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BOOK REVIEW

***In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, by Christina Sharpe (2017). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.**

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In her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, English professor Christina Sharpe draws examples from visual culture, literature, and postcolonial theorists to provide quotidian representations of Black lives. Her book accounts for both Black suffering and modes of disruptions that counter subjected Black deaths and the menacing conditions in which these catastrophes are produced. The book is divided into four interconnected chapters that correspond to four metaphors—the wake, the ship, the hold, and the weather—through which she theorizes how modes of Black subjection continue to haunt Black lives in the diaspora. Sharpe not only breaks free from the confinement of time and space in thinking through being Black, both in and out of the United States, via the metaphors she uses, but Sharpe also creates an intimate and effectual approach towards the current issues of Black subjection by connecting with the readers on a personal level.

In the Wake: On Blackness and Being is a critical addition to Black studies offering a new language and form for understanding Black being in diaspora. Sharpe uses the metaphors as part of that language and form. Through their semiotic significations, she seamlessly connects the past and the present, the history of Black slavery, and the “afterlives of properties.” The wake is the path left behind by the moving ship, and “the afterlife of slavery” (Sharpe borrows this turn of phrase from Saidiya Hartman). To be in the wake is to be aware of the impact of Black slavery as it continues to shape contemporary Black being, to keep watch with the dead, and to inhibit a Blackened consciousness. One of the strengths of Sharpe’s book lies in the ways in which she approaches the concept of “wake work.” She sees it not only as a location of cultural, literal, and artistic production, resilience, and consciousness that mourn Black deaths, but also as a method of care. Sharpe insists that “thinking needs care,” and that individual and communal forms of care need to stay in the wake in order to care for the dead and the living in the afterlife of slavery. For instance, she

critiques the ways some museums and memorials create space for mourning that nevertheless fail to account for the ongoing impact of Black slavery. Sharpe thus provokes readers to think about the following questions: How can people mourn Black subjections when those subjections are still present? How does the living defend the dead? How can Black people survive and resist the total climate of antiblackness—the weather? In other words, how does one occupy and become inhibited by a Blackened consciousness of incessant subjection to violence and vulnerability?

The clear conceptual flow in unpacking the four metaphors makes Sharpe's discussions of the impact of Black slavery in contemporary Black experiences particularly strong. Sharpe selects particular visual and literary works that overarch each metaphor. For example, she introduces NourbeSe Philip's story of the slave ship *Zong* in the first chapter—The Wake—to emphasize the importance of telling the untold stories that need to be voiced. Sharpe returns to the story of *Zong* in the second chapter—The Ship—to exemplify the arithmetic of Black lives during the slave trade. By connecting the *Zong* ship to Joe Raedle's photograph of the Haitian girl, and Jacque Langevin/Sygma/Corbis's image of a small Black child waiting to be registered for voyage to the U.S., Sharpe conceptualizes the Ship as a spatial reference to the ways in which Black lives were contained in the Middle Passage and continue to be held through prisons, schools, detention centres, and other social institutions. In chapter three—The Hold—Sharpe again mentions the *Zong* and the photograph of the Haitian girl in order to shed light on the re-occurring or re-holding of Black lives: from the slave trade and the shipping of Haitians, to ongoing Mediterranean crossings. In the last chapter—The Weather—the *Zong!* (now with the exclamation mark) is resistance. *Zong* means song, and an internalized map for Black people to navigate through their long displacement. Singing is a way to remind others of their existence. Through these metaphors, Sharpe successfully demonstrates her intention: like oxygen and hydrogen, the sea and the weather, Black lives are resilient and alive, even if the world tries to ignore them.

Another main strength of Sharpe's work is in the way she establishes an intimate relationship between the subjects in the text and the reader. Discussions about motherhood, loss, and her lived experience with deaths evoke personal connections with the reader. In both chapter two and chapter three, for example, Sharpe uses the character of Aereile Jackson in Allan Sekula's film *The Forgotten Space* to evoke the notion of "former mother." Jackson's children have been taken away from her six years ago. By connecting Jackson with the notion of the "former mother" in the context of gratuitous violence against Black lives, Sharpe connects with the reader around motherhood and loss, asking the reader to think about what it means to be a former mother who has lost her children to the state (in the form of police

brutality, death during sea voyage, imprisonment, etc.). Sharpe's discussion of her brother Stephen's death to cancer—the same way their mother passed away—gives a rather sentimental reflection on the medical prejudice and ignorance towards Black people as a result of pseudo-science, colonialism, imperialism, racism, and so forth. In providing such intimate details, Sharpe asserts a personal account that not only positions herself in the wake, in the afterlife of slavery, and in a state of keeping watch with her family members who passed away, but also creates a bridge between the individual and the socio-political sphere of all Black lives in the wake.

Sharpe's discussion on Black annotation and redaction in relation to visual art practices is particularly strong, for which she is not only interested in the problems and limits of those contemporary practices that visually represent Black being, but also the promises offered by annotation and redaction. Sharpe contends that portraits and photographs of Black people often circulate accompanied by annotation—notes or additional description that supplements the imageries. These annotations, such as the pictures of the Haitian girl with “ship” on her forehead, only re-affirm the dominant perceptions of the Black bodies whose meanings do not change through the photographs. Conventional photographic redaction that covers the eyes of the portrayed subjects reduce the identity of the subjects. Sharpe then provides her own performing of the photographic redaction of Deila and Drana—the U.S-born daughters of enslaved men and women who survived the Middle Passage. The daguerreotypes of the seven Black men and women (including Delia and Drana) were commissioned by the founder of the American School of Ethnography to demonstrate the inferiority of the Black race. Sharpe counters the conventional mode of redaction by making the eyes of Deila and Drana the only visible parts of their face. In doing so, Sharpe disrupts the colonial representation of Black people as seen in the daguerreotypes and photographs of the Haitian girl, and creates a visual ambiguity. Although not explicitly acknowledged by Sharpe, such ambiguity is important as it provokes the viewer to ask: Whose eyes are these? Who are they? These are the questions that would otherwise not be evoked without Sharpe's visual disruption of the traditional photographic redaction of Delia and Drana.

Sharpe's book *In the Wake* is one of a kind. It is a heartfelt introspective into her own family's loss and experience with the weather of anti-blackness, the hold, and the wake. It is also a collection of stories that provide a quotidian representation of Black living in diaspora, and in the wake. And through the four metaphors—the wake, the ship, the hold, and the weather—Sharpe manages to escape the confinement of time and space in thinking through what it means to be Black in the afterlife of slavery. She encourages the reader to not only

acknowledge the existing and ongoing violence against Black lives, but also to move toward a state of care in the wake.