

## 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

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

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

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

20 There are many silences in my family. I am the youngest of six chil-  
21 dren. My parents were born in Philadelphia in the first quarter of the  
22 twentieth century. My father, who went to Overbrook High School,  
23 was one of eight children and middle class (his mother had gone to  
24 Normal School in Washington, DC; three of my father's brothers went  
25 to Howard University), and my mother, who went to West Catholic  
26 Girls High School, was the only child of a working poor and single  
27 mother. My parents married on my mother's nineteenth birthday; my  
28 father was thirty. Neither of my parents went to college. My mother  
29 had always wanted to be an artist, but was told by the white nuns who  
30 were her teachers at West Catholic Girls that Black girls couldn't do  
31 that. So after graduating she trained to become certified as an X-ray  
32 technician. My father worked in the sorting room at the post office  
33 at Thirtieth Street in Philadelphia. My mother worked as an X-ray  
34 technician before I was born and then at *TV Guide* after she was diag-  
35 nosed with and treated for cancer the first time. After that she worked  
36 at Sears, Roebuck, and Co., in St. Davids, Pennsylvania, in the garden  
37 department and then in the personnel department. We children went  
38 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-

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

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

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

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

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

man was shot and killed last night when he ended an eight-hour stand-off with police by walking out of his apartment building and pointing a starter pistol at officers, police said Robert Sharpe, forty, was shot several times outside the apartment building on Manheim Street near Wayne Avenue. He was pronounced dead a short time later at Medical College of Pennsylvania Hospital's main campus" (Taylor 1994).

What the paper did not say is that Robert's neighbors knew him and were not afraid of him; they were concerned for him and they wanted help calming his agitation. What the paper did not say is that the police shot Robert, who was unarmed, or armed with a starter pistol—a toy gun—point blank eleven times, or nineteen times, in the back.<sup>12</sup> There was no seeking justice here. What would justice mean?<sup>13</sup> Joy James and João Costa Vargas ask in "Refusing Blackness-as-Victimization: Trayvon Martin and the Black Cyborgs": "What happens when instead of becoming enraged and shocked every time a Black person is killed in the United States, we recognize Black death as a predictable and constitutive aspect of this democracy? What will happen then if instead of demanding justice we recognize (or at least consider) that the very notion of justice . . . produces and requires Black exclusion and death as normative" (James and Costa Vargas 2012, 193). The ongoing state-sanctioned legal and extralegal murders of Black people are normative and, for this so-called democracy, necessary; it is the ground we walk on. And that it *is* the ground lays out that, and perhaps how, we might begin to live in relation to this requirement for our death. What kinds of possibilities for rupture might be opened up? What happens when we proceed as if we *know* this, antiblackness, to be the ground on which we stand, the ground from which we to attempt to speak, for instance, an "I" or a "we" who know, an "I" or a "we" who care?

That these and other Black deaths are produced as normative still leaves gaps and unanswered questions for those of us in the wake of those specific and cumulative deaths. My niece Dianna sent me a video about her cousin, my nephew. It was dedicated to "Little Nigga Trey," and that the video exists speaks to my nephew's life after he relocated and returned to live with and in proximity to his birth family in Pittsburgh and also speaks to the nonbiological family he made as a young adult.<sup>14</sup> Caleb's life was singular and difficult, and it was also not dissimilar to the lives of many young Black people living in, and produced by, the contemporary conditions of Black life as it is lived near death,



1 as deathliness, in the wake of slavery. “The U.S. Marshals this morning  
2 arrested a Pittsburgh homicide suspect in New Kensington who has  
3 been on the loose since December. Jamirre Wilkes is charged with kill-  
4 ing Caleb Williams, 20, of Turtle Creek on Dec. 10.”<sup>15</sup> *Wake; in the line*  
5 *of recoil of (a gun)*.

6 I include the personal here to connect the social forces on a spe-  
7 cific, particular family’s being in the wake to those of all Black people  
8 in the wake; to mourn and to illustrate the ways our individual lives  
9 are always swept up in the wake produced and determined, though  
10 not absolutely, by the afterlives of slavery. Put another way, I include  
11 the personal here in order to position this work, and myself, in and of  
12 the wake. The “autobiographical example,” says Saidiya Hartman, “is  
13 not a personal story that folds onto itself; it’s not about navel gazing,  
14 it’s really about trying to look at historical and social process and one’s  
15 own formation as a window onto social and historical processes, as an  
16 example of them” (Saunders 2008b, 7). Like Hartman I include the per-  
17 sonal here, “to tell a story capable of engaging and countering the vio-  
18 lence of abstraction” (Hartman 2008, 7).

19 Late January 2014. I was preparing to go to Germany to give a talk  
20 the first week of February when my niece Dianna, the daughter of my  
21 eldest brother Van Buren, called to tell me that Stephen, my second  
22 oldest brother, was ill and that she and Karen, my sister-in-law, had  
23 called an ambulance to take him to the hospital. She said he didn’t want  
24 to go but that he was having difficulty breathing. I knew that Stephen  
25 hadn’t been well. At IdaMarie’s funeral he seemed and looked aged and  
26 in pain. I made myself believe that what I was seeing on his face and  
27 body were “just” (as if this could be “just” in any meaning of the word)  
28 the long-term effects of sickle cell, his deep depression over IdaMarie’s  
29 death, and the grinding down of poverty—the poverty of the work-  
30 too-hard-and-still-can’t-make-ends-meet kind. Then I simultaneously  
31 thought, *but didn’t want to think*, that he was really ill. Now, panicked,  
32 I asked Dianna if I should come. When she said no, I told her that I  
33 was headed to Germany in a few days and that I would cancel that trip  
34 in order to be there; I told her I wanted to see Stephen, wanted to be  
35 with him.

36 The next day I talked to Stephen, and with his assurances I made  
37 the trip to Bremen, Germany, where I was to give a talk at the Univer-  
38



sity of Bremen, titled “In the Wake.” This was the third iteration of the work that has become this book. In our conversation Stephen told me that he was weak and worried and that the doctors weren’t sure what was wrong with him. There were many tests and multiple and conflicting diagnoses.

In the days after I returned from Bremen the doctors finally gave Stephen a diagnosis of malignant mesothelioma. They told him that he likely had between six and nine months to live. We were devastated. None of us were sure how he got this rare cancer that is usually caused by exposure to asbestos. We learned from the doctors that the dormancy period for mesotheliomas is long, from ten to fifty years. If this mesothelioma was from what and from where we thought, we were struck that the damage from one summer’s work forty-five years earlier at a local insulation company in Wayne, Pennsylvania, when he was fourteen years old could suddenly appear, now, to fracture the present. In the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present.

*The Past— or, more accurately, pastness— is a position. Thus, in no way can we identify the past as past. (Trouillot 1997, 15)*

In one of the moments that Stephen was alone in his hospital room, before he was moved to a rehabilitation center, then back to the intensive care unit at the hospital, and finally to hospice care, he called me and asked me to do him a favor. He said he knew he could count on me. He asked me to not let him suffer; to make sure that he was medicated enough that he wouldn’t suffer. I told him yes, I would do that. We knew that for each of us the unspoken end of that sentence was “the way our mother did” as she was dying of cancer.

Several nights later Dianna called and told me to come quickly. We rented a car and drove from Cambridge, Massachusetts, to Norristown, Pennsylvania. But my brother was no longer able to speak by the time we got to the hospital, in a repetition of 1998, when I made it to my mother’s side from Geneva, New York, where I was teaching in my first job as I completed my PhD dissertation. But I was there. He registered my presence. (I am the youngest child. We were always there for each other.) I could speak with him. I could hold his hand, and stroke

1 his face, and play Stevie Wonder and Bob Marley. I could tell him how  
2 much I loved him, how much he would live on in my life, and in the  
3 lives of everyone he had touched.

4 February 21, 2014. My sister Annette and her husband James had  
5 just left Stephen's hospital hospice room, and more of Stephen's friends  
6 started arriving; they were coming in from Texas and California and  
7 other states far from Pennsylvania. My youngest brother, Christopher  
8 (he is five years older than I), was traveling the next day from Cali-  
9 fornia. My partner and I bought wine and food. We brought it back  
10 to the hospital room. Several of Stephen's friends arrived. We opened  
11 the wine, we talked and laughed, we toasted his life. As we gathered  
12 around Stephen's bed and shared stories, played music, laughed, and  
13 told him how much we loved him, suddenly Stephen sat up, he looked  
14 at us, he tried to speak, a tear ran down his face, he exhaled, he lay back  
15 down, and he died. *Wake: a watch or vigil held beside the body of someone*  
16 *who has died, sometimes accompanied by ritual observances including eat-*  
17 *ing and drinking.*

18  
19 *Defend the dead.* (Philip 2008, 26)

20  
21 What does it mean to defend the dead? To tend to the Black dead  
22 and dying: to tend to the Black person, to Black people, always living  
23 in the push toward our death? It means work. It is work: hard emo-  
24 tional, physical, and intellectual work that demands vigilant attendance  
25 to the needs of the dying, to ease their way, and also to the needs of  
26 the living. Vigilance, too, because any- and everywhere we are, medi-  
27 cal and other professionals treat Black patients differently: often they  
28 don't listen to the concerns of patients and their families; they ration  
29 palliative medicine, or deny them access to it altogether. While there  
30 are multiple reasons for this (Stein 2007),<sup>16</sup> experience and research  
31 tell us "people assume that, relative to whites, blacks feel less pain be-  
32 cause they have faced more hardship.' . . . Because they are believed to  
33 be less sensitive to pain, black people are forced to endure more pain"  
34 (Silverstein 2013).<sup>17</sup> We had to work to make sure that Stephen was as  
35 comfortable as possible.

36 Being with Stephen and other family and friends of Stephen's as he  
37 died, I *re*-experienced the power of the wake. The power of and in sit-  
38 ting with someone as they die, the important work of sitting (together)

in the pain and sorrow of death as a way of marking, remembering, and celebrating a life. *Wake: grief, celebration, memory, and those among the living who, through ritual, mourn their passing and celebrate their life in particular the watching of relatives and friends beside the body of the dead person from death to burial and the drinking, feasting, and other observances incidental to this.* The wake continued after Stephen's death, to the funeral, and then into the gathering and celebration of his life afterward.

And while the wake produces Black death and trauma — “violence . . . precedes and exceeds Blacks” (Wilderson 2010, 76) — we, Black people everywhere and anywhere we are, still produce in, into, and through the wake an insistence on existing: we insist Black being into the wake.

### *On Existence in the Wake/Teaching in the Wake*

I teach a course called Memory for Forgetting. The title came from my misremembering the title of a book that Judith Butler mentioned in an MLA talk on activism and the academy in San Diego in 2004. The book was Mahmoud Darwish's *Memory for Forgetfulness*, and the course looks at two traumatic histories (the Holocaust and largely US/North American slavery) and the film, memoir, narrative, literature, and art that take up these traumas. I have found that I have had to work very hard with students when it comes to thinking through slavery and its afterlives. When I taught the course chronologically, I found that many, certainly well-meaning, students held onto whatever empathy they might have for reading about the Holocaust but not for North American slavery. After two semesters of this, I started teaching the Holocaust first and then North American chattel slavery. But even after I made the change, students would say things about the formerly enslaved like, “Well, they were *given* food and clothing; there was a kind of care there. And what would the enslaved have done otherwise?” The “otherwise” here means: What lives would Black people have had outside of slavery? How would they have survived independent of those who enslaved them? In order for the students in the class to confront their inability to think blackness otherwise and to think slavery as state violence, at a certain moment in the course I replay a scene from Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*. The scene is in the section of *Shoah* where we meet Simon Srebnik (one of three survivors of the massacre at Chelmo then

1 living in Israel) on his return to Chelmo, Poland. In this scene Srebnik  
2 is surrounded by the townspeople who remember him as the young  
3 boy with the beautiful voice who was forced by the Germans to sing on  
4 the river every morning. At first the townspeople are glad to see him,  
5 glad to know that he is alive. Soon, though, and with ease, their relief  
6 and astonishment turn into something else, and they begin to speak  
7 about how they helped the Jewish residents of Chelmo, and then they  
8 begin to blame the Jews of Chelmo for their own murder. The camera  
9 stays on Srebnik's face, as it becomes more and more frozen into a  
10 kind of smile as these people surround him. Some of these people who  
11 are brought out of their homes by his singing on the river — as if he is a  
12 revenant — are the very people who by apathy or more directly abetted  
13 the murder of thousands of the town's Jewish residents. The students  
14 are appalled by all of this. They feel for him. I ask them if they can imagine  
15 if, after the war's end, Simon Srebnik had no place to go other than  
16 to return to this country and this town; to these people who would have  
17 also seen him dead; who had, in fact, tried to kill him and every other  
18 Jewish person in Chelmo. That is, I say, the condition in the post-Civil  
19 War United States of the formerly enslaved and their descendants; still  
20 on the plantation, still surrounded by those who claimed ownership  
21 over them and who fought, and fight still, to extend that state of capture  
22 and subjection in as many legal and extralegal ways as possible,  
23 into the present. The means and modes of Black subjection may have  
24 changed, but the fact and structure of that subjection remain.

25 Those of us who teach, write, and think about slavery and its after-  
26 lives encounter myriad silences and ruptures in time, space, history,  
27 ethics, research, and method as we do our work. Again and again scholars  
28 of slavery face absences in the archives as we attempt to find “the  
29 agents buried beneath” (Spillers 2003b) the accumulated erasures,  
30 projections, fabrications, and misnamings. There are, I think, specific  
31 ways that Black scholars of slavery get wedged in the partial truths of  
32 the archives while trying to make sense of their silences, absences, and  
33 modes of dis/appearance. The methods most readily available to us  
34 sometimes, oftentimes, force us into positions that run counter to what  
35 we know. That is, our knowledge, of slavery and Black being in slavery,  
36 is gained from our studies, yes, but also in excess of those studies;<sup>18</sup> it is  
37 gained through the kinds of knowledge from and of the everyday, from  
38 what Dionne Brand calls “sitting in the room with history.”<sup>19</sup> We are ex-

pected to discard, discount, disregard, jettison, abandon, and measure those ways of knowing and to enact epistemic violence that we know to be violence against others and ourselves. In other words, for Black academics to produce legible work in the academy often means adhering to research methods that are “drafted into the service of a larger destructive force” (Saunders 2008a, 67), thereby doing violence to our own capacities to read, think, and imagine otherwise. Despite knowing otherwise, we are often disciplined into thinking through and along lines that reinscribe our own annihilation, reinforcing and reproducing what Sylvia Wynter (1994, 70) has called our “narratively condemned status.” We must become undisciplined. The work we do requires new modes and methods of research and teaching; new ways of entering and leaving the archives of slavery, of undoing the “racial calculus and . . . political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago” (Hartman 2008, 6) and that live into the present. I think this is what Brand describes in *A Map to the Door of No Return* as a kind of blackened knowledge, an unscientific method, that comes from observing that where one stands is relative to the door of no return and that moment of historical and ongoing rupture. With this as the ground, I’ve been trying to articulate a method of encountering a past that is not past. A method along the lines of a sitting with, a gathering, and a tracking of phenomena that disproportionately and devastatingly affect Black peoples any and everywhere we are. I’ve been thinking of this gathering, this collecting and reading toward a new analytic, as the wake and wake work, and I am interested in plotting, mapping, and collecting the archives of the everyday of Black immanent and imminent death, and in tracking the ways we resist, rupture, and disrupt that immanence and imminence aesthetically and materially.

I am interested in how we imagine ways of knowing that past, in excess of the fictions of the archive, but not only that. I am interested, too, in the ways we recognize the many manifestations of that fiction and that excess, that past not yet past, in the present.

### *In the Wake*

Keeping each of the definitions of wake in mind, I want to think and argue for one aspect of Black being in the wake as consciousness and to propose that to be *in* the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the

1 continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfold-  
 2 ing. *To be* "in" the wake, to occupy that grammar, the infinitive, might  
 3 provide another way of theorizing, in/for/from what Frank Wilderson  
 4 refers to as "stay[ing] in the hold of the ship."<sup>20</sup> With each of those defi-  
 5 nitions of wake present throughout my text, I argue that rather than  
 6 seeking a resolution to blackness's ongoing and irresolvable abjection,  
 7 one might approach Black being in the wake as a form of *conscious-*  
 8 *ness*. Political scientists, historians, philosophers, literary scholars, and  
 9 others have posed as a question for thought the endurance of racial  
 10 inequality after juridical emancipation and civil rights, and they have  
 11 interrogated the conflation of blackness as the ontological negation of  
 12 being with Black subjects and communities. That is, across disciplines,  
 13 scholars and researchers continue to be concerned with the endurance  
 14 of antiblackness in and outside the contemporary. In that way *In the*  
 15 *Wake: On Blackness and Being* joins the work of those scholars who in-  
 16 vestigate the ongoing problem of Black exclusion from social, political,  
 17 and cultural belonging; our abjection from the realm of the human.  
 18 But the book departs from those scholars and those works that look  
 19 for political, juridical, or even philosophical answers to this problem.  
 20 My project looks instead to current quotidian disasters in order to ask  
 21 what, if anything, survives this insistent Black exclusion, this ontologi-  
 22 cal negation, and how do literature, performance, and visual culture  
 23 observe and mediate this un/survival. To do this work of staying in the  
 24 wake and to perform wake work I look also to forms of Black expressive  
 25 culture (like the works of poet-novelists M. NourbeSe Philip, Dionne  
 26 Brand, and Kamau Brathwaite) that do not seek to explain or resolve  
 27 the question of this exclusion in terms of assimilation, inclusion, or  
 28 civil or human rights, but rather depict aesthetically the impossibility  
 29 of such resolutions by representing the paradoxes of blackness within  
 30 and after the legacies of slavery's denial of Black humanity. I name this  
 31 paradox the wake, and I use the wake in all of its meanings as a means  
 32 of understanding how slavery's violences emerge within the contem-  
 33 porary conditions of spatial, legal, psychic, material, and other dimen-  
 34 sions of Black non/being as well as in Black modes of resistance.

*If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America,  
 it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days  
 or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are*



*still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery.* (Hartman 2007, 6)

Living in/the wake of slavery is living “the afterlife of property” and living the afterlife of *partus sequitur ventrem* (that which is brought forth follows the womb), in which the Black child inherits the non/status, the non/being of the mother. That inheritance of a non/status is everywhere apparent *now* in the ongoing criminalization of Black women and children. Living in the wake on a global level means living the disastrous time and effects of continued marked migrations, Mediterranean and Caribbean disasters, trans-American and -African migration, structural adjustment imposed by the International Monetary Fund that continues imperialisms/colonialisms, and more. And here, in the United States, it means living and dying through the policies of the first US Black president; it means the gratuitous violence of stop-and-frisk and Operation Clean Halls; rates of Black incarceration that boggle the mind (Black people represent 60 percent of the imprisoned population); the immanence of death as “a predictable and constitutive aspect of *this* democracy” (James and Costa Vargas 2012, 193). Living in the wake means living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence; living the historically and geographically dis/continuous but always present and endlessly reinvigorated brutality in, and on, our bodies while even as that terror is visited on our bodies the realities of that terror are erased. Put another way, living in the wake means living in and with terror in that in much of what passes for public discourse *about* terror we, Black people, become the *carriers* of terror, terror’s embodiment, and not the primary objects of terror’s multiple enactments; the ground of terror’s possibility globally. This is everywhere clear as we think about those Black people in the United States who can “weaponize sidewalks” (Trayvon Martin) and shoot themselves while handcuffed (Victor White III, Chavis Carter, Jesus Huerta, and more), those Black people transmigrating<sup>21</sup> the African continent toward the Mediterranean and then to Europe who are imagined as insects, swarms, vectors of disease; familiar narratives of danger and disaster that attach to our



1 always already weaponized Black bodies (the weapon is blackness).  
2 We must also, for example, think of President Obama's former press  
3 secretary Robert Gibbs, who said, commenting on the drone murder  
4 of sixteen-year-old US citizen Abdulrahman Al-Alwaki, "I would sug-  
5 gest that you should have a far more responsible father if you are truly  
6 concerned about the well being [*sic*] of your children" (Grim 2012).<sup>22</sup>  
7 We must consider this alongside the tracking of Haitians and Domini-  
8 cans of Haitian descent without papers by drones in the midst of the  
9 ongoing ethnic cleansing in the Dominican Republic.<sup>23</sup> We must con-  
10 sider Gibbs's statement alongside Barack Obama's reprimands of black  
11 men in the United States, his admonishing them to be responsible  
12 fathers. Consider, too, the resurgence of narratives that Black people  
13 were better off in chattel slavery. This is Black life in the wake; this is the  
14 flesh, these are bodies, to which anything and everything can be done.

15 In the immediate aftermath of the June 17, 2015, murders of six Black  
16 women and three Black men in the Emanuel African Methodist Epis-  
17 copal (AME) Church in South Carolina in the United States, the poet  
18 Claudia Rankine published a *New York Times* op-ed piece titled "The  
19 Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning." Rankine writes, "Though  
20 the white liberal imagination likes to feel temporarily bad about black  
21 suffering, there really is no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily  
22 strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed for simply  
23 being black: no hands in your pockets, no playing music, no sudden  
24 movements, no driving your car, no walking at night, no walking in the  
25 day, no turning onto this street, no entering this building, no standing  
26 your ground, no standing here, no standing there, no talking back, no  
27 playing with toy guns, no living while black" (Rankine 2015). To be in  
28 the wake is to live in those no's, to live in the no-space that the law is  
29 not bound to respect, to live in no citizenship, to live in the long time  
30 of Dred and Harriet Scott; and it is more than that. To be/in the wake  
31 is to occupy that time/space/place/construction (being in the wake)  
32 in all of the meanings I referenced. To be in the wake is to recognize  
33 the categories I theorize in this text as the ongoing locations of Black  
34 being: the wake, the ship, the hold, and the weather. To be in the wake  
35 is also to recognize the ways that we are constituted through and by  
36 continued vulnerability to overwhelming force though not *only* known  
37 to ourselves and to each other *by* that force.<sup>24</sup>

38 In the midst of so much death and the fact of Black life as proximate

to death, how do we attend to physical, social, and figurative death and also to the largeness that is Black life, Black life insisted from death? I want to suggest that that might look something like wake work.

### *Wake Work*

When I finally arrived at the door of no return, there was an official there, a guide who was either a man in his ordinary life or an idiot or a dissembler. But even if he was a man in his ordinary life or an idiot or a dissembler, he was authoritative. Exhausted violet, the clerk interjects. Yes he was says the author, violet snares. For some strange reason he wanted to control the story. Violet files. Violet chemistry. Violet unction. It was December, we had brought a bottle of rum, some ancient ritual we remembered from nowhere and no one. We stepped one behind the other as usual. The castle was huge, opulent, a going concern in its time. We went like pilgrims. You were pilgrims. We were pilgrims. This is the holiest we ever were. Our gods were in the holding cells. We awakened our gods and we left them there, because we never needed gods again. We did not have wicked gods so they understood. They lay in their corners, on their disintegrated floors, they lay on their wall of skin dust. They stood when we entered, happy to see us. Our guide said, this was the prison cell for the men, this was the prison cell for the women. I wanted to strangle the guide as if he were the original guide. It took all my will. Yet in the rooms the guide was irrelevant, the gods woke up and we felt pity for them, and affection and love; they felt happy for us, we were still alive. Yes, we are still alive we said. And we had returned to thank them. You are still alive, they said. Yes we are still alive. They looked at us like violet; like violet teas they drank us. We said here we are. They said, you are still alive. We said, yes, yes we are still alive. How lemon, they said, how blue like fortune. We took the bottle of rum from our veins, we washed their faces. We were pilgrims, they were gods. We sewed the rim of their skins with cotton. This is what we had. They said with wonder and admiration, you are still alive, like hydrogen, like oxygen.

We all stood there for some infinite time. We did weep, but that is nothing in comparison.

—Dionne Brand, *Verso* 55

If, as I have so far suggested, we think the metaphor of the wake in the entirety of its meanings (the keeping watch with the dead, the path of a ship, a consequence of something, in the line of flight and/or sight,

1           awakening, and consciousness) and we join the wake with work in  
 2           order that we might make the wake and *wake work* our analytic, we  
 3           might continue to imagine new ways to live in the wake of slavery, in  
 4           slavery's afterlives, to survive (and more) the afterlife of property. In  
 5           short, I mean wake work to be a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this  
 6           episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives. With that ana-  
 7           lytic we might imagine otherwise from what we know *now* in the wake  
 8           of slavery.

9           Dionne Brand does this wake work as she imagines otherwise in  
 10          *Verso 55*, a verso in which she not only revisits *A Map to the Door of*  
 11          *No Return's* imagining of diaspora consciousness's relation to that door  
 12          as mythic and real location but also imagines an encounter between  
 13          the returned from diaspora and those who were held in the cells of  
 14          the forts.<sup>25</sup> She imagines those who were held, reconfiguring—coming  
 15          back together in wonder—the traces of their former selves rising up in  
 16          greeting. Here the ancestors are like Marie Ursule, who, in *At the Full*  
 17          *and Change of the Moon*, reanimates those Ursuline nuns who were her  
 18          enslavers for the purpose of looking after her daughter Bola whom she  
 19          dreams into a, into the, future. In *Verso 55*, Brand imagines that with the  
 20          entrance of the pilgrims those who were held reconstitute from where  
 21          they “lay in their corners, on their disintegrated floors, they lay on their  
 22          wall of skin dust,” and stand to greet them; the ancestors, the only gods  
 23          we had, their traces so much dust and haunt in those holding rooms.  
 24          With these words Brand produces into the wake *other than* the “pro-  
 25          duction of nothing—empty rooms, and silence, and lives reduced to  
 26          waste”; she imagines other uses for “the scraps of the archive” (Hart-  
 27          man 2008, 4).<sup>26</sup> Brand, like Hartman, encounters these rooms, this pain  
 28          of and in the archive, but those rooms are not empty, and though the  
 29          scraps of cotton, new world slave crop, may in fact be insufficient to our  
 30          needs and to theirs, they are what we have to offer. And those dwell-  
 31          ers of the rooms who had no thoughts of visitors, could not know, but  
 32          might imagine, that anything, any part, of them would survive the hold-  
 33          ing, the shipping, the water, and the weather, drink those visitors in like  
 34          violet tea and lemon air. *Verso 55* is filled with the knowledge that this  
 35          holding, these deaths, that shipping ought never to have happened, and  
 36          with that knowledge and “the scraps of the archive” Brand imagines  
 37          something that feels completely new. The rooms are not empty and the  
 38          scraps are what we have to offer.

But even if those Africans who were in the holds, who left something of their prior selves in those rooms as a trace to be discovered, and who passed through the doors of no return did not survive the holding and the sea, they, like us, are alive in hydrogen, in oxygen; in carbon, in phosphorous, and iron; in sodium and chlorine. This is what we know about those Africans thrown, jumped, dumped overboard in Middle Passage; they are with us still, in the time of the wake, known as residence time.

*They said with wonder and admiration, you are still alive, like hydrogen, like oxygen.* (Brand 2015)

Brand does this in *A Map to the Door of No Return* as well, particularly with her “Ruttier for the Marooned in Diaspora,” which bristles with her refusal to think return, her dislodging of belonging, and her *hard insisting* on the facts of displacement and the living in and as the displaced of diaspora. NourbeSe Philip does this in *Zong!* through her destruction of the archive in order to tell “the story that cannot be told” but must still be told (Saunders 2008a, 65). We must be (and we already are) about the work of what I am calling wake work as a theory and praxis of the wake; a theory and a praxis of Black being in diaspora.

I am trying to find the language for this work, find the form for this work. Language and form fracture more every day. I am trying, too, to find the words that will articulate care and the words to think what Keguro Macharia (2015) calls those “we formations.” I am trying to think how to perform the labor of them. Or what Tinsley (2008, 191) calls a “feeling and a feeling for” and what Glissant ([1995] 2006, 9) refers to as “knowing ourselves as part and as crowd.” This is what I am calling wake work. With Brand and Philip, I want to sound this language anew, sound a new language. Thinking, still, with Brand and Philip, who demand, always, a new thinking, I want to distinguish what I am calling Black being in the wake and wake work from the work of melancholia and mourning.<sup>27</sup> And though wake work is, at least in part, attentive to mourning and the mourning work that takes place on local and trans\*local and global levels, and even as we know that mourning an event might be interminable, how does one mourn the interminable event? Just as wake work troubles mourning, so too do the wake and wake work trouble the ways most museums and memorials take

1 up trauma and memory. That is, if museums and memorials materi-  
 2 alize a kind of reparation (repair) and enact their own pedagogies as  
 3 they position visitors to have a particular experience or set of experi-  
 4 ences about an event that is seen to be past, how does one memorialize  
 5 chattel slavery and its afterlives, which are unfolding still? How do we  
 6 memorialize an event that is still ongoing? Might we instead under-  
 7 stand the absence of a National Slavery Museum in the United States as  
 8 recognition of the ongoingness of the conditions of capture? Because  
 9 how does one memorialize the everyday? How does one, in the words  
 10 so often used by such institutions, “come to terms with” (which usually  
 11 means move past) ongoing and quotidian atrocity? Put another way,  
 12 I’m interested in ways of seeing and imagining responses to terror in  
 13 the varied and various ways that our Black lives are lived under occupa-  
 14 tion; ways that attest to the modalities of Black life lived in, as, under,  
 15 and despite Black death. And I want to think about what this imagining  
 16 calls forth, to think through what it calls on “us” to do, think, feel in the  
 17 wake of slavery—which is to say in an ongoing present of subjection  
 18 and resistance; which is to say wake work, wake theory. I want, too, to  
 19 distinguish what I am calling and calling for as care from state-imposed  
 20 regimes of surveillance.<sup>28</sup> How can we think (and rethink and rethink)  
 21 care laterally, in the register of the intramural, in a different relation  
 22 than that of the violence of the state? In what ways do we remember the  
 23 dead, those lost in the Middle Passage, those who arrived reluctantly,  
 24 and those still arriving? To quote Gaston Bachelard, whom I arrived at  
 25 through Elizabeth DeLoughrey’s “Heavy Waters,” “water is an element  
 26 ‘which remembers the dead’” (DeLoughrey 2010, 704).

27 What, then, are the ongoing coordinates and effects of the wake, and  
 28 what does it mean to *inhabit* that Fanonian “zone of non-Being” within  
 29 and after slavery’s denial of Black humanity?<sup>29</sup> Inhabiting here is the  
 30 state of being inhabited/occupied and also being or dwelling in. In acti-  
 31 vating the multiple registers of “wake,” I have turned to images, poetry,  
 32 and literature that take up the wake as a way toward understanding how  
 33 slavery’s continued unfolding is constitutive of the contemporary con-  
 34 ditions of spatial, legal, psychic, and material dimensions of Black non/  
 35 being as well as Black aesthetic and other modes of deformation and  
 36 interruption. That set of work by Black artists, poets, writers, and think-  
 37 ers is positioned against a set of quotidian catastrophic events and their  
 38 reporting that together comprise what I am calling the orthography of

the wake. The latter is a dysgraphia of disaster, and these disasters arrive by way of the rapid, deliberate, repetitive, and wide circulation on television and social media of Black social, material, and psychic death. This orthography makes domination in/visible and not/visceral. This orthography is an instance of what I am calling the Weather; it registers and produces the conventions of antiblackness in the present and into the future.

A reprise and an elaboration: Wakes are processes; through them we think about the dead and about our relations to them; they are rituals through which to enact grief and memory. Wakes allow those among the living to mourn the passing of the dead through ritual; they are the watching of relatives and friends beside the body of the deceased from death to burial and the accompanying drinking, feasting, and other observances, a watching practiced as a religious observance. But wakes are also “the track left on the water’s surface by a ship; the disturbance caused by a body swimming, or one that is moved, in water; the air currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow; in the line of sight of (an observed object); and (something) in the line of recoil of (a gun)”;

finally, wake means being awake and, also, consciousness.

In the wake, the semiotics of the slave ship continue: from the forced movements of the enslaved to the forced movements of the migrant and the refugee, to the regulation of Black people in North American streets and neighborhoods, to those ongoing crossings of and drownings in the Mediterranean Sea, to the brutal colonial reimaginings of the slave ship and the ark; to the reappearances of the slave ship in everyday life in the form of the prison, the camp, and the school.

As we go about wake work, we must think through containment, regulation, punishment, capture, and captivity and the ways the manifold representations of blackness become the symbol, par excellence, for the less-than-human being condemned to death. We must think about Black flesh, Black optics, and ways of producing en fleshed work; think the ways the hold cannot and does not hold even as the hold remains in the form of the semiotics of the slave ship hold, the prison, the womb, and elsewhere in and as the tension between being and instrumentality that is Black being in the wake. At stake is not recognizing antiblackness as total climate. At stake, too, is not recognizing an insistent Black visualsonic resistance to that imposition of non/being. How might we stay in the wake with and as those whom the state positions

1 to die ungrivable deaths and live lives meant to be unlivable? These  
2 are questions of temporality, the *longue durée*, the residence and hold  
3 time of the wake. At stake, then is to stay in this wake time toward in-  
4 habiting a blackened consciousness that would rupture the structural  
5 silences produced and facilitated by, and that produce and facilitate,  
6 Black social and physical death.

7 For, if we are lucky, we live in the knowledge that the wake has posi-  
8 tioned us as no-citizen.<sup>30</sup> If we are lucky, the knowledge of this posi-  
9 tioning avails us particular ways of re/seeing, re/inhabiting, and re/  
10 imagining the world. And we might use these ways of being in the wake  
11 in our responses to terror and the varied and various ways that our  
12 Black lives are lived under occupation. I want *In the Wake* to declare  
13 that we are Black peoples in the wake with no state or nation to protect  
14 us, with no citizenship bound to be respected, and to position us in the  
15 modalities of Black life lived in, as, under, despite Black death: to think  
16 and be and act from there. It is my particular hope that the praxis of  
17 the wake and wake work, the theory and performance of the wake and  
18 wake work, as modes of attending to Black life and Black suffering, are  
19 imagined and performed here with enough specificity to attend to the  
20 direness of the multiple and overlapping presents that we face; it is also  
21 my hope that the praxis of the wake and wake work might have enough  
22 capaciousness to travel and do work that I have not here been able to  
23 imagine or anticipate.





1.1 The author (age ten) and her nephew Jason Phillip Sharpe (age approximately one month). 1.2 Stephen Wheatley Sharpe (age eighteen). 1.3 Ida Wright Sharpe (my mother), Van Buren Sharpe Jr. (my father), IdaMarie Sharpe (my sister), Van Buren Sharpe III (my brother), and Stephen Wheatley Sharpe (infant; my brother) in 1954. Everyone in this photograph is now dead.



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**1.4** The wake of a cruise ship on the open ocean. Photo taken on March 10, 2011.  
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