

Exploring Slave Resistance Through Graphic History

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In recent years, graphic history has become a popular tool for teaching Canadian history and exploring its relationship with the history of the present. Compared to scholarly writings, artists have the freedom to present historical characters in new ways, unearthing truths that have traditionally gone unacknowledged. In his work on representations of John A. Macdonald, for example, Matthew Barrett suggests that the visual nature of graphic history can “make evident that which written history can often obscure.”¹ Artistic depictions express what documentation cannot, providing an original perspective on the past while inviting reflection for the future. Although graphic history struggles as a stand-alone learning tool, its lack of explicit meaning invites learners to dig deeper into historical events. This paper argues for the potential of graphic history as a tool for exploring marginalized stories. More specifically, it will look at Naomi Moyer’s depiction of Chloe Cooley, an enslaved woman whose violent abduction was used to garner support for emancipation in Canada.² Analysing Moyer’s graphic history poster in relation to Afua Cooper’s article, “Acts of Resistance”, reveals the potential of graphic history as a story-telling medium.³ Without connections between art and its historical significance, graphic history cannot be expected to form a cohesive narrative about the history of the present.

¹ Matthew Barrett, “De-picturing John A. Macdonald: Opportunities and Challenges of Representing Canada’s Past with Graphic History,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 103, no. 1 (2022): 42.

² Naomi Moyer and Funké Aladejebi, *Chloe Cooley*, Graphic History Collective,

<https://graphichistorycollective.com/project/poster-2-chloe-cooley>

³ Afua Cooper, “Acts of Resistance,” *Ontario History* 99, no. 1 (2007).



Figure 1: *Chloe Cooley* graphic history poster by Naomi Moyer and Funké Aladejebi.

Moyer's poster is a visual representation of Cooper's exploration of resistance efforts in Upper Canada before the implementation of emancipation laws. Cooper argues that enslaved people were "active agents in their own emancipation," an idea illustrated by Moyer's decision to feature Chloe Cooley, a woman who actively fought against her captors, as the focal point of her poster (see Figure 1).⁴ As stated by Cooper, "resistance could be subtle and fleeting" occurring in forms as simple as "a scream," which is evident in the way

⁴ Cooper, 5.

Cooley is artistically depicted.⁵ Her open mouth is a direct reference to the report given by Peter Martin following the Cooley case, stating that she “screamed violently” during her kidnapping.⁶ This connection between historical evidence and graphics is crucial as viewers “must be able to read and critique images from an informed position,” writes Matthew Barrett.⁷ The image of Cooley with unbound hands also draws attention to the resistance of physical labour, such as the “breaking of tools, destruction of livestock” and “work stoppage,” all of which are completed by one’s own hands.⁸ To enhance this understanding of graphic history, “text gives graphic historians opportunities not only to explain their arguments but also to guide viewers about where and how to direct their focus.”⁹ In regards to Chloe Cooley, the text featured at the bottom of Moyer’s poster works to connect Cooper’s documented instances of resistance with those specifically exhibited by Cooley, a real person whom viewers can associate such actions with. According to Moyer’s poster, “she regularly protested her subjection by utilizing other’s property, resisting servitude, and leaving work without permission.”¹⁰ This information can be verified by the examples in Cooper’s piece. However, textual evidence is a balance; it must be “revealing enough to cultivate readers’ informed interpretations but not revealing everything so as to close off opportunities for discovery and debate,” Barrett suggests.¹¹ The gaps present in Moyer’s telling of Cooley’s story leave room for viewers to apply evidence from Cooper’s article to develop an “informed imagination.”¹² Highlighting the importance of interplay between graphic history and academic documentation, Cooper’s detailed accounts of the experience of enslaved peoples in pre-confederation Canada provide the knowledge required to develop a proper understanding of the narrative choices made by Moyer in her poster of Chloe Cooley.

⁵ Cooper, 6.

⁶ Cooper, 9.

⁷ Barrett, “De-picturing John A. Macdonald,” 40.

⁸ Cooper, “Acts of Resistance,” 6.

⁹ Barrett, “De-picturing John A. Macdonald,” 40.

¹⁰ Naomi Moyer and Funké Aladejebi, *Chloe Cooley*.

¹¹ Barrett, “De-picturing John A. Macdonald,” 40.

¹² Barrett, 41.

Cooper's comparison of Cooley's violent removal from Upper Canada to that of enslaved peoples from Africa connects it to the greater legacy of enslavement. This is depicted in Moyer's poster. For creators of graphic history, merging "fragments of description and image to visually assemble a picture is ...[also] a process of informed imagination."¹³ Literally defined as "property that was bought, sold, and traded," enslaved people were merely pawns in a greater economic scheme in place within pre-confederation Canada.¹⁴ From a colonial perspective, they were reduced to "chattel," a depreciative term which is challenged by the symbols present in Moyer's poster.¹⁵ Cooper argues that "it was a status imposed upon them by their owners and white society as a whole. It was a status they rejected," an idea confronted by the depiction of Cooley as an empowered woman rather than a victimized girl.¹⁶ The illustration of waving hands contributes to this statement, creating an image of Cooley physically swatting away those who tried to restrain her, and acting for those who could not. Depicting Cooley in black and white rather than colour also makes a claim for justice, in which Moyer is prompting viewers to reflect on race and see the humanity of those enslaved. As stated by Barrett, when translating historical evidence into art, "interpretation and representation depends on how the source is visualized."¹⁷ Although her story is one of tragedy, Moyer presents Cooley as a leader, symbolizing her role in the larger fight to end enslavement in Canada. This interplay of graphic and academic history sparks debate, encouraging viewers to derive meaning from what has traditionally gone unsaid.

Analyzing the aftermath of the Cooley case as documented in Cooper's article, Moyer's poster breaks away from people's history of slavery, creating an image of empowerment rather than desolation. Evaluating the importance of combining graphic history

¹³ Barrett, 41.

¹⁴ Cooper, "Acts of Resistance," 7.

¹⁵ Cooper, 7.

¹⁶ Cooper, 7.

¹⁷ Barrett, "De-picturing John A. Macdonald," 41.

and scholarly documentation, Barrett argues that “a visual approach can offer new perspectives on the topic [being analyzed].”¹⁸ As there were no photographic records at the time of her removal from Canada, Moyer takes the creative liberty of depicting an African woman who represents not only Cooley, but the idea of resistance to enslavement as a whole. As explained by Cooper, the violent resistance displayed by Chloe Cooley played a crucial role in the mobilization of emancipation laws within the Canadian government. Moyer’s poster states that “her defiance was the catalyst in garnering legislative change and contributed to anti-slavery movements in Upper Canada,...[setting] the stage for the Underground Railroad.”¹⁹ Cooper expands on the significance of the Underground Railroad in her article, drawing attention to “the creation of Upper Canada as a haven for foreign slaves.”²⁰ Moyer mirrors this statement in her poster, utilizing the symbolism of a rising sun to represent a new dawn, or a new life, for African people who earned their emancipation on Canadian soil. From an informed perspective, the image of Cooley appears to be singing her triumph, as well as the triumph of those who would be free as a result of the courage displayed by those who resisted the institution of enslavement. Such freedom will eventually give way to the reclamation of cultural symbols, such as the headwrap and traditional face paint she wears in Moyer's artwork. Chloe Cooley represents the generations of African Canadians who came after her, drawing connections between past and present to generate hope for the future.

The convergence of graphic history and academic evidence allows for a deeper understanding of the history of the present. Moyer’s visual depictions of the resistance documented in Cooper’s article assist viewers in their development of an “informed imagination,” providing them with the tools required to evaluate graphic history from a

¹⁸ Barrett, 34.

¹⁹ Naomi Moyer and Funké Aladejebi, *Chloe Cooley*.

²⁰ Cooper, “Acts of Resistance,” 15.

position of knowledge.²¹ Merging textual evidence and artistic interpretation allows for the exploration of the legacy of enslavement in Upper Canada, creating opportunities for debate about what historically goes unsaid. Breaking away from people's history of enslavement, Cooper and Moyer work together to express the ways in which the outcome of the Cooley case shaped emancipation legislation in pre-confederation Canada, proving that the combination of graphic history and corresponding academic sources are crucial for the development of a fully formed historical consciousness. Graphic history unapologetically embraces layers of perspective to invite reflection from modern society. In relation to present day issues, Moyer's poster is an effective tool in educating the public on current matters regarding the oppression of African Canadians, and to historicize the Black Lives Matter movement. Her ability to merge the historical significance of Chloe Cooley with recognizable cultural symbols creates an informed historical narrative that is extremely successful in proving, as Foucault states, that "even the most downtrodden and marginalized person has some modicum of power."²²

²¹ Barrett, "De-picturing John A. Macdonald," 41.

²² Cooper, "Acts of Resistance," 8.

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