

“Wake Up, America!”: The *March* Trilogy as “Wake Work”

*“If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, recreated from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us:
God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!”
-James Baldwin*

John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell’s *March* trilogy has received numerous accolades as a primer of history and nonviolence. While these roles are important, I argue that the books perform another important role for contemporary society. In my presentation, I assert the visual narrative structure of the *March* trilogy embodies the complexity of what Christina Sharpe describes as “the wake” where “to be *in* the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery’s as yet unresolved unfolding” (13-14). Sharpe’s explanation of “the wake” is Derridean in nature: “the wake” is made up of multiple, contextual understandings of “wake”: rough waters, the aftermath of turmoil, a mourning period, to awaken, and to be aware. By engaging with texts that display the black diasporic experience, Sharpe explains that readers can perform “wake work,” which she describes as “a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives” (18). The *March* trilogy¹ facilitates wake work through innovation in style, composition, and comics. While this engagement occurs in many ways, the scope of my presentation focuses specifically on how narrative time is visually disrupted in the *March* trilogy. Namely, the untidy oscillation between Lewis’s Civil Rights Movement past and the narrative present of President Obama’s inauguration creates disruptions where the past and present invade one another’s visual space. In this way, *March* collapses illusions of time’s finite nature and instead displays how the past is ever-present—how we never emerge(d) from the wake. Finally, I juxtapose Sharpe’s water-based framework with James Baldwin’s warnings of “the fire next time” (120). I posit that *March* urges readers to see Jesmyn Ward’s renaming of “the fire *this* time” through its allusions to the present incendiary racial chaos of the U.S. Perhaps the way we douse these flames is by wading into the water and diving into the wake.

Proposal Bibliography

Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. Dial, 1963.

Lewis, John, Andrew Aydin, Nate Powell. *March: Book Three*. Top Shelf, 2016.

Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke UP, 2016.

Ward, Jesmyn, ed. *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks About Race*. Scribner, 2016.

¹ While parts working throughout the trilogy as a whole will be discussed, this presentation will emphasize *March: Book Three* due to time/space constraints.