

**Chandra D. Bhimull.** *Empire in the Air: Airline Travel and the African Diaspora*. Social Transformations in American Anthropology Series. New York: New York University Press, 2017. 224 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4798-4347-3.

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In the prologue to *Empire in the Air: Airline Travel and the African Diaspora*, Chandra D. Bhimull begins with two narratives about death. The first story is about Floresa Eglantine Varlack, a resident of Anegada, one of the British Virgin Islands, who died in 1989. Unable to attend her funeral, several of Varlack's children, migrants living in the United States, "grieved [from] a distance." The reason for their absence, Bhimull notes, was "money, time, transportation, [and] logistics." The second story occurred in 2010 and involved forty-six-year-old Jimmy Kelenda, a deportee headed to Luanda, Angola. While waiting for a British Airways flight to depart, Kelenda, like Eric Garner, repeatedly screamed, "I can't breathe." "No, no, no, no," adding "I have a family" (p. 3). The state played a role in both men's deaths: Garner at the hands of the police and Kelenda in the custody of G4S, a security firm hired by the British Home Office. How are these narratives about Varlack's and Kelenda's deaths, the African diaspora, and airline travel connected?

*Empire in the Air* is a compelling, meticulously researched, and rich narrative about the genesis of and interconnection between airline travel, racial oppression, and the British Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century. Central to Bhimull's argument is the idea that "early airline

travel reshaped the composition and experiences of empire. It ushered in new ways to imagine and inhabit space, time, and place" (p. 16). Bhimull initiates a reconfiguration of the black Atlantic beyond the familiar iconography of the slave ships, by adding the aircraft, and to a lesser extent, the Underground Railroad and Marcus Garvey's owned and operated ocean liner. As a ubiquitous modern technology, airplanes and the ability to fly are often taken for granted without much consideration given to the creation of airlines and the ideologies that sustain their existence. Bhimull maps and unpacks the workings of a much larger process that underpins the evolution of ordinary airline travel: global white supremacy. In exploring the creation of Imperial Airways Transport Company (1923), which turned into British Overseas Airway Corporation (BOAC) in the 1930s and then British Airways in the 1970s, Bhimull insists that notions of race and racism were deeply embedded in the establishment of airline travel. As a mechanism to advance empire, airline travel reinforced boundaries between the colonized and the colonizers.

To elevate Britain's flying status, a number of players participated in the task of defining "the purpose, meaning and advantage of commercial aviation for the nation" (p. 145). The stakeholders

and decision makers included, but were not limited to, government-formed committees, the press, bureaucrats, and government officials, who were far from unified in terms of assessing the significance of commercial aviation. The imperial government, albeit with some ambivalence, was a key player responsible for the support and dissolution of various airlines. In the initial proposal about “Britain’s sovereignty of the air,” questions about finances, efficiency, technology, competition, and alliances as they relate to commercial aviation emerged (p. 36). Despite intense arguments and debates that occurred in conferences and parliament and that were reported in newspapers regarding the need for and establishment of a national airline, the underlying sentiment was consistent. Commercial aviation was to advance the interest of empire or to restore Britain’s power and prestige, which had weakened following the First World War. Indeed, the stakeholders in Great Britain’s quest for aviation dominance were confident of their nation’s aerial potential, even if unequal in their power of persuasion. Eventually, Bhimull points out, the decision makers “opted for an airline that was ostensibly less international and more imperial, though the distinction between the two was hardly a neat one” (p. 145). Unlike other modes of transportation, airlines had the advantage of air and speed.

Speed is one trope that Bhimull harnesses, untethering its equation primarily with fastness, while foregrounding its symbiotic relationship with power. Names are signifiers. Speedbird was “the operational call sign for British Airways ... [and] the company logo of Imperial Airways,” which, according to Bhimull, “signaled supremacy in the sky” (p. 43). Hence, at the inception, the slogan “Speeding Up the Empire” was a way to sell the idea of commercial aviation to an uncertain British government and citizens. Air factored heavily in conversations, as it was the conduit through which the empire via the airline could assert its hegemony. Speed also had implications in terms of how routes were developed and drawn,

reflected in one of the initial government recommendations about imperial routes. Bhimull explains how “a route was imperial when air could be used to speed up some—but not all parts—of the empire.” Thus, only certain segments of the British Empire mattered, making visible temporal, spatial, and geographical hierarchies. Proposals were made to include white settler societies, such as Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. India and Egypt came later. Bhimull cautions that “colonial routes were not imperial routes ... [and that] they could, however, be feeder routes” (p. 62). Dominions were significant to Britain’s pursuit of flying supremacy. Colonies could partner with the dominions in order to access the empire by air. By using its imperial routes by way of the dominion Britain could get to the colonies inexpensively. The creation of imperial routes determined who could travel and from where.

Dominance is predicated on exclusion. Bhimull points out that “there were no direct air routes between Britain and the colonies; there were no direct air lines of communication or commerce between Britain and the black empire. Direct access to speed-up was denied” (p. 62). Then as now, direct access remains a problem for the African diasporic corridor. Recall Varlack, the mother whose children were unable to attend her funeral: in that case, logistics of travel were a factor. In the 1980s, to fly from New York to Anegada was a protracted process involving multiple layovers and waiting at airports. Back then, Bhimull reminds us, there were only two round trip flights, three days a week between Tortola and Anegada. This example serves to illuminate how the Caribbean factored in debates about the development of commercial aviation.

In the debates about “speeding up the empire,” Bhimull maintains that the Caribbean was marginal and almost nonexistent. She insists that there is still a story to be told about the region. Britain was interested in the Caribbean only if it stood to benefit, an old logic, Bhimull argues,

“used to justify development initiatives in the Caribbean: if the master benefits so then does the slave” (p. 106). Explorations regarding the possibility of an airline in the Caribbean occurred, and after some vacillation and apprehensiveness, in June 1930, Caribbean Airways, a private British company was born. It lasted only four years. Its demise was financial coupled with Britain’s corporate interest in partnership with Pan American. Instead of an intra-empire service linking the “Caribbean, Africa, India,” and other African diasporic geographic spaces resulting in accelerated travel and communication, Bhimull argues, “the shutdown induced international airline travel between Britain and the United States” (p. 120). The Caribbean was unable to satisfy Britain’s desires for global legitimacy in ways that an equal partnership with Pan American could.

What, then, can we make of Caribbean Airways’ insolvency and Caribbean peoples’ involvement? Bhimull insists that Caribbean people were active agents in the expansion of commercial aviation in the region, and provided two points. First, they recognized “the link between airline travel and foreign dominance” and insisted on the necessity of local airlines as a suitable defense strategy against US imperialism. Second, Caribbean people acknowledged the connection between the development of a local sustainable airline and larger project of empire. Equally important, they “strategically saw aviation companies registered” in the region as British, and “believed it was the imperial government’s responsibility to bail out businesses at the behest of Britain” (p. 120). These interventions by subaltern subjects were both practical and political.

This is a fascinating, beautifully written, and eloquent book that opens new vistas and perspectives about the interconnection of race, aviation, empire, and the African diaspora. *Empire in the Air* is long overdue. The book is further enriched by the vignettes Bhimull offers about the politics of writing from and about those on the margins.

To write about “what is and is not there,” about fragments with full confidence that the “margins do matter,” and to be mindful of these narratives, however insignificant, have value (pp. 24, 122). In such a time as this, “a world rife with drones and deportees executed on the fly” (p. 9), and I add, immigrant children camps, and cutbacks to education and social services, we could all use the reminder.

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