
Book Reviews

Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2016, 978-0822362944, 192 pp.)

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In the wake, there is no past tense; the ship still cuts through water, the hold still presses against our lungs, and the weather still settles in our chests like grief. Christina Sharpe's *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) teaches us that method itself must learn to breathe differently—not to escape the storm but to breathe inside it, to think where catastrophe refuses to end. A critical review of Sharpe's methodological framework reveals her use of wake, weather, hold and aspiration as central figures and as techniques of analysis and survival. Her book is not a monograph in the conventional sense; her methodology presents an orientation of scholarship that compels us to dwell in turbulence and to ask what it means to survive when survival itself is always under siege. Sharpe extends the wake through her concept of the weather, which she defines as the total climate; the condition of anti-blackness as total environment.¹ Weather is not metaphorical but descriptive: it names the everyday pervasiveness of anti-Black violence as atmospheric, inescapable...sitting with death while attending to breathe.

Sharpe proposes method as “wake work” being both analytic and praxis, a way of proceeding that acknowledges the “past that is not past,” the ongoing structures of slavery that persist into the present.² Unlike traditional methodologies that seek detachment, closure, or progress narratives, Sharpe's method insists on staying with rupture. The wake, then, is how Sharpe reads photographs, interprets literature, personal narratives, and writes theory.

¹ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 104.

² Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 9.

She moves between registers—academic analysis, memoir, poetry—creating a multi-vocal text that unsettles disciplinary boundaries. Sharpe’s brilliance lies in her refusal of consolation, her ability to transform catastrophe into a site of care and attention. Simultaneously, one must note the risks of totalizing Black life under the rubric of disaster and consider how her methodology both opens and forecloses possibilities for scholarly and lived practice. Sharpe is explicit about her relationship to methodology: she rejects traditional forms of method that pretend to objectivity. Instead, she situates herself personally and politically within her subject, “to live in those no’s, to live in the no-space that the law is not bound to respect, to live in no citizenship.”³ This stance is one of critical inhabitation rather than analytical mastery. To accomplish this, Sharpe uses a layered methodology: she draws from cultural theory, critical race studies, Black feminist thought, affect theory, archival fragments, and her own lived experiences. She refuses to separate the personal from the theoretical.

This methodological openness echoes Saidiya Hartman’s “critical fabulation,” the weaving together of historical fragments and imagination to account for lives erased in the archive.⁴ Yet Sharpe goes further—her method is not only about reconstructing but about remaining, about what it means to keep vigil in the ongoing wake of slavery. This refusal of disciplinary neatness is both strength and provocation. By braiding analysis and intimacy, Sharpe demonstrates that methodology itself can be a form of wake work. However, the risk is interpretive diffuseness: her methodology does not provide stable criteria of analysis but instead relies on atmosphere and resonance, which some may find too elusive for empirical rigor.

Sharpe’s foundational methodological figure is the wake. A wake is at once turbulence left behind a ship, the gathering of mourners, and the state of being conscious. Sharpe unites these meanings to argue that Black life is lived perpetually “in the wake of slavery.”⁵ This wake is not over; it structures our present. Methodologically, the wake becomes a practice of reading and witnessing. Sharpe examines photographs, the Middle Passage, police killings, and the mundane images of Black life, asking how they register the ongoing

³ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 16.

⁴ Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in two acts.” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14.

⁵ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 18.

wake. She writes: "To live in the wake is to live the afterlife of property."⁶ To engage with such images is not to seek closure or redemption but to acknowledge their persistence. The strength of this methodological gesture is its insistence that history is not linear. By orienting analysis around the wake, Sharpe compels us to see the past as constantly surfacing in the present. However, in framing Black life always and only as wake life, Sharpe risks producing a totalizing narrative of catastrophe that flattens differences in experience and forecloses spaces of rupture or joy. As a methodology, weather directs attention to saturation rather than exception. It shifts the analytic away from singular events of racism to the ongoing, diffuse, atmospheric conditions in which Black life unfolds. This allows Sharpe to connect the killing of Trayvon Martin to the mundane surveillance of Black bodies, insisting that both belong to the same weather system.

The power of this move lies in its expansiveness; it makes visible the pervasiveness of anti-blackness across domains of life. Yet the danger is that weather risks becoming too expansive—if everything is weather, how do we distinguish between microclimates? How do we name spaces of reprieve or flight within the storm? Sharpe herself acknowledges this risk, writing that "weather necessitates changeability and improvisation."⁷ Methodologically, then, weather is both illuminating and overwhelming.

Another methodological figure is the hold, the belly of the slave ship. She writes: "The hold is the slave ship hold; is the hold of the so-called migrant ship; is the prison; is the womb that produces blackness."⁸ The hold is the material site of enslavement and a metaphor for the structural constraints that continue to shape Black life. The hold allows Sharpe to perform a genealogy: she links the slave ship to contemporary prisons, refugee camps, and immigration detention centers. The hold becomes a conceptual bridge across centuries, revealing how architectures of captivity persist.

This methodological move demonstrates Sharpe's ability to trace continuity without collapsing difference. The strength of the hold as method is its concreteness—it grounds abstract theorizing in a spatial, material figure. Yet the risk lies in overextension: by emphasizing continuity, the method may underplay moments of historical rupture, resistance, or change. To insist that

⁶ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 18.

⁷ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 106.

⁸ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 27.

we remain always in the hold risks reproducing the very enclosure Sharpe critiques. Perhaps the most moving of Sharpe's methodological figures is aspirational. She writes of Eric Garner's words, "I can't breathe [Sounds familiar?]," connecting them to the impossibility of breath in the wake of slavery.⁹ Aspiration, then, is both literal respiration and the yearning for otherwise. Aspiration insists that even within the wake, there is breath—fragile, endangered, but present. It becomes a practice of attending to the limits of survival while also acknowledging the miracle of continued existence. This methodological move provides Sharpe's framework to counterbalance. Without aspiration, the wake would be suffocating. With aspiration, wake work becomes not just mourning but survival. To aspire is to create conditions for life even in catastrophe. Its limit, however, is that aspiration often feels overwhelmed by the storm; it flickers as possibility but does not stabilize into methodical clarity.

Sharpe's methodology is inseparable from her style. Her writing is fragmented, lyrical, and interwoven with personal narrative. She refuses the impersonal tone of academic prose. This stylistic choice enacts wake work by refusing to separate intellect from affect, scholarship from intimacy. She writes in the register of feeling from the very beginning. This style is effective because it makes the reader feel the weight of the wake; it draws the reader into proximity with loss and survival. Yet it also risks alienating readers trained in traditional academic expectations, who may mistake affect for lack of rigor. In fact, Sharpe demonstrates that affect is rigor, that to study Black life without attending to feeling is methodological failure. Sharpe creates a capacious framework for studying Black life, one that acknowledges catastrophe without demanding closure. Her figures—wake, weather, hold, aspiration—are powerful conceptual tools that invite expansive analysis. Her refusal of traditional method models a new kind of scholarship, one that is ethical, affective, and intimate. Her methodology is profoundly persuasive. It compels scholars to rethink method itself: not as neutral tool but as orientation, atmosphere, and care.

In the Wake is poetry in binders. Its central figures—wake, weather, hold, aspiration—are not merely metaphors but techniques of reading, witnessing, and caring. For my own research, Sharpe's work insists on humility and responsibility. To write in the wake is to attend to what cannot be closed, to

⁹ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 110

let scholarship itself become a form of vigil. It is to acknowledge that method is not only intellectual but also ethical; that analysis is also an act of care and in that recognition lies the possibility of a different kind of scholarship: one that listens, breathes, and attends—in the wake.