

## Haunting Darkness: A Theological-Philosophical Reflection on “In the Wake”

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(Published 2017)

### *Introduction*

On August 9, 2014, a young Black man, Michael Brown, was murdered by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri (the name of the officer in question is easily found, but does not deserve mention here). In some respects, we, the citizens of the United States, are still dealing with the memory of this unjust death, a remnant of a not-so-distant past, now rearing its ugly head through the barrel of a firearm pointed at Black bodies across the United States of America. The imagery haunts, even as it bespeaks the question long left unanswered.

We must dare to ask and answer the question which pricks at our conscience—seared and hardened as it may be—alongside the memory of Michael Brown and countless others, all unjustly executed at the hands of the state. The question of which I speak is the same question hidden within the name of the organization dedicated to fighting for the dignity and liberation of black lives—BlackLivesMatter. *What must be done to make black lives matter?* The answer is, apparently, given recent events, one we are neither ready nor willing to hear. Regardless, we *must* answer the question.

This essay will attempt to craft an answer, blending Christian theology and philosophical reflection, in tandem with Christina Sharpe’s book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016). I will build the argument for the inherent dignity of black lives by first discussing the religious concept of *imago Dei* and the concept of intersubjective difference, then transitioning to a philosophical treatise on alterity and difference as it relates to the question of race and the evil of white supremacy. Finally, I will coalesce these strands into an explicit defense of Black life as that which haunts our collective consciousness and disrupts the subjugating totality of whiteness, illuminating a path toward the emancipation of all marginalized people.

### *Imago Dei — Black God and Light Supremacism*

In the sacred texts common to the Jewish and Christian traditions, reference is given to humankind being "made" in the "image" of God; fashioned, as it were, within the imagery or conception of God (God’s image, or the image in God’s mind?). The majority of biblical interpretation has affirmed, in a generic sense, the common human nature as uniquely expressing something God-given. However, in actual practice, this notion of human nature as intrinsically good, in light of its divine imprint, has often misconstrued or ignored the text to justify systemic evil, namely, the subjection of difference under the totality of whiteness; colorful lives—Black or otherwise—are "blotted out." We must first ask whether the text is being read in such a fashion as to exclude the intersubjective, which is necessary for the disruption of totalizing subjugation inherent to whiteness.

What does it mean when the text, ostensibly speaking on God's behalf, says "let *us* make ~~humankind~~ in *our* image" (Gen. 1:26-27)? Before seeking to ascertain the meaning, a textual absence must be exposed in order to discern the root problem at work. *No mention is made regarding the ethnicity of Adam or Eve.* On the surface, the text suggests that Adam and Eve were prototypically human, representing human nature generically in its primordial simplicity and purity. The first couple are human—yet without difference? However, we know that humankind comes in all shapes, colors, sizes, genders, and orientations. Were Adam and Eve spared from the burden of such complexity? What would it

be like to be human, yet *not* like those following them? What ontological difference, or lack thereof, would Adam and Eve have experienced? I therefore suggest that the text has been read to ignore the problem of difference, that is to say, we are (silently) encouraged to ignore the question of whether Adam and Eve participated in the same experience of complexity and difference as we do ourselves. The mythical conception of the original human couple participating in human nature, yet spared from the weight of difference, suggests a textual attempt to ignore the reality of human difference—whatever sort that might be—as God-given, and therefore good. If tension can be made between the ostensibly simple and pure Adam and Eve, and the rest of us who struggle with the burden of categorical difference, the door is opened textually and practically for the subjugation of difference in pursuit of nostalgic social purity.

Moreover, the lack (or omission) of text regarding Adam and Eve's nature, other than being prototypically human, carries with it a resistance to the reality of ethnic difference. What if centuries of artwork depicting Adam and Eve as white or "non-racial" were altered to reflect the first couple as Black? Is the *imago Dei* absent from Black bodies? Is the color black lacking something ostensibly good? That the common conception, even subconsciously, of Adam and Eve as prototypically human, and therefore white or "non-racial", is further evidence that the text has been read to subjugate difference. The text in its omissions "whites-out" the possibility of intersubjective difference. Insofar as the biblical text is concerned, Adam and Eve could easily be Black—the lack of textual description should not force us to limit the scope of human difference in the quest for nostalgic purity, but embrace difference as intrinsic to human nature and therefore, as God says in the biblical account, consider it "very good."

*To summarize, briefly, the biblical text makes no mention of Adam and Eve carrying within themselves an experience of ethnic difference, as but one example of intersubjective difference. Yet this textual absence should not lead us to presume that Adam and Eve were "white," or "non-racial," but instead representing in and of themselves the very capacity for the intersubjective difference.*

We must now, briefly, consider Catherine Keller's treatment of the "dark" in *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (Routledge, 2003). Although this particular book is far more concerned with a theological treatment of creation and textual criticism than anything specifically related to questions of race or political action, Keller's insistence upon intersubjective difference within the biblical account of creation assists our present discussion. She contends that the contrast between "light" and "dark" is more than a question of varying levels of material luminosity, but the very distinction and contrast carries within itself a *rejection of the dark as inherently negative, or evil*. As such, she makes a connection between biblical interpretation of the dark as negative and the evolution of the word "denigration." Keller writes:

Civilization as we know it perpetuates this wound [systemic ignorance of racism]. We may call the wound: "the denigration of the dark." The word "denigration" tells a three-stage story: first it means simply a chemical "process of making or becoming black." Then by the 1800's, according to the *OED*, it takes on the figurative meaning: "blackening of character; defamation;" or "a stain, a black spot." But with a hyphen, *de-nigration* meant the opposite: "unblackening, whitewashing." So a theological denigration of the dark moves a natural association of darkness with Blackness to the defamation of Blackness as fault, inferiority, stain. But even when Christian cultures recognize racism as sin, they have been quick to whitewash themselves: they go suddenly colorblind, claiming there is after all no difference. Race is just skin-deep, we are all one before God, in Christ, in the light. Light supremacism

pierces even the sanctuaries of the subaltern. I have worshipped with a Black church singing “Wash us in the blood of the lamb, wash us white as snow.” Thus those who can never unblacken themselves, even if they try to distinguish their own dark surface from their “inner” light, remain poignantly “not quite/not white.” Never bright enough. (210)

This concept of “light supremacism” is helpful in understanding the way biblical texts have been read to either ignore or subject “darkness” as inherently negative. Darkness is only known by its difference from lightness, yet the gradient in luminosity carries with it metaphysical categories as well. The text is read to associate the “light” with the Spirit of God, and “darkness” with chaos (“the Spirit hovered over the face of the deep...formless and void...”), and chaos is typically understood as inherently negative, void, in need of something “other-than.” In and of itself, darkness, that preexistent chaos and void, is *not* good, or so we often assume. Throughout history, as Keller, argues, this textual interpretation of creation manifested itself within language designed to propagate the subjection of that which was not light—dark humans, beings of chaos, as it were—in favor of the superior gradient, lightness in itself; the white human is good, and the black human is not. Light supremacism always outshines its competition, sometimes to horrific lengths.

Therefore, if Adam and Eve—prototypical humans, representatives of innate human difference (or complexity)—signify this radical conception of human difference as God-given *in the beginning*, what does this say to our conception of God? When God says to the surrounding audience “Let *us* make ~~hu~~mankind in *our* image”, does this not suggest a potential for radical difference and complexity within Godself? If the image of God reflects the difference and complexity seen in human beings, then God must also be freed from the textual pull toward nostalgic purity; metaphysical, divine purity and simplicity, in this case. Godself is black; the *imago Dei* reflects Blackness. And it is very good. Light supremacism has no place within the Christian tradition, let alone human society. When our black brothers and sisters read the same text, they must read their divinely-given human nature as reflective of something divine. The question therefore, in actuality, is not whether Adam and Eve were white, black, or anything else in between, but whether Godself carries the capacity and actualization of intersubjective difference that we see and encounter within worldly experience. Godself, in its capacity for intersubjective difference, reframes the concept of *imago Dei* as difference-in-itself. The answer to light supremacism is the reality of difference as inherent to Godself, and therefore inherent to humankind. And it is very good.

#### *Non/Being and Black Being — Subverting the Wake*

In Christina Sharpe’s most recent work, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016), the question of alterity, black identity, and the reoccurrence of racist violence is dissected within the framework of the “wake.” Sharpe contends that “the means and modes of Black subjection may have changed, but the fact and structure of that subjection remain” (12). As such, she utilizes “wake work” to describe the “understanding [of] how slavery’s violences emerge within the contemporary conditions of spatial, legal, psychic, material, and other dimensions of Black non/being as well as in Black modes of resistance” (14). To *be* Black is to be *in the wake*—in the wake of slavery’s violences, just as Black bodies were once left in the wake of the Middle Passage, deprived of their humanity, and denied a proper wake in light of their “non/being.” The phrase “in the wake” is both a rhetorical and analytic tool to expose the continual effects of Black subjection within American society. As such, it reinforces two unquestionable realities: to be Black is to inhabit a fashioned space of non/being under the gaze of whiteness, and to be Black is a methodology and activism of resistance, forcing whiteness to account for its subjection of the Other, its subjection of

intersubjective difference. In the de/facing of Blackness, whiteness perpetuates the wake. “How do we memorialize an event that is still ongoing...What, then, are the ongoing coordinates and effects of the wake, and what does it mean to *inhabit* that Fanonian ‘zone of non-Being’ within and after slavery’s denial of Black humanity?” (20).

The scope of Sharpe’s argument is vast; within the text she utilizes film, photography, poetry, history, and literary criticism to reveal the wake as a haunting force, a question whispered within the cracks of society, yet most importantly, a space for Black “inhabitation” and resistance. That which is Black is that which exposes the subjecting totality of whiteness as inherently resistant to intersubjective difference. In the wake, there is insistence.

For the purposes of this short essay, I will focus on one particular element of *In the Wake*, namely the concept that with/in the wake, Black being disrupts the zone of non/being. Yet, to what end? Toward what or toward whom is Black being disrupting, asserting itself with/in the wake? Sharpe makes it clear that to be in the wake for Black being is to be resistant toward that which creates and perpetuates the wake. The wake engenders a space of non-being wherein Black bodies are submerged, forgotten, or distressed, and it is in this space that Black being defies the zone of non-Being, creating a contrasting identity in opposition to that which creates and perpetuates the wake. Black being, Blackness, Black bodies...these are the forces which radically disrupt the totality of whiteness as a subjecting force, that which creates and perpetuates the wake. Inhabitation is insistence, and insistence is resistance. As Sharpe succinctly writes, “The question for theory is how to live in the wake of slavery, in slavery’s afterlives, the afterlife of property, how, in short, to inhabit and rupture this episteme with their, with our, knowable lives.” (50).

Black being, Blackness, Black bodies are “knowable lives,” actually-existing human beings who counter the totalizing subjection of whiteness. The black body was and is, through no fault of its own, fashioned in the gaze of white being, whiteness, and white bodies to be simultaneously “other-than,” yet “not-human.” As I suggested earlier, the religious concept of *imago Dei* is ignored for the sake of maintaining a false notion of nostalgic purity. For the wake of systemic racism brings Black bodies to the surface, reminding us ever again of Black being as that perpetual zone of non/being in the service of white subjection; a time when law and order reigned, morality was pure and simple, and people knew their place within society.

As Sharpe contends repeatedly throughout the text, Black bodies/Black beings are still in the wake. What then must we do? First and foremost, black folk must recognize that the zone of non/being they inhabit as a result of systemic subjugation is the very space in which a newfound sense of Black being can be formulated. Black being is therefore a *response* toward the artificially-fashioned zone of in/existence. Perhaps, one might say that Black being is a manifestation of *imago Dei* which counters the false idol of whiteness. Just as Godself is black, carrying within itself the capacity for intersubjective difference, so too are Black being, Blackness, and Black bodies the very catalyst for a radical formulation of human difference that embraces the wake even as it subverts its flow.

Just as Keller demonstrated a “light supremacism” within common readings of biblical texts and subsequent socio-political movements, so too does Sharpe detail the manifestations of the wake within society. The wake and light supremacism are eruptions of the same systemic evil: the rejection of difference in the (false) interests of order. Order, in this case, just as the prioritization of one particular difference over another (e.g. whiteness versus Blackness), is evil because in the act of prioritizing one difference, difference-in-itself is eliminated. Those who do not fit within the totality

of whiteness are therefore subsumed within the subsequent blotting-out, becoming invisible to the ostensibly superior category of persons. Likewise, Sharpe's contention that Black being is therefore a radical subversion of the wake to create a newfound understanding of being-itself, or difference-in-itself, is essential if we are to have any hope of dismantling the totalizing subjection of whiteness.

*A Brief Summary — Questions for the Reader*

Thus far, we have discussed the religious concept of *imago Dei*, detailing how the very idea should be understood as the liberation of Godself as difference-in-itself, thereby releasing humankind from the temptation to prioritize or prefer one sort of difference over another. In other words, the biblical texts can no longer be read through what Keller describes as "light supremacism", an idol of light versus the darkness. If Black bodies, Blackness, and Black being are to be liberated from the totalizing subjection of whiteness, then the concept of *imago Dei* is helpful because it reminds us that the reality of intersubjective difference in human nature is reflective of the same intersubjective difference within Godself. Godself is black, filled with gradients of darkness and difference, and it is very good.

Moreover, we also discussed the concept of the "wake" within Christina Sharpe's work on the subject. Slavery's ongoing effects upon Black bodies, Blackness, and Black being remind us of the perpetual flow of the wake, whether this be of the ship transporting Black folk in the Middle Passage, or the wake of a Black being unjustly executed at the hands of the state. The wake, just as light supremacism, is a manifestation of white propensity to reject difference-in-itself. It is evil. Difference, however—seen with/in Black bodies, Blackness, and Black being—is very good.

The practical ramifications of these counters to the subjugation of Black bodies, Blackness, and Black being remains to be fully realized. Certainly, both Sharpe and Keller represent two unique perspectives on this question, and their work is vital to dismantling the hierarchies of oppression ingrained within American society. To their work, I would add and specifically recommend that of James Cone, Cedric Robinson, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, and Robert C. Smith, among others. However, the question at the beginning of this essay—what must be done to make Black lives matter?—must involve the two questions detailed in the preceding paragraphs. First, in religious contexts, how are biblical texts read in order to substantiate the very order and blotting-out of difference that leads to the subjection of actually-existing human beings? Second, how do the ongoing effects of systemic racism affect Black lives today, and what ways can Black beings subvert the wake, as it were, turning the zone of non-Being into a radical space for being as difference-in-itself? I leave these two questions largely unanswered, only because I wish for the reader to investigate and decide for themselves how the quest for Black liberation is to be achieved, and achieved it *must* be. However, as a white man, burdened to see Black being become that which is necessary for the complete subversion and dismantling of white supremacy, my own answers to these questions seem inherently self-serving. I am therefore content to ask the questions, and join those such as Catherine Keller and Christina Sharpe in their respective academic activism, yet leave the answers to those most interested in the quest for liberation.

Black bodies, Blackness, and Black being are subsumed under light supremacism, caught within the wake of slavery and its ongoing ramifications. Yet these very manifestations of intersubjective difference haunt our memories. What must be done to make Black lives matter? We must answer the question(s) if we are to ever see the liberation of marginalized people.