

Michelle D. Commander, *Afro-Atlantic Flight: Speculative Returns and the Black Fantastic*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. ISBN: 978-0-8223-6311-8 (cloth); ISBN: 978-0-8223-6323-1 (paper)

Examining and creating reimaginings of a “black sense of place”, Black geographies resituate Blackness in the ongoing struggles against white supremacy through what Katherine McKittrick (2011: 949) calls “alternative mapping practices”. In this vein, Michelle Commander’s *Afro-Atlantic Flight* explores the mapping of Black geographies in the post-civil rights era. Through geographic “speculative returns”, her research subjects attempt, borrowing from Paul Gilroy (1993), to recover their roots and re-forge new routes through the Afro-Atlantic. Commander “examine[s] how writers, tourists, urban planners and activists imagined the Africas to which African descendants might return, belong, and feel free through...a series of imaginings, including literary texts, films, and geographic sites, that envision return flights back to Africa” (p.3).

Chapter 1 develops two concepts, “Afro-speculation” and “flight”, through an exploration of both film and literature on Africa in the post-civil rights era. Commander writes about Afro-speculation, “[t]he folklore and myths that inform imaginaries about Africa are products of a complicated, transnational spectrum of longing...Afro-Atlantic speculative fictions are the result of collaborative processes whereby African cultural epistemologies are exchanged, imagined, and reconfigured” (p.5). Speculation, different from but not unrelated to Afro-futurism, provided and provides for the reclamation of agency and possibility. The importance of this argument is the understanding that these speculations need not be bound to ideas of “pragmatism” and reality: “Afro-speculation as a modality for living is conjectural and conditional; the evidentiary matters not” (p.6). A fundamental deviation from classic analyses of race in geography, speculation allows for the unchaining of Blackness from the epistemology of enslavement and opens it up to reimagination.

If Afro-speculation is the creation of new possibilities, “flight” is the vehicle through which to arrive at these futures. “Flight is transcendence over one’s reality—an escape predicated on imagination and the incessant longing to be free” (p.7). Through the speculative, individuals

take flight into alternative realities. Both physical and psychic, these flights allow for hurdling the constraints placed upon Black bodies through the creation of new geographies of belonging and return.

In Chapter 2, “The Production of Homeland Returns,” Commander analyzes Black Americans’ “flights” to Ghana. By interviewing American tourists she is able to show the multiple and conflicting experiences that returnees find when they arrive in the country seeking out spiritual returns to an Africa imagined through an ongoing nostalgia for an unknown home. The speculative functions to help the returners find meaning in the various place-based manifestations of slavery. The “triumphalist narrative” (p.80) of Ghana over its colonial past, writes Commander, is thriving, situated in a deep dialectical relationship with the geographic imaginaries already alive and well in the tourists’ minds. However, these experiences are complicated when expectations do not measure up and are exploited by enterprising Ghanaians. It is possible that *Afro-Atlantic Flight* could cause a measure of consternation among readers who adhere to a strict materialist view of race. Commander’s emphasis on the spiritual and speculative as productive and restorative may leave some to wonder if she is dismissive of the power of systemic racisms that constrain Blackness in the United States and beyond; however, this would be an incomplete understanding of her argument.

In Chapter 3, “We Love to Be Africans”, Commander interviews Black Americans who are attempting to find a way to repossess their Afro-Atlantic identity by traveling to Bahia, Brazil, a state that has a large number of Afro-descended citizens. She writes that these Americans are not only influenced by the deep history of “slave revolt, resistance, and triumph”, but they are drawn by a desire to “become African” (p.127) by living out narratives of Bahia being an Africa beyond the continent. Key to her argument, Commander analyzes this pull through the Portuguese term *saudade*, which she describes as a nostalgia for “nearness” to “an essence” (p.128), the essence here being the “reclamations of Africanist presences” (p.129). She explains that it is not necessary for one to have personally experienced these essences nor is it important that the *saudade* refer to something that is actually understood or “recoverable”. The use of this term acknowledges the power of longing in the creation of more just alternative futures. The radical Pan-Africanist pulls towards an Old World Africa are again here lost among

tourist traps, continuing inequalities for Afro-Brazilians, and exploitation created through neoliberal capitalist fantasies of an American Dream outside of the US. Again, material oppression could be engaged with more completely as it seems to dismiss the power of colonial practices against Blackness as secondary to the speculative.

In Chapter 4, “Crafting Symbolic Africas in a Geography of Silence”, Commander looks to the United States to find instances of domestic “flights”. She analyses how the institution of slavery dispossessed Black Americans and continues to do so today. This is done by examining the transformation of plantations from the only North American homelands of African-descended people, forced north during the Great Migration, and presently whitewashed to spaces selling the experience of antebellum whiteness. She shows how the dispossession of a Black South has been combated by groups like the Gullah/Geechee and continues to this day with people like North Carolinian activist Bree Newsome “actively democratiz[ing] master narratives by centering on the significance of Black social life” (p.217). Commander visits Oyotunji Village, an autonomous village built out of the Pan-Africanist surge in the 1960s, to interview visitors and examine how, despite its shrinking size, it exists as a speculative space in which Afro-Atlantic life is actively lived out and provides a place to and through which to take “flight”.

Despite the fact “the evidentiary matters not”, questions of the utility of flight against material forms of white supremacy may still remain. However, it is the tendency towards analyses overdependent on materialism that her work speaks to directly. Commander time and again acknowledges that travels to Africas, real or imagined, are complex practices that must be navigated and re-navigated by those who undertake them. It is the “flights”, the routes, that are revolutionary and transformative. These are “flights” that allow Black Americans spaces of “‘freedom just to be’, to attain social life without systemic obstacles” (p.129). *Afro-Atlantic Flight* is instructive and deserves a spot among the growing wave of Black geographies literature.

References

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