

A Moment of Silence: Individualizing Cultural Trauma

Melanie Munninghoff

How often are comic book readers confronted with the phrase “Aren’t you too old to read comic books?” or with being called “geek” or “nerd” for liking them? Also, in academic circles, even though the numbers of academic studies on comic books has increased in recent years, it is not yet established and unified as a critical field, partially because of its multimodality, but also because of its conceptualization as being a lowbrow genre in the literary field.

However, as with many other artifacts in popular culture, comic books offer great potential in exploring new perspectives into under-read ontologies. Specifically, the literary potential of comic books lies in the fusion of visual and textual elements. Comics are not only concerned with superheroes and ‘good against evil’ plots – they also offer personalized insights into difficult pasts. Crucially, momentum is reflected in both the characteristic genre basics – that is, the mixing of textual and visual elements – and the distinctive mode of reading comic books.

Momentum is defined as “strength or force gained by motion or by a series of events” (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*), meaning in this given context that as artifacts, comics have the potential to reframe notions and conceptions of cultural trauma. One apt example is *Maus* (1980) from Art Spiegelman, who explores the horrors of World War II, or *Daisy* (2012) by Reiko Momochi, in which Momochi tackles the life of students after Fukushima’s nuclear disaster. Many more comics have explored the depths of cultural traumas such as wars, disasters, and conflicts. These narratives express the individuality of cultural traumas and give victims the agency to express themselves. Thus, I argue that the comic book medium gains momentum by intersecting grand narratives and creating new points of views, as well as meanings by expressing the inexpressible nature of trauma.

To explore these qualities of comic books, I will analyze the story, “Sick Day” in *A Moment of Silence* (2002) that focuses specifically on two children’s trauma. The comic was

published by Marvel as a reaction to the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 (9/11). Not only does the comic tackle different narratives on the day of the tragedy, but it also turned out to be a commercial success and, at the same time, became a product for charity. As mentioned, *A Moment of Silence* is a Marvel production, which is the biggest operating publisher in the United States’ comic book market next to DC, thus making it truly a commodity of popular culture and impacting a large number of people.

My argument is embedded in a few concepts that need to be explained and brought into context. Firstly, the notion of cultural trauma is widely discussed in academia. However, I will mainly refer to Ron Eyerman’s chapter, “The Past in the Present: Culture and the Transmission of Memory” because he connects and interrelates notions of trauma, memory, and identity in the context of culture. On the other hand, Hilary Chute’s article, “Comics as Narrative? Reading Graphic Narratives” offers a theoretical framework in which

specific genre notions of comic books can be conceptualized. Thus, she introduces the formal conventions of comic theory.

To support my argument, I draw on articles that already explore the possibilities of comics and show that they are more than just mere entertainment. Joshua Leone's article, "Drawing Invisible Wounds: War Comics and the Treatment of Trauma" offers perspectives on how traumatic experience can be expressed through comics and answers the question of how the inexpressible can be expressed. Barbara Grüning, however, is focusing more on the notion of collective memory in comics in her article, "Educating to Remember: The Public Use of Comics in Germany and Italy." Her article introduces concepts that can help to understand how comics can open up different perspectives regarding difficult pasts. Lastly, the article by John Duvall and Robert Marzec, "Narrating 9/11," shows which long-lasting effects the 9/11 case had on the American nation and, together with Eyerman's chapter, proves that 9/11 can be considered a cultural trauma. I would like to point out that I will mainly explore the possibilities that comics can offer in the context of approaching various implications of cultural trauma. I am aware that there are also concerns that need to be addressed, such as reinforcing stereotypes or re-establishing the distinction between 'us' and 'the other.' However, it would be too ambitious to discuss this particular matter in this essay. Therefore, for further reading, I would like to refer to Jason Dittmer's article, "Captain America's Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics," which touches upon how comics can also reinforce stereotypes and the 'us'/them' binary.

The tragedy of 9/11 has become a cultural trauma for American society. According to Jeffrey Alexander, cultural trauma is:

when members of a collective feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories for ever, and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways (qtd. in Eyerman 23).

It is not only the death toll that turns the event into a cultural trauma because, as Eyerman further explains, the trauma does not need to be felt and/or experienced by everyone but its meaning needs to be collectively accepted by the community (Eyerman 23).¹ However, to establish this dramatic loss of identity and the meaning of the cultural trauma, it needs to be "understood, explained, and made coherent through public reflection and discourse" (Eyerman 23). Thus, the cultural trauma's meaning is established in the aftermath of the event.

For one, the Bush Administration changed the linguistic dialect around the security of the country. They took Orwellian terms such as "war on terror," "preemptive war," or "homeland security" which reshaped not only the political discussions, but also created a greater gap between red and blue states and a greater gap between the US and other nation-states (Duvall and Marzec 381). This political change was so fundamental, it formed a new American identity, which Duvall and Marzec call "Patriotic Correctness" (381), which has been used as justification for the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq (Duvall and Marzec 382). Furthermore, there is an ongoing academic discourse on the significance of the US American trauma, for example, by Roland

Bleiker, Wheeler Dixon, or Jason Dittmer, as well as a continuous attempt to represent 9/11 in the arts by Eric Fischl or Sharon Paz. Ultimately, the public discourse of such a cultural trauma leads to a collective memory which can be defined as "recollections of a shared past that are passed on through ongoing processes of commemoration" (Eyerman 25).

Memories can provide a cognitive map to help answer questions such as "who am I?", "why am I here?", and "where do I go?", which are central to form a collective identity (Eyerman 24). More importantly, those collective memories unify a group by the means of the discursive power of a grand narrative. Here, the grand narrative does not refer to Lyotard's interpretation of the term. Instead, I rely on a more toned-down theorization, which refers to a cultural narrative that orders and explains the knowledge and experience of a community.² In the case of 9/11, the grand narrative is formulated around the common agreement that the attack on the World Trade Center was an attack on the United States as a nation. Nevertheless, one needs to view the grand narrative critically, because memory acts, according to Niklas Luhmann's system theory, as a binary code: remembering and forgetting (Grüning 96). It is a selective process in which only elements that favor the grand narrative are remembered. Furthermore, the subjects that remember, and their stance towards the topic, are influenced by the hierarchical system, so those in power have a great impact on how incidents and events are remembered (Grüning 97). This implies that smaller narratives are not part of, or enter the grand narrative and, consequently, the collective memory.

¹ Here I would like to stress that cultural trauma as a concept refers to the loss of identity and meaning of a community due to a social crisis (Eyerman 23). This means the use of the term 'the cultural trauma' refers to the corresponding social crisis of that community – in this context 'the cultural trauma' in the US American context is 9/11.

² Here, 'orders' refers to, for example, the historization of a community. Events and experiences are sorted into a linear narrative structure in favor of a grand narrative.

However, some discourses try to give non-dominant narratives a voice. Comic books bear the potential to break through this grand narrative by verbalizing the traumatic experience of individuals, in other words, comics can create “space[s] of possible” (Bourdieu qtd. in Grüning 95). Spaces refers to giving room to other narratives about difficult pasts which can develop through these spaces’ new structures of meaning (or within this context, alternative meanings of a cultural trauma). These new structures of meanings can be defined as other narratives about difficult pasts. These other narratives can create alternatives to the pre-existing structures already present in the dominant narrative (Grüning 95).

Apart from giving minority groups a voice, it also serves as a resource for educational purposes. For example, in Germany, comics have been used to educate people about the atrocities of World War II. One such example is *Maus* by Art Spiegelman. The cartoon represents the brutal historical realities through a coherent narrative (Chute 457). Moreover, comics not only offer alternative meanings to the dominant narrative, but also new structural meanings from the factual and medical narrative. This is important because it gives back agency to the traumatized person and allows the individual to express how they actually experience their trauma. As Leone explains, medical narratives tend to silence personal narratives and become “the spokespersons for the disease or wounding” (257), which is done by turning experiences into facts, numbers, and unfamiliar terminology, which abstracts the experience of the traumatized person and does not necessarily make it more comprehensible.

The Marvel comic, *A Moment of Silence*, is an apt example of how the “space of possible” interacts. It is a collection of four different narratives, each based on a true story that revolves around the cultural trauma of 9/11. The first story follows a victim of the Twin Towers collapse. In the second story, a firefighter helps to locate

survivors. It follows with a story about a family who lost their father in the attack. It ends with a story about a family that was not really affected by the event. Looking closely at the third story, “Sick Day,” one can follow the forgotten narrative of children experiencing the loss of their father.

In this comic, different techniques are utilized to capture the individual experience of the children and the loss they experience. To do this, the artist introduces two brothers, who are relatively young considering the depiction of different toys lying around the childrens’ bedroom. Each boy has a different approach to dealing with the loss of their father. For example, one of the boys, who wears a striped shirt, openly shows his grief by expressing his emotions, whereas the brother who is depicted with a soccer ball throughout the comic internalizes his grief and is not able to express his pain.

Fragmentation offers many possibilities to express individual traumas

But the question remains: how is traumatic experience verbalized in the comic and how is expression given to the inexpressible and thereby momentum manifested in the comic format? To answer this question, it is necessary to reflect on the elements which make comics distinguishable from other artforms. Comics consist of different panels that are framed by a gutter, which are gaps between the different segments of action. This setup not only encourages the reader to group panels together, but also to fill in the gaps between the segments of action (Chute 452). Furthermore, the panels themselves consist of visual and verbal elements which are nonsynchronous. The combination of the former elements is its most distinguishable

feature compared to other pictorial narratives (Chute 454). This fragmentation offers many possibilities to express individual traumas. As mentioned above, cultural memory maps identity and engenders a dominant narrative, therefore the nonsynchronous form of storytelling gives space to the traumatized person by avoiding mapping their own memory.

Trauma disrupts the way people construct their own pasts and imagined futures, making it difficult to tell a coherent story to others (Leone 243). The psychological implications behind such fragmented identities can be reflected in certain narrative elements of comics, such as words, images, and graphic sequences. Its structure requires a continuous interaction between the reader and the page which makes it generally easier to translate the fragmented identity (Leone 245). Moreover, the reading technique that is used to understand the story is very different compared to film and novels. A common practice is a disjunctive back-and-forth reading between the pages and panels to continuously read and look for meaning and aid the reader to manage the narrative time (Chute 452; Leone 246). Leone adds that comics also give those who are affected a chance to participate in this “reconstructive reading process” (259).

So, coming back to the two boys in “Sick Day”, the reader also needs to construct a narrative between the panels, especially because the verbal element is missing, which refers back to the comic’s title, *A Moment of Silence*. The lack of verbal communication turns the reader’s attention towards the emotional impact and underlines the impossibility to express the pain of loss in words. Explanations are also unnecessary, not only because of the foreword which situates the comic into the given context, but also because the event of 9/11 is a shared memory of the nation. This leaves room to expand and focus solely on the emotional process. When looking at the boy with the ball, the soccer ball already becomes an important item in its first appearance

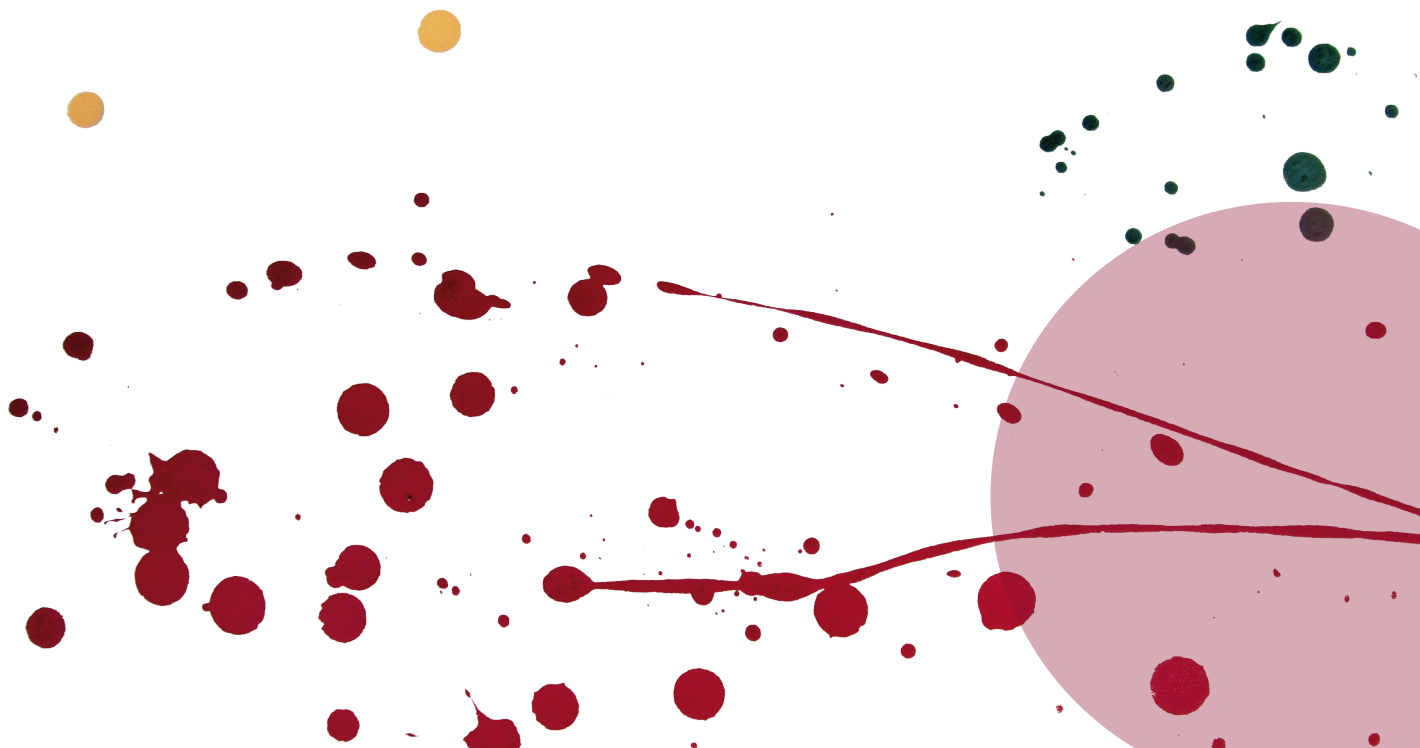
because it signals the boy's close relationship with his father. Throughout the narrative, this is indicated through several details, for example in one panel the mother carries a framed photograph depicting the father and the boy arm in arm, each wearing a soccer uniform, holding the same ball.

Compared to the rest of the family, who always stay inside but openly show their emotions, the boy sits outside on the porch, holding onto the soccer ball, and looks into the distance. Each day that passes, he looks more distressed, which is underlined by the strong shadows on his face. The passing of time shown on each page is important for the reader to signal how long it takes the family to find the strength to clean up and leave the house. But it also signals the effect of pain and the impossibility of following a daily routine. This can be seen in a comparative panel in which the reader sees twice the same point of view on the bedroom of the children. In the first panel, the bedroom is untidy; the beds are unmade, things are hanging from the beds, and a dirty glass is standing around. In the second panel the same room has been cleaned up. The passing of time is enhanced in both of these panels through the digital clock that indicates the physical time and date. The climax of the boy's narrative is when he is confronted with the ruins of the Twin Towers. The boy

finally bursts into tears and leaves the ball behind when he leaves the ruins. This might indicate his acceptance of his loss. However, because of the lack of words and the fact that in comics the reader needs to infer possible meanings the meaning of the ending itself is open for varied interpretations. Therefore, this example shows how comics convey traumatic experiences and create narratives without words.

In conclusion, comics have the capability to be more than just lowbrow entertainment. Texts of this genre engage with highly complex issues of culture. The given example might not critique cultural structures, such as cultural traumas, but it is aware of its existence and makes use of it. This is why each of the chapters in *A Moment of Silence* do not need any verbal elements and are still able to lead the reader through the characters' experiences. The notion of "spaces of possible" underlines the opportunities that can be explored through graphic narratives, especially because comics create meaning differently. There is no necessity for a coherent storyline because of the distinct reading technique that allows the reader to jump back and forth. Through this, it is the reader's responsibility to make sense of the different action fragments and manage the narrative time. Moreover, the visual and verbal elements do not need to relate to one another.

Those aspects open up possibilities to give non-dominant narratives and perspectives a space in which they can express themselves. In this case, it proves that comics give traumatized people their agency back by expressing and individualizing their pain and trauma. The grand narrative of 9/11 is mainly concerned with the attack on the nation. However, *A Moment of Silence* is focused on those who were directly involved and lost their family members due to the tragedy. Through the comic's aesthetic devices, traumatized people can express themselves without using the medical context. The comic book medium does not impersonalize their experience by turning them into facts and numbers. It can also be a means for traumatized people to individually reconstruct their own experience. Thus, taking all of the above into account, comics reshape the meaning of grand narratives and offer the possibility to express the inexpressible of traumas – making the format of the comic a symbol of momentum in the creation of new "spaces of possible."



Works Cited

Duvall, John N, and Robert P. Marzec. "Narrating 9/11." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 57, No. 3, Fall 2011, Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 381–400. JSTOR, [jstor.org/stable/26287207](https://www.jstor.org/stable/26287207).

Eyerman, Roy. "The Past in the Present: Culture and the Transmission of Memory." *Memory, Trauma, and Identity*, 2019, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 21–38. Springer Link, doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1007/978-3-030-13507-2.

Grüning, Barbara. "Education to Remember: The Public Use of Comics in Germany and Italy." *Dialogues Between Media*, vol. 5, 2021, pp. 97–108. De Gruyter, doi.org/10.1515/9783110642056-009.

Chute, Hillary. "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative." *PMLA*, vol. 123, no. 2, 2008, MLA, pp. 452–465. JSTOR, [jstor.org/stable/25501865](https://www.jstor.org/stable/25501865).


Leone, Joshua M. "Drawing Invisible Wounds: War Comics and the Treatment of Trauma." *Journal of Medical Humanities*, vol. 39, 2018, pp. 243–261. Springer Link, doi.org/10.1007/s10912-017-9442-8.

"Momentum." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/momentum>.

Quesada, Joe. "Sick Day." *A Moment of Silence*, vol. 1, Feb. 2002, Marvel.

Further Reading

Dittmer, Jason. "Captain America's Reflection on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post 9/11 Geopolitics." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 95, no. 3, Sep. 2005, Taylor & Francis, pp. 626–643. JSTOR, [jstor.org/stable/3693960](https://www.jstor.org/stable/3693960).



Melanie Munninghoff is a graduate student in National and Transnational Studies at the University of Münster. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Arts and Cultural Studies from the Radboud University in Nijmegen. Her research expertise lies in the intricate relationship between art and politics. Thus she specializes in cultural trauma studies, border studies, cosmopolitanism and cultural diplomacy.

