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Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*

Christine Okoth

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1Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*

2Duke University Press, 2016. Pp. 192. ISBN: 978-0-8223-6294-4

3Christine Okoth

4Christina Sharpe's 2016 *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* joins other recent publications in the field of Black Studies in combining visual, literary, and theoretical archives to describe the contemporary condition of Black life and death. In doing so, Sharpe moves gracefully between vastly disparate geographical and cultural sites to reconstruct a theoretical archive of contemporary Black existence that is simultaneously captivating and devastating.

5An associate professor of English at Tufts University, Sharpe is the author of *Monstrous Intimacies* (Duke, 2009) which shares a theoretical archive with *In the Wake*. Both books are indebted to the work of Saidiya Hartman and Hortense Spillers, scholars with long-standing commitments to intellectual projects that understand Black social and cultural life as theoretically generative. Sharpe too has consistently referred to a Black cultural archive as the location of theoretical activity rather than its destination, positioning blackness at the centre of scholarship on race and racialisation. In this monograph –more so than in the earlier work– Sharpe is also engaged in a methodological project; *In the Wake* is stylistically and structurally experimental especially in its refusal to distinguish between artistic and scholarly sources. This is a text that understands art as theory and theory as art. Like Frank Wilderson III, Dionne Brand, and Fred Moten, Sharpe deliberately blurs the disciplinary distinctions that have often functioned as a mechanism of containment. *In the Wake's* composition is part of its argumentation; Hartman's 'afterlife of slavery' is best understood as a global, transdisciplinary, and expansive phenomenon.

6The slim volume is divided into four sections, each dedicated to the exploration of a theme related to the forced transportation of Black persons across the Atlantic during the Middle Passage. Throughout these units, entitled The Wake, The Ship, The Hold, and The Weather, Sharpe demonstrates how seemingly innocuous phenomena and phrases contain starkly divergent consequences when deployed in relation to Black persons. These events and vocabularies are inhospitable to Black life; a wake no longer primarily signifies the occasion of mourning after a death in the family but also conjures images of the wave pattern of a moving ship. How individual tragedies relate to historic injustices is most pronounced in this first chapter, which begins with a meditation on Sharpe's own experiences of personal loss. As a formulation, living 'in the wake' (15) recognises the extent to which contemporary Black life remains framed by close proximity to death. Interwoven throughout this first chapter are readings of Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return*, which, like Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* contemplates the ruptures and uncertainties that accompany the project of tracing Black genealogies.

7By far the most fully realized example of Sharpe's approach is The Ship, where the author invokes the many vessels – both historic and contemporary – that have facilitated the subjugation, exploitation, and murders of Black persons. In returning to the image of the ship that functioned as a chronotype for the Black Atlantic in Paul Gilroy's canonical study of the same name, this chapter offers a

potent reminder that the ship retains the ability to transform African persons into objects. Large-scale abandonments of migrant ships on their way to Fortress Europe near Lampedusa indicate in how far the sea and its vessels contain deadly potential. For Sharpe, the fate of African migrants on 'The Black Mediterranean' (58) presents a continuation of 'the semiotics of the slave ship' (21). The entanglement of slavery and contemporary 'forced movements of the migrant and the refugee' (21) also converge around the unit of the Western nation-state. Resource extraction, liberal warfare, and 'the crisis of capital' (59) are explicitly identified as the culprits in the emergence of this contemporary manifestation of mass death. We learn once again that mechanisms and infrastructures of protection are reserved for European borders not African migrants travelling on unsafe and overcrowded vessels.

8Sharpe's reading of a photograph taken in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti brings to the fore this incommensurability of blackness and the vocabulary of care. The photograph depicts a young girl on a stretcher facing the camera. Her forehead is covered by a piece of tape that reads 'Ship.' This image, which Sharpe refers to throughout the remainder of the book, leads into a meditation on the many ways in which the Haitian girl's marking corresponds to the necessary renaming that takes place in order to transform a Black person into the target of protective measures. For Sharpe, the history of the Zong slave ship is the most immediate point of reference. Sharpe reminds her reader that the British ship Zong, which became famous because its crew threw 132 African persons overboard to save water and claim insurance, was initially a Dutch ship called Zorg. The original Dutch name translates to Care (45) in an act of naming that seems to anticipate the cruel circumstance of being cared for as cargo. Quantifying and mourning the loss of Black life –then and now– is also a matter of translating existence into the language of ownership and property. That the Haitian girl is destined for "a US military medical ship named Comfort" (50) and marked for this protective act by a sign that literally sticks to her skin speaks of the continued inability to recognize Black persons as subjects of care without the help of transformative signage.

9The image of the Haitian girl reappears throughout *In the Wake*. Like the repeated passages of italicized text, the photograph acts "as a reminder, a refrain, and more" (Endnote 1). These leitmotifs act as proof of the genealogies of subjection that connect the Zong to the Comfort and the Haitian girl to those indeterminate persons who were and are left to drown, cared for and about only when made into objects once more. In emphasising the fungibility of Black persons within racial capitalism, Sharpe echoes both Hartman and Spillers with the latter's famous theorisation on gender, grammar, and Black social life percolating in both *The Ship* and *The Hold*. In being marked for the ship, the Haitian girl loses some sense of individuation as do the children that Sharpe positions at the centre of the chapter entitled *The Hold*. Here, Sharpe narrates instances where Black children in the U.S. are taught to understand their lives, histories, and bodies as interchangeable with those of other Black children.

Temple University Hospital's Cradle to Grave programme illustrates this circumstance most clearly. So-called at-risk youths who are mostly of colour and mostly Black are shown the dead bodies of young victims of gun violence. The after-school programme is intended as a deterrent but simultaneously relies on those same logics that produce premature death, namely the belief that Black life is expendable and replaceable. Not only are participants asked to experience the trauma of viewing a dead body but they are also encouraged to place themselves on the operating table, enacting their untimely deaths before they have taken place (88/89). Institutions that are designed to nurture and sustain life perform the role of bringing Black children in closer contact with death. Schools too, are once again exposed as sites of containment, their carceral character exhibited in the criminalization of Black children who are more likely to be expelled and disciplined than their white peers. That this is also the chapter in which Sharpe engages in the now familiar act of listing the names of Black people that have been victims of police violence (97) emphasises how many of these deaths took place whilst persons were under institutional care. We find the first of such lists in the book's dedications. There, Sharpe lists the family members that were lost during the intellectual process which ultimately became *In the Wake*.

10In the final section – The Weather – Sharpe is explicit about the methodological implications of her readings. Departing from an analysis of Steve McQueen's End Credits, Sharpe points us to the possibilities of a critical practice she calls "Black visual/textual annotation and redaction" (117). She describes this method as a process of "reading and seeing something in excess of what is caught in the frame" (117), gesturing towards the frustrating inefficacy of those amateur documentary recordings that accompany the deaths of Black persons in the U.S. Like Simone Browne – whose work on surveillance and race traces how lighting holds the potential for both disciplinary and emancipatory gestures – Sharpe understands scholarly work that is attentive to the condition of Black life as a matter of shifting our points of view. How and from what standpoint we look onto the subjects of analysis shapes the outcome of academic study. It is in these moments that Sharpe's monograph comes closest to guiding the reader towards a critical method that does not repeat those acts of enclosing, directing, and managing Black social and cultural life that constitute many of the examples of her study. Sharpe's emphasis on the character of woman who lives according to her own perception of time and space in Abderrahmane Sissako's 2014 film *Timbuktu* serves as an example of a critical method that pays attention to narratives "of life lived in the immanence of death" (127).

11*In the Wake* is part of a growing body of work that attempts to develop new critical methods to adequately read and respond to forms of Black social and cultural life. This project should be considered as a contribution to activist movements that have become increasingly visible against the backdrop of continued racial and imperial violence. Like the work of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, Sharpe's monograph is a necessary addition to the toolbox of contemporary academic organizing. "Wake work" or critical practice that

“[imagines] new ways to live in the afterlife of slavery” (18) is also a praxis of experimentation when it comes to the spaces in which we encounter academic writing. *In the Wake* is therefore best understood as an example of collective thinking, where the institutional practices that obstruct the possibility of collaboration are rejected in favour of solidarity and mutual support. One would hope that readers are able to interact with this text in a setting conducive to these principles of organization; within, outside, or against the university.

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