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## *La Bête est morte!*: Mending Images and Narratives of Ethnicity and National Identity in Post-World War II France

While a proliferation of myths and counter-narratives of France's World War II experience prevail, few illuminate so clearly the role of ethnicity in the creation of myths of Resistance as does the two-part cartoon album *La Bête est morte!*, published during the period immediately following the Occupation. This essay examines how this fascinating work represents the Occupation and explores, in particular, how its iconic images and narratives of French Resistance become bound with singular definitions of French ethnicity to reinforce each other. Such an analysis focuses on the importance of the frequently underexamined role of ethnicity in the narration of France's World War II experience.

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In their work *Vichy, un passé qui ne passe pas*, Henry Rousso and Éric Conan underscore the vicissitudes of France's contemporary obsession with its World War II period, arguing that “[la] présence de ce passé est trace d'un deuil inachevé” (14). Plunged into an abyss of reflection on its own uses, accuracy, and failings, France's national memory of World War II “risque de déboucher sur une impasse” (44). The significance of this return of stagnant memory resides, according to Rousso and Conan, as much in an enunciation of a self-castigating national nostalgia as it does in the suggestion of an enclosed French fascination with its own national identity. They identify such a national narcissism in the multiple and diverse attempts to narrate the traumatic mark left in France's modern history by *les années noires* of the Occupation. Although the traumatic scission in the putative grand narrative

of this national identity engenders multiple cultural memories and narratives of “Frenchness,” the diverse array of cultural memories remains underpinned, nevertheless, by a common fascination with the constitution of French national identity and its articulation as a foundational narrative (Rouso and Conan 46).

In a similar manner, *La Bête est morte!*, a two-part cartoon album published in the popular French format of the *bande dessinée*, “pendant le troisième mois de la Libération,” as its cover states, evinces the tendency of cultural memory to narrate the trauma of national crisis in terms of a quasi-ethnic affiliation and identity.<sup>1</sup> In the guise of a history lesson for children on France’s ordeal during World War II and the Occupation, *La Bête est morte!* reveals how the attempt at constructing a mythology of national identity ultimately ends in a repetitive, fetishistic narrative defined by national trauma and loss. Étienne Balibar has termed this type of mythology of national identity, forged through cultural memory, “fictive ethnicity” (Balibar and Wallerstein 96). According to Balibar “fictive ethnicity” allows a nation to fabricate its nation base by representing its populations,

in the past or in the future as if they formed a natural community, possessing of itself an identity of origins, culture, and interests which transcends individuals and social conditions [...]. It is fictive ethnicity which makes it possible for the expression of a preexisting unity to be seen in the state, and continually to measure the state against its historic mission in the service of the nation and, as a consequence, to idealize politics. (96)

As an immediate post-war narrative, *La Bête est morte!* demonstrates how the turn to “fictive ethnicity,” which draws on the ideal of a unified

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<sup>1</sup> Edmond-François Calvo (1892-1958), one of the most famous children’s illustrators of the 1930s, is known best for his illustrations of numerous fairy tales, including *La Belle au bois dormant*, *Robin des bois*, *Cendrillon*, and many others. He published numerous illustrations and political drawings for *Le Canard enchaîné* as well. Calvo’s work on war is not limited to *La Bête est morte!*. He is also responsible for the interesting albums published at Éditions G.P. in 1945 entitled *Rosalie* and *Anatomies atomiques*, which I discuss in a comparative study I have undertaken that will appear elsewhere. For a more comprehensive biography on Calvo see Jean-Marc and Randy Loficier’s *French Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror and Pulp Fiction*. Despite the appearance of their names in numerous reference sources, virtually no biographic information exists about Victor Dancette and Jacques Zimmerman.

It is interesting to note that *La Bête est morte!* appears in English with a preface that presents the text as a translation from the Dutch!