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# The Flood Last Time: “Muck” and the Uses of History in Kara Walker’s “Rumination” on Katrina

MICHAEL P. BIBLER

Kara Walker describes her book *After the Deluge* (2007) as “rumination” on Hurricane Katrina structured in the form of a “visual essay.” The book combines Walker’s own artwork and the works of other artists into “a narrative of fluid symbols” in which the overarching analogy of “murky, toxic waters” holds the potential to “become the amniotic fluid of a potentially new and difficult birth.” This essay considers Walker’s use of history within this collection of images to show how the book opens up ways to interrogate Katrina’s particular significance as a wholly new, and yet eerily familiar, historical “event.” Nuancing a reading of Walker’s book with reference to James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* (1963), to which *After the Deluge* implicitly alludes, the essay examines Walker’s artistic challenge to the notion that history is a narratable account of a past that precedes the present and demonstrates how that challenge encourages us to think about the potential uses of history within civil rights discourse after Katrina.

To accept one’s past – one’s history – is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it.

James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*<sup>1</sup>

The title and cover image of *After the Deluge* (2007), Kara Walker’s visual-arts “rumination” on Hurricane Katrina, invoke the ancient story of Noah and the Flood. The book is a self-described “visual essay” resulting from Walker’s 2006 exhibition of the same name at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in which she arranged works from the museum’s collection alongside her own works. In red letters against a white background, the book’s title connects the floods that devastated New Orleans in 2005 with the biblical

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<sup>1</sup> James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (London: Penguin Books, 1990; first published 1963), 71. Hereafter cited by page numbers in the text.

flood sent by God to punish the wicked and renew the world. The picture is a detail from an original piece of Walker's, entitled *Burn* (1998). In solid black silhouette, a girl in ponytails is engulfed in flames; a can drops from her hand, indicating that she has set the fire herself. As with everything Walker creates, it is hard to decide how we should interpret this image, especially in the context of Katrina. Is this a "white" girl committing suicide, symbolizing a majority white nation that has reached the point of self-destruction? Is she a "black" girl martyring herself, representing the majority black city as a sacrificial victim of US racism, greed, and neglect?<sup>2</sup>

However one reads it, the cover situates Hurricane Katrina within a particular narrative of history. It suggests that, like Noah's flood, Katrina's "deluge" was a brutal lesson that we must mend our ways (of course, who "we" are is open to debate). If we do not, as the picture reminds us, God will send the absolute punishment of "the fire next time," just as He threatened Noah (and it will be our fault, as the girl has set fire to herself). The hardback boards beneath the cover jacket offer only this image of conflagration in black flames against a bright red background. The book's outer trappings thus link Walker's rumination with the old tradition of the American jeremiad, a stern but loving admonishment to a society that, in the eyes of the person sermonizing, has lost its way and must restore its sense of right and purpose before it succumbs to an even more catastrophic ending. In this schema, history is cyclical because it repeats the pattern of events mapped out in the Bible and because it offers the chance for renewal. In the same stroke, though, this history is also linear: after the deluge, there will come a much worse and more final ending – the fire next time. And yet Walker's combination of image and text in one frame defies both versions of temporal sequence by collapsing the two events into one space, making the fire next time simultaneous with the passing of the deluge. If there is an element of the jeremiad in Walker's book, the narrative distortion enacted by its cover already asks its readers to reconsider event, consequence, and promise/threat – not to mention complicity and guilt – in nontraditional ways.

<sup>2</sup> In an interview with Harvey Blume, Walker challenges Blume's description of a figure in one of her silhouettes as a "black woman," claiming, "That's an assumption! Keep in mind they're images, not men, boys, or girls. We're looking at pictures that respond to other pictures, rather than the actual thing." Harvey Blume, "Q&A with Kara Walker," *Boston Globe*, 2 April 2006, [http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2006/04/02/qa\\_with\\_kara\\_walker/](http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2006/04/02/qa_with_kara_walker/). In the case of *Burn*, we should also note that Walker provides no facial features in this silhouette, making it difficult to determine how she expects us to interpret the image racially. Given Walker's attention to black women in so much of her work, it is safe to assume that this girl is also "black," as long as we also remain open to the possibility that the image could be read as "white" as well.

By invoking this biblical story, Walker invites a comparison between her “visual essay” and James Baldwin’s essays in *The Fire Next Time* (1963). Thus she also invites us to consider her subject, Hurricane Katrina, in relation to the long civil rights movement and the ongoing problems of racial and economic inequality that Katrina brought to national attention. When we make this comparison between *After the Deluge* and *The Fire Next Time*, we see a slight but notable difference in how Walker and Baldwin treat the history of racism and that history’s relationship to the present. On one level, this comparison opens up ways to interrogate Katrina’s particular significance as a historical “event.” On another level, mapping the differences between the two texts suggests the potential for a larger intellectual project that reframes history not as a description of the past, but rather as a conduit rerouting attention back to the social problems of the present. This essay examines Walker’s artistic challenge to the notion that history is a narratable account of a past that precedes the present – a challenge already expressed in the cover’s temporal distortions – and shows how that challenge encourages us to think about the potential uses of history within civil rights discourse “after the deluge” of Katrina.

Like the cover, the book’s organization plays with and also destabilizes narrative structures. The table of contents divides the images into seventeen sections, as if some sense of progression might be gained by reading the book from cover to cover. The final section is called “Portents,” and the final image is a full reproduction of *Burn* (about which I will say more later), lending a kind of closure to the book by giving it a framework and, again, suggesting an endpoint to history in the imminent future. However, Walker does not assign her sections page numbers, making it impossible to tell which artworks belong under which heading. If readers try to follow this order as they turn the pages, they quickly lose track of where they are in *After the Deluge*. It becomes clear that the list of contents is more evocative than explanatory.

This disorientation – the feeling of being immersed in the images without recourse to a clear map through them – enacts the challenge to linearity that is embodied in the central image of Walker’s project: “muck.” In her preface, she explains that she is particularly interested in the “puddle” that is “always there” at the end of a story: “a murky, unnavigable space that is overcrowded with intangibles: shame, remorse, vanity, morbidity, silence.”<sup>3</sup> Consequently, she has “cobbed together” a collection of images and objects that relate to water, storms, disasters, and other elements that “connect a

<sup>3</sup> Kara Walker, *After the Deluge* (New York: Rizzoli, 2007), 7, hereafter cited by page number in the text.

series of thoughts together related to fluidity and the failure of containment” (8). She calls this collection “a narrative of fluid symbols, in which that fluidity is figurative and sometimes literal,” and she offers them as a means for renewal:

Black life, urban and rural Southern life, is often related as if it were an entity with a shadowy beginning and a potentially heroic future, but with a soul that is crippled by racist psychosis. One theme in my artwork is the idea that a Black subject in the present tense is a container for specific pathologies from the past and is continually growing and feeding off those maladies. Racist pathology is the Muck ... In this book’s analogy, murky, toxic waters become the amniotic fluid of a potentially new and difficult birth, flushing out of a coherent and stubborn body long-held fears and suspicions. (9)

In this passage Walker once again presents her book as a certain kind of narrative. Instead of flowing from deluge to fire, however, this narrative is more regenerative, moving from “pathology” and “muck” to “a potentially new and difficult birth.” Yet she also suggests that the “racist psychosis” that structures black life in America stops any kind of sequential movement in its tracks. Instead of traveling forward from “shadowy beginning” to “a potentially heroic future,” the “Black subject” she claims to show us – as well as the culture that creates and sustains this pathological subject – is caught in an endless loop, “continually growing and feeding off those maladies” (9).

Also in the preface, Walker asks, “what role can the visual arts play in reexamining one of America’s greatest failures?” (7). She answers, “Not much.” But I believe her arrangement of images as a response to Katrina does exactly that: it encourages us to make interpretive leaps in order to make sense of the images as part of a commentary on the shocking destruction that followed the storm. I certainly would not want to suggest that such a diverse collection of images – many with long and rich critical histories – should support a single overarching interpretation. Rather, in this essay I will examine a selection of key works and explore what they reveal about the particular context into which Walker has placed them and the problem of how to begin making sense of the human catastrophe caused by the floods of 2005.

There has already been a great deal of scholarly work explaining how the storm exposed the “muck” of racism and inequality that still affects African Americans and the poor whether black or white. But the only direct reference to Katrina in Walker’s book, beyond the words of the preface, is a photograph on page eight of an African American woman swimming through the flood. Her shoulders and head are just above the water as she swims with a small duffel bag in one hand – clearly too small to hold the life’s possessions she has left behind. In her other hand is a twelve-pack of bottled drinking water, poignantly symbolizing the increased privatization of basic public

services including water management – a trend accelerated under the second Bush administration – that has helped drain funds from urgent civil welfare projects such as levee controls and opened the gates for urban devastation epitomized by the undrinkable toxic soup in which the woman swims. The picture fills a whole page in the middle of the preface, and it powerfully exemplifies Walker’s idea of “muck.” The woman moves slowly through the polluted waters as she no doubt did (and probably still does) through the racist pathologies of everyday American life. And yet, splayed across the entire surface of the water is the beautiful rainbow one always finds in oil slicks. Read in the context of the story of Noah, disaster and promise are again collapsed into a single frame. Relocated from the sky to the water itself, the toxic rainbow becomes a symbol of the “potentially new and difficult birth” that this woman, now representative of the “Black subject,” might experience while mired in those pathologies. Walker’s discussion of muck’s fertile possibilities repaints this colorful sludge as a potential source of transformation, maybe even salvation, in and of itself.

The next image in the book offers a counterpoint to this photograph’s evocation of rebirth and renewal. In a two-page spread immediately following the preface is a reproduction of Joseph Turner’s famous 1840 painting *Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)* (10–11). As the chained bodies of the enslaved sink into the roiling sea, there are clear parallels with the bodies left to sink or swim in the mostly black neighborhoods of the Lower Ninth Ward and Gentilly. The violent murders committed in the painting also call to mind what A. C. Thompson in *The Nation* has described as Katrina’s “hidden race war.” During the floods and the days that followed, white residents in Algiers Point, a neighborhood located directly opposite downtown New Orleans on the Mississippi River, formed a vigilante patrol. Under the guise of protecting their neighborhood from thieves and intruders, these white patrols allegedly wreaked terror and violence on any black person they saw, even blacks who lived in Algiers. Thompson’s report suggests that the vigilantes killed several men and left them in the streets to rot, perhaps as examples to others, in some cases with the apparent blessing of local police. Only in the wake of his report has the federal government begun to investigate these deaths.<sup>4</sup> Despite all the

<sup>4</sup> A. C. Thompson, “Katrina’s Hidden Race War,” *The Nation*, 17 Dec. 2008, [http://www.thenation.com/doc/20090105/thompson?rel=hp\\_picks](http://www.thenation.com/doc/20090105/thompson?rel=hp_picks). See also *idem*, “New Evidence Surfaces in Post-Katrina Crimes,” *The Nation*, 11 July 2009, <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20090720/thompson>; and Rebecca Solnit, “The Grinning Skull: The Homicides You Didn’t Hear about in Hurricane Katrina,” *TomDispatch.com*, 22 Dec. 2008, <http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/175016>.

advances in civil rights in the United States, the same pathologies of racism and violence that are most clearly encapsulated in the Middle Passage continue to shape twenty-first-century life.

This broad evocation of a similarity or continuity between the Middle Passage and Katrina invites us to think about the storm's place as a historical event. Lloyd Pratt argues that many attempts to make sense of Katrina's devastation present the storm as either an exception or an example: "Was this gruesome spectacle of life stripped bare of something in excess of the everyday, or did it in fact recapitulate the new shape of American society?"<sup>5</sup> He answers that this "tendency ... to 'historicize' the storm in this way" actually limits how we might understand the real tragedy that occurred, for the either/or of exception or example "has encouraged an implicit but growing sense that what transpired in New Orleans during and after the storm was and is nothing especially *new*." The result, he argues, is the "perfectly reasonable and exceedingly popular judgment" that the more things change, the more they stay the same.<sup>6</sup> To help challenge this, Pratt thus employs "a third term" by calling the storm an "event," a "category of analysis" that can "serve as a placeholder capable of forestalling the recuperation of the unknown to the known long enough to determine what it was in this storm that was absolutely and terrifyingly new." Treating Katrina as an "event" helps us consider the storm's relationship to other historical events without slipping into the easy conclusion that Katrina's significance is imminently knowable by its relation to "a cumulative historical norm" of "the customary and the easily categorized." Calling Katrina an "event" foregrounds the uncertainty introduced by the newness of this storm.<sup>7</sup>

Following Pratt's reasoning, we would make a pretty clumsy comparison if we used Walker's inclusion of *Slave Ship* to claim that the horrors that occurred during and after Katrina were just like the horrors of the Middle Passage and slavery. Instead, we should be sensitive to the way that Walker's juxtaposition of images invites us to ponder what is both familiar and strangely new about this major event of 2005. While it is quite easy, and not necessarily bad, to see Katrina as another point within a "cumulative historical norm," Walker's book rather attempts to locate Katrina within what I would call an irregular continuum – a continuum that does not and cannot

<sup>5</sup> Lloyd Pratt, "New Orleans and Its Storm: Exception, Example, or Event?" *American Literary History*, 19, 1 (Spring 2007), 251–65, 251. See also *idem*, "In the Event: An Introduction," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 19, 2 (2008), 1–8; and Hayden White, "The Historical Event," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 19, 2 (2008), 9–34.

<sup>6</sup> Pratt, "New Orleans and Its Storm," 251–52, original emphasis. <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 254, 251.

smooth over the inevitable gaps and inconsistencies within it, a continuum wherein the inexact similarity between events forces us to confront their incongruity. As we recognize how the dead bodies in New Orleans and Algiers resemble and are historically linked to the bodies thrown overboard during the Middle Passage, we should also quickly recognize that such a comparison diminishes the unspeakable atrocities of African slavery and ignores the specificity of twenty-first-century racism and poverty. The irregular historical continuum Walker implicitly offers compels us to adumbrate what is wholly new and unknown about Katrina even as we acknowledge the seeming repetition of events from slavery to the present.

Part of what enables this sense of historical near-continuity between Katrina and the images of disaster that Walker brings together is the undeniable persistence of racism and the enduring presence of what Toni Morrison calls “Africanism” in American culture. Walker’s obvious reference to “de muck” in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) calls to mind the sense of community and rejuvenation that the muck gives Janie, Tea Cake, and the other black folk, underlining her own claim about muck’s potential for rebirth and renewal. But the images in this book – especially Walker’s own art pieces – also highlight the spectrum of pathologies tied to the objectification of blackness and black people. Morrison explains that notions of “autonomy, authority, newness and difference” are each “made possible by, shaped by, activated by a complex awareness and employment of a constituted Africanism. It was Africanism, deployed as rawness and savagery, that provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity.”<sup>8</sup> Relatively tame examples of this Africanist presence are evident in paintings Walker includes by William P. Chappel, especially *Baked Pears in Duane Park* (24–25) and *The Boot Black* (28–29), both from the 1870s. Both paintings depict clean, urban neighborhoods with eighteenth-century buildings orderly arranged under pleasant skies. In the center of each painting stands an African American figure: a turbaned woman with a basket on her head in the first picture, and a man carrying a rod with boots neatly hanging from it in the second. In both we might say that the civility of the implicitly white town is anchored by the presence and the labor of the civilized-looking blacks in the foreground. The woman’s baked pears nourish the residents, while the man’s skill at transferring (his?) blackness onto the white citizens’ boots supports the fashion, business, and identities of the men who wear those boots.

<sup>8</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Random House, 1992), 44.



Anyone familiar with Walker's art will know that her exploration of Africanism is not so genteel. One work entitled *Beats Me*, from her 2001 series *American Primitives*, shows the silhouettes of two men dressed like nineteenth-century southern gentlemen standing in front of what look like two slave cabins. One man shrugs his shoulders in the manner suggested in the title, apparently puzzled by the silhouetted body of a naked man, by implication an enslaved African, lying dead or unconscious on the roof of one of the cabins. The white men's nonchalance underscores the disposability of black life in a racist society, for not only are they unconcerned, but they may well be the ones who have beaten to death the "me" of the black subject in the first place.

In other examples, Walker recalls both the savagery attributed to Africanism in general and the false rumors of atrocities committed in the Superdome and elsewhere during Katrina with a collection of images depicting tribal and gang warfare, sporting fans, and the Amistad slave rebellion (50–54), as well as another painting from *American Primitives* entitled *Big House* (30–31). In this painting the silhouette of what looks like a nude black woman crouches over the horizontal body of another woman, potentially a white woman, in an alley of live oak trees leading to a white-columned plantation house clearly modeled on the Louisiana plantation Oak Alley. The scene closely resembles a scene filmed at Oak Alley for the movie *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), for the black woman's mouth is open as if she is about to bite the white woman or even drink her blood or eat her flesh (or has done so already). The violence here suggests the same idea in Chappel's paintings: that the primitivism of the Africanist presence supports the supposed orderliness of white America, figured in the symmetrical big house. But Walker also plays with the myth of the predatory black, the myth that the inhuman savagery of this Africanist presence threatens to destroy white society like a vampire – part of what fuelled the racist hysteria in Algiers Point and elsewhere, as well as some of the media coverage of the flood and its aftermath.<sup>9</sup>

A further example of the racist "psychosis" and "pathology" that "cripples" the black subject comes in Walker's untitled graphite drawing from 2002, in which two minstrels dance and play music in a puddle of black muck oozing from the mutilated body of a black woman, arguably a symbol of the countless women raped and murdered during slavery and after (22–23). The two men's faces look almost terrified, as if they are being forced to perform against their will, and their eyes stare warily out from the picture as if it is the

<sup>9</sup> See my article "Always the Tragic Jezebel: New Orleans, Katrina, and the Layered Discourses of a Doomed Southern City," *Southern Cultures*, 14, 2 (2008), 6–27.

viewer who is forcing them. Following Walker's comments in the preface that the "Black subject in the present tense is a container for specific pathologies from the past and is continually growing and feeding off those maladies," we notice how the two men emerge out of the puddle as if they are actually made of the muck, both their identities and their performance inspired and constrained by the same pathological racism responsible for the defiled black woman at their feet. Put another way, the puddle left over from the trauma inflicted on the one black subject feeds the emergence of new black subjects, who are also already traumatized. And yet the minstrels' trauma is also balanced by the suggestion that their response to the trauma – their music – is what helps them survive, to avoid momentarily the death inflicted on the woman. Returning to the photograph discussed earlier, I believe this notion of survival and endurance helps us make sense of the rainbow captured on the surface of the floodwaters. If the promise of new life is a component of the flood itself, rather than something far away in the sky, then the woman's salvation lies in her ability to negotiate the muck, to keep swimming. For if Katrina revealed nothing else, it is that the muck is still a problem; even 140 years after Emancipation and forty years after the civil rights movement, black Americans are still fatally subject to the racist pathologies of the nation.

This emphasis on creativity and survival within the muck is crucial to Walker's distortion of temporalities. The fact that the two performing subjects in the graphite drawing are nineteenth-century minstrels reminds us that the racist psychosis that dehumanizes them will in turn give rise to more modern forms of black subjectivity in our own time. The repetition of racist violence ironically produces something new in each generation, including new forms of black art and music, and we are again drawn to think of the differences between slavery, minstrelsy, and contemporary forms of racism even as we recognize the continuities between them. As Clyde Woods has argued,

We must look at this disaster [Katrina] from the eyes of working-class African Americans, blacks, from the eyes of the impoverished, and, more important, from the eyes of impoverished black children for whom this is a defining moment. The new blues generation is being constructed out of the same disaster-induced social ruins that were created after the biblical Mississippi flood of 1927.<sup>10</sup>

Walker's own art is part of this irregular continuum in which we can imagine both the connections and the disjunctures between her work, the blues of the 1920s, and the minstrel songs of the 1880s. Furthermore, the idea that racist

<sup>10</sup> Clyde Woods, "Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans? Katrina, Trap Economics, and the Rebirth of the Blues," *American Quarterly*, 57, 4 (2005), 1005–18, 1007.

pathologies can be regenerative as much as they are destructive is also figured in the full reproduction of *Burn* (105). The girl standing in the flames is never fully consumed by them. And in the smoke that rises from the fire, we see the profile of what looks like the face of a black woman, almost like the figurehead of a ship. At the very top, where the smoke begins to look like the woman's hair, we see the crosses and markers of a cemetery. Death and life blend and generate each other, and the fire ceases to be such a finality after all. The linear narrative Walker sets up becomes the feedback loop of pain and possibility that she associates with muck.

In interviews, Walker often describes the way that racism “keeps doubling back on itself” and potentially “traps” Americans into “restating certain things because of a tradition that’s already been established.”<sup>11</sup> This attention to cyclical structures, repetition, and simultaneity also shapes her aesthetic practice in terms of temporality and history. Philippe Vergne writes that Walker “takes the stereotypical value of the silhouette and in the process frees it from its history through a pirouette that makes it impossible to forget where the stereotype comes from.” Her shocking manipulations of the silhouette “free” it from its history as a mainly nineteenth-century tradition, yet still force us to recognize its connection to that history. This “freeing” of the artistic form thus creates a temporal distortion for the viewer. Vergne writes, Facing or entering one of Walker’s installations is tantamount to stepping into science fiction, where time is no longer relevant. It is both an anachronistic experience, being out of a proper time sequence, and a journey in uchronia, meaning a hypothetical alternative path that actual history might have taken, as opposed to a fictional history.<sup>12</sup>

Kevin Young also notes this distortion of sequence and time in his discussion of narrative in Walker’s works:

If it is narrative ... then it’s the kind found in the stereopticon – one less about what the picture depicts than about what departures the viewers engage in. We, not the stereograph’s captions, assert the remarks. Thus the narrative is not necessarily inherent in the stereograph, or the cutout, or the writing, but in the place we are willing to go with it.<sup>13</sup>

Walker’s art does not just tell us something about the past by appropriating what we would view as historical images and art forms, particularly the

<sup>11</sup> Blume, “Q&A with Kara Walker.”

<sup>12</sup> Philippe Vergne, “The Black Saint Is the Sinner Lady,” in *idem*, ed., *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2007), 22, 23.

<sup>13</sup> Kevin Young, “Triangular Trade: Coloring, Remarking, and Narrative in the Writings of Kara Walker,” in Vergne, *Kara Walker*, 45.

silhouette. Her rearrangement of historical forms pushes us to imagine different presents, where the images of the past become familiar and active representations of the world around us. Perhaps the eeriest thing about Walker's work is the fact that her silhouettes of older racist stereotypes are instantly recognizable, reminding viewers of the frightening currency and viability of those stereotypes. There is actually nothing "past" about the figures in these works. Even as she references an irregular continuum of repetition across time, her conflation of past with present disrupts and rearranges that already tenuous sense of linearity. Moreover, by confronting us with these stereotypes, she forces us to determine for ourselves the meanings they carry. She leaves it to us to determine what meanings we take away from her images of violence, slavery, mutilation, and sex by acknowledging the visceral familiarity of what she represents. In other words, by confronting us with images of and from American history, she prods her viewers to think more and more about themselves and their own historical moment. History is a feedback loop to the present.

Walker's main goal in *After the Deluge* is obviously to persuade her readers to use the images she collects to "reexamine" the newness of Katrina as an event and what that event has revealed about the nation. We can add further clarity to her project by comparing her uses of racial stereotype and history to James Baldwin's discussions of racism and civil rights in *The Fire Next Time*, which Walker's cover implicitly cites. There is obviously a great deal to examine and discuss in *The Fire Next Time*, but in this essay I offer only a brief engagement with those parts of the text that help us better understand Walker, namely Baldwin's meditations on the relationships between racism and history. In the 1960s Baldwin focusses substantially on the pathologies created by racism, advising his nephew in "My Dungeon Shook" that he "can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a *nigger*" (13, original emphasis). In "Down at the Cross," he offers detailed images of this kind of personal destruction in his descriptions of the Harlem of his youth:

My friends were now "downtown," busy, as they put it, "fighting the man." They began to care less about the way they looked, the way they dressed, the things they did; presently, one found them in twos and threes and fours, in a hallway, sharing a jug of wine or a bottle of whiskey, talking, cursing, fighting, sometimes weeping: lost, and unable to say what it was that oppressed them, except that they knew it was "the man" – the white man. (25)

Trying to get out from under this growing sense of oppression,

many of my friends fled into the [military] service, all to be changed there, and rarely for the better, many to be ruined, and many to die. Others fled to other states and

cities – that is, to other ghettos. Some went on wine or whiskey or the needle, and are still on it. And others, like me, fled into the church. (26)

As the people around him tried to escape the pathologies of American racism, they often found themselves simply mired in other kinds of muck: post-traumatic stress or disability from war, other ghettos identical to the ones they left, or alcoholism and drug addiction. As Baldwin eventually discovers, even the protective sphere of the church is a kind of muck, for his religious salvation does almost nothing to heal the psychosis caused by racism: “the blood of the Lamb had not cleansed me in any way whatever. I was just as black as I had been the day that I was born” (40).

Built into Baldwin’s description is a sense of what Walker describes as racism’s feedback loop, for Baldwin’s friends and acquaintances, as well as Baldwin himself, find that they constantly return to and feed off the “muck” they seek to transcend. For Baldwin, one explanation for this cyclical structure is the absence of real social change for African Americans over time:

this is what it means to be an American Negro, this is who he is – a kidnapped pagan, who was sold like an animal and treated like one, who was once defined by the American Constitution as “three-fifths” of a man, and who, according to the Dred Scott decision, had no rights that a white man was bound to respect. And today, a hundred years after his technical emancipation, he remains – with the possible exception of the American Indian – the most despised creature in his country. Now, there is simply no possibility of a real change in the Negro’s situation without the most radical and far-reaching changes in the American political and social structure. (73–74)

As the status of African Americans has remained largely the same even in the hundred years after Emancipation, only a wholesale change in the fabric of American culture, politics, and society can ameliorate the material and psychological effects of racism. Otherwise, things will only continue as they were. Thus, for Baldwin, the problem of racism is not just a problem of law, politics, economics, or psychology – it is also a problem with the forces of history.

Like Walker, Baldwin sees possibilities for renewal within the pain and psychosis caused by racism, particularly in the culture of the black church and the music of gospel, jazz and the blues (42). But he goes on to say that the nation as a whole will find this kind of renewal only when whites and blacks come to terms with the history that has limited African Americans for centuries:

But in order to change a situation one has first to see it for what it is: in the present case, to accept the fact, whatever one does with it thereafter, that the Negro has been formed by this nation, for better or for worse, and does not belong to any other ... The paradox ... is that the American Negro can have no future anywhere,

on any continent, as long as he is unwilling to accept his past. To accept one's past – one's history – is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. (71)

Confronting the history of black dehumanization in the United States does not mean succumbing to – “drowning” in – a force that one has given up fighting, but rather “accepting” the flood as something that must be reckoned with. Even white people, he goes on to say, must accept this history and the change it necessitates, for their resistance to change creates “an inability to renew themselves at the fountain of their own lives” (43). Indeed, he warns that “the untapped and dormant force of the previously subjugated” creates the risk “that this dishonored past will rise up soon to smite all of us,” leaving a “bill ... that I fear America is not prepared to pay” (44, 87). The only way to avoid this looming cataclysm, he concludes, is to acknowledge the problems of history that have led to this breaking point: “everything white Americans think they believe in must now be re-examined” (87–88).

However, Baldwin's warning of a coming apocalypse, of the fire next time, reveals the difference between his claim about “using” history and Walker's distortions of history in *After the Deluge* (as well as in her own work generally). Deak Nabers's reading is key to my discussion for his elucidation of the ways in which *The Fire Next Time* “routinely questions the specifically *legal* accomplishments of the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s.”<sup>14</sup> Nabers argues that in these two essays and others, Baldwin repeatedly directs the reader's attention to “the persistence of prejudice as well as the consequences of that prejudice.” For Baldwin, “the world of legislation and its adjudication bears only an attenuated relation to actual social practice,” and he “turns to the historical” as the force with the potential to change society “because of his skepticism about the power of the political.”<sup>15</sup> By this logic, “If historical myths lie at the heart of racism then historical revision will lie at the heart of any sensible effort to overcome it.” However, as Nabers shows, two problems immediately arise from Baldwin's line of thinking. First, although Baldwin asks his readers to “embrace history so as to escape it,” he also admits that history is what constrains the black subject to racist pathology in the first place.<sup>16</sup> Second, by situating black history as “the ground on which civil rights activism would have to take place in the 1960s,” Baldwin's idea is ironically “structured in such a way as to disable the very activism it seemed

<sup>14</sup> Deak Nabers, “Past Using: James Baldwin and Civil Rights Law in the 1960s,” *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 18, 2 (2005), 221–42, 227, original emphasis. <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 234–35.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 236–37.

to invite.” By commanding his readers to look at “racism’s status as an historical phenomenon,” Baldwin shifts his readers’ attention away from the immediate social problems of the present: “History emerges just in time to prevent present structural racial problems from coming into view ... [T]he historicizing of racial disadvantage actually obstruct[s] our view of the task before us.”<sup>17</sup>

What Nabers’s reading usefully reveals about Baldwin’s arguments, therefore, is an implicit belief in the linearity of history. Although Baldwin admits to the cyclical repetition of pathologies and traditions, the past for him is always something that precedes the present, the place where current problems first took root. He asks us to “use” the past, but in so doing inadvertently sets up history as a distraction because there is distance between then and now. Walker’s “visual essay,” however, unmoors the images and artworks from their historical contexts – without letting us forget those contexts at the same time – and brings both history and the social problems of the present into a kind of simultaneity. Although the objects from the Metropolitan’s archives come from earlier historical moments, her juxtaposition of them with her own work emphasizes their continued legibility in the present – a legibility assisted by the immediacy of any piece of visual art. By compiling image upon image associated with the muck of racist pathology and the possibilities for renewal and resistance, Walker repositions the past as something that does not just exert an influence from a temporal distance, but is actually part of our immediate present. She eschews history as a linear narrative and instead uses history to highlight the ongoing problems of the contemporary moment. As much as her portrayals of slaves, minstrels, and other forms of visual stereotype refer back to the nineteenth century and before, her work reminds us that it is we who must still come to terms with those stereotypes, not our nineteenth-century ancestors. Like Baldwin’s, her book does not make practical suggestions for activism and change, but her emphasis on the ongoing viability and presence of racism’s “muck” after Katrina invites her readers to begin imagining ways to “feed off those maladies” and strive toward some kind of “potentially new and difficult birth.”

Both Walker and Baldwin have rather fraught relationships with the long struggle for civil rights.<sup>18</sup> And if Walker does use history to reroute our attention back to the present, she certainly does not make explicit reference to the specific political problems of the present. But this indirectness, this

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 238–40.

<sup>18</sup> For example, see Douglas Field, “Looking for Jimmy Baldwin,” *Callaloo*, 27, 2 (Spring 2004), 457–80; Robert Carleton Hobbs, *Kara Walker: Slavery Slavery!* (Washington, DC: International Arts and Artists, 2002).

blurring of past and present, is what I think makes Walker's book so provocative, for instead of advocating a particular platform or agenda for social or political change, she places the burden of visualizing change on the viewer. She implicitly invokes a civil rights project by highlighting the irregular historical continuum of racism and black poverty, thereby forcing us to recognize the persistence of racism and poverty so shockingly exposed by the storm. If Katrina will give birth to the "Third Reconstruction," as Woods argued not long after the storm, Walker leaves us to decide what shape that new civil rights movement will take.<sup>19</sup> What she offers, instead, is a new way of thinking about the role of history within civil rights discourse. Whereas in *The Fire Next Time* Baldwin asks us to embrace history so as to transcend it, Walker suggests that transcendence is impossible, perhaps even undesirable, because no one can escape the muck of history. Furthermore, whereas Baldwin potentially distracts us from the present by stressing the need to understand the past, as Nabers contends, Walker introduces a way to view the past and present within the same frame. Her presentation of the history of racism redirects our attention to the effects of history and of racism in our own time. And once we find this new way of looking, she suggests, we can then reappropriate the historical in creative ways to produce something new.

In *After the Deluge*, Walker offers one example of this kind of reappropriation in her inclusion of Winslow Homer's 1899 painting *The Gulf Stream* (48–49). Here a shirtless black man lies on the deck of a small boat whose mast was evidently broken off by the cyclone moving across the horizon on the right. The waves toss the boat at a perilous angle, and numerous sharks fill the foreground, waiting for this piece of human prey. As Roberta Smith reports, "questions about the man's fate were so persistent that Homer eventually added a small vessel on the horizon to suggest that help was on the way."<sup>20</sup> However, near the end of the book Walker removes any suggestion of fear or rescue by reprinting a close-up detail of the man's body and the water behind him. The sharks are gone, as is the cyclone, the large ship, and any sign of damage to his boat. What was originally a painting of a man in danger has become an image of man simply reclined on the deck of a boat, as if he were just taking a leisurely sail on a quiet afternoon. Again, this is not really an image we would associate with the struggle for civil rights. But Walker's inclusion of this detail emphasizes the importance of finding

<sup>19</sup> Woods, 1005.

<sup>20</sup> Roberta Smith, "Kara Walker Makes Contrasts in Silhouette in Her Own Met Show," *New York Times*, 24 March 2006, [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/24/arts/design/24walk.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin#](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/24/arts/design/24walk.html?_r=1&oref=slogin#).



new ways to look at the historical in order to envision change. She teaches us how to peer into the image of danger and turmoil and extract what looks like calm, peace, and safety. Out of the muck of Homer's painting, we find a man simply sailing the ocean, navigating the seas without any apparent fear or discomfort. Reframing the picture this way, she has taken the past and produced something new, changed the painting to imagine a renewal emerging out of the pathologies of the past. And this is the kind of intellectual project that Walker's book opens up for any potential civil rights movement after Katrina. Where Katrina exposed the muck of America's history of racism, Walker is asking us to consider how we might put that muck to use – not to transcend history, as Baldwin advocates, but to confront head-on the racist pathologies of both history and the present, to navigate the mucky, historical terrain of the present and selectively adapt its most fertile areas to build a better future.