

Resistance Comix Narrative, Activism, and History

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REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

Resistance Comix: Narrative, Activism, and History

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Norah Bowman and Meg Braem, art by Dominique Hui, *Amplify: Graphic Narratives of Feminist Resistance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019)

Graphic History Collective with Althea Balmes, Gord Hill, Orion Keresztesi, and David Lester, *Direct Action Gets the Goods: A Graphic History of the Strike in Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2019)

Graphic History Collective and David Lester, *1919: A Graphic History of the Winnipeg General Strike* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2019)

Jamie Michaels and Doug Fedrau, *Christie Pits* (Winnipeg: Dirty Water Comics, 2019)

GRAPHIC HISTORY HAS EMERGED as an increasingly popular form of public history in recent years, particularly among historians interested in examining social issues through a medium that is accessible and engaging to more general reading audiences. Graphic histories focused on labour history and social justice issues more generally comprise a particularly strong core among these works.¹ The four recent graphic histories under review here show some

1. Examples focused on labour history include, among others, Paul Buhle & Nicole Schulman, eds., *Wobblies! A Graphic History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (London: Verso Books, 2005); Harvey Pekar, *Studs Terkel's Working: A Graphic Adaptation*, ed. Paul Buhle (New York: The New Press, 2009); Michael Demson, *Mask of Anarchy: The Story of a Radical Poem, from Percy Shelley to the Triangle Factory Fire* (London: Verso Books, 2013). Labour-focused graphic history has been particularly strong in Canada and includes Laura Ellyn, *Ginger Goodwin: A Worker's Friend* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016); Rob Kristofferson & Simon Orpana, *SHOWDOWN! Making Modern Unions* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2017); and a number of impressive works from the Graphic History Collective including *May Day: A Graphic History*

of the wide diversity of ways that authors of graphic histories can approach and frame their subject matter into narratives that engage broader audiences while also giving voice to the communities they represent. As activist works, they demonstrate ways in which the past can be used to inform and provide inspiration and strategic thinking for struggles in the present day. Importantly, they do this through comic art's unique ability to build a critical consciousness in its reader through the act of closure: the positioning of the reader as an active participant in the construction of the narrative by necessitating that they complete gaps and thereby co-create meaning, in the gutters between frames and elsewhere. But these graphic works demonstrate too how the intentional – and in some cases increasingly creative – use of primary historical sources can heighten such acts of closure.

Feminist scholar Norah Bowman, playwright Meg Braem, and artist Dominique Hui present a series of vignettes of both collective and individual feminist resistance in *Amplify: Graphic Narratives of Feminist Resistance*. Bowman worked with Braem to develop historical narratives into a script that Hui then put into graphic form. With a stated ambition of appealing to a diverse readership, Bowman's introduction devotes time and care to explaining some key feminist concepts to readers of the volume, including intersectionality, white supremacy, heteronormativity, capitalism, feminist resistance, direct action, radical inclusion, and transnational feminism. It focuses the volume on grassroots organizing led by those experiencing oppression and lacking institutional supports, an approach that Bowman hopes will inspire readers "to feed your community conversations about feminism."² A second hope is to provide inspirational stories that illustrate the centrality of relationship building as a key feminist practice in building resistance. Bowman also explains how the stories profiled in the volume focus on feminist direct action, while also usefully critiquing the jaded detractors of those tactics who fault them for falling short of their stated goals rather than appreciating their still vital

(Toronto: Between the Lines, 2012) and *Drawn to Change: Graphic Histories of Working Class Struggle* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016). Graphic histories focused on broader social justice issues are many and varied and include, for example, Art Spiegelman, *Maus* (New York: Pantheon, 1991); Kate Evans, *Threads: From the Refugee Crisis* (London: Verso Books, 2017); Joe Sacco, *Palestine* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1994); Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis* (New York: Pantheon, 2003); Ho Che Anderson, *King: A Comics Biography of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2005); David Wong, *Escape to Gold Mountain: A Graphic History of the Chinese in North America* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2012); Gord Hill, *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2010); Howard Zinn, Mike Konopacki & Paul Buhle, *A People's History of the American Empire: A Graphic Adaptation* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008). For a more extensive listing of graphic history works related to these themes, see Rob Kristofferson & Simon Orpana, "Shaping Graphic History: Primary Sources and Closure in *SHOWDOWN! Making Modern Unions*," *Labour/Le Travail* 82 (Fall 2018): 192–194.

2. Norah Bowman & Meg Braem, art by Dominique Hui, *Amplify: Graphic Narratives of Feminist Resistance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 5.

capacity-building functions. The introduction covers considerable conceptual ground, though in language perhaps more familiar to the academic, thereby limiting its accessibility.

The core of the book comprises seven chapters that profile notable acts of feminist resistance. While four of these chapters focus on individuals – Leymah Gbowee, Laxmi Narayan Tripahi, Kathleen Cleaver, and Harisa Walia – the authors succeed in contextualizing each as an adjunct to the collective activism of which they were a part, rather than as merely “hero stories.” The other three chapters focus directly on collective feminist resistance – Pussy Riot, Idle No More, and Rote Zora – with the hope that each will “inform and inspire our readers to look for similar collectives in their own communities.”³ While it includes Canadian examples (Idle No More, Walia, and, to a degree, Tripathi), the book also extends its geographic sweep to include resistance activities in the Russian Federation (Pussy Riot), Liberia and Ghana (Gbowee), India (Tripathi), the United States (Cleaver), and Germany (Rote Zora). Each chapter begins with a graphic narrative sequence ranging from 10 to 21 pages, followed by a short essay providing further context, a short series of discussion questions, a list of research questions and activities, and a list of suggestions for further reading.

In *Christie Pits*, writer Jamie Michaels and illustrator Doug Fedrau retell the story around the 1933 Toronto riot. That summer, against the backdrop of Hitler’s rise to power in Germany, tensions between Toronto’s Jewish and Anglo Protestant communities began to rise, partly as a result of young working-class Jewish youth trying to cool off by swimming at the largely Anglo Protestant Beaches neighbourhood. This conflict came to a boil on the evening of 16 August when young Nazi Pit gang members unfurled a Swastika-emblazoned blanket at a baseball game that included a team of Jewish and Italian players in Christie Pits. A six-hour riot ensued as Jews from the surrounding community (backed by Italians) entered the fray against large numbers of Anglos. Involving up to 10,000 citizens at its height, the riot exposed the deep racist attitudes toward Jews and other non-Anglo immigrants in Depression-era Toronto. In his introduction to the book, Irving Abella identifies the incident as “the worst racist riot in Canadian history.”⁴

Michaels and Fedrau build their narrative around real events reassembled from historical sources, but they use fictionalized characters to pull the reader into the personal experience of racism and fascism in 1930s Toronto. The story is centred on the family, friends, and community surrounding Yiddel and Areyeh, two Jewish boys recently arrived in Canada from Germany with their Aunt Rochelle and Uncle Fieval, themselves deeply traumatized survivors of the Ukraine pogroms and now fleeing the brewing terror in Berlin. The brothers themselves have different ways of solving problems. Areyeh, a boxer,

3. Bowman, Braem & Hui, *Amplify*, 10.

4. Jamie Michaels & Doug Fedrau, *Christie Pits* (Winnipeg: Dirty Water Comics, 2019), 5.

is more apt to use his fists while the more bookish Yiddel tries to talk it out. The boys' friend Tev, a local University of Toronto student, does both, speaking against anti-Semitism on campus but throwing punches when the need arises. Sofia, a local Italian labour organizer, soon becomes romantically involved with Tev and, in the process, helps cement an alliance between Tev, Areyeh, Yiddel, and other Jewish baseball players and local Italian players. Thus is formed the centre of resistance to Protestant gangs on the night of the riot.

Further sequences venture into the white Protestant world of the Pit gang members to show how Nazism as a larger social force subsumed the doubts that some young Anglo men had about its appeal. Yiddel's attempts to avoid violence also continue. He recites the words of Rabbi Hillel – "What is hateful unto you, don't do unto your neighbour" – in one pivotal scene where he helps three Nazi youth escape a tricky situation. While Areyeh, Tev, and some others appreciate Yiddel's sentiments, when the swastika is raised at that fateful baseball game, Areyeh decides on a different course of action: "You are my brother and I love you, but I'm going to get that Goddamned flag." And as a riot ensues, a fist-throwing Areyeh adds, "We'd rather die out here. On the streets. With our boots on."

The riots themselves take up only a short portion of the book. Instead, the authors focus more on the four months leading up to that event, acquainting readers with how Yiddel, Areyeh, the Rabinowitz family, and fictionalized folks in their social world have formed a tight-knit working-class community in the areas of the city adjacent to the Spadina garment district, where many of them found work. The authors also make use of these characters to imagine the local effect that such international events as rising Nazi persecution in Germany or the Baer/Schmeling fight had on the Toronto Jewish experience. They also use the characters to explore some more local Depression-era happenings such as communist and antifascist rallies and the union organizing of Toronto garment workers. The storyline intersects with such local politicians as a frustrated Sam Farber, MP for Toronto Centre West. The boys and their friends have some unfortunate encounters with local Swastika Club members, which soon turns into a turf war. The wrapping of the fictionalized narrative around these real-world events works compellingly to build empathy and unify the whole into a captivating story. Peppered with headlines and articles from local and international news, the authors skilfully use their central characters to lay the conflictual groundwork of both the spread of Nazi terror in Europe and the simmering fear that surrounded local Jewish populations in Bennett-era Toronto.

The ambition of *Direct Action Gets the Goods*, produced by the Graphic History Collective (GHC) with Althea Balmes, Gord Hill, Orion Keresztesi, and David Lester, is to help re-enliven workers' movements by reminding readers of the power of the strike in Canada's past. The book itself takes the form of a chronological collection of historically notable strikes in graphic form. The central narrative is held together throughout by the unifying presence

and narrative assistance of the arch-backed, bushy-tailed, hissing black “Sabo-Cat,” itself a central motif of the direct action tactics of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) likely created by Ralph Chaplin in the early twentieth century.

Sabo-Cat leads readers into an introduction that uses art by Kara Sievewright to establish the theory of the strike in capitalist society through an iconography that ties past and present work struggles and contradictions into one long continuum of experience. The chapters that follow highlight some of the more well-known strikes and direct-action events in Canadian history. Artist Gord Hill frames Chapter 1 around 19th-century labour struggles in Canada including the strikes of Irish canal builders, the Nine-Hour Movement (and the Trade Unions Act), and the Knights of Labor. The chapter details unsafe working conditions at 19th-century workplaces as well as the willingness of the state to support employers through the use of militias and police to brutally suppress strikes. One illustration is drawn from Valleyfield, Quebec, where the militia was brought in to disperse protesting construction and cotton mill workers in 1900. The rise of the capitalist labour relation is framed as a function of the colonial land dispossession of Indigenous peoples. A sequence on the BC fishing industry shows not only how the racist attitudes of white fisherman against their Japanese and Indigenous counterparts created lines of division in a developing working class, but also how these marginalized groups pushed back against the emerging system in their own right, as in the case of Indigenous fishers and cannery workers in British Columbia in the 1890s.

David Lester provides the art for Chapter 2, which focuses on the first 40 years of the 20th century. The chapter profiles a number of strikes and direct actions including the Winnipeg General Strike and its associated cross-country actions in 1919, the Cape Breton miners’ strike a few years later, and the Relief Camp Workers’ Union and the On to Ottawa Trek in the context of the Great Depression. Also woven into this narrative are themes of anti-Asian racism, the organizing of Black workers in the Order of Sleeping Car Porters, and the rise of feminized employment and activism among Winnipeg telephone operators and Calgary waitresses. The grim side of working-class activism is profiled in sequences on the killing of Albert (“Ginger”) Goodwin, the execution of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, and the death of miner William Davis.

Chapter 3 focuses on the period from the 1940s to the 1970s. Through Orion Keresztesi’s art the chapter documents the support that the 1945 strike at Ford in Windsor gained from workers across the country, the 1949 struggles of Quebec Asbestos workers, the wave of wildcats that swept across some Canadian workplaces in the 1960s, the Quebec Common Front, and the 1976 Day of Protest in Ottawa. The chapter also considers how the surge of strikes and workplace actions had by 1944 led to the creation of a collective bargaining regime largely constructed to contain labour militancy.

Increasing attacks by employers and the state on workers' right to strike since 1970 situate the struggles depicted by artist Althea Balmes in Chapter 4. The chapter also profiles some of the key moments of worker resistance within this increasingly repressive context, including the 1979 strike of the Farm Workers Organizing Committee in Clearbrook, British Columbia, the 1981 struggle by the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) for paid maternity benefits, Operation Solidarity, the Newfoundland public-sector workers 1986 defence of their right to strike, and the Ontario Days of Action. The chapter culminates with the contemporary struggles of the 2012 wildcat strike by Air Canada baggage handlers and ground staff at Toronto's Pearson airport, the 2014 strike of Indigenous court workers in British Columbia, and the 2014 strike of Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) members in Nunavut, ending with the strike by non-unionized fast-food workers at a Toronto poutinerie in 2017.

Sabo-Cat leads readers through a short conclusion that argues for the strike as a powerful tool and for its effective extension beyond the immediate workplace as a means of addressing larger social issues and effecting broader political change. This is followed by a fourteen-page illustrated timeline based on research done for an article prepared by Mark Leier for the Hospital Employees' Union entitled "The Strike as Political Protest." If the authors of this volume intended to remind people in today's more generally strike-averse world that the strike was a tactic used extensively, successfully, and by a wide array of people in Canada's past, they have been successful in their mission.

Produced by the GHC with artist David Lester in time for its 100th anniversary, *1919: A Graphic History of the Winnipeg General Strike* provides a lavishly illustrated and wide-ranging look at one the foundational events in Canadian labour history. In the preface the collective sets out its intention to use this volume to provide today's activists with a variety of important historical lessons from the workers' revolt to inspire their contemporary fights for radical social change. A short introduction by James Naylor provides the reader with a quick overview of the strike and its aftermath, setting those events in the larger and longer-running context of wider labour militancy and progressive political developments.

The 93-page core narrative, illustrated by Lester, is one of the most unified and visually arresting graphic narratives yet produced in the rapidly expanding field of graphic history generally. It starts with important contextual elements: a map, dramatis personae, a reproduction of a *Western Labor News* special strike edition. Further context is provided by considering the rise of Winnipeg as part of a larger capitalist colonial project with roots in Indigenous land dispossession, from the Red River Resistance to the creation of the Winnipeg Board of Trade on the eve of World War I. The participation of working-class Winnipeggers and other Canadians in that "senseless, imperialist war" – both on the battlefield and on a home front marked by hyperinflation and high

unemployment – further sets the stage.⁵ After fighting for democracy overseas, Winnipeg workers felt a growing disdain for war profiteers back home, bolstered by inspirational examples of international workers’ organizing from the Russian Revolution to the Seattle General Strike. The potential of workers’ power was also forged closer to home through events like the Vancouver General Strike of 1918 following the murder of Ginger Goodwin. The building of labour unrest in Winnipeg before the general strike is also noted.

The general strike itself is presented in two sequences, each with a distinctive temporal metering. The first segment chronicles the events following from the declaration of the strike on May 15 until just before the fateful Bloody Saturday of June 21. The wide base of solidarity that undergirded the 35,000 strikers is shown to have comprised building and metal tradesworkers and other Trades and Labor Council affiliates, “hello girls,” non-union workers, workers newly arrived from eastern Europe, and other groups. A. J. Andrews and the Citizens’ Committee of 1,000 are portrayed discrediting union leaders as Bolsheviks and actively recruiting scab labour. Ottawa’s efforts to end the strike are thwarted as worker solidarity continues in the form of mass public gatherings, Labour Church services, and social events, all helped along by the inspiring personalities of such key strike supporters as Edith Hancox, Helen Armstrong, John Arthur Robinson, J. S. Woodsworth, and a host of others. More than twice as many pages are devoted to the events of Bloody Saturday itself as the first section on the strike. Finally, the denouement is used to reflect upon the longer-lasting effects of the strike on labour militancy and labour politics and to draw connections to modern struggles for social justice.

One of the first difficult choices that authors face at the outset of a graphic history project is the adoption of a narrative format. The works under review exemplify the diverse forms these choices can take. The authors of *Amplify* opted to intersperse text and graphics by including a text-based introduction followed by a series of chapters in which short graphic sequences are followed by short contextual essays, discussion questions, research questions and activities, and suggestions for further reading. The other three works are almost wholly graphic but have notable differences in format. Michaels and Fedrau chose to employ fictionalized characters as an empathetic lever to draw readers into the historical events depicted in *Christie Pits*. In contrast, the authors of *Direct Action* use the Sabo-Cat as a unifier for a narrative that considers a large number of historical events over a considerable amount of time, while the narrative of *1919* is focused tightly on a single historical event.

Format also plays a role in a central challenge facing many creators of radical graphic histories: trying to find ways to reconcile the provision of a compelling graphic narrative while at the same time attaching it to broader

5. Graphic History Collective (GHC) & David Lester, *1919: A Graphic History of the Winnipeg General Strike* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2019), 17.

theoretical and/or activist exploration or consciousness-building themes. Bowman, Braem, and Hui chose to do this in *Amplify* by separating out graphic sequences from theoretical discussions contained in text-based sections.⁶ The risk with this approach is that a unified narrative can be compromised amid competing text flows.⁷ One possible way to achieve this reconciliation is to produce each component as a separate product – say, a comic with a separate study guide – each with its own unified text flow. The graphic narration can thus be given more centrality of focus to better position the reader to perform their own acts of closure leading toward conscientization, which could then encourage them toward further activities. This could involve a study guide that is more personalized and advanced than what otherwise might be possible. But as creators of graphic history know all too well, the cost of producing two such products is likely prohibitive. Another solution is to try to “let go” of straight text-based narrative altogether and to embed discussion of theory in the graphic sequence itself.⁸ Kara Sievewright and the GHC provide an excellent example of this possibility. Their three-page introduction to *Direct Action* uses graphics to establish elements of the labour theory of value, the contradictions of the wage relationship, and the theory of the strike in a way that, while admittedly not digging deeply into their complexities, effectively establishes enough of a theoretical base for readers to contextualize the discussion in the remainder of the book.

The authors of the works under review also demonstrate how graphic history that seeks to build bridges between past and present activism can do so in diverse ways. The resistance stories provided in *Amplify* were purposely chosen by the authors in the hope that together they will “inspire a new generation of intersectional feminists.”⁹ The authors explain to readers that the book “serves as a megaphone for feminist voices, calling out with courage and calling you in to the resistance,” with the intention of showing “how women working together to fight oppression and create a better world can have creative, progressive impact” and to inspire readers to “look for similar collectives

6. For another good example of this format, see Chris Hedges & Joe Sacco, *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt* (New York: Nation Books, 2012).

7. For a discussion of the compromising impact of competing text flows, see William Boerman-Cornell, “Using Historical Graphic Novels in High School History Classes: Potential for Contextualization, Sourcing, and Corroborating,” *History Teacher* 48, 2 (February 2015): 209–211.

8. Using graphics to explain theory has been successfully employed in some works. One of the earliest examples of this tradition is Rius, *Marx for Beginners* (New York: Pantheon, 1979). For a more recent example, see Brad Evans & Sean Michael Wilson, illustrated by Carl Thompson, Robert Brown, Mike Medaglia & Chris Mackenzie, *Portraits of Violence: An Illustrated History of Radical Thinking* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2017).

9. Bowman, Braem & Hui, *Amplify*, 5.

in their own communities.¹⁰ Within this general ambition, however, the volume also urges readers toward more specific contemporary activist movements. The chapter on Kathleen Cleaver and the Black Panther Party, for example, is framed around Cleaver recounting parts of her involvement with the Black Panthers while teaching a course on US law and citizenship at Emory University in 2017. In one frame a student asks, “Do you think racial inequality will ever be eliminated?” Cleaver answers, “There’s always a new generation.” The reader’s eye moves to the next frame to find the student now actively typing “#blacklivesmatter” at their computer.¹¹ In more general terms, the authors of this volume carefully position their graphic sequences as resistance vignettes deliberately designed to “pay attention to the relationships built by activists represented in this book. Ultimately, political change occurs through relationships.”¹² Bringing to mind Maya Angelou’s well-known dictum – “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel” – this volume succeeds admirably in this activist intention.

The GHC is also explicit about the activist aims of *Direct Action*. As explained in the opening statement to the book, one goal of this volume is to help reverse the steep decline of workers’ movements over recent decades through the use of activist art. As such, this graphic history positions itself as part of the long accumulating “agitational archive” of art in the service of workers’ movements. It seeks to do this by graphically documenting, and thus restoring to collective memory, the direct-action tactics of the strike and its centrality as a disruptor to capitalist production in Canada’s history in order carry forward “the lessons of past battles from generation to generation to teach workers how to organize, fight and win.”¹³ In a similar vein, the authors of *1919* point to the number of lessons provided by their portrayal of the workers’ revolt “that activists can lean on and learn from today as they fight for radical social change.”¹⁴

Christie Pits is particularly compelling and important for the parallels it draws with our current political environment. As author Michaels puts it, “history never repeats itself. But it often rhymes.” And the events around the riot in 1933 “are depressingly familiar today.”¹⁵ The imagery of the cover itself builds bridges between past and present with its depiction of a young male member of the Swastika Club in 1933 Toronto standing in front of the Canadian Red

10. Bowman, Braem & Hui, *Amplify*, 1, 10.

11. Bowman, Braem & Hui, *Amplify*, 89.

12. Bowman, Braem & Hui, *Amplify*, 159.

13. Graphic History Collective with Althea Balmes, Gord Hill, Orion Keresztesi & David Lester, *Direct Action Gets the Goods: A Graphic History of the Strike in Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2019), vii.

14. GHC & Lester, *1919*, vii.

15. Michaels & Fedrau, *Christie Pits*, 140.

Ensign, a flag that has more recently been resurrected by some far-right and white supremacist groups, perhaps most prominently when it was carried by five members of the Proud Boys when they disrupted an Indigenous protest on Canada Day in 2017.

Anyone involved in leftist or antifascist organizing today will find resonance in a number of situations and conversations that this volume's central characters grapple with. After three Swastika Club members pay a visit to dump garbage in front of the Rabinowitzes' house and are successfully fought off by Sammy and Uncle Fieval, the members of the household hotly debate whether the club's members are actually Nazis. As recent emigrants from Germany themselves, and with multiple family members still blocked by racist Canadian immigration policy from leaving that country to join them, what follows is a particularly fraught conversation, initiated by a distraught Rochelle Rabinowitz, who exclaims, "Those were Nazis. Here in Canada. At our house." Uncle Fieval offers a softer take: "They're boys. They're angry boys. They have nothing to do, no jobs, and it's too hot." Living myself in a community that is currently trying to come to terms with what action to take to respond to the escalating local activities of right-wing "yellow vest" and associated groups, Sammy's response to Fieval feels remarkably consistent with parts of current antifascist discourse: "Right now, they're only an idea. When they kill someone they will be full Nazis. And everyone can pretend they didn't see it coming."¹⁶

Another front on which all the authors are to be commended is the creative use of primary historical sources in the making of their respective graphic histories. As Simon Orpana and I have discussed at length elsewhere, the graphic history medium also opens up ways for historians to creatively use primary evidence to engage the reader in the building of critical consciousness.¹⁷ The use of primary sources in graphic history works to heighten the acts of closure discussed by Sean Carleton and others, thereby increasing their social and political potential.¹⁸ William Boerman-Cornell's study of twenty graphic histories produced between 1985 and 2010 shows that while some authors incorporated some primary source material in the assemblage of their works, its overall use was still infrequent.¹⁹ To varying extents, all the works reviewed here appear to take seriously the potential of primary sources to increase the varieties and intensities of closure available to readers that require them to project themselves in the open spaces of the comic narrative while also encouraging their imagination of creating a better world in the here and now.

16. Michaels & Fedrau, *Christie Pits*, 34–43.

17. Kristofferson & Orpana, "Shaping Graphic History," 189–226.

18. Sean Carleton, "Drawn to Change: Comics and Critical Consciousness," *Labour/Le Travail* 73 (Spring 2014): 151–177. For an excellent discussion of closure in comics form, see Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

19. Boerman-Cornell, "Historical Graphic Novels," 211–224.

The authors of *Amplify* explain in the preface that Hui based her graphic renderings on historical images that Bowman found in “archives and news sources.”²⁰ Particularly affecting are the series of pages portraying the 2003 protest of the African Women in Peacebuilding Network, offered in the volume’s vignette on Leymah Gbowee. Hui begins this sequence with an image of Gbowee standing alone in a field worried that no one will join her in protest. As the sun rises, a few women from the nearby market trickle in to join her. Over the next few pages the reader watches as their ranks swell to a point where thousands of women from diverse backgrounds, all dressed in white, are gathered in the field adjacent to Monrovia’s central road to begin their long, and ultimately successful, protest against the dictator Charles Taylor. Appearing to have been inspired by photos of the scene, these representations powerfully convey the book’s central theme of the role of relationship building in building solidarity. Primary sources other than photographs, however, appear infrequently in this volume. One particularly powerful exception appears in the 2012 trial portion of the Pussy Riot sequence: Nadezhda Tolokonnikova is depicted wearing her iconic “¡No Pasarán!” T-shirt, thus tying together historical struggles for the reader in a way consistent with Tolokonnikova’s original intent and thereby telescoping that politically poignant moment forward to the reader in the present day.

The use of primary sources is also apparent in *Christie Pits*. As Michaels explains in the frontispiece, “although a work of fiction, this story is grounded in the real history of Toronto.” Images and archival material sourced from the City of Toronto Archives, the University of Toronto Archives, the Ontario Jewish Archives, and the *yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* back up the author’s claim that “we draw our universe (literally) from newspaper microfiche, primary source documents, audio testimonials, personal interviews, archival material, and photographs to give readers an authentic feel of the times.”²¹ Most prominent in this regard are newspaper headlines and excerpts from newspaper articles, which are peppered throughout the volume, though historical photos adapted into comic art are also used. The latter effort is backed up on the last page of the volume, where the authors present a number of original photographs next to smaller versions of their graphic adaptations that appear in the body of the work. This juxtaposition of images urges the reader further to situate the graphic backdrop of the whole in actual historic landscapes.

The most intentional use of primary source material is apparent in the two works undertaken by the Graphic History Collective. The body of each work is followed by a “Notes and Bibliography” section in which GHC members explain their reliance on historical source material to inspire their graphics and then provide the reader with page-by-page citations for the sources used. *Direct*

20. Bowman, Braem & Hui, *Amplify*, preface.

21. Michaels & Fedrau, *Christie Pits*, frontispiece.

Action employs an impressive array of sources, including but not limited to IWW pamphlets, the original labour art of Ralph Chaplin, royal commission testimony, illustrations and articles from a variety of newspapers, and materials gleaned from at least eleven archival collections. Similarly, *1919* draws heavily on historical maps, newspaper headlines and article excerpts, and images available in a number of secondary accounts of the strike. In his short but engaging essay in the volume, titled “The Art of Labour History: Notes on Drawing *1919*,” Lester explains how he drew upon a wealth of historical images of the strike in creating the book’s graphic art. Bolstering primary source use further is a seven-page photo essay entitled “The Character of Class Struggle in Winnipeg,” included near the end of the volume. Compiled with the help of historian and curator Sharon Reilly, readers can easily match up certain scenes with which they engaged in the graphic portion of the book with the original photographs upon which they are based. The simplification of the scene available in the graphic form enables greater reader identification with the moment and helps collapse historical distance, thereby eliciting closure.²² However, the opportunity to later compare the stripped-down graphic representation with its original photographic image in this photo essay heightens reader agency by providing further historical tools with which to contemplate the past.

The use of primary source material in combination with artistic expression to enhance closure on the part of the reader is perhaps most startlingly and masterfully achieved in the 38-page section devoted to the events of Bloody Saturday, comprising over a third of the book’s core narrative. As noted above, Lester slows time substantially in his depiction of these events. Here, text becomes much scarcer and the pictures speak for themselves. This section breaks down the day hour by hour – sometimes minute by minute – using a number of artistically augmented crowd scenes based on original photos of the day to maximum effect in creating a sense of the feeling on the streets. Crowds jostling and then successfully upsetting a scab-run streetcar take up two separate full-leaf illustrations. The charge of police into the crowd is documented in a series of illustrations over the next few pages, and as truncheons are raised and pistols drawn, the artwork starts to intentionally morph into the kind of frenzied paint-splattered representations that Lester used earlier in the book to depict the experience of Winnipeg workers fighting in the trenches of Europe. In his essay on drawing the volume, the artist explains the intentionality of these drawings “rendered as if in the panic of fleeing as the sound of the horse’s hooves’ get closer,” with knife dragged across black watercolour-dipped toothbrush bristles flecking the images with “fine mist and blobs” to represent the “splatters of dirt, dust, screams and blood” that comprised the event.²³ The temporal slowing of Lester’s art in the Bloody Saturday sequence creates space for the reader to deeply contemplate this event. This act is further heightened

22. Kristofferson & Orpana, “Shaping Graphic History,” 208.

23. GHC & Lester, *1919*, 96.

by Lester's use of his considerable artistic abilities to amplify the scenes captured in the historical photos from which he draws. The reader is made to feel that they are in the moment. This slowed temporal metering combined with the stripped-down artistic essence of the original scenes needs to be applauded and appreciated as one of the most effective series of frames yet to appear in a working comic to achieve closure through the graceful combination of art and history.

All of the four works under review provide strong examples of how graphic history can be used to contextualize and support contemporary forms of activism, and together they demonstrate a range of ways in which this can be achieved. Aiding them in this endeavour is the unique ability of this medium to engage readers toward Paulo Friere's idea of "conscientization" through the active comics-reading mechanism of closure.²⁴ As Carleton explains, the incomplete nature of comics – requiring readers to "fill in the blanks" both frame-by-frame and otherwise – positions readers as central agents in the meaning-making process, thereby amplifying the development of a critical consciousness.²⁵ As such, the works discussed here also demonstrate how the medium of graphic history can overcome some of the difficulties that leftist organizers experience, as Alan Sears has noted, in trying to engage largely non-academic audiences with collective memory. The successful mobilization of collective memory, Sears points out, is a key ingredient in rooting collective dreams in new infrastructures of dissent.²⁶

24. Paulo Friere, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury, 1970), 19, as cited in Carleton, "Drawn to Change," 153.

25. Carleton, "Drawn to Change."

26. Alan Sears, *The Next New Left: A History of the Future* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2014), 14–18.