

# **“A night already devoid of stars”: Illuminating the Violent Darkness in Kyle Baker’s *Nat Turner***

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Kyle Baker’s *Nat Turner* (2008) not only illustrates the storytelling power of graphic novels, but it also reconstructs and reimagines Nat Turner and his uprising in new and challenging ways.<sup>1</sup> Baker’s text centers on Turner’s August 1831 rebellion, in which a group of enslaved men, led by Turner, visited sixteen plantations and killed fifty-five slave owners, including women and children.<sup>2</sup> The rebellion struck fear in the hearts of whites across the South, and in its aftermath, at least two free black men and forty-two enslaved persons were executed on the suspicion they might have been involved in the plot.<sup>3</sup> Largely through the tension between the novel’s pictures and words (or lack of words), Baker creates an account of Turner’s life that speaks against revisionist histories and, at the same time, connects the nation’s racist past to its supposedly postracial present.

*Nat Turner* primarily speaks to the United States’ present by pushing back against the nation’s pervading sense of individualism. The novel’s focus on systemic violence and injustice reminds readers, even in an increasingly neoliberal age, they are still connected to the larger societies they coinhabit and help create. Recently, for whites in particular, racial discrimination seems to be perceived as being disconnected from historic and entrenched systems of inequality. According to 2016 data from the *Pew Research Center*, 70 percent of whites in the United States believe individual rather than institutional racism is the bigger problem when it comes to discrimination against African Americans.<sup>4</sup> In

other words, most whites believe the racial ills plaguing the nation are the result of a few bad actors, usually located somewhere else.<sup>5</sup> Baker intervenes against this tendency to fixate on individual guilt or innocence. Instead, he uses his novel to emphasize how structural violence tends to stain and degrade everyone in the nation. Put simply, Baker makes it clear that in societies that condone and promote violence and human commodification there is no such thing as innocent, empowered individuals who watch from the sidelines. Rather, all who participate in unjust systems are enmeshed in violence done by that society—regardless of feelings about one’s own individual identity.

Baker accomplishes this focus on systemic injustice by revealing how American slavery created structures of power wherein to have public agency meant engaging in the dehumanization and destruction of other human bodies. Therefore, rather than becoming preoccupied with Turner himself, as a hero or a villain, Baker focuses on how systems of power go beyond individuals and their actions. Particularly, through the images in the novel, he creates a narrative in which readers encounter a sweeping sense of trauma. He then uses the few written words that do enter into the story to illustrate how the nation has traditionally hidden from or tried to ignore the true horrors of slavery. The words Baker includes are taken almost entirely from white-authored, nineteenth-century “histories.” These texts, unsurprisingly, belie much about the realities of slavery, and Baker uses his vivid and compelling artwork to color in the violence Americans so often want to ignore or explain away.

Also, by using images to counter older, written histories, Baker ties his work into a long African American literary tradition. The pictures in *Nat Turner* echo the artistic and oral practices that kept alive African memories and cultures in an America that denied black men and women the freedom to write their own stories. Baker’s text, then, pushes back against the notion of “post-blackness,”<sup>6</sup> which as literary critic Stephanie Li puts it, “threatens to become a dangerous abdication of history.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, if we forget the way current texts and cultural structures are connected to specific histories and systems of power, we are in danger of neglecting still-present ramifications born from those histories. African American resistance and resilience underlies the power of Baker’s artwork, tying his narrative to a legacy of nonwritten expression used to preserve and share black experiences. As Li goes on to explain, post-blackness seems to deny the reality that “literary traditions emerge from a web of intertextual meaning,” and “texts gain coherence by responding to the past and becoming part of a legacy that exceeds any single performance.”<sup>8</sup> The graphic novel’s unwritten language, along with Baker’s evocation of Turner’s life and the violence of antebellum America, places his text within a rich African American context. In doing this, Baker reminds readers, despite the impossibility of a singular history, there are still parts of the past that uniquely speak to black experience and can inform understanding of the United States’ present. Revisiting the often unwritten violence inherent in slavery also allows Baker to make it clear that

readers should pay attention to African American art and how it can illuminate frequently unseen aspects of the national character.

Finally, Baker’s interplay between text and image also illustrates an advantage of the graphic genre.<sup>9</sup> As comics scholar Coulton Waugh explains, “The special feature of [the graphic novel or comic] is that it jumps at the reader picture side first—you see the situation” and “the writing is a side explanation which the mind picks up, often without being aware of the process.”<sup>10</sup> Baker uses this “special feature” of graphic novels to reclaim Turner’s narrative from the written texts that have previously tried to define him. Instead of using this reclamation to try and present a factual account of Turner’s life, however, Baker uses his artwork and the conventions of comics to remind readers that history is always a matter of perspective. The images and pictures create competing “truths,” and if we were to take the words or images by themselves, we would only end up with half the story. When we consume both together, though, as graphic novels are intended to be read, we can gain access to a deeper appreciation of how a multitude of voices shape and produce history and culture.

Since narratives that include images are read, as Waugh puts it, “picture side first,” readers naturally develop a certain amount of faith in Baker’s drawings, but early in the novel he uses his artwork to resist this initial trust. While he certainly imbues the pictures with a truer sense of slavery’s intrinsic violence than is included in the nineteenth-century texts, neither the words nor the artwork can be taken as entirely reliable—at least in the sense that the events actually happened as they are depicted. For instance, we can recognize how the artwork rejects historical realism in the narrative’s opening action, when a slaver manages to lasso Turner’s mother while she is diving off a cliff.<sup>11</sup> Baker’s use of classic comic book action in this scene helps signal the book jacket’s claim to “a historically accurate story” is not so much a claim for the text’s factual veracity as a statement about how history is always a “story,” which makes *accuracy* a relative term. After all, the white lawyer Thomas Gray also begins his 1831 account, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*,<sup>12</sup> with the demonstrably false claim that his words are “An authentic account of the whole insurrection.”<sup>13</sup> Baker, then, reflects historian Hayden White’s assertion that “historical narratives . . . are verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences.”<sup>14</sup> Put again, Baker uses the relationship between his stylized art and the “historic” texts to blur lines between fiction and history, and in this blurring, Baker calls attention to the reality that conceptions of the past are inevitably created stories or fictions, no matter who is telling the story.

While the graphic novel does much to affirm history’s fictive attributes, Baker’s work is more than simply an effort to frame accounts of the past as being untrue or no longer useful to the present. Instead, he makes it clear there are real consequences to the stories in which the United States invests. By drawing attention to the all-encompassing cycles of violence that were born from fic-

tions of white supremacy, Baker illustrates the costs of societal beliefs in created narratives. In fact, the scope of American violence resulting from fantasies of white, Eurocentric exceptionalism is the central theme of Baker's story. Almost every page reminds readers that the history, which helped enable slavery, had a tangible and felt human price. *Nat Turner*, therefore, reminds readers that despite the reality that history is always a story, it is, nonetheless, important that we are conscious of which stories we give power and how those narratives can have real and inherited costs, especially for historically marginalized people.

At the end of the text, Baker gives a clear example of how American histories have promoted fantasies of white innocence. In the closing pages, he includes Thomas Gray's list of whites who were killed in the insurrection, but on the opposite page, Baker also adds an image of a slaughtered African American man, whose name would not have been included as one of the "persons murdered."<sup>15</sup> Baker, through this bloody image of a dead black man, adds ignored violence back into the narrative and asks readers to observe a broader account of the rebellion in all its gory details. This accounting means paying attention to the countless men and women who died nameless and were left out of the record by people like Gray. When readers acknowledge the full body count, it becomes apparent the blood Turner spilt was a small drop in an ocean of slaveholding, white-initiated violence. Witnessing the ocean of violence and Turner's response, however, leaves readers feeling somewhat sicker rather than encouraged or comforted by what they have seen. In other words, Baker does not make it easy to cheer on Turner's rebellion; instead, he asks readers to consume and take in the pain and suffering that accompanies even justified violence.

Much of the criticism already dedicated to *Nat Turner* recognizes the novel's pervasive focus on violence, but there is a wide array of reactions as to what this violence signifies. One popular response is to largely ignore Baker's more troublesome depictions and to read Turner as being cast as an exemplary and heroic figure. For instance, Michael Chaney's *Callaloo* article, "Slave Memory without Words," argues that Baker's reimagining of the rebellion allows readers to witness "Nat Turner's heroic example" and to discharge past trauma, which ultimately leads to a "recuperation of a usable history of slavery for contemporary African Americans."<sup>16</sup> In much the same way, Jennifer Ryan, in her chapter "Kyle Baker Retraces Black History," interprets Baker's text as being wholly celebratory of Turner. She casts Turner, according to Baker, as a martyr who works "as a central symbol of solidarity and resistance to social injustice."<sup>17</sup> Tim Bruno, in "Nat Turner after 9/11," also concludes that Baker, by imbuing his character with "Christological" attributes, has created another "too familiar Messiah."<sup>18</sup> Finally, in "Commence the Great Work," Jonathan Gray argues, "Baker clearly intends that his readers understand Turner's rebellious response to the indignities of slavery as heroic."<sup>19</sup> Gray, however, struggles to explain why Baker might include such graphic scenes of violence, especially against children, in his attempt to "update our cultural understanding of Turner."<sup>20</sup>

Like Gray, other literary scholars have recognized that Baker complicates Turner’s heroic legacy, but they also stop short of coming to a clear conclusion as to why Baker might create such an ambiguous and violent Turner. For instance, Andrew Kunka concludes that Baker works “to suspend closure . . . and leave in play multiple Nat Turners.”<sup>21</sup> Craig Fischer similarly determines that Baker’s text is “incoherent,” which “provokes dissent and response” from readers.<sup>22</sup> Both authors, though, conclude their essays before fully explaining what we are to do with multiple Nat Turners or an incoherent narrative—beyond simply recognizing that Turner was a complicated man or that history contains multiple perspectives. Therefore, while Kunka and Fischer call attention to the moral ambiguity of Baker’s novel and its postmodern emphasis on multiple truths, they seem less comfortable with the full implications of the text’s focus on a bloody and violent revolt, in which women and children, along with all of the novel’s central characters, die.

Comics scholar and literary critic Conseula Francis comes closest to explaining why Baker might include so much violence in his novel. In her insightful chapter, “Drawing the Unspeakable,” she argues that Baker’s text does important work in updating conceptions of enslaved persons. Francis explains the dominant image of enslaved people is often shaped by socially acceptable slave narratives, which ignore the full humanity and rage of those who suffered in the South. She contends *Nat Turner* allows us to see “righteous anger” born from the dehumanization inherent in slavery, and therefore, we gain a better perspective on why Turner struck back as violently as he did.<sup>23</sup> Francis, however, also wrestles with the novel’s full scope of bloodshed. While she thinks Baker “achieves exactly the right ambiguous tone in the story,”<sup>24</sup> Francis concludes her chapter with a series of questions rather than answers. She writes:

How should we judge the man who lashes out violently against the system that has degraded and dehumanized him, that stole his father from him, that stole his family away? How much do we sympathize with his desire to break the system that broke him? When is violence driven by righteous anger and when does it become reckless revenge? How violent does slavery have to become before violence is a justifiably appropriate response?<sup>25</sup>

These are all valid questions, but they point to how (like Gray, Fischer, and Kunka) Francis is still working to come to a firm conclusion on Turner’s role in the rebellion’s bloodshed.

While I would certainly agree Baker’s text elicits useful questions about Turner as a man, I also want to suggest that focusing on his individual morality misses an important aspect of the novel. I argue Baker, for the most part, rejects popular ideations of Turner (both in his originally depicted villainy and in his more recently created purity) in order to show how larger cultures inevitably

impact and shape individual behavior. Put more simply, Baker refuses to reconfigure Turner as someone who exists outside the devastating realities of slavery. He, instead, offers readers access to a man who has to try to survive in a society where agency and disturbing forms of violence are inextricably linked. This immersive violence generated a culture where no one truly escaped unscathed. Baker neither condemns Turner as a scapegoat nor serves him up as an uncomplicated hero. Rather, he takes a scythe to much of antebellum America, and the devastated landscape Baker creates offers few characters readers should wish to fully mimic.

Baker's rejection of antebellum society, however, does not mean he disapproves of the revolt or casts it as unnecessary. Instead, he uses Turner's rebellion to warn against all views and cultures that embrace and glorify violence. Throughout the United States' history, there is a tendency to revere those who best dominate and dehumanize other people. Whether it be George Washington's military prowess or Superman's ability to destroy his enemies, Americans love individuals who are able to overcome great odds and diminish those who stand in their way. As Frances Gateward and John Jennings point out, "the genre of the superhero is very much a white-male-dominated power fantasy,"<sup>26</sup> and Baker, in his novel, resists turning Nat Turner into simply another character, like the traditional superhero, who is celebrated because of his ability to commit and compel violence. Certainly, we can see how Turner could be understood as a kind of superhero. He takes on the entire institution of slavery and is able to strike a blow against an evil system. Baker, nonetheless, forces readers to reckon with the inherent horror and messiness of all violent solutions, which, in turn, compels his audience to reflect back on America's problematic conflation between heroism and the ability to devastate and kill.

Again and again in the novel, Baker demonstrates that torture and murder are always ugly and regrettable. In showing this ugliness, he frames even the best and most justifiable violence, like Turner's, as still being disturbing and hard to consume. Baker, then, echoes Martin Luther King Jr.'s call for nonviolence, and in many ways, *Nat Turner* illustrates King's claim that "the ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. . . . Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars."<sup>27</sup> I want to reiterate, though, that Baker's apparent rejection of violence does not mean he condemns Turner or judges the enslaved man negatively for rising up against his condition. Like King, who understood "the riot is the language of the unheard,"<sup>28</sup> Baker appears to recognize fighting back is sometimes the only and most appropriate option. Both King and Baker, however, also seem to posit that even necessary violence tends to produce more violence and should be mourned rather than celebrated. Violence, therefore, is cast in the novel as always being regrettable, even if it is being wielded for a just and righteous cause. Primarily through his drawings, Baker asks readers to gaze at the cyclical and destructive horror that characterized early America, and after witnessing this all-consuming violence, readers

are left with one overwhelming truth: very little of ideological worth survived the institution of slavery or the systems of violence it produced and promoted.

In order to fully grasp how *Nat Turner* demonstrates the failures and costs of violence, one must first learn to read the graphic novel with all of its complexities and layers of meaning. Baker begins educating his readers with the cover art, which contains an upraised black fist holding a bloody sword against a white moon (see Figure 1).<sup>29</sup> Each element of the composition offers readers

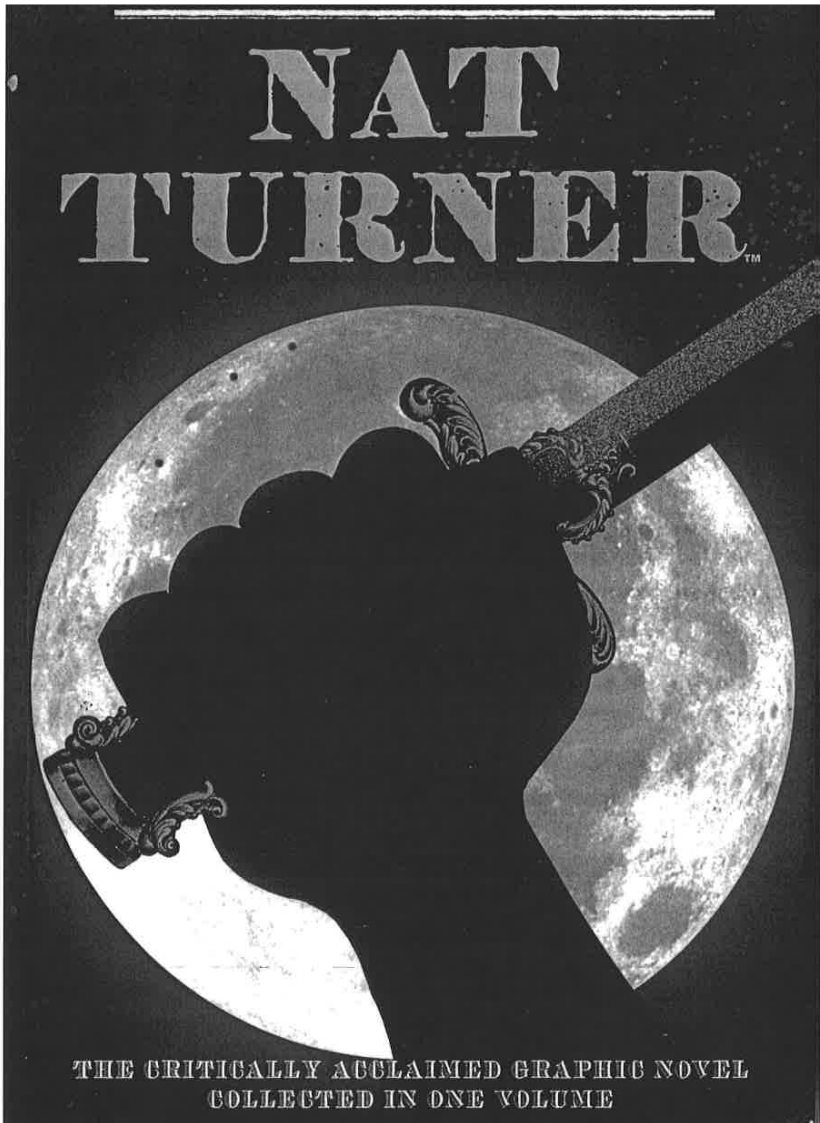


Figure 1: Kyle Baker. *Nat Turner*. (New York: Abrams, 2008), Front Cover.



insight into how the novel will play with ideas of history and fiction. Chaney also recognizes the cover's significance, and he describes Baker's artwork as "fusing two distinct styles of representation."<sup>30</sup> He labels these styles as, first, cartoonish, which can be seen in the hand, and, second, photorealistic, which he claims can be seen in the moon and sword. Chaney then goes on to argue that Baker's cover "emblemizes a primary objective of the book, to bridge chasms of history and memory, fact and inference,"<sup>31</sup> and he concludes, "the cartoonish is what seems most alive, while such correlates of photorealism as the material evidence of the past are left to appear coldly instrumental."<sup>32</sup> Much of what Chaney says here is true, especially about the "coldly instrumental" moon and the way the cover speaks to the novel's ambitions, but I believe he is missing something important in that there are actually three distinct styles of art on the cover. The two that Chaney identifies (photorealism and cartoonish) describe the moon and the fist, respectively, but the sword and blood are actually rendered in their own individual way. They are drawn in a style that bridges these two extremes and resides somewhere between photorealistic and cartoonish. It is this middle style that is continued in the majority of the novel,<sup>33</sup> and when we look more closely at these three artistic styles, we can begin to better understand an important element of Baker's argument.

What we can see is that the moon and the hand represent two poles of history that Baker rejects in favor of his own interpretation of the past, which is represented by the sword and blood. The first version of history Baker dismisses is reflected in the moon's photorealistic surface. This large, white orb, with all of its connections to lunacy, works as a symbol of the accepted, written historical record, which had until the late 1960s vilified Turner as a lunatic and a murderer. This version of history, in which Turner was almost exclusively cast as a villain or insane, has been portrayed by society as being both like a photo (truthful) and like the moon (appearing independent in its output). In reality, however, photos are the product of the photographer, and the moon only reflects the light of another source. In much the same way, the written history Baker includes in his novel reflects only the aims and intentions of the larger white society. By using a style in his novel other than photorealism, Baker then indicates he has little use for this false light that claims to illuminate the past.

Baker, though, also uses the cover to reject a very different characterization of Turner, one that emerged in the late 1960s.<sup>34</sup> Most notably in William Styron's *Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (1968), we can see how Turner was reimagined as a symbol of empowerment and virtue.<sup>35</sup> While the "ten black writers" provided necessary contradiction and contextualization to Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), their writings also largely ignored the more troublesome violence carried out during the rebellion. Baker, on the cover and throughout the novel, pushes back against sanitizing Turner's actions. As Kunka explains, "While Baker seems to reject Styron's version of Nat Turner, he does not wholly embrace the version proffered by Styron's critics, either."<sup>36</sup> Rather, he uses the novel to work between these two extremes, and the cartoon-



ish black fist on the cover helps us understand this refusal to use Turner as a straightforward symbol of masculine empowerment. The cartoonish style of the hand, which is a style Baker often uses but is not continued in this novel,<sup>37</sup> suggests that the fist, like the photorealistic moon, has no place in Baker’s account of Turner’s life. He discards both popular depictions of his subject, and neither the historical record that labels Turner a notorious madman nor the revisions that ignore the revolt’s violence work for Baker’s story. Instead, by associating the style that continues throughout the text with the sword and blood, Baker indicates his decision to face the era’s violence head-on. Therefore, even before opening the book, readers are prepared to navigate between two extremes of history and to focus on the all-consuming violence that damages every aspect of antebellum America.

In the preface, Baker further sets up how his novel will steer away from other attempts at capturing Turner’s life and legacy. Borrowing from the tradition of Henry James,<sup>38</sup> he uses his introductory remarks to teach readers how to consume and make sense of his book. The primary lesson he conveys is a warning against oversimplifying Turner and his rebellion. There is a tendency to assume authors who bring the past to life, especially in comic book form, will give readers valiant heroes to be imitated and clear villains to be condemned. Baker rejects these expectations, and when we look at the opening words, we can see Baker wants us to be suspicious of easily packaged morals and characters, even when we are considering Baker’s own attempt to depict Turner and his rebellion.

Baker sets up his novel’s complexity in how he talks about Turner as a model for current behavior. Late in the preface, after highlighting Turner’s “superior brain,” Baker draws a link between his own action of freeing himself from the publishing industry and Turner’s attempt to free himself from slavery. This comparison could be read as a straightforward example of how Baker wishes readers to embrace Turner’s revolutionary spirit, which is how Chaney reads it.<sup>39</sup> However, while Baker did gain some freedom through publishing his own work, it is also important to note his attempt at self-publishing eventually led him back to a large publisher. In fact, the edition containing the comparison is not self-published. It is published by Abrams, which is a company that produces everything from the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series to *Life’s a Bitch and Then You Change Careers*—a far cry from romantic freedom from large publishers. Put simply, Baker’s attempt to be like Turner is a short-lived one. The, as he puts it, “lovely edition you are now holding” is the result of his giving up on the notion that imitating Turner and rebelling is always a good idea.<sup>40</sup> In reality, Baker benefits from not fully following Turner’s example, as his book becomes more “lovely” and reaches a wider audience when it is published by Abrams, one of his “all-time favorite publishers.”<sup>41</sup> Baker’s preface, then, teaches his readers that neat, easy truisms should not be trusted. Ultimately, even what comes from Baker should be carefully questioned and evaluated, and by speaking against himself in the preface, Baker prepares readers to be skepti-

cal and critical consumers of history, ready to engage with the nuances of a time period full of contradictions, falsehoods, and violence.

Baker then concludes his preface with a gesture toward the power of reading, which further indicates he wants to promote something beyond just violent rebellion. He informs readers that his ability to write and eventually publish *Nat Turner* with Abrams is the product of his “free access to reading.”<sup>42</sup> This concluding thought, where Baker points to the importance of literacy, links the preface to the novel’s very first picture, which actually precedes Baker’s opening words. The image is drawn opposite the title page, and all we see is a book and a pair of eyes illuminating an otherwise dark page. By placing this image at the very beginning of the text before any words, besides the name “Nat Turner,” Baker signals his version of the insurrection will advance literacy, rather than violence, as being capable of shedding light on darkness.

In other words, through the preface and image of the illuminated book, Baker warns readers against embracing the novel’s nihilistic violence. Rather, he frames his text with hope for the future, a hope that he closely links to advantages accessed through education and reading. This belief in education as being a potent and dangerous tool that can be used against those in power is revisited throughout the novel. Early in the story, readers see an enslaved woman risking everything to read a few pages from a book. When she is caught, Baker shows the fear this causes white slave owners, as the woman is suspended and whipped for her transgression.<sup>43</sup> Later, Baker shows Turner reading through the Bible, and we see how the book opens the young man’s eyes to the injustices of slavery and the promises of freedom.<sup>44</sup> As Baker points out early in the preface, Turner “became a leader of men because he had developed his mind by reading.”<sup>45</sup> This ability to gain agency through education is central to the hope Baker offers, and he uses it to cut against the cynicism that could otherwise dominate the novel.

While Baker rejects the pessimism born from a belief in unending violence, his novel also does not gloss over the atrocities that led to inevitable bloodshed. Other scholars, such as Conseula Francis and Michael Chaney, have already done much to demonstrate how *Nat Turner* sheds light on the existing record’s inadequacies.<sup>46</sup> Before moving forward, though, I want to emphasize how Baker uses the graphic form to try to capture the real and human roots of American violence. The pictures force us to contend with the physical violation of actual beings, which is often lost in texts relying solely on the written word. Certainly, there is a long legacy of historically minded writers who have tried to illuminate the visceral realities of enslavement. In joining together text and image, however, Baker asks readers to witness, in a relatively new way, the institution’s consumption of men, women, and children. In the novel’s opening pages, we can see a clear example of how visual art can add to what written history often leaves out. The action starts in Africa, and Baker draws a serene village where families are peacefully going about their business. Slavers, however, soon disrupt this tranquility, and over the next 25 unnarrated pages, read-

ers watch as people are trampled by horses, blown away by shotgun blasts, and Nat Turner’s mother is captured, stripped, shaved, and branded.

The cumulative effect of these images is somewhat overwhelming, and by the time words enter into the narrative,<sup>47</sup> readers have already been bombarded with the horrors of the slave trade. Baker then uses a cold explanation from Brantz Mayer’s *Captain Canot or Twenty Years of an African Slaver* (1854) to describe what has just happened to Turner’s mother.<sup>48</sup> As Conseula Francis explains, the contrast between words and images demonstrate the importance of Baker’s addition to the story and the potential power of pictures.<sup>49</sup> Mayer simply writes, “The head of every male and female is neatly shaved, and if the cargo belongs to several owners, each man’s brand is impressed on the body of his respective negro. . . . They are entirely stripped, so that women as well as men go out of Africa as they came into it—naked.”<sup>50</sup> The antiseptic, neat language of *Captain Canot* is placed on the page directly below an image of Turner’s mother, who has a slaver’s hand around her neck and a glowing razor blade pushed against her face, ready to shave and cut her (see Figure 2).<sup>51</sup> When readers turn the page, they again encounter Turner’s mother, whom they have already cheered for while she bravely resisted capture. They stare into her eyes as she is pinned to the ground screaming while the letter W, perhaps for the whites who now claim to own her, is seared into her flesh.<sup>52</sup> The shaving and



**Figure 2:** Kyle Baker. *Nat Turner*. (New York: Abrams, 2008), 36.

branding Baker depicts, when placed next to Mayer's brief and cold description of the same actions, illustrates how the novel's artwork adds a physical body and human face to the anonymous violence described by older, written histories.

Baker, however, complicates more than just the written historical record. As the novel continues, his artwork also turns its sights on violence hiding behind popular American mythologies. This disruption of myth is important because, like accepted histories, cultural fictions shape much of what is conceived as historically accurate or as truly authentic. Baker challenges American mythologies in several ways, but he uses his text primarily to intervene against romanticized accounts of the plantation. Few myths have captured the national imaginary as heartily as what Craig Thompson and Kelly Tian call the "Moonlight and Magnolia myth."<sup>53</sup> They explain that this myth frames the South as being descendant from "an idyllic society devoted to a moral code of Christian honor and virtue that opposed the greed, avarice, and lowly mercantile interests attributed to Northern industrialists."<sup>54</sup> In recent years, the idealized antebellum South has perhaps lost some of its status, but nonetheless, it is still reimagined and given life. We can see its continued presence not only through the sustained popularity of films like *Gone with the Wind* (1939), but also through television shows like *Hart of Dixie* (2011–2015) and *Southern Charm* (2014–2018) or films like *The Blind Side* (2009), that breathe life into older forms of Southern, white "gentility." These more recent productions, despite their gestures toward racial accord, reify versions of plantation romance by how they try to sever the link between Southern aristocracy and the racial realities that helped produce that wealth. These productions draw from the myth that noble, genteel whites can live and enjoy the luxuries of the "big house" while escaping the stain of slavery's legacy.

"Moonlight and Magnolia" productions are united by their depiction of the region as a space where racism and racists are either nonexistent or simply inconvenient distractions to an otherwise enlightened and largely white populace. This version of an unproblematic and romantic region creates space for national audiences to embrace a fantasy where the inherent dehumanization of slavery has no relevance to the wealth and harmony they enjoy. Baker, though, in a way similar to how he highlights the inadequacies of the historical record, confronts readers with the shortcomings of mythologies that disconnect wealth from the marginalized labor used to produce it. In other words, Baker employs *Nat Turner* to disrupt imagined innocence, and to do this, he characterizes his plantation as an unquestionably violent and ugly place that left little unsoiled.

Baker's focus on the South, however, also runs a risk of simply feeding into another fantasy of national innocence, where the problems of slavery and racism are funneled onto the South and safely enclosed there.<sup>55</sup> This imagined version of the United States tends to position slavery's legacy as belonging only to a specific region of the nation, which makes its material impact seem irrelevant to most Americans. Baker, however, by confronting the mythology

of the plantation, is in reality speaking against a national investment in Southern commodities and enslaved labor. As books such as Sven Beckert’s *Empire of Cotton* (2014)<sup>56</sup> or the collection of essays in *Plantation Kingdom* (2016)<sup>57</sup> have recently explained, the entire nation is intimately linked to slavery and its profits. The United States relied on enslaved labor for its financial place in the world, and therefore, its legacies stain the entirety of the national fabric. Baker, then, by revealing the horrors of the plantation, rejects national fantasies of benign antebellum capitalism and confronts readers with the harsh realities that helped form and build the U.S. economy.

One important way Baker dismantles the plantation mythos is by taking on its most popular symbol: the romanticized icon of the Southern belle.<sup>58</sup> Brought to life, most notably, in Margret Mitchell’s still ubiquitous *Gone with the Wind*, the Southern gentlelady became a national symbol of grace and femininity. In the novel (1936) and then film (1939), the character of Melanie Wilkes is portrayed as an unimpeachable embodiment of virtue. Her soft, delicate disposition symbolizes the mythologized beauty and serenity of the American agrarian who was being replaced by rougher and more utilitarian capitalists—like Scarlett O’Hara and Rhett Butler. Melanie and her husband Ashley, along with their bucolic home Twelve Oaks, epitomized the projected romance of a bygone age that was disappearing in the wind, and whites, in every part of the nation, mourned this passing. Baker dismantles this mythology of Southern aristocracy by illustrating how these narratives discount and erase the lives and labor of enslaved men and women who suffered to produce the luxuries those like Melanie and Ashley enjoyed. Put simply, Baker does not allow a sanitized account of slavery where violence can be swept under the large rugs of the antebellum mansion or shed onto the backs of Southerners alone. Rather, he asks readers to gaze directly at an American history where violence is manifested throughout the society and no one escapes unharmed.

In Baker’s novel, there are neither Southern belles nor romantic scenes of agrarian beauty. Instead, he draws the Southern woman-of-the-house as an obese lady lying in her bed while enslaved African Americans serve her tea and take away her excrement.<sup>59</sup> Baker, in this image of the woman, provides readers with a window into the means by which the belle’s status was attained. To drive this cost home, he places the reclined figure opposite two bloody, dismembered hands, which stain the plantation ground and further draw attention to the blood spilled for her comfort (see Figure 3).<sup>60</sup> These African American hands, which were cut off because an enslaved man used them to create his own cultural production (by playing a drum), not only serve as a sharp contrast to the lady’s opulence, but they also illustrate the silencing of African American art and music so the myth of the plantation could endure. In this depiction, we can begin to wrestle with the costs lurking behind national investments in white myths of romance and innocence.<sup>61</sup>

Baker also goes on to show that the manufactured innocence, which the woman enjoys, does not actually afford any real separation or protection from





**Figure 3:** Kyle Baker. *Nat Turner*. (New York: Abrams, 2008), 68.

the violence perpetuated by the plantation economy. He demonstrates that the bloodshed she participates in, even as she lies in her bed, still begets more violence, and as Simone Weil points out, violence always tends to revisit itself upon those who believe they can use it with impunity.<sup>62</sup> In the novel, no one is safe from the ramifications of slavery, and Baker uses the death of a white

child to illustrate how presumed innocence does not provide asylum from the violence carried out by the larger society. We first see the doomed white boy in an encounter that takes place before the insurrection. The young child smiles and waves at a large black man who is chopping wood. The enslaved man looks down at the boy, grins, and waves back—all seems peaceful and serene, and the action of the story continues.<sup>63</sup> We meet the boy again, though, during the rebellion as he turns to see a group approaching in the distance. The boy once again smiles, and with arms outstretched, he runs to meet the crowd of men and women. In the group is the familiar face of the black man whom the boy knows, but instead of responding with a friendly smile and a wave, the man, who is now liberated, swings his axe and decapitates the young boy.<sup>64</sup> This act of violence, like much of the novel, is hard to consume, but it illustrates an important point that goes beyond just acknowledging children died in the revolt. What Baker shows in these two scenes helps readers understand that infantile naivety and avoiding the truth neither excuses nor shelters individuals from the ugly repercussions of a society built on the oppression of its inhabitants.

Undoubtedly, the white child believes he is innocent and also loved by the enslaved man. However, the boy dies nonetheless, and through this scene of violence, Baker suggests even if antebellum whites hid behind a childlike belief in their own innocence, all participants related to the institution of slavery were implicated in the society's collective actions. Patricia Yaeger defines this childlike inability or unwillingness to honestly assess the region's racial reality as the “unthought known,” which is “to register horrendous facts without thinking about them.”<sup>65</sup> Yaeger goes on to describe this term, which has roots in psychology, “as a residue of childhood imprinting us with expectations about the way the world will shape itself (or fail to shape itself) around us.”<sup>66</sup> In the full-page image of the decapitated boy, Baker rejects the idea that this self-perpetuated innocence creates any real distance from the society's violence. The boy (whether he realizes it or not) participates in a culture that degrades and dehumanizes people. As a result, he stands to suffer along with the rest of society. Therefore, while Baker acknowledges there were certainly individuals in antebellum America who clung to the myth that they were innocent or beloved by those they enslaved, he shows their involvement in slavery still made them susceptible to the violence that defines the plantation. In this boy's beheading, then, we can again see Baker calling our attention back to the ways violence seeped into every facet of the culture and how in such an environment, individual innocence or guilt becomes immaterial in the face of systems that demand an ever-increasing body count.

Readers further witness how antebellum violence damaged every aspect of society, as Baker also shows how slavery marred intraracial relationships as well as interracial ones. The ugly reality that enslaved people, at times, aligned their values with their captors is often one of the harder aspects of slavery to consume. Discussions of ways black men and women internalized ideologies of the white power structure and reinforced institutions that were used to harm



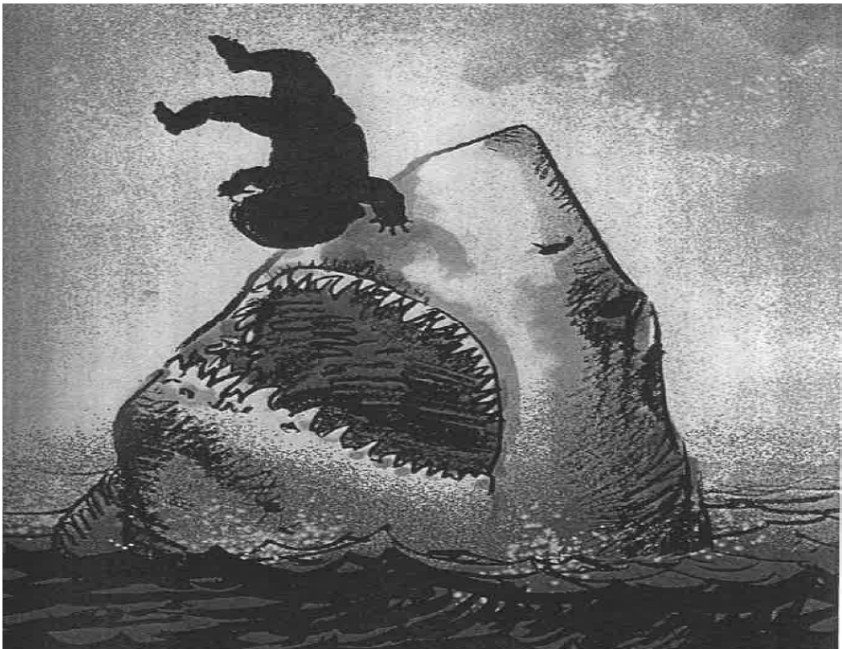
them can come uncomfortably close to victim blaming; however, avoiding this aspect of slavery omits the abhorrent ways African Americans were historically pitted against one another to benefit white society. Examples of this kind of alignment with Eurocentric ambitions are apparent in many of the early slave narratives in which, consciously or unconsciously, enslaved men and women supported the very practices and ideologies that enslaved them.<sup>67</sup> Baker explores this uncomfortable reality throughout the novel, and while he drives home the truth that whites were solely responsible for slavery and its atrocities, he also illustrates how the institution's inherent dehumanization extended across color lines, creating a pervading, toxic culture in which to have public agency and power meant dominating and degrading those around you.

One particularly horrific account of intraracial violence is encapsulated in a series of panels at the beginning of the novel. The scene starts with an aged man (whose hands we have already discussed) slipping off into the woods to play a tribal drum. The rich rhythmic "Boom, B-B-Boom, B-B-Boom, Boom, Boom, B-Boom" spreads throughout the pages,<sup>68</sup> but just as the man becomes consumed with his music, he hears something in the woods behind him. He turns as readers turn the page, and they find a shiny double-barreled shotgun pointed at the old man's head. In what follows, readers experience some of the novel's most disturbing depictions of violence. After the old man is captured, a large African American man whips the aged drummer, who has been stripped naked and is suspended by his wrists.<sup>69</sup> The depiction of the old man's torture is graphic. In the first panel, we can see blood dripping off the whip and collecting around his feet as women and children watch in horror, but it gets worse. Over the next three pages, the enslaved man is cut down; salt is rubbed into his wounds; his arms are pulled out of joint; and his hands are cut off. This violence is undoubtedly carried out on the orders of the white slave owner, who remains present throughout the torture; however, Baker wants to make it clear that the large black man, who is doing the whipping, the salt rubbing, and the hand chopping, is enjoying the power he has been given. We can see this enjoyment plainly as Baker draws the enslaved man with a large smile on his face while he holds up the salt to rub into the elderly man's wounds.<sup>70</sup>

This depiction of torture is perhaps an incomplete characterization of intraracial interaction, as Baker does not fully delve into how whites manipulated enslaved men and women to carry out these acts of violence.<sup>71</sup> The images, however, send readers' minds spinning in potentially productive ways. The younger enslaved man is working within the confines of his environment to maintain a semblance of agency and self-control. As a result, he supports and aids the corrupt power structure by lashing out at those who are even more marginalized. The horrific images Baker shows, therefore, again demonstrate how slavery dehumanized all who came in contact with it. They also illustrate how the institution led to multidimensional, widespread violence that cannot be measured or defined simply by looking across racial lines. To better grasp the damage done to the United States by slavery, one must look at the ways it

helped create a system wherein gaining societal empowerment meant violating another person’s body. Understanding this relationship between violence and power in America is key to recognizing the import of Turner’s rebellion, as Baker depicts it, in that this relationship frames how the insurrection can be necessary and heroic while also being a regrettable continuation of a damaging system.

Baker further illustrates how antebellum violence is complicated and often transcends traditional delineations of guilt and innocence by coming back, again and again, to the death of children. The white boy is neither the first nor the last child to die in the novel. In fact, the brutalization of young people plays a major role in how Baker reveals slavery’s systemic destructiveness. The first child who dies is an infant thrown overboard during the Middle Passage. Readers witness a young African woman, who, similar to Sethe in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), decides to end her baby’s life rather than see the child survive in slavery. The young woman seizes her infant, runs to the edge of the ship, and hurls the baby toward the open mouth of a waiting shark. The white slavers try to protect their “property,” but the mother fights them off and eventually manages to free her child into death (see Figure 4).<sup>72</sup> Again, as Conseula Francis points out, “Baker puts us in the position of applauding something awful,”<sup>73</sup> but Baker makes it clear, as the novel continues, that if the mother did not act, the child would simply be devoured in another way. Loss of life and liberty are fundamental realities of slavery, and 44 pages later, Baker illustrates this



**Figure 4:** Kyle Baker. *Nat Turner*. (New York: Abrams, 2008), 55.

unavoidable consumption by revisiting the image of the shark and child. Baker draws the man who buys Nat Turner's youngest child with open arms, like the open jaws of the shark, ready to consume human flesh (see Figure 5).<sup>74</sup> In this connection, Baker shows a pattern between enslavement and the devouring of black children.



**Figure 5:** Kyle Baker. *Nat Turner*. (New York: Abrams, 2008), 99.

Later, Baker again demonstrates that this violence has eventual repercussions for whites. Not only do we see the beheaded child, but also, during the rebellion, Turner contemplates whether or not they should go back to kill an infant they had left behind. As he thinks, he reflects on the scene of his children being taken from him.<sup>75</sup> In the next panel, after the recalled image, readers

see previously enslaved men going back and hacking apart a white, sleeping baby. Through the link between these images of devoured children, who are both black and white, readers can again recognize a white-initiated cycle of violence that starts with the slave trade and extends through the righteous anger of the rebellion.

Yet even during Turner's wholly justified rebellion, the depictions of dead children are difficult to stomach, and Baker uses these images to help illustrate the scope of antebellum violence. As we discussed earlier, the novel forces readers to confront the American "story" and reexamine the way we consume it. He uses the scene where Turner's men kill a sleeping infant, along with the depictions of other murdered children, to again ask readers to revisit the cost of violence. One of the most well-known aspects of Turner's revolt is that children died, but Baker shows how history often leaves out the devastating and cyclical violence that led to these deaths. Thomas Gray describes the scene where the men go back to kill the baby, writing simply that Turner told him, "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 to kill it."<sup>76</sup> Baker includes Gray's words in his text, but while in both accounts a baby dies, readers of Baker's work get to see the more complete story. The death of this white infant begins with a pattern of devoured black children, and therefore, the white child's death fits into a logical cycle of violence, where blood is repaid with more blood. However, while Baker clearly demonstrates Turner's revenge is more than merely justified in the "eye for an eye" tradition, he still makes the violence an awful thing to ingest. In fact, it is hard to imagine a scenario where harming young people and babies causes anything but a negative reaction. By presenting readers with several murdered and damaged children, Baker clearly

shows how violence, even against those who may deserve it, is still ugly and unfortunate.

As readers consume more and more of the novel’s bloodshed, they begin to search for some sort of redemption or a hero to stop the violence. Baker, however, initially resists their desire for relief and instead gives his audience two ineffective Christ figures who are pitted against one another in the rebellion. First, he draws the man who leads the effort to stop Turner. The white man Baker creates has the facial features and attributes of common, Western depictions of Christ. He is introduced as a gentle and kind person who cares for children and animals,<sup>77</sup> and upon hearing the alarm bells, he runs to protect his family with no regard for his own safety.<sup>78</sup> While helping to bring about the end of the insurrection, he receives an axe wound to the head and falls dead. He then, like Christ, dies adorned with a crown of blood after sacrificing himself for others. Baker, though, shows the problems with this Christ figure, as the white man dies fighting against the novel’s other unsuccessful savior: Nat Turner.

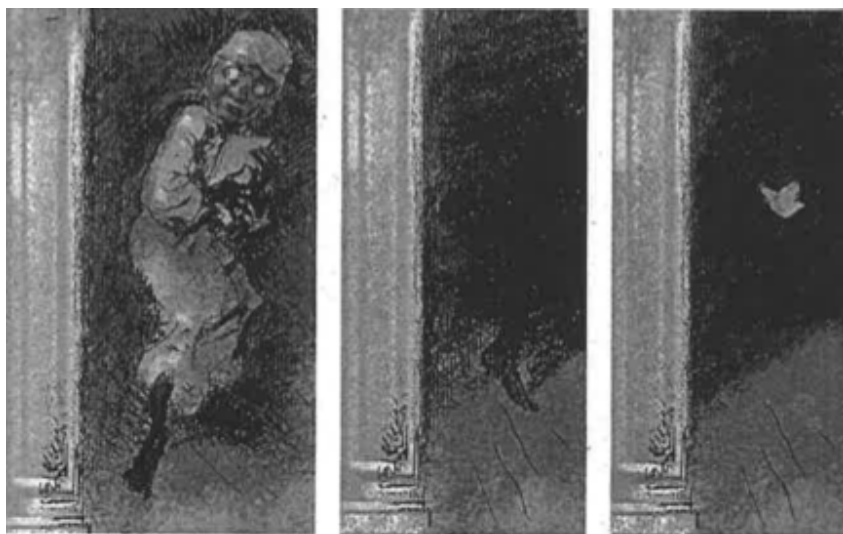
Turner, too, is shown as a symbolic Christ,<sup>79</sup> and in the depictions of his execution, we can clearly see this parallel being drawn. As Turner is carted to the tree where he will be hung, a crowd gathers to mock him, but when he is hoisted to his death, the sky darkens, the leaves fall from their trees, and the crowd grows silent as they stare at Turner with obvious respect in their eyes.<sup>80</sup> This pattern, of mocking viewers, dark skies, and then a stunned and respectful audience, alludes to the depiction of the biblical crucifixion as recorded by Mark: “In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him. . . . At noon, darkness came over the whole land. . . . And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, ‘Surely this man was the Son of God!’”<sup>81</sup> However, while it is apparent that Baker means for us to see these men as giving up their lives in a manner similar to Christ, they do not actually seem to redeem anything with their sacrifice. After their deaths, America largely remained unchanged; it was and still is, in many ways, a divided nation full of the same white-initiated racial violence. We are left at the end of the rebellion still searching for some meaning or redemption from all the bloodshed and death Baker asks us to consume.

Baker, though, does not leave us without hope, and in *Nat Turner’s* closing action, he revisits the beginning of his text and provides an indication as to what we can take away from the novel’s violence. In the closing panels, a white man, after stealing the concept for the cotton gin from a young enslaved woman, goes upstairs. The woman watches as the man leaves, then springs into action. She grabs from the desk a copy of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and retreats into the darkness to read. It is important, however, that this version of the rebellion is much thicker than the short text Gray published in 1831. In fact, it appears much closer in size to Baker’s more nuanced graphic novel.

In this final scene, Baker encourages readers to emulate this woman as she consumes the violence found in America’s history. She risks her life and safety to bear witness to the voices and pain that traditionally have been excluded

from the nation's understanding of itself. While her (and our) engagement with antebellum America may elicit only an uncomfortable interaction with the nation's culture and violent heroes, the woman's example suggests there is real value in facing the systemic violence that hides in the nation's past. The truth is, we will never wholly comprehend the myriad ways slavery damaged the United States, but this does not mean we should stop seeking to grasp more fully the institution's wide-ranging consequences. This confrontation and reevaluation of American violence also means questioning things like the cost of Manifest Destiny and why we still honor those responsible for torturing and killing indigenous and enslaved peoples. It also means addressing how we react to the dropping of bombs or the ordering of drone strikes that claim human lives. Finally, one has to look no further than recent events in Ferguson, Sanford, New York, Baltimore, Charleston, Charlottesville, and countless other places to see the importance of reflecting on the nation's unhealed racial wounds.

Texts like Baker's help us better grapple with the context of these events and how they are rooted in systems of violence with which the United States has not yet reckoned. As a nation, we are quick to trade away the complex messiness of the past for easy heroes and villains, but Baker's novel reminds us there is real value in disturbing binaries and questioning the stories in which we invest. What this means, and we can see this illustrated in the novel's final panel, where only a book is illuminated (see Figure 6),<sup>82</sup> is that we should take advantage of our free access to reading so that we may locate texts that help us better see and understand our current environment. With this enhanced vision, it is hoped, we can then start chartering a better path forward, one in which we confront and mourn violence while also celebrating the power and creativity born from education and literacy.



**Figure 6:** Kyle Baker. *Nat Turner*. (New York: Abrams, 2008), 200.



## Notes

1. A converted conference paper of mine dealt with some of these same ideas and was published by the *CEA Critic* in 2015, “Reimagining Terror in the Graphic Novel: Kyle Baker’s *Nat Turner* and the Cultural Imagination,” *The College English Association Critic* 77 (2015): 329–38.
2. The first half of Baker’s *Nat Turner* was originally self-published by Baker as a miniseries, which he then collected and published as *Nat Turner: Encore Edition: Volume 1* (2005). In 2007 the second half was published under the title *Nat Turner: Revolution*. Finally, in 2008, Abrams published the two halves as a single book, simply entitled *Nat Turner*. For this paper, I use the 2008 edition, published by Abrams.
3. For a full account of the rebellion, its context, and its aftermath see David F. Allmendinger Jr.’s book *Nat Turner and the Rising in Southampton County* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).
4. “On Views of Race and Inequality, Blacks and Whites Are Worlds Apart.” *Pew Research Center’s Social & Demographic Trends Project*, Pew Research Center, 27 June 2016, [www.pewsocialtrends.org/2016/06/27/on-views-of-race-and-inequality-blacks-and-whites-are-worlds-apart](http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2016/06/27/on-views-of-race-and-inequality-blacks-and-whites-are-worlds-apart).
5. *Ibid.* The data also show that most whites view their own communities as not having many racial problems, leading to “only 36% of whites saying [racial discrimination] is a major reason that blacks may be struggling to get ahead, 34 percentage points lower than the share of blacks who say the same.”
6. For a more complete treatment of the philosophy and reaction to “post-blackness” see Houston A. Baker and Merinda K. Simmons, ed., *The Trouble with Post-Blackness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).
7. Stephanie Li, “Black Literary Writers and Post-Blackness,” in *The Trouble with Post-Blackness*, ed. Houston A. Baker and K. Merinda Simmons (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 45.
8. *Ibid.*, 49.
9. This does not mean that comics always need an interplay between text and image, as explained by Roy T. Cook’s “Do Comics Require Pictures? Or Why Batman #663 Is a Comic”.
10. Colton Waugh, *The Comics* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1991), 14.
11. Kyle Baker, *Nat Turner* (New York: Abrams, 2008), 28.
12. The full title of Gray’s book is *The Confessions of Nat Turner, The Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va. As Fully and Voluntarily Made to Thomas R. Gray in the Prison Where He was Confined, and Acknowledged by Him to be Such When Read Before the Court of Southampton; With the Certificate, Under Seal of the Court Convened at Jerusalem, Nov. 5, 1831, For His Trial. Also, an Authentic Account of the Whole Insurrection, With Lists of The Whites Who Were Murdered, And of The Negroes Brought Before the Court of Southampton, And There Sentenced, &C.*
13. Thomas R. Gray, *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, VA* (electronic edition, UNC, 1999), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/turner/turner.html>.
14. Hayden White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” *Clio: A Journal of Literature, History, and the Philosophy of History*, 3, June (1974): 278.
15. Baker, *Nat Turner*, 178–79.
16. Michael A. Chaney, “Slave Memory without Words in Kyle Baker’s *Nat Turner*,” *Callaloo* 36, no. 2: 283–84.
17. Jennifer D. Ryan, “Kyle Baker Retraces Black History,” in *Projecting Words, Writing Images: Intersections of the Textual and the Visual in American Cultural Practices*, ed. John R. Leo and Marek Paryż (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2011), 302.
18. Tim Bruno, “Nat Turner After 9/11: Kyle Baker’s *Nat Turner*,” *Journal of American Studies* 50, no. 4 (2016): 951.
19. Jonathan W. Gray, “‘Commence the Great Work’: The Historical Archive and Unspeakable Violence in Kyle Baker’s *Nat Turner*,” in *Afterimages of Slavery: Essays on Appearances in Recent American Films, Literature, Television and Other Media*, ed. Marlene D. Allen and Seretha D. Williams (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 194.
20. *Ibid.*, 196.
21. Andrew J. Kunka, “Intertextuality and The Historical Graphic Narrative: Kyle Baker’s ‘Nat Turner’ and the Styron Controversy,” *College Literature*, 38, no. 3 (2011): 187.
22. Craig Fischer, “Provocation through Polyphony: Kyle Baker’s *Nat Turner*,” in *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics and Sequential Art*, ed. Frances K. Gateward and John Jennings (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 272.
23. Conseula Francis, “Drawing the Unspeakable: Kyle Baker’s Slave Narrative,” *Comics and the U.S. South*, ed. Brannon Costello and Qiana J. Whitted (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), 131.
24. *Ibid.*, 135.
25. *Ibid.*, 135–36.

26. Frances K. Gateward and John Jennings, "The Sweeter the Christmas," *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics and Sequential Art* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 5.

27. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 62.

28. Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Other America," in *The Radical King*, ed. Cornel West (Beacon Press, 2015), 235–44.

29. Jennifer Ryan also calls attention to how Baker, in *Truth: Red, White, and Black* (2004), uses his cover art to signal the larger arguments taking place within the text itself (*Truth*, 69, 72, 73, 75, 79).

30. Chaney, "Slave Memory without Words," 279.

31. *Ibid.*, 279.

32. *Ibid.*, 280.

33. See page 152 in Baker's text for a clear example of a weapon and blood drawn in the same style as on the cover.

34. We can also see examples of authors claiming Turner as a largely unproblematic hero in Terry Bisson's and Coretta Scott King's *Nat Turner: A Slave Revolt Leader* (1989), Sharon Ewell Foster's *Resurrection* series, and most recently, in Nate Parker's film *The Birth of a Nation* (2016).

35. For a complete treatment of the relationship between Baker's and Styron's texts, see Kunka, "Intertextuality and the Historical Graphic Narrative," 168–93.

36. *Ibid.*, 185.

37. We can see examples of Kyle Baker using a cartoonish style throughout the narrative in *Truth: Red, White, and Black* (2004) and *Birth of a Nation* (2004).

38. Baker, like James, employs the introductory remarks of his novel to "assume authority over his work both as its creator and ideal consumer, and then overtly and covertly instruct his readers how to appreciate and discriminate [his] literary art." Pearson, John H. *The Prefaces of Henry James: Framing the Modern Reader*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.

39. Chaney argues that this equation between Baker and his character illustrates that Turner's "heroic action is thus to be understood allegorically, typologically; it encompasses a regime of proper behaviors" ("Slave Memory Without Words," 283). As Chaney puts it later, Baker hopes "ideal readers of Turner's self-reliant literacy . . . will do something worthy of Nat Turner's heroic example," as Baker did in publishing his own novel (284). Chaney admits that there is some humor intended in Baker's equation between his and Turner's actions (284); however, in large part he reads these comments in the preface to be Baker demonstrating how those in the present can use Turner's heroic example to find their own symbolic freedom, wherever that might be located.

40. Baker, *Nat Turner*, 7.

41. *Ibid.*, 7.

42. *Ibid.*, 7.

43. *Ibid.*, 74.

44. *Ibid.*, 86–87.

45. *Ibid.*, 7.

46. See Chaney, "Slave Memory Without Words," 279–97; *Arts & Humanities Citation Index*. Web. 8 Mar. 2015; Francis, "Drawing the Unspeakable," 113–38; Kunka, "Intertextuality and The Historical Graphic Narrative," 168–93.

47. There are some words that precede this quote, but they simply indicate a sound or a general sentiment, like a "boom" for the sound of a gun, or a "\$" to indicate the slaver is talking about the monetary worth of an African woman his companion is about to murder.

48. Brantz Mayer's book *Captain Canot or Twenty Years of an African Slaver; Being an Account of His Career and Adventures on the Coast, in the Interior, on Shipboard, and in the West Indies*, recounted the adventures of a slaver named Theodore Canot. Mayer, a journalist, published it in 1854 (New York: D. Appleton) to try to persuade the United States to cease the slave trade. For more on this text and Mayer see John Albertus Kinneman, "Anthony Adverse or Theodore Canot," *Journal of Negro History* 30 (1945): 304–10.

49. Francis, "Drawing the Unspeakable," 125.

50. Baker, *Nat Turner*, 36, and Mayer, *Captain Canot*, 103.

51. Baker, *Nat Turner*, 36.

52. *Ibid.*, 38.

53. Craig Thompson and Kelly Tian, "Reconstructing the South: How Commercial Myths Compete for Identity Value through the Ideological Shaping of Popular Memories and Counter Memories," *Journal of Consumer Research* 34, no. 5 (2008): 599.

54. *Ibid.*, 599.

55. For more on the way the nation tends to locate its problematic racial history as solely a product of the South, see Leigh Anne Duck's *The Nation's Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism* and Jennifer Rae Greeson's *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature*.



56. Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A New History of Global Capitalism* (New York: Allen Lane, 2014).
57. Richard J. Follett, et al. *Plantation Kingdom: the American South and Its Global Commodities* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).
58. For more on the role of antebellum Southern women and their relationship to the myth of the Southern Belle see Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York : Pantheon Books, 1982), and Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York : Cambridge University Press, 2008).
59. Baker, *Nat Turner*, 69.
60. *Ibid.*, 68.
61. On page 195, Baker goes on to drive home this negative depiction of the Southern belle by creating a link between women from the region and the biblical Eve. Opposite a panel depicting Turner's execution, he draws a white woman taking a bite out of an apple. Baker, here, through the allusion to Eve's participation in humanity's original sin, names women as being coequal accomplices in the violence carried out in the region.
62. Simone Weil and James P. Holoka, *Simone Weil's the Iliad, or, the Poem of Force: A Critical Edition* (New York: P. Lang, 2003), 57.
63. Baker, *Nat Turner*, 108.
64. *Ibid.*, 135.
65. Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930–1990* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 101.
66. *Ibid.*, 101.
67. We can see examples of this relationship to the white power structure in the grandmother in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, as she aligns herself with the whites trying to keep Linda/Harriet from escaping to the North. We can see it again in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, as he aligns with his masters' ideology in belittling Sandy Jenkins as superstitious and simple when Sandy embraces African traditions, and again, we can see this alignment between an enslaved man and the white power structure, perhaps most clearly in Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*, as Northup served eight years as a driver enforcing backbreaking labor on fellow enslaved men and women. Also, we can see a more recent example of the complex ways African Americans were pitted against one another in Edward P. Jones's *The Known World* (2003).
68. Baker, *Nat Turner*, 63.
69. *Ibid.*, 65.
70. *Ibid.*, 66.
71. Douglass speaks to this manipulation in his *Narrative* as he writes about how whites used the holidays “to disgust their slaves with freedom” and make them feel as if slavery was their natural and preferred condition (75).
72. *Ibid.*, 55.
73. Francis, “Drawing the Unspeakable,” 126.
74. Baker, *Nat Turner*, 99.
75. *Ibid.*, 120–21.
76. *Ibid.*, 120, and Gray, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 13.
77. For more on this white character as a Christ figure see Kunka's “Intertextuality and the Historical Graphic Narrative.”
78. Baker, *Nat Turner*, 145–46.
79. For more on Turner as a Christ figure see Tim Bruno's “Nat Turner after 9/11.”
80. Baker, *Nat Turner*, 192–97.
81. Mark 15:31, 15:33, 15:39, *Bible, New International Version*, Biblehub, 2011. Web. 18 Apr. 2015.
82. Baker, *Nat Turner*, 200.