Drawn to Change: Comics and Critical Consciousness

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One of the last projects that activist and academic Howard Zinn completed before his death in 2010 was a comic book.\(^1\) 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*.\(^2\) The comic book is narrated by Zinn, and it depicts him at a teach-in during the height of the Iraq


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. 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. *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. 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.” 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.” This transformational pedagogy inspires learners to see themselves as empowered “Subjects” of history,


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. 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.

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 Louden, Samantha Pike, L.A.A. Barlott-Cardenas, Lydia Butts, Rob Butts, and Kyla Johnson’s *Shift-in-Progress: A Not-So-Comic Book*. 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.

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.


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*.13

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.14


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. 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. 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.

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.


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).

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. 19 Even Karl Marx's *Capital* has recently inspired a comic book adaptation. 20 Like Zinn's *A People's History of American Empire*, these comics highlight alternative

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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.21 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.22 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.23 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.”24 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.25


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.


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.” 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. 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*. 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*. With support from the cclh and the Social Sciences and Humanities


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.


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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.”

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.

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...
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.” 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.”

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. 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.” 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.” 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

33. Wolk, *Reading Comics*, 130.
35. Wolk, *Reading Comics*, 130.
what is known as “closure.”37 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.”38 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.”39 According to him, “comics is closure.”40

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.
40. McCloud, Understanding Comics, 67.
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.41 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.42 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


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.”

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. 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.” 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…” The ellipses direct the reader’s gaze toward the subjects in the panel below, accompanied by a caption suggesting


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).


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.  

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.  

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


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.
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!” 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.

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.50 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.”51 In Freireian terms, *Shift in Progress* encourages young workers to break the “culture of silence” surrounding their oppression.52

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

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

52. See Freire, “Chapter 1,” *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 27–74.
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…. 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.” 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 paycheque-to-paycheque 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 paycheque 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….” 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.” As the final story of

53. Louden et al., Shift in Progress, 6.
54. Louden et al., Shift in Progress, 15.
55. Louden et al., Shift in Progress, 66.
56. Louden 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.”

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!”

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. Louden et al., *Shift in Progress*, 69.

58. Louden 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.” 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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