Introduction

*It's about airline travel.* This is my stock answer to a standard question: *What is your book about?* It is simple talk. It is conventional, straightforward, and considerate. Then people ask why, and the pulse of the conversation changes from polite to political. The shift is slight but palpable. *Why do you study airline travel? Why did you get interested in that? Why does it appeal to you?* In other words: Why would flight matter to someone like me?

Social categories are weird creatures. They are seemingly fixed but totally flexible cultural constellations in which personal histories and historical processes unevenly fuse. Like most folks, I occupy many categories, but many people seem most curious about the confluence of my research topic, race and gender, and my chosen disciplines: aviation, black woman, and anthropology and history.

I am generally grateful when someone is kind enough to ask how I came up with my project. But every so often the question feels like a backhanded way to ask me to explain myself, most notably in academic spaces where colleagues who are not black women are not asked similar questions. Yet not once have I refused to answer the question, despite feeling uncomfortable or exposed.

I have thought about this scenario a lot over the years. At first, I thought that the exchange (the question and my reaction to it) was part of the racism deeply embedded in the academy, which it is. In arenas of power play, such as a conference, my willingness to satisfy this kind of curiosity is, as they say, a deadly encounter; depending on how one locates the players of the exchange, it was curiosity (i.e., racism) that killed (i.e., the question) the cat (i.e., the one who asks or answers, or both) and satisfaction (i.e., consent, spontaneous or not) that brought it (i.e., racism) back.¹

Such exchanges are not uncommon or new. Curiosity as surveillance has long surrounded, stifled, and suppressed black women scholars and
their topics in the academy. Over time, as I wrote this book, I realized that I had missed a key player: the topic itself, airline travel. There is something very interesting about how race and flying are represented, experienced, and (not) discussed in everyday life. By and large, ordinary air spaces, such as the airport and the airliner cabin, are tacitly understood to be ‘white’ places. Consider, for instance, *Soul Plane*, a movie about a black-owned airline, which arguably calls to mind buffoonery or black nationalism (e.g., Garveyism). Or ‘flying while black’ stories, which are usually about racial profiling and state-sanctioned violence. And the statement famously put forth by Black Lives Matter U.K. activists as they protested a mass deportation flight due to fly from London to Jamaica in September 2016: “Black people are the first to die, not the first to fly.” There are significant differences among these narratives, particularly in terms of circumstance, intention, and meaning. But commercial air travel, blackness, and transgression are among the concerns they have in common. One of the underlying points made in each of them is that black people do not belong in the commercial sky, as a company, consumer, worker, deportee, or otherwise. Passenger flights and black people do not go together. The relatively small presence of black people working *in-flight* is another example of the racial landscape of airline travel, especially when seen alongside the substantial presence of black people working *with* flights on the ground.

How racism took to the sky is one of the questions of this book. What brought me to the question, how I searched for answers, and why I wrote the book as an assemblage of fragments and more conventional prose, are central to this work. I am in a way explaining myself. However, this time, I am doing it more of my own volition.

A daughter of immigrant parents, I grew up in a family where access to airline travel seemed to define us. My father is from Trinidad and Tobago. My mother is from Anegada. Like countless West Indians who settled in Canada and the United States in the 1970s, my parents saved to send us to see their parents ‘back home’: money, vacation days, and eventually, air miles. When we returned to the States, they saved again. Baggage identification tags and used airline tickets merged with birth certificates, expired passports, and other important papers in a
combination lock case; it was a carefully selected repository of things that proved we had existed and moved.

The collection made sense in terms of class. A somewhat working-class family on solidly middle-class Long Island, we hardly ever flew, which meant we rarely saw our grandparents. This felt strange for the suburbs, a place that valued relatives visiting and visiting relatives. We saw nearby aunts, uncles, and cousins, but as kids, the overseas awayness of our grandparents marked us. For me, a stash of airline paraphernalia was profoundly comforting. Plastic pins shaped like wings, branded playing cards, stamped boarding passes, and even logoed napkins could briefly change our status. This stuff was more than memorabilia. It was an asset demonstrating some sort of means. It was leverage.

Except the loot was never enough. When it came to race, these trappings were risky. We were black—immigrant, first-generation, black—in a mostly white area. We were an anomaly, and a stockpile of tickets and other objects collected on trips to the Caribbean made us stand out even more: we were not on vacation; it was not a holiday.

As a black girl hell-bent on blending in in the burbs, my relationship to airline artifacts was complicated at best. I experienced privilege, connection, and love through them. I endured some of the quintessential hallmarks of racial difference because of them: self-consciousness, exposure, humiliation, and betrayal.

Then my grandmother died, on Anegada.

Our options were limited. We did not attend her funeral. I went to school and told a good friend all about it: no money, tricky layovers, no morgue, no time off from work. She was sorry about the death and snide about the fact that we couldn’t go. She knew family and flying were inextricably linked for us; our inability to fly to the funeral fueled anxieties about who we were and what we could do. It outed and othered us again.

Immobility sparked an acute sense of shame steeped in the subtlety of classism and racism. It was an ambivalent moment, and I split, aberrant on the one hand and stereotypical on the other. My point is that the situation made me deal with three identities at once: post-colonial, first-generation, and African-American. This is a painful thing to do. Each identity is sharp and unfinished. Each has a hyphen—a dash about breaks and omissions: a stroke, for the missing. For people who were enslaved and colonized, and for their descendants, the convergence of
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Hyphen-identities amasses shards, smashed pieces of personhood. It does not suture the self.\textsuperscript{5} We were odd for staying, but we would have been odd for going. We were, ‘of course,’ the black family who couldn’t get it together.

It was around this time that the significance of the trove of travel effects started to shift for me. Pieces were prompts, then portals, and I went.\textsuperscript{6} I met ancestors and stumbled on their relocations, generations of lives truncated in the making. I found interruptions and itineraries not taken. I mined cancellations. Personal roots were in the route stuff my parents saved. The artifacts allowed me to cross thresholds, rendering the lowest point the runway’s ends. They gave bearings. Present in the presence of a moving past, I learned and lifted a thing or two, and took them back to the ordinary world as a weapon. We were of course. We were a black family in the Americas. We were descended from the Middle Passage. We were made out of movement. I wanted to make sense out of that.

The decision to pursue anthropology and history was easy. History sought differences in similarities. It situated stories about people, practices, and places in time. It created chronologies for them, arrangements that could authorize the contextualization and comparison of experiences and events. History made actual imagined unknowable pasts, like parts of my own past, feel less lonely.\textsuperscript{7} Anthropology sought differences too, calling them forth for familiarity’s, not similarity’s sake. It crossed cultures and contrasted expressions of human creativity. It poked around the everyday and turned ordinary into odd and odd into ordinary. My discomforts delighted in this.

But the disciplines dealt in different domains. History mainly prioritized a then and anthropology mostly privileged a now, though crucial crossovers did happen.\textsuperscript{8} The distinction was disquieting. The disciplines seemed to need and thus created otherness, as they studied ‘other’ times, ‘other’ spaces, ‘other’ places.\textsuperscript{9} The elsewhen of histories and elsewhere of ethnographies were realms removed from the here and now of their writers and readers.\textsuperscript{10} It was a segregation of sorts, and it didn’t suit how the ancestors and descendants of the Middle Passage got going. In this African diaspora, supposedly separate futures, pasts, and presents
coincided. The creative manipulation of time and space was a survival strategy for the muted ways in which racism worked through the mundane. A black girl on Long Island moved mentally through corridors of imagination, met her long-dead Caribbean kin, who then taught her how to live. Alone, the disciplines could not account for lives lived like this. Anthrohistory at once opened up.

The approach of anthrohistory was manifold, labyrinthian in its possibilities and potentials. It was transdisciplinary, “not quite of two disciplines, not quite bridging them, not quite between them, and not quite aspiring to any of these postures.” It worked through imagination, an authentic space to play seriously with misfit ideas, awkward practices, and experimental forms. In serious play, archives could be field sites (and vice versa); pasts could be presents, could be futures, and all of them could be long ago, living, and dead. A fragment, a gap, a trace, a rhetorical question, an ambiguous word, or an unfinished moment could be combat matter to disrupt dominant exclusionary ways of knowing and being in the world.

The ‘almost, but not quite’ of anthrohistory is unsettling. It upsets conventions and seeks room, new ways to know and be known. If the market or disciplines insist on turning this much sought-after space into a place, let the walls of the room be “limited only by our imaginations.” In a world rife with drones and deportees executed on the fly, one advantage of standing on shaky ground is the ability to apprehend the opening of up. Another is the set-up: a little book that is loving because it hopes to be outside—and not just out of—the violence that informs it.