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BOOK REVIEW

***Afro-Atlantic Flight: Speculative Returns and the Black Fantastic*, by Michelle D. Commander (2017). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.**

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In her book, *Afro-Atlantic Flight: Speculative Returns and the Black Fantastic*, Michelle Commander asks: How might meaningful, transnational, Black solidarities emerge through real and/or imagined returns to Africa in the twenty-first century? As the title of the book suggests, flight is a central concept through which Commander participates in a long tradition of Black speculative thought. As a genre, Black speculative thought offers writers and readers what Commander terms a “fantastic, radical epistemological modality through which Afro-Atlantic identity can be lived across time and space” (p. 6). Flight, therefore, is but one of many speculative devices deployed throughout history as a means for Black communities to transcend the very real, spatiotemporal containments of their bodies.

Beginning with several tales from Afro-Atlantic folklore in which slaves are depicted to figuratively “fly” back home, Commander sets out on a task to understand the cultural, political, and spiritual significance of contemporary flights to Africa. These flights, the reader learns, are both imaginary and real. More importantly, Commander argues that it is through flight that Africa reveals itself to Black Americans in contested and fraught ways. The result of various generations of transnational longing through which Africa has been culturally (re)configured and (re)imagined, Afro-Atlantic flights are those which—often surprisingly—introduce its passengers to unfamiliar performances and remembrances of “home.” Despite a pervasive and continued longing to return to and reclaim precolonial Africa, Commander urges diasporans to negotiate the feelings of dispossession that inevitably arise from this impossible quest. In this way, Commander argues that Afro-Atlantic flights offer revolutionary and fantastic possibilities for transnational Black social relations, or what she terms a “neoteric Pan-Africanism,” so long as African dispossession (as opposed to repossession) become their focus.

The book is structured into four main chapters, with each chapter representing a different Afro-Atlantic flight. In the first chapter, Commander explores the speculative flights of authors or fictional characters who travel back in time and experience slavery across a

number of different temporal and spatial contexts. The purpose of these flights is not to resurrect the painful and traumatic memories of slavery so as to hurt the reader, but rather to heal, or spiritually rejuvenate, that reader through staged encounters with ancestral pasts. Examining a variety of neo-slave texts in literature and film, Commander convincingly argues that the genre travels back to the past not only to understand the present and/or future, but also to take control of that past and reclaim one's imagined origins from the present and/or future. In doing so, protagonists, readers, and authors resist commonsense notions of "progress" and call into question the very assumption that time (and forgetting) heals all wounds.

In the remaining three chapters, Commander shifts her attention from the representation of flights in literary and filmic texts, to those flights occurring through what is often referred to as "roots tourism." Each chapter draws from a mixed methodology that includes stories from her ethnographic experiences as a roots tourist; interviews with Black American tourists, tourism industry workers, traditional faith leaders and healers, and market vendors; and literary analyses of travel narratives, events, and news stories related to the contexts in which Commander finds herself a participant-observer.

Ghana acts as the first of these three contexts and provides Commander with a backdrop through which to explore the limits of a neoteric Pan-Africanism. Today, Ghanaian officials continue to preserve architectural reminders of slavery (e.g. slave castles) in the hopes that transnational, Black peoples and currencies travel to the first sovereign, sub-Saharan African country. But as Commander's research documents, literal flights to Ghana often fail to deliver on the promise of an imagined home, and are instead frequently characterized by misrecognitions between different Afro-Atlantic identities. In contrast, speculative returns to Ghana (e.g. Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*) come closer to delivering Commander's vision of a neoteric Pan-Africanism by reimagining history to produce communal "spaces of pleasure and possibility in the face of dispossession."

The Brazilian state of Bahia is explored in the third chapter, where Commander begins to unpack the meanings of Africa as they circulate in and through a South American context. Home to at least 20 major slave revolts in the early part of the 19th century, Bahia represents an "intradiasporic, surrogate Africa" to many cultural roots tourists or expatriates. Commander's fieldwork thus describes the various performances, practices, traditions, and objects through which Black Americans produce Afro-Bahian culture. Interestingly, this chapter points to the ways that Black Americans not only desire to repossess Africa in and through their return flights, but also pursue their own happiness in an attempt to realize the American Dream. The problem, Commander contends, is that the racist realities of Bahian

society fail to deliver on the promise of a utopic, transplanted, and precolonial Africa where Black Americans imagine the freedom to become African without the constant and lasting reminders of slavery.

Despite her reservations about roots tourism and its capacity to return one to the Africa they imagine, Commander finds hope in the actual flights of Black Americans to the U.S. South. In chapter four, she analyzes the various tours, monuments, architectures, and events through which slavery is contemporaneously (mis)remembered in the U.S. South. Not unlike the authors of neo-slave texts, Commander argues that Black Americans use speculative thought to reclaim and challenge the depoliticized histories of the U.S. South. More importantly, they render the Black fantastic public in a much different way than authors of literary or filmic texts by visibly occupying, disrupting, and contesting public spaces where reminders of slavery persist. In this chapter Commander thus provides a powerful example of the revolutionary power of speculative thought in action (i.e. beyond texts)—which, up to then, remains somewhat abstract to the reader.

Indeed, it is unfortunate that Commander leaves to the end of her book the radical potential for speculative thought to publicly challenge systems of white supremacy and capitalism. Through the activism of Black American cultural producers in the U.S. South, the reader not only learns how to theorize the politics of speculative thought, but also how to practice them and/or live a speculative life. A greater and earlier emphasis on these teachings, therefore, might have allowed readers a more thorough understanding for how to participate in Commander's call for a neoteric Pan-Africanism.

Additionally, Commander acknowledges that the politics of speculative thought are not without fault in the context of Oyotunji Village (i.e., an African, separatist community in South Carolina). Namely, she expresses concern over Oyotunji residents' focus on repossessing and recreating a precolonial Africa "while simultaneously rejecting contemporary Africa, which in many ways is still reeling from colonization, the transatlantic slave trade, and the continued plunder of its land" (p. 213). Left untouched, however, are broader concerns related to the colonization of Indigenous lands upon which Oyotunji Village finds itself. How might the Black fantastic also include the speculative thoughts, ancestral traditions, and mythologies of Native Americans? How can ongoing forms of Indigenous dispossession be accounted for in a neoteric Pan-Africanism? These are questions that understandably fall outside the scope of Commander's analysis, but might help in further strengthening the revolutionary and transnational potential of speculative thought. As bell hooks (1992) suggests, radical possibilities and futures can emerge from shared points of contact between Black and Indigenous peoples: "Within changing worlds, black and red

people look once again to the spirit of our ancestors, recovering worldviews and life-sustaining values that renew our spirit and restore in us the will to resist domination” (p. 194).

Alas, *Afro-Atlantic Flight* will inspire readers to further ruminate on the radical possibilities of speculative thought precisely because it is such a compelling political, spiritual, and literary apparatus in Commander’s writing. Most impressive is Commander’s diverse methodological toolkit, which she uses to analyze an entire range of texts (e.g., films, literature, interview transcripts, print and digital media, architectures, symbols, etc.). This methodological eclecticism does not confuse the reader, but rather adds to the rigor and substantive quality of Commander’s arguments. Furthermore, Commander is able to masterfully include literary analyses into her ethnographic observations and fieldwork without detracting from her subjects’ lived experiences. The result is an ontological landscape through which the imaginative and real, figurative and literal, or psychic and corporeal, constantly collide to produce invigorating, radical, and transformative possibilities in the reader’s own imagination. Indeed, Commander has written a book that offers hope and optimism to Black Americans by reclaiming old wounds that surface in the contemporary moment with an alarming regularity, violent maliciousness, and/or callous indifference. With little doubt, she has made important methodological, theoretical, and political contributions to the disciplines of literary studies, American studies, performance studies, diaspora studies, cultural anthropology, and geography.

References

hooks, b. (1992). *Black looks: Race and representation*. Boston, MA: South End Press.