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## Drawn to Change Comics and Critical Consciousness

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## RESEARCH NOTE /NOTE DE RECHERCHE

# Drawn to Change: Comics and Critical Consciousness

**Sean Carleton**

ONE OF THE LAST PROJECTS that activist and academic Howard Zinn completed before his death in 2010 was a comic book.<sup>1</sup> With the help of historian Paul Buhle and cartoonist Mike Konopacki, Zinn released *A People's History of American Empire* in 2008 as an illustrated adaptation of material from his bestselling book, *A People's History of The United States*.<sup>2</sup> The comic book is narrated by Zinn, and it depicts him at a teach-in during the height of the Iraq

1. Based on my reading of the scholarly literature on comics as well as my experience as a comics writer, I use the umbrella term “comics.” Comics, or comic books, are also commonly referred to as “floppies,” “periodicals,” “pamphlets,” “sequential art,” “graphic novels,” and “graphic histories” in English, “bande dessinée” and “bande dessinée Québécois” in French, and “manga” in Japanese. While I disagree with comics theorist Scott McCloud’s exclusion of the written word from his definition of comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence,” I do support his claim that “the best definition for comics will, I think, be the most expansive.” See Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: William Morrow Paperbacks, 1993), 199. My intention in using the term “comics” is to encourage a broad discussion about the possibilities of a medium that generally, though not strictly or exclusively, blends varying forms of text and visuals to convey meaning. For overviews of the terminology debate on “comics” see McCloud, *Understanding Comics*; Robert C. Harvey, *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History* (Jackson, MI: University of Mississippi Press, 1996); Stephen Weiner, *Faster Than A Speeding Bullet: The Rise of the Graphic Novel* (New York: NBM Publishing, 2003); Douglas Wolk, *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What they Mean* (New York: De Capo Press, 2007); Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester, “Introduction,” in Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester, eds., *A Comics Studies Reader* (Jackson, MI: University of Mississippi Press, 2009), xi–xv; and Bart Beaty, *Comics versus Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

2. Howard Zinn, Mike Konopacki, and Paul Buhle, *A People's History of American Empire: A Graphic Adaptation* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008); Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492–Present* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980).



Figure 1. *A People's History of American Empire, 7.*  
With permission.

War, delivering a lecture on America's sordid history of imperialism (Figure 1). Zinn's talk is aided by a mixture of historical narrative, photographs, and comics art that trace the roots of American expansionism from the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee to the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Zinn's goal, however, is not simply to illustrate the events of the past. Instead, he utilizes the popular comics medium to offer an alternative history of US

foreign policy intended to combat the pro-war propaganda of the early 2000s and inspire a new generation's resistance to imperialism. And in the current neoliberal age where, as Marxist geographer David Harvey suggests, people are told there are no alternatives to the capitalist status quo, critical comics such as *A People's History of American Empire* can be invaluable resources for renewing people's hope and energy to change the world.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Zinn's comic book has sold over 50,000 copies and has been praised by comics specialists like Joe Sacco, applauded in *The New York Times*, and endorsed by a wide range of celebrities.<sup>4</sup> *A People's History of American Empire* is significant, then, because it is a successful popular history and a politically progressive work; it is a comic book that challenges academics to think of comics as valuable tools for promoting critical thinking and informed activism.

This article contributes to the growing conversation about academia's engagement with comics.<sup>5</sup> I begin by contextualizing the medium's recent mainstream resurgence and academia's response to give the necessary background for such a discussion, and then I suggest certain theoretical and analytical insights to help scholars better evaluate the potential of comics. Yet like Zinn, I am particularly interested in how comics, especially those with politically progressive content, can be used to promote activist learning. Thus, I will explore the potential of comics in relation to Brazilian critical pedagogue Paulo Freire's theory of *conscientização*, which in English translates as "conscientization" and is popularly known as "critical consciousness."<sup>6</sup> Conscientization does not refer to one's mere attainment of an alternative or "critical" consciousness; it is also a pedagogical method. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire defines conscientization as an active process whereby people learn to "perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against oppressive elements of reality."<sup>7</sup> This transformational pedagogy inspires learners to see themselves as empowered "Subjects"<sup>8</sup> of history,

3. See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 198–206.

4. Hollywood actor Viggo Mortensen even narrates a YouTube video entitled "Empire or Humanity: What the Classroom Didn't Teach Me About the American Empire," which was written by Zinn and features illustrations from *A People's History of American Empire*, posted by Henry Holt, March 28, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Arn3lF5XSUg>.

5. For more on academia and comics, see Heer and Worchester, "Introduction," *A Comics Studies Reader*, xi–xv; and Paul Buhle, "History and Comics," *Reviews in American History* 35 (June 2007): 315–323.

6. See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1970); Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Continuum, 1974); Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom* (Cambridge, CT: Harvard Educational Review, 1975).

7. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 19.

8. "The term 'Subject' denotes those who know and act, in contrast to 'objects,' which are known and acted upon," translator's note in Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 20.

capable of acting to improve their own lives and working with others to change the world for the better.<sup>9</sup> By blending Freire's ideas with comics theory, notably the concept of "closure" as the way in which readers establish meaning in comics and can thus become empowered Subjects of the storytelling process, I argue that comics hold potential for conscientization.<sup>10</sup>

As examples of the potential of comics for conscientization, I will analyze two recent Canadian works with politically progressive subject matter: Gord Hill's *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book*, and Siobhan Loudon, Samantha Pike, L.A.A. Barlott-Cardenas, Lydia Butts, Rob Butts, and Kyla Johnson's *Shift-in-Progress: A Not-So-Comic Book*.<sup>11</sup> These comics powerfully document peoples' struggles against colonialism and capitalism respectively. By examining these two comic books from a perspective informed by critical pedagogy and comics theory, I will show how comics can create spaces for conscientization, and thus can be used by academics to encourage critical thinking and activism. Following in the footsteps of Zinn, then, I suggest that further academic engagement with comics can be a significant challenge as well as a valuable opportunity for scholars to cultivate critical consciousness in the 21st century.

## Slower Than a Speeding Bullet: Academia's Response to the Comics Resurgence

AFTER GROWING IN POPULARITY in the early 20th century, comics became prime targets during the Cold War moral panic of the late 1940s and early 1950s in Canada and the United States. Critics, led by American psychiatrist Fredric Wertham, attacked comics for their controversial content, and crime comics in particular were considered part of a youthful rebellion that promoted loose morals and glorified violence and resistance to authority.<sup>12</sup>

9. Those familiar with feminist and anti-colonial theory will recognize a similar logic in such works as Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: A Knopf, 1952); Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (New York: Orion Press, 1965); and Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967). In fact, the term *conscienciser*, meaning to bring patients to consciousness and orient them to social change, is used by Fanon in the French version of *Black Skins, White Masks*, 100.

10. A similar blending of Freire's ideas has occurred in theatre. In *Theatre of the Oppressed* (London: Pluto Press, 1979), Brazilian director Augusto Boal develops a theatrical method for liberation based on Freire's concept of conscientization.

11. Gord Hill, *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2010); Siobhan Loudon, Samantha Pike, L.A.A. Barlott-Cardenas, Lydia Butz, Rob Butz, and Kyla Johnson, *Shift in Progress: A Not-So-Comic Book* (Edmonton: Self-published by Edmonton rww, 2008).

12. The crusade against comics in the United States was led by Fredric Wertham, and his book *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rinehart, 1954) played a role in the creation of the Comics Code Authority to regulate comic book production in September 1954. For more on the attack

As a result, many publishers and creators of critical comics, including those with openly leftist politics, were driven underground. Writers and illustrators like Spain Rodriguez, Sharon Rudahl, and Harvey Pekar kept alive a dissident spirit in comics as they helped form the alternative “comix” movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The underground comix movement, which overlapped with a broader counter-culture in North America and Britain in the postwar period, saw a proliferation of self-published and socially conscious comics such as *Zap Comix*, *Anarchy Comics*, *Corporate Crime Comics*, and *Raw*. Important feminist interventions in the underground movement were made in the early 1970s by *Wimmen’s Comix*, *It Ain’t Me Babe*, and in the Canadian context, the Corrective Collective’s alternative comix history of Canada entitled *She Called it Canada Because That’s What It Was Called*.<sup>13</sup>

Building on the relative success of the underground movement, comics experienced a mainstream resurgence in the late 1970s. The publication of comix-influenced works such as Will Eisner’s *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*, Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’ *Watchmen*, and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* breathed new life into the medium in the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>14</sup>

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on comics and comics censorship, see David Hajdu, *Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How it Changed America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009); Bart Beaty, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture: A Re-Examination of the Critic Whose Congressional Testimony Sparked the Comics Code* (Jackson, MI: University of Mississippi Press, 2005); Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson, MI: University of Mississippi Press, 1998). In Canada in 1949, the federal government passed Bill 10, also known as the Fulton Bill (named for Conservative MP E. Davie Fulton who proposed it), as an amendment to Section 207 of the Criminal Code to designate crime comics as “obscene literature.” For more on the Canadian example, see Mary Louise Adams, *The Trouble with Normal: Postwar Youth and the Making of Heterosexuality* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 142–150; Augustine Brannigan, “Mystification of the Innocents: Crime Comics and Delinquency in Canada, 1931–1949,” *Canadian Justice History* 7 (1986): 111–144; Bryan D. Palmer, *Canada’s 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 183–190. Joan Sangster argues that even Communists in Canada condemned the perceived “American cultural imperialism” of popular comics. See Sangster, *Girl Trouble: Female Delinquency in English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 58–59 and 190.

13. *Wimmen’s Comics* (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1972–1985); *It Ain’t Me Babe* (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1970); *She Called it Canada Because That’s What It Was Called* (Vancouver: Corrective Collective, 1971). For more on the dissident dimensions of comics and the importance of the comix movement, see Paul Buhle, “The Left in American Comics: Rethinking the Visual Vernacular,” *Science and Society* 71, no. 3 (July 2007): 348–356; Mark James Estren, *A History of Underground Comics* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1974); Patrick Rosenkranz, *Rebel Visions: the Underground Comix Revolution, 1963–1975* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2002).

14. Will Eisner, *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* (New York: Baronet Books, 1978); Frank Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (New York: DC Comics, 1986); Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (New York: DC Comics, 1987); Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986 and 1991). Alan Moore and Steve Bissette’s



These works are longer and seen by many as more serious engagements with historical and contemporary political issues. In particular, Spiegelman's work significantly altered the comics landscape and solidified a more established place for comics in the popular literary tradition. Appearing first in the comix magazine *Raw* in 1980, *Maus* was subsequently collected and re-published by Pantheon Books in two parts in 1986 and 1991.<sup>15</sup> *Maus*' historical account

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work from 1984 to 1987 on *The Saga of Swamp Thing* (issues 20–64) should also be noted for its influence on the comics revival. Moore and Bissette's popular work on the series appealed directly to adults, and dealt with serious issues like racism and environmental destruction. Another significant factor supporting the comics resurgence was the advent of specialty stores, known as the direct market, starting in the early 1970s. For more on the history of comics culture, publishing, and the influence of the direct market, see Jean-Paul Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books* (Jackson, MI: University of Mississippi Press, 2010). The rising popularity of television shows and films featuring comic book characters such as Superman, Swamp Thing, Batman, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Spiderman, and the X-men since the late 1970s has also helped support the mainstream revival of the comics medium. Tracing all the contours of comics history is, of course, beyond the scope of this article. For historical treatments of comics, see for example, Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Shirrel Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008); Roger Sabin, *Comics, Comix, and Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 2004); Trina Robbins, *From Girls to Grrlz: A History of Women's Comics from Teens to Zines* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999); Paul Gravett and Peter Stanbury, *Great British Comics: Celebrating a Century of Ripping Yarns and Wizard Wheezes* (London: Aurum Press, 2006); and Paul Gravett, *Manga: Sixty Years of Japanese Comics* (London: Harper Design, 2004). For an examination of Canadian comics, see Peter Desbarats and Terry Mosher, *The Hecklers: A History of Canadian Political Cartooning* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1979); Michael Hirsh and Patrick Loubert, *The Great Canadian Comic Books* (Toronto: P. Martin Associates, 1971); John Bell, *Canuck Comics: A Guide to Comic Books Published in Canada* (Montréal: Matrix Books, 1986); Bell, *Guardians of the North: The National Superhero in Canadian Comic-Book Art* (Ottawa, ON: National Archives of Canada, 1992); and Bell, *Invaders of the North: How Canada Conquered the Comic Book Universe* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2006). For more on bande dessinée Québécoise, see Michel Viau, *BDQ: Répertoire des publications de bandes dessinées au Québec des origines à nos jours* (Laval, QC: Editions Mille-Iles, 1999); and Mira Falardeau, *Histoire de la bande dessinée au Québec* (Montréal: Études Québécoises, 2008). For a comic book treatment of comics history see Fred Van Lente and Ryan Dunlavey, *The Comic Book History of Comics* (San Diego: IDW Publishing, 2012).

15. Spiegelman's *Maus* is often credited as one of the first "graphic novels." I thank Roxanne Panchasi for assigning *Maus* in her historical methods course at Simon Fraser University, which is where I first encountered comics in the classroom. Other works that are cited as early "graphic novels" are Richard Corben, *Bloodstar* (Kansas City, KS: The Morning Star Press, 1976), Jim Steranko, *Chandler: Red Tide* (New York: Pyramid Books, 1976); Eisner, *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*; and Don McGregor and Paul Gulacy, *Sabre: Slow Fade of An Endangered Species* (New York: Eclipse Enterprises, 1978). The works of Lynd Ward and Granville Hicks, *One of Us: The Story of John Reed* (New York: Equinox Cooperative Press, 1935) and Giacomo G. Patri, *White Collar: A Novel in Linocuts* (San Francisco: Pisani Printing & Publishing Co., 1940) deserve serious consideration as early "graphic novels." However, I choose not to use the term graphic novel. For a defence of the term see Eddie Campbell, "A Graphic Novelist's Manifesto," *The Comics Journal* 263 (October 2004): 169. For a critique of the term

of Nazism and the horrors of the Holocaust captured the attention of traditional comics fans as well as a more general audience. *Maus* is a worldwide bestseller and remains the only comic book to win a Pulitzer Prize.<sup>16</sup> The mainstream success of the new works by Eisner, Miller, Moore and Gibbons, and Spiegelman proved to be a watershed for the comics medium.

In the late 1980s and the 1990s, works such as Jim Vance and Dan Burr's *Kings in Disguise*, Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta*, Harvey Pekar, Joyce Brabner, and Frank Stack's *Our Cancer Year*, and Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's *From Hell* continued the mainstream momentum and inspired other creators to refashion comics, especially as a medium addressing expressly political subjects.<sup>17</sup> Since 2000, numerous popular comics dealing with politically progressive content have been published. For example, comics have explored the history and politics of Ireland's War of Independence, the Spanish Civil War, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and dissent during the Iranian Revolution. Comics have also traced the development of anti-nuclear protests in France, movements such as the Beatniks, unions like the Industrial Workers of the World, and groups like Students for a Democratic Society. In addition, they have examined the lives of radical figures like Olympe de Gouges, Nat Turner, Emma Goldman, Pancho Villa, Leon Trotsky, Kiki de Montparnasse, Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, and Ferdinando Nicola Sacco and Bartholomew Vanzetti.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Canadian comics have examined the lives

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see Wolk, *Reading Comics*, 62–63. Ultimately, I believe that the broader term “comics” is more useful, and I agree with comics writer Alan Moore: “It’s a marketing term ... the term ‘graphic novel’ is not one that I’m over-fond of. It’s nothing that I might carry a big crusade against, it doesn’t really matter much what they’re called but it’s not a term that I’m very comfortable with.... I mean ‘comics’ is as good as anything.” “The Alan Moore Interview: Northampton/Graphic Novel,” October 17, 2000, <http://blather.net/articles/amoore/northampton.html>.

16. *Maus* was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1992. Michael Chabon's *The Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (New York: Random House, 2000), a fictional novel about the comics industry in New York during the Second World War, won a Pulitzer Prize in 2001.

17. See, for example, Jim Vance and Dan Burr, *Kings in Disguise* (Princeton: Kitchen Sink Press, 1988); Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta* (New York: DC Comics, 1988); Harvey Pekar, Joyce Brabner, and Frank Stack's *Our Cancer Year* (New York: Running Press, 1994); Joe Kubert, *Fax from Sarajevo* (Milwaukee, WI: Dark Horse Books, 1996); and Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's *From Hell* (Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions, 1999).

18. Joe Sacco, *Safe Area Gorazde* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2000); Sacco, *Palestine* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2001); Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The Story of Childhood* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003) and *Persepolis: The Story of a Return* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003); Paul Buhle and Nicole Schulman, eds., *Wobblies! A Graphic History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (New York: Verso, 2005); Andrew Helfer and Randy Duburke, *Malcolm X: A Graphic Biography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006); Sharon Rudahl, *A Dangerous Woman: A Graphic Biography of Emma Goldman* (New York: The New Press, 2007); Spain Rodriguez, *Che: A Graphic Biography* (New York: Verso, 2008); Zinn, Konopacki, Buhle, *A People's History of American Empire*; Kyle Baker, *Nat Turner* (New York: Henry N. Abrams, 2008); Paul Buhle and Harvey Pekar, eds., *Studs Terkel's Working: A Graphic Adaptation* (New York: New Press, 2009); Gerry Hunt, *Blood Upon the Rose: Easter 1916: The Rebellion that*



of people like Louis Riel and Nellie McClung, the struggles of Indigenous peoples, the 1970 October Crisis, the Winnipeg General Strike, May Day protests, Chinese immigration, and anti-globalization resistance.<sup>19</sup> Even Karl Marx's *Capital* has recently inspired a comic book adaptation.<sup>20</sup> Like Zinn's *A People's History of American Empire*, these comics highlight alternative

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*Set Ireland Free* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 2009); Harvey Pakar, Paul Buhle, and Gary Dumm, *Students for a Democratic Society: A Graphic History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009); Rick Geary, *Trotsky: A Graphic Biography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009); Geary, *The Lives of Sacco and Vanzetti* (New York: NBM Publishing, 2011); Richard Kleist, *Castro* (London: Self Made Hero, 2011); Paul Buhle, *Robin Hood: People's Outlaw and Forest Hero: A Graphic Guide* (Portland, OR: PM Press, 2011); José-Louis Bocquet and Olivier Catel, *Kiki De Montparnasse: The Graphic Biography* (London: Self Made Hero, 2011); Cindy Milstein, Josh MacPhee, Erik Ruin, *Paths Toward Utopia: Graphic Explorations of Everyday Anarchism* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012); José-Louis Bocquet and Olivier Catel, *Olympe de Gouges* (Paris: Casterman, 2012); Chris Hedges and Joe Sacco, *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt* (New York: Nation Books, 2012); Léonard Chemineau and James Carlos Blake, *Los Amigos de Pancho Villa* (Tournai: 001 Ediciones, 2012); Gerry Hunt, *At War with the Empire: Ireland's Fight for Independence* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 2012); Delphine Le Lay and Alexis Horellou, *Plogoff* (Paris: Guy Delcourt Productions, 2013); and Bruno Loth, *Los Fantasmas de Ermo: El Fuego* (Madrid: Kraken, 2013). There are also many more traditional comic book series dealing with politically progressive content, including *The Walking Dead*, *Orchid*, *Scalped*, *The New Deadwardians*, and *World War Three Illustrated* – the last one a standard on the leftist comics scene since the 1980s – to mention but a few. As well, there are a great number of comic book primers grappling with a wide range of progressive subjects in the *Introducing* and *For Beginners* series. One of the earliest was Rius' *Marx for Beginners*, which was published in 1976.

19. Chester Brown, *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography* (Montréal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2003); John Gallant and Seth Gallant, *Bannock, Beans, and Black Tea* (Montréal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2004); Guy Delisle, *Pyongyang: A Journey to North Korea* (Montréal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2004); Ho Che Anderson, *King: A Comics Biography of Martin Luther King; The Complete Edition* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2005); Laurence Hyde, *Southern Cross: A Novel of the South Seas* (Montréal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2007); Jeff Lemire, *Essex County, Collected* (Portland, OR: Top Shelf Productions, 2009); Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas, *Red: A Haida Manga* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2009); Hill, *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book*; Sylvain Lemay and André St-Georges, *Pour en Finir Avec Novembre* (Montréal: Éditions Les 400 Coups, 2011); Zach Worton, *The Klondike* (Montréal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2011); Brian Wright-McLeod, *Red Power: A Graphic Novel* (Markham: Firth House, 2011); David Alexander Robertson and Scott B. Henderson, *Sugar Falls: A Residential School Story* (Winnipeg, MB: Highwater Press, 2011); Kate Beaton, *Hark! A Vagrant* (Montréal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2011); Willow Dawson, *Hyena in Petticoats: The Story of Suffragette Nellie McClung* (Toronto: Puffin Canada, 2011); Robin Folvik, Sean Carleton, Mark Leier, Sam Bradd, and Trevor McKilligan, *May Day: A Graphic History of Protest* (Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 2012); Adam Campbell and Carly Campbell, *Bloody Saturday* (Winnipeg, MB: Self Published, 2012); David T. Wong, *Escape to Gold Mountain: A Graphic History of the Chinese in North America* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2012); Gord Hill, *The Anti-Capitalist Resistance Comic Book* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2012); Guy Delisle, *Jerusalem: Chronicles from the Holy City* (Montréal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2012); David Longworth, Harry Kalensky, Allan Stanleigh, and Dave Casey, *USNA: The United States of North America* (Vancouver: UNSA Publishing, 2012); and David Robertson and Scott B. Henderson, *7 Generations: A Plains Cree Saga* (Winnipeg, MB: Highwater Press, 2012).

20. Guy Yasko, *Capital – In Manga* (Ottawa, ON: Red Quill Books, 2012).

histories, accounts of resistance, and radical figures that challenge readers to think and act differently in the world. Moreover, these works have garnered serious attention and have helped to establish comics as a legitimate activist art form in Canada and around the world.

Librarians and educators are embracing comics as crucial teaching tools in the battle for literacy and youth attention in today's digital age. Many libraries are building their young adult collections around comics, citing their popularity with a wide range of readers.<sup>21</sup> In 2013, the Northlake Public Library in Chicago even started a campaign to erect a nine-foot statue of the Incredible Hulk as part of a strategy to "smash illiteracy" and attract younger patrons to the library.<sup>22</sup> Comics are also being used in the classroom. In "Getting Graphic with the Past: Graphic Novels and the Teaching of History," Canadian education scholars Michael Cromer and Penney Clark argue that there is great pedagogic potential in using comics to teach students to read and comprehend complex lessons about the past.<sup>23</sup> They suggest that comics are polysemic texts that encourage "students to marry print and visual representations in order to read in ways that are deeply meaningful, because the narrative is incomplete without both dimensions."<sup>24</sup> The critical adoption of comics in libraries and schools is a significant shift away from the early Cold War perception of comics as dangerous and subversive for children, and disrupts the stereotypical image of exasperated parents, teachers, and librarians confiscating comics as undesirable reading material.<sup>25</sup>

21. See Michele Gorman, *Getting Graphic! Using Graphic Novels to Promote Literacy with Preteens and Teens* (Santa Barbara, CA: Linworth Books, 2003); Kerry Ireland, "Build It and They Will Come: Graphic Novels for Your Collection," *School Libraries in Canada* 23 (March 2004): 18; Steve Miller, *Developing and Promoting Graphic Novel Collections* (New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, 2005); and Jesse Karp and Rush Kress, *Graphic Novels in Your School Library* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2012).

22. For more on the efforts of the Northlake Public Library to acquire a Hulk statue, see "9ft Statue of Hulk Intends to Smash Illiteracy," *CBC News.ca*, <http://www.cbc.ca/books/2013/05/9ft-statue-of-hulk-intends-to-smash-illiteracy.html>. Shortly after the campaign was launched, a boxing gym in California donated a statue of the Hulk to the library. See <http://www.indiegogo.com/projects/bring-the-hulk-to-the-northlake-public-library.html>.

23. Michael Cromer and Penney Clark, "Getting Graphic with the Past: Graphic Novels and the Teaching of History," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 35 (September 2007): 574–591. See also Gretchen E. Schwarz, "Graphic Novels for Multiple Literacies," *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 46 (November 2002): 262–265; Katherine T. Bucher and M. Lee Manning, "Bringing Graphic Novels into a School's Curriculum," *The Clearing House* 78 (November/December 2004): 67–72; Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher, "Using Graphic Novels, Anime, and the Internet in an Urban High School," *English Journal* 93 (January 2004): 19–25; James Bucky Carter, *Building Literacy Connections With Graphic Novels: Page by Page, Panel by Panel* (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 2007).

24. Cromer and Clark, "Getting Graphic with the Past," 589.

25. David Hajdu even describes an infamous comic book burning that took place in 1948 at a school in Spencer, West Virginia. Hajdu, *Ten Cent Plague*, 116–119.

Despite the acceptance of the comics revival by a variety of social groups and institutions, academia's relationship to comics remains uncertain. Until recently, it has mostly been comics creators who have been the outspoken advocates, critics, and producers of comics. However, academia's interest in comics is rising. In *A Comics Studies Reader*, scholars Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester argue that "the notion that comics are unworthy of serious investigation" is giving way to "a widening curiosity about comics as artefacts, commodities, codes, devices, mirrors, polemics, puzzles, and pedagogical tools. Comics are no longer a byword for banality; they have captured the interest of growing numbers of scholars working across the humanities and historically oriented social sciences."<sup>26</sup> Indeed, there has been a recent proliferation of new journals, conferences, and edited collections dedicated to comics criticism that shed greater light on the comics medium.<sup>27</sup> In Canada, it is not unusual to find Chester Brown's *Louis Riel* on university course syllabi. And Gord Hill's *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book* is receiving critical scholarly attention in academic journals such as *Journal of the Society for Socialist Studies*, *Left History*, and *BC Studies*.<sup>28</sup> It seems as though academics in Canada and the US are slowly embracing comics and learning how to teach and critique them as part of a diverse tool-kit.

But academia's involvement with comics is not solely limited to teaching and critiquing. In fact, some scholars are involved in the production of comics, and in Canada, left and labour historians are leading the way. The Canadian Committee on Labour History (CCLH) is playing an integral role in supporting the production of politically progressive historical comics, including *Kids on Strike at the Aberdeen School, 1913*, and a comic book that I helped write as part of the Graphic History Collective, *May Day: A Graphic History of Protest*.<sup>29</sup> With support from the CCLH and the Social Sciences and Humanities

26. Heer and Worcester, "Introduction," *A Comics Studies Reader*, xi.

27. See *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* and *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship*. In Canada, the "Comix and Multimodal World: An International Conference" took place at Douglas College, June 13–16, 2013, and there is a forthcoming edited collection by Gail de Vos and Chris Reyns-Chikuma, *Exploring Canadian Identity/ies in Comics* in consideration with the University of Alberta Press.

28. Peter Kulchyski, "Review of *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book*," *Journal of the Society for Socialist Studies* 6 (Fall 2010): 180–182; Sean Carleton, "Review of Gord Hill's *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book*," *Left History* 15 (Fall/Winter 2011): 120–122; Jean Barman, "Making Way for Indigenous Voices," *BC Studies* 172 (Winter 2011/12): 134–135. See also Sean Carleton, "Review of *Bloody Saturday* and *Which Side Are You On? The Story of a Song*," *Labor: Working-Class Studies of the Americas* 10, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 103–106; Sean Carleton, "Illustrating Racism: Confronting Canada's Racial Amnesia with Comics," *Histoire sociale/Social History* 92 (Fall 2013): 509–522.

29. Robin Folvik, Sean Carleton, Jeremy Milloy, Mark Leier, Sam Bradd, and Trevor McKilligan, *May Day: A Graphic History of Protest* (Vancouver: Self-published, 2008). For more on the goals of the initiative see Joan Sangster, "Work and Society in Historical Perspective: Creating a New Labour History Research Network," *Labor: Studies in Working*

Research Council, *May Day* was produced to revive interest in International Workers' Day by inspiring readers to see themselves as part of May Day's long history and its present and future as well. Projects like *Kids on Strike at the Aberdeen School, 1913* and *May Day* further illustrate the potential connection between comics and conscientization.

## Conscientization and Comics Theory

CONSCIENTIZATION IS A PEDAGOGICAL process defined by critical engagement with understandings of the world that leads people to actively reject established rationalizations of unequal power relations and oppression. In *Cultural Action for Freedom*, Freire explains that "conscientization is first of all the effort to enlighten [people] about the obstacles preventing them from a clear perception of reality.... Conscientization effects the ejection of cultural myths that confuse people's awareness."<sup>30</sup> Rather than a passive acquisition of knowledge which is simply taught to or "banked" in peoples' minds, Freire sees conscientization as an active process that offers people the opportunity, through critical reflection, to combat harmful myths and contradictions, and ultimately to create new knowledge to solve problems related to their own oppression. In short, Freire argues that the goal of conscientization is for people to comprehend their existence "*in* and *with* the world," or, to use the language of Historical Materialism more obviously, conscientization helps people to see themselves as both the products and potential changers of their social circumstances.<sup>31</sup>

Freire's views on conscientization mesh well with recent theorization on the mechanics of comics. At their core, comics offer readers the chance to actively construct, critically interpret, and consciously reflect on and relate to specific messages. Unlike popular mediums such as film and television, comics require more from their readers to establish basic meaning. In *Reading Comics*, critic

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*Class History of the Americas* 3 (Spring 2006): 41–47. After selling over 2,000 copies of the *May Day* comic book independently, the Graphic History Collective partnered with Between the Lines Press to release a revised edition of the comic book on May 1, 2012 as Robin Folvik, Sean Carleton, Mark Leier, Sam Bradd, and Trevor McKilligan, *May Day: A Graphic History of Protest* (Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 2012). The CCLH also supported the forthcoming comic book *Kids on Strike at the Aberdeen School, 1913* by Mary Anne Poutanen and Roderick MacLeod as well as a comic book about the Knights of Labor by the Graphic History Collective entitled *Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Canada, 1880–1900*, <http://graphichistorycollective.com/graphic-history-project/comic-1-dreaming-of-what-might-be-knights-of-labor/>.

30. Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom*, 64. For more on Freire's concept of conscientization, see *Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Education for Critical Consciousness*.

31. Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom*, 39. See also Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, 1947); Antonio Gramsci, "The Study of Philosophy" in Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, eds., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 624–704.

Douglas Wolk describes the act of reading a comic: “The viewer looks at a printed page and sees a series of drawn ... images, surrounded by borders, with empty space between them, each one a representation of a single moment or very short, continuous span of time.”<sup>32</sup> Wolk further explains that as a reader of comics, “you’re ultimately in control of the speed at which the page progresses. You can linger over each panel; you can observe a tier or a page or a two-page spread as a composition and get a sense of the whole thing at once; you can look back at panels you’ve already read ... or turn the pages backwards at will. And you can reorient yourself in the story with a glance, because you’ve got a visual cue for where you are on the page and in the narrative.”<sup>33</sup> In addition to reading the accompanying textboxes and word bubbles used in comics, readers are also asked to rely on what is known as visual literacy by extracting further meaning from images. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud argues that every artist has their own style of encoding and conveying meaning through their art and each reader, in turn, will relate to such representations differently based on their own experience and knowledge.<sup>34</sup> In short, comics readers must use both textual and visual literacy to be active agents of the storytelling process.

Moreover, unlike novels, comics are deliberately incomplete and require readers to extract meaning from the implied relationships between partial sequences of words and images. Wolk states that the space separating panels, known as “the gutter ... [is] where the fun happens.”<sup>35</sup> Readers get to fill in the lapse of time represented by the gutter in the process of establishing meaning. McCloud argues that “despite its unceremonious title, the gutter plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics.... Here in the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea.”<sup>36</sup> Using the *May Day* comic book as an example, it is possible to see the gutter in action. In Figure 2, the reader is presented with five main panels containing different textual and visual information separated by white gutters. The first panel is subdivided further by black gutters. Each panel and sub-panel contains a host of new ideas, and the gutter serves as a marker of change over time and an indicator of new information. Thus, comics are necessarily partial texts that require readers to bridge the gaps, or gutters, between panels by using their own imaginations and the blended images and visuals as guides.

Connecting the fragmented information of comics across gutters and between panels to perceive the greater whole and establish meaning creates

32. Wolk, *Reading Comics*, 126.

33. Wolk, *Reading Comics*, 130.

34. See McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 24–59.

35. Wolk, *Reading Comics*, 130.

36. McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 66.

what is known as “closure.”<sup>37</sup> Closure is the act of mentally completing that which is incomplete. In comics, gutters mark change in time and space, while closure establishes continuity to create meaning. McCloud argues that closure in electronic media is mostly involuntary and imperceptible, taking place at twenty-four or forty-eight frames per second as “our minds, aided by the persistence of vision, transforms a series of still pictures into a story of continuous motion.”<sup>38</sup> In comics, however, McCloud contends that closure “is far from continuous and anything but involuntary ... voluntary closure is comics’ primary means of simulating time and motion.”<sup>39</sup> According to him, “comics is closure.”<sup>40</sup>

Comics convey closure through the use of transitions that help readers to link incomplete mixtures of textual and visual information across gutters and between panels. The most common transitions in comics are subject-to-subject, action-to-action, scene-to-scene, and aspect-to-aspect. Briefly, subject-to-subject transitions convey change over time by juxtaposing sequences of different subjects (e.g., three panels separated by gutters depict a person, someone holding a baseball bat, and shards of glass to imply that a strikebreaker used a baseball bat to smash the windows of a union office). Subject-to-subject transitions require the greatest amount of reader involvement to render the transitions between panels meaningful. “Action-to-action” transitions show the distinct action of a single subject (e.g., a person waving a red and black flag); “scene-to-scene” transitions require a significant amount of deductive reasoning, as they transport the reader across significant distances of time and space (e.g., an Idle No More activist thinks back to the acrimonious arrival of Christopher Columbus in the Americas); and “aspect-to-aspect” transitions set a wandering eye on different aspects of a scene, idea, or mood being conveyed (e.g., a series of shots examining people singing on a picket line). Returning to Figure 2, the concluding page of the May Day comic book mixes textual narrative and subject-to-subject transitions – depicting the actions of different subjects – to suggest the importance of May Day as a day for worker protest, action, and celebration. Moreover, these panels include visual cues to further encoded messages that readers can use to establish added meaning. Here the illustrator is deliberately constructing a visual narrative to suggest the importance of racial solidarity as well as political and direct action in class struggle. This is an example of how visual literacy also shapes the “reading” of comics. In short, readers perform closure by observing

37. McCloud describes six different forms of transition that establish meaning, or closure, in comics: moment-to-moment; action-to-action; subject-to-subject; scene-to-scene; aspect-to-aspect; and non-sequitur. See McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 70–93.

38. McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 63.

39. McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 68–69.

40. McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 67.





Figure 2. *May Day: A Graphic History of Protest*, 28.  
With permission.

transitions across gutters and linking together different fragments of information, both textual and visual, contained in and between panels.

It is possible, then, to understand the process by which readers piece together the text, images, and transitions in comics, especially in politically progressive texts, as creating a potential space to experience closure as conscientization.

In constructing the meaning of any given comics transition or sequence, the reader relies on and can potentially confront established knowledge to create an alternative narrative using the text and images as clues for closure.<sup>41</sup> In actively engaging with critical comics, readers can be transformed, in Freire's terms, into an active "Subject" of the story capable of critiquing common-sense beliefs and releasing oppressed knowledge that can provide insight into liberation. This is not to say that readers have no agency, or that all comics have the same audience and effect. In fact, I am not arguing that comics are inherently progressive or that they represent a superior form of revolutionary pedagogy and should supplant other resources. Indeed, experiencing closure in comics as conscientization is anything but automatic, straightforward, or predetermined; I am simply suggesting it could be possible. Even in the most heavy-handed of comics, the text and images are still guides that must be interpreted actively by the reader, and each comic book is open to a variety of different readings based on individual experience, context, and prior knowledge. In this way, it could be argued that the effectiveness of comics is limited due to their incomplete and highly subjective nature. However, it seems that politically progressive comics, at the very least, have the potential to promote alternative knowledge and encourage the kind of active learning and critical political engagement that Freire argues must be at the very core of radical pedagogy.

### **"Long Live the Warrior!" *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book***

*THE 500 YEARS OF RESISTANCE Comic Book* is written and illustrated by Gord Hill and was published in 2010 by Arsenal Pulp Press. For many years Hill, an Indigenous Kwakwaka'wakw activist living in British Columbia, self-published anti-colonial comics under his own press, *Warrior Publications*.<sup>42</sup> Hill's underground comics were passed around and sold at demonstrations and in radical book stores in Vancouver. He has recently collected his comics and presented them as a standalone piece, including an introduction by activist Ward Churchill, with the aim of reaching a broader audience with his political message of radical resistance and decolonization. Hill's goal is to use comics to highlight Indigenous peoples' sustained resistance to colonialism in the Americas, primarily focusing on their use of direct action tactics. He looks at examples of resistance from early Inca and Aztec opposition and the killing of General Custer at the Battle of Little Big Horn, to more recent events including the Oka Standoff and the Zapatista uprising. For Hill, it is important to understand such historical struggles because they point to alternatives

41. See Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith, *The Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2009), 316.

42. I thank Elise Chenier for bringing Hill's comics to my attention and kindly sharing her collection.

to complacency and can help inspire new tactics and strategies necessary for contemporary resistance movements. Indeed, the very purpose of Hill's comic book is to "raise levels of historical understanding [about resistance and the] warrior spirit among Indigenous peoples and others."<sup>43</sup> *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book* is already in its second printing, and Hill has been able to connect to a wider audience, selling over 5,000 copies.

*The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book* offers readers a decolonizing sense of closure that fits with Freire's concept of conscientization. Hill gives readers the opportunity to confront two prevailing myths about colonialism in the Americas: first, that colonial expansion – especially in Canada – was a relatively peaceful process, and second, that it is now complete, implying the absence of contemporary Indigenous resistance movements.<sup>44</sup> He argues that the dominant narrative of colonial history in the Americas minimizes the story of Indigenous resistance, and maintains that "such a strategy has been used to impose capitalist ideology on people, to pacify them, and to portray their struggle as doomed to failure."<sup>45</sup> To counter this fatalistic narrative, *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book* offers an alternative account of the history of colonialism by illustrating the many defeats Indigenous warriors inflicted on invading European forces, and highlights the strength of contemporary Indigenous resistance movements in the Americas. Hill's comic book effectively uses textual and visual information as well as subject-to-subject and scene-to-scene transitions to challenge readers to come to terms with the ongoing legacies of colonialism.

*The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book* begins by debunking the conventional wisdom surrounding the events of the 1492 "discovery" of the Americas. Hill illustrates how the navigationally challenged Christopher Columbus and his crew sought to conquer, Christianize, and enslave the Taínos to create the first European colony in the Americas, La Navidad. Hill does not depict the founding of the colony as a simple exercise of Europeans exerting their supposed superior will over passive Indigenous peoples. Instead, in Figure 3 the reader is introduced to the cruelty of colonial expansion through the use of text, powerful images, and subject-to-subject transitions. In the top right panel, Hill explains that Columbus' goal was to "find gold, establish settlements, and 'Christianize' the natives...."<sup>46</sup> The ellipses direct the reader's gaze toward the subjects in the panel below, accompanied by a caption suggesting

43. Hill, *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book*, 6.

44. For more on damaging colonial myths and the roles they play in the political imagination of what is today Canada, see Alfred Taiaiake, *Wasáse: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2005); Paulette Ragan, *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010).

45. Hill, *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book*, 5.

46. Hill, *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book*, 29.



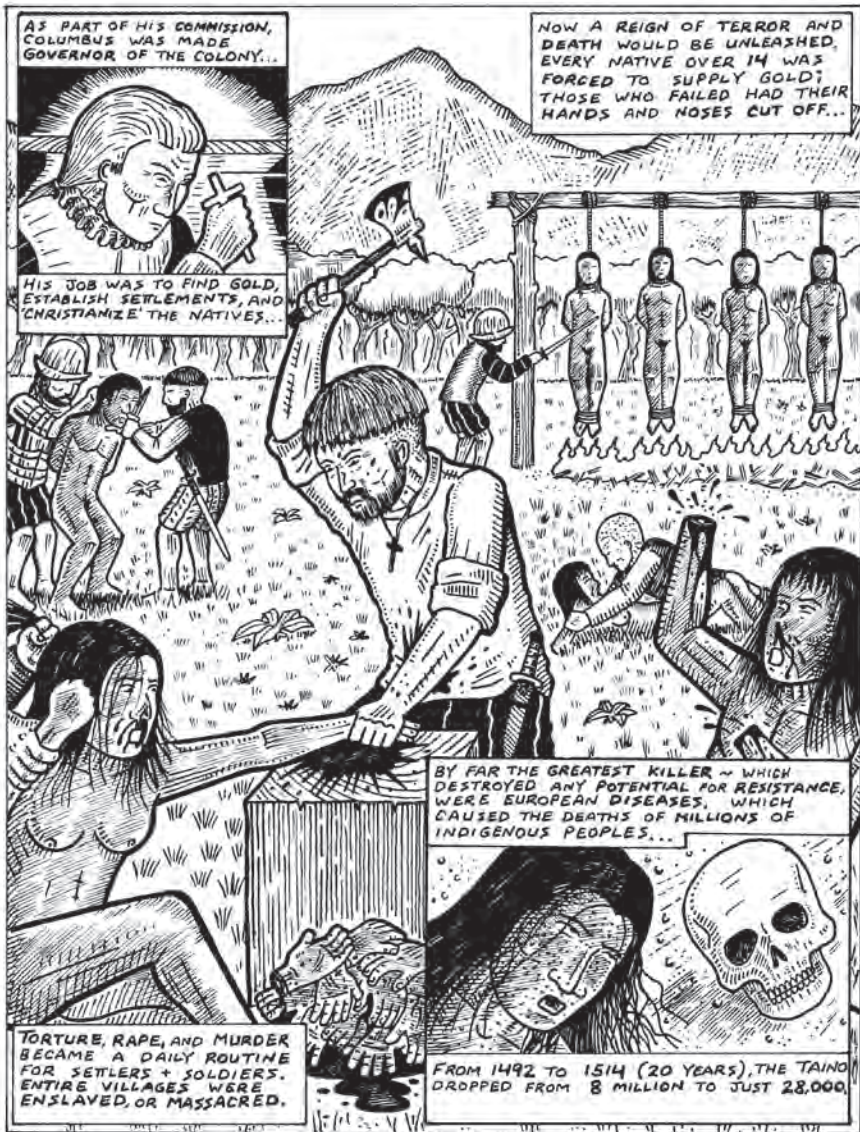


Figure 3. *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book*, 29.  
With permission.

a “reign of terror” was unleashed by the Spanish when the Taínos resisted European invasion. Using the captions as a guide, the reader must connect the visual information in the different panels across the gutters to understand the grisly results of colonization, which include the Spanish capture, rape, torture, and mass hangings of Indigenous peoples. Hill uses an extremely graphic

visual style. The blood and gore of his interpretation of colonization in the Americas is intended to shock the reader with the gruesome realization that colonialism was not carried out in a benevolent spirit of “discovery” as is commonly taught in schools, but was rather an unjust process defined by European brutality and exploitation.<sup>47</sup>

After the opening sequence, Hill shows how the colonization of other areas in the Americas – including Canada – was similarly bloody and vicious. He describes notable events such as Pontiac’s War and the War of 1885, as well as more obscure episodes of resistance. In Figure 4, from the section “War on the Coast,” he shows that the coming of Europeans to the Pacific Northwest Coast to trade with Indigenous groups for sea otter pelts often led to violence. Hill illustrates a number of occasions where Indigenous warriors defended their homes and interests by attacking and defeating invading British, Russian, and US forces. In order to achieve closure on this page, the reader must read across the gutters and piece together the text and different actions of the subjects visually depicted. In the second panel, Hill shows Indigenous warriors being repelled by British gunfire; however, the following two panels document subsequent instances where Indigenous warriors were more successful. The bottom panels visually display different Indigenous subjects in forceful positions attacking colonizers and, with subject-to-subject transitions, suggest a progression to victory the reader is supposed to positively identify with. In this sequence, Hill’s text and visuals ask the reader not only to confront the reality that colonialism in Canada was violent but also to begin constructing an alternative narrative of events from the perspective of Indigenous peoples.<sup>48</sup> His work vividly illustrates the fact that colonial encounters in Canada were often bloody affairs.

While much of Hill’s comic book portrays Indigenous peoples’ historical struggles, he also makes clear that colonialism, and violent resistance to it, continues today. Hill concludes his work by showcasing the strength of contemporary resistance movements across the Americas. In Figure 5, he presents four horizontal panels connected by scene-to-scene transitions. When read together across the gutters, the text, visuals, and transitions convey change over time as well as continuity to link past and present Indigenous resistance actions, and they ask readers to consider their own relationship to anti-colonial struggles. The first panel describes the strength of Indigenous resistance in South America, citing the active struggles in Ecuador, Bolivia, Chile, and Venezuela. The reader’s attention is then shifted to two different

47. On the “myth of benevolence” in Canada, see Paulette Regan, “Constructing Canada’s Peacemaker Myth,” in *Unsettling the Settler Within*, 83–110. For the US example, see James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: New Press, 1995). For Freire’s thoughts on colonialism, resistance, and the commemoration of Columbus’s arrival in the Americas, see “The Discovery of America,” in *Pedagogy of Indignation* (Bolder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2004), 53–56.

48. Hill, *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book*, 53–54.



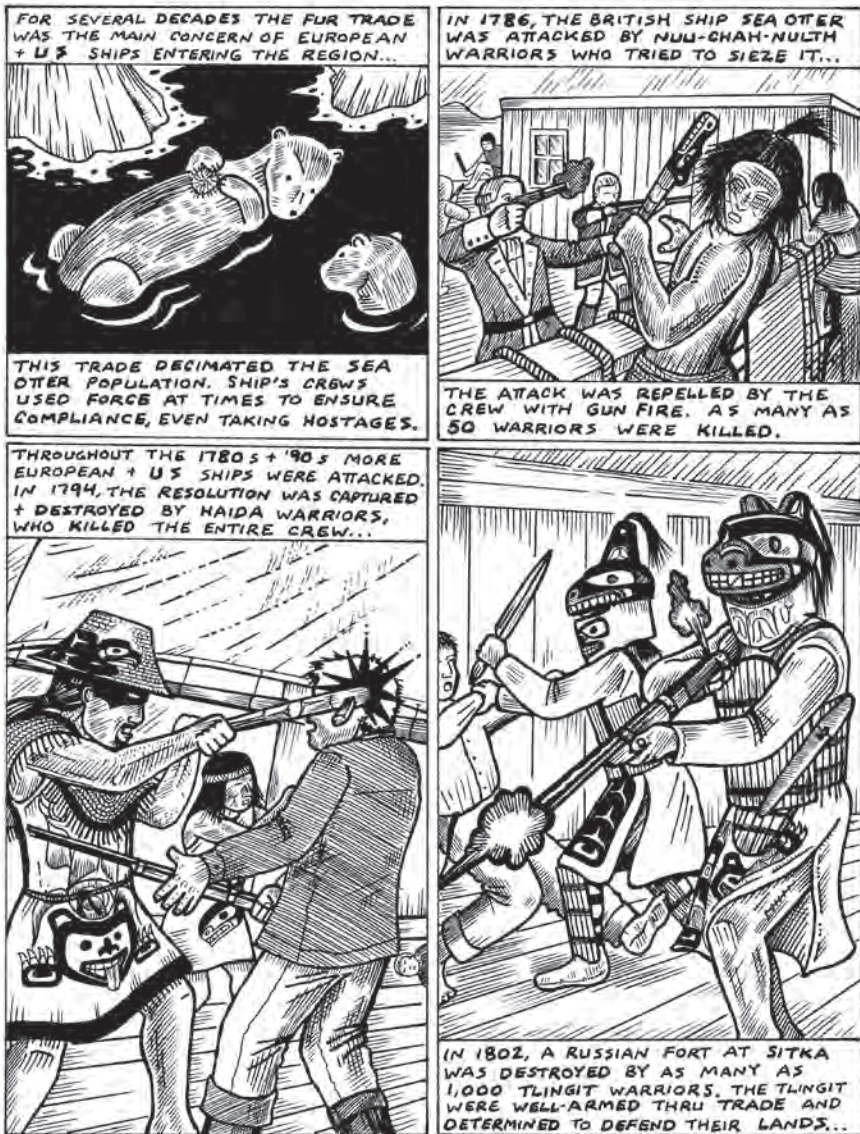


Figure 4. *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book*, 53.  
With permission.

panels highlighting recent actions in Canada by the Mi'kmaq in 2000 and the New Caledonia blockade by Six Nations members in 2006, respectively. These two panels serve to link seemingly isolated "Canadian" events to the strong Indigenous movements for liberation throughout the Americas today.



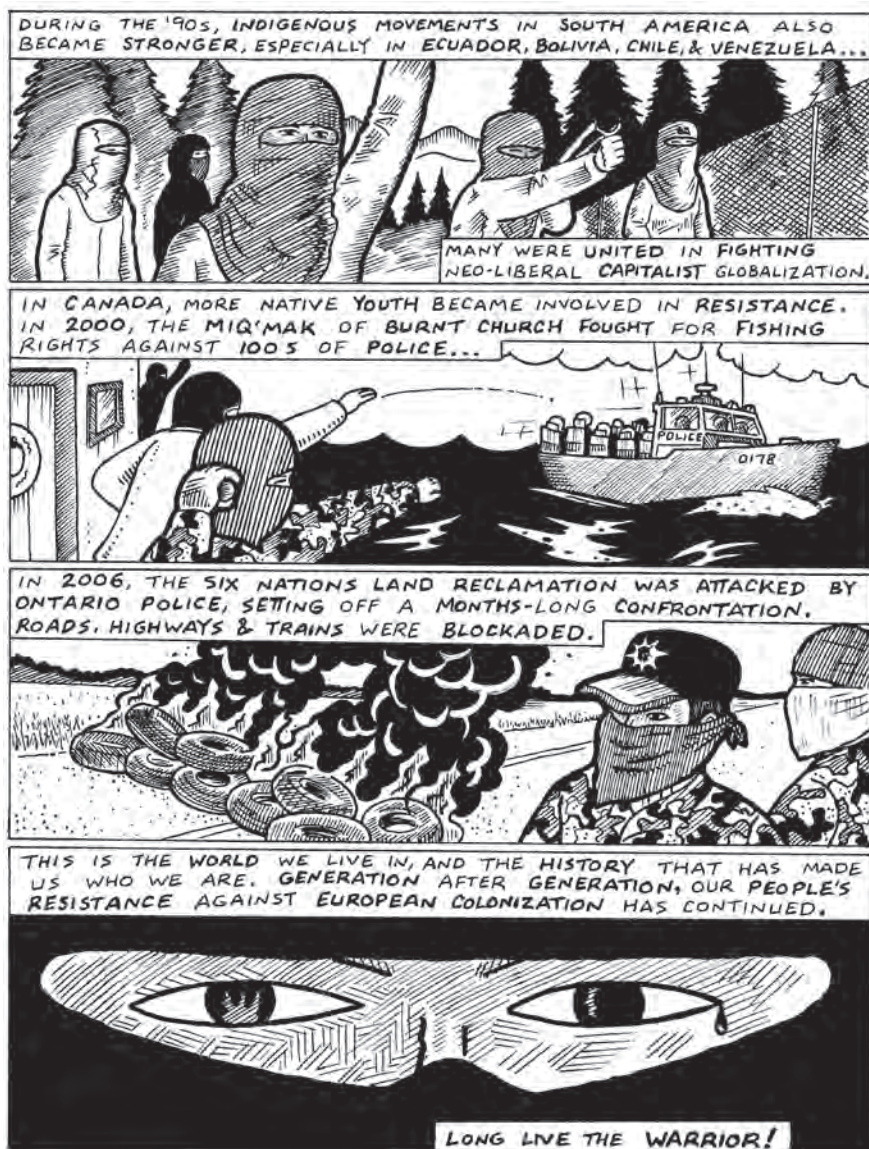


Figure 5. *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book*, 87.  
With permission.

The final panel brings Hill's ideas together. First, the reader is guided to read the caption at the top of the panel claiming, "this is the world we live in, and the history that has made us who we are. Generation after generation, our people's resistance against European colonization has continued." He uses this

sentence to suggest an intergenerational continuity between the different episodes of struggle and resistance displayed earlier on the page and throughout the comic book generally. The reader is directed to then examine the image of the masked figure depicted with a tear in one eye and a flame in the other, possibly representing the pain of 500 years of oppression and the burning desire for future liberation. After considering the caption and the image together, the reader is led to Hill's concluding remark, "Long live the warrior!"<sup>49</sup> Overall, this page effectively uses text, visuals, and scene-to-scene transitions to move the reader toward a conclusion suggesting that colonialism across the Americas is a violent process that will continue to be defined by sustained resistance by Indigenous peoples. Hill's work is a passionate plea for people to understand Indigenous peoples' long history of violent resistance to colonialism and to use it to infuse present and future struggles with activist energy.

Hill's use of text, visuals, and transitions throughout *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book* challenges readers, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to critically reflect on their roles in perpetuating colonial stereotypes that protect colonial and capitalist relations of privilege, and thus can potentially create a space for the reader to experience closure as conscientization. By engaging with and piecing together the textual and visual messages in Hill's comic book, readers are given the opportunity to debunk popular myths about colonialism, and to see themselves as part of the ongoing story of colonialism. Armed with new knowledge, the reader is pushed to reflect on how they might radically transform their actions in society. Hill's account shatters prevailing myths about Canada's peaceful history of colonialism, and the inherent pacification and docility of Indigenous peoples that rationalize inaction. *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book* thus encourages a potential shift in consciousness from colonized common sense to a decolonized form of good, practical sense that motivates the reader to think and act differently in the world.

### **Shift in Consciousness: Shift in Progress: A Not-So-Comic-Book**

*SHIFT IN PROGRESS: A NOT-SO-COMIC BOOK* is a collection of five comics, independently published in 2008 by the Edmonton Branch of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). After receiving funding from a 2007 "Voices Less Heard" Cultural Capital of Canada grant, IWW members J.D. Gysbers and M. von Gaza set out to create a comic book about the different issues facing young workers in Alberta. The aim of the project is to create a popular resource outlining a variety of strategies for change that young workers can use in their jobs. Gysbers and von Gaza conducted several interviews with youth about their work experiences. In addition, two IWW members were interviewed about their own experiences on the job and how they agitated and organized around certain problems to mitigate the consequences of precarious labour.

49. Hill, *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book*, 87.

The interview transcripts were passed along to artists, who used the material to create their stories.

The intention of *Shift in Progress* is to inspire young workers to use their voices to speak out and to take action on the job as a way to make change in their communities. Collectively, the stories of *Shift in Progress* address a variety of problems identified by young workers in their interviews. These include sexism, racism, ageism, irregular hours and scheduling, the pressure to work multiple jobs, low pay, lack of benefits, unpaid overtime, health and safety risks and injuries, increased supervision, and a lack of autonomy on the job. The fundamental task of *Shift in Progress* is to combat the normalization of such abuses that suggest to young workers that the conditions of precarious employment are simply to be expected and even unquestioningly accepted.<sup>50</sup> The goal is to “empower young people to tell their stories, to create a common story that speaks directly to the community through an art form that is current and relevant to them, and to enable the community to make its voices heard in a broader context.”<sup>51</sup> In Freireian terms, *Shift in Progress* encourages young workers to break the “culture of silence” surrounding their oppression.<sup>52</sup>

To help the reader establish closure in each story, the creators use a variety of textual and visual cues as well as comics transitions to link the information between panels. Many of the stories rely, like *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book*, on subject-to-subject and scene-to-scene transitions, but they also deploy “action-to-action” and “aspect-to-aspect” transitions to give readers different ways of connecting to the characters and their struggles at work. All of these transitions are used strategically at different parts in the comic book to help readers construct, interpret, and reflect on the real problems and experiences facing the characters to establish closure. *Shift in Progress*, then, is not only meant to entertain, it is a powerful organizing tool with the potential to cultivate critical consciousness.

Samantha Pike’s “The Illusion of Time” tells the story of a young woman named Eva who is an aspiring artist living in Edmonton with her supportive

50. For academic work on this subject see Leah Vosko, *Temporary Work: The Gendered Rise of a Precarious Employment Relationship* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); Dale Clark and Rosemary Warskett, “Labour Fragmentation and New Forms of Organizing and Bargaining in the Service Sector,” in Norene Pupo and Mark Thomas, eds., *Interrogating the New Economy: Restructuring Work in the 21st Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 235–255; Jan Kainer, *Cashing in on Pay Equity: Supermarket Restructuring and Gender Equity* (Toronto: Sumach Press, 2002); Ester Reiter, “Fast Food in Canada: Working Conditions, Labour Law, and Unionization,” in Tony Royle and Brian Towers, eds., *Labour Relations in the Fast-Food Industry* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 30–47; Rosemary Warskett, “Remaking the Canadian Labour Movement: Transformed Work and Transformed Labour Strategies,” in Vivian Shalla and Wallace Clement, eds., *Work in Tumultuous Times: Critical Perspectives* (Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007), 382–400.

51. Loudon et al., *Shift in Progress*, 2.

52. See Freire, “Chapter 1,” *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 27–74.



Figure 6. *Shift In Progress: A Not-So-Comic Book*, 15.  
With permission.

but concerned boyfriend, Ethan. She works at a local independent art supplies store and devotes her life to her work. Eva's commitment to her job finds her neglecting her family, friends, boyfriend, passion for art, and even her own health. She understands Ethan's frustration with her demanding work schedule, but feels that she has no other choice but to accept the situation: "No coffee



breaks ... lots of extra hours ... no requesting days off.... I know I don't get the respect I deserve, but I'm a high school dropout. It's not as easy as Ethan makes it out to be, to demand things from your boss...."<sup>53</sup> Eva is not yet confident in her ability to use her voice to improve her working conditions.

In the concluding sequence, Eva decides that she no longer wants to work unpaid overtime while neglecting her relationships and missing scheduled doctor's appointments. Unfortunately, her realization appears to come too late: she gets a nosebleed at work and has to go to the hospital. The reader is presented with a concluding page (Figure 6) that uses text, visuals, and subject-to-subject and action-to-action transitions to connect the reader to Eva's sense of fear as she waits for the doctor in panels one through three, "...is it too late to try again? To make each day count? To stand up for myself, for my life?" Pike uses the second panel, interspersing Eva's thoughts, to guide the reader to the idea – symbolically written on the wall –that the time for Eva to act and take back control of her life is now. Before this realization sets in, the readers' gaze is shifted by an action-to-action transition between panel three and four to the doctor who abruptly informs Eva she has cancer. However, the final three panels allow the reader to recognize that Eva has just been dreaming, and she is awoken by an alarm clock which reminds her that it really is "TIME TO WAKE UP."<sup>54</sup> This last sequence eloquently uses text, visuals, and subject-to-subject transitions to walk readers through Eva's dilemma and, ultimately, connects them to the moral of Eva's story: that it is important for young workers to use their voices to speak up against abuse at work before it is too late.

L.A.A. Barlott-Cardenas' "A Black Sheep Tale" concludes *Shift in Progress* with a story about Chan, an anarchist T-shirt-wearing teen living paycheck-to-paycheck by working in Alberta's garment industry. Specifically, "A Black Sheep Tale" deals with the notorious practice of wage theft in minimum-wage jobs. Chan shares Eva's sense of economic compulsion when he claims, "I don't have money for rent or food, my paycheck is late – if I don't get paid today, I'm screwed!" Later that same day, when Chan shows up for work, his boss Mr. Fowler reprimands him, saying, "You'll get paid when you come dressed for the job! I should have known better than to hire street trash...."<sup>55</sup> Chan is taken under the wing of Mary, an Indigenous woman and seasoned veteran of class struggle, who convinces him to grow into his anarchist T-shirt: "I'll tell you what we all should do! Fight back – against the poor working conditions, lack of overtime, low wages.... We need all the workers to be on our united front – our power is in numbers! Fowler honestly thinks he can treat us like we're inhuman.... This is class war! We strike – tomorrow."<sup>56</sup> As the final story of

53. Loudon et al., *Shift in Progress*, 6.

54. Loudon et al., *Shift in Progress*, 15.

55. Loudon et al., *Shift in Progress*, 66.

56. Loudon et al., *Shift in Progress*, 69.

*Shift in Progress*, Mary's advice to Chan sums up the overall goal of the comic book: "Fellow worker – it is up to you to reclaim your life and become what you are meant to be."<sup>57</sup>

The last page of the story (Figure 7) uses text, visuals, and aspect-to-aspect, action-to-action, and scene-to-scene transitions to build a sense of solidarity. It establishes that Chan, like the reader, is not alone in struggling for justice at work. In the first panel, Barlott-Cardenas uses aspect-to-aspect transitions to depict a diverse range of workers in terms of age, gender, and race standing at the front of a picket line with Chan. The reader must engage with different visual aspects of the panel, including the workers' appearances and the slogans written on picket signs, as well as the subtle presence of a black cat – an established anarcho-syndicalist symbol for direct action – in the upper left corner of the first panel, to understand that Chan's fellow workers have joined him on strike. This realization is confirmed by the two middle panels that use an action-to-action transition to suggest that Chan is warmly greeted by his co-worker and mentor, Mary. The accompanying word bubbles further confirm this as Mary tells him, "I am honoured to stand beside you." In the end, the reader is guided by text and visuals to an empowering closure with a scene-to-scene transition that carries over the emotional feeling of solidarity generated in the previous panels and stories with a dramatic depiction of Chan and Mary standing shoulder to shoulder on the picket line with their fellow workers chanting, "The People United, Will Never be Defeated!"<sup>58</sup>

Each story in *Shift in Progress* presents a different form of workplace abuse or harassment experienced and tolerated by young workers in low-paying jobs in Alberta. The stories are told using different writing and artistic styles and forms of transitions so that readers can achieve closure by actively constructing, and thus feeling connected to the methods of resistance the characters use to combat their workplace oppression. By basing each story on the experiences of young workers in Alberta, *Shift in Progress* is an excellent example of how comics might be used to promote Freire's view of conscientization and activist education generally. For Freire, radical pedagogy starts with peoples' everyday problems, and conscientization offers them the opportunity to grapple with these conflicts through critical reflection aimed at generating alternative awareness and action. The idea behind *Shift in Progress* is to create characters and stories of workplace abuse that young workers will relate to and, through piecing together the ways characters resolve their problems with collective action, can be similarly inspired to speak up at work. Like *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book*, *Shift in Progress* illustrates the potential of comics for conscientization, and can encourage activists and academics to think about how such popular resources might be used to inspire people to change the world.

57. Loudon et al., *Shift in Progress*, 69.

58. Loudon et al., *Shift in Progress*, 72.





Figure 7. *Shift in Progress: A Not-So-Comic Book, 72.*  
With permission.

## Changing the World with Comics

PAULO FREIRE'S WORK FIRMLY ESTABLISHES that humans are both the products and potential changers of their lived circumstances. In the conclusion to *A People's History of American Empire*, Zinn distills this revolutionary realization in a popular comic book that similarly draws attention to people's power to change the world. In language reminiscent of Freire's *The Pedagogy of Hope*, Zinn declares, "my hope is that [in reading this comic book] you will not be too discouraged by the way the world looks at this moment.... It's easy to be discouraged [but] to be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness.... If we remember those times and places ... this gives us the energy to act. Hope is the energy for change."<sup>59</sup> With *A People's History of American Empire*, Zinn engages with the comics medium to reach a new generation, to connect them to the long history of resistance to US imperialism, and to encourage them, as Freire would advocate, to play an active role in continuing the fight for love, justice, and liberation. Thus, popular comics with politically progressive messages like *A People's History of American Empire*, and others like *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book* and *Shift in Progress* make clear that people are active Subjects of this world with the power to change it for the better.

As new generations grow up accustomed to encountering comics in libraries and classrooms, teaching, critiquing, and even producing comics can be another way for academics to help keep activist learning relevant and exciting. Academics can work with comics as tools for cultivating critical consciousness. Comics are certainly not perfect pedagogic resources, but they have liberatory potential. In following Zinn's example, scholars can use comics to encourage people's critical engagement with the past and present in ways that empower them to struggle for a better future.

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59. Zinn, *A Peoples History of American Empire*, 263. See Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1994).