

Picturing the Pre-Confederation Canadian Past: Graphic History as a Critical Approach to
Canadian History through Naomi Moyer's *Chloe Cooley and Slavery in Canada*

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Naomi Moyer's *Chloe Cooley and Slavery in Canada* utilizes a graphic format to present Cooley's defiance against her sale as a slave across the US border. The poster frames her action as a catalyst for the abolition of slavery in Upper Canada, while simultaneously highlighting her everyday acts of resistance. The image of Cooley frames her story through contrasting colours and visual metaphors, inviting various interpretations, and allowing for critical thought and deeper connections between viewers and the content. By giving a face to Cooley, Moyer brings life to a lesser-known historical figure, challenging the "great man" narrative of history, and bridging the gap between "regular people" of the past and present. Further, the combined use of image and text engages multiliteracies, facilitating comprehension of the material for those who struggle with solely textual works, thereby widening the audience for historical work. Cooley's poster as an artifact of graphic history effectively presents people's history by centering a marginalized figure through a format that is accessible to those who do not actively interact with historical articles. This is done through historically accurate and comprehensible language compounded with the interpretable visualization of Cooley, allowing for personal evaluations of the work grounded in historical truths.

Moyer's imaginative depiction of Cooley forms an ambiguity that requires critical evaluation by viewers. Education historian Alyson E. King argues in "Cartooning History: Canada's Stories in Graphic Novels," that "the graphic elements of a story structure the narrative and, at the same time, tell the story in substantive ways."¹ Yet, this shaping of the narrative is not always overt and can allude to various meanings. Within Moyer's poster, this is exemplified by how Cooley's figure, shaded in black and white, is juxtaposed with the vibrant blue, orange, and

¹ Alyson E King, "Cartooning History: Canada's Stories in Graphic Novels." *The History Teacher* 45, no. 2 (2012), 201.

yellow brushstrokes of the background. As there is no clearly defined intention behind this contrast, the viewer must analyze and interpret this themselves. This simultaneously encourages conscious processing and influences one's immediate perception of the information displayed. Further, the incorporation of symbolic elements, such as the three arms outstretching from Cooley's body, lends to a deeper analysis of Cooley's history by asking the viewer to consider why that choice was made. As exemplified in our seminar discussions, there are a multitude of unique meaningful analyses one can draw from this. It is this personal analysis, which informs how Cooley, and her act of resistance, is framed within the viewer's mind. The use of art in this medium invites people to critically engage with historical work by assigning meaning to visuals.

The use of graphics can place one into unfamiliar contexts and facilitate a deeper understanding of history with little representation. Within Moyer's poster, Cooley's narrative is centered. She is the only figure present on the page, there is no depiction of her captor or any witnesses present. By exclusively focusing on Cooley, viewers are incentivized to view the event through her lens; it is her visual expression that sets the tone. There are few personal details known of Cooley, so a visual representation of her can provide a unique insight into her perspective when there are no personal accounts to rely on. Much of the information known about Cooley is framed through knowledge of her captor.² In the visual, Cooley is stripped of her tie to him, effectively decentering the culturally dominant view of the wealthy white male from the poster. It can be difficult to imagine oneself in a context such as Cooley's, and that is exactly why it is crucial to do so. As King notes, "[Sam] Wineburg claims it is more important to be shocked by strangeness of the past: studying history should 'teach us what we cannot see, to

² Afua Cooper, "Acts of Resistance: Black Men and Women Engage Slavery in Upper Canada, 1793-1803." *Ontario History* 99, no. 1 (2007), 16.

acquaint us with the congenital blurriness of our vision.”³ The graphic puts marginalized figures on a platform in a way that confronts viewers and asks them to grapple with the history displayed.

It is not only the visual that is key to the effectiveness of the graphic form, but its combination with the text that determines its success as an accessible format. Graphic mediums can break down the same information as academic articles in a shorter form; relaying the immediate facts and letting the graphics provide comprehensive details. Within Afua Cooper’s article “Acts of Resistance: Black Men and Women Engage Slavery in Upper Canada, 1793-1803,” Cooley’s history is explored alongside the wider context of slavery and resistance in Upper Canada, delving into the specifics of how her case was used to dismantle slavery. Both mediums insightfully convey important histories with a focus on different audiences. For instance, within Cooper’s article Cooley’s resistance is described in detail, “she screamed-a heart-rending scream that echoed beyond the boundaries of Vrooman's farm, and summoned Martin and Grisley to witness. [...] we can only imagine Cooley screaming, crying, cursing, and straining her limbs against the rope with which her master tied her.”⁴ In comparison, Moyer describes the same incident in briefer terms, “Chloe Cooley’s resistance to re enslavement in the States was so fierce that her captor needed the assistance of two men to get her in a boat to cross the Niagara River.”⁵ The information in both passages is equally accurate, but the article

³ Alyson E. King, “Cartooning History: Canada’s Stories in Graphic Novels.” *The History Teacher* 45, no. 2 (2012), 211.

⁴ Afua Cooper, "Acts of Resistance: Black Men and Women Engage Slavery in Upper Canada, 1793-1803." *Ontario History* 99, no. 1 (2007), 17.

⁵ Naomi Moyer, “Chloe Cooley’s Resistance to Enslavement, 1793.” *Graphic History Collective*, (n.d.), 1.

processes the emotional component in words while the poster utilizes images to do so. This stripping down of language makes the poster more accessible to those who struggle reading long passages and provides them with an alternative way of processing history. Overall, the use of art in this medium invites people who do not interact with lengthy academic articles to critically engage with historical work.

The combination of the straightforward text with complex visualization engages multiliteracies and leads to enhanced processing of the materials. It presents viewers with a different way of thinking about history, especially those who do not connect with traditional methods of historical education, such as textbooks. King argues that “reading or writing a graphic text, a text that relies more heavily on images with minimal print text, entails new forms of semiotic processing of the combinations of the visual, audio, textual, gestural, and spatial.”⁶ Taking the emphasis off text broadens the scope through which history is seen. King further states that “Learning through semiotic domains, however, focuses attention on academic content as “a lived and historically changing set of distinctive social practices.”⁷ Not only does this apply to students in a classroom, but to everyone who views the poster, no matter their age. By offering history in a new form, viewers understand that history is connected to them and the world that they inhabit and is not limited to an academic sphere. Instead, the physical nature of the events is highlighted, which can help a viewer place themselves in a historical context in a

⁶ Alyson E. King, “Cartooning History: Canada’s Stories in Graphic Novels.” *The History Teacher* 45, no. 2 (2012), 211.

⁷ Alyson E. King, “Cartooning History: Canada’s Stories in Graphic Novels.” *The History Teacher* 45, no. 2 (2012), 213.

way that is different from solely textual mediums.⁸ This alternative way of processing history enhances the connection between the viewer and the presented history.

Overall, the representation of a historically marginalized figure in a format that connects with a wide variety of people creates an effectual people's history. King claims that, "Graphic histories, because they are usually spare portrayals of events and people, may be less intimidating for students because they appear less academic and because they accentuate only some aspects of the historical events or characters."⁹ This argument extends beyond the context of students in classrooms. It also applies to those who are intimidated by longer texts, lack the privilege of spare time to read the texts, and those who do not have access to academic texts. In the case of Moyer's poster, the history being portrayed is one of a marginalized figure, who is not widely known within the context of Canadian history. This confronts the narrative of Canadian history wherein most well-known figures are "great men" or men in positions of power. By bridging the gap between "regular people" of the past and present, it confronts continual systems of oppression and examines the foundations of our current social, economic, and political structures.

Moyer's poster exemplifies how graphic history can enrich historical understanding for a wider audience. The incorporation of images presents a unique way to portray the history of marginalized people, especially those with no personal accounts. The viewer is brought into Cooley's context and must examine the situation through her lens. The images allow for condensed text, which makes the work more approachable for a variety of viewers. Further, the

⁸ Alyson E. King, "Cartooning History: Canada's Stories in Graphic Novels." *The History Teacher* 45, no. 2 (2012), 212.

⁹ King, "Cartooning History: Canada's Stories in Graphic Novels," 212.

use of ambiguous symbolic elements in the image encourages critical analysis and engagement with history, which forges a stronger connection between the viewer and material. As such, it allows viewers to unlearn the notion history is relegated to the past and question how it relates to the present day. Graphic history is an important form of historical communication; it does not need to be in opposition with more traditional forms but should be appreciated as a method that provides alternative ways of processing, analyzing, and connecting with history. By confronting the past, the viewer has a more comprehensive understanding of their present, and how their actions can shape the future.