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Teaching History Through Comic Books: Opportunities for Public & Visual History

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Abstract: Of the many and diverse ways public history is put to work in the world, visual history is one of largest including museum exhibits, video games, monuments, zines, films, art installations, digital collections, graphic novels, and other popular media. Yet, for all of the diversity and vibrance of public history works, public history pedagogy and practice tends to still be text-based. Building on transdisciplinary approaches from art history, comic studies, and education as well as the author's own experiences teaching, this paper explores new opportunities and approaches for historical education through comic books. Based on specific examples and potentials for graphic history didactics in Canada and United States the article proposes universal takeaways for teaching critical visual inquiry skills through the use of comics and graphic novels throughout public history. As the diversity of public history works grow, so too should our practice and pedagogy.

Keywords: graphic history; public history; historical education; comic books; graphic novels; comics

1 Introduction

Of the many and diverse ways public history is put to work in the world,[1] visual history is one of largest including museum exhibits, video games, monuments, zines, films, art installations, digital collections, graphic novels, and other popular media. Yet, for all of the diversity and vibrance of public history works, public history pedagogy and practice tends to still be text-based. A conspicuous example is the use and analysis of comics and graphic novels for history. Though more graphic texts are appearing on syllabi, the unique visual history aspects of these works still tend to be overlooked. In reviewing dozens of graphic novel reviews by historians, Neil H. Maher found that, with one exception, the artwork was either under or undiscussed in the reviews.[2] Graphic historian Trevor Getz echoes these findings, arguing that historians are "unaccustomed to using visual forms to convey information."[3] What both Maher and Getz spotlight is that as often as a work such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1992) is assigned and taught, rarely is the artwork considered.[4]

This article proposes new opportunities and approaches for the teaching of visual public history through comic books.[5] Building on transdisciplinary approaches from art

1 The National Council on Public History (NCPH)'s statement on the definition of public history reads: "When it comes to defining public history, practicing public historians might be tempted to recall the United States Supreme Court justice who offered this provocative shorthand definition of obscenity and pornography back in 1964: 'I know it when I see it.' For veterans and new professionals in the field, this might be good enough. But for those unfamiliar with the term, a little more elaboration is in order. The name of the NCPH blog – History@Work – offers a handy distillation: public history describes the many and diverse ways in which history is put to work in the world." Accessed November 10, 2024, https://ncph.org/what-is-public-history/about-the-field/.

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2 Neil M. Maher, "Graphic History and the Art of Collaboration," Reviews in American History 48, no. 1 (2020): 112–8.

3 Trevor Getz, "Graphic History Reviews: Introductory Note." The American Historical Review 123, no. 5 (December 2018): 1596.

4 Arguably the best-known graphic novel of all time, Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* is both the biographical story of his parents as Holocaust survivors and the auto-biographical story of himself as the child of Holocaust survivors. See Art Spiegelman, *MetaMaus: A Look Inside a Modern Classic, Maus* (New York: Pantheon/Penguin Random House, 2011); Hillary Chute, *Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017), 33; and Hillary Chute (ed.), *Maus Now: Selected Writing* (New York: Pantheon/Penguin Random House, 2022).

5 This article builds on course work submitted for the completion of PhD Candidacy Exams at Carleton University (Ottawa, Canada) in September 2022, a talk delivered for the International Federation of Public History (IFPH) Explorers in April 2024, a presentation given at the Public History Summer School (University of Wroclaw) in June 2024, and two semesters teaching the public history course, HIST 3909B History Through Comic Books, at Carleton University (Ottawa, Canada) in Fall 2023 and Fall 2024. My thanks to IFPH Explorers organizer, Jimena Perry, and Public History Summer School conveners Joanna Wojdon, Dorota Wiśniewska, and Marta Gałuszka for encouraging this work and offering feedback. I would like to offer thanks to the students of HIST 3909B in Fall 2023 and Fall 2024 as well as my colleagues in Public History at Carleton, Emma Awe (PhD Candidate in Public History) and Sierra Hill (MA Student in Public History) who served as Teaching Assistants and vital co-creators on this course in Fall 2023 and Fall 2024. I would also like to thank my supervisors, James Opp and John Walsh, who encouraged the development of this new course offering at Carleton, and

history, comic studies, and education as well as the author's own experiences teaching, strategies and case studies for teaching critical visual inquiry skills through the use of comics – introducing students to the visual languages and contexts of history – are discussed. Though this study is based on examples from North American classrooms in Canada and the United States, teaching history though comic books is an expanding international approach to pedagogy. This approach not only develops a more nuanced appreciation for graphic texts as historical documents and representations, but also cultivates a transferable framework for graphic analysis that can be applied to other aspects of visual history. As the diversity and breadth of public history works grow, so too should our practice and pedagogy.

2 "When Comics Were Everywhere": Addressing Popular Abundance & Historical Absence

In the 1950s the most popular books read by North American children were comic books.[6] In an interview with Library and Archives Canada (LAC), retired LAC archivist and comics historian John Bell describes growing up in Montreal in the 1950s as an experience in which, "comic books were everywhere."[7] He further relays that, "TV was a pretty important part of our lives, but comics were more important. They were everywhere, they were in the grocery stores, they were in the tobacco shops, the drug stores, and I was forever harassing my father for money to buy more comics."[8] Comics were also a reading mainstay of active military and veterans; 25 % of all titles shipped by the US government to troops stationed abroad during World War II were comics including *Captain America* and *Superman*.[9] Additionally, in the 1940s–50s, as today, comics enjoyed multi-media success including the beloved Superman radio show. Comics were so popular and so pervasive that, pressured by concerned citizens, governments in Canada, the United States, France, Belgium, the UK, Australia, and elsewhere passed sweeping legislation to restrict comics' content and limit their reach, fearing the perceived damaging impact on child readers.[10]

Yet this abundance of popularity – and fear – is absent from many Canadian or American histories. Reflecting the continued reticence that historian Sean Carlton in 2014 had called, "slower than a speeding bullet: academia's response to the comics resurgence,"[11] graphic history reviews were only added to the *American Historical Review* (AHR) in late 2018. Despite AHR Graphic History series editor Trevor Getz's compelling statement that, "modern graphic histories promise to deliver the happy union of creativity and historical inquiry,"[12] a number of the AHR reviews fail to engage the visuals and the materiality of the graphic histories reviewed.[13] My own scholarship on the history of comics censorship in Canada and the influential role played by Canadian librarians, educators, and politicians in transnational censorship conversations is relatively unique

Carleton History Department chair, James Miller, who has been a strong advocate. And lastly, special thanks to Carleton Public History Distinguished Research Professor, David Dean, who first saw this work and the pedagogy behind it as an important addition to public history discussions; his reflection assignment in the Introduction to Public History course at Carleton University inspired the course reflection assignment for the History Through Comic Books course discussed below.

6 This statement builds on the work of comics studies and library and educational history professor, Dr. Carol Tilley. See her article "Seducing the Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifications that Helped Condemn Comics," Information & Culture: A Journal of History 47, no. 4 (November-December 2012): 383–413. She has estimated that between 90 and 95 % of all children of all genders and backgrounds were comic book readers due in large part to their enticing content, popular accessibility, and affordable sticker price for young readers.

7 John Bell, "For the Greater Good." Hosted by Geneviève Morin. "Discover Library and Archives Canada: Your History, Your Documentary Heritage," Library and Archives Canada, December 22, 2016. Podcast, 31:20, https://library-archives.canada.ca/eng/collection/engage-learn/podcast/pages/for-the-greater-good.aspx.

8 Ibid.

9 Sidney Shalett, "189 Magazines Put on New Army List: War Department Acts on Survey of Soldier Preferences Made Under Taft Amendment," The New York Times, July 20, 1944. The World War Two popularity of comics is also discussed in Chute, *Why Comics?*, 309–14.

10 For more information on the transnational anti-comics campaigns of the 1940s/50s, see texts including (but not limited to) Martin Barker, *A Haunt of Fears: The Strange History of the British Horror Comics Campaign* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2006 [1984]); John A. Lent (ed.), *Pulp Demons: International Dimensions of the Postwar Anti-Comics Campaign* (Madison/Florham Park, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999); David Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008); and Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1998).

11 Sean Carleton, "Drawn to Change: Comics and Critical Consciousness," Labour/Le Travail 73 (spring 2014): 151–77, quotation on 154.

12 Trevor R. Getz, "Getting Serious About Comic Histories," The American Historical Review 123, no. 5 (2018): 1596.

13 Maher, "Graphic History and the Art of Collaboration," 117, footnote 1. Maher reviewed almost a dozen graphic history reviews for his article and "found only one that analyzed, in detail, the artwork of the book being reviewed." The rest of the almost one dozen reviews Maher found, "refrain[ed] from analyzing the artwork in graphic histories" including four reviews from the recently added Graphic History reviews in *The American Historical Review*.

among publications in the last few decades. Many Canadians, including other historians, would probably be surprised that Canada had anything to do with comics censorship in the 1940s and 1950s, including passing legislation in 1949 adding 'crime comics'[14] to the Canadian criminal code – or that crime comics remained in the criminal code until 2018.

Addressing the popular abundance and historical absence of comic books in traditional histories is how I begin instruction for HIST 3909: History Through Comic Books – a public history course for undergraduate students at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada.[15] This course was launched in Fall 2023 and developed as part of my candidacy work as a PhD student. This course builds on my MA and PhD research into the history of comics censorship combined with my professional work as a librarian and educator organizing comics programming, professional development, and pedagogical sessions for more than ten years. What follows are initial findings and feedback on the course and how my understandings of the course and the importance of teaching visual history within a public history framework evolved and expanded. Central to the teaching of this course is relaying to students how public history and the potentials of graphic history are intertwined – particularly in their focus to examine how the past and present can coexist and influence each other.

3 Teaching Graphic History at Carleton University (Ottawa, Canada)

'History Through Comic Books' is taught over thirteen weeks in an academic semester to undergraduate students as a Public History course. Covering the early twentieth century to the present, this course introduces students to Graphic History – history told through and taught using comics and graphic novels – and considers comic books and graphic novels as historical documents and historical representations. The course situates comics within the larger growing landscape of visual narratives and formats used in the telling, teaching, and understanding of public history including zines, video games, and digital platforms. The class queries ideas of what is a historical 'document' and in doing so interrogates our own practice(s) as public historians. Learning objectives of the class include understanding how to read, analyze, and decode the textual and visual language of comics; introducing some canonical and emerging works and formats of graphic history; recognizing the multiplicity of formats that 'comics' encompasses (linear storytelling, juxtaposed narrative, physical books, online webcomics, multimodal mass media, etc.); and analyzing how graphic history can address historical gaps and add to public history practice. The three principal course goals for teaching history through comic books are:[16]

(1) Expand knowledge of Graphic History and Public History as fields
(2) Discuss expanded spectrum of titles and formats for graphic history beyond commonly assigned titles (including titles from emerging graphic history fields such as webcomics and Graphic Medicine)
(3) Create/develop critical visual inquiry
    - Introduce students to language of comics – point of view, sequencing, image selection, color choices
    - Learn how to decode images
    - Put these skills to practice through drawing and other forms of image creation (zines) – working from primary sources

Starting a graphic history course discussing the documented historical abundance of comic books is certainly a nontraditional approach. Most history classes that work with comics might start off instead with discussions of a single

14 'Crime comics' was an umbrella term used to describe all comics deemed 'objectionable' which at the time included titles that ranged from horror and salacious comics to Dick Tracey and Superman. For more on the history of crime comics, legal history, and anti-comics campaigns in Canada see Mary Louise Adams, *The Trouble with Normal: Postwar Youth and the Making of Heterosexuality* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020 [1997]); Simon Fodden, "Crime Comics and the Remnants of a Moral Panic," Slaw: Canada's Online Legal Magazine, December 7, 2013, https://www.slaw.ca/2013/12/07/crime-comics-and-the-remnants-of-a-moral-panic/, accessed November 10, 2024; Mona Gleason, "'They Have a Bad Effect': Crime Comics, Parliament, and the Hegemony of the Middle Class in Postwar Canada, 1948–1960," in *Pulp Demons*, ed. Lent, 129–54; Janice Dickin McGinnis, "Bogeymen and the Law: Crime Comics and Pornography," Ottawa Law Review 20, no. 1, 1988, 3–24; Bruce Ryder, "Undercover Censorship: Exploring the History of the Regulation of Publications in Canada," in *Interpreting Censorship in Canada*, eds. Allan Hutchinson and Klaus Peterson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016 [1999]), 129–56; and Amie Wright, "Alberta's Forgotten Censor: The Advisory Board on Objectionable Publications (1954–1976) and the Continued Campaign Against Comics Post 1954," Canadian Literature, no. 249 (2022): 80–98.

15 Course site for HIST 3909: History Through Comic Books: https://carleton.ca/history/undergraduate/courses/3000-level-2/hist-3909b-history-through-comic-books/.

16 The full course syllabus can be found here: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1NfKT32x-mDq25zdOsN8akusubt-Sx9pv/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=115625631010020422010&rtpof=true&sd=true.

popular title such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1992) or Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003) in which she tells the story of her childhood and life as a young adult in Iran and Austria during and after the Islamic Revolution. However, after researching and working with comics scholarship and education for more than ten years I have found that misperceptions of comics are still so pervasive that without first addressing these assumptions, historical learning into the potentials of graphic history and how to cultivate a critical visual inquiry framework cannot occur.

In starting the class in this way, my intention is for students to first start thinking about how our historical *representations* of the past are influenced by our current historical *assumptions* of the past. As I note to students, I have rarely watched a World War Two movie or visited a World War Two museum exhibit in which I have seen visualizations or discussions of soldiers reading comic books, though – from a pragmatic perspective – comics are a lot lighter and more portable than a traditional hardcover book and were extremely popular, especially to trade. This juxtaposition between a documented past and our *perceptions* of the past highlight how historical omissions and absences can occur. To counter this, a needed conversation needs to happen in which students start to think about history – and our historical thinking – as a more fluid dialogue and conversation.

4 Learning How to Decode Comics as Public History

To begin these discussions, I use an infographic from public historian Marko Demantowsky to illuminate that "public history is a complex past-related identity discourse. Operated by collectives and individuals, it serves the mutual recognition of narratives."[17] Having taught this course twice and having used Demantowsky's image also in multiple lectures, I can attest to the added power of a graphic to visualize this idea of the active conversation between the past and present in a public history approach. This ability to visualize that intangible and invisible dialogue between narratives and time periods is also a strength of graphic history. Visuals such as the famous and oft-shared image from *Maus* entitled, "Time Flies," provide students a concrete example of this mediated process of past and present, and individual and collective narratives.[18] In this drawing, a weary Spiegelman sits at his artist drafting table reminiscing about the success of *Maus* while also discussing his parents' deaths – including his mother's suicide in 1968 – and the murder of over 100,000 Hungarian Jews in a 9-day time period in 1944. As the panel pulls away, the reader sees that Spiegelman's desk is on top of a pile of bodies with flies circling. The panel caption, "Time Flies," refers to both the passage of time in which past deaths and current successes coexist and the actual bodies occupying the bottom of the panel and the flies circling.

Though many students have, prior to the course, read *Maus*, many report that this is the first time they engaged with the artwork, considered graphic history as a format, or considered how the artwork and captions, when read together, can represent multiple narratives and passages of time. This approach from day one is purposeful so as to engage with and challenge what Martin Barker has deemed as the particular problem of comics. While investigating the British anti-comics campaign of the 1950s, Barker described what he saw as the persistent perception of comics being "seen as at best a marginal, silly medium, suitable only for children, or, at worst, as a dangerous inciting medium, suitable for no one."[19] It is worth noting that *Maus* – published and intended for an adult audience – is often assigned to students as young as age twelve due to this impression of comics as "suitable only for children."

No comics better reflect the juxtaposed assumptions of either silliness or violence than superhero comics, and that is the next activity we progress to in the class – reexamining an iconic superhero image we all think we know well. *Captain America* issue #1 was published in March 1941 and written and drawn by comic creators Joe Simon and Jack Kirby. As a first step I ask students to tell me what they see, and they describe the iconic image of Captain America punching the face of Hitler and Hitler falling backwards against a table. I then ask, "Let's think about the publication date: what was happening in March 1941? What, specifically was happening in the United States?" After a few minutes to further think and examine the image, I encourage students to zoom in again on the cover illustration and pay closer attention to an important detail often overlooked – what is on the table. Hitler, after suffering a momentous punch from Captain America Steve Rogers, is falling backwards against a table upon which sits a map of the United States – the implicit sentiment being that, unless stopped, the Nazis' next step is an American invasion.

In March 1941 the United States under President Franklin D. Roosevelt had not yet actively joined the war

17 Marko Demantowsky, *Public History and School: International Perspectives* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), 26.

18 "Time Flies," Art Spiegelman, Maus II*: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began* (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 41.

19 Barker, *A Haunt of Fears*, 6.

effort, but the Lend-Lease Act allowed the United States to lend or lease war supplies [arms] to any nation deemed "vital to the defense of the United States".[20] Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, the creators of *Captain America*, were both Jewish-Americans in New York City at a time in which Jewish-American newspapers were widely discussing the plight of Jewish displaced persons and the lack of direct American involvement in World War Two. A considerable outcry occurred after the denied refuge of the *St. Louis* and its hundreds of occupants in 1939, all of whom ended up back in Europe with many later dying in concentration camps.[21] When seen through the lens of March 1941 and through the eyes of Jewish-American creators, the iconic image of *Captain America* takes on greater historical context and urgency – demonstrating to students that superhero comics, though often still derided even in comics studies scholarship as being pulpy, commercial, or too popular, when read as historical documents offer vital and overlooked public history windows into the past.

5 Teaching the Visual Language of Comics

What can the visual framework of comics bring to history? A lot. The next and important step for students is to learn how to 'read' comics, especially how to decode and understand the visual language of comics, or, as Scott McCloud calls it in his seminal work, *Understanding Comics*, the "vocabulary of comics."[22] Using McCloud's text as one of the core course materials, the different elements that go into building comic images are discussed including visual selection, use of icons, art style, captions, caption placement, font choice, color choices, and panel transitions.[23] The goal for students – just as they did with a visual analysis of the cover image of *Captain America* issue #1 – is to slow down and pause with visual imagery and ask questions about **why** an image is so successful. Why specifically were the panels in *Maus* so effective in capturing the experience of the post memory generation?

To give students practice with both recognizing and thinking through the visual language of comics, they are tasked with finding and visually analyzing examples of, "Graphic History in the Wild."[24] This activity introduces students to noticing the popularity and abundance of graphic history in our everyday lives, beginning with an ubiquitous example that most people have encountered but probably have never thought of as a 'graphic history' or as an 'informational comic' – the emergency pamphlet found in your seat pocket on an airplane. This visual narrative uses the "vocabulary of comics" making strategic use of color, directional symbols and icons, and – importantly – employs visual sequencing so that you can follow along on what to do when. The emergency airline manual is meant to communicate information quickly and effectively to a whole range of audiences across different literacies and backgrounds and builds on an even older tradition of public health and graphic narratives. Students are then tasked with finding their own examples of "Graphic History in the Wild," sharing images with fellow classmates, and providing a short commentary on what they think works well for the graphics. Some of the most common examples students have identified are IKEA manuals, museum interpretative material, and the lingering public health comics on proper hand washing and mask wearing to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

After identifying "Graphic History in the Wild" examples, students are tasked with creating their own graphic histories. We begin by doing short in class drawing activities based on the Graphic Medicine hosted web series, "Drawing Together" which began during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic as a way to encourage people to embrace art therapy, virtual community, and to remember the

20 See Lend-Lease Act (1941), National Archives, https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/lend-lease-act, accessed November 17, 2024.

21 In May 1939, the German liner St. Louis sailed from Hamburg, Germany, to Havana, Cuba with 937 passengers who were almost all Jewish refugees. Cuba, and then the United States and Canada, refused to allow the ship to land and the St. Louis returned to Europe. Spiegelman told the story graphically marking the seventieth anniversary of the ship being denied safe harbor: "St. Louis Refugee Ship Blues," Washington Post, June 24, 2009, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/opinions/outlook/st-louis-refugee-ship-blues/static.html, accessed November 17, 2024.

22 Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics. The Invisible Art* (New York: William Morrow, 1992). Students are encouraged to read the whole text but, in terms of reading requirement, we focus on Chapters 1: Setting the Record Straight (which focuses on the history of graphic narrative which according to McCloud stretches back to Egyptian hieroglyphs and medieval tapestries), Chapter 2: The Vocabulary of Comics (which introduces readers to icons and image selection), Chapter 3: Blood in the Gutter (which discusses 'gutters' – the space between comic panels – and different types of panel transitions), and Chapter 8: A Word About Color.

23 McCloud identifies six types of panel transitions: Moment to Moment, Action to Action, Subject to Subject, Scene to Scene, Aspect to Aspect, and Non Sequitur in *Understanding Comics*, 70–72.

24 My great thanks to Meghan Landrigan-Buttle, PhD Candidate in History at Concordia University (Montreal) who first introduced me to a version of this activity and exercise in which students find examples of 'history in the wild.' The graphic history version of this activity has proven to be one of the most popular and impactful learning opportunities for students in the course.

transformative power of creating.[25] The background thinking of this web series and also how I approach drawing in this course is to remind people that we all have the ability to draw and think and express ourselves visually. In her award winning book, *Making Comics*, cartoonist Lynda Barry has empathetically argued that drawing is our first language, a language that most children use to communicate and yet something that we lose as we age into adulthood and we grow conscious of our drawings, especially if we or others deem them 'inartistic.'[26] The challenge for students with our in-class drawing activities is to get them to push past this reticence and instead focus on the doing and thinking through what visual icons, images, and composition they could use to communicate information. An explanation I offer to students is twofold: firstly, that we are drawing together to better bring in another modality into our learning: kinesthetic learning; secondly, that by practicing and thinking through these visual elements we become better visual historians: transferable skills that we can all use going forward whether it is planning a museum exhibit, preparing a slideshow, or including images in an article. The first drawing exercise the students complete is as follows (Figure 1):

Step #1 – Divide your sheet of paper into 4 panels. These do not have to be perfect squares. You can also draw the 4 panels in any way you wish – not just how it's depicted below

Step #2 – Take 10–15 min and fill out 4 panels using the prompts below. Remember this is NOT a drawing competition or assignment. Instead think about **what icons** and **visual language** you can use to create your images (especially the fourth prompt with emojis), and how you can **signal the passage of time**

Drawing Prompts:

- The highlight of today was _____
- The best thing about last weekend was _____
- I can't wait for vacation so that I can _____
- Today described in emojis _____

For subsequent drawing activities in class, students are encouraged to 'break the panels' – experimenting with

Figure 1: Drawing Prompt #1 for HIST 3909: History Through Comics – learning how to create graphic history and thinking through how to use visual languages. Credit: Amie Wright.

illustrations that leave the borders behind or drawings that bleed into other panels. We also experiment with cutting up our panels and changing the order. How does a visual narrative change when we change the sequence of panels? Students share their work with fellow classmates, e.g. bonding over a shared love of coffee or sleeping (two of the most common emojis used for 4th panel above). Encouraging students to use emojis I have found to be a liberating exercise because – without realizing it – we all have a default visual language we turn to whether it is popular GIFs we utilize in emails, emojis that populate our replies in group chats, or icons that we add to our social media profiles.

Part of the learning for these activities is also sharing with students my own drawings for these prompts. As seen in Figure 2, I am demonstrating that creating graphic panels

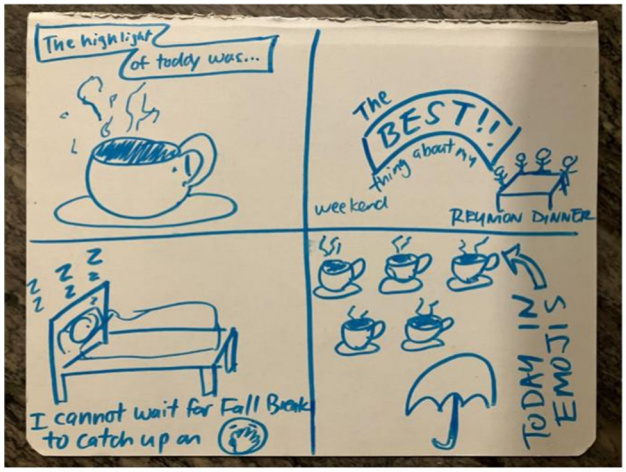

Figure 2: My own completed drawing for Prompt #1 that I shared with student. Credit: Amie Wright.

25 Drawing Together Archive: https://www.graphicmedicine.org/drawingtogether/, accessed November 10, 2024. The Drawing Together initiative was created in response to the cancellation of the 2020 Graphic Medicine conference and the social isolation felt during the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Drawing Together sessions are facilitated Zoom sessions that bring community members together to draw, support one another, and share. Most sessions feature a creative prompt or practice that is recorded and posted online so that other groups or individuals may make use of them in their own work.

26 Lynda Barry, *Making Comics* (Montréal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2019).

actually blends three elements – the words, the pictures, and the captions – and that captions and how we create them can be their own art form. Note the different types of captions in the panels of Figure 2: ribbon or banner style caption in the panel in upper left-hand corner or the caption forming a welcoming arc in the upper right-hand corner. Size and repetition also create visual narratives. By foregrounding my coffee in the upper left-hand corner and drawing a big a steaming coffee cup whose steam leads into the caption, I can create a point of view and perspective that the coffee was a very important and integral part of my morning. Taking this same icon – the coffee cup – and repeating it in multiples and making them smaller in the lower right-hand corner, I am using the same icon but describing a different visual narrative and relaying a different personal history – that of multiple cups of coffee on a rainy day.

As the class progresses so too do the drawing prompts. When we read historical graphic memoirs, such as *Maus* and *Persepolis*, the drawing activities those weeks encourages students to think of their personal stories and their families – thinking through how they would relay differences in time periods, personal narratives, and change over time (Figure 3). For previous classes I completed a drawing with myself and my grandfather and juxtaposed my dream career as a child – to be a 'vet' as in a veterinarian (panel on the lower left-hand side of Figure 3) – with my grandfather's involvement when he was younger as a 'vet' during World War Two (panel on the lower right-hand of Figure 3) to further show students how visualizations of text can show nuance. Additionally, I contrasted my grandfather's service with how I completed the rest of the panels – for the panel on the upper right-hand corner in Figure 3 I noted how my grandfather often told stories of growing up in Maine and swimming in lakes as a child. He never shared stories of his service with me.

As the course progresses, we also talk more about color, font choices, and art styles. Drawing encourages us to think visually and to consider which icons, imagery, and composition are most effective to communicate what we are trying to express graphically through words and pictures. We also talk more about how order, progression, and relationships between the panels works creating **sequencing** and an **implied narration** between the panels – which is what makes single pieces of art into a 'comic strip' (or, when there are more panels, turns single pieces of art into a 'graphic novel' or 'comic book'). Students are also encouraged to revisit their 'Graphic History in the Wild' examples and think even more critically about some ways that sequencing is created. What is effective? What types of visual language are used? The in-flight manuals, for example, make effective use of both red (to signal stop/no) and green (to signal go/approved behaviors). Some in-flight manuals use blue to illuminate directional language such as arrows, but other in-flight manuals may use red as directional arrows and as 'stop' language. Comparing these two examples, using red for directional language is not as effective a use of visual communication as we – without thinking about it – read red as 'stop' in most ethnocultural geopolitical landscapes. The goal of these drawing exercise is for students to begin to think about how to build their own graphic histories and in doing so start to ask different questions about they approach visual histories in general.

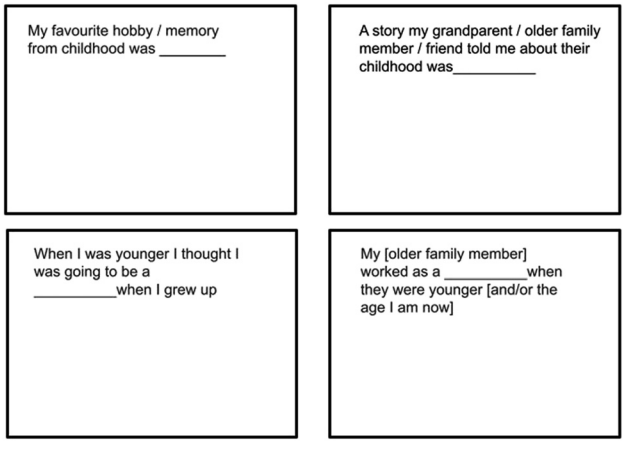

Figure 3: Drawing Prompt #2 for HIST 3909: History Through Comics – drawing exercise to coincide with the reading of Persepolis: A Story of a Childhood. Credit: Amie Wright.

6 Student Final Projects: Creating 4 Panel Histories

In his article, "Historical Thinking and Visual Literacy: Exploring the Canadian War Museum with Graphic History," Matthew Barrett writes that, "historians must expand beyond the traditional knowledge delivery model of the written word alone."[27] For the final assignment in the seminar students are tasked with creating a "4 Panel History" that they have drawn or designed that illustrates a historical topic that they think the public(s) should know more about. Just as future historians practice writing in history classrooms, this final assignment is tended to give future historians practice creating visual histories so that we will start to develop a critical visual framework for historical

27 Matthew Barrett, "Historical Thinking and Visual Literacy: Exploring the Canadian War Museum with Graphic History," *Canadian Military History* 30, no. 1 (2021): 1–34.

Figure 4: Final Assignment HIST 3909 Fall 2023, "The Irish Potato Famine." Credit: Nathan O'Hare.

analysis that will serve them going forward. Envisioning this as a four-image museum exhibit, four slide PowerPoint, or even a four tile Instagram post allows students multiple mental models to think through this assignment and its transferability to other future professional settings.

In addition to their four panels students also have to submit a short, written paper with a research bibliography that explains both the **historical context** of their panels and their **artistic choices**. In explaining the historical context, students need to answer – what imagery did you include? Why? What imagery did you not include? Students are also asked to consider, what is the larger historical context to this topic? Why does this topic matter and why is it a good fit as a graphic history and a public history? In explaining their artistic choices, students need to answer – why this angle, why this close-up, why this juxtaposed image? Why did you choose to tell the story in a linear or non-chronological way? Did you 'break the panels'? Did you tell your history in a comic or a zine? Did you use color, black and white, a limited color palette? What role does color serve (or not serve) in your work? Students are not graded on the strengths of their artistic skills but rather the visual historical research they have put into their topic and the artistic choices they have made to illustrate that topic. Included here are three student examples and the historical and artistic contexts of their topics.[28]

In Figure 4 student Nathan O'Hare chose a topic often discussed in traditional histories – the Great Famine in Ireland (1845-1852) – but rarely visualized in the way the student chose. Using time lapse close-ups of a single image and setting repeated over four periods of time in 1844, 1845, 1846, and 2012, O'Hare's four panels brought new emotion to an examination of absence and change over time to the historical topic 'known' to that many readers. The artistic selections in these panels with impactful use of color and comic tools – including the zoom close-up of the healthy potato in 1844 contrasted with a potato afflicted with *Phytophthora infestans* mold in 1845 – demonstrate the devastation over time. By altering the tones and color choices of these four hand drawn panels showing the scenes from 1844 to 1846, the student visually represents the obvious and rapid deterioration of this scene.

In four panels O'Hare effectively and concisely describes a moment in historical time, concluding with a panel that is at once bucolic with its use of green and blue – suggesting regrowth – but also somber by choosing to keep the devastated house rendered in dark greys, represents the lingering effect of the Potato Famine. The student also purposefully chose brilliant greens for panel #1 (1844) and panel #4 (2012) as green is a color heavily associated with Ireland, thereby making the juxtaposition of somber greys and devastation at

28 These are but three student examples form HIST 3909 in Fall 2023; it is my hope to be able to spotlight additional student work on a digital Public History platform in the future. Again, my great thanks to all students in HIST 3909 in Fall 2023 and Fall 2024 who brought such creativity, thought, and original primary source research to their 4 Panel Histories.

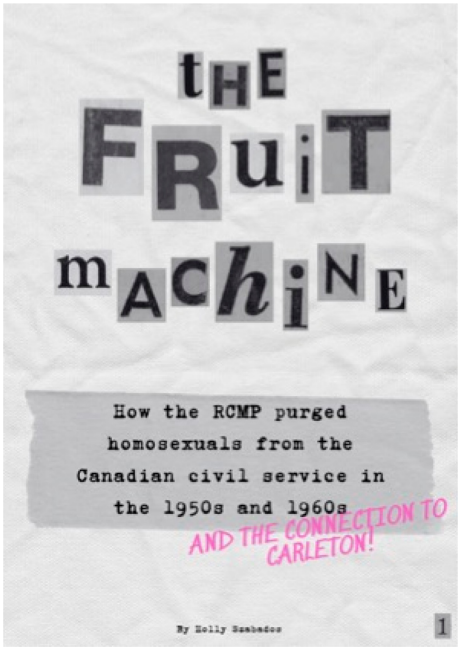

Figure 5: Final Assignment HIST 3909 Fall 2023, "The Fruit Machine and the LGBT Purge of the Canadian Civil Services in the 1950s and 1960s" (and the Connection to Carleton University). Credit: Holly Szabados, hszab987@gmail.com.

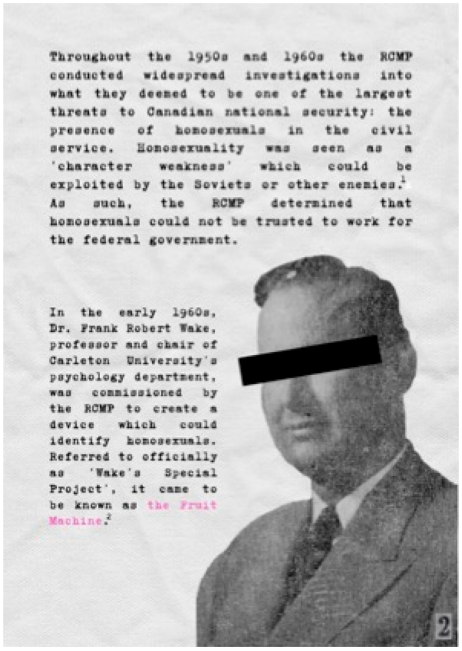

Figure 6: Final Assignment HIST 3909 Fall 2023, "The Fruit Machine and the LGBT Purge of the Canadian Civil Services in the 1950s and 1960s" (and the Connection to Carleton University). Credit: Holly Szabados, hszab987@gmail.com.

the height of the blight in 1846 that much more jarring. Another detail is the absence of smoke coming from the chimney starting in 1845, indicating that people fled from the house. By 1846 the roof of the right-hand side of the house has collapsed in on itself and the fields are overgrown and full of neglect. The Great Famine is something talked about in history texts, but the student felt that there was additional potential to capture the level and scope of devastation by creating a graphic history. The student was able to do this by using a limited image selection with purposeful edits and changes over the panels, demonstrating that an effective graphic history can be achieved with multiple levels of art styles, composition, and expertise.

Figures 5 and 6 show two of the eight images that Holly Szabados created as part of a digital zine[29] on the 'Fruit Machine,' a homophobic and discriminatory test performed by Canadian military intelligence in the 1950s and 1960s designed to test, harass, and remove members of the military and civil service suspected of 'homosexual behaviour' due to the perception that homosexuality was a 'risk' to national security. The 'LGBT Purge' as it is now called is a dark chapter in the history of Canada's civil service and has many ties to Ottawa and Carleton history as well, which is why the student chose to spotlight this topic. As seen in Figure 6, "In the early 1960s, Dr. Frank Robert Wake, professor and Chair of Carleton University's psychology department, was commissioned by the RCMP to create a device which could identify homosexuals. Referred to officially as 'Wake's Special Project,' it came to be known as the Fruit Machine."[30]

29 "A zine, short for fanzine or magazine, is a DIY* subculture self-publication, usually made on paper and reproduced with a photocopier or printer. Zine creators are often motivated by a desire to share knowledge or experience with people in marginalized or otherwise less-empowered communities," Zine Library at Barnard College, Columbia University, https://zines.barnard.edu/, accessed November 20, 2024. Zines and comics have a lot of overlap with many zinesters and comic creators using the terms zines and mini comics interchangeably based on type of creation. For HIST 3909 I choose to introduce students to zines and mini comics in addition to the traditional four panel comic structure to allow for expanded platforms for visual sequential creation and to spotlight the place of zines in DIY history, queer history, labor history, and more. For more on zines, please see Emma N. Awe, "Zines 101," https://emmaawe.com/zines-101 and Library of Congress, "Research Guide: Zines at the Library of Congress," https://guides.loc.gov/zines accessed November 20, 2024. In the LOC collection zines are part of the same portfolio as comics, periodicals, and newspapers, connecting contemporary and historical visual narrative with sequential art.

30 RCMP stands for Royal Canadian Mounted Police. On page 8 of the zine Szabados included a full reference list of historical sources used. The footnote that appears in Figure 6 following the statements about Wake's work and research is a reference to Gary Kinsman and Patrizia Gentile, *The Canadian War on Queers: National Security as Sexual*

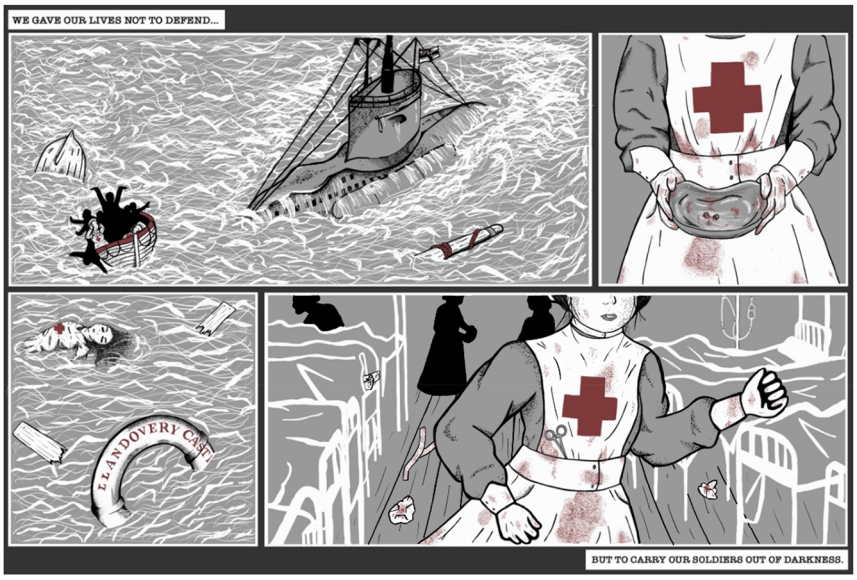

Figure 7: Final Assignment HIST 3909 Fall 2023, "The Sinking of the HMHS Llandovery Castle on June 27, 1918 and the experiences of WWI nurses." Credit: Holly Lackner.

The digital zine was created using the program Canva to incorporate letters and images from archival records using typewriter font and grey wash to mimic the reams of typewritten memos that comprise the archival memory of this event. The only color used is an electric pink, a purposeful choice referencing the use of the pink triangle in Holocaust concentration camps and later the color pink in many 2SLGBTQIA+ social justice movements.

Figure 7 by HIST 3909 student, Holly Lackner, also illuminates another under discussed topic in Canadian (and global) history – the experiences of wartime nurses serving in World War I. With a caption that outlines the panels on the top and the bottom stating, "We gave our lives not to defend … But to carry our soldiers out of darkness," Lackner's four panels offer a very different historical visualization of nurses serving in active combat environments during the Great War than is generally represented. Noting the lack of nurse experiences in historical texts from World War I, the student chose to focus on a specific well-documented event to open up conversations about the larger experiences of trench nurses missing from historical narratives. The HMHS Llandovery Castle was a hospital ship travelling from Halifax, Nova Scotia, to Liverpool, England, on June 27, 1918, when it was spotted and torpedoed by a German U-boat, resulting in the deaths of 234 people, including 14 nursing sisters, in just minutes. Based on propaganda posters from the era and archival photos, these panels were created digitally and maximized shades of greys and washed out tones to mimic black and white photographs with a strategic use of rusted red that is both the red cross insignia and the color (and smell) of blood.

7 Conclusion: Toward a More Vibrant and Graphic Future for Public History

Graphic History – history taught and told through comic books – is not a new practice. Even during the heights of the anti-comics moral panic in the 1940s and 1950s educators were teaching with and about comics.[31] Among the multiple examples of comics history in the Library of Congress's extensive comics and periodical division – one of the largest collections of comics and comic ephemera in the world including a webcomic digital archive and small press zines – are copies of *Golden Legacy*, a 1966–1976 educational comic series on Black history published by Bertram A. Fitzgerald.[32] My own origins story coming to teach comics in history classrooms is influenced by the passionate and tireless comics and education advocates I have worked with in New

Regulation (Vancouver, B.C.: UBC Press, 2010), 168. The quote is from chapter 4: "The 'Fruit Machine': Attempting to Detect Queers."

31 Carol L, Tilley and Robert G Weiner, "Teaching and Learning with Comics." In *The Routledge Companion to Comic* ed. Frank Bramlett, Roy T. Cook, and Aaron Meskin (New York and London: Routledge, 2017), 358–66: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315851334-44.

32 Megan Halsband, "Let's Talk Comics: Golden Legacy," Heroes & Headlines: Newspapers, Comics, & More Fine Print (Library of Congress Blog), March 24, 2021, https://blogs.loc.gov/headlinesandheroes/2021/03/lets-talk-comics-golden-legacy/.

York City schools and libraries since 2013.[33] Educator Deirdre Hollman, along with cartoonist Jerry Craft, and comics studies scholars John Jennings and Jonathan Gayles, started the Black Comic Book Festival at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library in 2013.[34] The NYC Department of Education (DOE) added the civil rights graphic memoir, *MARCH*, by former US Congressman John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell to its Passport to Social Studies curriculum in 2016 and the NYC DOE has now quietly become one of the largest publishers of comics in the United States with its NYC Social Studies Civics for All program which uses comics for historical education.[35]

Comics, graphic novels, graphic works, and other names for the multitude of sequential visual narratives are all created in two languages of information sharing: visual and textual. When we teach graphic history analyzing only the text, we are only translating half the work. Additionally, when we bring a sharper focus to the engagement with the art, it allows us to ask important questions in history classrooms around shared authority and who is a 'public historian'. Medar de la Cruz's Pulitzer Prize winning *The Diary of a Rikers Island Library Worker* (2024) provides a rare eyewitness account of the environments and daily life of incarcerated people inside the restrictive island prison in New York City which does not allow cameras or any type of photography.[36] Similarly, Kate Beaton's *Ducks: Two Years in the Oil Sands* (2022) offers a singular glimpse into the labor history of frontline workers in the resource extraction industry in Alberta, Canada.[37] Like court room illustrations, these graphic works provide visual documentation and important pictorial records to experiences and environments rarely chronicled in traditional histories. Neither Beaton nor de la Cruz are 'public historians' by academic training, but their works are public history in practice.

Thinking further through our own historical consciousness and perceptions around history and who is a

33 From 2013 to 2017 I worked at the New York Public Library with the School Outreach/MyLibraryNYC department first as the Collection Development Librarian and later the NYPL Manager on this initiative. A partnership between the NYC Department of Education and New York City's three public library systems, MyLibraryNYC is the largest school-library partnership globally, https://www.mylibrarynyc.org/, accessed November 20, 2024. Through this partnership I worked with the NYC Office of Library Services and the NYC Social Studies department, and it is with great thanks to my colleagues past and present at the NYC DOE, MyLibraryNYC, and BookOps that we were able to host our first dedicated conference of professional development in partnership with New York Comic Con in October 2017. From 2017 to present I have worked with NYC schools and libraries and the NYC Department of Education through the American Library Association (ALA) Graphic Novels and Comics Round Table (GNCRT), https://www.ala.org/gncrt, accessed November 20, 2024. The GNCRT organizes and helps to support educational programming and professional development sessions for educators, library workers, and comic scholars for shows throughout North America including New York Comic Con, San Diego Comic Con, Emerald City Comic Con (Seattle), Chicago Comic & Entertainment Expo (C2E2) and the Toronto Comic Arts Festival (TCAF).

34 Ian Thomas "The Origin of The Black Comics Collective: A Conversation with Deirdre Hollman," The Comics Journal (November 19, 2020), https://www.tcj.com/the-black-comics-collective/, accessed November 10 2024. See also Deirdre Lynn Hollman, "Critical Race Comics: Centering Black Subjectivities and Teaching Racial Literacy," Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy 18, no. 2 (2021): 119–33.

35 John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell, *MARCH: Book One* (Sherman Oaks, CA: Top Shelf Comix, 2013). MARCH is the nonfiction trilogy of titles (2013–2016) written by former US Congressman John Lewis and Andrew Aydin and illustrated by Nate Powell. *MARCH Book Three* won the National Book Award for Young People's Literature in the United States – the first graphic novel to win that distinction. *MARCH* is a memoir of Lewis's time as a student organizer with the civil rights movement in the United States, including speaking at the 1963 March on Washington alongside Dr. Martin Luther King, https://www.topshelfcomix.com/march, accessed November 19, 2024. The NYC Passport to Social Studies is a guiding curriculum for history education and didactics for educators teaching in K-12 classrooms in New York City, https://sites.google.com/schools.nyc.gov/social-studies-and-civics/resources/passport-to-social-studies, accessed November 19, 2024. Rob Salkowitz, "How NYC Public Schools Secretly Became One of America's Largest Comics Publishers," *Forbes* (May 2, 2024), https://www.forbes.com/sites/robsalkowitz/2024/05/02/how-nyc-public-schools-secretly-became-one-of-americas-largest-comics-publishers/, accessed November 19, 2024. Recent titles from the NYC Civics for All Comics Group include *Sensational Stories #1 Real Life Heroes: Sana Amanat and Kalpana Chawla* by Kay Sohini and *Historias de Resistencia #1: Dolores Huerta and the Plight of the Farmworkers & Union Organizers* by Henry Barajas, Louie Chin, Gab Contreras, J. Gonzo. All comic titles in the NYC Civics for All series can be viewed here: https://sites.google.com/schools.nyc.gov/social-studies-and-civics/resources/comics-group, accessed November 19, 2024.

36 Medar de la Cruz, "The Diary of a Rikers Island Library Worker: Every week for a year, I pushed a cart of books through the largest jail complex in New York City," *The New Yorker* (May 12, 2023), https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-diary-of-a-rikers-island-library-worker, accessed November 10, 2024. De la Cruz's work won the 2024 Pulitzer Prize for 'Illustrated Reporting and Commentary.'

37 Kate Beaton, *Ducks: Two Years in the Oil Sands* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2022). *Ducks* won the 2023 Eisner Award for Best Memoir amongst its many accolades, https://drawnandquarterly.com/books/ducks/, accessed November 20, 2024. For additional resources and commentary on the opportunities for labour history and comics in Canada please see Sean Carleton and Julia Smith, "Getting Graphic with the Past: Comics and Radical History" Bulletin of the Canadian Historical Association/Société historique du Canada (CHA/SHC) Issue 40.1 (2014); Graphic History Collective (eds.), *Drawn to Change: Graphic Histories of Working-Class Struggle* (Toronto, Ontario: Between the Lines, 2016). The Graphic History Collective, founded in 2008 in Ontario, Canada, "is a group of activists, artists, writers, and researchers passionate about comics, history and social change" https://graphichistorycollective.com/about, accessed November 10, 2024.

'historian,' students are asked to reflect on this themselves as they conclude the course. A final written assignment students complete in HIST 3909: History Through Comic Books is a short paper asking them to reflect on their own perceptions of comics and history both before and after taking this course and reflecting – on a larger level – what these answers reveal of their own ways of knowing the past and their own positionalities. Students are asked to respond to the following questions:

- Prior to this course – what did you consider 'authoritative' teaching materials or 'historical documents'?
- Prior to this course – what did you know about comic books and graphic novels?
- Prior to this course – what were you taught about comics and graphic novels?
- Were comics encouraged/discouraged in your schools or in your houses?
- In taking this class, how have your opinions changed on comics, visual culture, and history?
- What new questions have occurred to you around visual culture and history, especially public history?
- What training on comics, graphic novels, and other visual culture would you recommend for future history students and future public historians?

As I say to students in my final lecture and thoughts on the class, the takeaway is not to make them comics readers (though that would be a great conclusion) but rather to encourage them to ask different questions about how we approach history, especially visual histories. Teaching in this way also encourages us as history educators to consider our own scholarship and how we approach topics and build syllabi. If graphic history offers an opportunity to expand, not limit, voices and representations, why would we restrict ourselves to teaching the same few graphic titles and in ways that do not engage with the art? Lastly, having worked with and learned from history educators, librarians, archivists, comic shop owners, curators, and, importantly, comic creators, I would encourage all of us to see graphic history as a potential to widen the larger fields of public history not only in the format choices that we bring to our classrooms, but also who we consider public historians.