



**CHRISTINA SHARPE** In the Wake  
On Blackness and Being

IN THE WAKE



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*Wake*

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ON BLACKNESS AND BEING

CHRISTINA SHARPE

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

*Durham and London*

2016

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Printed in the United States of America on  
acid-free paper ☺  
Designed by Amy Ruth Buchanan  
Typeset in Arno Pro by  
Tseng Information Systems, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Names: Sharpe, Christina Elizabeth, author.  
Title: In the wake : on Blackness and being /  
Christina Sharpe.  
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2016. |  
Includes bibliographical references and index.  
Identifiers: LCCN 2016024750 (print) |  
LCCN 2016025624 (ebook) |  
ISBN 9780822362838 (hardcover : alk. paper)  
ISBN 9780822362944 (pbk. : alk. paper)  
ISBN 9780822373452 (e-book)  
Subjects: LCSH: African Americans—Social conditions. |  
Racism—Health aspects—United States. | Premature  
death—Social aspects—United States. Discrimination in  
law enforcement—United States. | Slavery—United  
States—Psychological aspects.  
Classification: LCC E185.625 .S53 2016 (print) |  
LCC E185.625 (ebook) | DDC 305.896/073—dc23  
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016024750>

Cover art: Cornelia Parker, *Hanging Fire (Suspected Arson)*, 1999. Charcoal, wire, pins, and nails; 144 × 60 × 72 inches. The Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, Gift of Barbara Lee, The Barbara Lee Collection of Art by Women, 2006.5. Courtesy of the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London. Photo by Jasmine Fu.

FOR THOSE WHO HAVE DIED RECENTLY.

*IdaMarie Sharpe*

*Caleb Williams*

*Stephen Wheatley Sharpe*

\*

FOR THOSE WHO DIED IN THE PAST

THAT IS NOT YET PAST.

*Van Buren Sharpe Jr.*

*Robert Sharpe Jr.*

*Jason Phillip Sharpe*

*Van Buren Sharpe III*

\*

FOR THOSE WHO REMAIN.

*Karen Sharpe*

*Annette Sharpe Williams*

*Christopher David Sharpe*

*Dianna McFadden*

\*

FOR ALL BLACK PEOPLE WHO, STILL,  
INSIST LIFE AND BEING INTO THE WAKE.

\*

FOR MY MOTHER

*Ida Wright Sharpe*

AGAIN. AND ALWAYS.



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Both my sabbatical leave and the Tufts University Deans' Semester Research Leave gave me time and space away from teaching to finish the book. I am thankful for this. Thanks to Dean James Glaser for his help. Thanks to Dean Bárbara Brizuela and the Faculty Research Awards Committee for each providing funds to pay the permissions for many of the images that appear in this text. Thanks, as well, to former Dean Joanne Berger-Sweeney for her crucial early support of this work.

I had the good luck to present work from this project in a number of forums: Michigan State University; Extra(-ordinary) Presents, University of Erlangen, Germany; the Futures of Black Studies, University of Bremen, Germany; The Fleming Museum, University of Vermont; The Afrikan Black Coalition Conference, University of California, Irvine; University of Toronto; Cornell University; Caribbean Studies Association Conference; Black Folk in Dark Times, Vanderbilt University; American Studies Association Conference; Modern Language Association Conference; Southern Illinois University Edwardsville; Barnard College; Pratt Institute; Curatorial Controversies in Traumatic History and Pedagogy and Commemoration Seminar at York University, Toronto; the Dark Room Race and Visual Culture Seminar Panel, Black Portraiture(s) II: Imaging the Black Body and Re-Staging Histories, Florence, Italy; Black + Queer + Human Symposium, University of Toronto; The Black Studies Race Literacies Series, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. My thanks to the people who organized the panels and events at which I presented this work and to

those people in attendance who so generously engaged the work-in-progress.

Earlier and substantially different portions of *In the Wake* appear in the following places: From “The Weather,” the section on Barack Obama’s speeches appears in an earlier but also much expanded form in “Three Scenes” in *On Marronage: Ethical Confrontations with Anti-Blackness* (2015), edited by P. Khalil Saucier and Tryon P. Woods (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 131–153). The section in “The Hold” on Dasani Coates and William appears in a different form in the essay “Black Studies: In the Wake” in *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (2014): 59–69.

The list of those who have accompanied and encouraged me is long. Any listing of them, and an alphabetical one at that, is incomplete, but it is a beginning. *Beloved*, Black Lives Matter, Black Youth Project 100, Nicholas Brady, Sabine Broeck, Kimberly Juanita Brown, Kimberly Nichele Brown, Kevin Browne, Tina Campt, David Chariandy, Margo Crawford, Warren Crichlow, Delia, Mario DiPaolantonio, Martin Donovan, Drana, “Dream Haiti,” Lee Edelman, Andrea Fatona, Rafael Fonseca, Donette Francis, Vivek Freitas, Charlene Gilbert, Saidiya Hartman, Kimberly Hébert, Tiffany Willoughby Herard, Molly Hildebrand, Peter Hudson, Vijay Iyer, Aereile Jackson, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, Amber Rose Johnson, Jessica Marie Johnson, Kima Jones, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Mariame Kaba, Amor Kohli, Joseph Litvak, Lisa Lowe, Keguro Macharia, David Mann, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, Egbert Alejandro Martina, Dianna McFadden, Katherine McKittrick, Diego Millan, Siddhartha Mitter, Fred Moten, John Murillo, Gee Ngugi, Tamara Nopper, Tavia Nyong’o, Abdi Osman, Jemima Pierre, Modhumita Roy, Ashraf Rushdy, Leslie Sanders, P. Khalil Saucier, Jared Sexton, Christopher Sharpe, Evie Shockley, Faith Smith, C. Riley Snorton, Eddy Souffrant, Hortense Spillers, Aparna Mishra Tarc, Grete Telander, Selamawit Terrefe, the unnamed Little Girl with the word *Ship* affixed to her forehead, “Venus in Two Acts,” “Verso 55,” Alex Weheliye, Frank Wilderson, Jaye Austin Williams, Jean Wu, Van Zimmerman, and *Zong!* To those whom I have inadvertently neglected to name here, I am no less thankful because of a temporary failure of memory.

After my sister IdaMarie died, Amor Kohli heard the unsaid and came to get me and he and Sonya cooked for me; Van Zimmerman

was there through and in all of those wakes (and through some of his own) and I remain deeply grateful, my Tufts colleague Anne Gardulski generously met me for lunch to talk with me about water wakes and residence time; Kate Siklosi transcribed that interview with Anne and indexed the book; Abbe Schriber provided expert and timely help securing art and text permissions; Anthony Reed sent me parts of “Dream Haiti” as I waited for my book to arrive. Thank you.

At Duke University Press, thanks to Jade Brooks, Nicole Campbell, and Amy Buchanan. Most especially, thanks to Duke University Press editorial director Ken Wissoker for his kindness and his commitment to the work. Thanks, as well, to the two readers of my manuscript; what a privilege to be read so generously and well.

Dionne Brand and Rinaldo Walcott, thank you for reading, for your generative conversations with me, your clarity, insights, and for your being, in the wake.



ONE

*The Wake*

I wasn't there when my sister died. I was in Chicago at the Cultural Studies Association meeting and I was finishing the paper that was my first attempt at the work that became this book. My brother Christopher called on that Wednesday in May and asked if I was busy. I told him that I was finishing the paper I would give on Friday. He asked me to call him back when I was done. When two hours passed and I still hadn't called, he called me. He said that he'd wanted to wait but that our brother Stephen and sister Annette had urged him to call me back. They'd told him I would be upset if he waited. Our eldest sister Ida-Marie was dead, Christopher told me. There were very few other details. She lived alone. She was late to work. No more than ten minutes late, but she was always so prompt that ten minutes with no call, text, or email so alarmed her employers that they called the police and convinced them to go to her apartment. They found her there. I put the phone down. I called my partner and two friends. I texted one of my fellow presenters to tell him that I wouldn't be on the panel and why. I texted another friend, a former student who is now a professor at DePaul University, and he said that he was coming to get me. He told me that I shouldn't be alone. I put down the phone and fell asleep.

That was May 2013 and I had no idea, then, that two more members of my family would also die within the next ten months. This would be the second time in my life when three immediate family members died in close succession. In the first instance, between February 2, 1997, January 19, 1998, and July 4, 1999, we survived the deaths of my

nephew Jason Phillip Sharpe; my mother, Ida Wright Sharpe; and my eldest brother, Van Buren Sharpe III. As this deathly repetition appears here, it is one instantiation of the wake as the conceptual frame of and for living blackness in the diaspora in the still unfolding aftermaths of Atlantic chattel slavery.

No one was with my sister when she died at home less than a week after she, my brother Stephen, my sister Annette, and my brother-in-law James had returned from a ten-day vacation together in Florida. Her death was sudden and alarming. We still don't know what caused IdaMarie's death; the autopsy report was inconclusive.

IdaMarie and I weren't close. We had only ever had moments of closeness, like in the chiasmic aftermath of the death of her son, my nephew, Jason (figure 1.1). This lack of closeness was largely, though not only, because almost twenty-two years my senior we had never spent much time together, we had never really gotten to know each other, and I had grown used to her absence. I didn't, in fact, experience her absence *as* absence because when I was born she was already living in her own life, at a distance from me, because her relationship with our father was irretrievable, for reasons that remain unknown to me.

There are many silences in my family. I am the youngest of six children. My parents were born in Philadelphia in the first quarter of the twentieth century. My father, who went to Overbrook High School, was one of eight children and middle class (his mother had gone to Normal School in Washington, DC; three of my father's brothers went to Howard University), and my mother, who went to West Catholic Girls High School, was the only child of a working poor and single mother. My parents married on my mother's nineteenth birthday; my father was thirty. Neither of my parents went to college. My mother had always wanted to be an artist, but was told by the white nuns who were her teachers at West Catholic Girls that Black girls couldn't do that. So after graduating she trained to become certified as an X-ray technician. My father worked in the sorting room at the post office at Thirtieth Street in Philadelphia. My mother worked as an X-ray technician before I was born and then at *TV Guide* after she was diagnosed with and treated for cancer the first time. After that she worked at Sears, Roebuck, and Co., in St. Davids, Pennsylvania, in the garden department and then in the personnel department. We children went to Archbishop John Carroll High School, St. Katherine of Siena, the

Academy of Notre Dame de Namur, Devon Preparatory, and also Valley Forge Junior High School and Conestoga Senior High School; good-to-mediocre Catholic schools, elite private schools, and good public schools. We went there, that is, until the scholarship money ran out and/or the racism proved too much; sometimes the scholarship money ran out because of racism. In each of these private and public institutions and across generations (there were twenty-one and twenty-two years between my eldest siblings and me) we faced the kinds of racism, personal and institutional, that many people, across race, like to consign to the pre-*Brown v. Board of Education* southern United States. The overriding engine of US racism cut through my family's ambitions and desires. It coursed through our social and public encounters and our living room. Racism, the engine that drives the ship of state's national and imperial projects ("the American ship of state . . . the ark of the covenant that authorized both liberty and slavery": DeLoughrey 2010, 53) cuts through all of our lives and deaths inside and outside the nation, in the wake of its purposeful flow.

*Wake: the track left on the water's surface by a ship; the disturbance caused by a body swimming or moved, in water; it is the air currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow.<sup>1</sup>*

In 1948 my parents moved with my two eldest siblings from West Philadelphia to Wayne, Pennsylvania, on the Main Line. They were Black working, middle-class, striving, people who lived at a four-way intersection, at one end of a small mixed-income Black neighborhood called Mt. Pleasant that was surrounded by largely upper-middle-class and wealthy white suburban neighborhoods (up the street were the St. David's Golf Club and the Valley Forge Military Academy). From what I understand, my parents moved to the suburbs for *opportunity*; they wanted what they both imagined and knew that they did not have and their children would not have access to in Philadelphia: from space for their children to grow (there would be six of us and the house was small), to a yard large enough to have fruit trees and a vegetable garden, to easier access to good educations for their children. (*Opportunity*: from the Latin *Ob-*, meaning "toward," and *portu(m)*, meaning "port": What is opportunity in the wake, and how is opportunity always framed?) This, of course, is not wholly, or even largely, a Black US phe-

nomenon. This kind of movement happens all over the Black diaspora from and in the Caribbean and the continent to the metropole, the US great migrations of the early to mid-twentieth century that saw millions of Black people moving from the South to the North, and those people on the move in the contemporary from points all over the African continent to other points on the continent and also to Germany, Greece, Lampedusa.<sup>2</sup> Like many of these Black people on the move, my parents discovered that things were *not* better in this “new world”: the subjections of constant and overt racism and isolation continued. After my father died when I was ten, we slid from lower-middle-class straitened circumstances into straight-up working poor. With all of the work that my parents did to try to enter and stay in the middle class, precarity and more than precarity remained. And after my father died, that precarity looked and felt like winters without heat because there was no money for oil; holes in ceilings, walls, and floors from water damage that we could not afford to repair; the fears and reality of electricity and other utilities being cut for nonpayment; fear of a lien being placed on the house because there was no, or not enough, money to pay property taxes. For my part, my dining services access was cut during my first semester in college, and after that semester the University of Pennsylvania almost did not allow me to return to campus because we were unable to pay the (small but too large for us) parental contribution. But through all of that and more, my mother tried to make a small path through the wake. She brought beauty into that house in every way that she could; she worked at joy, and she made livable moments, spaces, and places in the midst of all that was unlivable there, in the town we lived in; in the schools we attended; in the violence we saw and felt inside the home while my father was living and outside it in the larger white world before, during, and after his death. In other words, even as we experienced, recognized, and lived subjection, we did not *simply* or *only* live *in* subjection and *as* the subjected.<sup>3</sup> Though she was not part of any organized Black movements, except in how one’s life and mind are organized by and positioned to apprehend the world through the optic of the door<sup>4</sup> and antiblackness, my mother was politically and socially astute. She was attuned not only to our individual circumstances but also to those circumstances as they were an indication of, and related to, the larger antiblack world that structured all of our lives. *Wake; the state of wakefulness; consciousness*. It was with this sense of wakefulness

as consciousness that most of my family lived an awareness of itself as, and in, the wake of the unfinished project of emancipation.<sup>5</sup>

*So, the same set of questions and issues are presenting themselves to us across these historical periods. It [is] the same story that is telling itself, but through the different technologies and processes of that particular period.* (Saunders 2008a, 67)

It is a big leap from working class, to Ivy League schools, to being a tenured professor. And *a part of* that leap and *apart from* its specificities are the sense and awareness of precarity; the precarities of the afterlives of slavery (“skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment”: Hartman 2007, 6); the precarities of the ongoing disaster of the ruptures of chattel slavery. They texture my reading practices, my ways of being in and of the world, my relations with and to others. Here’s Maurice Blanchot (1995, 1–2): “The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact. . . . When the disaster comes upon us, it does not come. The disaster is its imminence, but since the future, as we conceive of it in the order of lived time belongs to the disaster, the disaster has always already withdrawn or dissuaded it; there is no future for the disaster, just as there is no time or space for its accomplishment.”<sup>6</sup> Transatlantic slavery was and is the disaster. The disaster of Black subjection was and is planned; terror is disaster and “terror has a history” (Youngquist 2011, 7) and it is deeply atemporal. The history of capital is inextricable from the history of Atlantic chattel slavery. The disaster and the writing of disaster are never present, are always present.<sup>7</sup> In this work, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, I want to think “the wake” as a problem of and for thought. I want to think “care” as a problem for thought. I want to think care in the wake as a problem for thinking and of and for Black non/being in the world.<sup>8</sup> Put another way, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* is a work that insists and performs that thinking needs care (“all thought is Black thought”)<sup>9</sup> and that thinking and care need to stay in the wake.

December 2013. I was in the grocery store when my brother Stephen called. I listened to the message and I called him back immediately. The tone of his voice and the fact of the call let me know that something was wrong because in recent years my brother became very bad

at making and returning calls, a fact that he was always deeply apologetic about. When he answered the phone, he told me that he had bad news about Annette. I froze. Asked, "What? Is she okay?" Stephen told me yes, physically she was okay, but Annette and my brother-in-law James's adopted and estranged son Caleb (called Trey before he was adopted and renamed) had been murdered in Pittsburgh. Stephen had no other information.

Caleb had been severely abused before he was adopted at the age of five. He was very small for his age and quiet, and my sister and brother-in-law at first were not aware of the extent or the severity of the abuse he had suffered. But when Caleb continued to have trouble adjusting, they sought the help of therapists. In response to a therapist's question about the difficulties he was facing, the then six-year-old Caleb replied, "I'm just bad." Eventually Caleb was diagnosed with a severe attachment disorder, which meant that it was likely he would never bond with my sister. There are other stories to be told here; they are not mine to tell.

I put my basket down and left the store. When I got home I searched online for Caleb's name, and the brief news stories I found on the websites of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* and the *TribLive* were about the murder of a twenty-year-old young Black man on Pittsburgh's North Side, and together they provided all of the details I had of my nephew's death.<sup>10</sup> "Caleb Williams, a twenty-year-old Black male from Turtle Creek, was fatally shot to death in the trunk and neck as he and another person left an apartment in the 1700 block of Letsche Street in the North Side. Shots were fired from an adjoining apartment. He was taken to Allegheny General Hospital, where he later died. No one has been charged; the investigation is ongoing."<sup>11</sup>

This wasn't the first time that I searched newspapers for the details of a murdered family member. In 1994 the Philadelphia police murdered my cousin Robert, who was schizophrenic; he had become schizophrenic after his first year as an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania. What I have been able to reconstruct with the help of my brother Christopher, my partner, memory, and online news archives is that Robert was living in an apartment in Germantown not far from my uncle, his father, and my aunt, his stepmother, and he had stopped taking his medication. He was a big man, six foot eight. Apparently he was agitated and had been walking the neighborhood. "A Germantown