victim rather than the predator who is “punished” and turned into a boy by the name of Benny. The comic continues to be told through Benny’s perspective. The visual depiction of this rebirth is striking and hauntingly mesmerizing. Bunjevac dedicates six full-page illustrations to this rebirth. The first two depict the Priestess’s transformation. On the right side, the Priestess is seen falling downwards into a hole, drawn to imitate the look of a hypnotic swirl. On the left, the Priestess has been “sucked in” by the hole, only a shred of her dress remaining visible amidst the background of hypnotic swirls. The next four pages replicate this hypnotic swirl. In of themselves, Bunjevac’s backgrounds are a visual force to reckon with. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud writes that “backgrounds can be another valuable tool for indicating invisible ideas [...] particularly the world of emotions” (132). He expands on this, highlighting the fact that “even when there is little or no distortion of the actual characters in a given scene, a distorted or expressionistic background will usually affect our “reading” of characters' inner states” (132). This form of visualization amplifies the eerie and surreal tone of the comic, as well as alluding to the distorted inner state of both the Priestess, and later on, Benny.

The comic follows Benny from his birth as a “miracle child” to parents who thought they would never get pregnant; his adolescence where “he was a funny child, always leering at his classmate ‘White Becky,’ with his hand down his pants”; and finally to a young man who was “always lurking in the shadows, for the infliction of his childhood had never fully taken its leave—it had merely learned to hide” (Bunjevac 2019). The text follows Benny’s life in the

shadows as a janitor at a Zoo, and as an isolated and troubled young man struggling with his sexual obsessions. One day, he runs into Becky from his past and steals a sketchbook she forgets. This mysterious sketchbook contains sexually explicit “instructions” prophesying future sexual encounters between Benny, Becky’s maid and friend, and finally Becky herself. For Benny, “it was clear that the encounter had not been purely accidental, and that the sketchbook had been purposely left there for him to find, perhaps as an invitation to fulfill these fantasies” (Bunjevac 2019). This encounter propels the text into the depiction of Benny’s sexual encounters with these women, told through a dark surrealist lens that allows Bunjevac to explore the unexplorable. By the end of the graphic narrative, Bunjevac subverts the expectations of readers by revealing that Benny has been delusional all along, and that the reality of what was going on is much more sinister in nature. It is revealed that the sexual encounters Benny has been in were actually him raping and murdering young girls. This sinister revelation comes to readers as a gruesome shock, problematizing the content of the text as a whole, and leading us to ask: what is the purpose of exploring the psyche of a predator and acts of evil?

Throughout the text, Bunjevac blends the genres of dark surrealism and hyperrealism in order to explore the troubled psyche of a sexual predator. The surrealist style is seen through Bunjevac’s emphasis on the unconscious, dreams, and the uncanny. The hyperrealism is evident in the way in which she draws her characters with extensive detail, almost as if they were being reproduced from photographs. Bunjevac alternates between the use of hyper-realistic visual images and more mystical, and surreal symbolism and metaphors. The depiction of humans is very realistic. Bunjevac dedicates a lot of time to detailing the human body in very authentic and graphic forms. The drawing of Benny demonstrates this hyperrealism. On one page, Benny occupies the center of the page and is surrounded by a background of leaves. To recall

McCloud's statement on the function of backgrounds, the leaves in this case help submerge Benny within the shadows. The background that serves as a veil for Benny simultaneously serves as an instrument of clarity for readers, revealing his unseen, sinister nature. In the words of Cathay Carruth, "to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image" (Carruth 2). Bunjevac's visuals capture this possession, as readers are taken aback, disturbed, and left with a searing image in their heads. They demand that readers confront the uncomfortable, and in many of her depictions, the grotesque and violent. Jared Gardner and David Herman articulate the way in which this moment of slowed down pace affects the reader's relationship with the text. They state that "in comics and graphic novels, illustrations of faces and bodily postures may capitalize on the availability of visual coding for human emotions, eliciting readers' feelings before they even read the accompanying text (10). In the image, Benny's eyes illicit uncomfortable feelings within the reader. They are drawn in such a way that his gaze penetrates the page. His gaze is intense and seems to imply that he is looking at something he shouldn't be. They simultaneously prompt the reader to both *fear* Benny, and have fear *for* Benny. Given this illustration occurs prior to the readers knowledge of his sexual assault, Benny's look is one that anyone who has engaged in some sort of clandestine activity can identify with.

Bunjevac's decision to place emphasis on Benny's facial features is continued throughout the comic. It is important to draw attention to this emphasis because "graphic novels can greatly increase the process of empathy by highlighting the visual sense and drawing the reader further into the experience of the 'other'" (Lloyd 53). This raises an important question: what is the function of having readers empathize with the predator? Bunjevac uses the visual track of the comic as a way of eliciting the complexities of human emotion. This hyper-realistic drawing makes readers both fear and empathize with Benny. Prior to this image, readers are told that

Benny “dropped out of school early and was a friendless child. Subjected to harsh discipline at home, he learned to keep his thoughts and yearnings to himself” (Bunjevac 2019). The autobiographical narration is in the 3rd person, which results in a degree of separation between Benny and the reader. This distancing is contrasted through the use of language and visuals that evoke feelings of empathy, creating a movement between distance and closeness.

This verbal emphasis on the loneliness and misery of a young boy makes it so that the reader can empathize with Benny’s oddities. However, on the following page, Bunjevac uses leaves once again, except instead of serving as a method of concealment, the leaves are now being used to reveal something— Benny’s view from the shadows of the leaves on the previous page. Readers read this page from Benny’s point of view, as the visual construction of the leaves in the foreground with a slight opening to reveal a group of girls at a Zoo in the background makes it so that the reader *becomes* Benny. The reader’s potential empathy from the prior page is problematized as Benny’s sinister tendencies begin to unravel.

Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey discusses the womb-like circumstances of a theatre auditorium. “People sit in the dark and stare with impunity at the bodies on screen without being seen themselves, encouraging regression and with it the illusionary sense of owning these other bodies” she states, and “the viewer, whether male or female, is thus forced to align as a subject, with this voyeuristic, controlling, sadistic gaze or else to identify masochistically with the women as an object” (Mulvey 381). I wish to extend Mulvey’s argument and apply it to the form of comics. *Bezimena*’s visual style mimics this womb-like feel. One of the illustrations is in fact a young Benny falling out of the womb, umbilical cord still attached. Bunjevac only uses black and white, which further contributes to this womblike feel by engulfing the reader into a certain darkness. Through these visual cues, when readers reach the page featuring Benny hidden in the

leaves and Benny's view of the women from the leaves, they are engaging in a form of double-voyeurism and double-witnessing. The reader is both fascinated by watching Benny in his discomfort and fear in the leaves, as well as Benny's point of view, engaging in a voyeuristic viewing of the women at the Zoo. Readers are witness to both Benny's internal emotions and feelings, as well as to his sexual gratification from the viewing of women.

The hyperrealism is also evident in Bunjevac's depictions of sexual encounters. Bunjevac depicts bodies in their utmost raw and uninhibited state. Her depiction of the female body is especially graphic. A lengthy eight-page spread is dedicated to Benny's first sexual encounter with Becky's nameless friend. The first two pages depict the female masturbating to the contents of a book. She is seen touching her breasts in one panel and in the next, she is stimulating her genitals. Her genitals are drawn with detail, down to the minute details of her pubic hair. Julia Kristeva uses the term "abject" to refer to anything that crosses the boundaries of the body that is thus perceived as unsettling, "because it is neither completely separate from nor entirely part of the illusive ideal of a 'clean and proper self'" (Julia Kristeva, 1982, as cited in Refaie 68). She continues on: "The abject confronts us with those fragile states where we stray onto the territory of the animal and where we are confronted with our mortality... The abject both repels and fascinates: on the one hand it offers a constant reminder of the vulnerability of the subject, but on the other hand it can provide the pleasure of challenging norms and breaking taboos" (Rafaie 68). The graphic and hyperreal depictions of sex force readers to engage with the abject as they depict visceral bodily interactions, BDSM, ejaculation and blood. Bodily fluids are especially abject as they are both part of the body, and outside of it. The visualization of ejaculation and blood both expose bodily vulnerabilities while simultaneously breaking the taboo of publicizing and visualizing sex, something often restricted to the private realm. Another element that is

important to consider in these sexual encounters is the fact that the woman's face emphasizes the eroticism of the act, and gestures toward her enjoyment and gratification. In the following two pages, Benny enters the woman's bedroom from the window. As he ties her from behind, her face shows fear and shock. The next two pages show Benny covering her mouth, her eyes are wide with panic. Benny exposes his genitals while pulling on the woman's hair. In this drawing, an important visual change occurs in the woman's face. The fear and panic of the previous scenes is replaced with an expression of arousal and desire. Bunjevac then goes on to depict the penetrative sex between the two. The woman's facial expressions alternate between that of arousal and fear.

In *Graphic Women*, Chute discusses the work of Phoebe Gloeckner, an American cartoonist popular for her visual depictions of the morally grotesque like rape, abuse, and pedophilia. Her work has similarly been labeled as "pornographic," something that Chute complicates by highlighting the fact that she is presenting her own experience of abuse. Chute writes that Gloeckner "refuses to ignore the complex terrain of lived sexuality that includes both disgust and titillation" (*Graphic Women* 30). I wish to draw a parallel between the work of Gloeckner and Bunjevac, as seen through the ways in which both complicate female trauma and sexuality. This tension between titillation and disgust is one that Bunjevac explores through the visually visceral and hyper-realistic sexual encounters between Benny and the women. The depiction of these sexual encounters is evidently complicated by the fact that by the end of the narrative, it is revealed that they have been a fabrication of Benny's perverse and delusional mind. This sexually explicit and graphic scene is an example of how Bunjevac pushes back against invisibility and is taking what Chute calls the "risk of representation". I argue that Bunjevac undertakes this risk of representation through the hyperrealism of her graphic

narrative, and the contentious things she chooses to depict. Bunjevac pushes the boundary of how the female body and sexuality can be talked about in a public and cultural space. Her graphic images can be labelled excessive, pornographic even. These types of images are powerful because they emphasize a deconstruction of tropes of unspeakability. They actively challenge what women are *allowed* to talk about. In *Why Comics?* Chute describes comics as “visual technology that can make the unseen concrete and easily conjure the improper, there is something *illicit* about drawing” (28). These images, upon first encounter, are already illicit; however; with the hindsight afforded to readers by the end of the narrative, they become morally grotesque. I believe that the purpose of this inversion is meant to deeply distress readers.

Chute writes that “the most explicit images threaten to implicate the reader, transforming a sympathetic eye into a voyeuristic one” (*Graphic Women* 70). This implication is important as it forces the reader to confront the uncomfortable. It makes the reader grapple with the fact that the graphic scenes they have been witnessing have been the result of a man’s delusions, and that they have actually been witnessing rape. The fact that Bunjevac chooses to depict this through a lens of hyper-realism reinforces this unsettling reality. Chute emphasizes that female graphic novelists “push on the conceptions of the unrepresentable that have become commonplace in the wake of destruction” (*Graphic Women* 2). In *Bezimena*, Bunjevac does precisely this. Like Gloeckner, whose work is “disarming precisely because she takes on both pain and pleasure,” Bunjevac demonstrates a “refusal to adopt one or the other as the foundational contour of the female subject” (*Graphic Women* 69). By complicating the ways in which female sexual violence survivors grapple with trauma, she exposes that the road to recovery is a convoluted and highly individual one. She confronts the unspeakable by choosing to depict the women’s rape

through both a lens of disgust and desire; implicitly alluding to the taboo topic of arousal during acts of sexual violence.

Surrealism and Symbolism

The hyperrealism is juxtaposed against the surrealism that is salient throughout *Bezimena*. The function of this surrealism is to offer implicit, but meaningful, commentary on the complexity of trauma following sexual violence. An important element of the visual style of the comic is the use of symbolism, particularly, the recurring motif of owls. The first appearance of the owl occurs following an image of a younger Benny, laying in a bed with his arms restrained; the owl appears perched on a tree through a windowsill. The second time it appears is after Benny's first sexual encounter with 'White Becky's' friend. The emphasis on Becky's whiteness alludes to her innocence and purity. Becky's "whiteness" is thus both ironic and foreboding. It is ironic that Becky is consistently sexualized, and foreboding in that by the end, it is revealed that Becky was, in fact, an innocent under-aged girl all along. This notion of foreboding and knowing is also demonstrated through the symbolism of the birds. Two owls appear perched on trees as Benny leaves the woman's bedroom. That night, Benny also has a dream about "observing and about being observed" in which a drawing depicts a naked girl's body with the face of an owl. The final appearance of the owl is following his sexual encounter with 'White Becky's' maid. This time it appears in mid-flight drawn across a white moon. The owl serves an important symbolic function. In Greek mythology, Athena (virgin Goddess of wisdom) is often depicted as an owl or accompanied by one. Considering the parallels to the story of Artemis, it is likely that Bunjevac chose this deliberately in order to convey a certain message. Athena's owl has been used as a metaphor, perhaps most famously by German

Philosopher Hegel, who states that “when philosophy paints it’s gray on gray, then has a form of life grown old, and with gray on gray it cannot be rejuvenated, but only known; the Owl of Minerva first takes flight with twilight closing in” (Barfield 168). Hegel’s point has come to be understood as a way of saying that philosophy only understands reality or the past with hindsight (Barfield 168). Bunjevac signals this symbolic nature of the owl, as her text too can in some ways only be understood and appreciated with the hindsight that comes with reading the ending and her afterword. By choosing to place the owl throughout the comic, Bunjevac is alluding to a tragic and sinister reality, one in which victims of sexual assault can sometimes only come to realize that they have been raped *after* the act. Similarly, Benny does not realize the reality of his actions until the end when he is exposed to the truth. The visual representation of truth as an owl forces “readers who encounter [the text] to reexamine their expectations and critical perspectives” (Darda 323). The owl is a symbol for truth, and suggests that it is always present, despite our failure to *see* it at all times.

Bunjevac further blurs the line between truth and falsity through the way in which she chooses to posit ‘White Becky’s’ sketchbook as a surrealist object. The object serves to inspire Benny to act out his desires, that in his view, are predetermined in the book: “it was clear to him that the encounter with Becky had not been purely accidental, and that the sketchbook has been purposely left there for him to find... perhaps... as an invitation to fulfill these fantasies” (Bunjevac 2019). Benny imagines this sketchbook as a mystical object that has laid out his destiny; as something beckoning him to act out his lustful desires that he has harnessed for so long. This prophetic book is used by Benny as a means to justify his sexual desires and as “permission” to act them out. At the end of the comic, Bunjevac reveals that the sketchbook has actually been a perverse manifestation of Benny’s mind; the sketchbook had actually belonged to

a young girl and contained childish drawings of animals. This sets up the bigger revelation at the heart of the comic, which exposes Benny as a child-rapist and murderer who, in his delusional state of mind, convinced himself he was engaging in sexual acts with consenting women. The surreal function of the book thus serves as a representative of the ways in which the predator's warped perception of reality is seriously dangerous. The fragmented and warped way of portraying the story is highlighted by Chute who writes that, "images in comics appear in fragments, just as they do in actual recollection; this fragmentation, in particular, is a prominent feature of traumatic memory. The art of crafting words and pictures together into a narrative punctuated by pause or absence, as in the comics, also mimics the procedure of memory" (*Graphic Women* 4). The portrayal of the story through the lens of a deluded man makes it so that the reader's perception of events is distorted, calling attention to the way in which memory and trauma announce themselves in the human mind—in messy, convoluted ways. The moments of pause and absence that Chute emphasizes are visually represented through Bunjevac's use of black, blank pages. The use of these pages emphasizes the delusional and deteriorative state that Benny is in, and the lapses in memory and knowledge that readers have in regard to his escapades. The absence of memory, history, and time is punctuated by this visual emptiness. Chute emphasizes that the work women's comics do is to "erase the inscription of women in the personal space of sexual trauma, offering nuanced representation that place pressure on notions of what a 'correct' feminist sexual politics should look like" (*Graphic Women* 30). By exploring the mind of a sexual predator, Bunjevac creates a space in which there is no correct way for a woman to explore her trauma.

In *Bezimena*, Bunjevac uses the visual form in order to play with notions of seeing, *being* unseen, and choosing to (un)see. Most of the comic unfolds through Benny's perspective;

however, Bunjevac occasionally disrupts this perspective in order to shift the reader's attention to what is lurking underneath the surface. This interplay between seeing and (un)seeing is visualized through the motif of the eye. The eye as a disembodied subject appears early on in the comic after readers learn about Benny's anti-social tendencies and his withdrawal from society as "he learned to keep his thoughts and yearning to himself" and recused himself "far from the judging eyes of others" (Bunjevac 2019). The full-page illustration features eight eyes, each contained within a frame, mounted on a wall. There is a hand that appears to be adjusting one of the framed eyes. The illustration is such that it harkens to the notion of a peephole. From this moment, it becomes clear that Benny has a palpable fear of being observed, and of being caught.

The second appearance of the eye follows his sexual encounter with 'White Becky'. Here, the left page is left blank and black, and the right page features a single oval peephole, with an eye gazing out of it. The following four pages feature a single oval shape—like the peepholes previously seen—that contain illustrations of a woman leading a little girl to a man in a forest. The next left page is a replication of a singular eye gazing out of the peephole, and the right page is an illustration of Benny gazing into a small house. On the door, the window is again shaped like a peephole. This repetition of the eye within the peephole signals this notion of being seen. Chute comments on a rhythm that arises in comics "between presence and absence in the repetition of the peephole frame" (*Graphic Women* 72). The eyes within the ovals are punctuated by the complete darkness of the interwoven pages, creating a visual juxtaposition between visibility and invisibility. By framing the sequence of illustrations depicting the young girl being handed off to the man with these two eyes gazing out a peephole, Bunjevac is alluding to the troubling ways in which sexual assault is often "seen" but ignored and silenced. The eyes are both seeing the sexual assault taking place, as well as looking directly at the reader. The eyes

can be read in two ways: they are both the voyeuristic eyes of a predator seeing a sexual assault, as well as eyes directed towards the readers, positioning the readers as the voyeur. The eyes serve as an acknowledgement of the readers' presence, and force them to grapple with the unsettling sense that they are bearing witness to violence and rape. This movement between positioning the reader as both predator and witness perturbs the readers. They are simultaneously encouraged to identify with Benny, as well as the victims.

Following this illustration, the next eight pages operate as a sequence, building off the prior sequence of girls being handed off to a man in a dark forest. As Scott McCloud writes: "by creating a sequence with two or more images, we are endowing them with a single overriding identity, and forcing the viewer to consider them as a whole (73). The "whole" that Bunjevac's illustrations, in this case, depict is her own sexual assault. Following the illustration of Benny gazing into the small house, there is a two-page spread depicting a series of doors belonging to houses (much like the house Benny was just gazing into). However, in lieu of the windows, Bunjevac illustrates a series of female genitalia, specifically, a woman's clitoris. There are a total of six of these clitorises between the two pages. On the right page, one of the clitorises is being touched by a finger. On the left page, the finger appears again, except this time, it is inside the genitalia. The last clitoris on the page is also being touched by a hand, except this illustration is noticeably violent compared to the other ones. The finger is deeply inside the genitalia, and drops of blood are pouring out. The way in which the various clitorises are positioned on the page encourages readers to "read" the illustrations in a certain sequence: a progression of a sexual violence.

Bunjevac follows this illustration with a sequence of six pages. These six pages have no words, nor do they have any illustrations of people, or tangible objects. The first page on the left

is a blank page; the right page features a single, black line that resembles a drop of blood, coming from the top of the page, and stopping midway down the page. The background is white. The next two pages feature the same white background. The left page has extended the drop of blood from the previous page, except now there are more drops coming down from the top, dripping down to the bottom of the page. The right page continues building on the amount of drops; the thin line drawings have now become much more dense and thick. The drops have now formed a black pool at the bottom of the page. The last two pages feature a continuation of the pooling drops of blood; the left page is now almost completely black with only a few lines of white space; the right side is completely black. Visually, these six different pages can be read as a sequence, as Bunjevac continues the same visual motifs throughout, allowing the readers to connect the illustrations in their mind. This connection is also formed due to the way in which Bunjevac both opens and ends the sequence with a silent, black page. This is the moment of sexual assault.

The way in which Bunjevac chooses to depict the sexual assault is one filled with silence, blackness, and emptiness—a visual void. McCloud writes that “when the content of a silent panel offers no clues as to its duration, it can also produce a sense of timelessness [and] because of its unresolved nature, such a panel may linger in the reader’s mind” (102). The silence of the six-page sequence of illustration is palpable. This is an example of how comics materialize space *as* time, something that cannot be achieved through text alone. Bunjevac uses the drops of blood as a means of visualizing time through space. As the drops of blood continue to accumulate, readers experience two different conceptions of time. On one hand, the accumulation of blood signals a progression of time passing; however, the silence and black pages also endow the reader with a sense of timelessness, as if time has stopped passing all together. In “Hierarchies of

Pain: Trauma Tropes Today and Tomorrow,” Katalin Orban articulates the ways in which the comics form provides artists with “distinctive multimodal strategies for emphasizing inaccessibility, dissociative states, and the impossibility of articulation” (35). Orban emphasizes the ways in which these strategies “visualize inaccessibility and engulfment, by using visual signs and metaphors of blockage, post-traumatic states, and subjective landscapes of isolation and engulfment” (35).

The visual form gives Bunjevac a way to use “absence and presence [to] replicate the fragmentary nature of traumatic memory” (Payal and Sengupta 135). The lack of narration signals the way in which some trauma cannot be articulated using words. The age-old idiom “a picture is worth a thousand words” comes to mind. Despite the fact that the sequence is devoid of anything except the droplets of blood, it is precisely this void that makes the way in which Bunjevac depicts sexual assault so powerful. In discussing *Becoming Unbecoming*, by English comics artist Una, Ana Ruiz highlights the fact that an absence of narration, panels, frames, and explicit images “charts a non-chrono-logical progression that approximates the remembrance of trauma as typically one of confusion, numbness, and dissociation” (237). The sequence follows prior illustrations drawn in a hyper-realistic style, coupled with a narrative track. Much akin to the way in which trauma and grief manifest themselves, this sequence appears unannounced, without warning. Thus, the abrupt visual barrenness and silence produces a disorienting effect for the reader. Much like trauma, the sequence arrives unannounced, without warning. Marianne Hirsh comments on the relationship between trauma and the visual, highlighting the fact that “trauma [that] may be unspeakable, can be communicated viscerally and emotionally through the alternative cognitive structures of the visual” (Hirsh 1211). The visual representation of the assault through a *lack* of definite or explicit narration and illustrations highlights the way in

which the visual form can communicate without having to explain. The drops of blood, the silence, and the void, all signal a violent and traumatic experience, one that words may not be able to explain.

Conclusion

Bezimena ends with Benny's suicide in jail, instigating a parallel to the beginning of the comic in which the Priestess is transformed into Benny, except this time, Benny is transformed back into the Priestess. Bezimena, the old mystical lady, pulls the Priestess out from the water. "Who were you crying for?" she asks, not once, but twice (Bunjevac 2019). This emphasis suggests a controversial claim: that one may cry for the predator, as well as the victim. This visual and written move "tests the limits of what can be shown in contemporary cultural spaces, and tests the ground for what the medium of comics can do to contribute to wider conversations about the ethics and aesthetics of the depiction of difficult subjects" (Precup 225). Through her visual style of both hyperrealism and surrealism, and exploring her own sexual assault through the eyes of a predator, Bunjevac challenges the ethics of visualizing trauma and sexual violence. She demonstrates the ways in which emotional survival following sexual violence doesn't always fit into a prescribed and correct box that society seems to impose upon victims. The ending is a radical in that it explores what it means to go beyond sanitized and accepted forms of healing. It is within this radical reimagining of trauma that Bunjevac creates space for the ways in which we can begin to rethink and break free of what society has deemed a "correct" way to experience and heal from trauma

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