

Gord Hill, Indigenous Artist and Anarchist

An Interview

CrimethInc.

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Gord Hill is an anarchist artist and a member of the Kwakwaka'wakw nation who has been active in anticolonial and anticapitalist struggles for decades. Over the years, his art and criticism have been an inspiration and challenge to us. Gord is the author of two comic books, *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book*, *The Anti-Capitalist Resistance Comic Book*, as well as *500 Years of Indigenous Resistance*, and runs the website Warrior Publications. He also draws and writes under the pseudonym Zig Zag.

Obviously, there have always been intersections between art and resistance, but we'd like to hear how you see those intersections for yourself, and how you see those intersections playing out in society today.

I believe art is an important part of resistance in that it contributes to an overall *culture* of resistance. Art inspires, educates, motivates, and helps to maintain a history of resistance as well. Today art is perhaps even more prolific in social movements due to greater access to communications technology with new forms such as memes and gifs emerging, although I find these to be more transient than traditional forms such as posters, banners, t-shirts, etc. My main focus is on graphic arts but it's important to acknowledge the power of other media such as writing, music, etc., all of which contribute to building and maintaining a culture of resistance.

Are the aesthetic choices you make in your art political in and of themselves?

In some cases yes, because I consciously use images that I hope are empowering or inspiring. I also frequently use what I would consider iconic images from a particular action or event, images that people might already be familiar with and which help add authenticity to my artwork. Or slogans on banners that help convey a message, especially with comics in which I have very limited space for text. I will also consciously use images to "normalize" militant actions, like including masked persons in an image of a rally or protest, for example.

Can you talk about other artists and traditions that you draw political and aesthetic inspiration from?

Sure... some artists that have inspired me include Louis Karoniaktajeh Hall (the Mohawk artist that designed the warrior flag and wrote *The Warrior's Handbook*), Art Wilson (a Gitksan artist who used traditional Northwest Coast art to address contemporary struggles in his book of published prints entitled *Heartbeat of the Earth: A First Nations Artist Records Injustice and Resistance*), Joe Sacco (who did the *Palestine* comics), as well as more traditional Native artists including Tony

Hunt (Kwakwaka'wakw) and Mark Henderson (Kwakwaka'wakw). Old school comic artists that inspired me include Jack Kirby, Alex Toth, Berni Wrightson, Alex Nino, and Frank Frazetta.

Being an artist and historian, can you talk about the differences between written history and oral tradition, and how the use of imagery might interact with these methods?

Written history is useful for historians as it provides dates, names and locations, which help in understanding history chronologically. From this chronology we can see, for example, the process of colonization, or the expansion of an empire, etc. European states didn't appear out of nowhere but were the result of a long history of colonization by the Romans and centuries of warfare between feudal kingdoms that emerged after the collapse of the Roman empire. This history, much of it recorded by observers at the time, helps us understand how the world we live in today was created. The oral history of Indigenous peoples has been portrayed as mythologies or fantasy, but we know today that events that are told as oral history are actually real events that occurred. For example, there are widespread oral histories of an earthquake and tsunami dating from the 1700s along the Northwest Coast that scientists now know actually occurred and which caused considerable destruction to many villages. The oral history of this event portrays it as resulting from the actions of spiritual forces; until scientists linked the stories to actual events, they were generally dismissed as mythology.

In regards to oral history, Indigenous people had many ways of portraying these histories through graphic arts, such as pictographs, paintings, beadwork, and carvings. Songs and dances were another way that these oral histories were remembered.

Today, there are examples of oral history that continue to be used, including poetry and hip hop. Even videos with interviews and testimonials are examples of oral history.

I find that comics are a good "middle ground" in that they combine written history with graphic images.

Where do you see the intersections between indigenous struggles and anarchist struggles?

I would say they meet in opposition to the state and capital, which for Indigenous peoples would be seen as anti-colonial and anti-capitalist resistance, although the concept of anti-capitalist is perhaps weaker than that of anti-colonial... I think that's probably the strongest intersection, but there are also concepts such as anti-authoritarian or egalitarian forms of organizing. Although this differs in degrees from one Indigenous nation to another, it is, overall, a fairly strong part of our traditional culture (with some exceptions).

How do you think non-indigenous anarchists can be informed by and supportive of indigenous struggles?

By knowing the history of European colonialism and incorporating this into their analysis and actions.

Which past movements have you learned the most from?

I would say definitely the '68 generation: the American Indian Movement/Red Power movements, the Black Panthers, as well as the 1950s-60s black civil rights struggles, the Zapatistas. I've also been inspired by and learned from the autonomist movements in Europe, particularly in Italy and West Germany.

Have you ever felt torn between your role as an artist and your responsibility to other forms of political resistance? If so, how have you resolved those dilemmas?

No, I've never felt torn between being an artist and other forms of political resistance... It's all part of a diversity of tactics and I believe that propaganda is a vital part of resistance movements

and in building cultures of resistance. I do, however, believe it's important for people that do art, or writing or any other form of propaganda to be involved in the movement because otherwise they can be out of touch with events and current trends.

You've talked a lot over the years about tactics in struggles. Do you find these conversations to be similar in indigenous contexts and non-indigenous struggles? Have you seen changes in these discussions over the years?

In some ways, the discussion of tactics is similar. For example, in some cases in the Indigenous movements, there is a discussion about the wearing of masks and the carrying out of illegal direct actions; there are debates around militancy, the logistics of blockades or occupations, security and counter-surveillance. I don't think these discussions have changed over the years, since, say, the 1990 Oka Crisis, but instead they kind of emerge and then subside depending on the types of mobilizations that are occurring. One change has been discussions around internet security and the use of social media such as Facebook, which is being used quite a bit more recently by police for investigations and pressing charges.

The struggle against the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock is arguably the most prominent struggle for indigenous sovereignty we've seen in recent times. Do you think there are important philosophical or tactical lessons to be taken from how this struggle has played out?

Yes, I would say the NoDAPL campaign was very important for a variety of reasons. While there have been a number of anti-pipeline campaigns in Canada, and in particular in BC, it was the first real struggle against a proposed pipeline to occur as construction began. In Canada, the proposed Enbridge Northern Gateway pipeline was eventually abandoned after several years of Indigenous resistance. At the Unis'tot'en camp, it doesn't appear that the proposed natural gas pipeline has attempted to build on Unis'tot'en land. So the NoDAPL campaign was the first one to actively resist construction of a pipeline.

I think especially for Natives in the US, the NoDAPL campaign was very important, and I'm sure thousands of Native youth were radicalized in some way by participating in it.

Ultimately, however, the NoDAPL campaign failed. I would suggest this occurred for a number of reasons, the primary one being that the opposition, despite some militant actions that occurred, was primarily based on "non-violent civil disobedience" and pacifist methods. Any attempts at creating a diversity of tactics were largely squashed by the NGO-type organizers that dominated the debates on tactics, combined with the lack of experience among members of the Standing Rock reservation.

In contrast, I like to point out the resistance carried out by the Mi'kmaq in New Brunswick in 2013 against exploratory work for fracking operations. They didn't have thousands of people gather, didn't have big name celebrities join in, and didn't have tens of thousands of dollars at their disposal. They mobilized their community and after a brief attempt at non-violent civil disobedience, they carried out more militant actions including sabotage and road blockades. Their main blockade was cleared out by police in October 2013, which resulted in six police cars being torched; afterwards, they used more mobile tire fire blockades to disrupt the exploratory work. Eventually, the company, SWN Resources, pulled out before completing all their work, and the next year a provincial election was held that saw the pro-fracking government thrown out of power in what was seen as a plebiscite on fracking. The new government enacted a moratorium on fracking. The Mi'kmaq, even though they were much smaller in numbers than what we saw at Standing Rock, and with far less resources, were victorious.

In looking at the two campaigns, there are many lessons to be learned, and I would caution against people hoping to replicate the Standing Rock model because, ultimately, it was defeated.

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