

In the Wake: On Blackness and Being by CHRISTINA SHARPE. Duke University Press, 2016; 175 pages; ISBN 9780822362955 (paper).

Christina Sharpe refers to *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* as her “wake work” and points to the continued nonexistence of a safe space in a landscape marked by the constant tension of “antiblackness as total climate” (21). Sharpe’s own experience of the loss of her family members caused due to untimely deaths invokes a lyric of awakening which demonstrates that Black cultural studies and Black knowledge production cannot be separated from the archive of black deaths. Several reviews of *In the Wake* have illuminated the need to imagine Black ontology “beyond pre-scripted death” (Nguyen 85) as well as to strongly consider the “derivative oppressive regimes that have emerged in the aftermath of chattel slavery” (Little 138). However, Sharpe’s book makes a further investment in rethinking our current sociopolitical environment which is informed by hashtag activism, racial profiling, and police brutality. In between the deaths of Trayvon Martin in 2013, the initiation of the Black Lives Matter movement and the recent death of Stephon Clarke on March 18, Sharpe’s monologue finds a place to expose the underrepresented middle passages that still transport black bodies silently.

By being in conversation with some of the great Black intellectuals of this contemporary moment: Fred Moten, Claudia Rankine, Saidya Hartmann, Kamau Brathwaite, Toni Morrison, Hortense Spillers, Kara Walker, Dionne Brand and others Sharpe treats the social normativity around pre-mature Black death as the byproduct of political medians created by the state through state-sponsored violence. *In the Wake* is neither a memoir nor simply a theoretical text and it also lacks an introduction. It is divided into four chapters titled, “The Wake,” “The Ship,” “The

Hold,” and “the Weather” where the terms “wake,” “ship,” “hold,” and “weather” play a profound role in confronting death and migration in Black cultural studies. Sharpe situates contemporary discourses on the afterlife of slavery within deep historical contexts making an argument that “the past is not yet past” (62). The text lacks a positive black ontology and places itself within themes of victimhood and the normalization of black social deaths, making her analyses an indispensable way to enter the growing racial fear and disillusionment in the United States.

In chapter one, titled, “The Wake,” Sharpe likens a series of deaths in her family with “silences” that need to be mourned. These silences emerge from financial, educational and racial hurdles that form an inescapable part of black lives. Sharpe illustrates each of these impediments with her own experiences as well as with those of her family members. She writes about how her mother, a Black woman is told by the White nuns at her West Catholic Girls School that Black girls could not become artists. Highlighting the omnipresence of personal and institutional racism that is transmitted transgenerationally, Sharpe states that, “[T]he overriding engine of US racism cut through my [her] family’s ambitions and desires” (3). Upon establishing the graphic time-table of the deaths of IdaMarie, Caleb, Robert, and Stephen, Sharpe’s family members enter an archive shared by the likes of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and Eric Garner.

Chapter two, “The Ship: *The Trans* Atlantic*” foregrounds itself on the study of the displacement of bodies and Sharpe continues with her analyses of spaces (like the sea) that bear witness to the objectification of living bodies that are harbingers of trade and capitalism. Sharpe studies the ship as a vessel and confers upon it a coffin-like quality as it contains damaged, bruised, and sometimes dead black bodies. The Atlantic and the Mediterranean on the other hand are read as the burial grounds where unwanted bodies are disposed of. Allan Sekula and Noel

Burch's *The Forgotten Space*, *The Fish Story*, Omise'eke Tinsely's "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic, Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage," natural disasters like hurricane Katrina and Sandy, *Zong*, the ship, and *Zong!* by NourbeSe Philip, and *Dream Haiti* by Braithwaite are all intertwined by the communal dilemma caused by the presence of the absence of blackness.

In "The Hold," the Atlantic's current symbolizes a premonition that brings Black bodies to a door, a port, a junction or a station and makes them want to "hold" onto that destination. Using the word "thirsty" from Dionne Brand's poem that goes by the same name, Sharpe explicates instances of unquenchable thirst or the inability to come to terms with one's lived reality. Hence, Albert Johnson who is killed by a policeman's bullet in Toronto, Africans who are thrown overboard into the ocean, child migrants from sub-Saharan Africa who are kept below the deck devoid of water and sunlight, all form a part of the framework that manifests in their "always-possible deaths" (71).

Sharpe also brings our attention to the way bodies of black women perform the role of the belly of a ship carrying future Black lives in them, thus becoming the living middle-passage connecting what Hortense Spillers calls the "human and the non-human" world (78). In chapter four, "The Weather" Sharpe's analysis of the photograph of the Haitian girl with the word *ship* written on her forehead mandates the need for a new mode of writing and performance that can initiate care work and prevent states of Black non-being. In our present sociopolitical moment, *In the Wake* emerges as an important text. It transcends intertextuality and demands disclosure of the structural silencing of violence on Black bodies using trans-spatial and trans-temporal methodologies.

Works Cited

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