

Unlocking Graphic History:
A New Way of Expanding Historical Education – Chloe Cooley and the Resistance of Slavery in
Upper Canada, 1793

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A captivating journey through history requires more than just words on a page; it calls for an immersive experience that goes beyond traditional academic articles. This is where graphic history shines, providing a distinct advantage over written academic articles as a mode of historical learning. It encourages viewers to establish a more profound connection with graphic depictions, such as posters, as the immersive experience promotes in-depth learning and understanding of historical subjects by encouraging personal interpretation and critical thinking based on visual representations. This approach accommodates individuals struggling with comprehending complex, written material, making history more accessible and approachable. With the visual element in graphic history in mind, it becomes a potent tool for fostering a more inclusive historical discourse, effectively humanizing silenced figures by giving them a tangible identity through visual illustrations. This not only reclaims their significance in history but also contributes to the diversification of historical narratives that had, until now, marginalized their presence. Furthermore, the concise and visually appealing format not only simplifies intricate historical concepts but sparks people's interest, encouraging them to seek out scholarly articles to enhance their historical knowledge. Though useful for introducing readers to historical events, graphic history is most effective when it is used in tandem with academic articles. The combination of both formats enhances the overall grasp of historical topics, offering a more informative and well-rounded perspective than either format alone. As a result, graphic history emerges as a valuable tool that enables a more inclusive and convenient approach to broader historical education.

As noted by Alyson E. King, traditional historical education depended mainly on written academic books, emphasizing hard facts, linear timelines, and a neutral perspective, frequently overlooking a deeper understanding of history. However, the emergence of graphic history

challenges this conventional approach. The visually appealing approach simplifies complex historical issues, making them more accessible and inviting viewers to interact with the graphic narrative for greater critical analysis and personal interpretation. King's exploration of graphic history strongly reinforces this idea. She points out, “the multimodal nature of graphic narratives can help learners develop embodied understandings of the events and stories depicted.”¹ She does, however, recognize that engaging with graphic history requires interpretation from the viewer to comprehend the images. This characteristic contributes to the model’s appeal, as King notes that graphic history “may be less intimidating for students because they appear less academic.”²

In this case, Naomi Moyer's graphic history poster of Chloe Cooley, an enslaved Black woman sold off by her owner, William Vrooman,³ demonstrates how artistic mediums may deliver an immersive experience of in-depth historical learning without the need for words. The poster of Chloe Cooley, symbolic of her resistance to her captors by fighting back, illustrates how graphic history may reclaim forgotten historical heroes by giving a visual identity to individuals like Chloe who have been marginalized in history, despite their incredible efforts. King affirms graphic history's ability to amplify diverse perspectives in Canadian history that may have been dismissed in academic papers. She argues, “these graphic texts challenge the traditional stories of Canadian history—those that focus on straightforward narratives of progress, modernization, and nation-building. They bring to light the stories of those who are often relegated to the margins of Canadian history.”⁴ Graphic history plays a key role in

¹ Alyson E. King, “Cartooning History: Canada's Stories in Graphic Novels,” *The History Teacher* 45, no. 2 (February 2012), 190.

² King, “Cartooning,” 212.

³ Naomi M. Moyer and Funké Aladejebi, “Poster #2: Chloe Cooley,” Graphic History Collective, July 1, 2020, <https://graphichistorycollective.com/project/poster-2-chloe-cooley>.

⁴ King, “Cartooning,” 201.

elevating the voices of historically significant figures, such as Chloe Cooley, who have been undervalued and, at times, disregarded in traditional historical instruction.

The extensive history of oppressed minorities whose names have been systematically erased or downplayed throughout history arises from the deliberate overlooking of social issues existing during specific periods, such as slavery and colonialism in Chloe's time. Nonetheless, the poster achieves the purpose of educating people about suppressed histories by casting light on significant moments in both Black history and women's rights in Canada. Unlike academic publications, the poster applies artistic interpretation to visually convey historical events, such as the use of watercolours to symbolize Chloe's trek over the Niagara River. Through abstract and critical thinking, this approach enables viewers to reflect on the significance of artistic judgments and their historical relevance. Graphic history undeniably boosts appreciation and knowledge of historical events, transforming people such as Chloe Cooley from mere names in textbooks into fully realized individuals, clearly attesting to the transformative power of this medium as a learning tool.

In line with the argument, graphic history serves as a powerful catalyst for sparking curiosity and motivating deeper historical research through the examination of relevant academic journals, such as Afua Cooper's "Acts of Resistance: Black Men and Women Engage Slavery in Upper Canada 1793-1803." Posters, like Chloe Cooley's, serve as an effective gateway to understanding specific historical events, ideas, topics, and issues. Graphic history operates as an essential introductory tool for historical information, harnessing visual engagement, and stimulating viewers to actively expand their knowledge through academic journals related to the poster's theme. Nevertheless, it is essential to recognize the uncertainty inherent in the format of graphic history. The simplified portrayal of historical events may lead to generalization or foster

an overconfidence bias, wherein individuals believe they comprehend the “full story” from just a portion of the information presented in graphic narratives. This assumption, if unquestioned, has the potential to impede individuals from seeking more in-depth knowledge. For instance, Cooper’s article delves into how Chloe Cooley’s enslavement and forced sale to an American slave master played a pivotal role in the emergence of the Underground Railroad. She maintains, “this paper looks at how Upper Canadian slaves, in their condition of subalternity, protested and resisted their enslavement in diverse ways. It also challenges the temporary/permanent binary of acts of resistance and shows that, as in the case of Upper Canadian slave Chloe Cooley, her sole act of courage led to a collective and permanent protest movement called the Underground Railroad, in which tens of thousands of enslaved people resisted bondage by running away from it.”⁵ When comparing the poster visuals to the specific details in Cooper’s article detailing Chloe’s history, impact, and significance, there are seemingly no visual indicators connecting crucial events like the Underground Railroad to Chloe. This disparity highlights the varied interpretations and representations of the same historical events. Cooper’s article underscores the necessity of looking beyond the surface of graphic history. To derive true value from graphic history, viewers must recognize that the visual narrative presents a simplified version of a historical subject and may take creative liberties in conveying information. Those who choose to solely engage with the poster, neglecting the article, may overlook crucial details pertaining to Chloe’s profound impact on Canadian history. The only way to gain complete historical literacy is to embrace the additional step of delving into academic articles, as they offer specific details and facts that enhance the depth of understanding in the context of the graphic history poster to establish a true comprehension of the historical topic.

⁵ Afua Cooper, "Acts of Resistance: Black Men and Women Engage Slavery in Upper Canada 1793-1803," *Ontario History* 99, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 8-9.

While some may argue that graphic history might overlook key details due to the limitations of the visual format, it is essential to recognize that the purpose of graphic history is not to replace written texts but to offer a supplementary tool that enhances the learning of history. This viewpoint is articulated by King, who emphasizes that graphic history complements written materials and gives an easier means to grasp difficult historical themes than simply reading academic publications. She reasons, “although both authors construct their narratives to appeal to an everyday audience rather than highly educated academics, the multimodal nature of these graphic histories adds another layer to the text that requires additional interpretation, as well as new strategies for analysis.”⁶ Furthermore, graphic history is most effective when combined with pre-existing historical knowledge because “students can purposefully think and reflect on their cultural models of Canadian history by juxtaposing them to new models about the semiotic domain of Canadian historical memory. One way to do so is to use images, in graphic narratives and other mediums such as film.”⁷ It can be said that graphic history aids students in retaining information as the context becomes more apparent when presented through both images and text.⁸ Using examples from this paper, applying Cooper’s piece on Cooley, and examining Moyer’s poster allows for a more exhaustive, critical, and nuanced evaluation of historical concepts. Thus, while graphic history enhances accessibility and engagement, it should be integrated with traditional academic sources to provide a more balanced approach to historical education and knowledge.

In conclusion, graphic history presents a compelling, accessible avenue for examining historical events, encouraging in-depth learning through subjective interpretation. As evidenced

⁶ King, “Cartooning,” 201.

⁷ King, “Cartooning,” 213.

⁸ King, “Cartooning,” 214.

by King's scholarly work, the format's engrossing nature renders it less intimidating than traditional, complex written texts, facilitating practical comprehension of the topic. Visual narratives, such as Naomi Moyer's portrayal of Chloe Cooley, enhance diverse perspectives and highlight the importance of individuals who are often neglected in history. However, the model's simplicity and informality allow it to communicate a limited amount of knowledge, motivating viewers to turn to academic journals, such as Afua Cooper's piece describing Cooley's great impact on Canadian history, to improve their historical literacy. Ultimately, graphic history possesses the potential to revolutionize the teaching, absorption, and acquisition of history, emerging as a potent medium for effective historical education.