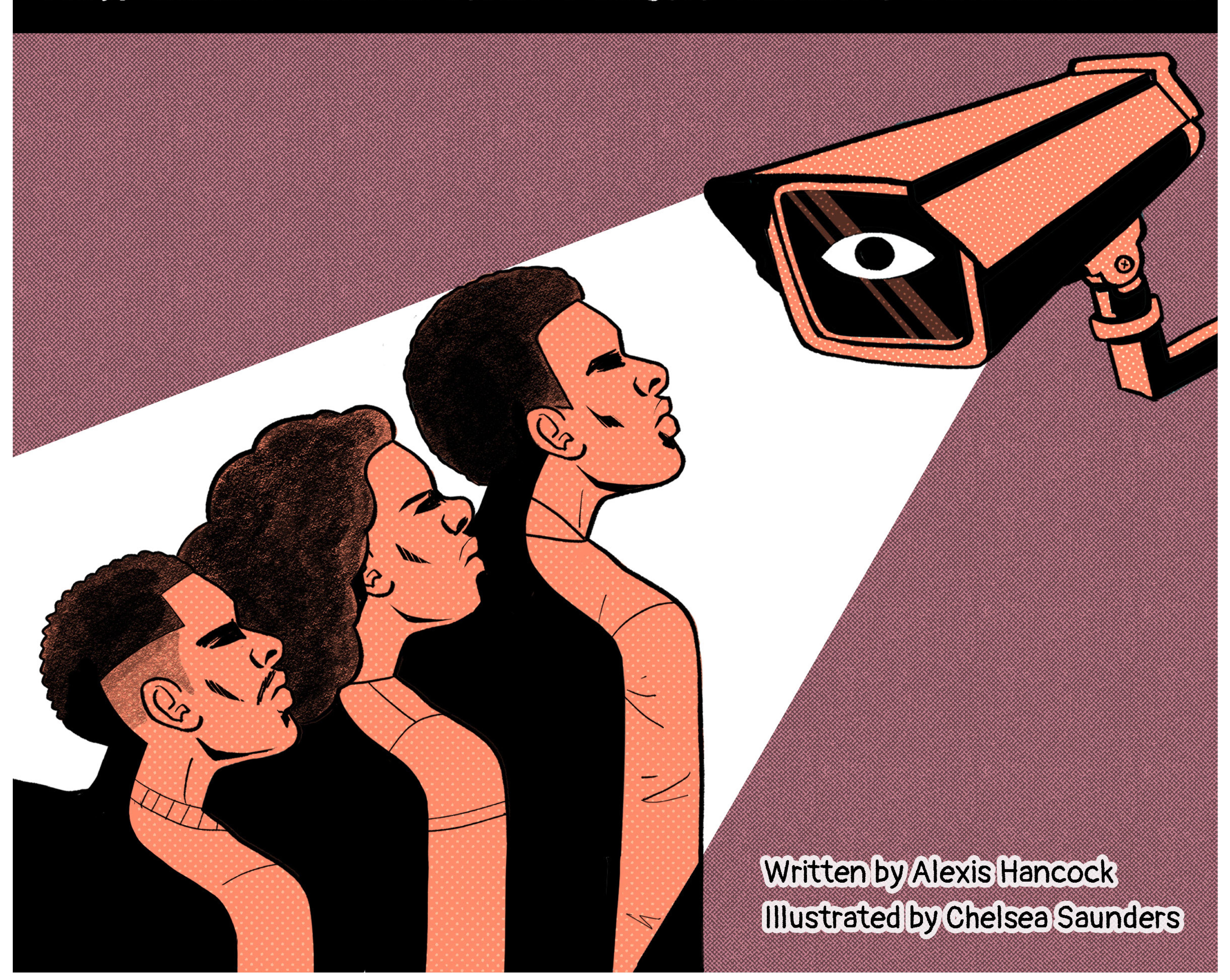
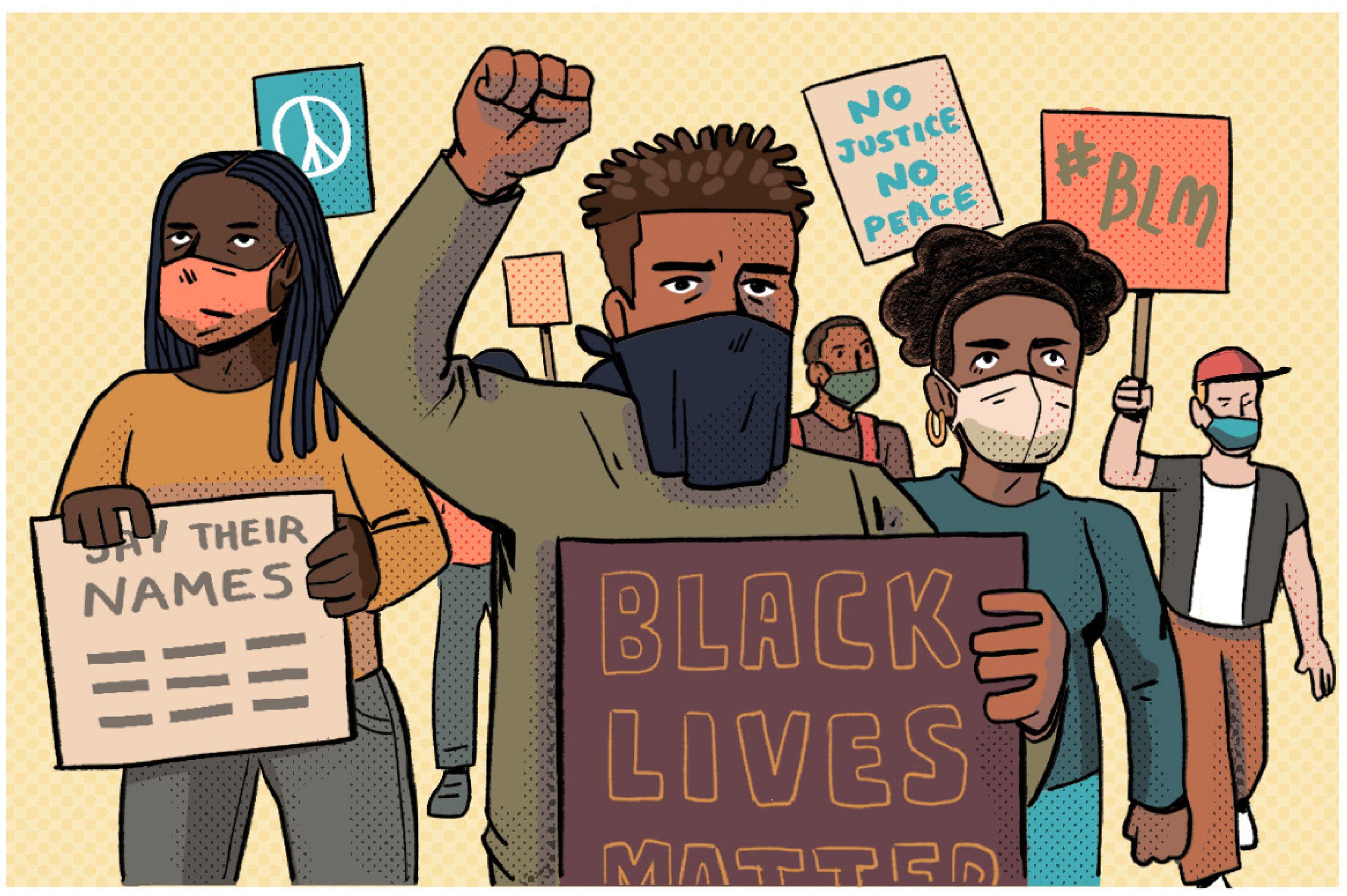
HOW BLACK COMMUNITIES FOUGHT AGAINST SURVEILLANGE



Strife, resistance, organizing to combat government surveillance and oppression. This is intertwined with Black History.

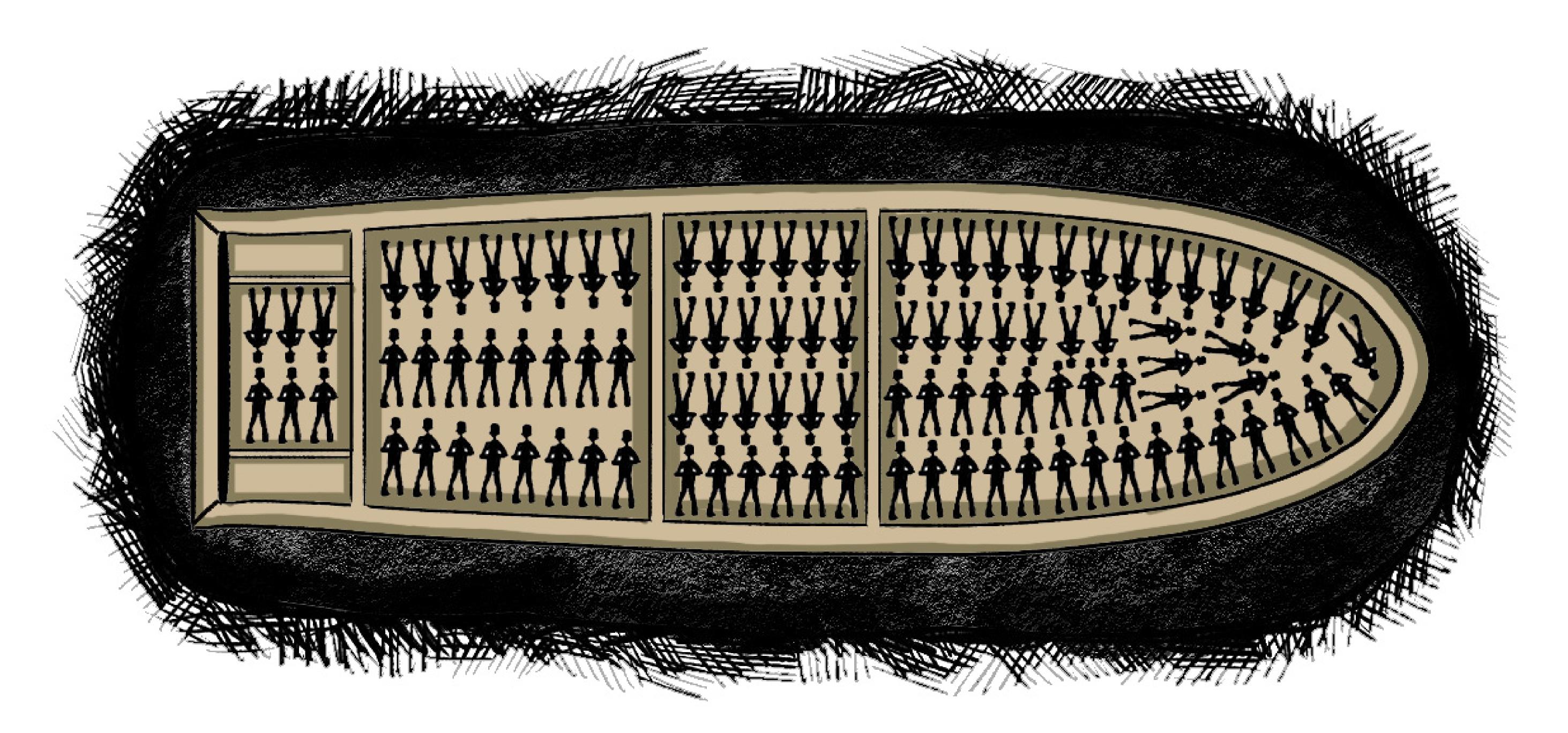


Today we are more aware of the ways of how communities are surveilled during times of unrest and calls for change...



...however, the Black community has fought back and avoided surveillance through intricate networks and communication for hundreds of years.

The horrors of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade still cast their shadow of systemic racism today, none so pivotal to oppression as scrutiny from colonizers and slave owners.



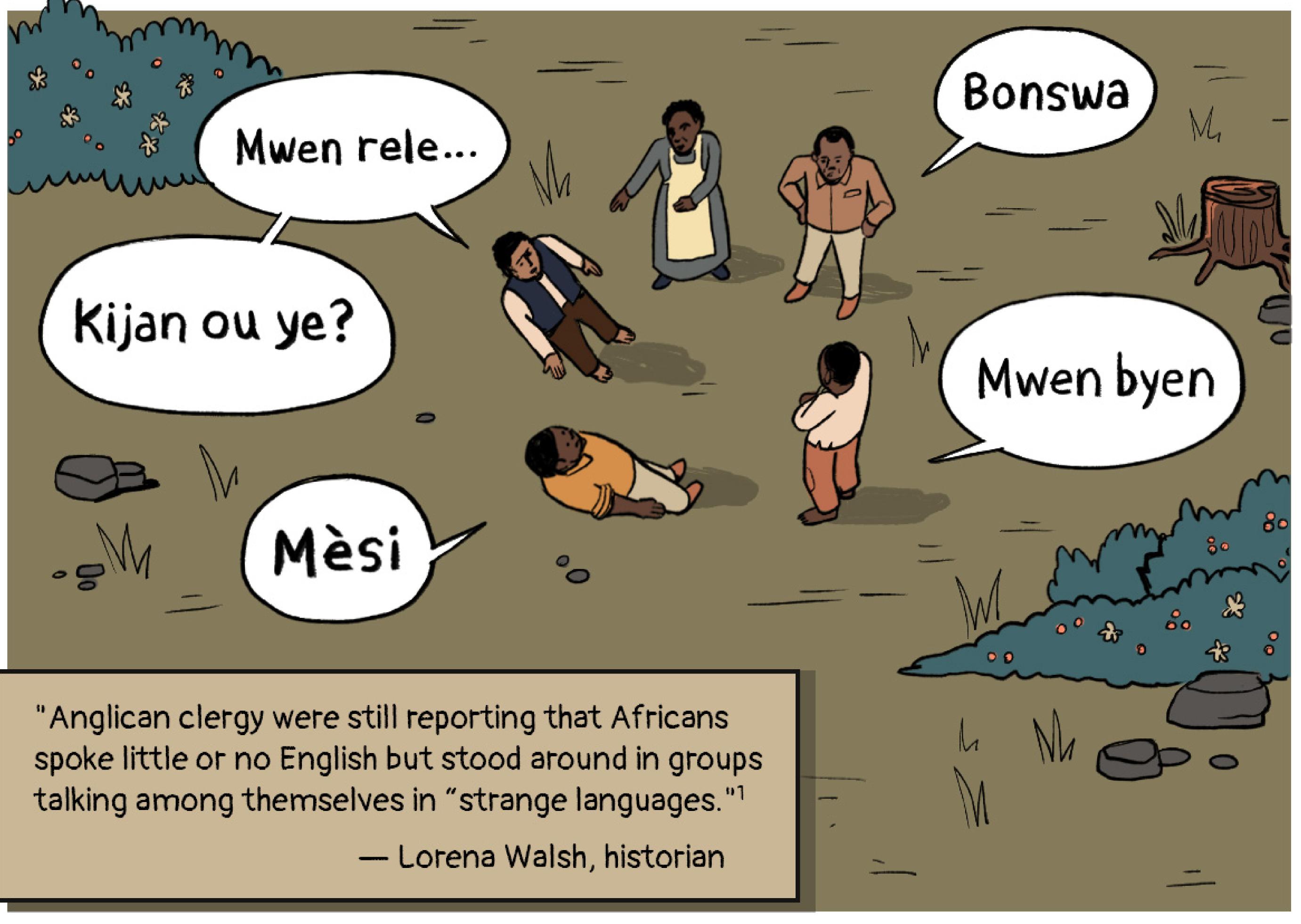
Enslaved Africans were separated from their loved ones, abused, tortured, and brought to a foreign land to work for free until their death...

... and all the while one of the biggest obstacles they faced when trying to organize and fight was the fact that they were so closely watched.

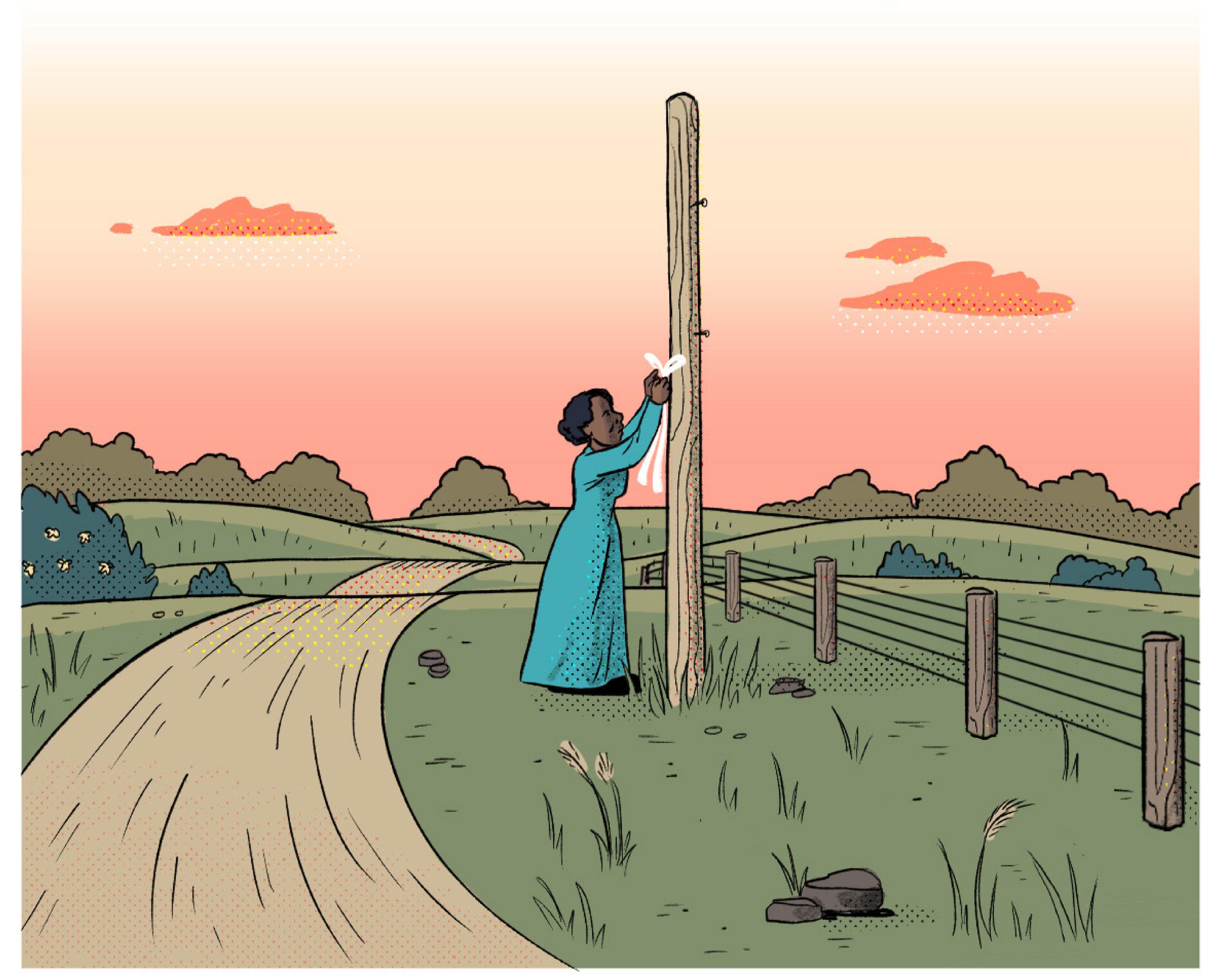




While over time European languages were forced onto enslaved Africans, many found a way to each other by creating entirely new languages of their own — **Creole**. Creole served as a "home" language-wise, but it was also a way for slaves to communicate information to each other under the eyes of overseers.



One married couple had a simple yet effective signaling system where the wife placed a garment in a particular spot that was visible from her husband's hiding spot.



A man named Ben and his wife had other systems in place if it was too dark to see. For example, shining a bright light through the cracks in their cabin for an instant, and then repeating it at intervals of two or three minutes, three or four times.



Those captured from Africa and brought to the Americas seldom gave their captors a night of rest. Rebellion brewed everywhere. Including places like New York, where in 1712 an uprising broke out.



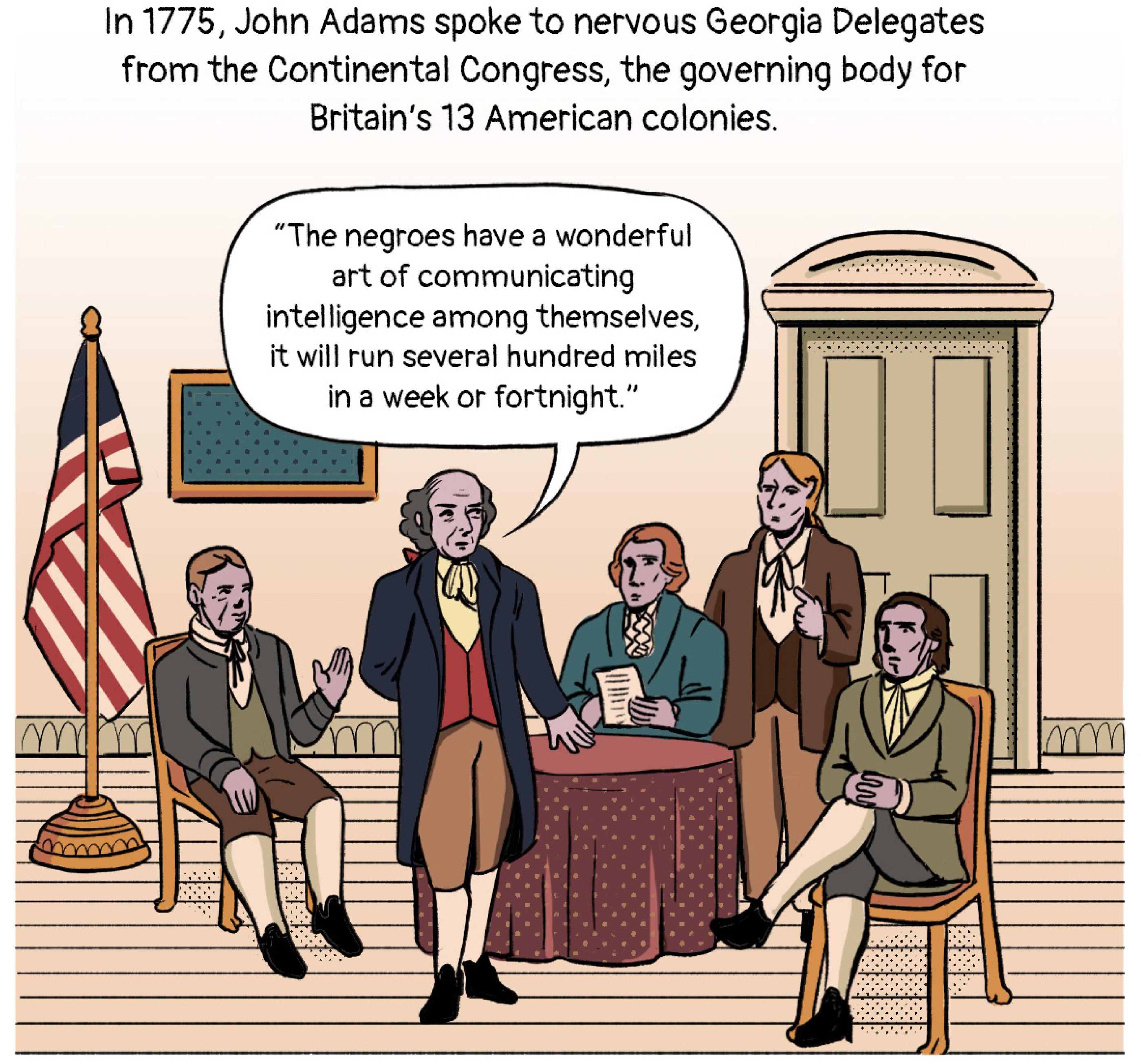
Unlike plantations of the South, in 18th century New York, the enslaved were working alongside the free.



They were able to communicate more frequently with free Black people and support each other to liberate the enslaved from their harsh conditions.



But after the revolt, more restrictive laws were passed that limited gatherings of the enslaved to just three people. The amount of communication between free Black people and enslaved generated great fear among slave holders.



Coachmen, draymen, boatmen, and others who were allowed to move around off plantations were the backbone for this chain of intelligence.



These networks often gained runaway slaves years out of captivity and thus the ability to maintain a network among the enslaved.

As historian Sylviane A. Diouf recounts, keeping a high level of surveillance took a lot of resources from the slaveholders, and that fact was well-exploited by the enslaved.





Perhaps the most famous artisan of secret communications during this period is the venerable Harriet Tubman.



As the first and only woman to organize and lead a military operation during the American Civil War, her reputation was solidified as an expert in espionage. Her incredibly detailed and accurate information often saved Black troops in the Union from harm.

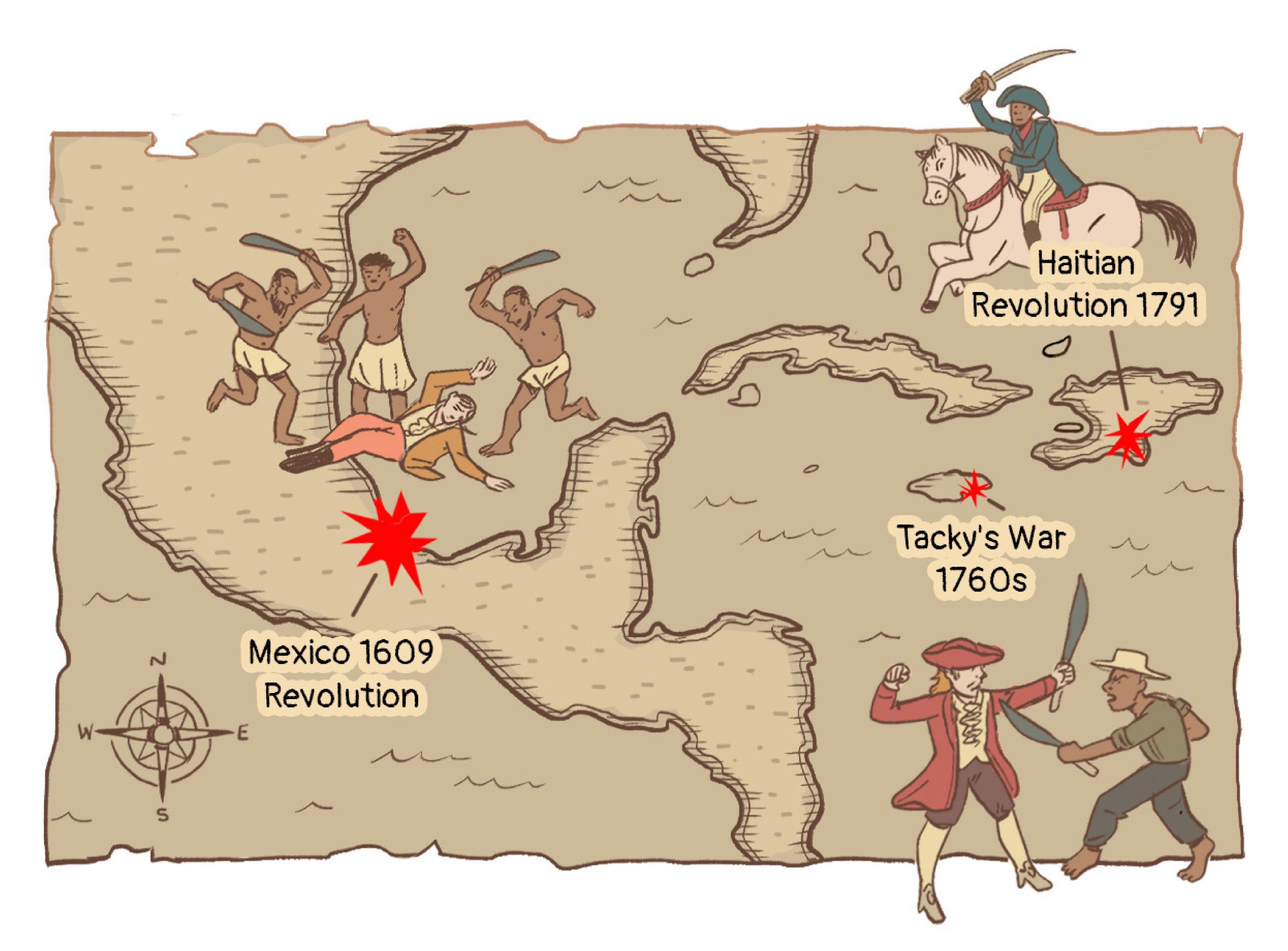


It was illegal or prohibited for Black people to read and write.

Much of Tubman's verbal communication and transcribed
letters were through ordinary language that acted as metaphor.

The tradition of oral history and storytelling remained strong among the enslaved, and acted as a way to "hide in plain sight." Tubman said she changed the tempo of the songs to indicate whether it was safe to come out or not.



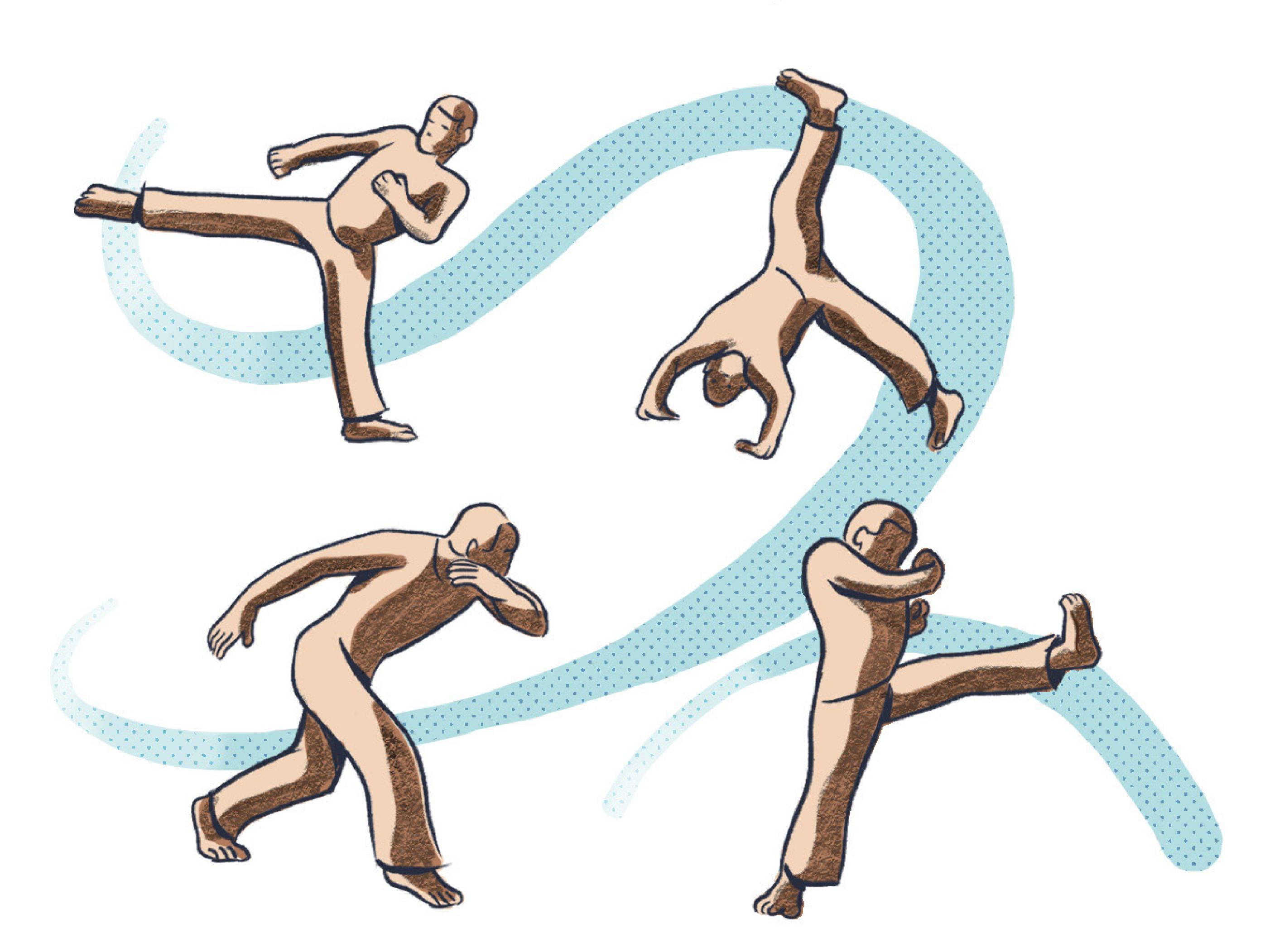


Slave rebellions elsewhere in the Americas were not, as they are sometimes portrayed, merely the product of spontaneous and rightful rage against their oppressors. Some rebellions, such as Tacky's War in Jamaica, were documented to be in the works for over a year before the first strike.



A common tie in the New York 1712 Rebellion and Tacky's War, is that the same ethnic group was involved with these uprisings and dozens of others. The Akan people, from what is modern day Ghana and Republic of Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast), were highly organized and had a prominent military background.⁴

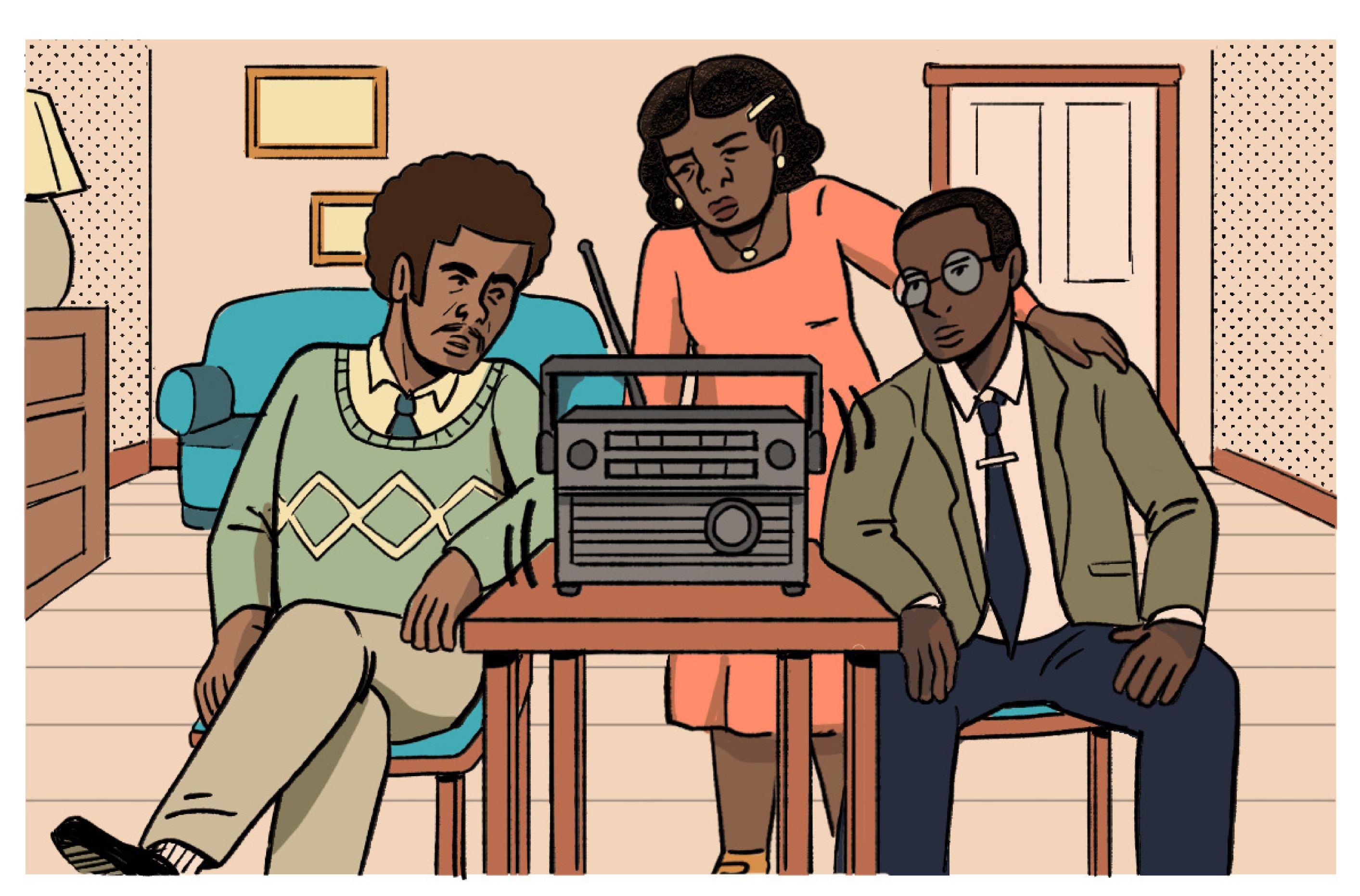
In Quilombos, a Brazilian hinterland settlement of "Maroons," (escaped slaves), developed a way to fight against the Portuguese rule of that time: capoeira. A dance style served as a way to bypass prohibitions on practicing their cultural custom and learning martial arts.



The Emancipation Proclamation, the American Civil War and the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery in the United States, did not end oppression.

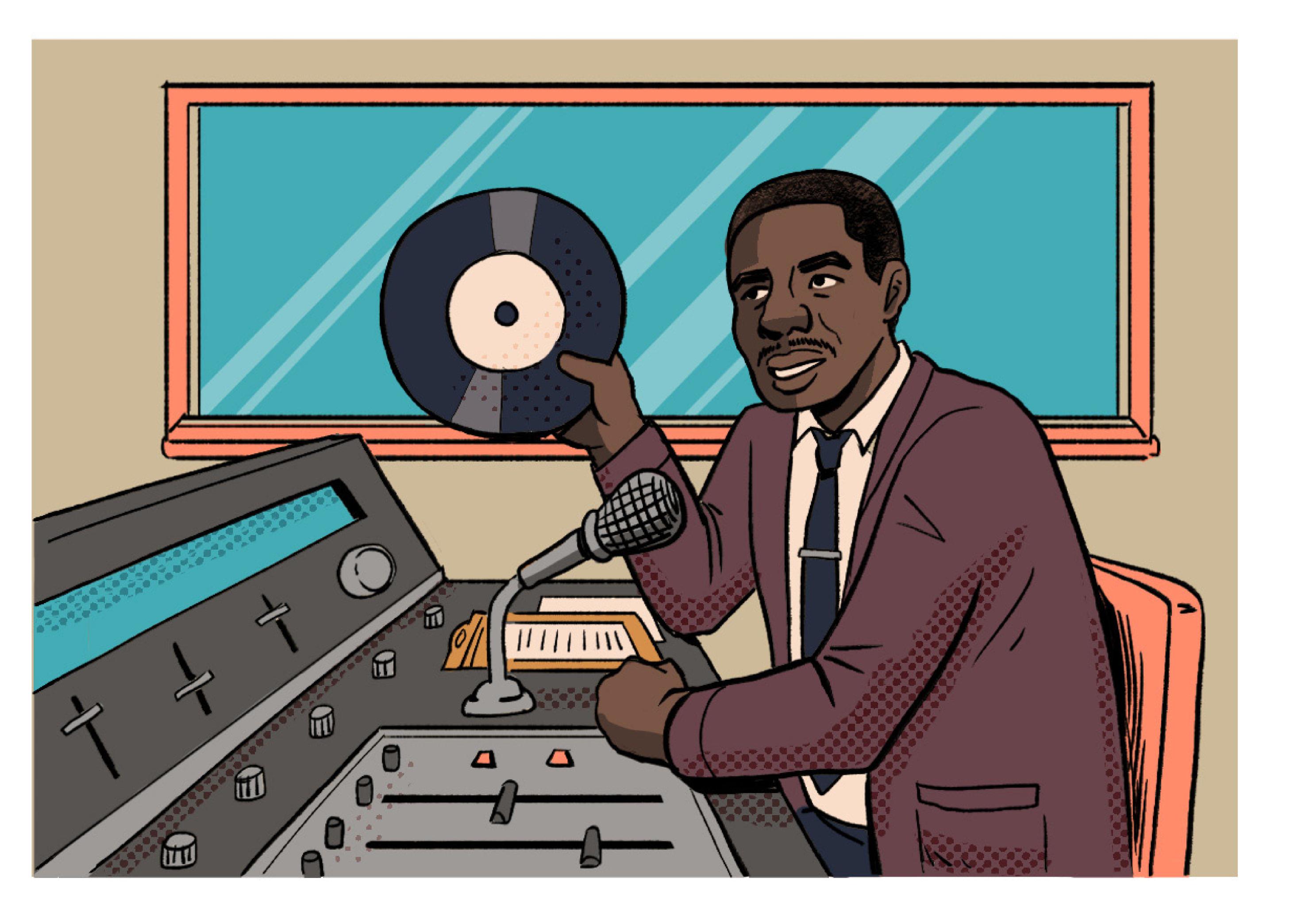


As technology progressed, the oppressed adapted. During the height of the Civil Rights Movement, radio became an integral part of informing supporters.



Radio made information accessible to those who could not afford newspapers or who were denied access to literacy education due to Jim Crow.

Black DJs relayed information about protests, misinformation, and police checkpoints. Keeping the community informed and as safe as possible became their mission outside of music and propelled them into civic engagement, from protest details to walking new Black voters through ballot procedures.



To circumvent the monopolistic Bell System ("Ma Bell") that only employed white operators and colluded with law enforcement, vital civil rights organizations used Wide Area Telephone Services phone lines (WATS).



Directly patching through to organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Congress of Racial Equality, Council of Federated Organizations, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to disperse information during important moments that often meant life or death.



These organization's bases had code names to refer to when relaying information to another base either via WATS or radio.

Coded language and fast information were vital for Civil Rights organizations, many of who were impacted by COINTELPRO.

This extralegal FBI program surveilled and actively derailed political movements.



Often tapping Black people close to targets to betray information, COINTELPRO used covert operations against Martin Luther King jr., The Nation of Islam and the Black Panthers.⁵



The Black community has been fighting what essentially is the technological militarization of the police force since the 1990s.

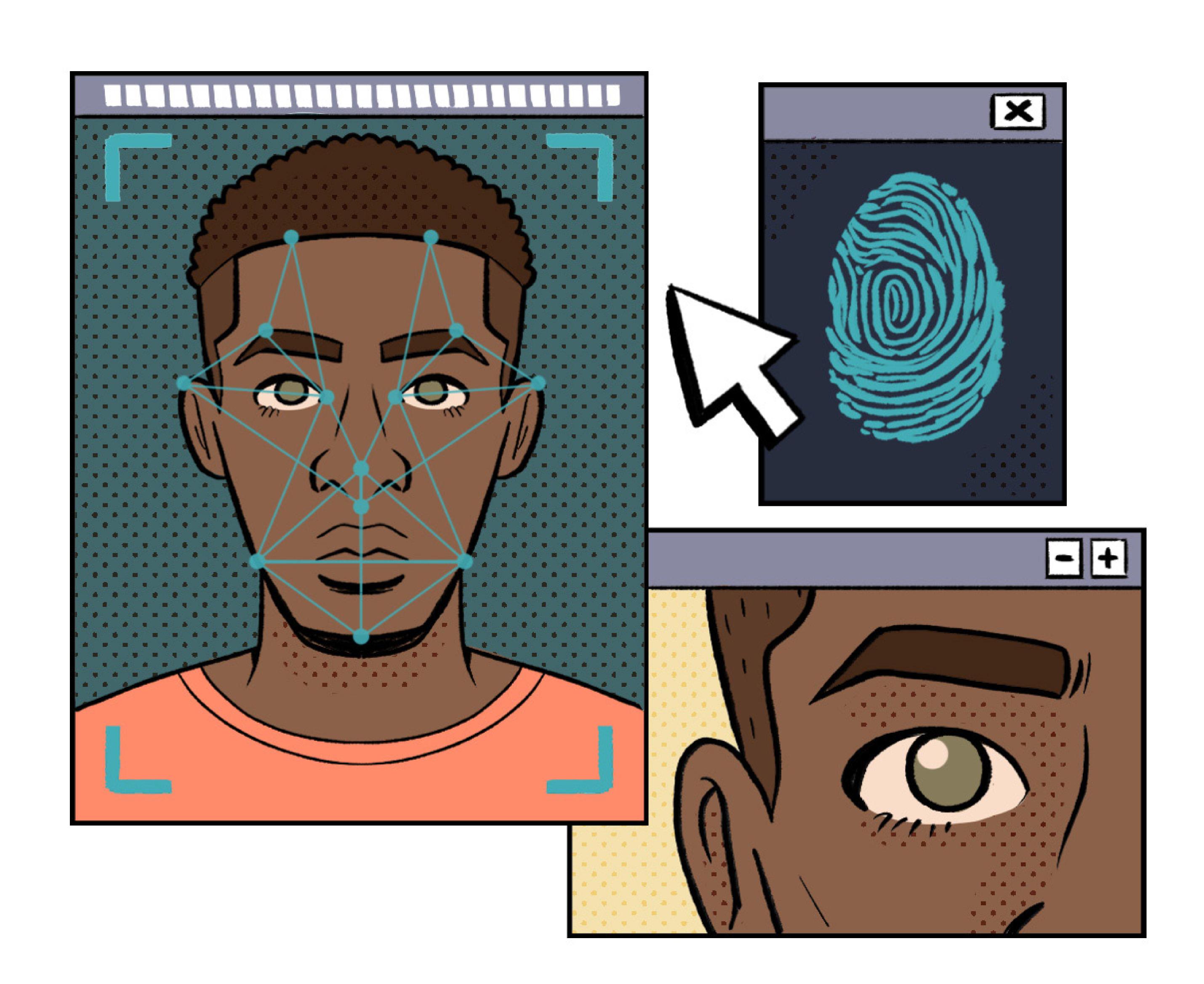
Black and other marginalized communities still struggle to communicate despite surveillance, but in the 21st century we do have digital tools to help. With encryption widely available, we can now use protected communications with each other for sensitive information.



Just as with the DJs of the past, current activist groups like Black Lives Matter used this hypervisibility under Big Tech to get police brutality highlighted in the mainstream conversation and in real life.



The world has seen racially motivated police brutality up close because of on-site video, live recordings from phones and police scanners.



While the struggle continues, we have seen recent wins where police use of facial recognition technology is now being limited or banned in many areas in the U.S.

Whether online or off, we are keeping a public eye on those who are sworn to serve and protect us, with the hope one day we can freely move without the chains of surveillance and white supremacy.

