

Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies

Volume 18, Issue 1

2018

Article 6

TRANSITION/TRANSGRESS

In the Wake: On Blackness and Being

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***In the Wake: On Blackness and Being.* Sharpe, Christina. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, November 2016. 192 pp. \$22.95 Paperback. Ebook available.**

Our repeated
Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury.
-Tracy K. Smith, "Declaration"

Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* begins with the personal. The ways in which antiblack racism has shaped her family's life open the pages of this mixed genre masterwork, positioning it and Sharpe herself squarely within what she calls "the wake." In an interview with Patricia J. Saunders, Saidiya Hartman explains that personal stories open up avenues for analyzing sociohistorical processes while countering the violence of abstraction in both content and narrative form (Saunders 2008). Similarly, for Sharpe, autobiographical example serves as an entry point for examining how Black life endures an enduring state of subjection. The disaster that is this state of subjection emerges from chattel slavery and as she shows throughout the book, repeats across spatiotemporal boundaries. In other words, the past continuously ruptures our present and in some respects—like residence time—the past is our present (Sharpe 41). Every sense of the wake thus becomes a central metaphor for understanding the ongoing past and its deathly repetitions. While slavery's afterlives produce Black life in proximity to death, the wake is not a totalizing narrative, as her own family's story makes clear. Rather, everyday modes of resistance create

possibilities for rupture within the rupturing of the past to insist on Black being in the wake.

To be in the wake, explains Sharpe, requires that we recognize slavery's afterlives permeating through each aspect of our present. With the wake as our analytic, current disasters betray continuities concealed by structural silences. As such, the wake provides an undisciplined method for coming up against the ongoing past in—and navigating the archives of—the present (13). Yet to be in the wake also approaches a new consciousness, one that resists the quotidian push toward death. Sharpe rejects petitions for redress and instead, turns to visual, literary, and performance culture that takes up the paradox of living blackness in the wake. In the three chapters following the first, she emphasizes the aesthetic representation of slavery's afterlives, focusing attention on pieces that do not seek a resolution to ontological negation. These pieces, and especially the oeuvres of Dionne Brand and Marlene NourbeSe Philip, perform the impossibility of resolving antiblackness (which Sharpe later describes as “total climate”) thereby disrupting the discursive and material continuation of the wake.

Staying in the wake is both at stake and the purpose of “wake work,” argues Sharpe. As a theory and praxis of Black being in the wake, wake work acts through the contemporary conditions of Black life to imagine otherwise. Coupled with the wake then, wake work accounts for moments of rupture despite immanent and imminent death. It is “a mode of inhabiting and rupturing this episteme” (18). It demands that we attend to the palimpsestic present as well as the present needs of the dying and the living. What's more, wake work demands that we rethink care in the wake and that doing so poses a critical problem for thought. More precisely, it moves us away from thinking care solely in response to state violence. Sharpe therefore shifts the axis of care onto a lateral line that renders people beholden to each other. Because wake work refuses to silence the ongoing past, it brings a radically different kind of care to bear on the present.

Sharpe proceeds to explain that like the wake, “the ship” too persists. Here, she puts forth a way of marking the repetition of slavery's afterlives, including the transformation of progeny into property under *partus sequitur ventrem*. The “Trans*Atlantic” signals the range of transformations enacted on the Black body. That excess captured in the asterisk appears again and again through the ship and its wake as well as the ship's hold. The absence of personhood characterizes the space of “the hold,” in which blackness is produced as nonbeing. Sharpe reads the ship and the hold together with the birth canal to contend with the continuing negation of Black maternity. Under *partus*, which legalized the matrilineal heritability of slave status, the birth canal was turned into “another domestic Middle Passage,” she argues (74). Building on Hortense Spillers' seminal theorization of how chattel slavery undoes notions of embodiment, gender, and kinship, Sharpe goes on to show that motherhood—and childhood—loses meaning in the wake, where the logic and language of the hold repeat and multiply (Spillers 1987). “The details accumulate like the ditto ditto in the archives,” declares Sharpe (Sharpe 56). Indeed, logic and language itself fall apart when confronted with the violent suspensions of Black being.

In the US, explains Sharpe, slavery was an atmospheric singularity comprising the environment at large. The afterlives of slavery perpetuate antiblackness as total

climate, as “the weather.” According to Sharpe, the weather signifies the constructedness of antiblack ecologies in which terror predates Black life. “What is the word for keeping and putting breath back in the body?” asks Sharpe (113). The weather of the wake necessitates “wake work as aspiration” (109, emphasis added). In conclusion, Sharpe calls for an optic that opposes the ways in which Black life has been violently annotated and redacted. By inhabiting the wake, alternate forms of seeing give way to “blackened knowledge” for surviving subjection (13). Sharpe highlights visual and textual practices of Black annotation and Black redaction that, she asserts, rupture “the orthography of the wake.” In refusing the hold’s logic and language, Black aesthetic and other modes of resistance “sound an ordinary note of care” (132).

I am reminded of Tracy K. Smith’s recently published poem in *The New Yorker*. Her erasure of the Declaration of Independence reveals what is already there, subverting the orthography of the wake with disordered words (Smith 2017). Yet it is the wordless breaks in “Declaration” that most forcefully resonate an ethics of care in the wake. One cannot read Sharpe’s *In the Wake* without the same attention to poetic devices that make the text a performative piece. What sets this book apart is not only its transformative theoretical interventions, which are critical and crucial to all fields of study, but also Sharpe’s prose. She writes at the limits of language as well as theory in order to advance a new method of both encountering and accounting for the past in the present by instrumentalizing the orthography of the wake. In doing so, she stays in the wake to forge breath and breathing space with words that fail, simultaneously exposing “the inability of language to cohere around the bodies and the suffering of those who Black people who live and die in the wake and whose everyday acts insist Black life into the wake” (96).

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