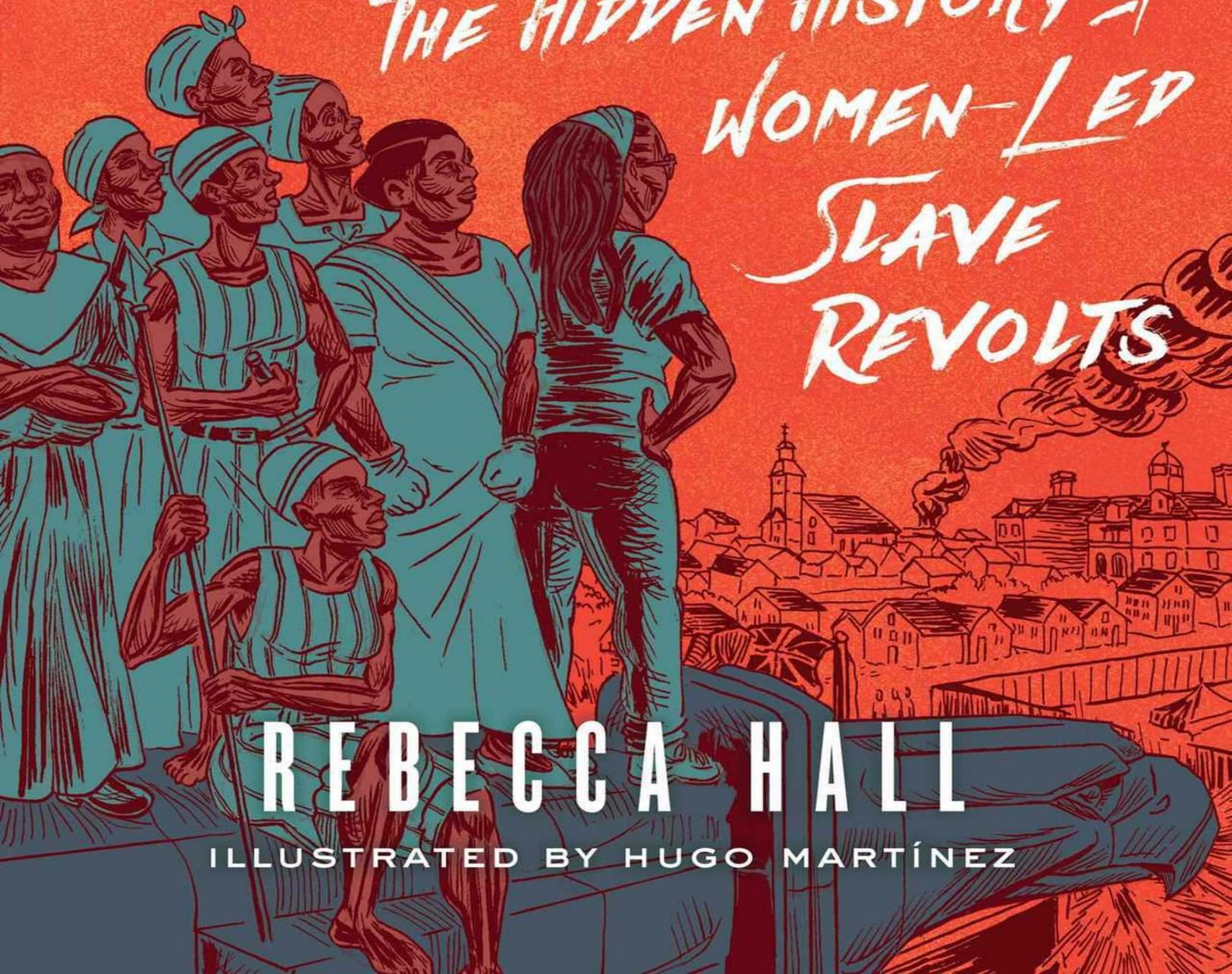


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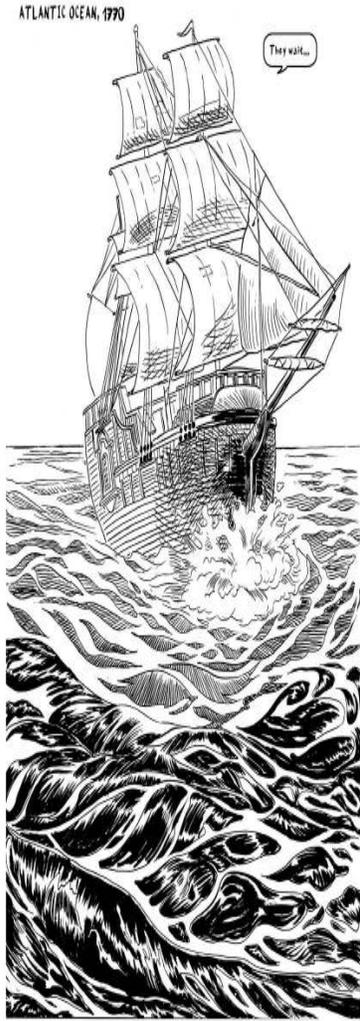
# WAKE

THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF  
WOMEN-LED  
SLAVE  
REVOLTS



REBECCA HALL

ILLUSTRATED BY HUGO MARTÍNEZ

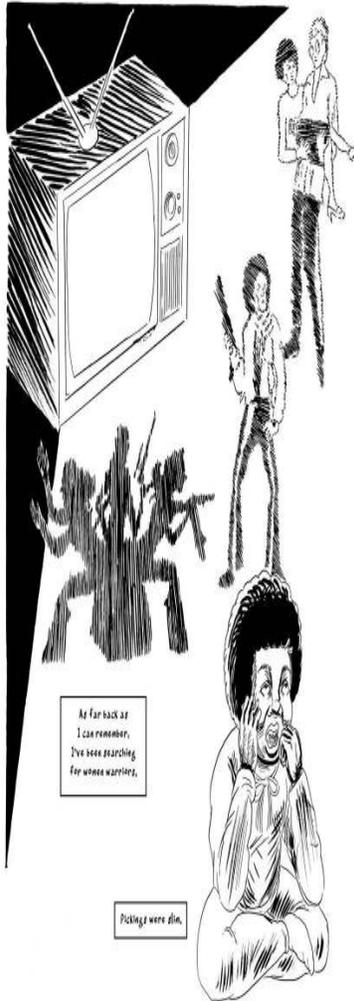












As far back as  
I can remember,  
I've been searching  
for women warriors.

Pickings were slim.



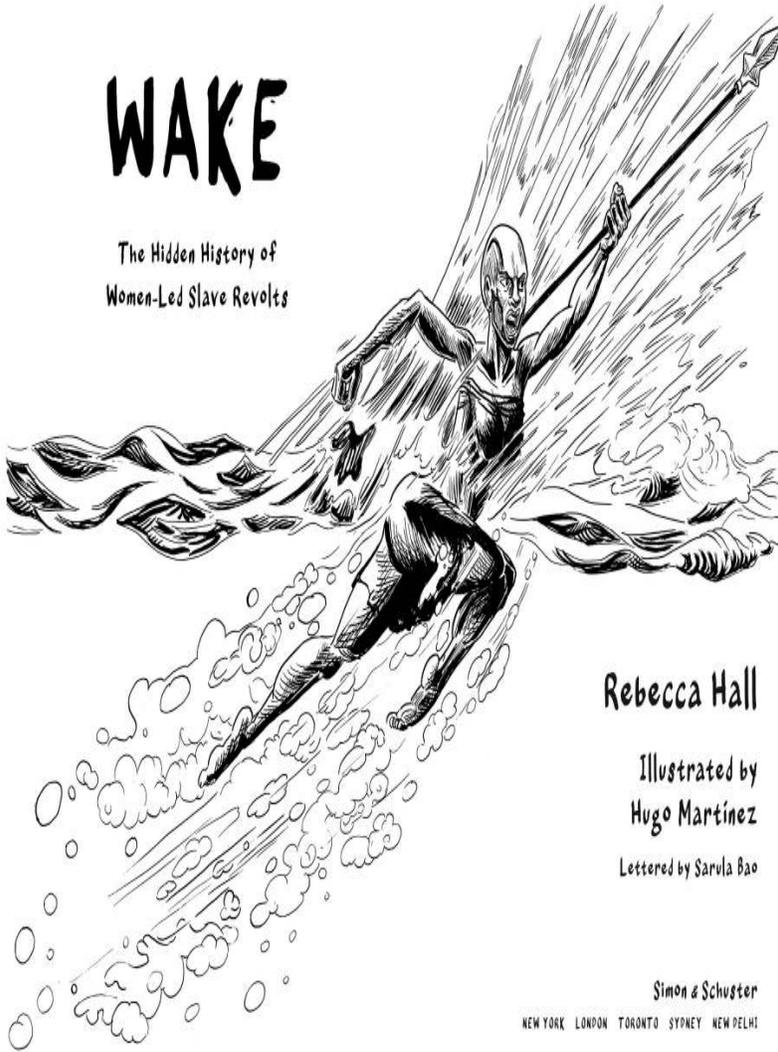
For hundreds of years,  
our ancestors were brutally  
placated. I wasn't supposed  
to find their voice.

But sometimes, when  
you think you're hearing  
from the past...



# WAKE

The Hidden History of  
Women-Led Slave Revolts



Rebecca Hall

Illustrated by  
Hugo Martínez

Lettered by Sarula Bao

Simon & Schuster

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI



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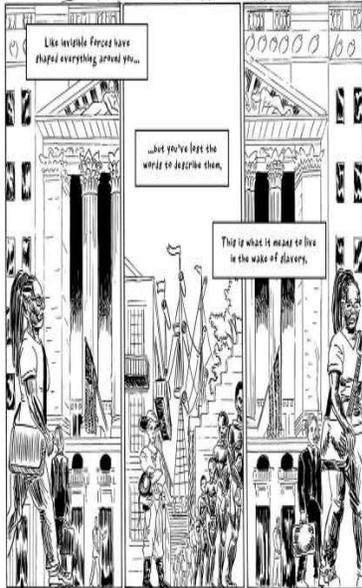
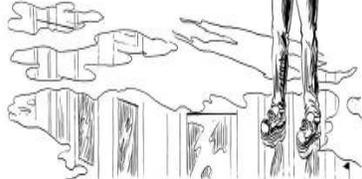
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Like invisible forces have shaped everything around you...

...but you've got the words to describe them.

This is what it means to live in the wake of slavery.



I grew up in this city, but left New York a long time ago to go to law school in Berkeley. I was a tenant rights attorney for eight years.

I believed even then that justice had to be fought for.



Legal doctrine teaches a clear idea of justice, but the world only showed me justice deferred. Everywhere I looked, racism and sexism warped the very possibilities of justice.

For example, I would see my Black women plaintiffs get half the money damages awarded to them that my white women plaintiffs would get in the very same case.



The latest research on justice shows—wow, I don't know how else to say this, but you need to act like white women on the stand. You have to show your vulnerability, show your pain!



Or when I walked into a courtroom to do my job, I had to fight or I would be turned away.

Attorney for the plaintiff, please check in.



The defendant's chair is that way.



I'm not the defendant. I am the attorney for the plaintiff!



I could "win" these cases for my clients. But I felt the need to go underneath the "justice system"—to get at the root of what was warping the world.



So I went back to school to get a PhD in history. I studied the history of race and gender in America. And it became clear to me that in order to understand our experience as Black women today, I had to study slavery.



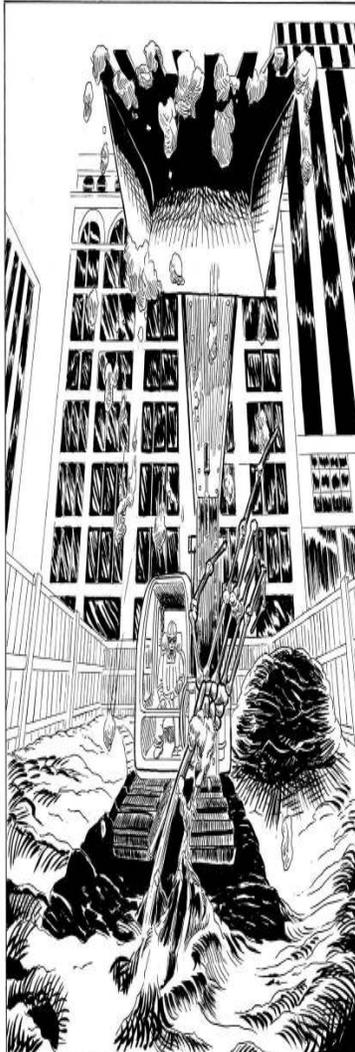
I dove straight into the archives, the orphan, the blank space in the documents. I felt compelled to uncover the stories of other Black women who fought for justice. Those women warriors who fought their enslavement.



I decided to write my dissertation on women who led slave revolts, and that research brought me back to New York City, and away from my partner and etc.

I had an idea that recovering their stories would be its own fight...





Chapter 2  
*Dom Regina vs. Negro Slaves*

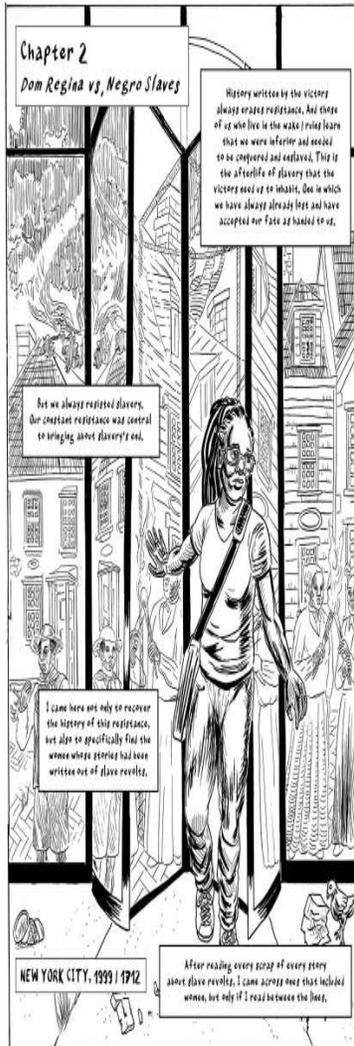
History written by the victors always erases resistance. And those of us who live in the wake of being learn that we were inferior and needed to be conquered and enslaved. This is the afterlife of slavery that the victors need us to inhabit. One in which we have always already lost and have accepted our fate as handed to us.

But we always resisted slavery. Our constant resistance was central to bringing about slavery's end.

I came here not only to recover the history of this resistance, but also to specifically find the women whose stories had been written out of slave revolts.

NEW YORK CITY, 1999 / 1912

After reading every scrap of every story about slave revolts, I came across ones that included women, but only if I read between the lines.



There was a slave revolt in New York City in 1712. The few history books in which it is discussed describe the participants as a group of men.

In that year, Robert Hunter, the colonial governor of New York, writes to the Lords of Trade back in England.

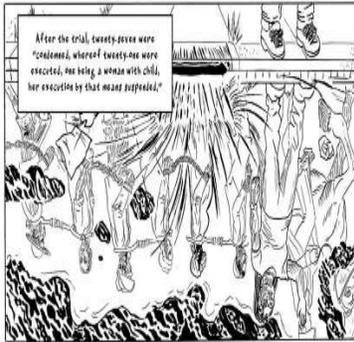
He tells them about "A bloody conspiracy of some of the slaves of this place to destroy as many inhabitants as they could."

They did this, he explained, to avenge themselves for "some hard usage they apprehended to have received from their masters, (for I can find no other cause)."

"Tying themselves in secrecy by sucking up blood of each other's hands," they planned a revolt, which took place in April.

They burned down a building and then shot the white people who came to extinguish the fire, and then fled. The governor called in the militia to "drive the island" and claimed to the Lords that "we found all that yet the design in execution, six of these having their last violent hands upon themselves."





After the trial, twenty-seven were "condemned, whereof twenty-two were executed, one being a woman with child, her execution by that means suspended."



Of the twenty-two sentenced to death, do we read that as one was a woman?



or do we read it as of the twenty-two condemned, one of the women was pregnant?



NEW YORK CITY MUNICIPAL ARCHIVES

These documents don't give me enough information about enslaved women who might have been involved in this revolt, so I have come to look at the original court records at the Municipal Archives.

I find four women among these trial: Sarah, Abigail, Lily, Anna.



Who were these women?

What do the trial records reveal about their actions, their motivations...

...the decisions they made and why they made them?

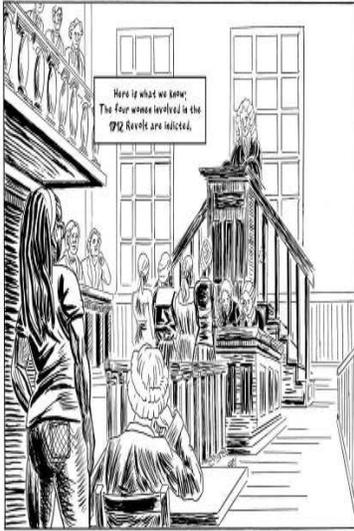


to do  
at the time of  
the  
Sarah  
Abigail  
Lily  
Anna

I look for their testimony, I find this:

Having nothing to say for herself then when she had previously said...  
I look for their testimony, I find this:  
Having nothing to say for herself then when she had previously said...  
I look for their testimony, I find this:  
Having nothing to say for herself then when she had previously said...





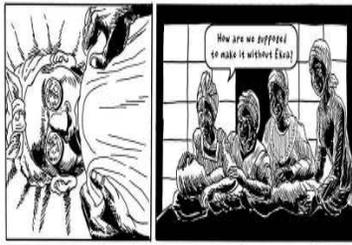


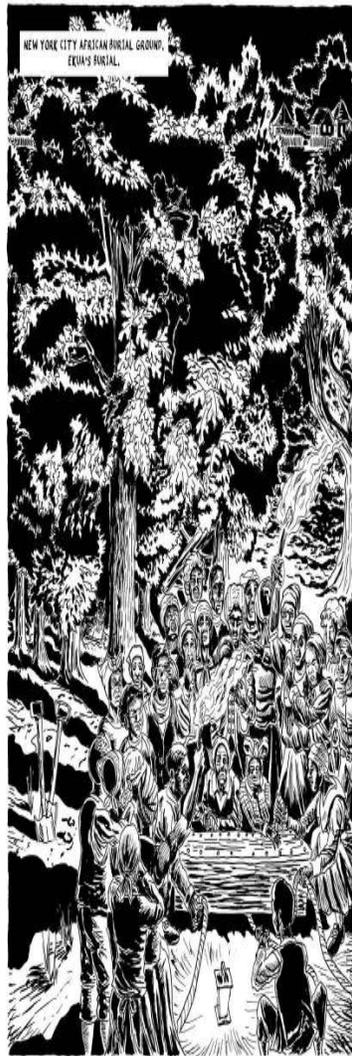
What drove them to revolt?  
It is time for a measured use  
of historical imagination in  
order to reconstruct a story.

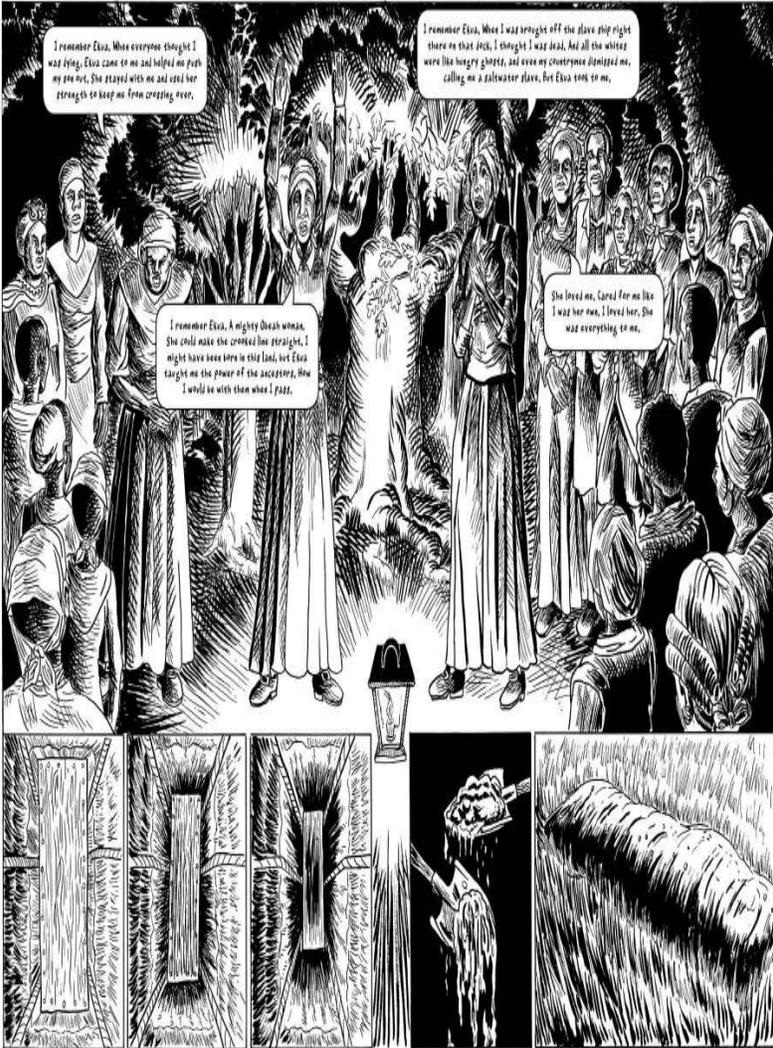
Chapter 3  
*Some Hard Usage*

NEW YORK, 1912







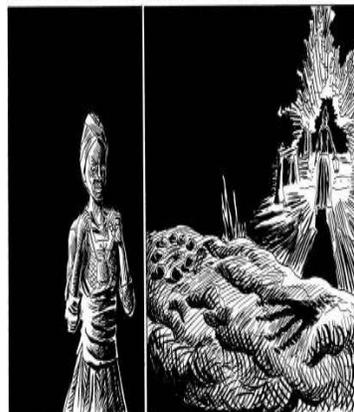


I remember Eliza. When everyone thought I was dying, Eliza came to me and helped me push my feet out. She stayed with me and used her strength to keep me from crossing over.

I remember Eliza. When I was brought off the slave ship right there on that dock, I thought I was dead, but all the whites were like hungry ghosts, and even my countrymen despised me, calling me a saltwater slave, but Eliza took to me.

I remember Eliza. A mighty Obeah woman. She could make the crooked line straight, I might have been born in this land, but Eliza taught me the power of the ancestors, how I would be with them when I pass.

She loved me, cared for me like I was her own. I loved her, she was everything to me.





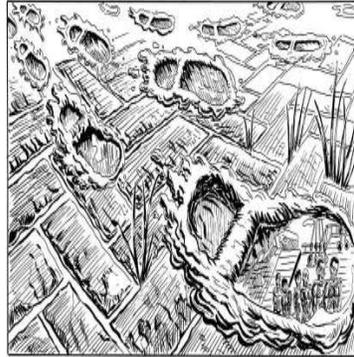
I'm going for water.

ROPE FACTORY OF STONEL BELLS

Assembly member...

The home of  
Aldon Phillips...

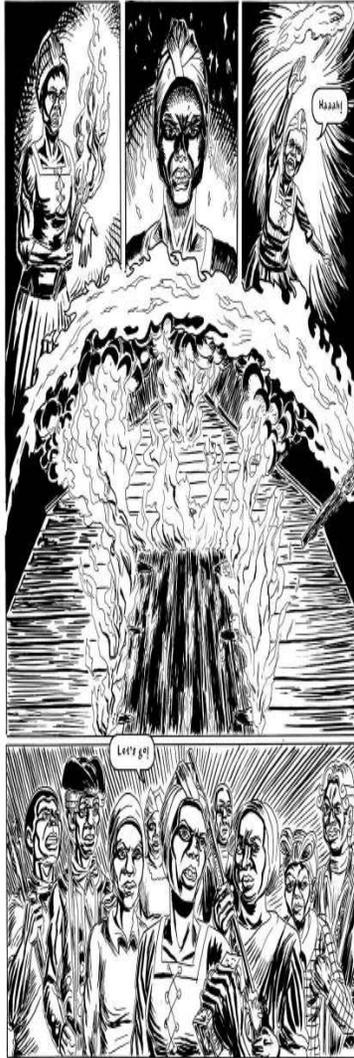
slave trader...



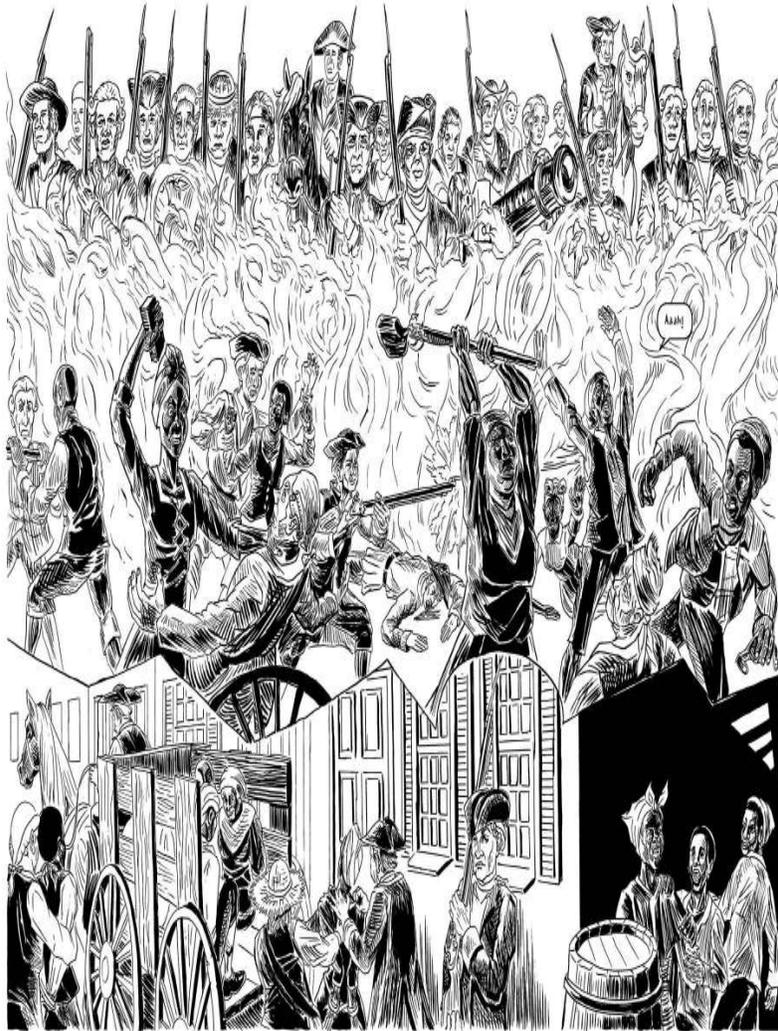


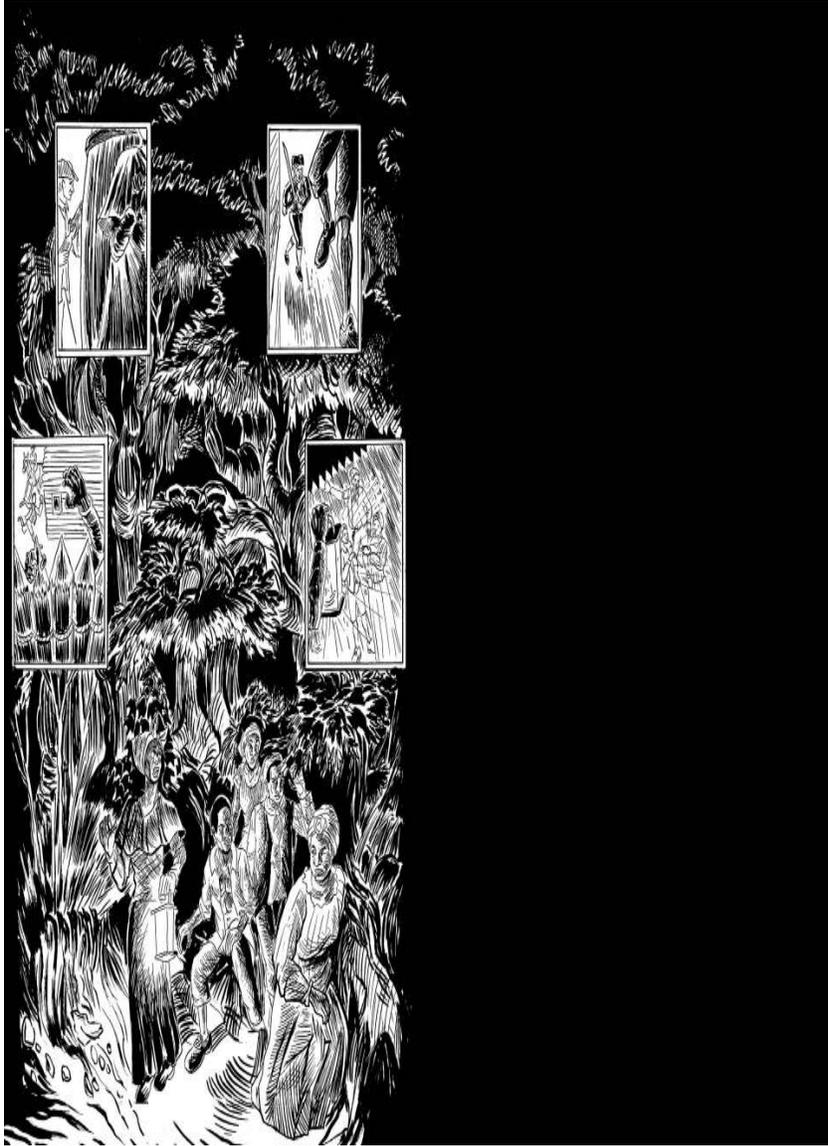












New York governor's letter to Don Regina

June 23, 1712

*We found all that put the design into execution, six of these  
having first laid violent hands upon themselves, the rest  
forthwith brought to trial before ye Justices of this place ...*

*Twenty-seven condemned, whereof twenty-one  
were executed, one being a woman with child,  
her execution by that means suspended ...*

*Some were burnt others hanged, one broke on the wheele,  
and one hung a live in chains in the town, so that  
there has been the most exemplary punishment inflicted  
that can possibly be thought of ...*



Ama, time to  
come home.



Chapter 4  
Sarah or Abigail

We know from court records that after the records, Sarah and Abigail were both sentenced to death.

NEW YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY, 2000

The pregnant woman had her execution delayed until after she gave birth because that baby was someone's property.

For which one was pregnant?

Sarah or Abigail?



In researching the answer to that question, I bumped into a historian's worst nightmare—especially when she is trying to write the history of enslaved women.

To find the answer, I had to review the correspondence between New York's colonial governor, Robert Hunter, and the Penitentiary's Lewis of Train.

I must read the documents against the grain.

assuming there are any documents to be found at all.

The letters traveled back and forth by ship, between New York and England, taking weeks or months in each direction.

Governor Hunter asks the warden for pardons for the slaves he imprisoned.

He explains that enough had been executed, "more have suffered than we can find were active in this bloody affair..."

A reprieve is temporary, only the warden had the power to issue a pardon here.

On March 6, 1713, almost a year after the trials, Hunter writes the Lewis of Train, reminding them of the slaves awaiting execution, and says, "I have not had the honor of your Lordship's commands since last Fall."

Hunter writes: "I beg, you will procure Her Majesty's Pardon to be signified to me for their pardon, for they lie now in prison at their master's charge."

I find a letter from the secretary of the Lewis of Train dated April 23, 1713, saying that as soon as we "know Her Majesty's Pleasure" regarding the other pardons, Hunter will be informed.



Hester, a year and a half later, having still heard nothing, writes again, reminding them of the woman who is still being held.

"There is likewise a Negro woman who was seized privy to the conspiracy but pleading her belly, was reprieved, she is since delivered, but in wretched condition ever since, and I think has suffered more than death by her long imprisonment, if that's Lewis' thin fit to include her, I should be pleased, for there has been much blood shed already on that account, I'm afraid too much, and the people are now easy."

During that time, so one was meant to stay in jail for more than a few days. The punishment was inflicted on the only itself—branding, amputation, execution—on by giving a prison sentence. These jails, or "goals" were miserable places; exposure, cold, hard surfaces filled with excrement and vermin.

Ultimately, the fate of Sarah or Abigail gets lost in political upheaval. Hester doesn't hear from the secretary until June 22, 1715, over three years after he first petitioned the queen.

Queen Anne has died and been succeeded by the independent King George. "His principal amusement, apart from conversing with his mistresses, had been cutting paper into pretty patterns."

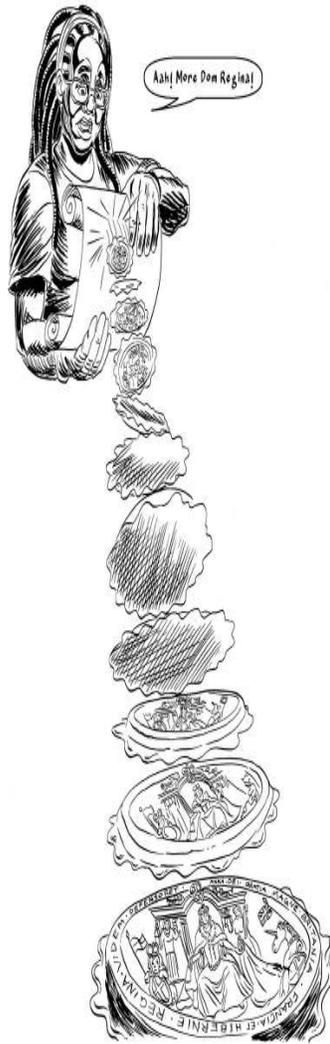
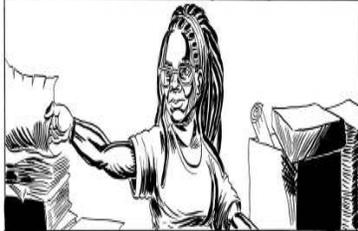
Now, three years after the revolt, and Sarah or Abigail is still in jail.

I review every letter between them for the next five years, until Governor Hester is recalled to England in 1720. There is no mention of a pardon.

Was it possible that Sarah or Abigail could have still been alive in jail eight years after the revolt?

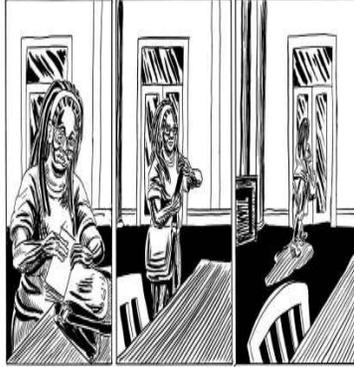
Could Hester have just let her go?

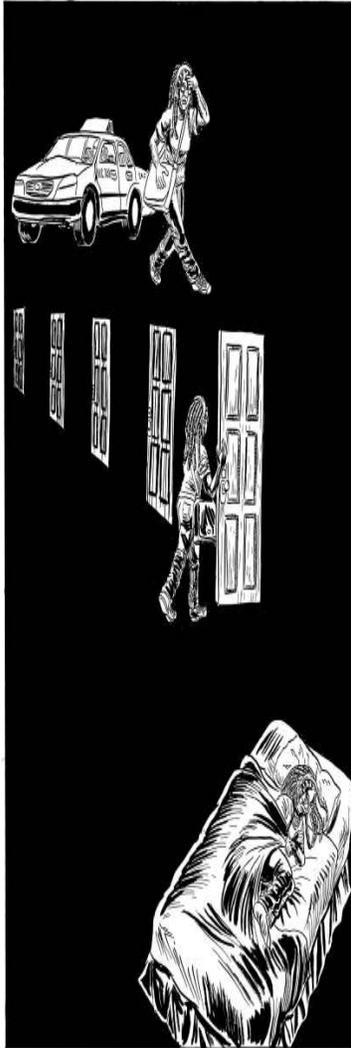
Or did he order her execution before he returned to England?





I can't find her, I'll  
never know what happened  
to Sarah or Angela.





Chapter 5  
The Search for the Negro Fiend

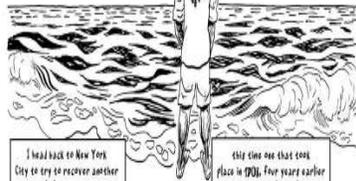
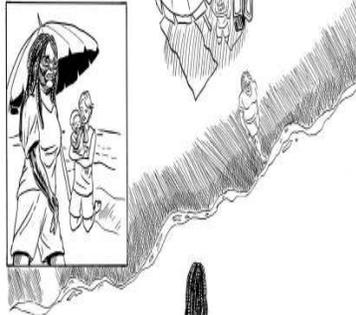
SANTA CRUZ, CALIFORNIA, 2000

Before I continue my quest to research these people, I take a much-needed break with my family to restore my energy.

As Andre Leroie said:  
"Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."

Ugh, he'd eat all the sand on this beach if we let him.





I head back to New York City to try to recover another revolt led by a woman.

this time one that took place in 1906. Four years earlier than the revolt involving Abigail, Sarah, Anna, and Lily.



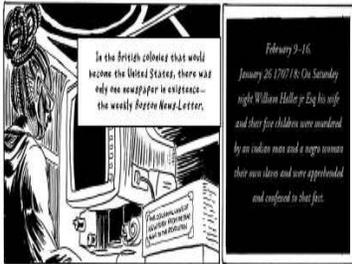
I had stumbled across a clue to this earlier revolt while I was reviewing the court records of the 1912 Revolt.

I found a law that had been created in 1903 in response to an uprising.

An Act for Preventing the Conspiracy of Slaves, 1706: *Bartholomew Mander and Family of William New Town in Queens*

Back in New York, I was determined to find out more about that uprising.

I headed to the New York Public Library to look through newspapers from the year 1906.



In the British colonies that would become the United States, there was only one newspaper in existence—the woefully *Begone News-Letter*.

February 9-16,  
January 26, 1707/18. On Saturday night William Haller & his wife and their five children were murdered by an Indian man and a Negro woman; their own slaves and were apprehended and confined in that jail.



From this bit of information, I did a deep dive into the archive as I could tell the story of that woman and that revolt.

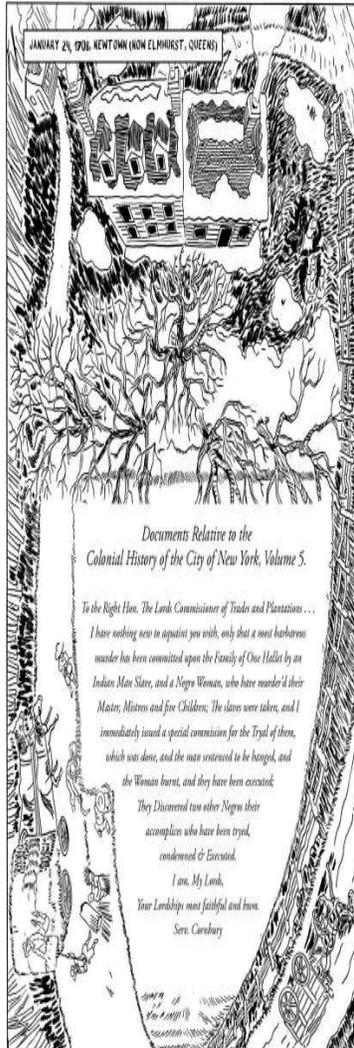
This story has been almost completely elided in the history of slave revolts, though seven white people were killed and four slaves were executed.



Here, the revolt resided in the statutory framework that shaped slave control, and was a crucial linchpin in turning New York from a society with slaves into a slave society.

I pieced together as much of the story as I could from newspapers, government correspondence, estate documents, and even a nineteenth-century "history" book that talks about it.

The only names I could find for those enslaved involved in the revolt was one "Indian Sam." The woman is only ever referred to as the "Negro Wench" or the "Negro Thief."



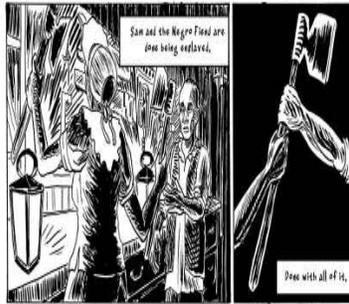
JANUARY 26, 1707, NEWTOWN (NOW ELMHURST, QUEENS)

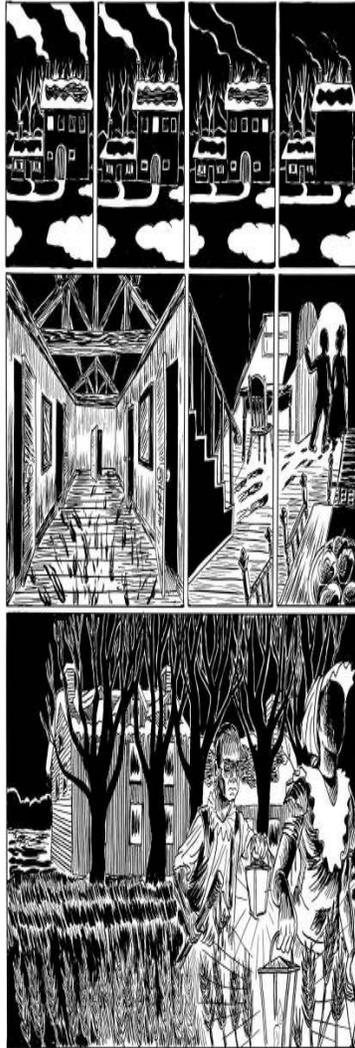
*Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the City of New York, Volume 5.*

To the Right Hon. The Lords Commissioners of Trades and Plantations . . .

*I have nothing new to acquaint you with, only that a most barbarous murder has been committed upon the Family of One Haller by an Indian Man Slave, and a Negro Woman, who have murder'd their Master, Mistress and five Children; The slaves were taken, and I immediately issued a special commission for the Tryal of them, which was done, and the man sentenced to be hang'd, and the Woman burnt, and they have been executed. They Discovers'd two other Negro their accomplices who have been try'd, condemn'd & Executed.*

*I am, My Lords,  
Your Lordships most faithful and hum.  
Sers. Carsbary*







In jail, they awaited trial. The men were hanged, and the Negro Fred was burned at the stake.

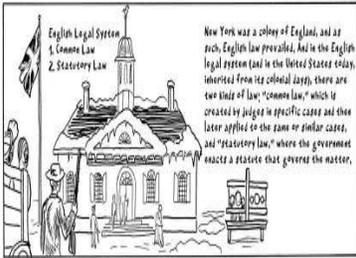
And why was that? Why was *she* the only one burned at the stake?

The court in 1783 actually had no other choice.

Newtown

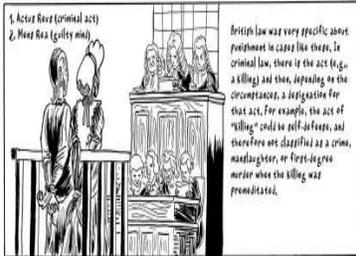
Flushing

Jamaica



English Legal System  
 1. Common Law  
 2. Statutory Law

New York was a colony of England, and as such, English law prevailed. And in the English legal system (and in the United States today, inherited from its colonial days), there are two kinds of law: "common law," which is created by judges in specific cases and then later applied to the same or similar cases, and "statutory law," where the government enacts a statute that governs the matter.



1. Actus Reus (criminal act)  
 2. Mens Rea (guilty mind)

British law was very specific about punishment in cases like these. In criminal law, there is the act (e.g., a killing) and then, depending on the circumstances, a designation for that act. For example, the act of "killing" could be self-defense, and therefore not classified as a crime, manslaughter, or first-degree murder when the killing was premeditated.



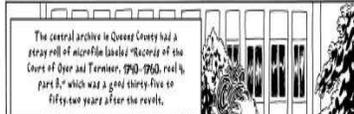
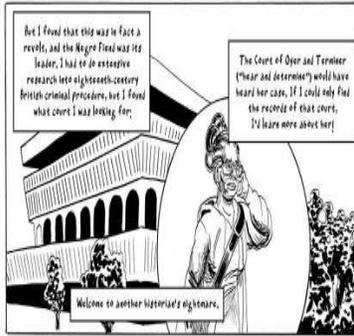
1. Actus Reus: Killing  
 2. Mens Rea: Treason



Way back in 1352, King Edward III created a statute that said if a woman killed her husband or master, the killing is "treason" and the required punishment was to be burned at the stake. In such cases, the killing was not "murder" but "treason" against the state because a woman's husband or master was considered "her natural lord," and killing him was like killing the monarch. It was a crime against The State.

1. The very essence of Patriarchy  
 2. In case you were wondering









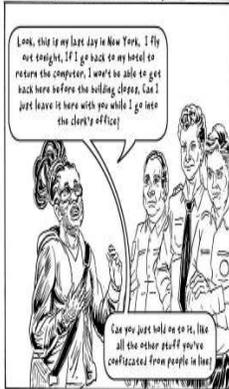
There is no way you are getting in here with a computer!



I need it for my work. Here is my bar card. I'm an attorney.



Well, you aren't a New York attorney—you're a California attorney, so you can't come in here with that computer.

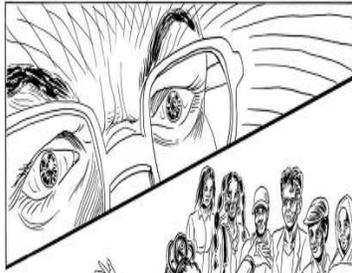


Look, this is my last day in New York. I fly out tonight. If I go back to my hotel to return the computer, I won't be able to get back here before the hearing starts. Can I just leave it here with you while I go into the clerk's office?



I can't do that. Your computer could be broken and then you could blame me. You could sue me. As a lawyer, you should know that.

Can you just hold on to it, like all the other stuff you've confiscated from people in here?



Are you kidding me? I could practice law across the street at the federal court. I could argue a case before the Supreme Court of the United States.

and you have the audacity to keep me out of the Queens County criminal court building because I have a computer!!!



Okay, okay, calm down! This is what we are going to do. Call the clerk's office.



If you can get someone from there to come out and walk you in, over there.



I will let you in with that computer.



Clerk's office,

Good afternoon, I'm a historian doing research on an old criminal case and—

Case number?

Oh yes, Well, This case is from long before case numbers and—

Date?

1706.

What?

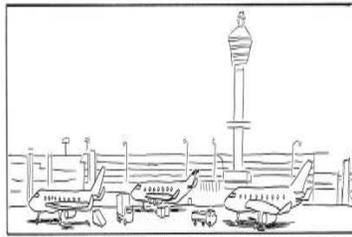
1706.

Are you joking? How do you even know it was a criminal case?

Well, the woman was burned at the stake and—

If you want to write about women being burned at the stake, go to Salem, Massachusetts!

Actually those women were hanged—



Chapter 6

*They Cut Off My Voice (So I Grew Two Voices)*

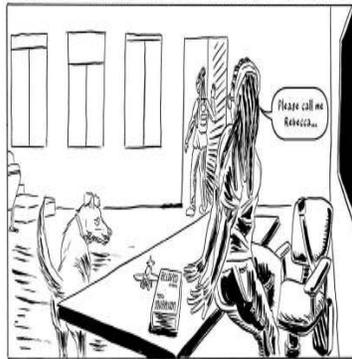
SANTA CRUZ, 2001

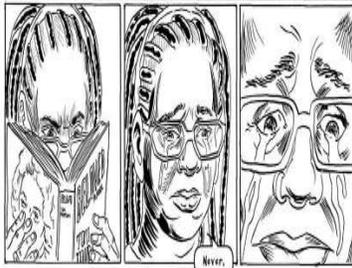
When I wasn't researching,  
I was teaching.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
SANTA CRUZ

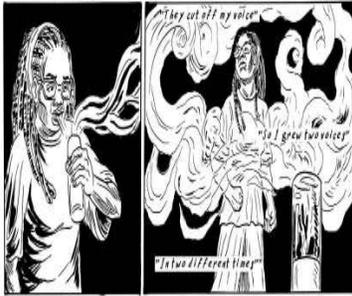
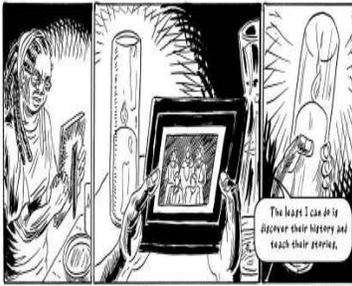








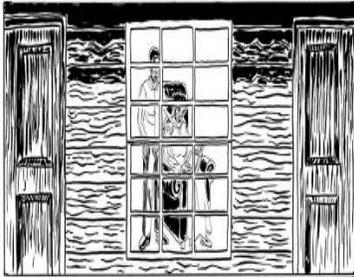




"Sweet Honey in the Rock," "Song of the Etoile," Live at Carnegie Hall, 1987.







You are learning to read so fast! Why don't you learn when you were a kid!

Spire Sweeney didn't let any of us learn on his plantation, and after slavery, all my time was spent working and earning money.

Ohh, I didn't have time for no school, but now you have your schooling and you are teaching me.

Thank you, Mom.



Later that day

You want to be an architect!

No Negro is an architect!

Times are changing!

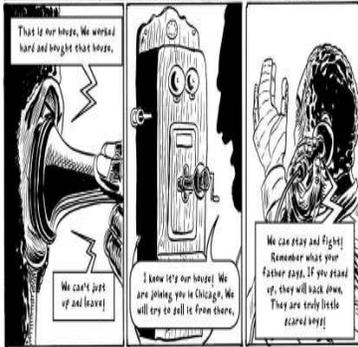
Not that fast!

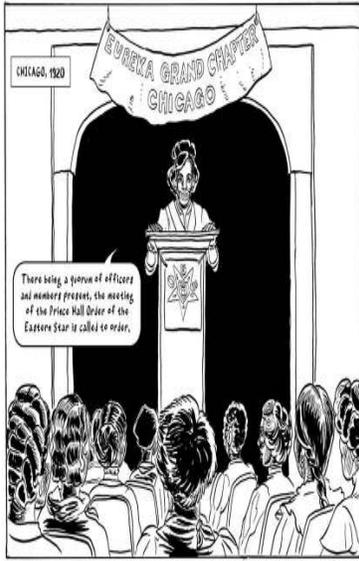
You need to get your sights on something more realistic.

When you finish your education, apply to be a postal clerk. They hire Negroes for that.

Pa!







CHICAGO, 1920

There being a quorum of officers and members present, the meeting of the Prince Hall Order of the Esoteric Star is called to order.



Sister Harriet, are the plates final for this year's commemoration of the Emancipative Proclamation?

Yes, they are! We have a larger venue than last time.



And this year I will be directing the collage in their musical offering. They will be in their wigs, robes and crowns.



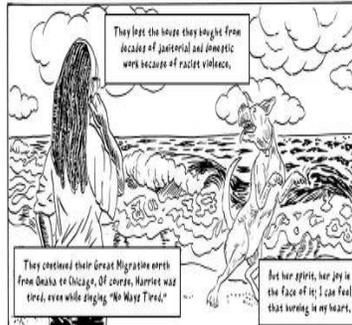
They will start by singing "Get On Board," in four-part harmony. Then—



I knew I needed to create this research and write those stories.

My grandparents survived slavery, it was not easy.

It is a part of living in the wake of slavery. We must defend the dead and fight the violence inflicted on them by their erasure from the record.



They lost the things they bought from decades of unjust and domestic work because of racist violence.

They continued their Great Migration north from Omaha to Chicago. Of course, Harriet was tired, even while singing "No More Tears."

But her spirit, her joy in the face of it; I can feel that burning in my heart.

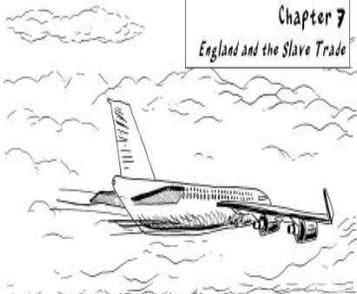


To create my research, the next step on this journey had to be London.

the center of government for British America and its slave-built empire.

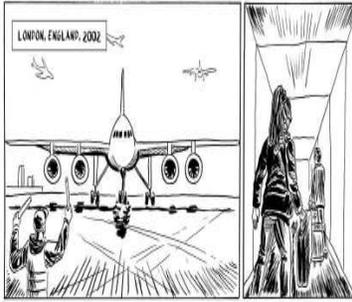
Right, I guess I need clothes, too.

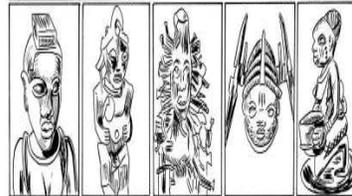
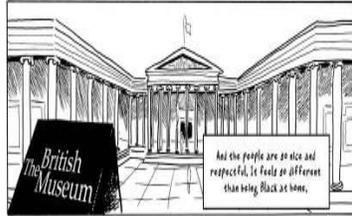
Chapter 7  
England and the Slave Trade



In England I would find a new set of people, whose led reviles on slave ships.







I've come to the parliamentary archives to begin my search for more information on women in slave revolts. And who knows, maybe either here or at the public records office I can find out what happened to Sarah or Akiqah, and the sons of the Negro Fleet, the one who was burned at the stake after the 1793 revolt.

What I've found instead is a lot of information about the slave trade, the Middle Passage, and women in slave ship revolts.

The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade spanned four hundred years, from the late 1400s to the late 1800s. England didn't really become a player until the mid-1600s, but what they left in time they made up for in numbers.

It started as a trickle, but by the mid-1600s, as the demand for slaves exploded, it turned into a flood. Scholars estimate that at least twelve million Africans were brought to the Americas as chattel slaves.

There was also a high mortality rate among the people who were forced to march to the coast, who died as they waited in the barracoes—the cages where they were kept before being loaded onto the slave ships.

It doesn't include the people who died waiting on the ships, shackled below as the slavers sailed from slave trading ports to slave trading ports down the coast of West Africa until they had just the right cargo. That alone could take weeks or months.

And they died during the Middle Passage itself. If they made it to the Americas, they died in the first year of "seasoning," as it was called, where they died of disease or were worked to death.

VICTORIA TOMES, HOUSE OF PARLIAMENT, LONDON

Good morning, I have an appointment to use the archives.

Passport, please.

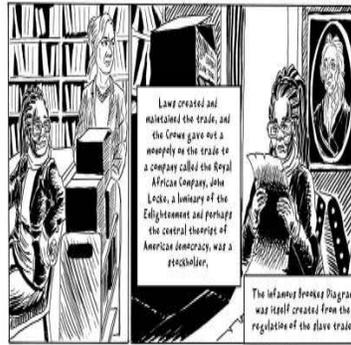
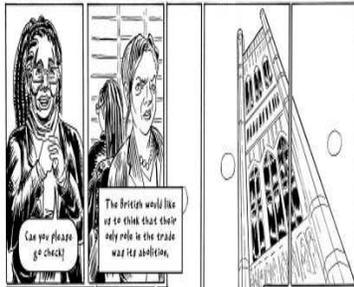
When historians count all of that, the mortality estimates are between 20 and 30 percent of the captives.

Millions and millions and millions of people, gone, just gone.

Wow, here, cool?

Well, you're seeing it all through.

I'm going to have to keep your passport while you are here. Also, a guard will be accompanying you.



At first, Europeans could get to West Africa, but because of the wind and currents, they didn't have the means to return. Eventually they turned to the lagoon sail, which allowed them to tack against the wind.

By the mid-1500s, the Portuguese were trying to land on the coast and raid for slaves, but they were driven back every time. West Africa in this age was made up of powerful nation-states with strong militaries.

In the early days of the trade, Europeans had to make trade agreements with individual kingdoms, and their trading posts were limited, geographically, to the coast.

They made their weapons with iron, and anywhere horses could travel, they were already in use. Europeans had these poor-quality muskets, and if they could keep the powder dry, by the time they could get them loaded, they would have already been killed by the iron spears and arrows of the African militias.

In addition, slaves were traded in Africa, as they were pretty much everywhere else in the world. But the prevailing places in Africa were not slaves in the way they came to be in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.

Chattel slavery, the system the captives would enter into, was race-based. For life, and a status inherited by your children. Slaves in Africa tended to be war captives or criminals, often treated similarly to serfs in Europe.

African kings and other elites would trade some of these slaves—the war captives, the criminals—to Europeans, usually in exchange for essential items, goods that brought them status. This trade was very small, a trickle compared to what would later develop.



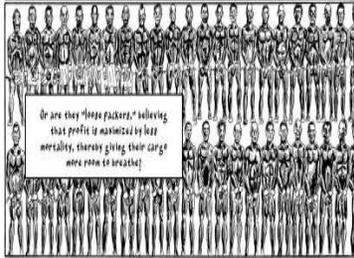
As time passed, two things changed: 1. As Europeans colonized the Americas, they needed huge amounts of labor. European demand for slaves skyrocketed, and 2. European military technology improved, and overtook that of West African kingdoms.

By the mid-1600s, these two factors combined caused devastation in West Africa. The European powers started trading items very strategically, to create as much "supply" of captives as possible. This evolved into what we call the "gun-slave cycle."

They would trade one gun for one captive. In order for these kingdoms to protect their people from being traded by rival kingdoms, they would have to capture and trade their enemies to get guns.



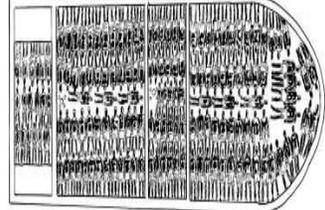




It is a complex business turning people into things, Things that can be stored, shipped, and sold.

PLAN OF LOWER DECK WITH STORAGE OF MEN SLAVES

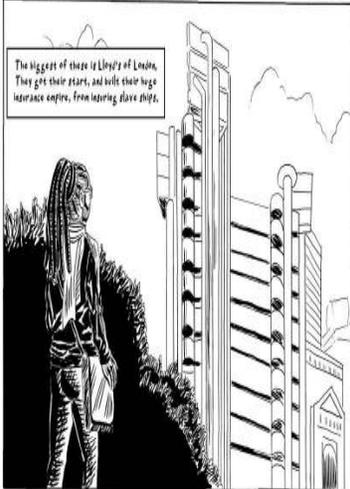
ONE OF THREE SLAND BOW STOWD UNDER THE SKEWER AT DECK IN FORWARD'S THATCHES



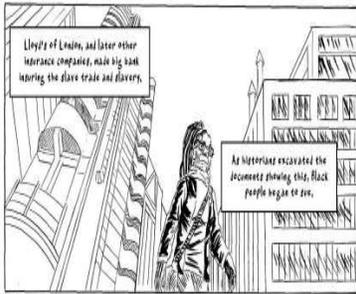
My eyes glaze at the calculating of profits-to-storage ratios, and how to be more efficient in arranging the cargo.

And it is not easy for a historian to comb through these documents, feeling a combination of justifying boredom, anger, and constant nausea.

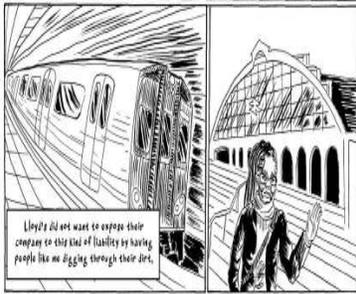








As historians excavated the documents showing this, Black people began to sue.

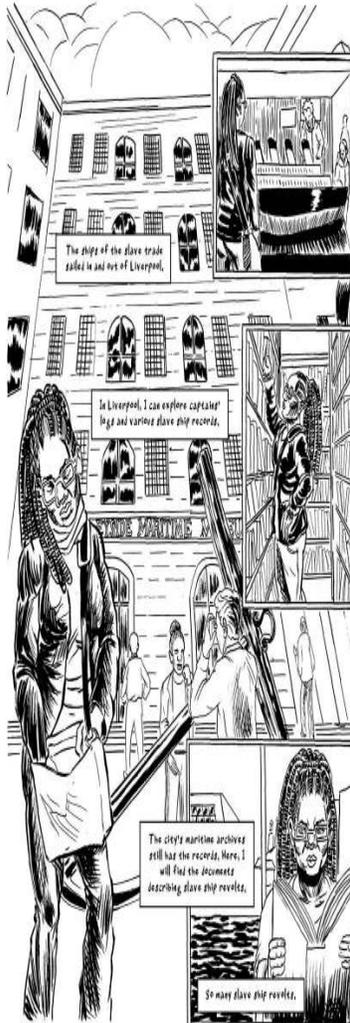


Lloyds did not want to expose their company to this kind of liability by having people like me digging through their dirt.



There are still so many other sources, so many other archives I can explore for the captain logs and various slave ship records in order to give our story more specificity.

London may have been the capital from which the slave trade was governed, but Liverpool was its central port.



The ships of the slave trade sailed in and out of Liverpool.

In Liverpool, I can explore captain logs and various slave ship records.

In Liverpool, I can explore captain logs and various slave ship records.

The city's maritime archives still has the records. Here, I will find the documents describing slave ship revolts.

The city's maritime archives still has the records. Here, I will find the documents describing slave ship revolts.

So many slave ship revolts.

So many slave ship revolts.

Chapter 8  
The Insurrection of Cargo

Is Dobby?

They say that sound travels differently in water.

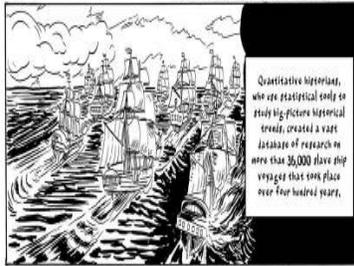
Sound waves travel so slowly in water and the ocean is so vast, the sound can last centuries underwater.

Maybe, if we listen carefully, we can hear them.

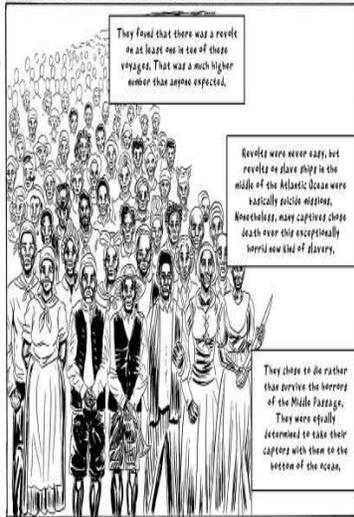




Historians who search the archives for documentation of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade are a specialized group. It is a hard, long, and often lonely endeavor, but in the 1990s, some historians started using new digital technologies and began pooling their resources.



Quantitative historians, who use statistical tools to study big-picture historical trends, created a vast database of research on more than 36,000 slave ship voyages that took place over four hundred years.



They found that there was a revolt on at least one in ten of these voyages. That was a much higher number than anyone expected.

Revolts were never easy, but revolts on slave ships in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean were particularly vicious missions. Nonetheless, many captives chose death over this exceptionally brutal new kind of slavery.

They chose to die rather than survive the horrors of the Middle Passage. They were equally determined to take their captors with them to the bottom of the ocean.



This type of resistance was so expensive and time-consuming for the slavers, these historians estimate that it prevented at least a million more people from being captured and entering the slave trade.

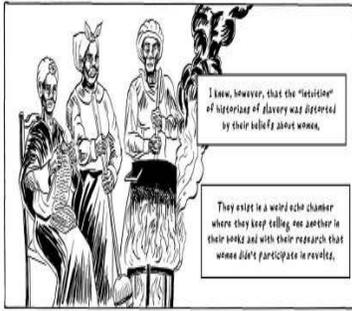
So why would a revolt happen on one ship and not another? The quantitative historians couldn't find a clear pattern, other than that captives tried to revolt whenever they could. But one thing did stand out.

The more women onboard a slave ship, the more likely a revolt.

Let me emphasize this point; the more women onboard a slave ship, the more likely a revolt would occur.

How could this be, they asked themselves? Women weren't involved in slave revolts. These historians then identified this as some kind of statistical fluke.

"The lower proportion of males on vessels undergoing revolts is counterintuitive...women are rarely mentioned as leading violent resistance on board ship, or in the New World, where instances of resistance is rather more extensive."



I knew, however, that the "reticence" of historians of slavery was distorted by their beliefs about women.

They exist in a weird echo chamber where they keep telling one another in their songs and with their research that women didn't participate in revolts.

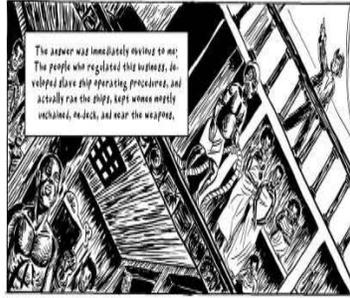


As I had found in my research on slave revolts in colonial New York, if you believe something doesn't exist, you don't go looking for it. Never. If you stumble on it, you still can't see it.

So here I was in England, poring over the original documents and finding that women were leaders in slave ship revolts.



Letting aside gendered assumptions, I could start over and ask, why would there be more revolts on ships where there were more women?



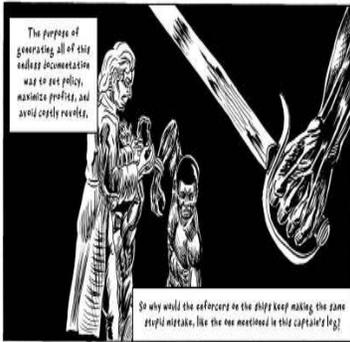
The answer was immediately obvious to me: The people who regulated the business, developed slave ship operating procedures, and actually ran the ships, kept women mostly secluded, in-deck, and near the weapons.



Reports of the Lords of the Privy Council, 1789:  
"The Slave, if a Man, is put in Iron on the Main Deck; if a Boy, he is put on the Main Deck loose; if a Woman or Girl, they are placed without Irons on the Quarter Deck."



The women used their relative mobility and access to weapons to plan and initiate revolts after revolts after revolts.



The purpose of generating all of this collect documentation was to see policy, maximize profits, and avoid costly revolts.

So why would the enforcement on the ships keep making the same stupid mistake, like the one mentioned in this captain's log?



Two or three of the female slaves having discovered that the armour had incautiously left the arm chest open . . .



conveyed all the arms which they could find through the bulkheads to the male slaves, about two hundred of whom immediately ran up the forecables, and put to death all the crew who came in their way.

—the Thomas, 1797



Generally, the slave ship crews remained oblivious to the agency of enslaved women.

For example, a crewman aboard the *Eagle* in 1809 wrote that the crew was so worried about a revolt that they checked the men's chains day and night, and a revolt happened anyway. They had no idea how it happened.



Not every slave displayed this level of violence.

For example, here, Dr. John Bell, the ship surgeon on the *Thames*, tells the owner of the ship about a revolt on board.

For your safety as well as mine . . . You'll have the watchful guard over your Slaves, and put not too much Confidence in the Women nor Children lest they happen to be instrumental in your being surprised which may be fatal.

—the *Thames*, 1776

Bell explained that the only reason the women didn't join the revolt was because the men who planned it acted so quickly they didn't have time to let the women know about it. And if they had, he said:

"Your property here at this time would be but small."



Upon boarding, both men and women were chained together while the ships were near the African coast.



This was a dangerous time for slaves, because holes in the walls often rained the ships and free the slaves.



This was called a "cut off" and slaves took every precaution to avoid it happening.

Most cut offs were not successful.



Once the ship was away from the coast,

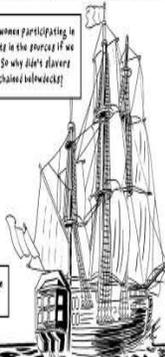


the women were unchained and brought above to spend the rest of the voyage in the quarterdeck.

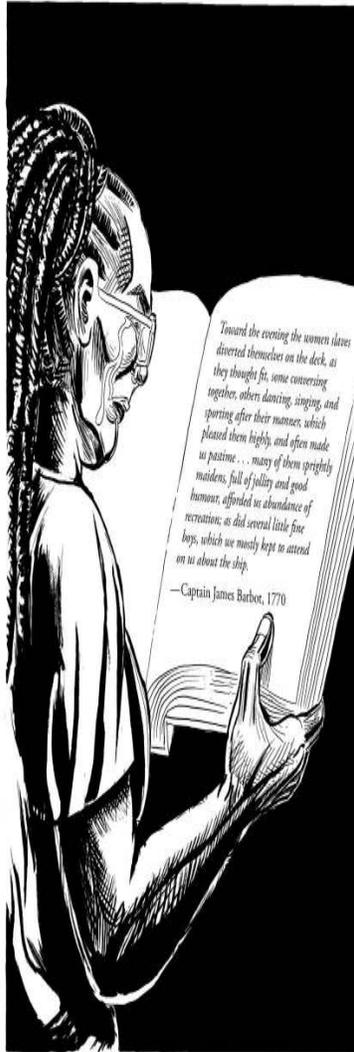


We can see the women participating in popular revolts in the sources if we look for them. So why didn't slavery keep women chained and locked?

For one, they believed that women wouldn't be fighters.

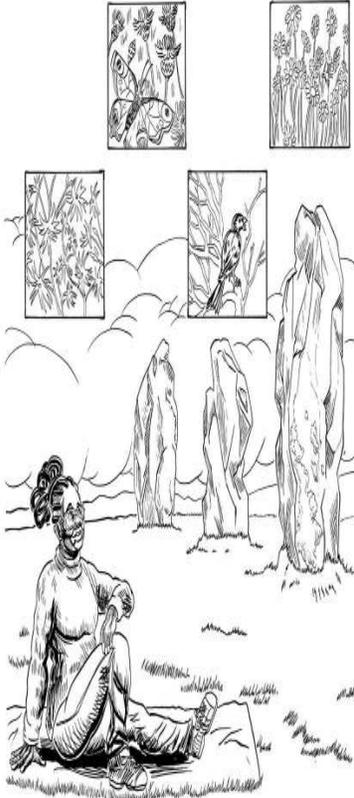
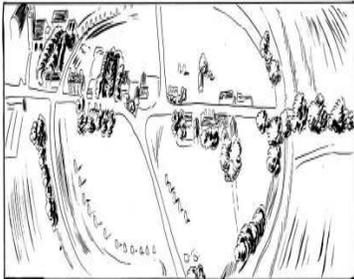
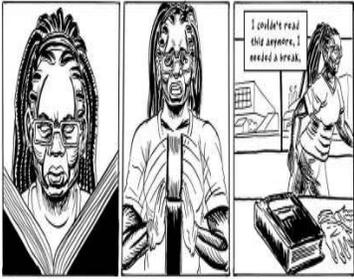


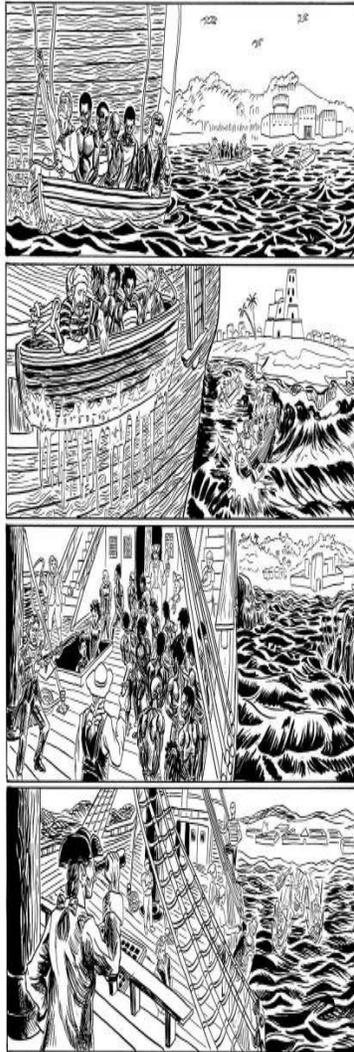
Also, keeping women accessible provided a "benefit" to the crew. Of course, rape and sexual violence are a tool for domination and control, certainly not less fierce than the shackle or the cat-o'-nine-tails.



Toward the evening the women slaves diverted themselves on the deck, as they thought fit, some conversing together, others dancing, singing, and sporting after their manners, which pleased them highly, and often made us passive... many of them sprightly maidens, full of jollity and good humour, afforded us abundance of recreation; as did several little fine boys, which we mostly kept on attend on us about the ship.

—Captain James Barbot, 1770





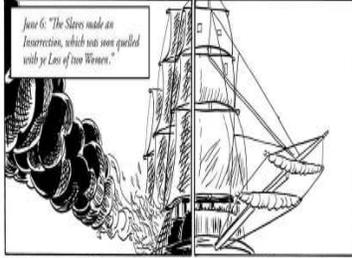


Arrive Whydah, May 19, 1770.



May 20: "got 200 slaves, 425 slaves on board."

May 31: "Depart Whydah."



June 6: "The Slaves made an Insurrection, which was soon quelled with ye Loss of two Women."

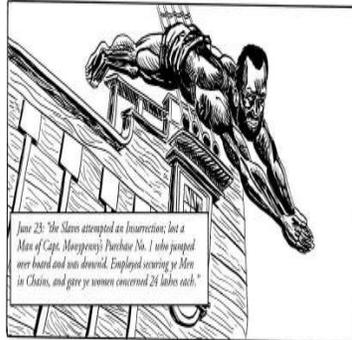


June 13: "died a girl Slave No. 9."

June 14: "died a Woman No. 10."

June 15: "died a Man Slave No. 11."

June 16: "died a Woman Slave No. 12."



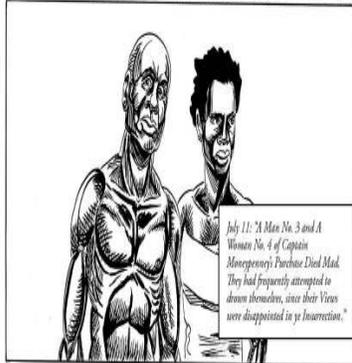
June 25: "the Slaves attempted an Insurrection, but a Man of Capt. Moncey's Purchase No. 1 who jumped over board and was drowned. Employed securing ye Men in Chains, and gave ye women concerned 24 lashes each."



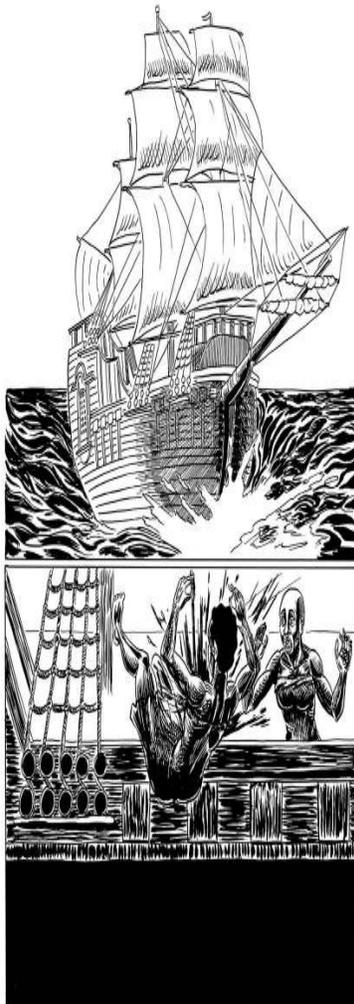
June 27: "the Slaves attempted to force up ye Gangway in the Night, with a design to murder ye whites or drown themselves but were prevented by ye watch in the morning."

"They confound their intentions and that ye women as well as ye men were determined if disappointed of cutting off ye whites,

to jump overboard but in case of being prevented by their Irons were resolved at their last attempt to burn the ship. Their obstinacy put me under ye Necessity of shooting ye Ringleader."



July 11: "A Man No. 3 and A Woman No. 4 of Captain Moncey's Purchase Died Mad. They had frequently attempted to drown themselves, since their Vices were disappointed in ye Insurrection."



I am sick of reading about "Mansa No. 1" or "Mansa No. 2." Who were these women? What were their stories?

How did they get to this place and this time, where they were prepared to die fighting?

The Dutch traded captives from Whydah, now called Ouidah in present-day Benin. We know a lot about this place port and the milling brought into the trade through it.

About the social and political conditions in this part of West Africa at the time of Baily's voyage.

The wars caused by the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade were fierce, and by the 1770s, they were desperate.

The Kingdom of Dahomey rival here, but they were at war with the mighty Yoruban Oyo Empire in the east.

As a result of these wars, war captives abounded. It was these very captives who were sold into the Atlantic trade.

Documentation shows that there were women warriors involved in these wars, women from many different castes and ethnic groups fighting to protect their villages from slave raiders throughout West Africa.

But the Kingdom of Dahomey, where Whydah was located, had a whole army of women soldiers. They were called the Agoes.

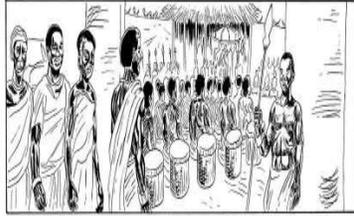


Perhaps Minaa No. 9 and Minaa No. 10 were Akeji too. I want to know their people, but all I can do for them is imagine their story, imagine their struggle, with all I know of their King John's history.

With a measured use of historical imagination, I can reconstruct the story of how these two Akeji warriors ended up on the *Holly*, and did fighting their captives during a slave ship revolt.







Stand and report.  
Does the Ope Empire  
claim your land?

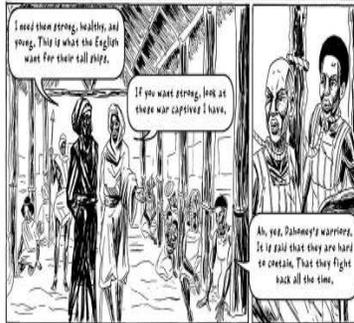
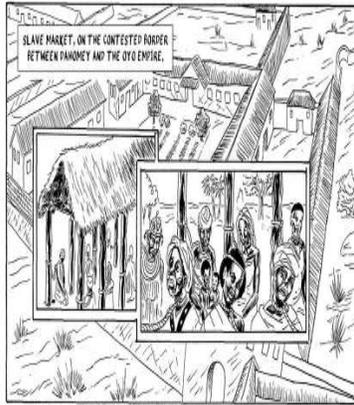
Yes, Dika. They demand  
slaves and tribute, even  
though we are of Dikney  
and not part of the Ope  
Empire. They will attack at  
the beginning of the dry  
season if we do not give  
them what they want.

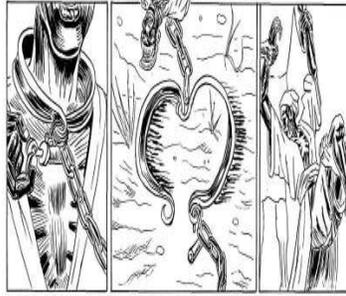
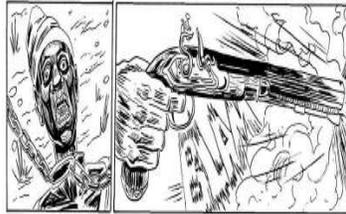
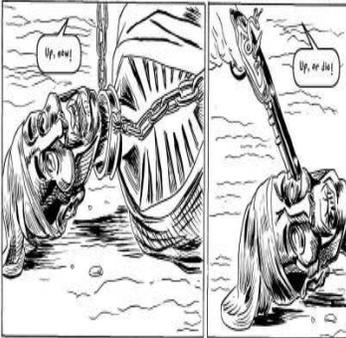


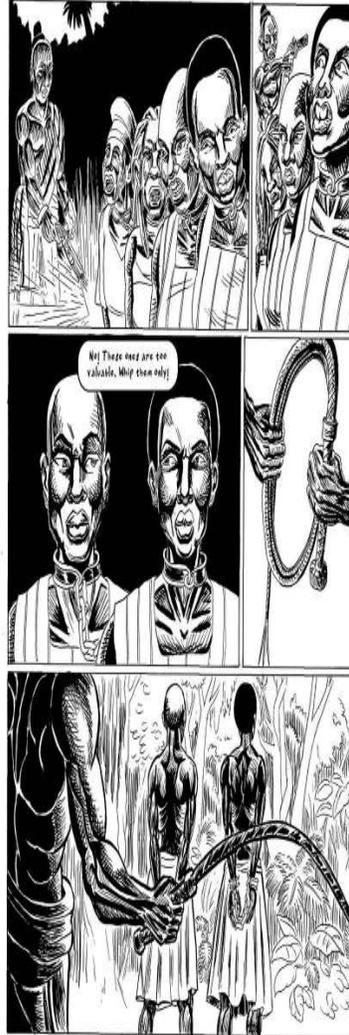
\*The King of Dahomey









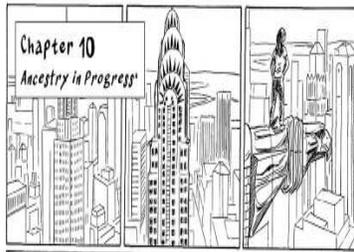


WHYDAH SLAVE TRADING POST



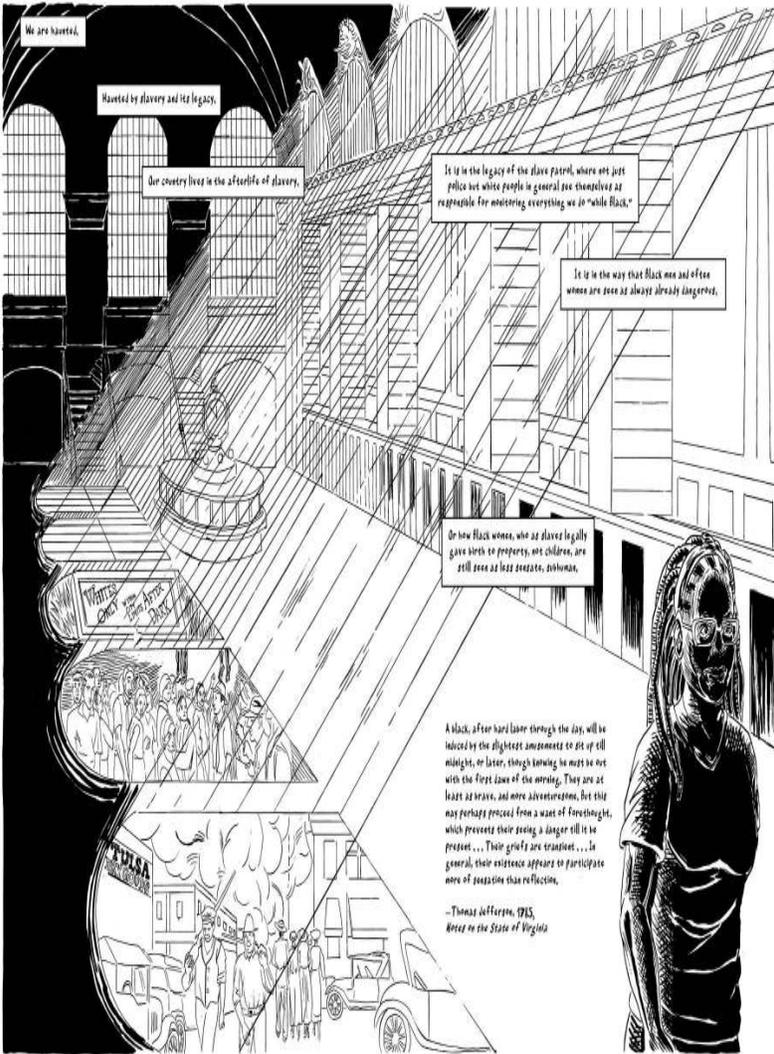






Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,  
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.  
—Maya Angelou

\*Zap Mama, *Ancestry in Progress*, V2 Records, 2004.



We are hunted.

Hunted by slavery and its legacy.

Our country lives in the afterside of slavery.

It is in the legacy of the slave patrol, where not just police but white people in general see themselves as responsible for monitoring everything we do "white Black."

It is in the way that Black men and of the women are seen as always already dangerous.

Or how Black women, who as slaves legally gave birth to property, not children, are still seen as less creature, not human.



A black, after hard labor through the day, will be induced by the slightest amusements to sit up till midnight, or later, though knowing he must be out with the first dawn of the morning. They are at least as brave, and more adventuresome, but this may perhaps proceed from a want of foresight, which prevents their seeing a danger till it is present. . . . Their griefs are transient. . . . In general, their existence appears to participate more of passion than reflection.

—Thomas Jefferson, 1785, Notes on the State of Virginia





It is said that haunting  
make the present water,

Like a mirage floating above  
and within the commonplace  
structures of our lives,



We need to see the present water,  
because the present we have been  
given so inarticulate is impractical.



We see our haunting to justify  
what is affirmed as the truth  
of our existence,



Because in this "world,"  
Black death is everywhere,





We must see our  
history, to see how  
Black life truly is and  
see how it could be  
otherwise.



We must live in an  
alternative Black  
community where we  
reach into the past to  
"reimagine a future  
otherwise."



The story we are given of being Black  
in America is that we have no past, and  
we have no say in the future, the future  
that doesn't contain us.



But it must.

They say that the traumas of our  
ancestors are stored inside us, in  
our bodies, our minds, our spirits.

So too is our resilience.

As Audre Lorde said, "We  
were never meant to survive."

But we have.



Four hundred years of slavery  
and all that it has wrought.

The historical archive that violently erases  
our past continues the violence against us.

This alter shapes what we  
believe is even possible for us in  
the future.

When we go back and retrieve our parts,

our way out of us way,

our legacy of resistance through impossible odds,

we redress the void of origin that would erase us,

We empower and bring joy to our present,



This is ancestry in progress, and it is our superpower.





## Acknowledgments

I wrote this book for my grandmother Harriet Thorpe Hall (1860–1927), for all the women who fought slavery, and for all of us living in its afterlife.

This book would not have happened without the support of Bea Hammond, my partner of thirty-two years. After the fourth time I was racist-fired from a professorship or teaching position, we agreed that I should step out of institutions of white supremacy, and Bea supported the family, giving me the time to figure out what was next for me. That turned out to be turning my dissertation and published articles into this graphic novel. Our son, Caleb, has helped me stay focused on what is truly important, even in the face of adversity. I also joyfully thank all of *Wake's* supporters on Kickstarter, who gave me the resources to get a start on this book, and even more importantly, created buzz and visibility. And thanks Easton Smith for contacting the press about the Kickstarter campaign entirely on his own initiative. Special thanks here to Sara Ramirez for using their Twitter account to recommend my Kickstarter project to their gazillion followers.

Anjali Singh is my agent and my angel. Everyone thanks their agents in their acknowledgments, but Anjali picked up a somewhat abstract idea and taught me everything from how to write a book proposal to how to deal with a publishing auction. I literally knew nothing about this process and would never have thought in a million years that my passion project would be of interest to more than a handful of people. Anjali helped me see that this book was so much more than that and kept reminding me until I began to believe it. Thanks to Tananarive Due and John Jennings for connecting me to Anjali. I had the honor of Anjali calling me to say she wanted to represent me, and ever since she has fought for me and this project like a mother lion. And she even responds to my texts on weekends.

I want to thank my friend Kate Savage, who helped me think about this project in its pre-infancy, and for suggesting I be a character in this book. Kate also connected me to Hugo Martinez, who has been a diligent, thorough, and brilliant artist to work with. Hugo, your art has brought this work to life. And thanks to both Vita Ayala and Jason Little, who helped me understand how to write a graphic novel script. Deep thanks go to Sarula Bao and Caroline Brewer, who joined Team *Wake* right after it was picked up by S&S and managed pre-production. They held my hand and gave me confidence as I fumbled in the dark,

trying to shift from an academic writer to a visual writer. And special thanks to Sarah Beth Hulbauer, who has been my dearest friend for over forty years, and has had my back through some very dark times. Thank you for helping me edit the final draft of this book in the midst of a pandemic over several five-hour phone calls when I had lost all sense of motivation and direction.

I also must thank Dawn Davis, the publisher and original editor of *Wake*. She believed in this project from jump and her edits made this a better book. And after Dawn left S&S, Carina Guiterman smoothly stepped in as editor, shepherding me and this book through the dizzying publishing process with the help of Chelsea Johns and Lashanda Anakwah. Thanks also to Kayley Hoffman for proofreading, Jon Evans for copyediting, and Morgan Hart, the production editor. Brianna Scharfenberg of publicity and Leila Siddiqui of marketing joined Team *Wake* with amazing enthusiasm for the work and patience with me as I kept forgetting which of them was in charge of what.

Donna Haraway, my feminist theory professor and dissertation advisor, has supported my academic work on women in slave revolts in so many ways, continuously, even fifteen years after receiving my PhD. A rare and generous advocate, her belief in the importance of this work helped me stay on course.

Finally I want to acknowledge my parents. My mother, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, for showing me that being a historian can have a profound impact on the world. My father, Harry Haywood (1898–1985), for telling me stories of my grandmother, giving me great books to read at an early age, and showing me through lived example how to be brave and proud in the face of constant white supremacist violence—and to never give up the fight.

—Rebecca Hall

For this incredible opportunity, I thank Dr. Rebecca Hall. Also Kate Savage, our Kickstarter supporters, Leah Champagne, Jesse Moss, Dan Brawner, Gene Menerat, Brett Thompson, Luke Howard, Mike Vulpes, Bob Sread, Michael Lapinski, Sally Richardson, Kalli Padgett, Erika Witt, Jonah Quinn, and Fernando Lopez.

—Hugo Martinez

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## A Conversation with the Author

### Why a graphic narrative?

Graphic narrative is a powerful medium that allowed me to accomplish what I couldn't in any other format. The use of text and images in a complex back-and-forth relationship allowed me to put the past right up against the present, which was crucial for this book. It also allowed me to make this story more accessible while keeping its complexity. The sources on enslaved women are only fragments in the archive. The structure of the medium—panels with gutters (the blank space between panels)—is uniquely suited to recover and honor these stories and restore them to the historical record.



The graphic narrative format is a powerful methodology for portraying what I call the "shape of absence." Hugo and I do this here, while also breaking the pacing of the panel/gutter arrangement to then push at the form's boundaries to create more emotional impact. Here, the four women prosecuted for their involvement in the New York City Slave Revolt of 1712, drawn in blank outline, push up through the gutter and pierce through the panel above where I sit, researching them.

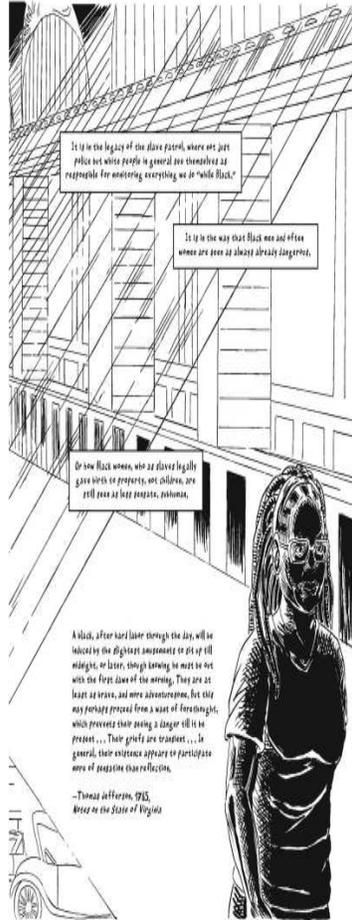


### Why does *Wake* focus on the eighteenth century?

In *Wake*, I talk about how I left the practice of law to go back and study this history. I knew that the history of slavery was deforming the justice system and the world around us, but I didn't understand how.

I study racialized gender. I focus specifically on how concepts of race and gender were used to create the law of chattel slavery and how this still shapes our lives today. Slavery unfortunately existed in many times and in many places, but the race-based chattel slavery in the Americas was a uniquely horrible new thing introduced in the early colonial period, and it continues to structure systems of race and gender today. This form of chattel slavery, in which Black people were transformed into property and their children inherited this status, was created by law in the Americas in this early period. It takes a lot to legally turn people into property. In order to make this happen, the new laws that established chattel slavery created two genders of women: white women who gave birth to heirs of property, and Black women who gave birth to property. People who give birth to property and people who are born property are thereby constructed as subhuman.

This is what drew me to that early time period. And as I quickly found in graduate school, it is a bad mental health formula to study slavery and not study slave resistance. This is how I came to the study of slave revolt.

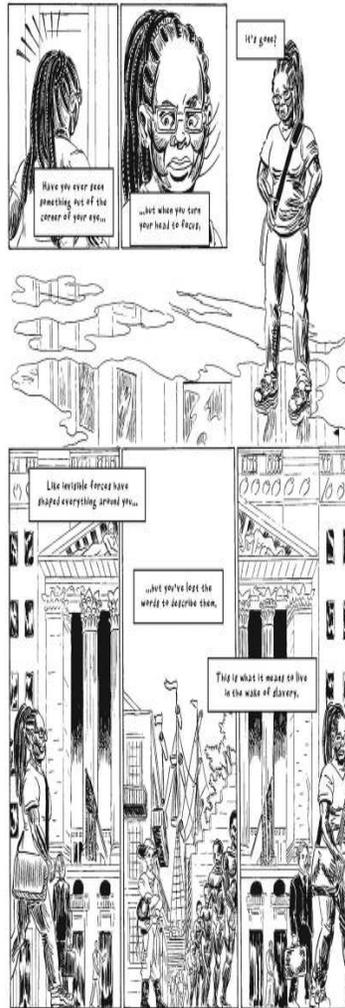


### Why New York City?

I'm from New York City and have always been drawn to its history. Yet I didn't learn until graduate school about just how central both the institution of slavery and the slave trade were in the creation and building of New York City as the world's financial capital.

If people are taught the history of slavery, they are taught that it was a southern, rural institution. But slavery existed everywhere in the British colonies and continued to exist in parts of the northern United States well into the nineteenth century. Enslaved labor was used to build and run urban areas as well as rural areas. Enslaved people built the infrastructure of New York City: the roads, the docks, even the wall that protected the city from Indigenous people trying to get their land back. That wall ran the length of what is now called Wall Street.

In 1700, half of the white population of New York City owned slaves. Enslaved people made up over 20 percent of the population. The only other city that had a higher population of enslaved people in 1700 was Charleston, South Carolina.



### **Why is the history of women in slave revolts "hidden"?**

To understand why the role of women in slave revolts has been erased from history, it is necessary to understand something called "historiography" and how it differs from history. History is the event in the past being studied. Historiography is the study of how history is written and what factors shape the historical interpretation of the past. All historical writing is someone's perspective. Historiography traces those perspectives and what shaped them. It is the study of how those perspectives shift over time and why. This is actually really important! Historians always write in a social and political context, and this shapes how they write about the past. They also write in conversation with other historians' interpretations of the past. In *Wake*, I show how historians claimed that women didn't participate in slave revolts despite the fact that their participation was documented in the records created at the time of those events. But why did historians leave women out of the story?

The perspective of the historians who first wrote about the history of slave resistance was that there was none. Mainstream history taught that slavery was a benign institution, a civilizing force, and no one wanted to resist it. When these blatant racists were no longer part of the mainstream, other historians started focusing on recovering the story of slave revolts from the archives. When this shift happened in the late 1960s and 1970s, US culture was saturated with the idea that Black people lived in their own subculture, created during slavery,

that was responsible for the poverty and disenfranchisement they faced. It was caused not by systemic racism and economic exploitation, but by this so-called defective culture, caused by having the "wrong" gender roles. Black women were matriarchs who emasculated Black men, and therefore Black people as a whole would never succeed unless they changed their gender roles. The historians who were interpreting the history of revolt insisted that this was not true. That Black people always had the "correct" gender roles. That Black women "did not undermine their men" by participating in organized violent uprisings like revolts.

No historian pushed back at this sexist interpretation, even during the later rise of feminist historiography. The study of women's history became more mainstream in the 1980s and onward, and these historians focused on recovering and honoring what they saw as more "feminine" types of resistance. This included "individual" acts of violence, like poisonings or arson, or acts that were less violent and less confrontational, like breaking tools or feigning illness. These historians wanted to honor this type of resistance, and I agree. It should be reclaimed and honored.

When I was working on my dissertation at the turn of the century, my research and interpretation rejected the original idea that women weren't involved in revolts. I received a lot of pushback. The idea is still seen by many as controversial, despite the existence of historical records proving otherwise. That is the power of historiography!

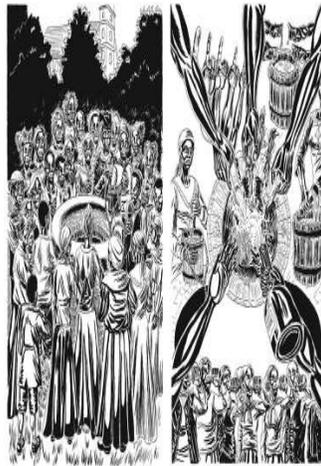
**What does "the measured use of historical imagination" mean? How is it different from fiction?**

All history is written by historians who use sources to then create a vision of what happened in the past. But sometimes the records fall completely silent, as they often did in my research for *Woke*. But instead of just giving up and leaving the lives of these women in complete silence, I use the same historical training to take this process one step further and try to reconstruct what *could* have happened. I call this "the measured use of historical imagination." And in the one and a half of the ten chapters in *Woke* where I do this, I clearly let the reader know when I am doing so, to keep integrity in the process.



For example, in imagining and creating visuals for the stories of the women involved in the New York City Slave Revolt of 1712, there is not one cobblestone, not one plant, not one city layout, that wasn't carefully researched.

The oath-taking ceremony in chapter 3, only briefly referred to in the colonial governor's correspondence, is drawn from sources in another British colony where the enslaved people were also predominantly Akan. These documents, which described in detail how these ceremonies work, were created to prevent slave revolts. It cautioned enslavers about what to be on watch for. If they saw an enslaved person gathering graveyard dirt, it was probably for an oath-taking ceremony and a revolt was being planned. This allowed Hugo and me to use those detailed descriptions to visualize the oath-taking ceremony that occurred before the revolt.



Since there are obviously no photos of the city in the early 1700s, I used the first two decades of eighteenth-century city council meetings to get a sense of what New York City looked like. The council minutes reveal incredibly useful details in their recording of mundane disputes about things like how to light the streets and who had to pay for the candles, or passing an ordinance that a specific neighborhood had to do a better job weeding around their houses

for fire prevention. This allowed us to visualize the city. I also used forensic anthropologists' analysis of the skeletons in the African Burial Ground, which showed that men and women were forced to do equally hard labor. There were even skeletons of women who had died from skull collapse from carrying heavy loads. Burial arrangements with specific grave goods showed that one woman was likely an Obeah priestess. We even know how many of those buried were originally born in Africa by analyzing nutrition patterns. Those born in Africa started with good nutrition that then deteriorated after being taken to New York City, whereas enslaved people born in New York City had poor nutrition from the start.

The measured use of historical imagination, as opposed to fiction, describes only what absolutely could have happened. For that reason, I felt comfortable using it in *Wake*.

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"Not only a riveting tale of Black women's leadership of slave revolts but an equally dramatic story of the engaged scholarship that enabled its discovery."

—**ANGELA Y. DAVIS**, political activist and professor emerita, departments of History of Consciousness and Feminist Studies, University of California, Santa Cruz

"Wake is a revelation. . . . Hall's writing cleverly flows between the reality of her research on Black women-led slave revolts and speculative imaginings that uncover the spectrum of human experience and resilience."

—**JOHN JENNINGS**, Eisner Award-winning illustrator of Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* graphic novel



"Wake makes accessible the historians' craft in the service of telling the powerful stories of women-led slave revolts. With the moving illustrations of Martínez and the impressive storytelling of Hall, we are transported into 1712, 1708, and the four-hundred-year history of the Black Atlantic, gaining a deeper sense of women-led uprisings. Infusing the text with her personal story and a sharp historical imagination, Hall never wavers in giving life to this history. She lifts the veil on enslaved women's leadership in the relentless pursuit of freedom. She brings into the present stories that must be read and passed on."

—**ROSE M. BREWER**, professor of Afro-American and African studies, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

"Hall and Martínez connect the past and the present in a moving and exciting narrative that brings to light the history of slavery in the United States. Showing how enslaved women resisted slavery, even though their participation in rebellions remains largely absent from written records, *Wake* will be a crucial tool to introduce students to the problematic nature of slavery primary sources."

—**ANA LUCIA ARAUJO**, professor of history, Howard University

"In this beautiful and moving graphic novel, Hall unearths a history so often overlooked: the significant role Black women played in leading slave revolts. Through Martínez's vivid graphics, combined with Hall's brilliant insights and powerful storytelling, *Wake* transports the reader to a moment in time when a group of Black women set out to overturn the institution of slavery in British North America. Their courageous story, told with remarkable skill and elegance, offers hope and inspiration for us all."

—**KEISHA N. BLAIN**, coeditor of the #1 *New York Times* bestseller *Four Hundred Souls* and award-winning author of *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom*

"More than just a history, *Wake* is a meaningful engagement with a living past. Read this book slowly. Savor the visual metaphors. Let them take you back in time while Hall's narration pins you to the uncomfortable present. This book will haunt you the way that the legacies of slavery haunt this country."

—**TREVOR R. GETZ**, professor of African and world history, San Francisco State University, and author of *Abina and the Important Men: A Graphic History*

"We who live in the wake of centuries of white supremacy feel the hidden history of our ancestors' struggle to survive uncovered in this book. In its pages we not only feel their sorrow in bondage but also their elation when they finally broke free."

—**BEN PASSMORE**, author of *Your Black Friend and Other Strangers*