

MONTAGE

*To Go through Fire and Water: Kara Walker's *After the Deluge*¹*

Rebecca Keegan

Introduction

On August 27, 2005 a hurricane warning was issued for Louisiana's southeastern coast. The mayor of New Orleans, Ray Nagin, urged the city's residents to evacuate immediately. Two days later Hurricane Katrina ripped two holes in the roof of the Superdome then sheltering the over 10,000 people who had not yet evacuated. As the streets of New Orleans filled with water, the rest of America was inundated with a flood of news footage documenting the effects of Katrina on the people of New Orleans. The growing media coverage sparked public uproar as millions witnessed the tense race and class relations of the now submerged city come into the spotlight. Photographs of the suffering endured by impoverished African-Americans in the Gulf Coast made daily appearances in newspapers and newscasts.

In 2006 contemporary African-American artist Kara Walker was approached by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and invited to create an exhibition on a subject of her choice. The resultant exhibition and book, *After the Deluge*, combined Walker's signature cut-paper silhouettes, stream of consciousness text pieces, and drawings with an assortment of European and American paintings culled from the collections of the Metropolitan and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts that dealt with floods and natural disasters from the fifteenth to twentieth centuries.² Although her involvement with the Met coincided with the surge in media coverage of Hurricane Katrina, Walker writes, "The book [and its exhibitionary counterpart are] a series of thoughts of or related tangentially to Hurricane Katrina,

Note: *Montage* articles, and the images contained therein, are for educational use only.

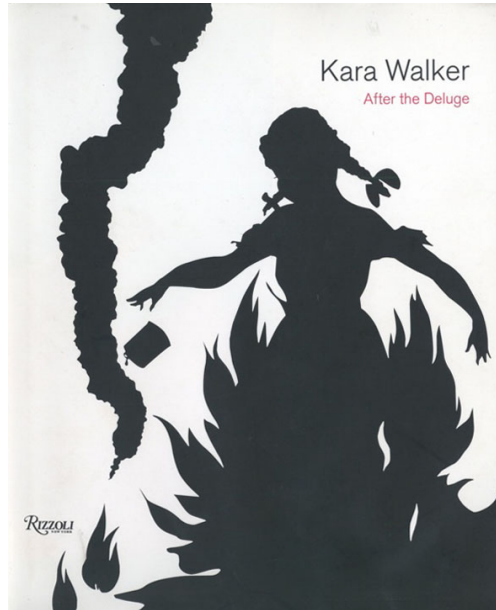
1. This paper began as a seminar paper for the course "Black Visual Theory: Images of Black Struggle and Trauma," taught by Dr. Richard J. Powell in the fall of 2008. Thank you to my fellow seminar participants and to Dr. Powell for reviewing early drafts and providing feedback on this work.

2. *After the Deluge* was on view from March 21, 2006–August 6, 2006 in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's new Modern Art wing. Rizzoli published *After the Deluge* in 2007. For more information on the exhibition including reproductions of several works discussed in this paper, and to listen to an interview with Kara Walker by Metropolitan Museum of Art curator Gary Tinterow visit: http://www.metmuseum.org/special/se_event.asp?OccurrenceId={E4F51062-8A08-4593-8273-8807B8201F95}.

and floods to come. It is a rumination of the fear of the deep and the problem of the shallow—‘skin deep.’”³ The floodwaters of Katrina and water more generally function for Walker as both a physical marker of a specific historical moment and as a psychic medium permitting the flow between the conscious and unconscious/subconscious realms.⁴

In this paper I have chosen to focus on the book incarnation of *After the Deluge* (Fig. 1) and to investigate how *After the Deluge* might be read as a counter to the photography-dominated visual narrative of Hurricane Katrina.⁵ Utilizing Freud’s theory of the subconscious I suggest that Walker’s *After the Deluge* can be understood as an engagement with the deep-rooted and often suppressed history of Black trauma. I elucidate how Walker visually brings her viewer from the photography-driven reality of the post-Katrina moment into the psychological realm of the subconscious, revealing traumas linked to Middle Passage, Antebellum America, and the Civil Rights Movement. In doing so, Walker highlights how water has historically functioned as an agent of Black trauma.

By presenting her contemporary work alongside such canonical works as J. M. W. Turner’s *Slave Ship*, Winslow Homer’s *Gulfstream*, John Singleton Copley’s *Watson and the Shark*, and seventeenth-century works like Pieter Nolpe’s *The Bursting of St. Anthony’s Dike, 5 March 1651* and Jean Audran’s *The Flood (Winter)*, Walker illustrates how the confluence of Black suffering and disasters are far from breaking news. Perhaps in an effort to further distinguish *After the Deluge* from the visual culture produced by news agencies during and after Katrina, the book and exhibition contain no new work by



3. Kara Walker, *After the Deluge* (New York: Rizzoli, 2007), inside flap of the book’s dust jacket.

4. Mark Reinhardt addresses the slippage between past and present in Kara Walker’s work in his essay “The Art of Racial Profiling,” in *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negress*, ed. Ian Berry, Darby English, Vivian Patterson, and Mark Reinhardt (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 109–129.

5. In January 2009 my advisor, Dr. Richard J. Powell, spoke with Kara Walker about the production of *After the Deluge* and learned that Walker worked side by side with designers at Rizzoli. Thus I have chosen to interpret Rizzoli’s publication as an extension of Walker’s artistic project.

Fig. 1: Kara Walker, Cover of *After the Deluge* with detail of *Burn* as published by Rizzoli, 2007. *Burn*, 1998, cut paper and adhesive, 92 x 48 inches, the Speyer Family Collection, New York.

Walker. Rather her older cut-paper silhouettes, gouache paintings, and text pieces are here reintroduced and recycled serving as Deleuzian screens or Rorschach inkblots inviting multiple interpretations and encouraging meditation.⁶ Moreover, when one examines the assembled pieces in the book form of *After the Deluge* one notes how the works take the viewer on a journey from the conscious mind into the depths of the subconscious—home to repressed trauma, irrationality, and fear.

Freud's Theory of the Unconscious

Freud's theory of the unconscious or subconscious is often thought of in relation to an iceberg metaphor in which the top one-seventh of the iceberg that appears above the water is representative of the conscious mind whereas the rest of the iceberg beneath the surface is the unconscious or subconscious realm. The water's surface can be seen as the boundary between the conscious and the unconscious, known in Freudian terms as the preconscious. It is this remaining six-sevenths beneath the water that contains an individual's secret desires, as well as memories of traumatic events.⁷ The progression from conscious reality to the unconscious is represented as the movement downward into deeper and darker waters. I wish to imply that one might read Walker's visual text—its movement away from photography and her use of water as a psychic medium—in regards to Freud's concept. Whereas Freud believed individuals did not have access to their subconscious thoughts, performing close readings of the works in conjunction with flipping through the pages of *After the Deluge* I wish to imply that Walker might be giving her viewer access to the subconscious.

Walker's investment in exposing the subconscious reveals itself in her introductory essay, entitled "Murky." She writes that the included work is "an attempt to understand the subconscious narratives at work when we talk about such an event [as Katrina]."⁸ For Walker the "Black subject in the present tense is a container for specific pathologies from the past."⁹ Walker's use of water as a subject and a theme in *After the Deluge* allows her to both respond to the visual narrative of Hurricane Katrina and explore the subconscious narrative of Black trauma that lives beneath the surface.

6. Here I am thinking of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of Faciality, which uses a white screen with black holes metaphor. For more information see Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1987).

7. I am relying on the Freudian notion of the unconscious or subconscious in which the conscious level is filled with thoughts and perceptions while the movement to the unconscious reveals levels of repressed traumas and fears. For more on Freud's conceptions see Sigmund Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) (originally published in English in 1913). The terms unconscious and subconscious seem to be interchangeable; as Walker uses "subconscious," I will use the term to describe the level of the unconscious as well. A quick Internet search reveals many useful diagrams for visualizing Freud's concept. When this paper was presented at the University of Iowa's 2009 Symposium I used a diagram created by Knox College professor of psychology Dr. Frank T. McAndrew, available from: <http://faculty.knox.edu/fmcandre/freudoh.gif>.

8. Kara Walker, *After the Deluge* (New York: Rizzoli, 2007), 9.

9. *Ibid.*

On the dust jacket of *After the Deluge* Walker writes that the art objects she incorporated are those “that bring to the surface a subjective mix of terror, wish fulfillment, and mundane observation that is sometimes lost in a photography-driven world.”¹⁰ Although the statement indicates Walker’s disdain for photography she begins her visual essay with AP photographer Bill Haber’s untitled color photograph (Fig. 2) from August 30, 2005.¹¹



The image is the only explicitly Katrina-related object that appears in the book. In the photograph an obese black woman pushing a leopard print overnight bag and a twelve-pack of bottled water wades from left to right through water tinged in metallic purples, blues, and greens.

The inclusion of the photograph next to text that informs the reader of Walker’s interest in the subconscious narratives can be read as an invitation to dive beneath the surface. One cannot help but want to see what is going on underneath the water. Is it dirty? Is it cold? Is it deep? What is hidden within? As a depiction of reality and the sole photographic piece, I propose that Haber’s photograph might be read as the tip of the iceberg, so to speak—part of the conscious rational reality that Walker wants her viewers to leave behind. The faceless woman captured in her moment of migration by Haber symbolizing the waterborne journey on which the readers/viewers of *After the Deluge* are about to embark.

Medium

Before diving into the content of Walker’s pieces, her choice of medium, the cut-paper silhouette, cannot be ignored. The silhouette was a portrait medium first popularized in the eighteenth century, in which an individual would sit while an artist traced the shadow of his or her profile. The in-

10. Kara Walker, *After the Deluge*, dust jacket.

11. Bill Haber is a New Orleans-based photographer for the Associated Press. The photograph was one of a series of images produced by AP photographers that were awarded the Sigma Delta Chi award by the Society of Professional Journalists for breaking news photography in April 2006. Haber discusses his documentation of Hurricane Katrina in the article “Telling a Tough Story in Your Own Backyard,” *Nieman Reports* Fall 2007, published by the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University. Electronic version of the article available: <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitem.aspx?id=100157>.

Fig. 2: AP Images/Bill Haber, *Untitled*, August 30, 2005, color photograph.

roduction of the daguerreotype, an early form of photography, in the mid-nineteenth century led to a decline in the silhouette's popularity. Walker's engagement with the silhouette began while a graduate student at Rhode Island School of Design in the early 1990s.¹² Given her interest in issues surrounding race and gender the stark contrast between black and white offered by the silhouette medium seems a fitting choice for Walker's practice. Though the silhouette originally gained favor as a portrait medium, Walker's silhouettes are often based on racial stereotypes rather than individual sitters. The cast of characters employed in Walker's installations is at times ambiguous, crossing the boundaries of race, gender, and occasionally species.

Moreover much of Walker's work deals with the politics of revision. Her fantastical and frightening representations of Antebellum American life have sparked much controversy as viewers and fellow artists alike are unsure what to make of her often crude, sexually explicit, and violent depictions of African-Americans.¹³ Art critics Michael Corris and Richard Hobbs have noted, "[Walker] enlists the aid of an alias from another time as the perspective from which to assess the contemporary world, so that the present is viewed in terms of the past."¹⁴ The movement between past and present, memory and event, reality and fantasy, pervades Walker's pieces included in *After the Deluge*.¹⁵

Art Historian Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw has elsewhere described that it is "Through the evacuated interior and expressive exterior line of the form, [that Walker] could reshape and manipulate racist icons of white supremacy such as the nigger wench, the mammy, and the pickaninny."¹⁶ Shaw has also suggested that Walker's work can be read in relation to the theory of the shadow proposed by Carl Jung in which the shadow functions as the model for the collective unconscious.¹⁷ Jung proposes that the shadow becomes home to an individual's repressed emotions or inner actions that contrast with one's exterior presentation.¹⁸ As others have proposed that Walker's silhouettes are examples of repressed emotions gone astray, is it too far of a stretch to posit that they might also be considered visual prompts that serve as conduits for exploring an individual's subconscious? Walker says, "The silhouette lends itself to avoidance of the subject, of not being

12. Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 15.

13. Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw addresses Walker's controversial status in the introduction to her *Seeing the Unspeakable*, and Juliette Bowles recounts artist Betye Saar's often-cited letter against Walker's work in "Extreme Times Call for Extreme Measures," *The International Review of African-American Art* 14 no. 3 (1997).

14. Michael Corris and Richard Hobbs, "Reading Black Through White in the Work of Kara Walker," *Art History* 26 3 (2003): 422–41, 433.

15. Mark Reinhardt also addresses the slippage between past and present in Kara Walker's work in his essay "The Art of Racial Profiling," in *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negress*, ed. Ian Berry, Darby English, Vivian Patterson, and Mark Reinhardt (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 109–129.

16. Shaw, 18.

17. *Ibid.*, 40.

18. Carl Jung, "Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious," in *Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, 2nd ed., Vol. 9 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 3–41.

able to look at it directly . . . Yet there it is, all the time, staring you in the face.”¹⁹ The subconscious works in a similar fashion; it is often avoided but it too is always there.

19. Imani Powell, “Evidence of Things Not Seen,” *Essence* (October 2007): 93.

Placement

I would here like to discuss how Walker’s placement and arrangement of the artworks in *After the Deluge* contributes to the aforementioned descent into the subconscious. For the sake of time I will be focusing on the first set of art objects encountered as Walker’s “visual essay” commences. The first image one confronts is Haber’s photograph. Upon turning the page J. M. W. Turner’s *Slave Ship* from 1840 is splashed onto two pages. The splitting of the painting onto two pages results in an increased visual emphasis on the lower right-hand area of the painting in which a shackled leg stretches out of the choppy water as the body beneath is surrounded by fish. Walker’s manipulation of the painting, her enlargement and I suspect subtle cropping, allows viewers to examine the water’s surface. As the slave ship sails into the horizon to the left, the viewer turns the page on the right and, like the individual with the shackled leg, begins to sink.

The next image is Walker’s own *Untitled* from 1996, which I have subtitled “Beating a Dead Horse.” The square cut paper and pastel drawing mounted on canvas includes a riverboat engulfed in flames as a backdrop, while in the foreground two silhouettes of a horse and pickaninny child are found. The wild child holds a wooden club and is posed as if she is about to strike the fallen horse. The horse, positioned with its back at the bottom of the composition, dominates the frame in size. Though the work is untitled, its subject makes reference to the popular idiom “beating a dead horse,” translated to the waste of time that occurs when you do something that has already been attempted. Perhaps in the context of *After the Deluge* the dead horse to which Walker refers is the visual narrative of Hurricane Katrina, asking viewers to move beyond the trauma associated with the hurricane. The placement of the horse in an unnatural position forces the viewer to look again, to ask what is going on and to search his or her mind for possible scenarios. The placement of the “real” object—the burning riverboat—in the background might symbolize a departure from reality as the only option for escape is being destroyed. One is

TO GO THROUGH FIRE AND WATER

left to face the pickaninny and her horse. Following the iceberg diagram, *Untitled* (Beating a Dead Horse) would fall in the realm of the preconscious—the stage in between the conscious and the subconscious—where memories are first found; the little girl depicted literally beating the memories out.

The next image is John Carlin's dock scene, *After a Long Cruise* from 1857. Also split onto two pages, Carlin's painting depicts a well-dressed African-American woman being accosted by a trio of drunken white sailors who seem to believe that she has knocked over the fruit seller's wares to the right. The African-American woman attempts to leave the scene but she is grabbed by a black-bearded sailor. The sailor in turn is connected to the white-bearded sailor at the center, who links arms with the third sailor closest to the distraught fruit merchant. The three sailors create a bridge of sorts linking the fleeing African-American woman to both the overturned fruit and the boat docked at the far right of the image. Within the context of *After the Deluge*, is the African-American woman attempting to escape the wrath of the fruit merchant or the danger associated with the sea and the sailors? Within the pages of *After the Deluge*, Carlin's *After a Long Cruise* may be considered a veiled reference to Middle Passage and the chains that bind. While one might try to escape the experiences, emotions, and fears suppressed in the subconscious, they are in fact inescapable.



Fig. 3: Kara Walker, *They Say Water Represents the Subconscious in Dreams*, from *American Primitives* series, 2001, gouache and cut paper on paint board, 8 x 11 inches, collection of Rachel and Jean-Pierre Lehmann.

Moving further into *After the Deluge* is *They Say Water Represents the Subconscious in Dreams* (Fig. 3) from Walker's 2001 *American Primitives* series; the descent into the subconscious is complete.²⁰ Like *Untitled* (Beat a Dead Horse), *They Say Water Represents the Subconscious in Dreams* contains a riverboat, though it has moved from the background to the middle ground. Gone is the horizon line; the entire work is covered in a dark color palette of grays, purples, and browns. The murky color scheme imparts a dark, almost sinister, feel to the piece—are we now beneath the surface? The gouache medium is evident, the puddles of watercolor appear dotting the paper and the brushstrokes are obvious, lending a fluid and layered effect to the composition. To the left a female figure is seen suspended upside down, her feet barely touching the top edge of the paper. Two figures arm in arm bound towards her from the right as if walking on water. The figure closest to the middle stands with his arm outstretched as if reaching for the hand of the hanging woman. Has the upside down woman fallen from above, or is she dangling like one of Billie Holiday's lynching victims described in her *Strange Fruit*?²¹ Is the pair of skipping figures here to welcome her to the world of the deep and dark? Walker's placement of the black figures on top of the nautical narrative makes one ask whether Walker is cutting into or cutting away from the original scene. The black cut out silhouettes function as black holes similar to the rabbit hole into which Alice falls entering Wonderland, her world of fantasy. For Walker this new world is not one of happy fantasy but of remembering the continual presence of Black trauma.

The remaining artworks (both by Walker and other artists) in *After the Deluge* function as visual prompts for those exploring their own subconscious and often contain visual references to violent acts. Walker's works following *They Say the Water Represents the Subconscious in Dreams* include representations of dark liquids or, if no patent liquid element is present, the backgrounds are dark with references to night or shade. In a way Walker has brought the viewer visually into the darkened world of the subconscious and then used her imagery to provoke the viewer into exploring it. *Big House* depicts two women—the distinct hairstyles (one nappy and the other long and flowing) of the two women suggesting different races—engaged in a violent sexual act against the backdrop of

20. A reproduction of the painting can be found at: <http://www.artnet.com/artwork/424449668/983/kara-walker-american-primitives-they-say-water-represents-the-subconscious-in-dreams.html>

21. Billie Holiday's song *Strange Fruit* condemned American racism and directly referenced the lynching of African-Americans. Holiday first performed the song in 1939. David Margolick, *Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Café Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2000), 25–27.

the big plantation house. It is possible to interpret the drawing as an example of the unacceptable sexual desires found in the depths of the subconscious or the irrational urge for the African-American woman to kill her white mistress. I posit that an investigation of Walker's visual strategies demonstrates how the piece visually represents the location of the subconscious as distant from "reality." The two female figures are shown in the foreground cavorting in a tunnel of black tree trunks. The tree trunks provide a hole of darkness in which the two women play. Moreover, the placement of the big white plantation house at the center of the tunnel in the background creates a reverse telescope effect. The reality of the plantation is seen in the distance while the violence-tinged lesbian fantasy plays out in the safety of the shade of the subconscious. The presence of the tunnel indicates a mental movement from consciousness to subconscious.

Conclusion

The title of this paper is borrowed from the biblical adage "to go through fire and water," or the difficulties one must endure in order to achieve a goal.²² Elsewhere in the Bible one finds the narrative describing the great flood of water sent to destroy humanity. After the flooding of Earth God swore that another flood would appear, but it would be one of fire, not water. Where the flood of water was intended to destroy, this flood of fire would be one of purification. With this in mind I would like to conclude with some thoughts surrounding the cover of *After the Deluge*, on which one finds Walker's *Burn* from 1998. *Burn*'s protagonist, a young girl engulfed in flames who literally adds fuel to her own fire by dropping a can of accelerant, is not an obvious referent to water. Does the fire *Burn* references represent the prophesied fire of purification described in the Bible? Or are the flames indicative of the continued struggle endured by African-Americans? With *Burn* Walker presents to the viewer an image that combines bodily trauma, fire, and the Black body. Paired with the title *After the Deluge*, *Burn* seems out of place, much in the same way Walker's exhibition seems an unlikely response to Hurricane Katrina.

Not one to shy away from controversy, Walker could have used *After the Deluge* as an opportunity to capitalize on

REBECCA KEEGAN

the post-Katrina chaos. Yet rather than perpetuate the discourse, Walker has chosen to use her exhibition/book at the Met as a chance to step back from the media firestorm surrounding Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in an effort to expose how the historic legacy of Black suffering has been repressed and stuffed down into the collective subconscious of America. In this way *After the Deluge* functions both as a response to Hurricane Katrina and as a spotlight homing in on the continued presence of a subconscious narrative of Black trauma. Thus, the choice of *Burn* for the cover of *After the Deluge* suggests a movement away from the literal connotations of water and perhaps the photographic visual narrative of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The presence of fire on the outside of *After the Deluge* speaks both to the biblical connotation of fire as purifying and an invitation to step through the fire and, as I have suggested, to step into the murky waters of the subconscious. ■■