



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

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in *Toward the African Revolution*, “There is not occupation of territory, on the one hand, and independence of persons on the other. It is the country as a whole, its history, its daily pulsation that are contested, disfigured . . . under these conditions; the individual’s breathing is an observed breathing. It is a combat breathing.”

What is the word for keeping and putting breath back in the body? What is the word for how we must approach the archives of slavery (to “tell the story that cannot be told”) and the histories and presents of violent extraction *in* slavery *and* incarceration; the calamities and catastrophes that sometimes answer to the names of occupation, colonialism, imperialism, tourism, militarism, or humanitarian aid and intervention? What are the words and forms for the ways we must continue to think and imagine laterally, across a series of relations in the hold, in multiple Black everydays of the wake? The word that I arrived at for such imagining and for keeping and putting breath back in the Black body in hostile weather is *aspiration* (and aspiration is violent and life-saving). Two additional forms of wake work as a praxis for imagining, arrive in the registers of Black annotation and Black redaction.

### *Black Annotation, Black Redaction*

Annotate: To add notes to, furnish with notes (a literary work or author).

An annotation is metadata (e.g. a comment, explanation, presentational markup) attached to text, image, or other data. Often annotations refer to a specific part of the original data.

—OED Online

Redaction: a: The action of bringing or putting into a definite form; (now) *spec.* the working or drafting of source material into a distinct, esp. written, form. Usu. with *into*, (occas.) *to*.

b: The action or process of revising or editing text, esp. in preparation for publication; (also) an act of editorial revision.

Obs. The action of driving back; resistance, reaction.

—OED Online

I point to these practices of Black annotation and Black redaction as more examples of wake work. The orthographies of the wake require new modes of writing, new modes of making-sensible. Redaction comes to us most familiarly through those blacked-out “sensitive



4.1 Steve McQueen, *End Credits*, 2012. Sequence of digitally scanned files, sound, continuous projection. Installation at the Art Institute, Chicago, 2013. Courtesy of the artist; Marian Goodman Gallery and Thomas Dane Gallery, London

lines” in certain government documents that contain information we are not allowed to read. Steve McQueen’s film *End Credits* (2012) consists of six hours of images and voiceover of the redacted FBI files of Paul Robeson. As I watched and listened, it again became clear to me that so much of Black intramural life and social and political work is redacted, made invisible to the present and future, subtended by plantation logics, detached optics, and brutal architectures.

There is, in the Black diaspora (and I include the Continent here because of colonial histories and presents and trans\*migration) a long history of Black life, of Black lives being annotated and redacted. There is, as well, continuous resistance to and disruption of those violent annotations and redactions. A 2015 conference on Black portraiture has the subtitle *Imaging the Body and Re-Staging Histories*. Each time I read that word *imaging* I read it doubly. That is, I read the word as *imaging*, “to make a representation of the external form of,” and also as *imagining*, “to form a mental image or concept of; to suppose or assume; the ability to form mental images of things that either are not physi-

cally present or have never been conceived or created by others.”<sup>12</sup> If we understand portraiture to be both the “art of creating portraits” (image and text) and “graphic and detailed description,” how might we understand a variety of forms of contemporary Black public image-making in and as refusals to accede to the optics, the disciplines, and the deathly demands of the antiblack worlds in which we live, work, and struggle to make visible (to ourselves, if not to others) all kinds of Black pasts, presents, and possible futures? Much of the work of Black imaging and the work that those images do out in the world has been about such imaginings of the fullness of Black life. In *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture*, Richard Powell (2008, xv) writes that “a significant segment of black portraiture stands apart from the rest of the genre, and not only because of the historical and social realities of racism. Rather, the difference often lies in the artistic contract between the portrayer and portrayed; conscious or unconscious negotiations that invest black subjects with social capital.” While Powell speaks here of Black artists and subjects’ negotiated and reciprocal imaginings, I want to think about those portraits outside of our own imaging and imagining in which, to borrow from Huey Copeland (2013), we seem “bound to appear.” There is a long history and present of resistance to, disruption and refashioning of images of blackness and Black people. There is a long history and present of imaging and imagining blackness and Black selves otherwise, in excess of the containment of the long and brutal history of the violent annotations of Black being: what Spillers, for example, called the hieroglyphics of the flesh; a history that is “the crisis of referentiality, the fictions of personhood, and the gap or incommensurability between the proper name and the form of existence that it signifies” (Hartman 2014). I am thinking here, ushering here, into the gap, Black annotation together with Black redaction, not as opposites, but as trans\*verse *and* coextensive ways to imagine otherwise.

Put another way, I want to think annotation in relation to the dysgraphia and the orthography of the wake; in relation to those photographs of Black people in distress that appear so regularly in our lives, whether the image of that suffering Black person comes from quotidian or extraordinary disasters, the photos of them often hit in the register of abandonment. The photographs do this even, or even especially, when they purport to “humanize” Black people—that is, they purport

to make *manifest* “humanity” that we already know to be present.<sup>13</sup> To be clear, just as I am not interested in rescuing the term *girl* (see “The Ship”), I am not interested in rescuing Black being(s) for the category of the “Human,” misunderstood as “Man,” or for the languages of development. Both of those languages and the material conditions that they re/produce continue to produce our fast and slow deaths. I am interested in ways of seeing and imagining responses to the terror visited on Black life and the ways we inhabit it, are inhabited by it, and refuse it. I am interested in the ways we live in and despite that terror. By considering that relationship between imaging and imagining in the registers of Black annotation and Black redaction, I want to think about what these images call forth. And I want to think through what they call on us to do, think, feel in the wake of slavery—which is to say, in an ongoing present of subjection and resistance.

Annotation appears like that asterisk, which is itself an annotation mark, that marks the trans\*formation into ontological blackness. As photographs of Black people circulate as portraits in a variety of publics, they are often accompanied by some sort of note or other metadata, whether that notation is in the photograph itself or as a response to a dehumanizing photograph, in order that the image might travel with supplemental information that marks injury and, then, more than injury. We know that, as far as images of Black people are concerned, in their circulation they often don’t, in fact, do the imaging work that we expect of them. There are too many examples of this to name: from the videotaped beating of Rodney King in 1991, to the murder of Oscar Grant, to the brutal murders of twenty-one trans women in the United States as of November 2015, to all of the circulating images of and in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, to the ongoing deaths in transatlantic, trans-Mediterranean, and trans-continental crossings extending across the Black global diaspora. This is true even though and when we find images of Black suffering in various publics framed in and as calls to action or calls to feel with and for. Most often these images function as a hail to the non Black person in the Althusserian sense. That is, these images work to confirm the status, location, and already held opinions within dominant ideology about those exhibitions of spectacular Black bodies whose meanings then remain unchanged. We have been reminded by Hartman and many others that the repetition of the visual, discursive, state, and other quo-

tidian and extraordinary cruel and unusual violences enacted on Black people does not lead to a cessation of violence, nor does it, across or within communities, lead primarily to sympathy or something like empathy. Such repetitions often work to solidify and make continuous the colonial project of violence. With that knowledge in mind, what kinds of ethical viewing and reading practices must we employ, *now*, in the face of these onslaughts? What might practices of Black annotation and Black redaction offer?

What follows are three examples of what I am calling Black visual/textual annotation and redaction. Redaction and annotation toward seeing and reading otherwise; toward reading and seeing something in excess of what is caught in the frame; toward seeing something beyond a visibility that is, as Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011) argues, subtended by the logics of the administered plantation. In “Home,” Toni Morrison (1998, 7) writes that she has consistently tried “to carve away the accretions of deceit, blindness, ignorance, paralysis, and sheer malevolence embedded in raced language so that other kinds of perception were not only available but were inevitable.” I am imagining that the work of Black annotation and Black redaction is to enact the movement to that inevitable—a counter to abandonment, another effort to try to look, to try to really see.<sup>14</sup>

I return, again, to the photograph of the little girl with the word *Ship* affixed to her forehead (figure 2.5). This little girl was at the beginning of this work, and she occupies its center. Shortly after that catastrophic earthquake hit Haiti on January 12, 2010, I entered the archive of photographs that had emerged from it. It wasn’t the first time I had cautiously entered this archive, but on this occasion I was stopped by that photograph of a young Black girl, ten years old at most. A third of the image is blurry. But on the right-hand side one can still make out grass and dirt, something black that she is lying on, and, in the background, other things (a figure? a bundle of clothing? a cigarette? something else?).

The girl’s face is clear; it’s what’s in focus. She is alive. Her eyes are open. She is lying on what looks like a black stretcher; her head is on a cold pack, and you can make out that there is writing on that cold pack and some of the words, like *instructions for use and disposal*. You can also read the words *roll up* and *dispose* and *registered trademark*. There’s some debris on the stretcher. There are two uncovered wounds over the girl’s right eye and another smaller one under it. A piece of paper

is stuck to her bottom lip. She is wearing what seems to be a print cotton hospital gown. She is looking straight ahead of her, or directly at, or past, the photographer's camera. She looks to be in shock. Her big black eyes, with their lush eyelashes, look glazed. Her look reaches out to me. Affixed to her forehead is that piece of transparent tape with the word *Ship* written on it. What is the look in her eyes? What do I do with it? The first annotation was that word *Ship*. What can one see beyond that word that threatens to block out everything else?

When I stumbled upon that image of this girl child with the word *Ship* taped to her forehead, it was the look in her eyes that stopped me. Then with its coming into focus that word *Ship* threatened to obliterate everything and anything else I could see. What was it doing there, I wondered? But I returned again and again to that photo and to her face to ask myself about the look in her eyes. What was I being called to by and with her look at me and mine at her? Over the course of the years since I first found that image of this girl, I returned to it repeatedly to try to account for what I saw or thought I might see. Where is she looking? Who and what is she looking at or looking for? Who can look back? Does she know that there is a piece of tape on her forehead? Does she know what that piece of tape says? She must be afraid. Does she know that she is already linked to a ship and that she is destined for yet another one? Her eyes look back at me, like Delia's eyes, like Drana's.<sup>15</sup>

In a move that is counter to the way photographic redaction usually works—where the eyes are covered and the rest of the face remains visible—here I include only Delia's and Drana's eyes. I performed my own redaction of Agassiz's ethnographic images in order to focus in on their eyes. I redact the images to focus their individual and collective looks out and past the white people who claimed power over them and the instrument by which they are being further subjected in ways they could never have imagined or anticipated. I want to see *their* looks out and past and across time. Delia and Drana. In my look at them, I register in their eyes an "I" and a "we" that is and are holding something in, holding on, and held, still. Delia and Drana sitting there (still) and then standing there (still), and clothed and unclothed (still) and protected only by eyelashes (still).<sup>16</sup> I am reminded here, of the anagrammatical life of the word *still* for the enslaved and for all Black people in slavery's wake. Over the course of a paragraph in *Beloved* Morrison elaborates what *still* means for the heavily pregnant Sethe, who at this point in her



**4.2** Joseph T. Zealy, Delia, country born of African parents, daughter, Renty. Congo. Delia's eyes. Detail. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, PM# 35-5-1/053040 (digital file# 60742034 DETAIL)



**4.3** Joseph T. Zealy, Drana, country born, daughter of Jack, Guinea, plantation of B. F. Taylor Esq. Drana's eyes. Detail. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, PM #35-5-1/053041 (digital file# 60742035 DETAIL)

pregnancy “was walking on two feet meant for standing still . . . still, near a kettle; still at the churn; still, at the tub and ironing board” (Morrison 1987, 29–30). I am reminded here of *still* as it repeats in Brand’s *Verso* 55 (2015), marked as it is there, with wonder at our survival and the residence time of the wake: “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.” Delia and Drana, marked, still, because of the daguerreotype’s long exposure time, which required that one hold still for long periods of time, and because they were of the ship yet not immediately off the ship like their fathers identified as Renty (Congo) and Jack (Guinea). The little girl who survives the 2010 Haitian earthquake is also a descendant of the ship and she is marked still, and once again, for its hold. I looked again at that photo and I marked her youth, the diagonal scar that cuts across the bridge of her nose and into her eyebrow, those extravagant eyelashes that curl back to the lid, the uncovered wounds, that bit of paper on her lip, and a leaf on the gown and in her hair. “*standing here in eyelashes, in/. . ./the brittle gnawed life we live,/I am held, and held.*”

I marked the violence of the quake that deposited that little girl there, injured, in this archive, and the violence in the name of care of the placement of that taped word on her forehead, and then I kept looking because that could not be all there was to see or say. *I had to take care.* (A different kind of care and a different optic than the ones employed in the wake of the *Zorgue*, that ship called Care.) I was looking for more than the violence of the slave ship, the migrant and refugee ship, the container ship, and the medical ship. I saw that leaf in her hair, and with it I performed my own annotation that might open this image out into a life, however precarious, that was always there.<sup>17</sup> *That leaf is stuck in her still neat braids.* And I think: *Somebody braided her hair before that earthquake hit.*

### *The Little Girl Who Wrote “Hi”*

She comes to us from the front pages of the *New York Times*, a December 10, 2014, article titled “Schools’ Discipline for Girls Differs by Race and Hue” and with the caption “Mikia Hutchings, 12, whose writing on

- hierarchical-system-aboard-italys-migrant-boats-that-governs-who-lives-and-who-dies-10193130.html.
- 5 “Los Angeles Police Reconsider Using Choke Hold,” *New York Times*, September 2, 1991, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/09/03/us/los-angeles-police-reconsider-using-choke-hold.html>.
  - 6 “Los Angeles Police Reconsider Using Choke Hold,” *New York Times*, September 3, 1991, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/09/03/us/los-angeles-police-reconsider-using-choke-hold.html>.
  - 7 Caroline Bankoff, “The Chokehold Situation in NYC Is Not Good,” *New York Magazine*, September 28, 2014, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2014/09/chokehold-situation-in-nyc-is-not-good.html>. See also “A Mutated Rule: Lack of Enforcement in the Face of Persistent Chokehold Complaints in New York City (An Evaluation of Chokehold Allegations Against Members of the NYPD from January 2009 through June 2014),” New York City Civilian Complaint Review Board. October 7, 2014, [http://www.nyc.gov/html/ccrb/downloads/pdf/Chokehold%20Study\\_20141007.pdf](http://www.nyc.gov/html/ccrb/downloads/pdf/Chokehold%20Study_20141007.pdf).
  - 8 Susanna Capelouto, “Eric Garner: The Haunting Last Words of a Dying Man,” *CNN*, December 4, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/12/04/us/garner-last-words/>.
  - 9 Mary M. Chapman, “Theodore Wafer Sentenced to 17 Years in Michigan Shooting of Renisha McBride,” *New York Times*, September 4, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/04/us/theodore-wafer-sentenced-in-killing-of-renisha-mcbride.html>.
  - 10 Lizette Alvarez and Cara Buckley, “Zimmerman Is Acquitted in Trayvon Martin Killing,” *New York Times*, July 13, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/14/us/george-zimmerman-verdict-trayvon-martin.html>.
  - 11 “50 Migrants Die of Suffocation in the Hold,” *TVM*, August 26, 2015, <http://www.tvn.com/mt/en/news/50-migrants-die-of-suffocation-in-hold/>.
  - 12 S.v. “imaging,” *OED Online*.
  - 13 I am suspending, here, a conversation about the ethics of the photographer. Kimberly Juanita Brown tackles this subject exceptionally well in her powerful and difficult essay “Regarding the Pain of the Other” (2014).
  - 14 I have modified this framing and phrasing from Charlotte Delbo’s outraged response and charge, in *Auschwitz and After* (1995), to Christians and others who presume to “know.”
  - 15 Here, of course, I refer to the enslaved women captured by Zealy’s camera for Agassiz. Delia and Drana are the “country born” (meaning born in the United States and not in Guinea or Congo) daughters of Renty and Jack, two of the enslaved men who are also caught by and in Zealy’s photographic process. I say more about this in the section called “The Ship.”
  - 16 The seven daguerreotypes that were recovered in a drawer of the Peabody Museum at Harvard in the 1970s include images of the men sitting and standing, half naked and fully naked, front, side, rear. The images of the two women, the

daughters, Delia and Drana, are of them front, dress pulled down and tucked in, and standing side. No images of them naked front, side, rear have been recovered. There are, however, images of an enslaved woman from Brazil that Agassiz commissioned and she is shot, captured, held, completely naked, front, back, side. There is no reason to think that such images of Delia and Drana do not exist. There is nothing that would have protected them.

- 17 I try to find out more. I try to contact the photographer. Finally, I get in touch, again, with Getty Images. Through them I ask the photographer if he knows what happened to this little girl. I ask if there were other people there waiting for evacuation with the word *Ship* affixed to their foreheads. Getty Images contacts Joe Raedle and they relay my questions to him. This is the answer I receive: "The photo was taken near the ruins of the presidential palace. The U.S. military was using the area as a staging site to transfer injured people out to the USNS Comfort on January 21, 2010 in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Many other people were also being transported to the ship but I wouldn't know how many. I don't know where she is today, it's a long shot, but maybe if Christina contacts the PAO from the 82nd Airborne he may be able to help."
- 18 Tanzina Vega, "Schools' Discipline for Girls Differs by Race and Hue," *New York Times*, November 12, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/11/us/school-discipline-to-girls-differs-between-and-within-races.html>.
- 19 James Roberts, *The Narrative of James Roberts a Soldier under Gen. Washington in the Revolutionary War* (1858), *Documenting the American South*, posted 2001, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/roberts/roberts.html>.
- 20 John Hiscock, "Steve McQueen: 'This Film, for Me, Is about Love,'" *Telegraph*, March 3, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/10525932/Steve-McQueen-This-film-for-me-is-about-love.html>.
- 21 "Sissako says, "Zabou, the character she plays really exists: she lives in Gao and is a former dancer from *Crazy Horse* back in the 60s. She went crazy and started to dress like in the movie. She always has a cockerel on her shoulder and she speaks very good French. When the jihadists were in Gao, she was the only one who could walk around with her head uncovered, the only one who could sing, dance, smoke, and tell them they were 'assholes.' In other words, all that is forbidden is allowed when someone goes crazy. She is the embodiment of women who have borne the struggle; of those who have dared to resist." Watershed, *Conversations about Cinema: Impact of Conflict*, May 28, 2015, <http://www.conversationsaboutcinema.co.uk/ioc/timbuktu/671/a-film-is-a-conversation-interview-with-abderrahmane-sissako/>.
- 22 I am here referring, again, to Maurice Blanchot.
- 23 Oumar Bar, "When Senegalese Writer Fatou Diome Kicked European Union Butt," *Africa Is a Country*, April 2015, <http://africasacountry.com/2015/04/that-moment-when-senegalese-writer-fatou-diome-kicked-european-union-butt/>.
- 24 Biennale newspaper. The paper has no name. It was distributed in the German Pavilion at the 2015 Venice Biennale.