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INTERVIEW



'History is not over; we are made of it.': an interview with Nora Krug

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ABSTRACT

In Spring 2022 we met with Nora Krug, Professor of Illustration at the Parsons School of Design, to discuss her graphic narrative, *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home* about the history and future of German cultural identity. We also talked about her collaboration with Timothy Snyder on the graphic edition of *On Tyranny* and her future projects. Krug shared with us her process of creating *Belonging*, uncovering her family history, and her search for material remnants of Nazi Germany in second-hand stores. She described how creating her work led her to reflect on the history she inherited from her family and her country. In this interview, we discussed how her work may facilitate a similar reflective process in the reader. Our conversation led us through the history of illustration, what comics do different from photography, and comics as archive.

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In Spring 2022 we met with Nora Krug, Professor of Illustration at the Parsons School of Design, to discuss her graphic narrative, *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home* about the history and future of German cultural identity. We also talked about her collaboration with Timothy Snyder on the graphic edition of *On Tyranny* and her future projects. Krug shared with us her process creating *Belonging*, uncovering her family history, and her search for material remnants of Nazi Germany in second-hand stores. She described how creating her work led her to reflect on the history she inherited from her family and her country. In this interview, we discussed how her work may facilitate a similar reflective process in the reader. Our conversation led us through the history of illustration, what comics do different from photography, and comics as archive.

Vera Camden and Valentino Zullo: Thank you for being here with us today. We've just reread your work and we have to say *Belonging* really is so powerful. We are both involved in psychoanalysis and so just before this call we were discussing how we feel a rapport with what you are doing in this memoir. It's almost what we would call a self-analysis that happens as you reflectively transcribe and redraw what you pull from both community and personal archive. Extraordinary.

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Nora Krug: It was a very exhausting process. Not because it was so personal or because of the things I found out, but because of the thing that you're saying: I had to really deeply reflect on what I'm thinking and why I'm thinking this way. In that way it was very therapeutic indeed!

Camden and Zullo: You really are revisioning, if not revising, the past. In some ways it's reminiscent of this Raymond Carver quotation: "That's when it dawns on me that autobiography is the poor man's history."¹ *Belonging* illustrates this so well as you tell the story with found objects. The grand history of World War II narrows into the individual's experience, which in turn becomes a different kind of history. This history in some ways is more relevant to a reader by focusing on that personal voice. Could you say more about that process? What was it like to contend with your own thoughts as you redrew both familial and cultural history?

Krug: So, my book *Belonging* talks both about the search for my family and what they did or didn't do under the Nazi regime and also the search for German cultural identity. I think I hadn't as fully reflected on the fact that we are deeply ingrained in our cultures and in our old histories. Before I started working on this book, something that I thought about a lot is: can we ever exist outside of those realms or are we merely products of our history and our families? I was thinking about all the emotional reactions I had to the materials I found in the archives and the ways in which I dealt with the information I found. I immediately questioned myself throughout because I wondered whether my responses were actually just culturally informed or whether they really were my own feelings and opinions. I constantly questioned my own reactions and perceptions of what I found and what and what those things meant to me and to my life.

Camden and Zullo: Right, you are thinking, what are my own thoughts and what was passed down intergenerationally? It does seem to be a question that many autobiographical comics ask. How did comics as a media help you to process that question of what is your own and what has been passed down to you? (We realise you are a Professor of Illustration, and so we will use the terms comics loosely here to capture the image-text form).

Krug: Writing and illustrating this book was an attempt at rediscovering my country's past and my family's past, at shedding light on things that had been undiscovered before and also reconstructing a family narrative that had been passed down. This is something that I think happens in every family, I think. We have narratives that we believe in but have not thought about. For example, an American person might say, "my grandfather was part of the liberation during World War II" and everybody is amazed and pleased to hear that, but you don't really question what that means or what that person engaged in or saw or did at the time. So, I think I see my book as a not only a way of constructing my own thoughts and feelings on these political ideas but also an act of deconstructing and trying to disassemble my family's stories as well as my own understanding of history (Figure 1).

I also think that illustration as a medium, or comics as a medium, allows you to reflect on history because it's a very personal medium. It allows you to look at the past from a personal and more emotional angle. It doesn't claim to be objective. I think that's a very



Figure 1. From *Belonging*. Reprinted with permission.

freeing thing for any illustrator— as opposed to photography. Of course, photography isn't always objective, but, I think, illustration doesn't make that claim at all. It's clear from the beginning that any illustration that's created always says something about the person or says as much about the creator as it says about the subject that's depicted. There's a strong subjectivity which allowed me to look at history in a less factual way and in a more emotional and personal way and to recognise through illustration that history is an accumulation of experienced moments. I mean facts are undebatable and we need to believe in them, but it is also an accumulation of individually experienced moments. People experience war. They saw things they heard things; they felt things; I think that highlighting that is as important for our understanding of history because it allows us to access history in a more personal way. I think illustration has a very strong role to play in that for better and for worse.

Camden and Zullo: Right, precisely because comics, illustration, cartooning, insists upon that subjectivity that you are talking about. There is currently a kind of saturation in terms of the prevalence of the photograph, indeed, but even with all the technology, the drawn image retains a greater popularity than ever before. Comics capture trauma narratives because whether historical, familial, or political they focus on feelings interpreted through the drawn image.

Krug: There's such a range of photography but there's also always a political angle and some photographers focus on that more than others. But it's interesting with illustration, too. There are people who work much more naturalistically in a way and some even propagandistically. I'm thinking of some earlier illustrators who would accompany armies or accompanied soldiers throughout decades and who sometimes portray the soldiers in a very particular way that also serves the military in its self-perception. Whereas, then there are other artists who just portray war and death in a much more merciless and direct way or honest way. That also really depends on the artists.

Another thing I really appreciate about illustration is that you must *create* everything. When you make a film or when you're a director of a theatre play and you set the stage, set the scene, you bring the characters on the scene, you decide what they look like, how they move, how they act, what they wear. That's not necessarily what photographers do. When they're documentary photographers they capture reality even though there can be a personal angle, but as an illustrator you have to invent all that. That involves a strong sense of empathy which is something that is very important to me in my work. Because when I, for instance, did the short visual narratives with my grandfather and imagined what he did during the War and how he engaged with his brother and tried to convince him to defect, I had to imagine him in a moment that I had no visual proof for at all. There were no photographs of him and his brother in the bedroom talking about him leaving the army. I had to imagine it. As a photographer you have to work with what is there, but as an illustrator you can invent things and they can still be real. I didn't claim in this story that my grandfather really wore this type of pair of pyjamas, but I'm not lying either. I'm just giving the reader an option of what this moment could have looked like and how I imagined it based on the information I found and that requires me to put myself in my grandfather's shoes. If he had felt sad, what would his physique look like, how would he have held his arms? How would the emotion have been communicated through his body? These are all acts of empathy in a way and you deeply engage with the people in your family but on a certain artificial level it allows you to get closer. So, that's another fascinating thing that I find with writing too, it's a way of distancing yourself by taking a step back, so you can observe certain things that otherwise seem natural to you, that you don't question normally. You can observe them from a distance and then in that way get closer at the same time because there's an artificial artistic layer in between you and the subject (Figure 2).

Camden and Zullo: It does sound a little bit like the position of the analyst, too. You look at this with an objective distance, but you have to be as involved as humanly possible in the narrative.

Another question we have is about the German relationship to nature and the land. There is something very ingrained and very special about the Germans' relationship to the land. In a final scene you say this is the closest I'll get to my uncle through a depiction of a landscape photograph: I think you're saying in part that you can feel him in this landscape.

Krug: Thank you. So, I use photographs of landscapes often as placeholders or as passive portraits, as placeholders for my own emotion (Figure 3). So, I think that little photograph in the back is both in a way a portrait of my uncle and of myself. All of us together



Figure 2. From *Belonging*. Reprinted with permission.

even though neither of us is in it. Scale and placement are very important to me in my found materials. I chose to show this photograph, which in its original it is also small, very small on the page because I wanted to say I won't actually get closer. This is the closest I can get and only get a glimpse. What I also find fascinating with this particular photograph, and it's a recurring motif in photographs and German paintings (and maybe also in other countries) is that of the path that leads into the distance, but you don't know where it ends. I see that in so many paintings and photographs and to me that also took on a symbolic character in the book. I'm on this path, I haven't arrived yet and I don't know whether I'll ever arrive and what the final point of destination will look like. So, that's what this photograph represents.



Figure 3. From *Belonging*. Reprinted with permission.

Camden and Zullo: It does offer a future as well; it's in the past but it's also imagining a future. That is something that is so persuasive about your work: that this journey into the past takes as its purpose finding a German cultural identity for the future. Can you think about how the form of comics helps you to do that, how it facilitates imagination for the reader as well? That future, not only for German cultural identity, but perhaps even for American identity?

Krug: Illustrations have always taken on the role of showing us what's possible. Of course, in a propagandistic way illustrations show us illusions, they can show us utopias, but they also warn us to whatever the common norms are because if we don't follow them, we will end up punished in "hell." Propaganda illustrations in history reminded people that they better pay their church taxes, for example, because otherwise terrible things would happen to them if they did not. There's a very strong political element, but also, as you say, there can be a very hopeful element. Illustrations at their best can dismantle our common notions of what the future can or cannot be and provide us with completely new pathways. They can question our current worldview and give us an alternative perspective. That is something very powerful about illustration.

This book isn't just a book about the past or about my family that lived through the Nazi regime. I didn't want to do a biography of my grandparents and that's also not a form that I'm interested in for my future work. It's important to me to always relate it to the present. As an artist, I feel like creating art or writing is always a way of asking questions to the world, trying to understand the world a little bit better. An important part of that for me is how do all the things we learn about – everything we've experienced

as a people and as individuals – relate to who we are now? I basically question the ways in which we exist in the world in relationship to others. So, it was important to me to bring the past into the present and try to figure out what this means for a German today. What does being German really mean? Is there such a thing as cultural identity? Or is it just, again, a utopian construct, a myth? In reality, it's something that's not static, that evolves constantly over time. But we're always told that to be a certain culture or being an American has to be a certain way and if you're different you're un-American. It's a very political question too.

Camden and Zullo: It brings us to the illustrations that you did for the graphic edition of Timothy Snyder's *On Tyranny* (Figures 4 and 5). It describes the contemporary moment, but it's also a handbook of survival located in the present and imagining the future. Could you tell us a bit about how you got involved in this work with Snyder?

Krug: So, when *Belonging* was about to be published, my publisher and I were looking for people to write endorsements for the back of the book and Timothy Snyder was one of the people we contacted, and he kindly agreed to write a comment. Then he approached me after *Belonging* came out and asked me if

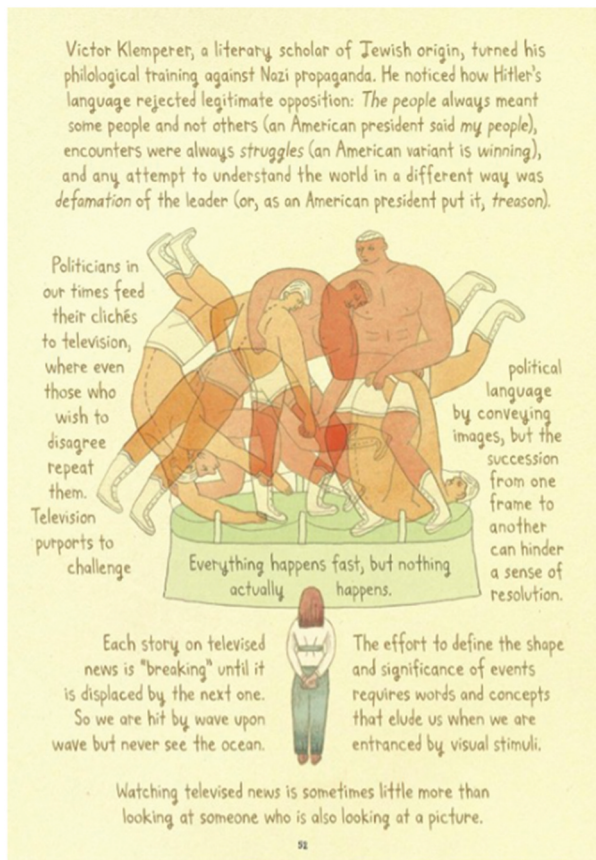


Figure 4. From *On Tyranny*, p. 52. Reprinted with permission.



Figure 5. From *On Tyranny*, p. 53. Reprinted with permission.

I wanted to do this illustration. He had been thinking of working on a visual adaption of his book that came out in 2017 and he wanted me to do it. At first I wasn't sure. I felt very flattered and honoured because I admire his work. I think what he does is very important, especially at the moment, but it's not the same as my previous projects: it's not a narrative that evolves emotionally over the course of time. There's no narrative tension, no arc. It's a book of ideas and principles, and so I didn't want to be repetitive. I didn't want to always show the same type of image. So, I decided to just apply the same method that I had applied to *Belonging* and create a book that would consist of a variety of different mediums including my own drawings and photographs. I found graphic materials to create a certain visual tension to comment on the idea that tyranny is timeless and universal. That's why I brought the historic images, because that's one of the major points that Snyder is making. I have learned from history that history is not over; we are made of it. That's also exactly what drove me to do *Belonging*, recognising the importance of confronting your past continuously and understanding that it continues to live within you, and you have responsibility to keep it alive.

Camden and Zullo: There is indeed a timelessness to tyranny and comics capture that so well. Comics shatter time. They refuse that chronological narrative that would suggest tyranny is behind us.

Krug: That's a great point. Illustration can dissolve the boundaries of time and space. *Jimmy Corrigan* by Chris Ware is an example of this. The imaginary quality of illustration comes in where you can imagine different times and spaces and that gives the work something universal.

Camden and Zullo: What's also intriguing is the way that you reframe these historical materials through your cartooning, through your illustrating. For example, when you take a photograph, and you write over it. What does it mean to bring the photograph into the contact with the cartoon and one's own handwriting? Is this something you feel comics lends itself to in that the boundaries between word and image have already been broken down or is it something else? (Figure 6)

Krug: I use these stored materials and I surround them with my own text or write my own words on it. I make it my own, in a way, or maybe I acknowledge the fact that again the past is within me. That this photograph is in some way part of me because it's part of

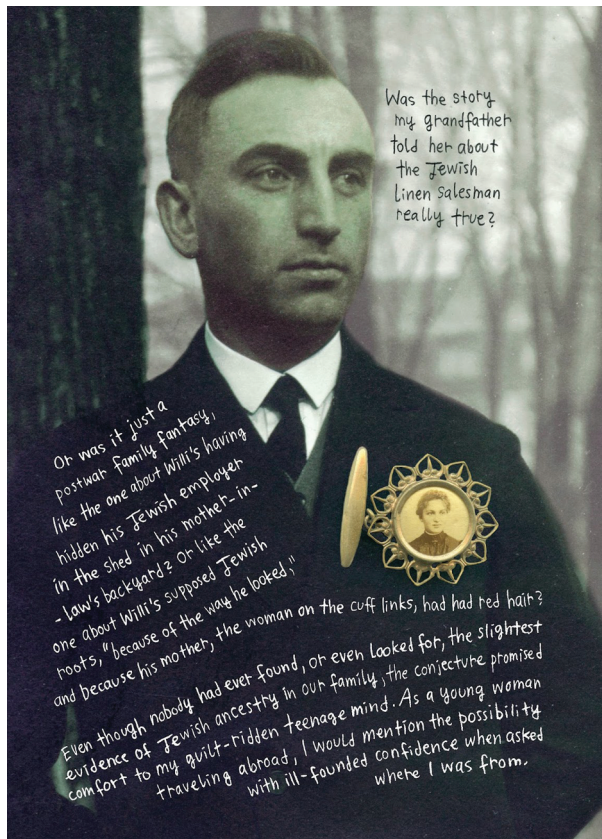


Figure 6. From *Belonging*. Reprinted with permission.

human history and I'm a product of human history. So, it's also an attempt to understand these materials. As an example, a lot of the photographs I used in *On Tyranny* and *Belonging* are from my private collection of flea market finds. I've been looking for photographs and personal objects. I'm interested in finding propaganda from the time of the Second World War and before the time of the Nazi regime in order to understand on a more visceral level what it was like to experience that time. That is an experience that my own grandparents didn't provide me with because they had all died by the time I was 8. I was never able to ask them about the Holocaust or the War or the Nazi regime. Trying to find these personal artefacts and objects and photographs has allowed me to understand that time in a more personal way. I often find these things in places where it's clear that some family member has died, the children are not interested in any of their stuff, and then an organisation comes in and clears out the home.

Camden and Zullo: Estate sales are full of documents, papers of people's lives. So, you go through those boxes, over those materials that are left behind?

Krug: Yes, because people tried to forget many of these things. This is all evidence of lives lived under the Nazi regime, and I'm trying to save that evidence. I feel like a private detective in some ways. At one time I found the file of a woman who had over the course of, four decades tried to find her son who had vanished during World War II. It was this little binder that I got for four euros. It was basically this woman's life story; it was heartbreaking, and it was chronologically filed. The first letters were her writing to the Nazi military asking for the whereabouts of her son because she hadn't heard from him. Then the war ended and suddenly she wrote letters in Russian that a translator translated for the Russian military that was occupying East Germany. You could see the political shift throughout the file, but you also see her desperate attempt to find her son. She never found him. What is just so tragic is that these documents basically end up in the trash. I try to make them come back to life so that they're seen. Because the act of seeing to me is also an act of witnessing. I'm trying to make the reader witness history by showing these documents and these photographs and the same is true for some of the archival material I found. Like in *On Tyranny*, the photograph of the formerly enslaved people who escaped I put that in there because I wanted the reader not to forget. I wanted them to look at the faces of these two men who looked directly at the camera and to ask ourselves: 'What are we doing today to help that this will never happen again, or to combat contemporary racism?' I was trying to challenge the reader into witnessing what was then and what is now.

Camden and Zullo: How long have you been doing that? Were you going to thrift stores even as a child or is that more of a recent passion?

Krug: It's more of a recent passion. I'm not really a collector. I only collect when I have a specific project that I'm working on.

Camden and Zullo: More of a researcher.

Krug: Exactly. So, this, the collecting, began when I started the research for *Belonging*. I wanted to find materials from the time of the Nazi regime but also this was when I was on my quest of trying to figure out what does trauma and cultural identity mean, what has it meant? What has it meant to Germans throughout different decades and centuries?

I was looking to see if I could find recurring motifs. This is where I started to collect those photographs of people looking at landscapes from behind. Because I found that was a recurring motif amongst photographs I found at flea markets (Figure 7). I was wondering, 'Is this all in reference to Caspar David Friedrich's paintings' from the Romantic period'? Is this an intrinsically German desire to be at one with nature and to also have that visually manifest itself by taking photographs of a solitary figure in a landscape or does that exist in every culture? And what does that mean and why is it so important for us to capture that and photograph that? And who is that person who's capturing it? Because in fact, it's never just a solitary figure. There's always another person with a camera.

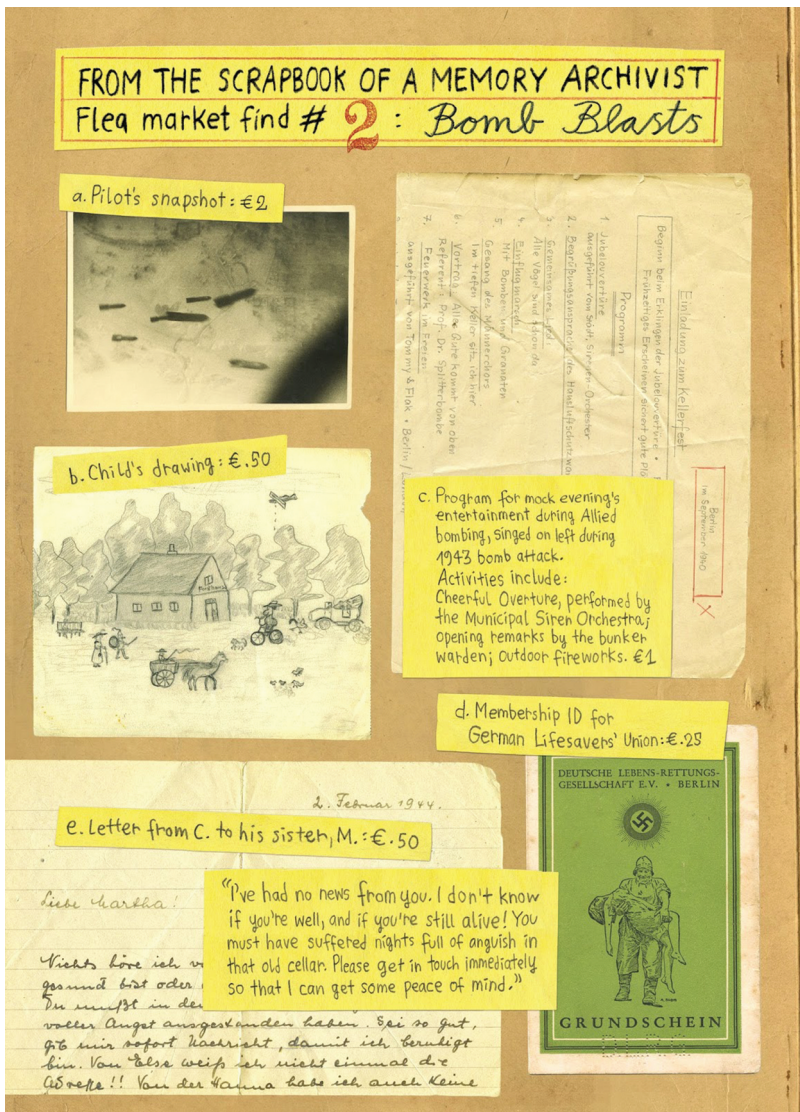


Figure 7. From *Belonging*. Reprinted with permission.

Camden and Zullo: Or with a paintbrush.

Krug: It's not only about 'Who are we as a people but also how do we want to be seen as a people?' I think maybe that's the more important question that maybe there isn't really such a thing as cultural identity and maybe it's more about what we want to believe is who we are and how do we want to be seen by the outside? That's another thing that illustration has done throughout the centuries, it has established an idea of who we think we are and how we want to be seen and also who we are not. That is again where propagandistic imagery comes in. For example, the anti-Semitic imagery, anti-Muslim imagery during the Ottoman empire. There's a long tradition. Of course, there is also long tradition in Japan of depictions of Europeans throughout different centuries. So, illustration has also filled that role of showing who we are not and how we believe we are different from one another.

Camden and Zullo: It's a fine balance between a sort of healthy patriotism versus nationalist isolationism. The other side of it being a genuine cosmopolitanism when there can be an appreciation cross culturally.

Krug: And that's where the personal connection obviously comes in.

Camden: Reading your book, I was also very interested in the way that you describe the early years of growing up with this kind of hyper correction almost to the point of disavowing and demeaning of cultural identity or the grandeur, I mean the unabashed grandeur of German art and literature. The way that that almost gets denied through an attempt to force children to disavow love of country. Ai Weiwei, the Chinese artist describes the cultural revolution and he remembers the destruction of the glories of Confucianism, for example. He describes that very powerful absurd propaganda that makes children disavow, in a sense, who they are.

Krug: I agree with you. You can't erase history. I think there's a danger in trying to do that, which is that it can lead to the opposite tendency. This happens in America, too with extreme right-winged people, where they say they are tired of always being the bad person and then that leads into a very dangerous ideology. I think a reflective and critical engagement with the past is definitely necessary. I think that the Second World War and the Holocaust and all the other atrocities that the Germans committed during that time should remain an important part of the German school curriculum. I also personally think that visits to Holocaust museums and concentration camp museums should be obligatory for German children. But I think what was missing and what I hope might change in the German curriculum is a more personal confrontation with these subjects such as going into archives to find out what happened in your town and in your families, and again, making a connection to now. How can students help now? How can they help people who are ostracised or minorities who are mistreated? Because that will give them an opportunity to let go of this passive paralysis in a way, this guilt-ridden paralysis and turn what they learn about history into something productive and proactive. That can go along with a certain kind of confidence in one's own national identity. I think national pride, as you said before, in reference to the *On Tyranny*, or patriotism is actually good thing. I think, if I were to say that in Germany, probably half of the audience would say it is not. That's not something we grew up being comfortable with and for good reason, but

at the same time I think we need to learn to embrace our culture and acknowledge that we need to continuously look back at it with a critical point of view, but if we don't learn to love our country it can have the adverse effect.

Camden and Zullo: As you say, there's a reactionary response.

Krug: Yes, and we can't leave the love for Germany or German identity or the term *Heimat*, which is the foreign title of my book, to the extreme right. That's why I called the book *Heimat* in German, because *Heimat* has always been a very debated term ever since the Nazis because it has a very sentimental ring to it and a very political ring, and it was abused by the Nazis. This is similar to the way that a term like freedom has become so political in the US.

In reality, though, it can mean so many different things, it means different things for different people. *Heimat* should not be an exclusive term that only applies to one particular person or person with a particular colour of skin. It's important for Germans to claim that term as well, for those Germans who think that it's important to continue to look at German history from a critical angle so that's why I made this commitment of calling the book *Heimat*. Basically to claim that term back from the extreme right.

Camden and Zullo: So, reclaiming that word is not unlike taking possession of the photographs and putting your own experience and understanding on that object. You're reclaiming history from the trash. You make clear that even the European nations, such as Germany which we think that we know so much about at this point, we indeed do not.

Krug: That's what writing and images can do. That's partly also why I wrote the book because living abroad for so long I realised there's very little, not only in America, but also in European countries, even in France, which is a direct neighbour of Germany, very little understanding of how Germans today live with this legacy or struggle with the legacy. How would one know that not growing up in that country, but that's why it's so important to write books and illustrate books so that people can reflect on these things in a new way.

Camden and Zullo: We are also wondering if you would speak a little bit about what you're working on now.

Krug: Well, I have many, many ideas for projects. At the moment I'm at a stage where I'm confused about what I should focus on next. I have many subjects that interest me. I know I want to continue with visual non-fiction. That's clear to me. I also see it as my responsibility, not responsibility somebody else puts upon me, but I feel responsible for contributing to the political dialogue as an illustrator.² There are so many issues in the world that are troubling and that we know far too little about and I want to know more about them. Writing and illustrating books for me is always a way of learning more about something that upsets me or makes me angry. That's usually the starting point. I also feel like I should communicate those things to readers. That is my job in a way. So, it will probably be something about

a political conflict, but it doesn't necessarily have to be World War II, it could be another war or conflict.

Camden: We look forward to hearing from you when you do know so that we can follow along in your way.

Krug: Check back in another ten years or so!

Zullo: Funny. So, what are you reading about now? Or rather what are you learning about?

Krug: I'm not reading enough at the moment, but I just started *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* by Yuval Noah Harari. I just want to understand humanity from the largest scope and how we got to where we are now. I also have a stack of books on German colonialism and subjects around contemporary racism that I want to tackle because I realise that German colonialism is something that that we didn't really grow up learning anything about. It's an interesting observation when you look at how much we learned about the Holocaust and how little about German colonialism. The favourite German response to this statement is often that Germany owned colonies much later and for a much shorter time than other countries. So that's why we didn't need to learn about it, which is of course rubbish because the colonial regime caused havoc and terrible misery. So, that's a subject I want to learn more about. Also, as somebody who's been living in the United States for seventeen years, I'm continuously surprised by how little I still know about the African American experience and African American childhood in America. I feel like I need to know more about that. I became an American a few years ago, and I feel like now I'm adopting that history even though it was not originally my own but I made the decision to become a citizen and now I also have that responsibility towards this other history, not just my German history.

Camden: Even the history of Germans as immigrants to America is so interesting.

Krug: Right and how that German identity is still preserved in pockets of the country. That was the experience I had when I went to Milwaukee where it almost seems frozen in time. Very different perception of national or cultural identity than the one that I have.

Camden: There again is that timelessness of history as we discussed. That seems like a good place to stop. Thank you again for having this conversation with us.

Zullo: Yes, thank you again. Goodbye.

Krug: Thank you! And have a good weekend!

Camden: So long, farewell!

Notes

1. Raymond Carver, 'Blackbird Pie,' in *Where I'm Calling From: Selected Stories* (New York: Random House, 1989), 511.

2. After our interview and shortly after the invasion of Ukraine, Nora Krug began creating a weekly illustrated diary published by the *Los Angeles Times* where She interviews K., a Ukrainian journalist in Lviv, and D., a Russian artist in St. Petersburg about their firsthand experience of the conflict. The weekly diary can be found here: <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2022-03-23/diaries-of-war-ukraine-russia-comics>

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).