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MMM
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EDITORIAL

Comics, memory, activism: Introduction to the special collection

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Athens, 7 October 2020. It is a pleasantly sunny day, early noon. It is also a historic moment: after nearly 10 years of court proceedings, twenty thousand people have gathered in front of the Court of Appeal to hear the verdict of a trial. Then, finally, the moment arrives: the loudspeakers announce, 'Golden Dawn constitutes a criminal organisation'. A cry encompassing both euphoria and relief rings through the crowd.

The mobilisation of the crowds on the day the verdict was pronounced was the result of multiple efforts by lawyers, human rights activists, NGOs, and victims of violence. Crucially, it included initiatives that made use of comics. In collaboration with the organisation HumanRights360 and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in Greece, over fifty comics artists contributed to the project *X Them Out! A Black Map of Racist Violence*, a digital map made up of drawn images in varying styles with short textual excerpts. The map documents instances of violence perpetrated by the far-right organisation Golden Dawn in cartoon form, showing that the violence perpetrated by the organisation was not a case of a few isolated incidents but was of an organised nature. The project included the public circulation of these cartoons in the form of a website, book and through QR codes available at the sites of violent incidents around Athens. The playful use of comics in this project helped to raise awareness of the severity and magnitute of the case in an accessible manner (see Gedgaudaitė's contribution to this collection for a sustained discussion of this case).

A Black Map of Racist Violence shows some of the manifold ways in which comics can engage with memory to contribute to activist endeavours. It forms part of a wider phenomenon in which comics are used to document overlooked instances of injustice and contribute to activist demands. In light of such instances, this special collection of *Memory, Mind & Media* (*MMM*) considers the intersection of comics, memory and activism at which a growing number of graphic novels, memoirs, and other visual-verbal publications testify to oppression, mediate the lives of historic activists (Nayar, 2016; Vlessing, 2025) or bear witness to internal conflicts within social movements (Belia, 2025). Our collection speaks to a moment in which protest and civil unrest are violently suppressed the world over and highlights the power with which this irreverent medium can disrupt dominant

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narratives, challenge and reshape our understandings of shared pasts to inspire hopeful visions for just futures.

Comics, Memory, Activism draws inspiration from a reorientation in memory studies – sometimes described as an 'activist turn' (Gutman et al., 2023; Chidgey, 2024) – towards the intersection between memory and activism (see the opening of Merrill and Rigney, 2024 for a summary of books and articles at this juncture). And, while previous scholarship has engaged with comics and memory or comics and activism (see, for instance, Ahmed and Crucifix, 2018; Nabizadeh, 2019; Nordenstam et al., 2025), this collection innovates in its consideration of the triangulation *between* these three elements.

This is not to suggest that comics, memory or activism are simple concepts in and of themselves. The 'comics' of our title form part of a heterogeneous visual–verbal medium (see Kuttner et al., 2021's overview of different efforts to define that medium), which encompasses multiple genres, styles, origins, practices and histories (LaCour et al., 2022, 2). *Comics, Memory, Activism* engages with a variety of forms of this medium – be they graphic novel, cartoon or comic strip – each with their own histories, traditions and associations.

'Memory' for its part may be autobiographical, where comics record incidents and events experienced by individuals. It may be collective, building from understandings of the past shared and communicated by a group; or cultural: mediated, and remediated across and between a network of artefacts to become accessible to many more people. Often, the relationship between comics and memory involves an interplay between all three of these forms.

'Activism' includes traditional notions of activism that involve supporting or leading social struggles but it also encompasses broader definitions including the production of situational knowledge, the provision of a sense of self-empowerment or facility for advocacy, and allows for mundane or unexpected acts of resistance. The comic form helps to broaden our understanding of activism. As in the example of *A Black Map of Racist Violence*, a comic may draw from the autobiographical memories of its 'protagonists' or 'activist' creators while contributing to the cultural memory of a historic moment that seeks an 'activist' public. In doing so, comics produced by or about a range of differently political people preserve memories of, and/or use memories for the purposes of, political contention. Comics help advocate for social change by crafting, nuancing and contesting stories about the past.

The starting point of our collection is an enquiry into the means and mechanisms behind that crafting, nuancing and contesting. *Comics, Memory, Activism* invites scholars to consider comics that mediate historic activism, protests and other instances of political contention, and to analyse comics as carriers of memory with activist intent. This invitation is also an opportunity for practitioners of creative arts and scholars across the social sciences, humanities and cognitive sciences to engage in dialogue. Bringing together interdisciplinary approaches to comics, memory and activism, this collection considers the relationship between cultural representation and socio-political change.

It asks: how do hybrid image-text forms foster critical literacies, interpellate politically engaged readers and mediate individual or collective memories of civil disobedience? What can we learn about the relationship between acts of creation and collective action by focusing on representations of representations of activism in comic form? How do the autobiographical memories of a writer, artist or reader facilitate the political claims made by a comic? How do comics fit into the media ecologies that structure and shape our understandings of political pasts? And what does a focus on future-facing and hopeful comics bring to the field of memory studies?

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The past and the future in comic form

The aptitude of the comic form for purveying and engaging with fractured and complex versions of individual and collective pasts is well documented. '[T]he doubled, multiply layered form of comics has become the site of so much wrestling with history', writes comic scholar Hillary L. Chute (2016, 34). Studies of the many comics that represent difficult pasts have pointed to the medium's seemingly 'demotic' nature (Nayar, 2016) and its ability to balance objective and subjective versions of the truth (El Refaie, 2012), as well as drawing attention to the depiction of history in comics as a process that extends well beyond specific events (Gedgaudaitė, 2023). These aspects make the medium well-suited to an engagement with fluid and dynamic understandings of the past of the sort held within the term 'memory'.

'Much like memory, comics are "polysemiotic"', argues Golnar Nabizadeh: they are composed of words of images, 'characterised by their diversity of representation and the potentially endless ways in which we tell stories about one another and ourselves' (2019, 3). Investigations into both autobiographical and historical comics show the ways these works exploit the interplay between image and text to testify to personal and collective trauma, moving beyond conventional imagery and giving visual form to subjects that resist verbal expression (Chute, 2010; Davies and Rifkind, 2020). Well-established research on cultural memory celebrates the medium's propensity – paradigmatically in Art Spiegelman's account of his father's experience of the Holocaust in *Maus* (1980–1991) – to depict traumatic and violent pasts, both those that are based on individual and collective experience, in nuanced and emotionally resonant ways (Huyssen, 2000; Hirsch, 2002, 2004). Comics, these scholars effectively argue, have particularly productive strategies for the depiction of traumatic memories (Davies, 2020; Brookes, 2022).

Yet the potential of comics to represent trauma is only part of the picture. Comics also have a longstanding association with many different sorts of political action. The same demotic qualities that make the comic a fruitful carrier of memory also facilitate its use for instruction, campaigning, critiquing, archiving, giving testimony, raising awareness or visualising alternative futures. Scholarship on comics and activism has paid considerable attention to the development of comics' narrative and visual strategies within specific activist spaces and subcultures, as well as the role comics play in the negotiation of identity and community or in providing positions of identification that help establish political belonging (Streeten, 2020; Belia, 2024; Nordestam et al., 2025).

The close association between comics and political contention is exacerbated by the medium's status as a 'once-maligned art form' (Nabizadeh, 2019, 1) and historical association with disruption, degeneracy or illegality. In part, this reputation for trouble draws from the comic's multifaceted relationship with its reader. Inviting a 'visual-verbal literacy' (Hirsch, 2004, 1212) or 'imaginative collaboration' (Polak, 2017, 1) between creator and receiver, comics require highly engaged and involved readers who must draw connections between words and images or fill in the gaps between frames: 'comics texts often require an active and complicated literacy–one to which those making comics, and writing about them, attribute a slowed-down engagement', writes Chute (2016, 36). This slowing down allows comics to transmit, even to teach, complex information to their readers; the medium is well-placed to act upon their political imaginations and mobilise their support for new ideas and actions. In doing so, comics do not merely reflect the world as it is but gesture towards worlds that might be, cultivating imaginative groundwork for different, better or more radical futures.

In light of a significant body of work on comics and memory, and comics and activism, this collection takes a medium-specific approach to the 'memory-activism nexus' (Rigney, 2018, 372). The rest of this editorial sets out our findings so far.

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Comics

Drawing from existing scholarship on comics, memory and activism, our diverse contributions explore the specific formal properties of the comic that make it an apt medium for recording and fulfilling present and past activist purposes. This collection approaches comics as, at their core, a world-building project in which past, present and future can come together to produce new forms of knowledge. Through a variety of voices, and in a non-hierarchical fashion, comics imagine and advocate for a future that is different from the doom-and-gloom narratives that often populate mainstream narratives in the public sphere. The medium's longstanding association with humour is essential to this, and several of the comics analysed in this collection give a levity to potentially weighty or unpleasant topics. The approaches to comics in this collection so far fall within two broad categories.

Firstly, comics are approached from the perspective of auto/biographical memory and its mediation. Our contributors consider individuals who provide role models for others, inspiring them to reflect and build on their sense of identity and to gain visibility in heterogeneous struggles – from environmental to urban, neurodivergent or LGBTQI+ activism (see contributions by Emilie Sitzia and Pierre Gramond as well as Tânia A. Cardoso, Andrea Hoff and Alice Parrinello, respectively). Comics of any genre may become a model for identity-building and an emancipatory tool in activist practices as they circulate between authors, publishers and readers. Personal histories in the form of a comic may also become vehicles for collective or cultural remembrance. This brings us to the second category of comics: those that contribute to the circulation of cultural memory, often through their depictions of collective struggle or engagement with participatory cultures of re/mediation.

Two examples of the latter phenomenon are provided by John A. Walsh and Evan Brandon's, as well as Elise Talgorn and Heidi Toivonen's, contributions to this collection. Drawing on the correspondence between the readers of the comic magazine *Misty*, created by Trina Robbins and published in the United Kingdom in the 1970s, Walsh and Brandon show how readers actively participated in creating the magazine by suggesting plotlines and fashion design ideas, as well as advocating for the continuation of its print run. Reflecting on memories of reading *Misty* expressed through interviews with its readers today, the authors show that participatory culture often leads to a sense of self-empowerment, which, at least in some cases, has influenced important life choices such as the careers of the magazine's readers. In the context of environmental activism, Talgorn and Toivonen put the notion of participatory culture into practice by co-creating a comic through an interview with a character who represents a nonhuman perspective. This results in a playful more-than-human storytelling method that challenges traditional human-centred modes of remembering and promotes everyday environmental activism through what the authors call, eco-entangled memories: intersubjective memories co-created through an interaction with nature.

Across these categories, our contributions show the comic as a multimodal, intermedial form that not only combines word and image but also easily accommodates a wide range of sources, from written testimonies or reproduced photographs to infographics and historic documents, in order to create a public archive of activist practices (see, for instance, the contribution by Sitzia and Gramond on environmental activism in France). Comics make visible places and people that may otherwise remain out of sight, expanding our repertoires of possible representations and, as Duygu Erbil and Eamonn Connor's article on prison comics and decarceral activism demonstrates, calling into question corrosive forms of 'common sense'. In a similar vein, Cardoso's contribution engages the layout of a page to accommodate the multiple timelines, perspectives and spaces of Rotterdam's urban landscapes, drawing unexpected connections between resistance in the war-torn city of the past and the activism of its residents with regards to urban development projects in the present.

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Following an emerging trend in comics studies in which the creation of comics is used as a methodological tool for the collection, generation and/or dissemination of research data in fields as wide-ranging as history, anthropology and graphic medicine (Kuttner et al., 2021) – matched with the conviction that 'making comics is an effective means of theorizing comics' (Kashtan, 2015, 1) – we are especially excited that *MMM* allows for contributions outside of the text-only format of traditional academic articles. Inviting submissions in the form of comics, this collection asks what opportunities are created through comics-based research and how these hybrid communicative modes can disseminate academic knowledge. The contributions of Cardoso, Hoff, Talgorn and Toivonen offer some preliminary answers.

Memory

Comics, Memory, Activism takes an open approach to memory, allowing for contributions with varying perspectives on understanding, storing and sharing past events. In line with Maaheen Ahmed and Benoît Crucifix's conception of 'comics memory' (2018), our focus is never exclusively on isolated modes of autobiographic, collective or cultural remembrance but on their messy overlap and association with histories of the comic form.

We welcome contributions that show the multiple ways in which a recourse to memory can both reactivate latent archival sources and histories and/or document social contention in the present. Memory is rarely taken as a given in the comics drawn for or analysed in this collection. More often, our contributors show how comics bring together on their pages mnemonic traces across time and space in a way that makes readers complicit in this process. Invoking memory in activist comics is thus both a historicising and a (re-) contextualising project that evokes a certain amount of contestation and/or appeals to solidarity. Sitzia and Gramond focus on environmental protest in France to show the ways in which comics can both crystalise a certain moment into a recognisable image and expand our understanding of a specific event in the past. Crucially, engaging with memory through the form of comics makes mental images and processes of remembrance material on the page, offering an effective way to bridge empirical and sociological approaches to memory and oftentimes providing shape and form to something that is not tangible. Hoff's research comic on the diverse worldviews that emerge through a visual–verbal exploration of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder is a pertinent example of this process.

We also include and invite contributions that draw attention to the fact that comics, just as any other medium, carry their own mnemonic associations. We ask, how have the different contexts in which comics have been published and promulgated affected their political potential? What sort of memories are 'implicit' (Erll, 2022) in the comic as a medium? Erbil and Connor's contribution, for example, shows how the American comic book's historically ambivalent entanglements with criminality – stigmatised and banned by law enforcement authorities yet also serving as 'a bottomless well of hegemonic crime and justice fantasies' – impact abolitionist comic projects in the twenty-first century. Talgorn and Toivonen, meanwhile, draw on the long history of associations between comics and humour to advocate for raising environmental awareness. This collection includes pieces that showcase the productive ways in which activists engage 'comics memory' to further their aims and campaigns or to challenge and repurpose the medium's narrative tropes.

Activism

Our contributions explore the manifold ways in which comics enact activism and engage memory through documentation, commemoration, community-building, calls for action and education.

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This last aspect comes to play an especially important role across several contributions that look at the pedagogical power of comics. Building from an understanding that transformative learning covers 'the cognitive, the emotional and the social dimensions' of education, Sitzia and Gramond's article looks at the formal mechanisms through which a single-page comic shared by ecological activists in France engages its reader-viewer. In 'Reading and Writing Italian Queerness', Parrinello shows how two autofictional graphic novels that deal with trans identity contribute to an 'archive of memory and activism'. Given the failures of the Italian education system to provide adequate education on gender and sexuality, and its co-option by far-right 'anti-gender' politics, this archive fills a substantial educational and representational deficit. Through engaging with the comics readers and writers gain a sense of self-empowerment; they enter a participatory culture in which trans identities are made visible.

In line with *MMM*'s focus on 'the impact of media and technology on individual, social and cultural remembering and forgetting,' we welcome contributions that consider how new digital ecologies influence practices of activism and the creation of comics. For instance, as Andrew Hoskins has pointed out, generative AI changes the production and status of memory; it can 'both enable and endanger human agency in the making and the remixing of individual and collective memory' (2024, 7). Gareth Brookes engages with this question in our collection, locating the authorial trace or drawn line, and the authenticity that stems from it, as a central premise of comics-based activism. He shows that each authorial practice is also always collective: individual style is based on engagement with current and earlier traditions and comics themselves rely on remixing already mediated material in their pages. AI generated content, by contrast, is premised on a sense of objectivity that is decoupled from individuality and generates new contexts for remembering that are disconnected from historical events. Distinct as these two practices may seem, Brookes traces some common ground between them arguing that both AI and authorial practice are inevitably shaped by algorithmic reality. He concludes that critically engaging with this intersection offers tools not only simply to deal with the consequences of AI but also to critique it from within; a process which could, in itself, constitute an activist practice for comics' creators and readers.

An open invitation

We began this special collection of *Memory, Mind & Media* as an open invitation to bring empirical and theoretical approaches to comics, memory and activism into dialogue. We aimed to offer both empirical evidence for theories that have been hitherto substantiated through individual insight and to position empirical data in wider social contexts through critical analysis. Our hope was to explore 'the overlap of the biological and the social in the acquisition and deployment of "ways of seeing"' (Dunst et al., 2018, 6); to consider different sorts of mnemonic traces in relation to activism and comics. The initial enthusiastic response to our call for papers has enabled us to offer some preliminary answers. We are delighted that the nature of the *MMM* special collection allows us to keep this invitation open and to keep the conversation going. We are already looking forward to what will come next.

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