

Intertextuality and the Historical Graphic Narrative: Kyle Baker's *Nat Turner* and the Styron Controversy

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On July 2, 2007, cartoonist Kyle Baker published a single-panel cartoon titled “Happy Independence Day!” on his website.¹ This cartoon depicts Thomas Jefferson seated comfortably inside his home while writing the famous line from the Declaration of Independence, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. . . .” Meanwhile, in the background, a slave boy is pressing himself against the window and pleading, “Daddy, I’m cold,” while slave masters whip slaves in the fields behind him. (see Figure 1). The cartoon’s satiric commentary on race and American history is obvious, but I would argue that this panel also makes a comment about comics as well—specifically, the use of the graphic narrative form in depicting historical events. This is especially evident through the way in which the division of panes in the window visually resembles the panels of a comic page,

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inviting the audience to read that section like a comic within the larger panel—a page that reveals a narrative about the trauma of slavery that Jefferson ignores.

The irony in this cartoon occurs in the juxtaposition of text and image. The text, coming from a well-known historical document, is rendered false by the evidence outside the window, which, other than the brief dialogue, “Daddy, I’m cold,” is depicted through cartoon images. Therefore, Baker uses the powerful imagery in the background to undermine the “truth” of the written historical record.

The point of view in this cartoon also presents certain ethical and ideological problems for the reader. The audience, regardless of an individual reader’s race, is positioned inside the house with Jefferson, looking out, thus aligning the reader with the beneficiaries of the freedoms associated with the Declaration of Independence. In addition, readers are also aligned with the perspective of the slave owner in that the real violence happens far off in the distance, away from our realm of experience, and in a shadowy silhouette. Yet unlike Jefferson’s, our backs are not turned away from the violence; instead, we face it in a way that highlights a perspective that benefits from a contemporary understanding of the history of slavery in America and which allows us to see the irony of the cartoon.

The juxtaposition of the historical text and cartoon image resembles the postmodern use of intertextuality in historiographic metafiction—fiction that metatextually comments on and critiques the written historical record—as described by Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. In particular, Hutcheon sees feminist and African American postmodern writers as particularly adept at using historical intertexts to parodically challenge traditional power structures: “[Such authors] have gone far to expose—very self-reflexively—the myth- or illusion-making tendencies of historiography. They have also linked racial and/or gender difference to questions of discourse and of authority and power that are at the heart of the postmodernist enterprise in general and, in particular, of both black theory and feminism” (Hutcheon 1988, 16).² At its simplest, the cartoon undercuts the myth of equality established in the Declaration of Independence by exposing it to the historical truth of slavery, which was condoned by the same man who wrote those famous words about equality. This may be the example *par excellence* of the “ironic intertextuality” that Hutcheon describes (134).

While Hutcheon’s discussion focuses solely on prose fiction, Hillary Chute directly addresses the unique opportunities that graphic narratives can have in dealing with history: “In particular, graphic narrative offers compelling, diverse examples that engage with different styles, methods, and modes to consider the problem of historical representation” (Chute 2008,

457). Graphic narratives seem to be particularly adept at showing traumatic personal and historical events, Chute argues, because creators of such works “refuse to show [the traumatic side of history] through the lens of unspeakability or invisibility, instead registering its difficulty through inventive (and various) textual practice” (459). Additionally, “Graphic narrative suggests that historical accuracy is not the opposite of creative invention; the problematics of what we consider fact and fiction are made apparent by the role of drawing” (459). By utilizing this ironic juxtaposition of image and text, Baker’s single panel cartoon, while humorous, demonstrates comics’ ability to represent traumatic history through these tensions between image and text and history and creativity. This incident in Jefferson’s life likely never happened in this way, but the image and text speak to a truth about America’s failure to live up to its own basic tenets when it comes to the equality of its citizens.

This panel also provides a model for reading Kyle Baker’s historical graphic narrative, *Nat Turner* (2008), about the 1831 Southampton slave insurrection led by the eponymous figure. This is especially true of the way in which the graphic narrative relates to or engages with the various texts, both historical and fictional, about Turner’s slave insurrection, in the same way that Baker’s “Independence” image engages with the text of the Declaration of Independence. These texts, specifically, include Thomas Gray’s 1831 document *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (which serves as a literal intertext within Baker’s graphic narrative), William Styron’s controversial 1967 novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, and the responses to Styron’s novel recorded in John Hendrik Clarke’s *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*.³ Baker’s *Nat Turner* juxtaposes its images and text in a way strikingly different from the traditional graphic narrative, but one which exploits the graphic narrative’s potential to visualize historical trauma as Chute describes. Baker’s illustrated narrative contains almost no conventional verbal elements, such as word balloons or caption boxes, with the exception of a few sound effects and a single phrase—“RUN, DADDY! RUN!”—that repeats in several balloons over the course of three pages (Baker 2008, 82–84). Running in the white space of many pages, however, are quotes from the most significant original historical source for the story: Nat Turner’s 1831 confession to Thomas Gray on the eve of his trial for leading a violent slave revolt that resulted in the murders of fifty-five white people in Southampton County, Virginia. Baker quotes almost the entirety of Gray’s text, which Gray claimed was a transcription of Turner’s oral confession, but Baker leaves out some information about the uprising, the legal case, and stories of survivors clearly added by Gray.⁴ Baker also often adds to the illustrated narrative scenes derived more from general research on slavery than from the Turner story in particular, but such scenes speak more to the historical truth of slav-

ery than to the specific, known details of Turner's life. The juxtaposition of Baker's images and Gray's text is often complementary, but more often, Baker's visual narrative expands or even contradicts Gray's verbal narrative, creating a kind of antagonistic relationship between word and picture similar to the one deployed in the "Independence" cartoon.⁵ The polyvocality (a term used with some irony, as the dominant "voice" Baker deploys is a virtually silent visual narrative) of Baker's approach opens up the Nat Turner story in such a way that multiple interpretations of the slave leader's controversial life can be suspended within the single graphic narrative, and in a way that makes Baker's text more than just an illustrated version of Gray's narrative, as it may look like on the surface.

The relationship between image and text in visual narratives has been discussed by W. J. T. Mitchell, and Mitchell's conception of the "image/text" has in turn informed comics studies, in which many scholars have dealt with Mitchell's essential question: "The real question to ask when confronted with these kinds of image-text relations is not 'What is the difference (or similarity) between the words and images?' but 'What differences do the differences (and similarities) make?'" (Mitchell 1994, 116).⁶ This question certainly informs this particular study of Kyle Baker's work. In *Nat Turner*, the reader is in a constant state of flux, trying to align the visual and verbal registers of the work. How do the pictures relate to the words? Are the pictures illustrative, supplementary, complementary, or contradictory? All of these comparisons between the visual and the verbal function in Baker's narrative, but the relationship is neither easy to decode nor organic, as it would be if Baker's images were merely illustrations of Gray's text, or as it would be in more traditional graphic narratives, where word balloons and caption boxes usually occupy the same panel space as the images. In *Alternative Comics*, Charles Hatfield identifies "several kinds of *tension*, in which various ways of reading—various interpretive options and potentialities—must be played against each other" in the medium of comics (Hatfield 2005, 36). One of these, "code vs. code," explains the tension between word and image in comics: "comics depend on a dialectic between what is easily understood and what is less easily understood; pictures are open, easy, and solicitous, while words are coded, abstract, and remote" (36). Baker pushes this particular tension to its limit, and, as Hatfield's definition implies, the reader tends to favor the visual text over the written in the transmission of meaning. Key moments in Baker's visual narrative break free from Gray's verbal text to reveal elements of Turner's life derived from other sources, or aspects of slavery in general. In particular, Baker adds images that display other modes of resistance among slaves, including secret attempts to achieve literacy and the use of coded messages sent through drum beats. Baker also includes many atrocities associated

with the practice of slavery, including violent whippings and mutilations. These events are not mentioned in Turner's testimony as documented in Gray's narrative, but they have credibility because the reader's contemporary understanding of slave history includes such underground activities.

Michael Chaney discusses Ho Che Anderson's use of photography in his graphic biography *King* in a way that can be useful for understanding Baker's use of Gray: "In borrowing from this [photographic] archive, Ho Che Anderson fundamentally asserts the fungibility of image repertoires, capitalizing on their semantic manipulability to augment the generic expectations of biography and the graphic novel form, which seamlessly makes a routine out of the juxtaposition of images and the multidimensionality of their meanings" (Chaney 2007, 188). Replacing the photographic archive in the above quote with the historical archive represented by Gray, we can see how Gray attempts to fix Turner with a specific meaning—a monstrous criminal who slaughtered many innocent white people—while Baker's images open the reader to a more "multidimensional" understanding of Turner.

Chaney applies Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s conception of "Signifyin(g)" to the African American graphic narratives discussed in his essay, and that concept is relevant to Baker's work as well. For Gates, "Signifyin(g)" constitutes a variety of "language games, . . . figurative substitutions, [and] free associations" that appear in African American vernacular and literary discourses (Gates 1988, 58). Gates asserts that "The black tradition is double-voiced," meaning that texts in this tradition "talk to other texts" (xxv). This intertextual relationship, then, involves various kinds of revision from one text to another. One type of "Signifyin(g)," "motivated Signifyin(g)" (for Gates, something like parody), "functions to redress an imbalance of power, to clear a space, rhetorically" (124). Gates is primarily concerned with the way in which the African American literary tradition builds upon itself through one writer's revising another, and, for the most part, Gates presents "Signifyin(g)" as a primarily verbal or textual concept. However, it is helpful to see Baker's *Nat Turner* as "double-voiced" in a very literal sense, as the artist's images "signify on"—comment on, undercut, or revise—the text that comes from Gray's narrative. Baker's images also literally "create a space" for his version of Turner's story in relation to Gray's text on the very pages of the graphic narrative, occasionally creating interesting relationships between image and text. Through this relationship, Baker "signifies on" the entire historical and literary tradition that has attempted to fix Nat Turner in a variety of particular roles.

The dialectical imbalance between image and text is exacerbated by the historical reputation of Gray's narrative, which claims to be derived from Nat Turner's exact words but clearly contains enough editorializing, bias, and revision on the part of Gray to raise serious doubts about its veracity. Gray

opens the *Confessions* with a message “To the Public,” claiming that this is Turner’s direct confession transcribed by the lawyer: “I determined for the gratification of public curiosity to commit his statements to writing, and publish them, with little or no variation, from his own words. That this is a faithful record of his confessions, the annexed certificate of the County Court of Southampton, will attest. They certainly bear one stamp of truth and sincerity” (Gray 1831, 40). However, the language used for Nat’s “voice” is almost certainly Gray’s creation, and Gray’s own attitude toward the revolt is clearly expressed:

It will thus appear, that whilst every thing upon the surface of society wore a calm and peaceful aspect; whilst not one note of preparation was heard to warn the devoted inhabitants of woe and death, a gloomy fanatic was revolving in the recesses of his own dark, bewildered, and overwrought mind, schemes of indiscriminate massacre to the whites. Schemes too fearfully executed as far as his fiendish band proceeded in their desolating march. No cry for mercy penetrated their flinty bosoms. No acts of remembered kindness made the least impression upon these remorseless murderers. . . . Never did a band of savages do their work of death more unsparringly. (Gray 1831, 41)

Gray’s agenda is clear: to depict the rebel slaves as “fiendish,” “remorseless murderers” and Turner himself as a mad “fanatic.”⁷ Baker lets Gray’s representation of Turner and his revolution stand in relation to the cartoon images that intersect with and diverge from this document, thus suspending multiple interpretations of the historical event in a single work. Chaney’s description of other African American graphic narratives, including Baker’s collaboration on *Birth of a Nation*, is also relevant here: “each author seeks to confront and revise history, to discover or invent a usable history by repurposing inflexible items or images from an archive founded upon black exclusion and misrepresentation” (Chaney 2007, 199). The various revisions and reassessments of Turner’s story following the publication of Gray’s *Confessions* seem to confront Gray and attempt to resurrect Nat Turner’s lost voice within his own story.

Baker’s attempt to find a “usable history” in *Nat Turner* can be read through a historical lens that is not only influenced by a contemporary understanding of slavery in general, but also through a more recent controversy about Nat Turner in particular: the late 1960s/early 1970s debates that surrounded William Styron’s novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967). Though Baker does not directly cite Styron’s controversial and problematic prose novel,⁸ the debate surrounding that earlier work informs Baker’s graphic novel, and the intersections with and digressions from the key disagreements of that debate highlight a profound ambivalence about whose

“Nat Turner” is most historically accurate. In this sense, Baker also “signifies on” Styron’s novel and the surrounding controversy in a sense akin to Gates’s conception of the term.

William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* was published in late 1967 to almost universal critical acclaim, followed months later by a Pulitzer Prize. Upon the awarding of the prize, however, came a dramatic increase in negative responses to the novel, mostly from black writers and intellectuals. These responses crystallized in the publication of *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, edited by John Clarke. This collection attacked Styron and his novel on several points, ranging from historical inaccuracy to overt racism.⁹ Most of the contributors object to the idea of a white novelist’s appropriating a black cultural hero. For some, like Charles V. Hamilton, Styron is an apologist for slavery whose motivation is to further an insidious, racist agenda. Others, like Lerone Bennett, Jr., criticize Styron for reinforcing certain stereotypes of black masculinity and black history. The more charitable contributors, like psychiatrist Alvin F. Poussaint, attribute the problems to Styron’s unwitting and unintentional racism. Bennett lays out a clear statement of the disjunction between the ten writers’ historical understanding of Nat Turner and Styron’s:

According to the historical data, the real Nat Turner was a virile, commanding, courageous figure. Styron rejects history by rejecting this image of Nat Turner. In fact, he wages literary war on this image, substituting an impotent, cowardly, irresolute creature of his own imagination for the real black man who killed or ordered killed real white people for real historical reasons. The man Styron substitutes for Nat Turner is not only the antithesis of Nat Turner; he is the antithesis of blackness. In fact, he is a standard Styron type: a neurasthenic, Hamlet-like white intellectual in blackface. (Bennett 1968, 5)

In addition to the racial debate inherent here—the white writer imposing his own white sensibilities on this black historical figure—the parameters of the historical debate are clear as well: Styron has substituted a novelist’s imagination for historical fact. This very binary between fiction and fact is what historiographic metafiction seeks to dismantle, according to Hutcheon, and such binary challenging is also what Chute sees as the particular purview of the historical graphic narrative. Therefore, Baker situates his graphic narrative within a larger historical debate on the Nat Turner story, yet unlike the prose fiction and historical contributions to that debate, Baker’s *Nat Turner*, through the formal choices the cartoonist makes, resists the narrow limitations to which those contributions fall prey.

For both Baker and Styron, the appeal of Nat Turner’s story is similar: a virtually blank historical canvas, or, at the very least, one in which the avail-

able data are flexible enough to allow some creative interpretation. As Albert E. Stone writes in *The Return of Nat Turner*, “there simply are no texts or historical records of this event whose authority remains unquestioned” (Stone 1992, 24–25). In his preface to the Abrams edition,¹⁰ Baker points out that his first exposure to the Nat Turner story was one paragraph in an American history textbook, and future investigation yielded far less information than on other black historical figures like Harriet Tubman and George Washington Carver. In addition, and perhaps more significant, was the absence of a “Hollywood Nat Turner film” (Baker 2008, 6) that would fix the figure in the popular imagination.¹¹ Styron, in his afterword to the Vintage edition commemorating his novel’s twenty-fifth anniversary, expresses a similar childhood fascination with the story of the Southampton slave insurrection and the limited information available. He also confesses, “I later realized that one of the benefits for me of Nat Turner’s story was not an abundance of historical material but, if anything, a scantiness” (Styron 1967, 439).

But for Baker, that historical canvas does, ostensibly, include Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, and, more notably, the strong critical and cultural reaction against Styron’s novel that followed its publication. Yet none of those sources are represented in Baker’s bibliography, and their absence is conspicuous.¹² Such an absence could represent a “Signifyin(g)” as well: commenting on the relative worth of those sources by denying them a space within the work. Additionally, Baker chooses a silent, visual style that resists Styron’s introspective, existentially paralyzed version of Nat Turner,¹³ nor does he wholly embrace the image of the mythic rebel hero endorsed by many of Styron’s most vociferous critics. Instead, Baker’s Turner is motivated by both religious fervor and revenge at an unjust, dehumanizing system. Also, Baker depicts Turner’s revolt as complex, brutal, and torn by competing agendas. In the end, Baker engages with—either by embracing or rejecting—various interpretations of Nat Turner that have emerged from Gray’s *Confessions* through Styron’s novel and the resulting controversy to a contemporary understanding of slavery and history.

Baker’s Images/Gray’s Text

Contrasting sharply with Gray’s *Confessions* and with Styron’s novel, both of which fix Turner with a particular identity, Baker’s graphic narrative depicts Turner in a variety of ways: as a traditional trickster figure, as a revolutionary leader, as a religious zealot, and as a cold-blooded murderer, all of which are versions of Turner featured in representations of the Southampton revolt since 1831. Through this ambivalence, Baker’s graphic narrative exemplifies Linda Hutcheon’s concept of postmodern historiographic metafiction. Hutcheon explains, “[Many] postmodern novels . . . openly assert that there

are only *truths* in the plural, and never one Truth; and there is rarely falseness *per se*, just others' truths. Fiction and history are narratives distinguished by their frames, . . . frames which historiographic metafiction first establishes and then crosses, positing both the generic contracts of fiction and history" (Hutcheon 1988, 109–10).¹⁴ Baker certainly embraces the plural *truths* of the Nat Turner story with his multiple and occasionally contradictory depictions of the character. However, he also parodically plays with the "generic contract of fiction and history," especially in some of the ways in which he marketed the work in its original publication. The back matter for Baker's previously published *Nat Turner: Encore Edition* (2005) claims of the following volume, "All presented in a historically accurate & educational presentation which is quite stimulating to the adrenal system through inventive depictions of such things as beheadings & eviscerations" (Baker 2005b, 96). According to this statement, the work is both "historically accurate" and "inventive," which strongly resembles Chute's assertion that "Graphic narrative suggests that historical accuracy is not the opposite of creative invention" (Chute 2008, 459). The dichotomy of history and fiction remains humorously at play in these claims. As Hutcheon describes, "It is part of the postmodernist stand to confront the paradoxes of fictive/historical representation, the particular/the general, and the present/the past. And the confrontation is itself contradictory, for it refuses to recuperate or dissolve either side of the dichotomy, yet it is more than willing to exploit both" (Hutcheon 1988, 106). As with Hutcheon's conception, *Nat Turner* resists closure on the varying interpretations available on this historical event while also calling into question the veracity of the historical record. In this sense, rather than revealing a singular historical truth about Nat Turner, Baker imbues the character with many of the historical interpretations that have preceded this work, no matter what biases informed those interpretations and no matter how contradictory one is to the other.

Excluded from Baker's graphic narrative, however, is Styron's existential, introspective, and morally paralyzed version of Nat Turner. The visual narrative that Baker utilizes makes the depiction of interiority difficult. As Baker explains in the preface to the Abrams edition, "Comic books/graphic novels are a visual medium, so it's most important for an artist to choose a subject with opportunities for compelling graphics. The Nat Turner story has lots of action and suspense, also a hero with superhuman abilities" (Baker 2008, 6). Baker describes the work as first and foremost an action comic, and though that may be said with tongue in cheek (as is clear in the above quoted back matter to the *Encore Edition*), it's precisely that action which separates Baker's Turner from Styron's. Though Baker's Turner is never entirely the superhero the cartoonist claims him to be, Baker has chosen a medium

and a style that leave Styron's version behind in a way that inherently critiques Styron's novel.

Baker sets his narrative apart from both Styron's and Gray's immediately by opening with a forty-five-page sequence that tells a story of native Africans captured as slaves, their journey on the Middle Passage, and one woman's desperate attempt to save her baby from a life of slavery by throwing the infant overboard and into the mouth of a waiting shark. This sequence is virtually "silent," save for some sound effects of gunfire and some brief text from a slaver's memoir on the treatment of Africans taken as slaves. This separate story does not correspond to anything in Gray's version of the *Confessions* or in any other historical document of Turner's life. Baker reveals, however, that this story is being told by the young Nat: over the boy's head, a conventional word balloon floats, filled not with words, but with an image of an open-mouthed shark that is repeated from an earlier page, highlighting the way in which image supersedes, or in this case, replaces, text in the work's hierarchy of meaning (see Figure 2). The opening story is meant to convey one of the few autobiographical details that Gray's *Confessions* provides from Turner's youth:

Being at play with other children, when three or four years old, I was telling them something, which my mother overhearing, said it had happened before I was born—I stuck to my story, however, and related some things which went, in her opinion, to confirm it—others being called on were greatly astonished, knowing that these things had happened, and caused them to say in my hearing, I surely would be a prophet, as the Lord had shewn me things that had happened before my birth. (Baker 2008, 57; Gray 1831, 44)

The original text itself provides absolutely no details of Turner's amazing and possibly supernatural revelation, using vague language like "something" and "things" to stand in for the story he told. Baker, instead, creates a story that has credibility because it conforms to a general historical understanding of events that occurred in the slave trade. The addition of the Africa/Middle Passage narrative allows Baker to extend his own narrative and include a much broader vision of the slave experience beyond the limits of Turner's life in rural Virginia. The visual register here dominates the graphic narrative for such an extended period that it reinforces for the reader very early on the privileged position the visual has over the verbal. That hierarchy, then, sets the reader up to be skeptical of Gray's narrative when Baker's images contradict or otherwise differ from it.

The scene also has a greater impact on the reader's understanding of Turner. Baker embraces Turner's status as a prophet amongst his people much more than Gray does, and Baker privileges the inexplicable, contingent ele-

ments of the narrative in ways that Styron does not. As with other such passages from Gray, Styron ignores many references to Turner's mysticism and prophet-status.

In another example of the disjunction between image and text, young Nat Turner is reading the Bible when an approaching slave master causes Turner to flip the book upside down, scratch his head and cross his eyes in an ignorant pose, and then perform a lively dance for the entertainment of the master, thus enacting the playful "Sambo" stereotype in order to escape abuse and persecution by his master (Baker 2008, 88-90; see Figure 3). Baker does not base this on any corresponding scene from Gray. In fact, the text Baker quotes on the same page provides details of Nat's education that are not depicted in Baker's drawings. Baker portrays the young Nat Turner as a conventional trickster figure in contrast with the pious and somber figure that emerges from Turner's testimony and the existential, introspective figure in Styron's.¹⁵ Any humor is vacated from this scene, however, by the final image that punctuates it, where the young Nat is depicted with an angry scowl as the master walks away (90): the roleplaying Turner must do only fuels both his hatred for his masters and his rebellious spirit. In this scene, Baker uses the figure of Nat Turner and the racial stereotype depicted here in combination to signify a resistance to the dominant culture through the hegemony's own stereotyping practices: in order to keep his literacy and intelligence hidden, Nat has to act ignorant in a way that fulfills the master's expectations of a slave's behavior. Hutcheon explains how such historical "types" have a limited use in historiographic metafiction: "'type' has little function here, except as something to be ironically undercut" (Hutcheon 1988, 114). Baker, therefore, inserts a contemporary interpretation of the trickster image as a mode of resistance to a historical discourse, inscribed in the master's playful response, that "typed" slaves as "Sambos"—a mode that Chaney argues is common in African American graphic narratives (Chaney 2007, 175-76).

William Styron vs. 10 Black Writers: An Overview

Styron uses the "Sambo" image also, and this comes under fire from the Ten Black Writers. Particularly they object to the influence on Styron of the controversial views about slavery raised by Stanley Elkins in *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*. As Stone summarizes one of Elkins's more controversial claims: "an unopposed capitalist power gave southern slaveowners the license to impose upon the great majority of their working property a basic personality pattern—'Sambo' as childlike, carefree, self-deprecating victim" (Stone 1992, 265). Of the Ten Black Writers, Ernest Kaiser most vociferously objects to Styron's acceptance of Elkins's "Sambo"

image, “[Styron] accepts wholeheartedly the fraudulent and untenable thesis of . . . Stanley M. Elkins . . . that American slavery was so oppressive, despotic and emasculating psychologically that revolt was impossible and Negroes could only be Sambos” (Kaiser 1968, 54). In Styron’s novel, Nat Turner often refers disparagingly to fellow slaves who behave in this stereotypical fashion, so it is difficult to see how Styron “accepts” this image, as Kaiser claims. One memory that appears early in the novel shows Nat expressing more hatred of that behavior in his friend Hark than of the whites who inspire it:

I realized it wasn’t the man [Cobb] himself who annoyed me so much as it was Hark’s manner in his presence—the unspeakable bootlicking Sambo, all giggles and smirks and oily, sniveling servility. . . . He had the face one might imagine to be the face of an African chieftain—soldierly, fearless, scary, and resplendent in its bold symmetry—yet there was something wrong with the eyes, and the eyes, or at least the expression they often took on, as now, reduced the face to a kind of harmless, dull, malleable docility. They were the eyes of a child, trustful and dependent, soft doe’s eyes mossed over with a kind of furtive, fearful glaze. (Styron 1967, 55–56)

Nat becomes enraged and chastises Hark for going too far with his performance and recommends some kind of balance between obsequious servitude and open defiance that would allow Hark to maintain his masculine dignity. As this scene demonstrates, the Sambo image in Styron’s novel is a bit more complex than Kaiser makes out, but it’s also by no means the mode of resistance that Baker depicts it as.

In addition to claims that Styron supports such stereotypes, each contributor to *Ten Black Writers Respond* attacks Styron on the issue of alleged historical inaccuracies. For example, Styron significantly alters the family structure of Turner’s youth from that which is described in the available historical resources. According to Gray’s narrative, young Nat was heavily influenced by his grandmother and knew his father before the senior Turner ran away. In Styron’s novel, the grandmother dies (Styron 1967, 130) and the father runs away before Nat is born (133), leaving Nat under the sole care of his mother, a house servant who is frequently raped by her master. Also, Styron leaves out an escape attempt described in Gray: “About this time, I was placed under an overseer, from whom I ran away,—and after remaining in the woods thirty days, I returned, to the astonishment of the negroes on the plantation, who thought I had made my escape to some other part of the country, as my father had done before” (Gray 1831, 46). Turner explains that he returned because he was encouraged to do so by a “Spirit” who comes to him in a vision. This was, according to Gray’s *Confessions*, a significant turning point in his development as a religious leader among his fellow slaves.

Certain other omissions, additions, and revisions resonate throughout the ten essays in *Ten Black Writers Respond*. In particular, Styron is specifically crit-

icized for his depiction of Turner's education because Styron's version does not match that of Gray's confession (thus highlighting one of the specific problems of the criticism from that essay collection, as acknowledged by Albert E. Stone in his study of the Styron controversy: a privileging of Gray's narrative as historically and factually irrefutable, despite obvious evidence of Gray's own proslavery bias). In Styron, Nat is taught by the benevolent slave owner, Samuel Turner, and his daughters, as a kind of social experiment that prepares Nat for survival as a free man. Nat overhears Samuel Turner explain:

"It is I am sure a kind of unorthodoxy, and considered thus by some, . . . but it is my conviction that the more religiously and intellectually enlightened a Negro is made, the better for himself, his master, and the commonweal. But one must begin at a tender age, and thus, sir, you see in Nat the promising beginnings of an experiment." (Styron 1967, 124)

In an afterword published in Vintage's twenty-fifth anniversary edition of the novel, Styron explains his revision of the historical details of Nat's education: "Such a strategy, while disdainful of the facts, enabled me to demonstrate certain critical philosophical attitudes I couldn't have done otherwise, except didactically, yet still allowed me to remain, in the larger sense, historically faithful" (1967, 443). In other words, Styron used Samuel Turner to illustrate a debate about slave education that did take place at the time yet could not be fit into the novel any other way by the author, much in the way that Baker also adds historical information about slavery to the Turner narrative. These elements gain a sense of historical veracity because they "happened" in a general sense, even if the events themselves never happened within the lives of the historical figures. Thus, each creator tries to access a similar sense of historical truth while not feeling obligated to the extant and limited historical record.

Styron's Confessions as Baker's Invisible Intertext

In the historical source material, however, the details of Nat Turner's education are hardly clear, and it is on this point that one of the most noteworthy differences between Styron and Baker becomes evident. In the original *Confessions*, Turner briefly describes how he precociously but mysteriously achieved literacy: "The manner in which I learned to read and write, not only had great influence on my own mind, as I acquired it with the most perfect ease, so much so, that I had no recollection whatever of learning the alphabet—but to the astonishment of the family, one day, when a book was shewn me to keep me from crying, I began spelling the names of different objects" (Gray 1831, 45). The mystery here certainly helps maintain Turner's reputation as a prophet among his fellow slaves. However, later in the *Confessions*, Gray contradicts Turner's own story: "As to his ignorance, he certainly never had the advantages of education, but he can read and write, (it

was taught him by his parents)" (54). Gray does not explain where he got this contradictory information, and he does nothing to reconcile it with Turner's own narrative. Styron, therefore, elides the mystical/heroic image of Turner as an autodidact in order to present a debate about the education and benevolent treatment of slaves. Baker, however, offers a third option, in which young Nat sneaks into the big house and eavesdrops on the white children's education. In addition, other slaves are shown receiving severe punishment when they surreptitiously look at books, so Baker provides another explanation as to why Turner may be cagey about the origins of his literacy. Just as Styron eschewed available data and used Turner's education to make a larger historical point about slavery, Baker uses it to reveal the historically real dangers of self-education for the average slave. The final image of the graphic narrative reinforces this by showing a female slave sneaking away with a copy of Gray's *Confessions*: Turner's rebellion survives not only in that narrative, but also in the inspiration Turner provided to other slaves for educating themselves.

Styron's critics were also angered that the novel depicted Turner's rebellion as motivated by sexual longing for white women, occasionally manifesting itself as rape fantasies. These critics not only saw this as reinforcing a particular stereotype, but also felt it ignored historical evidence that Nat was indeed married (though these need not be mutually exclusive).¹⁶ The issues surrounding Nat Turner's marriage are particularly interesting in the way that the presence or absence of a wife suits different interpretations of Turner's story. In the 1992 afterword to the Vintage edition of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Styron returns to the defense of the novel that he made publicly in the late 60s and early 70s. In particular, he continues to defend the depiction of Turner as a celibate bachelor:

in the process of using the *Confessions* as a rough guide, I was struck by the fact that Nat referred to his relationship with quite a few people . . . but never to a woman in a romantic or conjugal sense; apparently he had neither a female companion nor wife. . . . A wife or companion would have had important resonance, and his mention of such a woman would have forced me to create her counterpart. But since no other reliable source ever spoke of Nat's being married (a pointless connection in the formal sense, slaves being legally forbidden to wed) or even being involved with a woman, it made it all the more plausible for me to portray a man who was a bachelor, or at least womanless, a celibate with all the frustrations that celibacy entails. (Styron 1967, 443-44)

Styron's defense problematically depends on the reliability of source material on the Turner rebellion, when Styron himself, along with historians who have addressed the event, admit that all the historical source material is unre-

liable to a considerable degree. In fact, much evidence survives that points to the existence of Nat's wife. An anonymous letter (possibly written by Thomas Gray, according to Tragle) published in the Richmond *Constitutional Whig* on 26 September 1831—while Turner was still at large—mentions “some papers given up by his wife, under the lash” (Greenberg 1996, 81). Thirty years later, Thomas Wentworth Higginson seems to take for granted that Nat was married: “Thus, for instance, we know that Nat Turner's young wife was a slave; we know that she belonged to a different master from himself; we know little more than this, but this is much” (Higginson 1861, 54). Stephen B. Oates's *The Fires of Jubilee* (1975) and Tragle both provide further evidence of her existence: her name was Cherry Turner, and she was sold off to Giles Reese during the same auction in which Nat was sold to Thomas Moore's farm after Samuel Turner's death (Oates 1975, 29–30). Therefore, Styron's insistence that “no other reliable source ever spoke of Nat's being married” in 1992 ignores the fact that sources did exist at the time of the novel's composition and more had been unearthed since.

Even more problematic for these critics, however, was Styron's inability to imagine why, exactly, Nat may have left his wife out of the confession to Gray. Clarke writes in his introduction to *Ten Black Writers Respond*: “Why did he ignore the fact that Nat Turner had a wife whom he dearly loved?” (Clarke 1968, vii). Clarke goes on to cite Higginson's reference in order to argue that “the very separation and helplessness of a man to protect his mate was part of the explanation for Nat Turner's revolt against slavery and the plantation system” (viii). In the end, Styron needed Nat to be single and celibate in order to serve the imaginative project that he was engaging in with the novel, and he argues that such liberties are available to the historical novelist regardless of the facts involved.¹⁷

Baker, however, chooses an approach to Nat's marital status that more closely resembles Clarke's connection between family separation and rebellion. Baker provides a five-page silent sequence that covers the course of the Turner marriage from romance and courtship through the wedding and on to the fateful auction, relying largely on the evidence from *The Fires of Jubilee*. Nat and Cherry (who is not named in Baker's narrative) first make doe-eyes at one another while Nat is pushing a plow and Cherry is bringing in laundry; in the background, the master approaches with a whip to break up the tender moment. The wedding ceremony, with the couple jumping over the traditional broomstick, is followed by two panels of domestic happiness, including Nat and Cherry in bed with two young children, which indicates that some time has passed. Next, an auction scene shows children and parents all being separated, and Nat is dragged away in chains from the rest of his family. Finally, Nat seethes with anger as he looks up at the window of

the big house, seeing the white couple putting their children to sleep (one of the children even has a pickaninny doll clutched in her arms). In a parallel scene, Cherry despondently examines her empty cabin (Baker 2008, 97–101). Following this, Nat appears in a dramatic image, shaking his fists at the sky during a thunderstorm, and beneath this image appears the text describing the vision that led Nat toward rebellion: “And about this time I had a vision—and I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened . . .” (Baker 2008, 102; Gray 1831, 46). Baker’s placement of this phrase below this image, and following the family separation sequence, demonstrates a “motivated” revision (to use Gates’s term, 1988, 124) of the historical text. Gray’s passage is quoted verbatim, but the juxtaposition of image and text alters the meaning of that text. The phrase “about this time” makes the causal connection between family separation and the rebellion, indicating that this was the event that pushed Turner into his revolutionary phase, as Clarke also argues. Much later, in the heat of the revolt, Baker flashes back to the traumatic auction when Nat, Will, and another slave named Henry discuss an infant that was left behind: “There was a little infant sleeping in a cradle, that was forgotten, until we had left the house and gone some distance, when Henry and Will returned and killed it” (Baker 2008, 121; Gray 1831, 49). Though Baker spares the reader a graphic depiction of the infant’s murder, he does use the family separation not only as a motivation for the rebellion but also as a justification for some of the atrocities involving children. Even later, in one of the more emotionally charged scenes, Will graphically decapitates a young boy with whom the slave was seen playing earlier in the narrative.

Both Baker and Styron attempt to address their own explanation for such atrocities. For Styron, one of the central problems in the Nat Turner story was the revolutionary leader’s inability to kill anyone but the teenage girl, Margaret Whitehead, as the author explains in the afterword to the Vintage edition:

as a novelist I couldn’t abandon the relationship of Nat Turner and Margaret Whitehead to the vacuum into which it had been cast in the *Confessions*. It was nearly inconceivable that in the tiny bucolic cosmos of Southampton the two had not known each other, or had not been acquainted in some way. . . . Since she was his sole victim, could the entire rebellion have been conceived as his retribution against her? . . . Had they been lovers? This seemed unlikely, given one’s convictions about his basic asceticism. Perhaps, however, she had tempted him sexually, goaded him in some unknown way, and out of this situation had flowed his rage. (Styron 1967, 446)¹⁸

Styron frames this unrequited sexual longing as the motivation for the rebellion, and the murder, then, becomes the climax of the novel. In Styron’s

novel, Turner has frequent contact with Margaret when he is loaned out to the Whitehead farm, and the family places considerable trust in him when he is given the job of transporting Margaret. During these excursions, they form a bond, and Margaret claims that he is the only person, white or black, with whom she can talk. Nat, on the other hand, develops detailed rape fantasies while they are alone together: “There’s not a soul for miles. I could throw her down and spread her young white legs and stick myself in her until belly met belly and shoot inside her in warm milky spurts of desecration” (367). Sitting in his cell awaiting execution, Turner recalls his tumultuous feelings for Margaret:

Suddenly, my ears still pounding uproariously, I am filled with a bitter, reasonless hatred for this innocent and sweet and quivering young girl, and the long hot desire to reach out with one arm and snap that white, slender, throbbing young neck is almost uncontrollable. Yet—strange, I am aware of it—it is not hatred; it is something else. But what? What? I cannot place the emotion. It is closer to jealousy. . . . (Styron 1967, 92)

This emotional confusion, where language of violence and eroticism is interspersed, also highlights the kind of existential paralysis that Styron depicts, making Turner less of the decisive leader that the Ten Black Writers claimed was the historically accurate version of the character.

Alternately, Baker’s depiction of the Margaret Whitehead incident relies heavily on Gray’s narrative. Four small pictures punctuate a page of Gray’s text, with a final picture of Nat swinging a bloody fence rail while Margaret’s pleading hand reaches up from below panel (see Figure 4). This exemplifies another of Charles Hatfield’s “tensions,” this one involving the sequence of individual panels vs. the surface of the page itself as a consciously designed unit (2005, 48). On this particular page, Baker designs the layout less with the temporal sequence of panels in mind and more with an overall design that uses the panels as brief illustrations of the printed text. In this case, then, Baker momentarily gives up authority to Gray’s narrative, privileging the written text over the images. This page also challenges Thierry Groensteen’s notion of “iconic solidarity” in the sequence of comic images: “interdependent images that, participating in a series, present the double characteristic of being separated . . . and which are plastically and semantically overdetermined by the fact of their coexistence *in praesentia*” (2007, 18). When viewed separately from the text, these images do not function as a clear interdependent sequence, unlike other sections of this graphic narrative; instead, the reader must rely on the text for meaning, more like an illustrated book. The lack of hard panel borders also causes the images to blend visually with the text. Even the killing itself, despite the graphic blood spray, takes place below the panel, and the reader does not actually get to “see” Margaret Whitehead. Baker

renders this one death as a minor incident in the overall slave rebellion, standing in sharp contrast to Styron's depiction of it as the central, culminating event in Turner's rebellion. The reversal of emphasis functions as an intertextual commentary, or "Signifyin(g)," on Styron by Baker: in the midst of a rebellion where many women and children are killed (and depicted graphically by Baker), this one does not warrant the attention it has received in other versions of Turner's story.

While Baker seems to reject Styron's version of Nat Turner, he does not wholly embrace the version proffered by Styron's critics, either. Toward the end of Baker's graphic narrative, images appear that stand at odds with the objections of the Ten Black Writers to Styron's novel. Specifically, they objected to Styron's claim that the failure of Turner's revolt was due to the betrayal of fellow slaves. In a jailhouse exchange between Gray and Turner, the lawyer explains,

"you not only had a fantastic amount of niggers who did not join up with you but there was a whole countless number of other niggers who was your active enemies. What I mean in simple terms, Reverend, is that once the alarm went out, there was niggers everywhere—who were as determined to protect and save their masters as you were to murder them. . . . Reverend, I have no doubt that it was your own race that contributed more to your fiasco than anything else." (Styron 1967, 397)

Turner feels this betrayal acutely, and it, along with his guilt over Margaret Whitehead's death, wracks his conscience in his final days. The Ten Black Writers argue that such betrayal never happened, and in subsequent debates, historians like Eugene Genovese came to Styron's defense, pointing out the occurrences of such betrayals and internecine conflicts in other slave revolts (Genovese 1968, 207–208).

Baker contradicts the Ten Black Writers' objection by including several scenes in which the revolution is undermined by slaves. One top-hat-wearing slave warns white slave owners of the approaching mob, and other slaves rush to inform whites of the atrocities that have occurred. This leads directly to alarms being raised and set in motion the events that will ultimately quell the rebellion. Also, Baker imagines many rebel slaves undone by alcohol consumption and shows Nat's difficulties holding the rebellion together due to such internal problems. Rebel slaves are even shown to be captured at gunpoint by loyal slaves. The depiction of the self-inflicted downfall of the rebellion creates an impression far from the mythical, inspirational vision that many of Styron's critics had for this event, as Baker carves a space for his narrative that rejects both sides of this debate.

Perhaps Baker's ambivalence toward Turner can best be seen not in the many versions of Turner himself that Baker employs, but in his depiction of

Benjamin Phipps, the white man responsible for Turner's capture. Baker draws Phipps not just as the epitome of white heroism—strong, handsome, romantic—but, in Phipps's first appearance, Baker has imbued him with traditional Christ-like features: he has long hair and a beard, and he is first shown being kind to both animals and children (see Figure 5). In fact, Baker doesn't name Phipps, so to the casual reader unfamiliar with the Nat Turner story, this could very well be Christ. And to whites of the time of Turner's revolt, Phipps was a savior, and by association, Turner becomes the devil that the whites must defeat in order for their world to survive. This image presents Baker's most troubling and intense irony in this work, one that becomes difficult to navigate if a reader has already invested in a more positive interpretation of Turner.

Kyle Baker's *Nat Turner* at once subtly rejects Styron's image of the doubt-wracked, existentially paralyzed, sexually obsessed slave while also resisting the call for a mythical rebel hero that the Ten Black Writers demand. As such, Baker delicately navigates the cultural and historical pitfalls for which the Nat Turner story is notorious. For Baker, that story is a complex and contradictory event—one for which the historical record is extremely incomplete, and the available data is unreliable due to the competing agendas behind the recording itself. In Baker's hands, Turner is a trickster, a religious fanatic, a prophet with quasi-supernatural powers, a father and husband seeking revenge on a system that separated him from his family, an insurgent, a devil to be driven out by a white savior, and a freedom fighter rebelling against oppression. Similarly, the insurrection itself is righteous, bloody, filled with murderous atrocities, undermined from within, and ultimately brought down by a Christ-like white man. Baker's multifaceted interpretation of Turner and his rebellion embraces the incompleteness and unreliability of this historical record, and therefore points to the futility of Styron's fictional enterprise, which attempts to fix the historical figure in a particular identity. However, Baker is also ambivalent about the mythical, heroic version of Turner endorsed by Clarke's contributors. While Baker's Turner can be read as a heroic freedom fighter during certain points in the graphic narrative, he is also a terrible fighter and an ineffective leader who ultimately cannot control his fellow rebels. The polyvocality that Baker utilizes in this work is entirely in keeping with what Hillary Chute sees as the potential that historical graphic narratives have to offer over other narratives, and it is also the method Michael Chaney identifies as a key resistance technique in many African American graphic narratives, tied directly to the role Henry Louis Gates, Jr. affixes to "Signifyin(g)" in the African American literary tradition. Baker uses the freedom afforded him by comics form and its complex rela-

tionship between image and text to suspend closure on the Nat Turner story and leave in play multiple Nat Turners in order to reflect the controversial and complicated history of this story.

Notes

¹ Kyle Baker ranks among the best known African-American comic creators working today, and his work as both writer and artist appears in both mainstream superhero (*Plastic Man*, *Deadpool*) and independent comics (*The Cowboy Wally Show*, *Special Forces*). His work has garnered some attention in comics studies, though primarily as an artist in collaboration with other writers, such as Robert Morales, Aaron McGruder, and Reginald Hudlin. See especially Rebecca Wanzo's (2009) and Stanford W. Carpenter's (2005) essays on *Truth: Red, White, and Black*—Baker's collaboration with Morales about the first black Captain America—and Michael A. Chaney's "Drawing on History in Recent African American Graphic Novels" (2007) which includes a discussion of *Birth of a Nation*, a satirical graphic novel by Baker, McGruder, and Hudlin.

² Hutcheon tends to group together postmodern feminist writers and African American writers as both attempting to use history to undermine traditional male, white power structures. As she writes, "it is feminist *writers*, along with blacks, who have used . . . ironic intertextuality to such powerful ends—both ideologically and aesthetically. . . . Parody for these writers is more than just a key strategy through which 'duplicity' is revealed, . . . it is one of the major ways in which women and other ex-centrics both use and abuse, set up and then challenge male traditions in art" (Hutcheon 1988, 134). Such writers include Alice Walker and Ishmael Reed in particular.

³ See Davis 1999 for a discussion of other fictional accounts of the Southampton slave insurrection, including Daniel Panger's 1967 novel *Ol' Prophet Nat*.

⁴ In addition to passages from Gray's *Confessions*, Baker also quotes once from Captain Theodore Canot's *Adventures of an African Slaver*.

⁵ What I describe here as "complementary," Scott McCloud, in *Understanding Comics*, describes as "duo-specific," "in which both words and pictures send essentially the same message" (1993, 153). However, in breaking down the various relationships that words and pictures can have in the medium of comics, McCloud does not identify one that specifically addresses the kind of antagonistic relationship between words and pictures that happens in Baker's work. The closest approximation for McCloud is "interdependent," "where words and pictures go hand-in-hand to convey an idea that neither could convey alone" (155). In his examples of interdependence, he includes one in which the narrative caption reads "After college, I pursued a career in high finance," while the image shows masked thieves trying to break into a safe (155). "Interdependent," therefore, can involve an ironic relation between image and text.

⁶ Key debates exist in comics scholarship over the essential characteristic that defines comics. One school, following Mitchell and including scholars like Robert Harvey, argues for the image/text relationship. As Harvey asserts, "the essential char-

acteristic of ‘comics’—the thing that distinguishes it from other kinds of pictorial narratives—is the incorporation of verbal content” (Harvey 2001, 75). Most important to this discussion of Baker’s historical graphic narrative, Hillary Chute embraces this definition in her discussion of historical representation and graphic narratives. Others, like Groensteen and McCloud, favor sequential images—what Groensteen refers to as “iconic solidarity” (Groensteen 2007, 18)—as the essential characteristic of comics. I would argue that Baker’s work in *Nat Turner* presents particular challenges to both standard notions of the image/text relationship and the iconic solidarity of sequential images on a page.

⁷ For more evidence of the failure of Gray as an historically accurate, reliable text, see Henry Irving Tragle’s *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material* (1971).

⁸ Baker’s bibliography is, in fact, fairly limited. In addition to Gray’s narrative, the only works specifically about the Nat Turner rebellion included in the list are Stephen Oates’s *The Fires of Jubilee* (1975) and Terry Bisson’s *Nat Turner: Slave Revolt Leader* (1988), a children’s book. Missing are Styron’s novel, John B. Duff and Peter M. Mitchell’s *The Nat Turner Rebellion: The Historical Event and the Modern Controversy* (1971), Henry I. Tragle’s *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831* (1971), and Herbert Aptheker’s *Nat Turner’s Slave Rebellion* (1966), among others. Styron and Aptheker especially seem to be willful omissions, as they are often linked as competing texts in the controversy that followed Styron’s novel. However, as Albert E. Stone points out, most post-1970 histories of slavery in general or of the Turner rebellion in particular fail to mention Styron’s novel at all. Perhaps, in that tradition, Baker is linking himself with historians instead of fiction writers and literary or cultural critics.

⁹ As Albert E. Stone discusses in *The Return of Nat Turner*, the Nat Turner debates were part of a larger social/historical context in the late 1960s that went beyond mere disagreements over a novelist’s use or misuse of historical facts. Stone exhaustively covers the entire cultural context for the Styron controversy from the late 1960s through the 1980s, including the anticipation built through publicity for Styron’s novel and later re-imaginings of the Nat Turner story. The focus in this essay, however, is on the specific historical objections raised in the most well-known criticism of Styron’s novel: the essay collection *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, edited by John Clarke. For a more thorough discussion of the critical and cultural debate that surrounded Styron’s novel, see Stone 1992. Also, John B. Duff and Peter M. Mitchell collect a variety of the most important documents from the debate in *The Nat Turner Rebellion: The Historical Event and the Modern Controversy* (1971).

¹⁰ Kyle Baker’s *Nat Turner* graphic novel has been published in several forms prior to the 2008 Abrams edition. Baker first self-published the work as a comics miniseries, though he produced only two issues of a proposed four-issue series. Baker collected those first two issues in 2005 as *Nat Turner: Encore Edition*. The second half was published in 2007 as a single volume by Image Comics, titled *Nat Turner: Revolution*. Abrams then collected the two volumes into a single book, along with a new preface and supplementary material.

¹¹ In a 2005 interview on the website Pop Image, Baker explained, “Part of the appeal of NAT TURNER, say, is the fact that there hasn’t been a Denzel Washington

movie, so the material will be fresh to many readers” (Baker 2005a).

¹² In a 2007 interview with Rich Watson, Baker discusses the research process he used to prepare for *Nat Turner* and the anxieties he experienced regarding historical accuracy:

Even today, “‘cause I’m working on Nat Turner, I was listening to recordings of interviews with slaves. You ever hear any of this stuff? That’s what I did on most of my research, actually, ‘cause I didn’t want anyone to call me a liar. I made sure I wasn’t gonna have anything in these books that didn’t actually happen for real. . . . You read books about slavery, very few of them are published by black people [laughs]. . . . Most of these books you read, they say great things like, ‘Yeah, they branded them, but it didn’t hurt!’” [laughs] I’m reading this and I can’t trust that stuff! (Watson 2007)

In the process of composing his graphic narrative, then, Baker was aware of disjunctions between histories of slavery, and he then foregrounds those disjunctions in his own work.

¹³ This is not to say that comics, even silent comics, cannot depict interiority. Baker, in fact, shows how a young Nat Turner’s imagination is sparked by the Old Testament story of Exodus and the freeing of the slaves (Baker 2008, 86–87). However, Baker’s artistic style does tend to favor action and violence over such introspective moments.

¹⁴ As stated earlier, both Chute and Chaney make similar arguments about the multiplicity of the historical graphic narrative and the African American graphic novel, respectively.

¹⁵ As with the other representations of Turner that Baker provides, there is historical precedent for reading Turner as a trickster figure. In an 1861 *Atlantic Monthly* article on the Southampton slave revolt by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the author describes two particular legends:

To this day there are traditions among the Virginia slaves of the keen devices of “Prophet Nat.” If he was caught with lime and lamp-black in hand, conning over a half-finished county-map on the barn-door, he was always “planning what to do, if he were blind,” or “studying how to get to Mr. Francis’s house.” When he had called a meeting of slaves, and some poor whites came eavesdropping, the poor whites at once became the subjects for discussion; he incidentally mentioned that the masters had been heard threatening to drive them away; one slave had been ordered to shoot Mr. Jones’ pigs, another to tear down Mr. Johnson’s fences. The poor whites, Johnson and Jones, ran home to see to their homesteads, and were better friends than ever to Prophet Nat. (Higginson 1861, 55)

For more on Nat as trickster, see Greenberg 1996, 27.

¹⁶ Much to several of the Ten Black Writers’ chagrin, Styron also includes a homoerotic encounter in Nat’s youth. The negative responses from these critics to this scene display a problematic homophobia, claiming that Styron was attacking Turner’s masculinity. See especially Vincent Harding’s and John Oliver Killens’s essays in Clarke 1968.

¹⁷ Styron does, however, deal with the issue of family separation through the character Hark, who is motivated to join the revolt after his family is sold off.

¹⁸ Davis points out that, among the novels discussed in her study, Styron is “the first to explore the mystery of Turner’s murder of Margaret Whitehead” (Davis 1999, 240).

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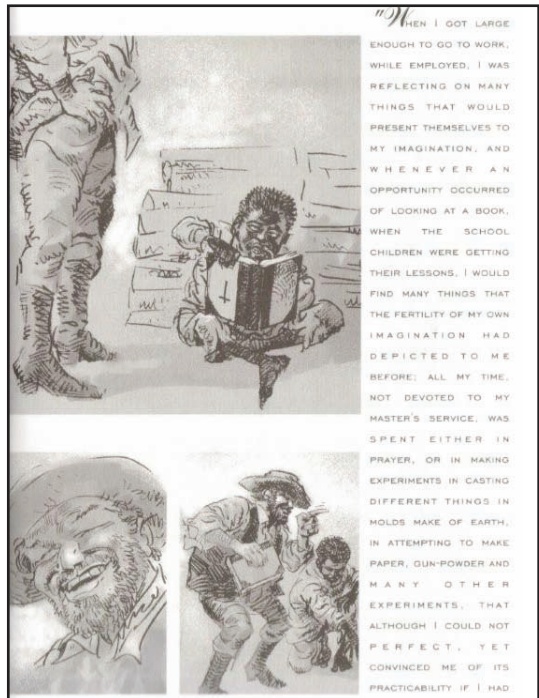
Figure 1 (Baker 2007)



(Figure 2 (Baker 2008, 57))




Figure 3 (Baker 2008, 88-89)



WHEN I GOT LARGE ENOUGH TO GO TO WORK, WHILE EMPLOYED, I WAS REFLECTING ON MANY THINGS THAT WOULD PRESENT THEMSELVES TO MY IMAGINATION, AND WHENEVER AN OPPORTUNITY OCCURRED OF LOOKING AT A BOOK, WHEN THE SCHOOL CHILDREN WERE GETTING THEIR LESSONS, I WOULD FIND MANY THINGS THAT THE FERTILITY OF MY OWN IMAGINATION HAD DEPICTED TO ME BEFORE; ALL MY TIME, NOT DEVOTED TO MY MASTER'S SERVICE, WAS SPENT EITHER IN PRAYER, OR IN MAKING EXPERIMENTS IN CASTING DIFFERENT THINGS IN MOLDS MAKE OF EARTH, IN ATTEMPTING TO MAKE PAPER, GUN-POWDER AND MANY OTHER EXPERIMENTS, THAT ALTHOUGH I COULD NOT PERFECT, YET CONVINCED ME OF ITS PRACTICABILITY IF I HAD

"BY THIS TIME MY COMPANY AMOUNTED TO fifteen, and nine men mounted, who started for Mrs. Whitehead's, (the other six were to go through a byway to Mt. Bryant's, and rejoin us at Mrs. Whitehead's). As we approached the house we discovered Mr. Richard Whitehead standing in the cotton patch, near the lane fence; we called him over into the lane, and Will, the executioner, was near at hand, with his fatal axe, to send him to an untimely grave. As we pushed on to the house, I discovered someone run round the garden, and thinking it was some of the white family, I pursued them, but finding it was a servant girl belonging to the house,



I returned to commence the work of death, but they whom I left, had not been idle; all the family were already murdered, but Mrs. Whitehead and her daughter Margaret. As I came round to the door I saw Will pulling Mrs. Whitehead out of the house, and at the step he nearly severed her head from her body with his broad axe. Miss Margaret, when I discovered her, had concealed herself in the corner formed by the projection of the cellar cap from the house; on my approach she fled, but was soon overtaken, and after repeated blows with a sword, I killed her by a blow on the head with a fence rail. By this time, the six who had gone by Mt. Bryant's rejoined us, and informed me they had done the work of death assigned them.






Figure 4 (Baker 2008, 129)



Figure 5 (Baker 2008, 144)