

## Trauma, Identity and Memory: The Individual/Collective Dialectic in 9/11-related Comics<sup>1</sup>

Christophe L. Dony

### Introduction

In their thematic review of contemporary art since the 1980's, Craig McDaniel and Jean Robertson argue that "identity defined through culture and relationships is a preeminent theme in Western art and art discourse" (2005:103). Because comics are tremendously interesting cultural products revealing significant ideas about the values of a society, scholars studying comics from a cultural viewpoint -- comics as both an art form and an industrial product -- have often been interested in the theme of identity. In 2000, Milla Bongco, focused on gender in devoting a whole chapter on the representation of women in her book *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Super-hero in Comic Books*. In 2002, Marc Singer wrote an article for the *African American Review* entitled "Black Skins' and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race," in which he investigates "the association of comic books with the perpetuation of racial stereotypes."<sup>2</sup> More recently, in 2005, Jason Dittmer reflected on how the national trauma of 9/11 was still perceived in early September 2002 *Captain America's* issues and how the character was able to construct national identity and geopolitical scripts.

In this essay, I will make a case for exploring the theme of identity in various mainstream comics compendia dedicated to the Sept. 11, 2001 events, which include *Marvel's Heroes* (Oct. 2001), *Dark Horse's 9/11 vol.1* (Jan. 23 2002) and *DC Comics' 9/11 vol.2* (Feb. 2002). In terms of identity, studying comics dealing with the traumatic events of 9/11 has been revealed as tremendously interesting because, as March Howard Ross puts it:

In bitter conflicts, among the strongest feelings people have are fears about attacks on their identity.... In violent conflicts, the fears also include concern for physical security and fears of extinction of the self, family, and the group and its culture, including its sacred icons and sites (306).

The events of 9/11, as Ross suggests, have encouraged people to reconsider their individual identities -- the nature of their self, as well as their communal identities -- the way they relate and belong to groups and communities (collective identity). Thus, this essay specifically engages in the debate between individual and collective identity -- that has now for long

animated the field of "trauma literary studies," in an attempt to argue that the collective national voice of the United States has overshadowed individual testimonies of the events in the aftermath of 9/11. In order to do so, this essay first discusses how comic artists investigated the relationship between individual and collective identity in general terms. Secondly, the essay addresses this dialectic in terms of national identity and investigates how artists relied on national symbols, tropes, and myths in order to redefine what it meant to be American in the aftermath of the events.

A significant example from the press illustrating this emphasis on the one voice of America within the individual/collective dialectic would be the contrast between *The New York Times* and *Life* magazine's responses to the 9/11 events. Between Sept. 15 and Dec. 31, 2001, *The New York Times* published 1,901 stories of individual victims of the attacks in its obituary section entitled "Portraits of Grief." In that extensive section, as Nancy Miller argues, "everyone was given equal space and treatment" (114). It was thus an attempt to commemorate the collective tragedy of 9/11 by means of individual portraits of victims. In contrast, the editors of *Life* magazine created a book very similar to *The New York Times'* "Portraits of Grief," featuring individual portraits commemorating the victims of the tragedy. However, they interestingly entitled it *One Nation: America Remembers September 11*.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, this emphasis on the one voice of America within the individual/collective identity dialectic can be traced back to a national cultural definition of American identity. Indeed, one of the mottoes of the United States that appears on one dollar coins, dimes and nickels reads *E-Pluribus unum*, "out of many, one." This last example interestingly connects the theme of identity with that of memory and therefore illustrates one of the strongest points that runs throughout this essay: "crises of identity are concomitant with crises of memory."<sup>4</sup> (187), as Pierre Nora (quoted in Kanseiter, 2002) suggests.

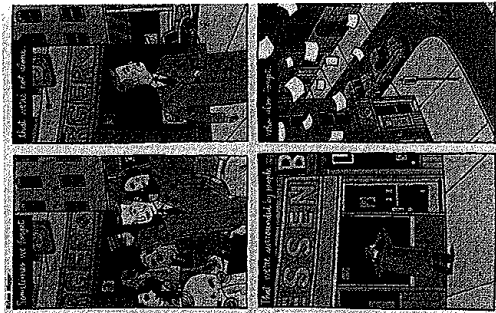
Finally, this essay uses the issues of identity and memory to show how the political and ideological implications of the 9/11-events were reflected in a populist medium. To use Jason Dittmer's words, this article investigates comic books as a medium through which "national identity and geopolitical scripts are narrated" (626).

Before turning to this analysis, however, it is first necessary to account for the types of publications and audiences that are dealt with in this essay. Wulf Kanseiter claims that, "Most studies on memory focus on the representation of specific events within particular chronological, geographical, and media settings without reflecting on the audiences of the representations in question" (183). I will therefore first account for the sort of publications I am dealing with in this study.

The closest compendium in time to the events (*Marvel's Heroes*, published in Oct. 2001) hardly deserves the name of compendium. In fact, it

Istvan Benyai's response (Fig. 1) could be characterized as existentialist, as it depicts a character going through an individual identity crisis in an absurd universe. In fact, the character has literally lost the nature of his self in the shadow of the events. Indeed, he is not recognizable as he turns his back to the viewer. Moreover, the environment in which he evolves is as mysterious as one of Kafka's narratives, and the grayish blue color, echoing the storm of dust created by the collapsing of the towers, not only emphasizes the unreality of the events but also his own puzzling and enigmatic state of mind. In fact, the only connection with reality in the setting is rendered with a theater reading "Late Show" on its presentation panel. This, of course, conveys a mysterious character to the response and, once again, stresses the unreality of the 9/11 events. In addition, it also connects the theme of identity with that of memory.

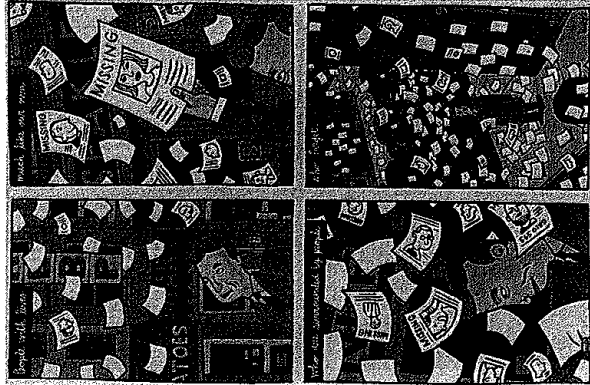
Indeed, "The Late Show" is a 1977 movie that plunges the viewer into a film noir ambience similar to those of the 1950s which then evolves into a detective story. This reference thus suggests that the individual is looking for clues in order to redefine his identity. The traces of his footprints, which he literally leaves behind as a part of himself, indicate that he is seeking for a pattern that will help him overcome his individual identity struggle. From this response, it thus appears that the 9/11 events have had a tremendously strong impact on individual identity and have caused "fears of extinction of the self," as Ross (2002) puts it.



Figs. 2-3. Biggs, B., "Untitled," in Levitz, P., (ed.), 9/11 volume1,(2002), Dark Horse Comics.

In Brian Biggs's response (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3), the individual also goes through an individual crisis but evidently feels the need to define his identity in relationship with others. Indeed, the character is surrounded by portraits of potential victims and reflects on the human condition: "Sometimes, we forget/that we're not alone/ That we're surrounded by people/who also forget/People with lives/much like our own/who are surrounded by people/ who forget."

Although Jospheh Wirek argues that "the verbal text has relatively little direct connection to the visuals, and serves as a general comment on the action, explaining its significance from a distant and omniscient vantage point" (2003:291), it is clear that there are some significant parallels between the text and the visual in Biggs's response, when one considers the theme of identity in terms of the individual/collective dialectic. Indeed, the character wandering in the middle of portraits of potential victims or missing individuals, while thinking "people with lives/much like our own," feels the need to relate to others. Second, and this is where the other dialectic of individual/collective memory merges with that of identity, the protagonist "forge-[s]" that he is "not alone," while yet being alone in the visuals of the second panel in the first page of the narrative.



Figs. 2-3. Biggs, B., "Untitled," in Levitz, P., (ed.), 9/11 volume1,(2002), Dark Horse Comics.

Although this opposition between the text and the visual gives a sharp contrast between an individual identity struggle and the way one defines oneself in relationship with others, it is clear that this opposition is intended as ironic. Indeed, in the closure of the narrative, the character does not resolve his identity crisis as he concludes that the people around him "also forget" that they are "surrounded by people." In fact, this response primarily functions as an ironic comment on the 9/11 events by showing that it takes a traumatic event to remind us that identity is relational, and then by emphasizing that this communal identity is rapidly erased from individual as well as collective memory.



Fig. 4. Zezelji, D., "Untitled," in Levitz, P. (ed.), *9/11, volume 2*, (2002), DC Comics.

In his response (Fig.4), Daniel Zezelji uses this pair of dialectics (individual/collective identity and memory). In this case, however, the relationship between the individual and the collective seems to be more

conflictual. In order to achieve this opposition between the individual (probably the artist himself) and the collective, Zezelji uses the technique of the negative space by which the image can be read backwards. Indeed, turned upside down, the picture suggests the collective tragedy of 9/11, with the sketch of New York's skyline and the two prominent vertical shapes reminiscent of the Twin Towers. If Zezelji does not put the emphasis on the destruction of the towers, it is because he expands the notions of destruction, chaos, and violence as belonging to a broader collective than that of the U.S. In fact, he makes use of archetypal imagery such as skulls and fire, makes the color red dominant, and uses a primitive style to suggest that war, death, and destruction belong to the collective of humanity.

In contrast to this violent and destructive collective, the individual makes a personal statement and suggests a positive message while painting a sun, a symbol of hope and harmony amid the "evil" collective imagery. The individual's will is thus evidently in discord with the collective, but he nevertheless suggests a renewal after the trauma, a regeneration of both life and art by drawing dawn in darkness.

These two responses (Figs. 2-3 and Fig. 4) clearly suggest that both collective and individual identities are interdependent. They evince that identity defines itself in relationship with others and is therefore understood as communal and relational. In addition, they also convey that identity is connected to memory in the context of a traumatic event. However, they do not account for the identity of the group or the community to which they allude. In fact, the notion of collective or group in those responses remains mainly abstract or undefined. In contrast to the previous ones, many other responses from the compendia under study are clearer about the collective, group, or community they want to define. Most of the time, this collective is understood as the U.S. and subsequently brings up the concept of national identity.

### National Identity

Arthur Neal claims that "the cumulative effects of traumatic experiences are of central importance in forging the collective identity of any given group of people" (1988:15). He goes on to assert that "All collective traumas have some bearing on national identity" (16). It is clear that the events of 9/11 can be characterized as traumatic and, as such, have had a considerable impact on the American collective identity. Interestingly, the U.S.'s history, and subsequently the nation's memory, is extremely rich in terms of national traumas. The Civil War, "Remember the Alamo," "The Maine," Pearl Harbor, and Iwo Jima are among the most significant examples on which I will come back to in the conclusion of this essay.

Many scholars have commented on the concept of national identity, and they generally agree to define it, as Marilyn Brewer and Qiong Li argue, as "a constructed and public national self-image based on membership in a political community as well as history, myths, symbol, language, and cultural norms commonly held by members of a nation" (2004:727). Taking the context of the early aftermath of 9/11, national identity has been expressed through, among other things, language. On the one hand, the Bush administration promoted a strong sense of national identity while attempting to unify the community and its virtues through epideictic rhetoric. In other words, President Bush attempted to unify the community, the American public and memorialized the 9/11 events in becoming the one voice of America, speaking for the nation as a whole. Subsequently, the discourse of his administration blaming the Middle Eastern Al Qaeda terrorist network became the one and only understanding of the events. If anyone tried to go against that reading, against the one voice of America and the nation state's response to the events, it was considered synonymous with anti-Americanism.

Indeed, there were counter-readings of the 9/11 events. For example, Amiri Baraka, an African American author, poet laureate of the state of New Jersey, advocates the demise of the capitalist state and white cultural hegemony for what happened on 9/11 in his poem "Who blew up America?" In asking "Who got fat from plantations/ Who genocided Indians/Tried to waste the Black nation" or "Who stole Puerto Rico/ Who stole the Indies, the Philippines, Manhattan/ Australia & The Hebrides/Who forced opium on the Chinese" or again "Who made Bush president/ Who believe the confederate flag need to be flying/ Who talk about democracy and be lying," Baraka suggests that right-wing politicians and white cultural hegemony were responsible for the tragedy. However, this counter-reading of the 9/11 events, along with others, were rapidly attacked and dismantled by the Bush administration and the public discourse.

Speaking of the latter brings us to the second point. Besides the Bush administration, the mass media network also stimulated an intense sense of national identification in the early aftermath of the 9/11 events by displaying titles such as "America Under Attack" and other similar phrases. As a result of both the influence of the Bush administration and the public discourse, as John Hutcheson *et al.* argue, "in the weeks following September 11, it became commonplace...to publicly emphasize the strengths, values, and visions of America as a nation and Americans as a people" (27).

True, national identity blossomed in the aftermath of the 9/11 events, and so did patriotism. It thus seems necessary to distinguish the two. Patriotism is one's love for one's country and the will to die for it, if necessary. Patriotism is thus one of the ways national identity expresses itself. In the context of 9/11, patriotism was supportive of the nation state's policies and was connected with notions of masculinity. It was thus a political and ideological tool. National

identity, in contrast, is descriptive and not supportive of the nation. It refers to both the distinguishing features and specificities of the group and to the individual's sense of belonging to it. As such, national identity can be expressed through national symbols and myths, as well as through individuals and thus also function within the individual/collective dialectic. In the following responses, I will attempt to show that both the collective representations of the nation and the individual's sense of belonging to it -- through interacting with it via national symbols -- have played a role in the construction of national identity in the aftermath of 9/11.

### Tropes, Symbols, and Myths

In Keyron Dwyer and Mark Chiarello's response (Fig. 5), the dialectic between individual and collective identity/memory can still be sensed. However, the notion of American collective becomes more evident as the artists have memorialized the events in using the visual trope of the Twin Towers.

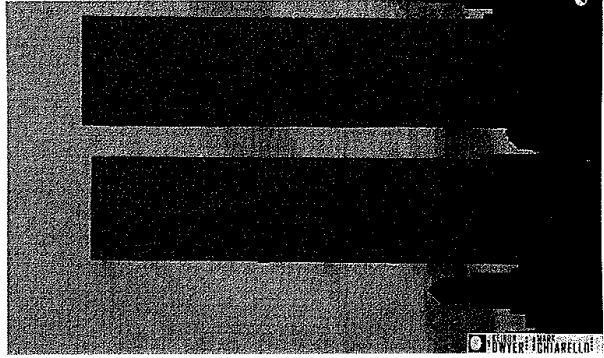


Fig. 5. Chiarello, M., Dwyer, K., "Untitled," in Levitz, P. (ed.), 9/11 volume 2, (2002), DC Comics.

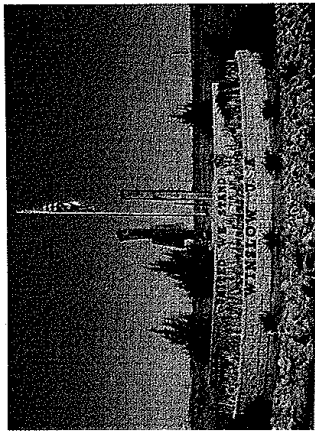


Fig. 6. 9/11 Memorial in Arizona, in Sullivan, R., (ed.), *Life: One Nation: America Remembers September 11 2001*, (2006).

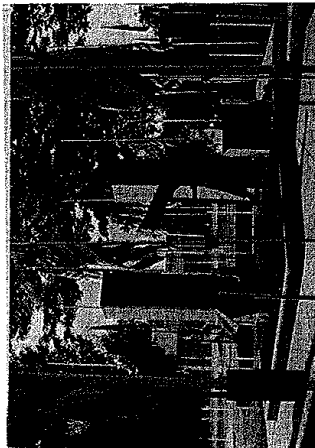


Fig. 7. 9/11 Memorial in Ohio, in Sullivan, R., (ed.), *Life: One Nation: America Remembers September 11 2001*, (2006).

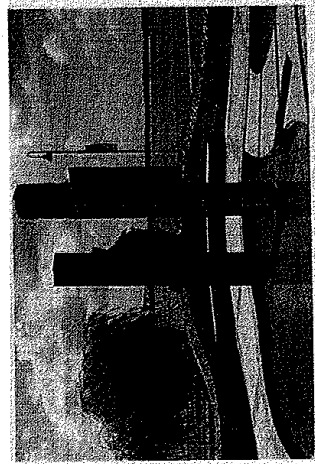


Fig. 8. 9/11 Memorial in Los Angeles, in Sullivan, R., (ed.), *Life: One Nation: America Remembers September 11 2001*, (2006)

It is clear that the depiction of the towers as a means to remember the events of 9/11 has become a trope in the American collective discourse. Numerous memorials representing the towers have been erected throughout the U.S. in commemoration of the events. Consider, for instance, the various memorials (Figs. 6-9). However, although the imagery of the towers has become a trope in the American collective identity, it remains difficult, in this response, to determine what they symbolize collectively. Indeed, the towers are filled with countless faces of potential victims. In doing so, the authors have attenuated the collective symbolism of the towers so that they come to embody the lost lives of individuals rather than wealth, power, achievement, masculinity, or any other collective meaning. In other words, they have depoliticized the collective meanings of the towers and subsequently the events of 9/11. The towers are not understood as a symbol of the U.S. but rather as the place where thousands of individuals died. And yet, because the imagery of the towers has gained so much resonance in the American psyche, their very presence does more than just embody the death of individuals. In fact, it could be argued that this response also politicizes the 9/11 events by connecting 9/11 with the memory of the Vietnam War.

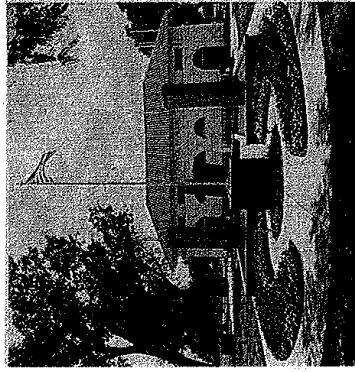
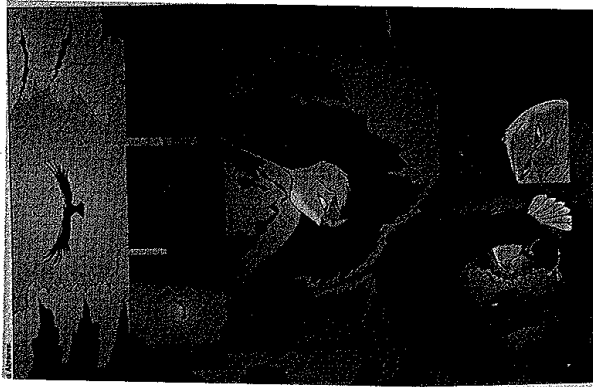


Fig. 9. 9/11 Memorial in Kansas City, in Sullivan, R., (ed.), *Life: One Nation: America Remembers September 11*, (2006).

In David Alvarez's response (Fig. 10), a sense of national identity is conveyed both through the bald eagle and the territory. The eagle, on its own, is a national symbol that conveys ideas such as strength, authority and, arguably, superiority. As the breach of security endured during 9/11 directly came from the sky, it is important to reassess America's power and security in the air. Therefore, the eagle flying above the site of the tragedy functions as a watcher, as a guard responsible for the security of the country. The eagle thus maintains and reinforces the trust in the national structure in a time of crisis

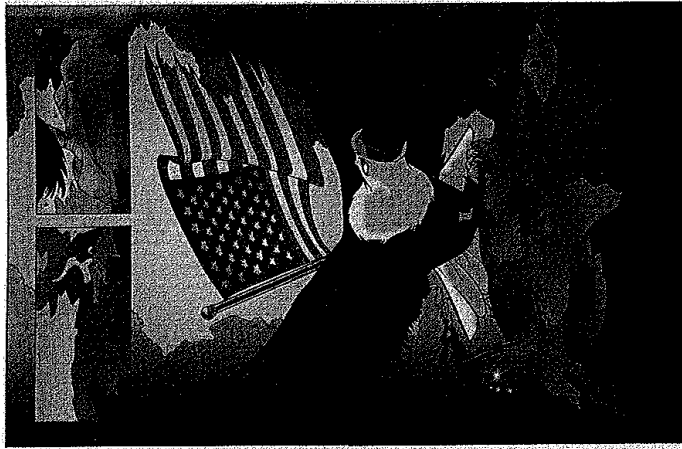
while avoiding presenting America's vulnerability. Moreover, on the second page of the narrative, the two close-ups on the legs emphasize the eagle's grip on the territory before it unfolds its wings, showing its full strength, and that of the nation state, while piecing the broken pieces of the U.S. together. One can for instance recognize a sketchy map of the United States' territory among the pile of rubble. Among others, the state of Texas is evident with its prominent triangle shape towards the South.



Figs. 10-11. Alvarez, D., "Untitled," in Levitz, P., (ed.), *9/11 volume.1*, (2002), Dark Horse Comics.

The territory, the land, the landscape is of course one of the ways the U.S. has expressed a strong sense of national identity. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, for example, many artists praised the American landscape as a way to remember the dead. In the realm of poetry, for example, Walt Whitman eulogizes the land in his book *Drum Taps* as a means to remember the carnage. In the realm of visual arts, numerous painters also glorified the American landscape as a way to remember the tragedy of the Civil War (Winslow Homer, Frederic Edwin Church, Albert Bierstadt, etc.). As Susan Mary Grant argues in discussing national identity and the Civil War, "Ownership of the land is conferred by the

burial of the dead in it, and through them the physical landscape is transmuted into a national one" (2003:34). In Alvarez's response, it is exactly the same process that is occurring. The territory becomes a national element as the dead are buried in it.



Figs. 10-11. Alvarez, D., "Untitled," in Levitz, P., (ed.), *9/11 volume.1*, (2002), Dark Horse Comics.

The flag is another symbol that has been recurrently used in various responses from the different compendiums as a means to provide a sense of national identity. In fact, the flag has been the most widespread signifier of national identity in the aftermath of the events. Many commentators, for instance, have observed a considerable increase of flag selling in the aftermath of the 9/11 events.

While discussing the significance of the flag, Claire Clark and William Hoynes argue that:

The reason the flag is an obvious symbol is not its ubiquitousness; the recent prevalence of the national symbol is simply an illustration of a greater power. The flag is obvious because its meaning is taken for granted; it can be viewed without the effort of conscious interpretation. It reductively references America. The flag is a symbol of national unity; it is the idea of the ideal nation, of the principles of its foundation, not the nation itself. In actuality, America emerges from a network of relationships too complex to be diagrammed in a simple rectangle of stripes and stars (2003:443).

By positioning the flag in various contexts, comic artists both reference and construct national identity. Generally speaking, the flag functions as a symbol of unity gathering people in one group -- Americans -- under one label, one concept, one ideal: America (Fig. 15).

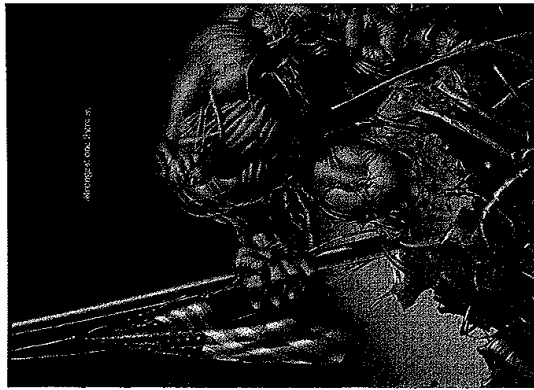


Fig. 12. Unknown author, in Quesada, J., (ed.), *Heroes*, (2001), Marvel Comics.

However, in the aftermath of the events, as already mentioned, the idea of a strong and united the U.S. was tied with an intense sense of patriotism. For example, the flag appears in different instances where national identity is connected to notions of masculinity and emphasizes characteristics such as physical strength, a punitive response and a context of war (Figs. 12, 13, 14). Those responses convey a non-vulnerable image of the U.S. in the wake of the events. Therefore, they are likely to have been influenced by the public discourse and the Bush administration's epideictic rhetoric of the early

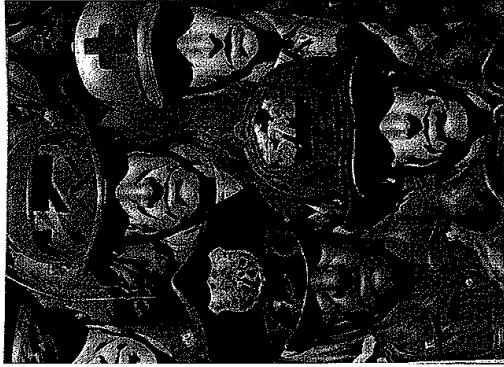


Fig. 13. Unknown author, in Quesada, J., (ed.), *Heroes*, (2001), Marvel Comics.



Fig. 14. Olivetti, A., "Untitled," in Levitz, P., (ed.), *9/11, volume.2*, 2002, DC Comics.

aftermath. Indeed, they maintain the trust in the patriarchal structure and reassess the nation's superiority over other nations which bring up the issue of the us/them syndrome, on which I shall elaborate later in this essay.

Meanwhile, I am interested in the flag as a symbol of national unity. In Enrique Breccia's response (Fig. 15), a set of various cultural icons of America stand united and work together to redress one of America's pillars. While this pillar might symbolize one of the Twin Towers, it also refers to the famous picture of Iwo Jima in which soldiers are raising the flag in a communal effort after the battle. In this case, the U.S. redefines itself in the wake of the 9/11 events by looking at its cultural past, and thus, once again, connects identity with memory. By presenting different typical American characters, among whom a Puritan, cowboy, African American, and Native American all strive to achieve the same goal similarly to the soldiers raising the flag after the battle of Iwo Jima, this response implies that all Americans share the same values and sense of civic duty after the 9/11 events. In addition, it connects the 9/11 events with World War II and the heroic victory of Americans.

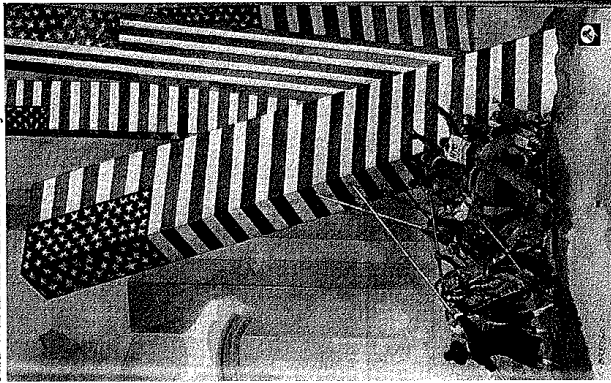


Fig. 15. Breccia, E., "Untitled," in Levitz, P. (ed.), *9/11 volume 2*, (2002), DC Comics.

In essence, this response emphasizes an ideal collective vision of America with individuals from different backgrounds striving to achieve unity. In that sense, it illustrates the metaphor of the melting pot in which various people of different cultures and religions are combined so as to form a homogenous society. In that process, individual identities are erased to a certain extent for the sake of a more uniform final product: the U.S.

This emphasis on the one nation is also clearly expressed in Brian McDonald and Brian O'Connell's response (Figs. 16-17). Similarly to the previous one, this response also makes use of several historical references of U.S. history to convey a sense of national identity. On the first page (Fig. 16), it emphasizes the different communities of America. In the first pictures, the English Puritans coming "to escape religious oppression" are identified. That the Puritan community is depicted in the first place induces the idea that this specific community has built the country and the governing institutions of the nation state.



Figs. 16-17. McDonald, B., O'Connell, B., "Untitled," in Levitz, P. (ed.), *9/11 volume 1*, (2002), DC Comics.



After the English Puritan community, the African American community is identified in the second picture. The imagery of the chains suggests the U.S. period of slavery. Third, different groups seeking fortune and/or the American Dream are identified, and then the Asian, and more specifically Chinese, community is identified. Finally, the Jewish community is also identified with the imagery of German Nazism and the caption "sadly, some of us came to evade the fate proscribed by a mad man." Interestingly, in this last panel, World War II and the Holocaust are clearly turned into a stereotypical narrative of good vs. evil with the identification of an individual enemy "by a madman." Thus, although this first page presents the cultural diversity of the American contingent, it does so in a very stereotypical and reducing manner.



Figs. 16-17. McDonald, B., O'Connell, B., "Untitled," in Levitz, P., (ed.), *9/11 volume 1*, (2002), DC Comics.

On the second page of the narrative (Fig. 17), this diversity of communities inherent to the American collective is once again emphasized. Portraits of individuals from different backgrounds are presented. In addition, the

representation of a collective diversity is reinforced by Martin Luther King Jr.'s words, "We came to America on different ships, but we're in the same boat now." Interestingly, this last sentence echoes the imagery of the Puritan community that arrived by boat on the American soil in the first panel (Fig. 16). As a result, Martin Luther King's voice speaking for the minority and for the diversity is reinterpreted by the official voice of the nation and arguably, by the Puritan community and the white conservative identity of the U.S. Similarly to the previous one (Fig. 15), this response thus offers a representation of the melting pot of America, emphasizing the "one" rather than multiculturalism.

In those two responses (Fig. 15 and Figs. 16-17), the idea of the melting pot refers to the contemporary culture wars of the U.S. The term culture wars was coined in the 1980s, a period in which ethnic and cultural minorities strove to emphasize the differences and diversity of the American people in order to question and redefine the American ideal in terms of multiculturalism. In fact, this rise of multiculturalism also resulted from post-colonialism and the explosion of world culture. A significant example of this rise of multiculturalism is Bill Ascheroff's postcolonial study *The Empire Writes Back* (1989). Nowadays, the culture wars are still debated in the political sphere of the U.S. While liberals tend to emphasize multiculturalism, conservatives tend to opt for the image of the melting pot that erases diversity and speaks for the nation as a whole. In the aftermath of 9/11, it is evident that the idea of the melting pot was reintroduced by the public discourse and the Bush administration as a means to unify the country.

### Superheroes

Various responses have also used another national symbol which is characteristic of the comic medium itself: the superhero. The superhero is a specific product of the U.S. and therefore is also able to reflect on the concept of national identity. In discussing the superhero and American identity, Christopher Murray contends that:

In this genre comics are often used to explore certain political ideas about heroism and morality, and these ideas communicate much about the values and culture of the society that produces and consumes these adventure stories. In this context, the superhero can act as a metaphor for American identity... These iconic "heroes" can transcend popular appeal and can become "signs," or models for understanding or expressing political ideals and notions of race, gender, identity, and power (2002:186).

One of the best examples is of course the character *Captain America*. As Jason Dittmer argues, *Captain America* is able "to connect the political

projects of American nationalism, internal order, and foreign policy (all formulated at the national or global scale) with the scale of the individual, or the body" (2005:626). In Stan Lee's response (Fig. 18), *Captain America* seems to allow the reader to reflect on the future of a post-9/11 era in terms of archetypal American landscape iconography. Indeed, the superhero, although carrying a flag in tatters, stands proud in a brand new shining costume over the landscape. This empty and desert landscape recalls the theme of the frontier and the availability of land which has fostered the westward expansion of the country. The American wilderness is praised and reminds the viewer of the iconography of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century tradition of landscape painting led by the artists of the Hudson River School who strove to represent explorations of the American West. Consider for instance the similarity between the comic response and Jerome Thompson's and Jasper Cropsey's paintings (Fig. 19 and Fig. 20), where the male individual dominates the landscape. It is not surprising that *Captain America* is depicted in that mythical space of the American frontier as a means to provide a sense of national identity in the aftermath of 9/11. Indeed, as Dittmer contends, "his characterization as an explicitly American superhero establishes him as both a representative of the idealized American nation and as a defender of the American status quo" (2005:627).

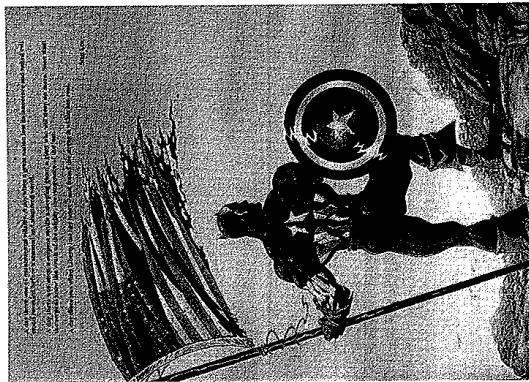


Fig. 18. Lee, S., "Untitled," in Quesada, J., (ed.), *Heroes*, (2001), Marvel Comics  
*IJOCA, Fall 2007*



Fig. 19. Thompson, J., (1858), *The Belated Party on Mansfield Mountain*, in O'Neill, J., (1987), *American Paradise, The World of the Hudson River School*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

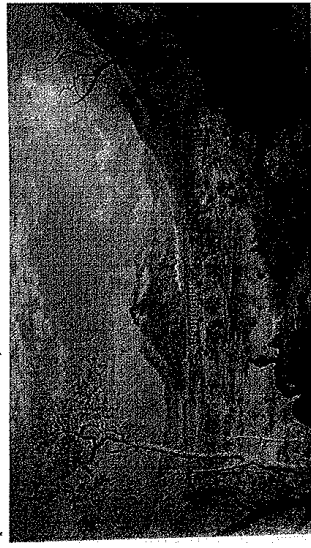


Fig. 20. Cropsey, J., (1865), *Starrucca Viaduct, Pennsylvania*, in O'Neill, J., (1987), *American Paradise, The World of the Hudson River School*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

In a similar way, the character *Superman* has also been used as a means to convey a sense of national identity. *Superman* has a great resonance in the American consciousness because, as Murray argues, "it touches upon the main themes that characterize the American experience: immigration and integration" (2002:188). Indeed, Superman is an alien sent to earth by his parents to avoid the destruction of his home planet Krypton. Though of alien origin, Superman is accepted and brought up by an American couple, the Kents. Superman accepts the values and laws of his new country and as such, as Murray contends, demonstrates that "immigrants can be 'Americanized'" (2002:188). In Dave Gibbons and Patricia Mulvihill's response (Fig. 21),

Superman is presented as taking care of America's immigrant youth and helping them rebuild the Towers with wooden cubes. As such, Superman takes care of foreign children as the Kents did with him. It is once again a story of immigration and integration. In addition, this image of Superman recalls the imagery of the 1950s comics, a period when the Comics Code attempted to regulate the content of comics in the United States and, as a result, made superheroes concerned with moral issues for the youth of the nation. In this response, it is once again the image of an idealized America that is emphasized as a diverse group of individuals work together to rebuild the normative structure of America after the 9/11 events.

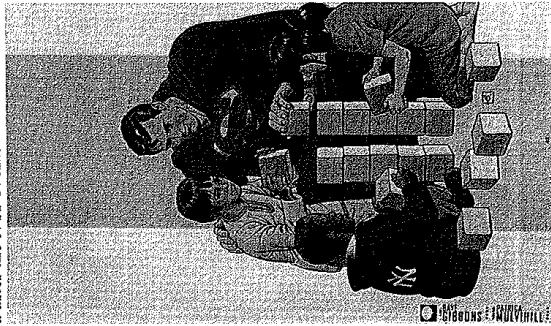


Fig. 21. Gibbons, D., Muivihill, P., "Untitled," in Levitz, P., 9/11, volume 2, (2002), DC Comics.

Thus, so far, we have encountered responses addressing national identity through presenting social and cultural myths and symbols of the U.S. In that sense, we have observed that the construction of national identity in the aftermath of 9/11 was largely connected to the cultural history of the nation, and hence, to memory. Generally speaking, those responses have stressed the one voice of the nation and have portrayed a united vision of the U.S. However, as earlier mentioned, it is clear that the U.S. was far from being united in the aftermath of 9/11. In fact, as the Bush Administration framed a

response to the events into an us/them dialectic, thereby legitimizing the "war on terror," division and difference were sensed in America.

### *The Us/Them Syndrome: Who Is Part of the American Collective?*

As Schlesinger argues, national identity is a form of collective identity that is simultaneously "one of inclusion that provides a boundary around 'us' and one of exclusion that distinguishes 'us' from 'them'" (2001:298). Since a war prototypically has two sides, both the Bush administration and the public discourse's framing of the events in terms of war rhetoric helped articulate the idea of a national identity by means of an us/them dialectic.

Generally speaking, this us/them dialectic allowed people to understand the 9/11 events in terms of war within the binary distinctions Christian/Muslim or Western/Eastern. For instance, in the early aftermath, Arab Americans, Muslim Americans, Sikh Americans, and Asian-Pacific Americans, all became targets of backlash violence and became victims of hate crimes as a result of this us/them dialectic.

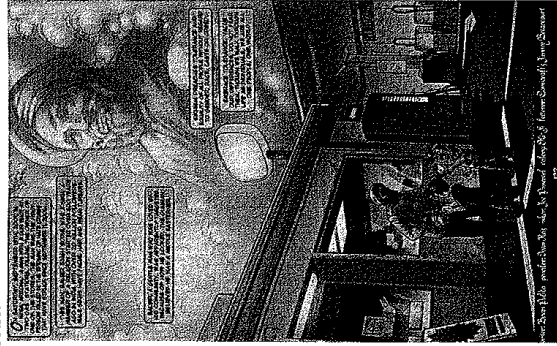


Fig. 22. Piemeriel, J., Pulido, B., Reis, J., "Untitled," in Levitz, P. (ed.), 9/11 volume 1, (2002), DC Comics.

This of course implies that the us/them syndrome was part of the national identity debate in the early aftermath of 9/11. It suggests that the American people were reluctant to embrace ethnic and cultural diversities which, at other times, are praised as an inherent characteristic of American national identity.

For example, Brian Pulido's story (Fig. 22), presents how a Sikh, Balbir Singh Sodhi, was attacked and killed "because of how he looked." This story portrays a real event that took place "On Saturday, September 15<sup>th</sup> 2001, in Mesa, Arizona" and evidently aims at embracing tolerance rather than rage and violence. Indeed, Pulido concludes with, "We are all one people, one world." In addition, he also accounts for what Sikhism preaches: "tolerance and equality of all people without regard to gender, race, caste or creed" and subsequently tries to challenge the stereotypical representation of the Middle Easterner in the aftermath of the 9/11 events.

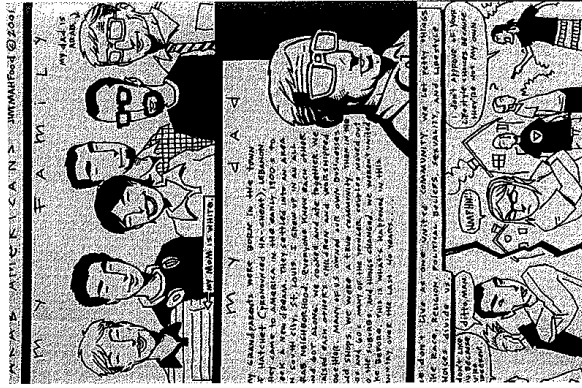


Fig. 23. Mahfood, J., "Arab Americans," in Levitz, P. (ed.), 9/11 volume 1, (2002), DC Comics.

In fact, Middle Easterners, as Jim Mahfood argues in his response entitled "Arab Americans" (Figs. 23-26), have always been represented as stereotypes

in the American culture. He contends that "since the beginning, Hollywood has depicted Arabs as either crazy AK-47-toting terrorists or convenience store clerks."

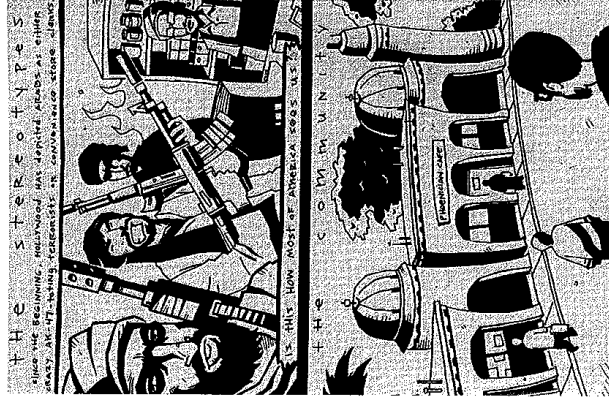
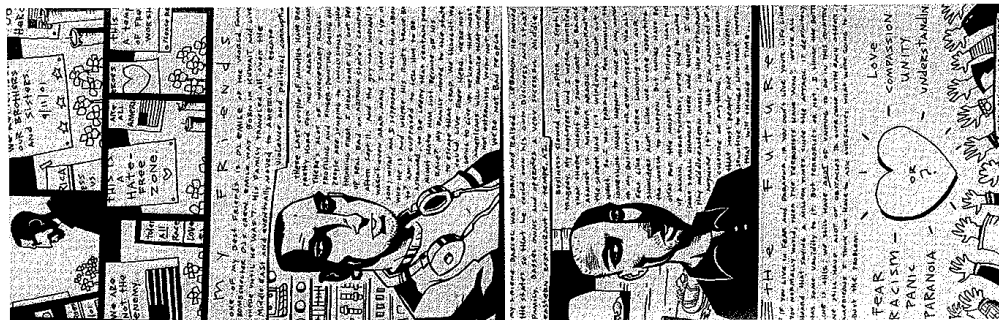


Fig. 24. Mahfood, J., "Arab Americans," in Levitz, P. (ed.), 9/11 volume 1, (2002), DC Comics

In order to give a contrast to those stereotypical representations, he then portrays two of his friends who have settled themselves as working individuals in the United States "to escape violence and political corruption," thereby offering individual testimonies of the 9/11 events rather than a collective remembering.

It is clear that the message he wants to convey is one of unity rather than difference. Nevertheless, he states in his conclusion that "we still have a lot of uniting to do in this country," thereby condemning fear and paranoia against Arab Americans in the aftermath of 9/11. It is thus a politically engaged response which strives to have an impact on its readers. However, it does not do so by forcing the reader to take one side. In fact, it leaves the choice to the reader between "fear, racism, panic, paranoia" or "love, compassion, unity,



Figs. 25-26. Mahfood, J., "Arab Americans," in Levitz, P. (ed.), *9/11 volume 1*, (2002), DC Comics

understanding" and therefore embraces the American ideal of free choice.

**Individual Perspectives on National Identity**

As mentioned earlier, national identity refers to both the distinguishing features and specificities of the group and to the individual's sense of belonging to it. Besides being expressed through cultural myths and symbols, national identity is also expressed by individuals. With the following responses (Fig. 27 and Fig. 28), I will explore instances of individuals interacting with the national symbol of the flag, more specifically, how those individuals relate to the concept of America and interpret the meaning of the flag.

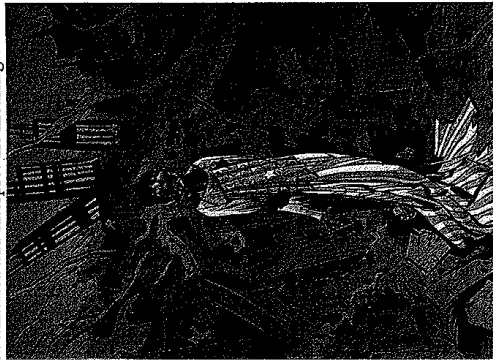


Fig. 27. Unknown Author, in Quesada, J., (ed.), *Heroes*, (2001), Marvel.

In the first response (Fig. 27), it is clear that the individual assigns meaning(s) to the flag by firmly holding it in the middle of the rubble while screaming and crying to express shock and possibly anger. In fact, the character is in a state of anguish very similar to the individual in Edward Munch's *The Scream*. This reference to Munch's famous painting is not only obvious in the portrayal of the individual but also in the depiction of the landscape and the use of colors. Indeed, the landscape is sinuous and drawn in an expressionist style and the blend of colors literally screams. Similarly to the original, this serves the purpose of reinforcing the character's tormented state of mind. Not

only does this reference to Munch express the individual's inner hell in the aftermath of the 9/11 events but it also conveys a sense of apocalypse by connecting the desperate aspect of fin de siècle of the original with the anxiety of America in the aftermath of 9/11.

In that context, the flag can endorse at least two meanings. It can function as a symbol that mourns the victims of the 9/11 events. In that sense, the character restores his individual identity crisis with a symbol embodying the collective that died on Sept. 11th 2001. However, the flag might also embody the last remnant of hope for this individual; an ultimate attempt to recover from his trauma and perhaps his identity by connecting it with a national symbol and everything it might embody: the American dream, unity, the rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution and its Bill of Rights, personal liberty as set forth in the Declaration of Independence, the national anthem or in short, all that it is to share an American way of life. As such, it does not really offer a conventional representation of the U.S. as one nation but rather emphasizes the doubts and questions of the individual in relation to the collective identity of the U.S.

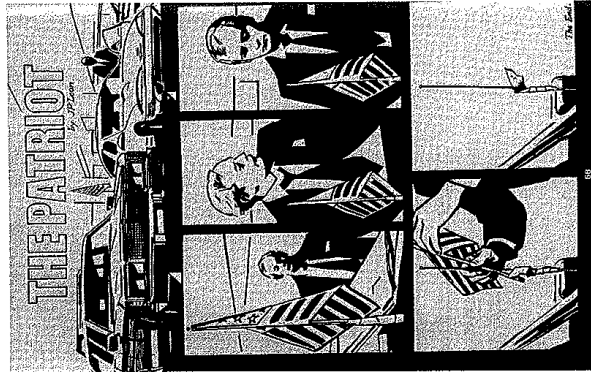


Fig. 28. Leon, J.P. "The Patriot," in Levitz, P. (ed.), *9/11 volume 1*, (2002), DC Comics.

In the same way, JP Leon's "The Patriot" (Fig. 28) also describes a character developing a relationship with the national symbol of the flag. In this case, the protagonist sees a small flag on the car next to his. He comes closer to it and, after having looked around him as if he did not want to be seen, takes it off the car. From this action, the conflict between the individual and the collective is once again obvious. In fact, it is possible to argue that the individual gets rid of the flag because he does not relate to it anymore. In that sense, the narrative's title "The Patriot" might be intended as ironic. However, the narrative's title might also be intended as genuine. One might argue that it offers an alternative version of what it means to be an American patriot in the early aftermath of 9/11 that has been characterized with a heightened nationalistic drive. Either way, structurally speaking, this response encourages the reader to question the symbolic meanings of the flag, what it embodies and what it represents. Indeed, the narrative progressively evolves from the middle section which presents the scene and the character to a close up of the flag and eventually the absence of it in the last panel, which leaves him/her with questions on the significance of being American.

Thus, those responses (Fig. 22 to Fig. 28) all address national identity from an individual perspective. In doing so, they undercut the traditional unity narrative of America in the early aftermath of 9/11 and offer alternative representations of national identity by reflecting on the individual's sense of belonging to the nation.

### Final Thoughts

Using mainstream comics compendia dealing with 9/11, I have shown how the individual/collective identity dialectic operates in times of traumatic events, both on a general level and on a national level. In doing so, I have argued that comics are intrinsically connected to political actual events "through which national identity and geopolitical scripts are narrated." Comics are thus influenced by culture and politics, but I support the claim that the contrary is also true. Comics also influence society and more specifically politics and wars. For example, Antonio Monegal and Francesc Torres (2004:14) introduce the relationship with war and popular culture in showing how MIT scientists plagiarized "a drawing of one of the characters of the comic *Radix*" to "design the high-tech equipment of the 'soldier of the future'" (Fig. 29).

In addition, I have suggested that "crises of identity are concomitant with crises of memory" and, more specifically, that the U.S. relied on its cultural and historical past in the aftermath of 9/11 to convey a sense of national identity. In fact, national identity in the comics under study has generally been conveyed through one-panel responses, thereby avoiding both the sequential characteristic of the medium and the complexity of the traumatic

experience of 9/11. This choice of drawing single panel responses not only simplifies the complexity of the events into one specific geopolitical script or collective narrative but also connects these comic responses to the rich visual cultural heritage of national identity in the U.S.



Fig. 29. "The Soldier of the Future" (left) according to the MIT and Valerie Flores (right), a character from *Radix*, created by Ray and Ben Lai.

Indeed, the collective memory of American national traumas such as the Civil War, The Maine, The Alamo, or Iwo Jima have always been framed into single images in a range of various media: popular prints, newspapers, illustrations, and paintings. These images printed, for example, in 19<sup>th</sup> Century magazines such as *Harper's Weekly*, *London Illustrated News*, or *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, depicted conventional representations of traumatic events. They emphasized heroism, allegories, and icons in order to support meta-narratives of American unity.

It is thus not surprising that the comic responses under study relied on different symbols, tropes, and narratives into single panel responses in an attempt to unify the American collective in the aftermath of 9/11, thereby connecting collective identity with collective memory. However, while all compendia proved to be nationalist to some extent, various responses also challenged the meta-narrative of American unity in presenting alternative readings of the 9/11-events. In essence, as Marylin Brewer and Qiong Li put it, "[t]he period of intense national identification, uncertainty, and emotionalism that followed 9/11 created an unusual set of conditions to test the implications of different meanings of American identity in a meaningful context." Therefore,

they further argued that "shared understandings and collective representations of the nation were in a state of flux" (2004:729).

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Pr. Warren Rosenberg for his invaluable assistance on this research which is part of a larger project on the representations of 9/11 in comics.

### References

- Aschcroft, Bill. 1989. *The Empire Writes Back*. N.Y.: Routledge.
- Bongco, Milla. 2002. *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books*. N.Y.: Routledge.
- Brewer, Marylin and Qiong, Li. 2004. "What Does it Mean to Be American? Patriotism, Nationalism, and American Identity After 9/11." *Political Psychology*. Vol.25:5, pp. 729-739.
- Clark, Claire and William Hoynes. 2003. "Image of Race and Nation after September 11." *Peace Review*. Vol.15:4, pp. 443-450.
- Dittmer, Jason. 2005. "Captain America's Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. Vol. 95:3, pp. 626-643.
- Grant, Susan, (ed.). 2003. *Legacy of Disunion: The Enduring Significance of the American Civil War*. Louisiana State University Press.
- Hutcheson, John et al. 2004. "U.S. National Identity, Political Elites, and a Patriotic Press following September 11." *Political Communication*. Vol.21, pp.27-50.
- Kansteiner, Wulf. 2002. "Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies." *History and Theory*. Vol. 41, pp. 179-197.
- Kennedy, Martha. 2003. "Early Creative Responses to 9/11 by Comic Artists: Panelists Share Personal Experiences." *The International Journal of Comic Art*. Vol.5:1, pp. 366-373.
- McDaniel, Craig and Joan Robertson. 2005. *Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art after 1980*. Oxford University Press.
- Miller, N. 2003. "'Portraits of Grief': Telling Details and the Testimony of Trauma." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*. Vol.14:3, pp.112-135.
- Monegal, Antonio and Francesc Torres. 2004. "The Culture of War." In *At War*, pp. 14-18. Barcelona: Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, Institut de la Disputació de Barcelona.

- Murray, Chris. 2002. "Superman vs. Imago: Superheroes, Lacan, and Mediated Identity." *International Journal of Comic Art*. Vol.4:2, pp. 186-208.
- Neal, Arthur G. 1988. *National Trauma and Collective Identity: Extraordinary Events in the American Experience*. New York: M.E. Sharpe.
- Ross, March. 2002. "The Political Psychology of Competing Narratives." In *Understanding September 11*, edited by C. Calhoun, P. Price and A. Timmer, pp. 303-320. New York: New Press.
- Schlesinger, Paul. 2001. "Media, the Political Order and National Identity." *Media, Culture and Society*. Vol.13, pp. 297-308.
- Singer, Marc. 2002. "'Black Skins' and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race." *African American Review*. Vol. 36:1, pp. 107-120.
- Witek, Joseph. 2003. "Long Form/Short Form; Narrative strategies of some 9/11 Comics." *International Journal of Comic Art*. Vol.5:2, pp. 281-295.