

CITIZENS OF THE AIR:
PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY IN THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY OF FLIGHT

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ABSTRACT

Julia Scatliff O’Grady: Citizens of the Air:
Perceptions of Safety in the Social Imaginary of Flight
(Under the direction of V. William Balthrop)

Despite technological advances in aviation that have made flying more reliably safe, certain rhetorical practices have also normalized the experience of human flight for the U.S. public and have contributed to the perception of flight’s safety in what I identify as the Social Imaginary of Flight. I argue that three iconic stories—that of the Wright brothers and the origin story of human powered flight, the story of Amelia Earhart’s aviation career, and the heroic narrative of the Tuskegee Airmen of World War II—acknowledged but ultimately downplayed the risks of flying. My project reveals the rhetorical construction of these stories and their circulation in their respective eras and their subsequent recirculation in public memory in order to demonstrate how they each not only generated excitement about flying but also offered reassurance to a public interested in, but a little skittish about, becoming “citizens of the air.” In thinking about the “citizens of the air” through a web of discourses related to the sky, I use archival research, critical theoretical frameworks, and discursive analysis. Chapter 2 explores the rhetorical construction and circulation of the Wrights’ origin story of flight, which transformed flight from sport and spectacle into a (nascent) form of safe passenger travel, if always provisional. My study considers both the circulating texts related to the story

and the public memory of the Wright Brothers National Memorial. Chapter 3 revisits the nine-year aviation career of Amelia Earhart, and using such critical frameworks as feminine style and feminist standpoint theory, demonstrates how a public memory focused on her disappearance has mostly obscured the discourse about flight's safety that she participated in during her career. Chapter 4 considers safety in air combat and the heroic narrative that was retrospectively overlaid on the history of the Tuskegee-trained African-American pilots who served as escorts for white bomber pilots in World War II. Using critical race theory—specifically Kirt Wilson's "rhetoric of place"—I complicate that narrative and reconsider the safety that the pilots famously provided.

For Uncle Harvey

Harvey T. Andresen (1925-)

B-24 Waist Gunner, 15th Air Force

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I was lucky in my doctoral committee. I took my first class in rhetorical criticism with Carole Blair. Since then, I have aspired to write about flying in the same manner in which Carole interpreted the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. As the former Chief Historian for the U.S. Air Force and a scholar of peace, war, and defense, Dick Kohn introduced me to aviation history, both through Antoine de Saint Exupery's *Wind, Sand, and Stars* and Clyde Edgerton's book *Solo*. In my class with Eric K. Watts, we read *Passing* by Nella Larsen; that course in African-American Rhetoric also challenged my understanding of Booker T. Washington, and that nuanced understanding is reflected in my project. I tested the waters of Communication Studies in a seminar about George H. Mead with Julia T. Wood, a friend and colleague, who changed and continues to change my life. My advisor, Bill Balthrop, has taught me to how to care about the details while never forgetting the big picture. He reminds me "when one takes off, one also must also land."

This doctoral project began as an ethnographic study of air traffic controllers at Atlanta Hartsfield-Jackson Airport's Terminal Radar Approach Control facility (TRACON) facility in Peachtree City, Georgia. I am grateful to Jim Allerdice and to the many air traffic controllers he introduced me to. For two years, I periodically visited the facility and documented the work lives of several air traffic controllers. As a result of these visits, my fascination with aviation, its apparatus of safety, and the sky as a space of both transit and

wonder grew. As my research progressed, however, I became more interested in early flight and its rhetorical construction. On a cold day in 2010, the air traffic controllers organized a goodbye lunch for me at a nearby Chinese restaurant. Then, I drove another hour South on Interstate 85 to the Tuskegee Airmen Historic Site, where I began to reframe this doctoral journey.

Since then, I have traveled to twelve archival repositories to discover exemplars of the circulating texts that constitute the social imaginary of flight. The sites include the National Air and Space Museum Archives, the Library of Congress, the Outer Banks History Center, the American Heritage Center, the Tuskegee University Archives and the National Park Service Archives at Tuskegee Airmen Historic Site, the Air Force Historical Research Agency, the Women Air Service Pilots (WASP) Collection at Texas Woman University, the Amelia Earhart Papers at Purdue University, the Robert Hinckley Collection at the University of Utah, the Collett E. Woolman Collection at Louisiana State University Archives, and the Lindbergh Papers at the Missouri History Museum.

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Despite the support and guidance, I do know that all of the mistakes are my own.

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

“Our language needs new words to express the conception of air travel.”
—Florence Kernick, thirteen-year-old winner of an essay contest on flight, 1940¹

Once the sole domain of birds, the sky has always inspired human wonder.² Dante’s *Paradiso* registered this awe in the fourteenth century; da Vinci’s sketch notebooks demonstrate such awe in their fantastical images of the sky and flying apparatuses. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, balloons and dirigibles made it possible for humans to join the birds. The question of how humans could enjoy sustained, controlled flight intrigued and stumped the earliest pioneers. Only in the twentieth century was the conundrum of flight solved when two hardworking brothers from Ohio successfully launched their motorized biplane off the dunes of the Outer Banks.

As inventors crafted and adventurers flew new and improved models that made ever-longer flights and with better safety records, the realm of the skies slowly opened up to the greater public over a few decades. As the barnstorming phenomenon faded and commercial aviation dawned, how did the American public perceive this new opportunity? How did the public weigh the risks of flying against the novelty, thrill, and promise of greater efficiency? Was this new form of transportation safe? Then as now, in

¹ Florence Kernick, “Cultural Value of Flying,” National Aeronautic Association, Feb. 1, 1940, p. 4, in the Robert H. Hinckley Collection, MS 102 Box 67 Fd 1, Robert H. Hinckley Papers, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah (Salt Lake City, UT).

² Graham Coster, ed., *The Wild Blue Yonder: The Picador Book of Aviation* (London: Picador, 1997).

order for passengers to board a plane and to feel safe doing so, they had to trust that there would be a safe landing.

Despite the technological advances contributing to safety, the commercial aviation industry grew to be such a thriving and successful enterprise based in part on a series of rhetorical practices that normalized the experience of human flight for the American public and contributed to the perception of flight's safety. During early aviation, the perception of safety once in the air was critical to the public's decision to fly. In this study, I borrow Kenneth Burke's perspective on dialectics, or "linguistic transformation," in order to think about how it was possible to entice a public to risk flying. I look at the rhetorical practices that define risk by the converse promise of safety.³ Dialectics, such as action-passion, mind-body, and being-nothing—the three major pairings Burke identifies—demonstrate how words "mutually modify one another" to contribute to make a new "whole."⁴ This interplay suggests what is possible when words and their transposed meanings retain the possibility for both mergers and divisions in our reception. In this dissertation, I examine three iconic stories of early flight that changed the way the public viewed aviation and paved the runway for the development of commercial aviation. In so doing, I investigate how the people I identify as the "citizens of the air" relied upon dialectics of risk and safety in order to construct a sky that was safe enough for humans to enter.

One of the most consistent ways in which flight was represented as safe during early aviation was to mediate its potential risk through various assurances to the public of

³ See Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: U of California P, 1945), p. 402.

⁴ Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, p. 402.

its safety. This practice of telling stories in order to reassure potential flyers of the possibility, if not the reality—of safe flying, dates back to ancient Greece, to the mythological tale of Icarus.⁵ The story of Icarus is often cited on aviation historical timelines as the first milestone event of human flight. Icarus' father, Daedalus, a great craftsman made two pairs of wings by adhering feathers with wax to wooden frames for his son and himself. Daedalus outfitted his son, but cautioned him not to fly too near the sun lest the wax melt the wings. Icarus, however, ecstatic with the ability to fly, forgot his father's warning and dared to fly too close to the sun. As his father predicted, the wax melted, the feathers loosened, and he plunged to his death in the sea. The hubris and tragedy of Icarus is a cautionary tale, and embedded within it is the warning to heed the rules of engagement in order to enjoy the wonder of flight. If Icarus had listened to his father, he would have experienced the ecstasy of flight while making a safe journey home. Such advice foresees the dialectic of risk and safety evident in the three iconic stories of flight that I explore in the pages to come.

This dissertation examines how the circulation of three iconic stories in the history of flight promoted the perception of flight's safety by acknowledging but ultimately downplaying its risks. These stories—that of the Wright brothers and the origin story of flight, the story of Amelia Earhart's aviation career, and the heroic narrative of the Tuskegee Airmen of World War II—circulated in their respective eras and subsequently re-circulated as public memory. It is the work of each chapter of my project to reveal the rhetorical construction of these stories in order to demonstrate their

⁵ Francis Bacon, "The Flight of Icarus, also Scylla and Charybdis, or the Middle Way," *Wisdom of the Ancients* (London: Longman, 1857).

role in generating both excitement about flying and reassurance to a public set on, but a little skittish about, becoming “citizens of the air.”

Golden Age of Aviation

The heart of my project lies in the Golden Age of Aviation, that era bookmarked by the two World Wars when the thrill and novelty of seeing humans as pilots and passengers peaked. Each of the three iconic stories I study depends upon the historical record, circulating texts, and public memory between 1903 and 1945, with the Golden Age of Aviation representing this time period’s crescendo. A firm grasp of this era is necessary to appreciate the rhetorical messages about aviation that circulated and how they shaped the imagination of the U.S. public. I turn now, therefore, to a brief review.

In order to understand the Golden Age of Aviation, it is critical to review the impact of World War I on U.S. aviation. The Wright brothers had only in 1903 demonstrated that controlled motorized flight was possible, but, by the beginning of World War I in 1914, the new technology had already found a practical military application. Despite Orville Wright’s disappointment at seeing his invention turned into a weapon of war, airplane technology was destined to transform the experience of warfare forever, and, like so many inventions invented or adopted by the military, eventually that technology would filter down to the general public. The German airship and airplane attacks on Britain, which began in 1917, had, by war’s end, claimed the lives of more than 1,400 people and injured almost 4,000 more. In response, the Allies, which had been slower to create the technology, developed bombers and trained bomber aircrews to

retaliate.⁶ After the war's end, the U.S. government realized that those bomber aircrews were experienced in long-distance flying and night flying, and that the large aircraft made to carry ammunition could be modified to carry passengers and freight instead of bombs. Thus, aviation historian R. G. Grant reminds us, "strategic bombing in World War I helped pave the way for the development of commercial aviation."⁷ By the end of the war in 1918, Great Britain, France, Germany, and the United States were all producing, on average, 2,500 planes a month.⁸ In the immediate aftermath of the war, with no more haste to outfit air forces, aircraft manufacturers almost collapsed. Surplus military aircraft, such as the Curtiss Jn-4 or "Jenny," flooded the market at bargain rates, and thousands of military pilots sought civilian employment using their flying skills. Historian Roger E. Bilstein said these planes "captured the imagination of . . . young Americans," most notably Charles A. Lindbergh.⁹ For the first time, certain individuals could afford to purchase their own aircraft for recreational purposes.

Flying in the early days after that first war was a harrowing venture. For instance, the first airmen to cross the Atlantic—a feat achieved in 1919—traveled in an open cockpit with the deafening sounds of the roaring engine and few instruments to assist them (and those unreliable, at best). They flew through often-turbulent weather, with zero visibility, disorienting lightning flashes, hail, snow, iced-up wings, darkness, and exhaustion. Therefore, milestone, record-breaking flights such as that one both

⁶ See R. G. Grant, *Flight: 100 Years of Aviation* (New York: DK Publishing, Inc., 2002), p. 103.

⁷ Grant, *Flight*, p. 103.

⁸ Richard P. Hallion, *Taking Flight: Inventing the Aerial Age from Antiquity through the First World War* (New York: Oxford U P, 2003), p. 378.

⁹ Roger E. Bilstein, *Flight in America: From the Wrights to the Astronauts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 2001), pp. 3-40.

showcased aviation's potential and highlighted its dangers.¹⁰ After that flight, it would still be another nine years before Earhart would rise to national fame, and in that period of time, aviation did develop some safety measures. However, when Earhart was selected to be the first female passenger to cross the Atlantic in 1928, flying was still a very dangerous endeavor and her presence as a passenger was meant to demonstrate that anyone could travel by air, despite the potential for untold disaster.

Carrying the mail provided a foundation for the nascent but ambitious commercial airline industry.¹¹ In 1918, the United States Post Office Department had begun using government-owned aircraft to experiment with delivering mail via plane, and many of those early airmail pilots risked injury or death to deliver mail marginally faster.¹² Government-owned and operated planes delivered Air Mail letters and packages for its first eight years of service; then, in 1925, U.S. Congress passed "The Kelly Act," which was intended to encourage the development of commercial aviation. This Act authorized the Postmaster General to contract out Air Mail Service.¹³ From that point forward, the U.S. Post Office Department contracted with commercial air carriers to survey, establish, and operate service over a variety of new routes. Commercial airlines could not yet compete with the comparative reliability and flexibility of ground transportation, and so they depended on contracts with the U.S. Government to remain solvent. From the

¹⁰ Grant, *Flight*, p. 111.

¹¹ Michael J. H. Taylor, *The Times Aviators: A History in Photographs* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), pp. 116-39.

¹² For more, see A. D. Jones, *Aerial Mail Service: A Chronology of the Early United States Government Air Mail, March – Dec., 1918* (Mineola, NY: The American Air Mail Society, 1993), pp. 53-113; and William M. Leary, *Aerial Pioneers: The U.S. Airmail Service, 1918-1927* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution P, 1985).

¹³ 45 Stat. 594 (1925); P.L. 359, 68th Cong.

perspective of the infant commercial air industry, citizens who entrusted their letters to airplanes might next entrust their loved ones or themselves to airplanes. Each time citizens sent mail by air to friends or business associates and successfully received replies, the public faith in the utility of flight grew. However, the lack of federal regulations made flying still a perilous endeavor, and U.S. Air Mail Service pilots faced a high fatality rate.¹⁴

Meanwhile, a number of other jobs appeared in the 1920s for enterprising pilots: skywriting advertising; crop dusting; aerial survey photography; Hollywood stunt piloting; and, most prominently, barnstorming. Barnstormers awed crowds with highly publicized aerial acrobatics. They performed circus tricks, such as wing walking, hanging by trapeze underneath the plane, crossing midair between one plane's wing to another's, illusory death falls, and staged crashes to please the crowds. These dare devils—like the Air Mail pilots—risked death or injury for a paycheck and the possible thrill of flight itself. At the same time, press magnates and wealthy flight enthusiasts who were “airminded”—by which I mean they were advocates and enthusiasts of flight and unafraid to fly—sponsored contests for record-breaking flights, backed by cash prize money.¹⁵ A number of brave and talented pilots answered their call, some dying spectacularly in the process. Those who succeeded—most notably Lindbergh and Earhart—became national heroes and icons. Therefore, despite the postwar recession and then the Great Depression, the Golden Age of Aviation developed in the 1920s and 1930s.

¹⁴ From 1918-1927, 38 U.S. Airmail Service Pilots, mechanics and field personnel died. See “Fatalities in the Line of Duty,” *Air Mail Pioneers* (Web); accessed Feb. 28, 2015.

¹⁵ The term “airminded” was a common term in the 1920s and 1930s used to describe those Americans who embraced the new technology and participated in aviation.

A federal response to the barriers and risks faced by aviation came with the Air Commerce Act of 1926, which responded to some of the public concerns over air safety. Prior to government intervention, aviation was, as one Earhart biographer describes it—a “chaotic industry.”¹⁶ While there was increasing safety in flight after the Air Commerce Act, the in-flight conditions were harsh. Thomas A. Heppenheimer’s account of Henry Ford’s newly produced transport aircraft, the “tin goose,” illustrates the state of flight in 1925:

Trimotors could fly high enough to top mountains . . . but had no pressurization or adequate cabin heating. An airline might cruise at twenty thousand feet but passengers would freeze. Some passed out. Some died walking into a propeller. Many got airsick. Western Air Express advertised that people could fly with the windows open or shut. Some stuck their heads out to throw up. Planes had to be hosed down after a flight.¹⁷

As Heppenheimer’s description suggests, the early commercial aviation industry had the challenging duty to promote a form of transportation perhaps more efficient than ground transit, but besmirched by tales of sickened passengers and even fatal trips.

Persuading a public to take the risk of flight, despite the uncertainties and the very public accounts of duress, would require rhetorical messages that could convince people that the discomfort up in the air was worth it. As a result, flight and its safety had to be sold, not only as a (potentially) more efficient transportation option, but also as one associated with excitement and novelty. To sell this message, the industry leaned on the

¹⁶ Susan Ware, *Still Missing: Amelia Earhart and the Search for Modern Feminism* (New York: Norton, 1993), p. 65.

¹⁷ Thomas A. Heppenheimer, *From Turbulent Skies: The History of Commercial Flight* (New York: Wiley, John, and Sons, Inc., 1995), p. 25.

record-setting pilots who demonstrated not only that the sky was a place of great wonder, bravery, and adventure and that it also offered a safe path home. It was in this environment that the first commercial air services began. The nascent industry promised passengers a completely novel perspective on the earth, adventure-filled travel, and the opportunity to experience the most modern mode of transit. Unsurprisingly, relatively few civilians experimented with flying. Even with the development of enclosed cabins, passengers had to endure deafening noise, body-rattling vibration, stomach-churning turbulence, and extreme temperatures. In addition, those early commercial flights were unpredictable: they had to be canceled during bad weather and they frequently made forced landings.¹⁸

That conundrum—about how to make flight safe for humans—was an old problem. It had plagued the first inventors. The Wright brothers had dedicated four years to testing the safety of their earliest gliders prior to their first human powered flight in 1903.¹⁹ Even in the decade that followed their first successful flight, the risks involved in flying were still tremendous: there were no safety measures, such as seat belts, enclosed cockpits or ground-to-air communication, for instance. Yet, by 1911, a dozen aviation companies had emerged that foresaw the commercial potential of producing, selling, and improving airplanes. More than fifty firms were then making airplane parts. The demands of WWI had pushed the industry to increase aircraft production. War contracts had catalyzed the industry and narrowed the competition from seven firms to four, making monitoring easier. Indeed, as Earhart became a household name in 1928, there was

¹⁸ Grant, *Flight*, p. 132.

¹⁹ “Inventing A Flying Machine,” Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, n.d. (Web), accessed Nov. 4, 2014.

already a campaign in place that encouraged Americans to give flight a chance.²⁰ In addition to heightened volume in production, there were great leaps in aviation innovations. Compare, for example, the photograph of the 1903 Wright Flyer, constructed out of a spruce wooden frame, covered in a finely-woven cotton cloth, to Lindbergh's *The Spirit of Saint Louis*, with its enclosed cockpit, 425-gallon gasoline tank, and mild carbon steel fuselage. Both of these planes are exhibited at the National Air and Space Museum: the *Spirit of Saint Louis* hangs next to air- and spacecraft in the Milestones of Flight Gallery. The Wright Flyer is on display in a second floor room. As the placement of these two iconic planes at the NASM registers, the era of early aviation, which produced them both, was a dynamic one.

By the late-1930s, as the U.S. military began preparing for the possibility of entering World War II, airplanes had become a critical component to the war effort, and there was a need to recruit and train pilots. The exigency of war convinced the military to consider recruiting and training not just white male pilots, but African-American male pilots, too. The story and the war record of the Tuskegee Airmen, which this project will explore, intersect with many technological innovations in air combat. Men enlisted in the Tuskegee Experiment from all over the U.S., expressing both their patriotism and also their desire to learn how to fly during an era when there were few opportunities for African Americans to attain a pilot's license. Once troops were sent to North Africa, pilots of the 99th pursuit squadron flew the P-39 Airacobra, an essential U.S. fighter aircraft of WWII that featured tricycle landing gear and the engine behind the cockpit. A second fighter aircraft, the Curtiss P-40 Warhawk, was one of the most durable fighters but rarely "outperformed" its opponents. Most Tuskegee Airmen were associated with the

²⁰ For more detail, see Bilstein, *Flight in America*, pp. 41-83.

P-51 Mustang, an aircraft most famous as an air-to-air combat interceptor and escort and whose tail when painted red fetched the Tuskegee Airmen the nickname “Red Tails.”²¹ All three aircraft were workhorses of WWII and made it possible for African Americans to serve as escort pilots to the white bomber crews.

World War II brought greater public understanding not only for aviation’s potential for destruction but also for its everyday utility. After the war, Americans took for granted that airplanes were part of the transportation system, and, increasingly, they began to picture themselves riding inside them. Therefore, the beginning of the Second World War serves as an appropriate bookend to the Golden Age of Aviation. The risks inherent in flying continued, but as the tools developed for the war filtered down to commercial aircraft, flying became an increasingly safer mode of transit. This dissertation focuses less on this later period, because flying had become statistically so much safer. Instead, I examine those years before war’s end and look carefully at the stories that circulated and that assured potential new passengers that flying was safe enough.

Critical Contexts

My study sits at, and even nudges, the boundaries of the communication discipline. My concerns in this project echo those of communication scholars more broadly: safety and risk, citizenship, race, class, and gender. In my work, I engage two primary theoretical constructions—the social imaginary and public memory—and use as bricks and mortar a wide variety of texts that circulated primarily during the twentieth

²¹ For more information about the P-39, P-40, and P-51, see “Aviation Models,” The Aviation History Online Museum, accessed Feb. 25, 2015.

and twenty-first century. The textual fragments I found in archives, libraries, and online—newspaper articles and newsmagazines (from both the white and black press), published memoirs, congressional testimony, and commemorative events and structures—date in large part from the first half of the twentieth century, and, when considered collectively, animate fleeting debates and messages about the perception of safety from the earliest days of human motorized flight in the United States.

In conducting a study of the rhetoric of flight's safety from the beginning of the 20th century until the mid-1940s, along with later interpretations of this era in public memory, I have carved a new path that branches out from existing lines of inquiry. Organizational communication has been interested in the ways that various disciplines have represented concerns about safety and risk—primarily within the health sciences and physical sciences, and in technical communication. Such research has mostly been quantitative in nature and based on studies of institutional and individual behavioral responsiveness to risk. Such studies have considered external dangers, such as sickening food or dangerous work conditions, and how risk can be ameliorated through the implementation of safety practices. While studies about occupational risks or the dangers of 'tween online dating practices, for example, attend to perspectives on civic safety, they do so primarily within the boundaries of quantitative analysis.²² What distinguishes my study from the quantitative studies concerning risk and safety is the premise from which I work: that it is possible for the perception of safety to be attained not just by specific behaviors or methods, but also through the telling, retelling, and shaping of

²² See for example Jennifer Welbourne, Tara Hartley, Sybill Ott, and Sherrilyn Robertson, "Effects of Risk-Focused and Recommendation-Focused Mental Imagery on Occupational Risk," *Health Communication* 23.5 (2008): 473-82; Sonia Livingstone, Kjartan Olafsson, and Elizabeth Staksrud, "Risky Social Networking Practices Among 'Underage' Users: Lessons for Evidence-Based Policy," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 18.3 (2013): 303-20.

stories. My project, at its core, is an analysis of the stories that circulated about flight, beginning with the first reports of the Wright brothers' initial success.

Within organizational communication, a subset of researchers has studied the safety of commercial flight. My own purview is a step removed: I study the discourse that circulated about how safe and how risky the public perceived flight to be, both in commercial flight (Chapters Two and Three) and in air combat (Chapter Four). In my work, I have benefited from and been inspired by the contributions of colleagues in organizational communication who have shared this topic of interest. Scholars in this more narrow field have considered how air traffic controllers, pilots, flight attendants, and airline passengers communicate—and how their communication reflects risk and safety to passengers, both on the ground and up in the air. Their findings have been productive. For example, research on human communication among air traffic controllers has found how unclear exchanges of phrases and protocol have led to dangerous outcomes in flight.²³ To cite a second example, I point to two studies by Alexandra G. Murphy, whose work helped me see aviation in a new light and inspired me to further investigate some of the communicative practices she observed.²⁴ In her work, Murphy interprets the discrete yet everyday routines of flight attendants as performances or discursive practices. The public expects flight attendants to smile through turbulence and to adhere to strict codes concerning dress and make-up routines that reflect a calming presence up in the air. Flight attendants, Murphy argues, play a powerful role in

²³ See Karen Ashcraft and Dennis Mumby, "Organizing a Critical Communicology of Gender and Work," *Journal of the Sociology of Language* 166 (2004): 19-43; John W. Howard, III, "Tower, Am I Cleared to Land?: Problematic Communication in Aviation Discourse," *Human Communication Research* 34 (2008): 370-91.

²⁴ See Alexandra G. Murphy, "An Analysis of Communication and Sensemaking during In-Flight Emergencies," *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 29 (2001): 30-53; Murphy, "Hidden Transcripts of Flight Attendant Resistance," *Management Communication Quarterly* 11 (1998): 499-535.

projecting confidence of the safety of the plane and the flight. Murphy's identification of and interpretation of the performativity of safety inspired me to investigate the rhetorical practices and performances involved in assuring the public of the safety of flight.

What, then, have fellow scholars of rhetoric investigated along these lines? Most rhetorical inquiry related to the dialectic of risk and safety in human aviation has hitherto focused on the spectacle of risk. Spectacular disasters, such as the explosions of the *Hindenburg* and the *Challenger* and the controversy surrounding the *Enola Gay* Smithsonian exhibit, have prompted researchers both in and outside of Communication Studies to study disasters as representations of risk.²⁵ Out of the eight iconic photographs that Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites chose to interpret in their book, *No Caption Needed*, two are photographs of aircraft disasters: the *Hindenburg* and the *Challenger*.²⁶ Hariman and Lucaites draw out the dialectical relationships between progress and risk and control and catastrophe.²⁷ They found that the rupturing of the *Hindenburg* also ruptured humanity's illusion of control.²⁸ While the U.S. public saw the *Hindenburg* blow up in a photograph in the pages of a newspaper and in film, the *Challenger* blew up on live TV before the eyes of millions. President Reagan described the astronauts as brave adventurers, and quoted John Gillespie Magee, Jr.'s poem "High Flight" to say that

²⁵ See Richard H. Kohn, "History and the Culture Wars: The Case of the Smithsonian Institution's *Enola Gay* Exhibition," *The Journal of American History* 82.3 (1995): 1036-63; Hubbard, Bryan and Marouf A. Hasian, Jr., "Atomic Memories of the *Enola Gay*: Strategies of Remembrance at the National Air and Space Museum," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 1.3 (1998): 363-85.

²⁶ My understanding of the iconicity of these disasters depends on Robert Hariman and John L. Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2007).

²⁷ Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, p. 244.

²⁸ Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, p. 250.

the astronauts “slipped the surly bonds of earth” to “touch the face of God.”²⁹ Hariman and Lucaites mention President Reagan’s rhetorical efforts to restore the public’s confidence in flight’s safety, yet they study these two flights primarily as examples of humanity’s gambles. Their research has certainly reshaped the field and how scholars see visual communication, and I borrow from them the idea of the appropriation and reappropriation of images when I write about how iconic stories of flight have circulated. However, their focus on spectacle and disaster and risk and control perhaps kept them from seeing the role that stories can play, not to stir up fear, but to inspire and reassure the public. That is the focus of my project.

Some rhetoricians have studied the dialectic of risk and safety in various discourses—just not in regard to human flight. For example, Donyale R. Griffin-Padgett and Donnetrice Allison coined the phrase “restorative rhetoric” to characterize the responses of mayors Rudolph Giuliani and Ray Nagin to 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, respectively.³⁰ This scholarship considered the rhetorical process of restoring hope and attending to the dialectical nature of risk and safety. Other recent scholars have followed similar lines of inquiry. Bryan Taylor and Judith Henry examined the terminology used to talk about nuclear weapons. They argued that the term “stockpile stewardship” rhetorically frames the storing of nuclear weapons as a safe and generative practice.³¹ Yet another pair of rhetoricians, Lisa Corrigan and Amanda Edgar, identified the “jazz

²⁹ Qtd. by Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, p. 254.

³⁰ Donyale R. Griffin-Padgett and Donnetrice Allison, “Making a Case for Restorative Rhetoric: Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and Mayor Ray Nagin’s Response to Disaster,” *Communication Monographs* 77.3 (2010): 376-92.

³¹ Bryan C. Taylor and Judith Hendry, “Insisting on Persisting: The Nuclear Rhetoric of “Stockpile Stewardship,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 11.2 (2008): 303-34.

vernacular” that Spike Lee used in his post-Katrina documentary, *When the Levees Broke*,³² arguing that it is Lee’s choice to play a soothing jazz soundtrack behind images of devastation that, in fact, amplifies his portrayal of the hurricane disaster. In all of these examples, Communication scholars have pointed to how rhetorical invention has been used to interpret tremendous risk. It follows, then, that messages of safety have the ability to reframe risk and to possibly restore public confidence. My study depends upon the precedent of such critical perspectives concerning messages of safety.

Publics and Citizens

For my project, I poll a population I call the “citizens of the air.” They were the early adopters of human flight: the pilots, crew, passengers, and on-the-ground enthusiasts who constructed the earliest rhetorical messages that were aimed at convincing people of the safety of human flight. In thinking about the citizens of the air, I acknowledge that Communication scholarship has offered many definitions of “citizenship,” and that our understanding of what and who comprises citizens and members of the public has evolved over the years. Political philosopher John Dewey long ago defined “the public” as the interaction among strangers who are hardly impartial to the actions of others.³³ Taking it a step further, Robert Asen and Daniel Brouwer asserted that the very act of discourse alone is itself an act of citizenship.³⁴ Finally, David

³² Lisa M. Corrigan and Amanda N. Edgar, “Not Just the Levees Broke: Jazz Vernacular and the Rhetoric of the Dispossessed in Spike Lee’s *When the Levees Broke*,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 12.1 (2015): 83-101.

³³ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Holt, 1927), p. 126.

³⁴ Robert Asen and Daniel C. Brouwer, *Counterpublics and the State* (Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 2001), p. 1.

Cisneros interrogated how citizenship can reflect a hybridity when an immigrant to the U.S. self-identifies neither as “alien” nor fully American.³⁵ Rhetorical inquiry, therefore, does not see stable entities in its understanding of what a public is and in its efforts to illumine and define citizenship. Rather, to borrow from Asen and Brouwer, the public is an “ephemeral phenomenon built through public perception.”³⁶ This concept is foundational for me since the citizens of the air that I identify and study in my project inhabited several public identities. All were “airminded,” but their opportunities varied widely depending on their race, class, and gender. Flight had become a religion for some, a “Winged Gospel”—to borrow a phrase from Joseph Corn—an experience or technology with exuberant promise.³⁷

Not all scholars insist that a public sphere must be material. Communication scholar Thomas Farrell demarcated “the polis,” traditionally understood as the place of citizenship, as extending beyond mere physical location to relationships, and, indeed, to habits.³⁸ Similarly, Gerald Hauser did not limit citizenship to a bounded geography. Instead, he interpreted individual discourses and practices by how they imbue “people’s shared sense of the world,” without reference to any material claims.³⁹ While such assertions of the public as removed from materiality are provocative, they diverge from any articulations of the sky as a public sphere in this study.

³⁵ David Josue Cisneros, “(Re)bordering the Civic Imaginary: Rhetoric, Hybridity, and Citizenship in *La Gran Marcha*,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 97.1 (2011): 26-49.

³⁶ Asen and Brouwer, *Counterpublics and the State*, p. 1.

³⁷ See Joseph J. Corn, *The Winged Gospel: America’s Romance with Aviation, 1900-1950* (New York: Oxford U P, 1983).

³⁸ Thomas Farrell, “Practicing the Arts of Rhetoric: Tradition and Invention, Philosophy and Rhetoric,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 24.3 (1991): 183-212; p. 199.

³⁹ Gerard A. Hauser, *Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres* (Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P, 1999), p. 113.

How we define what the sky is and where it begins is not an exact science. The demarcation line between what we call “the ground” and “the sky” has changed over the years. For the Wright brothers, entering “the sky” on December 17, 1903 meant elevating ten feet above ground. One hundred years later, commercial pilots and passengers—from the luxury of pressurized cabins—probably do not think they have entered “the sky” until they are above the trees or the clouds; they think nothing of cruising in the sky at 30,000 feet.

Second, because the sky is not a place we inhabit, it is impossible to return to a particular place in the sky in the way that we can return to a place on the ground where an event occurred. President George W. Bush acknowledged this limitation at the dedication of the Air Force Memorial in 2006: “A soldier can walk the battlefields where he once fought. A Marine can walk the beaches he once stormed. But an airman can never visit the patch of sky he raced across on a mission to defend freedom.”⁴⁰ Therefore, when trying to remember and commemorate things that happened up in the sky, there can be no material commemoration.

The naked eye observing the sky may have only the sun, moon, and stars as guides, but, in an era of commercial flight, private flying, and satellites, the sky is a vectored and monitored space. While there may be no “patch of sky” to commemorate, the air traffic control radarscope reflects a dome that has been vectored and represented in splashes of green, purple, and orange in a weather report. While the sky reflects a teeming public sphere of aircraft, satellites, and people, the material concerns of this project cannot be understood through the cartography of air traffic control. Rather, I understand the sky to be a material space that reflects a web of discourses, the

⁴⁰ “Air Force Memorial Dedicated,” *USA Today* (Web); accessed Oct. 6, 2006.

relationships and meaningful interactions among pilots, crew, and passengers that take place inside and among aircraft. Because of the materiality of the aerial public sphere, geographic locations on the ground are mirrored in the sky space above them. In some very profound manner, there is little separation between ground and sky. In order to support the claim that the public sphere is a material one, it is important to theorize the role of people in the aerial public sphere.

When I write about “citizens of the air,” I am depending on the theoretical framework provided by Michael Warner in his research on publics and counterpublics. Warner’s research transformed our understanding of what a public is. He liberates publics from the confines of a room and from the gathered audience of a speech. Instead, Warner identifies publics in many settings and groupings and argues that no single text can characterize a public. Instead, it is the “ongoing space of encounter for discourse” that forms how a public interprets, promotes, and is transformed by what they see, hear, and experience in everyday life.⁴¹ In his book, he makes seven claims about publics, four of which are particularly pertinent to my project. When these claims are applied to the focus of my study—the rhetorical construction of flight’s safety—they take on even greater importance. The first of these claims, that a public is a relation among strangers, means that people who do not know one another can all share a common identity, but it also means that you never know who you might encounter from moment to moment. Warner’s public works on the premise that strangers may have in common a set of beliefs, but they do not necessarily know—nor are even necessarily familiar with—one another. In the early years of human flight, the public that became enthusiastic about the possibility of flight and shared an exuberance about flying—or even hoped to fly themselves—were

⁴¹ Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” *Public Culture* 14.1 (2002): 49-71.

described as “airminded.” The “airminded” public can be read in this study as the citizens of the air.

Warner also claims that a public is a social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse. The excitement for flying depended upon the circulation of newspapers in the U.S. and all around the world. The stories told in the print media bore witness to this new technology and also to the possibility of its being safely adopted by the public. This reflexive circulation of discourse is pertinent to my study.

Additionally, Warner asserts that publics act historically according to the temporality of their circulation. There is a specific time frame in which a discourse emerges. During the Golden Age of Aviation, flight caught the imagination of the public and inspired people, even though few of them at the time had the opportunity to themselves fly. The conditions of flight in the 1910s and '20s and '30s were rough, but the activity was novel and the possibilities plentiful. The public was airminded because they had an excitement for flying. Post-World War II, flying became commercial, democratic, and readily accessible to everyone, and because of such conditions, the excitement dissipated and, to a large extent, disappeared. Today, few gather around to celebrate flying; it is too mundane. Flying at the turn of the century, however, was special and novel, and that is why there was a public gathered around it.

Finally, for my purposes, Warner claimed that a public is poetic world making.⁴² The way that public discourse circulates is in part utilitarian in the way it provides information, but there is also a certain character in how discourse travels. Through that travel, we see the world in a certain way. The vocabulary coined in those decades sought to describe the new experiences and technology that could be seen in the sky. Much of

⁴² See Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), pp. 67-119.

that vocabulary has been lost to history. For example, planes were once called “airships,” and individual flights were called “hops.” There is a poeticism to this vocabulary. As this engagement with archaic vocabulary terms illustrates, in order for me to investigate the circulation of discourse that described early flight during the Golden Age of Aviation, I have needed in my project to include historical accounts and circulating texts in order to make the rhetorical analysis legible. I provide accounts of the Wright brothers and how they came to understand the principles of flight. The advances in aviation in those early decades were phenomenal, but the actual physical conditions of flight in the 1920s might surprise and startle twenty-first century readers, who need that description in order to appreciate the hesitation of the public to consider flight. In order to understand Earhart’s accomplishments, for instance, it is necessary to understand the limitations she faced, her relationship with her publicity-savvy husband, and the fact that she struggled to gain sponsorship for her flights. Earhart’s financial struggles prompted her to attempt ever-riskier flights and to make a spectacle of herself in order to fund her flying. In order to understand the accomplishments of the Tuskegee Airmen, to cite another example, it is helpful to have eyewitness accounts of the Jim Crow South that describe how its rules hindered black pilots from getting licenses and how oppressive this climate was for air-minded blacks compared to the climate in Chicago. The story of the Tuskegee Airmen cannot be fully appreciated without understanding the role that the Roosevelts played, and public memory has drawn an oversimplified version of the Roosevelts’ involvement in Tuskegee; the reality was much more complicated. Therefore, in Chapter Four, I describe the Roosevelts’ visits to Alabama and the complicated relationship they had with Booker T. Washington and the Tuskegee Institute, and I describe how the imminent

threat of World War II created the exigency for black pilots. All of these accounts, found primarily within circulating newspapers during this era, bring this poetic world making of that historic discourse to life.

Like Warner, Benedict Anderson provides a conceptual framework for the public sphere by destabilizing a modern geography demarcated by fixed lines on a map and replacing it with demarcations inspired by the social practices, texts, and discourses of particular groups of people, as a way to define the borders of a country.⁴³ The imagined community is one that is defined by text and nationalism, not fixed borders. Instead of nationalism, what becomes common or definitional are the shared beliefs and values that emerge from imagined relationships.

The citizens of the air that I identify and describe were all citizens of the United States. Their citizenship, however, reflected an airmindedness that got them to participate in the risk of flying. There was also a level of patriotism involved in flying. At the turn of the century, there was a race among nations—particularly France, Germany, England, and the United States—to be the first to invent the airplane. The Wrights claimed to be the first to invent sustained, controlled flight, and they did so within a competitive environment, particularly between U.S. and French aviators. For the purposes of my project, it is important not just that humanity gained the ability to fly in 1903, but also that it was two Americans who accomplished this feat first. The citizens of the air that I study were American. Warner acknowledges that citizenship can be an entity independent of institutional affiliation, but in my project, citizenship must be understood in relation to relevant regulations by federal and sometimes military institutions. Ever since the Air

⁴³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2006).

Commerce Act of 1926, flying has been a regulated activity, and those participating in it have been screened and licensed. Warner does consider the barriers presented by institutions, but for him, they are just possibilities; in my project, they are not optional.⁴⁴

Counterpublics

According to Warner, a counterpublic “maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status.”⁴⁵ While counterpublics share similar communities and cultural traditions, they also share the barriers of individual and institutional racism, and limited access to educational and economic opportunities. A search for counterpublics in aviation history reveals that it was white women and communities of color who were excluded from invitations to flight. From the first circulation of news about the Wright brothers’ feat in Kitty Hawk, human flight appears to have been intended for white male pilots; other demographic groups threatened to impose on this sacred space, or, worse, threatened the safety of those below.

Race and gender are civic identities that both intersect with and diverge from the air-minded identity. My focus in Chapter Three, on perhaps the most famous air-minded woman of the Golden Age of Aviation, Amelia Earhart, demands a consideration of how her identity as a woman—a woman noted for her androgyny—helped to shape her experiences. Julia T. Wood argues that gender, as parsed in feminist scholarship, cannot be studied apart from “other aspects of identity and cultural life.”⁴⁶ This dilemma is

⁴⁴ See Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, Chapter Two.

⁴⁵ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, p. 119.

⁴⁶ Julia T. Wood, “On the Eve of *Women’s Studies in Communication’s* 40 Year Anniversary,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 37.3 (2014): 246-48; p. 246.

particularly pointed in most analyses of Earhart, which tend to focus either on her feminism (to the exclusion of her flying), or on her aviation career (without regard for the particular constraints she experienced as a woman pilot in the 1930s). To situate such constraints within their historical context, I heed the lessons of Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and her elucidation of the double bind experienced by public women and the lessons of Robin Jensen et al., who have argued that Earhart endures as a “transcendent persona” who utilized her “symbolic capital” and performativity to promote her vision for the world.⁴⁷ I build upon this characterization in my study to elevate the political and civic influence not only of Earhart, but also other well-known aviators. In Chapter Four, I focus on race as a civic identity in aviation. Focusing on characterizations of the contributions of the African-American “Tuskegee Airmen” of World War II, that chapter analyzes texts, reports, and speeches through Kirt Wilson’s theoretical analysis of race relations in the U.S. and his definition of a “rhetoric of equality,” or a “rhetoric of place,”⁴⁸ in order to evaluate the role that race played in discourses about the black pilots. The dream of flight was not one among whites alone. African Americans during the 1920s and 1930s identified flying and airmindedness as part of the rhetorical construction of the New Negro.⁴⁹ My project, therefore, builds on the work of Communication scholars and critical theorists in order to re-enliven the messages of safety and risk that circulated among the citizens of the air in the early decades of human motorized aviation.

⁴⁷ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, “What Really Distinguishes and/or Ought to Distinguish Feminist Scholarship in Communication Studies,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 11.1 (1988): 4-5; and Robin Jensen, Erin F. Doss, Claudia I. Janssen, and Sherrema A. Bower, “Theorizing the Transcendent Persona: Amelia Earhart’s Vision in *The Fun of It*,” *Communication Theory* 20 (2010): 1-20.

⁴⁸ Kirt Wilson, *The Reconstruction Desegregation Debate: The Politics of Equality and the Rhetoric of Place, 1870-1875* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State U P, 2002), pp. 7-8.

⁴⁹ Eric K. Watts, *Hearing the Hurt* (Tuscaloosa, AL: U of Alabama P), p. 11.

Circulating Texts

While critical rhetorical inquiry extends far beyond the podium, methodologically there remains an imperative for critics of rhetoric to justify how and why they have brought together certain circulating texts within a piece of rhetorical criticism. This project's object of study is represented in the newspaper articles, news magazines, archival texts, and historic sites that circulated within and constituted the social imaginary of flight. Without the natural boundaries of a speech to delimit a study, such knitting together of related but disparate texts must be made transparent. When a speech functions as the primary rhetorical artifact, then any newspaper articles, photographs, or administrative documents, for example, can be identified and worked with as the context related to the critic's primary text or object of study.

In an analysis that seeks to “unframe” these existing rhetorical models, Jenny Edbauer traced a rhetorical lineage of “public distribution” studying how they became oversimplified by sender-receiver-text models.⁵⁰ Edbauer extended her analysis beyond the confines of “situations” to more porous “affective ecologies.” Instead of funneling rhetorical analysis into the confines of one situation—a fixed entity with fixed conditions—that public formation can be constituted through an “ecological model,” one defined by an “ongoing circulation process” with theoretical commitments to a “distributed emergence” and networks that can be interpreted by their movement and connections.⁵¹ Edbauer offered an “ecological model” that reclaimed rhetoric from the constraint of situations. If there are to be useful rhetorical models, she argued, they must

⁵⁰ Jenny Edbauer, “Unframing Models of Public Distribution: From Rhetorical Situation to Rhetorical Ecologies,” *Rhetoric Society of America* 35.4 (2009): 5-24.

⁵¹ Edbauer, “Unframing Models,” p. 13.

respond to the “temporal, historical, and lived fluxes” of everyday life. This “rhetorical publicness” is the result of a circulation of texts that Charles Taylor associated with the formation of popular belief and philosophies.⁵²

It behooves critics of rhetoric to justify why they link together the particular texts they have chosen. One way in which to justify such rhetorical inquiry between and among texts has been by the cultural myths and ideologies of geographic place. Constituted publics and their beliefs can also be identified by shared political beliefs. This kind of rhetorical construction can be witnessed within rhetorical criticism from the mid-1990s in Kathryn Olson and Tom Goodnight’s analysis of the public controversy between pro- and anti-fur advocates.⁵³ Interpreting social controversy bolsters understandings for textual movement that travels “from the ground up.”⁵⁴ Summing up and interpreting the parts of a larger discourse afford the promise of seeing the big picture, be it controversy or other social concerns.

Controversy, according to Olson and Goodnight, spawns rhetorical engagements that determine the scope of their respective public and private spheres.⁵⁵ Instead of being able to determine the limits of controversy by contiguous borders or by a particular event, any “arguer” who invents alternatives to established social conventions embodies the

⁵² Edbauer, “Unframing Models,” p. 9.

⁵³ Kathryn M. Olson and G. Thomas Goodnight, “Entanglements of Consumption, Cruelty, Privacy, and Fashion: The Social Controversy Over Fur,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80.3 (1994): 249-76.

⁵⁴ Olson and Goodnight, “Entanglements,” p. 249.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

greater controversy.⁵⁶ The boundaries of a controversy are not limited by location, but rather travel pluralistically, following many different paths at once.

While Olson and Goodnight's analysis reflects demarcation and contestation of boundaries within circulating texts, they must also be scrutinized by their patterns of recognition and representation. Burke explains that the dialectic affords "brief excursions" from any one meaning, to a newly constituted one from its two terms. Burke elaborates on such mergers as "near" and "far" and how they reflect one concept of "distance." Both terms maintain the integrity of their own meaning, even after the collapse of their separate meanings. And sometimes, the meaning of one term becomes concealed after being paired with another term. This question is essential to how the dialectic of risk and safety can be evidenced within the three iconic stories of flight.

Social Imaginaries and the Social Imaginary of Flight

Since the publication of *Modern Social Imaginaries* in 2004, Communication scholarship has found useful intersections with political philosopher Charles Taylor, as Edbauer's research proves. Taylor points to the change in societies since the vertical, hierarchical world of monarchies gave way to the horizontal structure of democracies. With this book, he issues a call to a new kind of inquiry, into what he calls the "social imaginary" which is constituted by a set of beliefs embodied and espoused by a group of people. He is not necessarily focused on discourse, but on the mobility of beliefs and philosophies—how they travel and how they come to shape society. The shift he identifies with the onset of democratic societies brought the possibility that beliefs could be communicated across and among people, as opposed to by edict or dictate from above,

⁵⁶ Ibid.

or from a philosopher. Beliefs, he said, arise organically from the people and travel from person to person. In its early days, flight provided a way for people to imagine being able to travel at high speed in any direction they wanted to, much like beliefs and everyday perspectives move with greater mobility in Taylor's imaginary. The very image of an airplane is, arguably, a visual metonym for human achievement and the triumph of ingenuity, bravery, and technology over nature. What in this project I call the "social imaginary of flight" is all of the social beliefs and perspectives that people during the Golden Age of Aviation, up through the beginning of World War II, associated with being up in the air: that flying was a transformative experience—that they could return from flight as different people—and that they could enjoy lasting benefits in their daily lives from having flown. These lasting benefits could have included opportunities for happiness, adventure, employment, and the new perspective gained from having seen the world from above. It was the air-minded—the people whom I call citizens of the air—who helped to construct this heretofore-nonexistent public sphere. These people were more than just a public. I call them citizens to acknowledge their particular agency; they, after all, put themselves at risk in order to become a part of this burgeoning public sphere. In formulating this idea, I liberally borrow from Taylor, who has helped us understand that we are all participants in how we see and interact with the world.

In 1903, the year the Wright brothers made their first successful flights, the social imaginary of flight that I represent in this study became a democratic proposition. When the Wrights first embarked on breaking the code and solving the problem of flight, they assumed they would be participating in a sport. However, they soon discovered that they would need the backing of science and industry to be successful in their quest to solve the

problem of flight. In 1905, when they found that they could pilot their planes sitting up and could therefore accommodate passengers, they began to see their invention's commercial potential. Soon thereafter they acknowledged the potential military application of the new technology and began trying to sell their planes to American and European militaries. All along, the Wrights had to be strategic about keeping the invention of their aircraft, and their story about the first flights in 1903, in the eye of the public. While their invention had no real peer within the social imaginary of flight, the brothers had to keep their story in circulation in order to be credited with and celebrated as the inventors of human powered flight.

With the invention of human flight, questions about its safety arose on at least three different levels: the level of administrators, the level of aviators, and the level of everyday Americans witnessing the formation of this new mode of transportation. These questions represent what circulated in the social imaginary of flight in its earliest days. Administrators asked practical questions about legislation: Should the sky be demarcated? Who owned the sky? Does altitude affect health? Should women fly when they are menstruating? What types of questions should aviation reporters ask, and what kinds of stories should they tell? What benefits could be reaped from this newly opened space, and how could it be legislated? How should pilots be trained? How could landings be predicted? How should pilots be licensed? Who should be allowed to become a licensed pilot?

Aviators asked their own kinds of questions in the earliest days of flight, when there were few schools and no manuals: How do I afford a plane? How do I learn how to fly? What do I pack for the journey? Who do I bring along? Additionally, the questions

asked by white and black pilots were very different. Black pilots would have wondered who might have helped them if their plane landed off course? What might put the pilot in harm's way, both up in the sky and back on the ground?

Aside from the wonder of flight, citizens of the air were concerned about the safety of flight. In the earliest days of aviation, planes flew very low. Everyday Americans certainly wondered, for instance, whether an airplane might fall on their house. Landing presented its own set of challenges. Would the aircraft get tangled up in electrical wires flying over a neighborhood on the way to a runway? Would navigational aids be reliable? Before the infrastructure of flight was built, there were not enough runways. Would highways and city streets need to be commandeered by an airplane landing?

The period I study in my project really ends with World War II, even though I pay attention to the way that public memory keeps these stories in circulation. The types of questions that arose in the social imaginary of flight changed radically with the onset of commercial air travel. It was no longer a radical concept that a human being could travel like a bird. Over time, the distances people traveled by airplane and the ease with which they traveled and the cost of traveling made the experience more and more commonplace. My project seeks to animate the beliefs and discussions that circulated in those earliest years of human aviation, before mass adoption of commercial flight.

In the chapters that follow, I focus on three iconic stories from these early decades of flight and examine how they circulated. Taylor identified the kinds of texts that might circulate in an imaginary, and he thus sanctions the study of stories and legends and

images, like the ones I study.⁵⁷ He acknowledges that the imaginary is comprised of beliefs based on stories that may never have been true, but nonetheless have been influential to the public. Taylor's social imaginary is constituted by people's imaginations and by the everyday interactions of groups of people as evidenced in stories, legends, images, and common understandings through the circulation of texts. In the early days of flight, everyday Americans were seeing people doing something that they did not fully understand. The mere act of flight was so exotic that there was a desire to join aviators in the air (even though few could do so). The ones who did get the opportunity to become aviators were glorified.

Taylor writes of a social "embeddedness" to one's identity that comes out of such conceptions of reality.⁵⁸ My study adopts Taylor's premise, that there are rhetorical perspectives to be gleaned from the circulation of texts and images. In the circulation and recirculation of texts, my study finds the larger public perspectives about risk and safety during the early period of aviation and how they were negotiated by public memory.

Chapter Summaries

In each chapter, I interpret the circulation and recirculation of one iconic story of flight, and how that story contributed to the rhetorical construction of flight's safety. I point to the texts and images that accomplished this task and that have come to shape the social imaginary of flight.

Chapter Two: The Wright Brothers and the Origin Story of Flight. That Orville and Wilbur Wright were the first pilots to successfully accomplish controlled, motorized

⁵⁷ See Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke U P, 2004), p. 23.

⁵⁸ See Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, p. 55.

flight in their biplane on December 17, 1903 has been a source of national and state pride. The story of those first four flights on that windy December day on the Outer Banks has become what I call “the origin story of flight.” The fact that the Wrights were two hardworking, methodical preacher’s sons from the Midwest seemed to suggest that their invention was something that everyday Americans who valued safety over risk could embrace. Before the Wrights, the inventors who had attempted flight had all been eccentric, wealthy adventurers. In this chapter, I put in context the Wrights’ origin story of flight, review the competing narratives and subplots that got drowned out as the Wrights’ claims became popularly adopted, and track the journey of their story over one hundred years as it circulated through newspapers and in politician’s speeches, and in the construction and development of the National Parks Historic Site on the Outer Banks that commemorates and documents the origin story. As this chapter demonstrates, the story was a touchstone for many subsequent milestones in aviation: from Lindbergh’s accomplishments, to the expansion of commercial flight during the 1960s, to the 1969 landing on the moon, to the centennial celebration in 2003. Alongside the circulation of the story, I consider three events that threatened to tarnish in the Wrights’ image or destabilize their claim: the first air passenger death in a plane piloted by Orville Wright, Glenn Curtiss’s flight of failed competitor Samuel Langley’s Aerodrome in 1912, and the relocation of the 1903 flyer to London in 1928 after a skirmish with the Smithsonian. My detailed treatment of the Wright Brothers National Memorial explores the evolving nature of the origin story of flight and its public memory. This chapter can be read as a prequel to the two subsequent chapters: the shaping of the origin story of flight inspired other fliers who incorporated the legacy of the Wright brothers into their own rhetorical

platforms. Despite the many threats and challenges from other aviators, the Wright brothers' iconic story of flight has remained intact.

Chapter Three: *Earhart: Reassuring a Skittish Public of Flight's Safety.* This chapter highlights the circulating texts of the 1920s and 1930s that related to Earhart's nine-year aviation career. The attention she garnered after her disappearance bolstered her iconicity in the public imaginary, but overshadowed her achievements. During her lifetime, Earhart played a significant role in the development of the commercial air industry as both spokeswoman and cheerleader tasked with reassuring the American public of the 1920s and 1930s that flying was safe. The fame she garnered from her spectacular feats gave her a platform and a ready-made audience, and with a public relations-savvy spouse, she wrote three memoirs, delivered lectures, and gave interviews to ladies' magazines. Unlike the discourses and texts of record-setting male pilots, such as Lindbergh or Wiley Post, those of Earhart's aviation career reflect not only her achievements as a record-setting pilot but also a persistent rhetorical assignment of reassuring a mostly non-flying public to consider risking flight. It is ironic that the aviatrix who became a spokesperson of the commercial aviation industry and encouraged the public to see flying as safe, while downplaying its inherent risks, became, in her disappearance, an example of the risks involved in flying.

Chapter Four: *The Tuskegee Airmen and the Color Line in the Skies.* The public memory of the so-called Tuskegee Airmen has come to serve a different function than have historical narratives. Chapter Four sets aside the public memory of the Tuskegee Airmen in order to examine texts related to the "Tuskegee Experiment": a social and military experiment in World War II to determine if African Americans were sufficiently

competent to fly in combat. However, the collective term “Tuskegee Airmen” became popularized ten years after the war’s end, and, since then, has been conscripted into the broader public imaginary. The heroic narrative of the Tuskegee Airmen became a “safer” version of the Tuskegee Experiment in the way it omitted specific acts of racism during WWII. Rhetorical inquiry can afford further understandings of how public memory participates in ongoing negotiations with a historical record.

The stories that circulated about the Tuskegee Airmen after WWII highlighted the claim that they “never lost a bomber.” Setting aside for a moment the fact that this was both an exaggeration and an unfair standard to be held to, this claim telegraphed the message that the white bomber pilots who flew for the United States in WWII were safer for having the black escort pilots who looked out for them. I read this claim through what Kirt Wilson calls the “rhetoric of place”: that white America expected blacks to know their place.

Public Memory

This study could have focused solely on evidences of the circulation of texts during the Golden Age of Aviation, but I found it useful to consider some of the texts’ recirculation in public memory and how they illustrate the way that the shared beliefs within the social imaginary carry on. In order to think critically about how particular stories about flight have served as symbolic messages of safety, this rhetorical project incorporates public memory scholarship. The work of Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott offers insights as to how these iconic stories of flight might have operated within public memory, particularly the story of the Wrights as commemorated at the

Wright Brothers National Memorial.⁵⁹ Dickinson, Blair, and Ott's *Places of Public Memory* situates the work of public memory firmly within a rhetorical tradition. The chapter opens with a definition of rhetoric as "the study of discourses, events, objects, and practices that attends to their character as meaningful, legible, partisan, and consequential."⁶⁰ By this definition, the authors affirm the need for rhetorical study, and, like Edbauer and Taylor, evince an understanding of publics and how texts circulate and extend beyond formal public address and how they relate to one another and influence the public sphere. As a result of such circulation, rhetorical stances form, which in my study is representative of the social imaginary of flight.⁶¹

Dickinson, Blair, and Ott consider six "consensual assumptions of public memory," all relevant to the recirculation of the iconic stories of flight in my study:

First, public memory reflects present exigencies, not representations of the past. V. William Balthrop, Blair, and Neil Michel's analysis of the World War II Memorial illustrates this point in a commemorative process of the WWII Memorial, that says "more about the present than about the past."⁶² In this memorial, the exigencies of the present are channeled through particular current ways of remembering the war, from the vantage point of a new millennium. All acts of commemoration engage in this practice of relating

⁵⁹ Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott, "Introduction" to *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials*, ed. Dickinson, Blair, and Ott (Tuscaloosa, AL: U of Alabama P, 2010), pp. 1-56; see esp. p. 6.; and Kendall R. Phillips, ed., *Framing Public Memory* (Tuscaloosa, AL: U of Alabama P, 2004), p. 2.

⁶⁰ Dickinson, Blair, and Ott, eds., *Places of Public Memory*, p. 2.

⁶¹ Dickinson, Blair, and Ott, eds., *Places of Public Memory*, p. 3.

⁶² V. William Balthrop, Carole Blair, and Neil Michel, "The Presence of the Present: Hijacking 'the Good War'," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 74.2 (2010): 170-207.

the past to a current audience by interpreting history through the needs of the contemporary moment.

Second, public memory narrates a public identity.⁶³ Chapter Four of this study reckons with questions of collective identity and public memory in the exploration of all that is obscured when individual black pilots become remembered as Tuskegee Airmen. Any individual acts of racism, bravery, or fear become insignificant in light of this one united face to flight.

Third, public memory is “animated by affect,” but most explorations have been misguided either as “irreducible” or as an opportunity for “phenomenological explorations of trauma.”⁶⁴ Both are insufficient in that not all responses to public memory are ones founded in trauma, nor is all public memory born of a traumatic event. Instead, there is always a great range of emotions, including that of apathy or neglect. Somewhere between emotion and dispassion, trauma and everyday, lies the stance of inquiry. Such questions animate the public memory of Amelia Earhart, which is more obsessed with the questions prompted by her disappearance and less with the successes of her aviation career.

Fourth, public memory, like the greater scope of rhetorical inquiry, is “partial, partisan, and thus frequently contested.”⁶⁵ Certain memories are emphasized over others. As is in the case of my study, certain stories of flight are privileged over others, for the same reason that flying has necessitated a focus on safety in order to convince the public to take the risk of flight. Public memory is “partial, partisan, and frequently contested”

⁶³ Dickinson, Blair, and Ott, eds., *Places of Public Memory*, p. 7.

⁶⁴ Dickinson, Blair, and Ott, eds., *Places of Public Memory*, p. 7.

⁶⁵ Dickinson, Blair, and Ott, eds., *Places of Public Memory*, p. 9.

because within a circulation of texts, certain people and institutions hold the power and the sway to influence how stories get told.

Fifth, public memory depends upon “language, ritual performances, communication technologies, objects, and places” to affirm and lend meaning to the “infrastructure” of such collective memory.⁶⁶ All three stories of flight continue to recirculate as a result of such infrastructure, reified by historic sites and the display of their airplanes, along with regular accounts of their successes in museum exhibits, books, periodicals, and newspapers.

Finally, “public memory has a history” and is situated within particular “cultural practices” and intellectual perspectives.⁶⁷ The many biographies of Amelia Earhart reflect not only a chronology of events, but also their relationship to cultural expectations and aspirations of the era in which they were scribed. One biography considers how the choice to put Earhart on the cover of *Ms. Magazine* responded to the exigencies of feminism, while another biography’s portrayal of Earhart as victim to the abusive authority of her husband, George Putnam, draws out a whole different set of concerns related to women, domesticity, and the roles they could play in public life. Both portrayals speak as much, if not more, to the public memory of Earhart during the time in which both were circulated.

Places of Public Memory makes clear that, most often, there remains a “trace” of the “real event” in all that is circulated about a historical figure or event.⁶⁸ Such traces are evident in all three iconic stories of flight. The photograph of Orville Wright prone on his

⁶⁶ Dickinson, Blair, and Ott, eds., *Places of Public Memory*, p. 10.

⁶⁷ Dickinson, Blair, and Ott, eds., *Places of Public Memory*, p. 10.

⁶⁸ Dickinson, Blair, and Ott, eds., *Places of Public Memory*, p. 13.

aircraft evidences the trace necessary to propel and remind the public of the origin story of flight. Representations of Earhart's departure from Miami on June 2, 1937, offer the trace of her possible return. The shooting down of a German plane by a black pilot provides evidence of victorious air combat, singularly claimed by one of the Tuskegee Airmen. But how these stories circulate and strengthen the identity of one historical figure or a collective identity becomes the work of public memory.

In my study, I pay more attention to the social imaginary of human powered flight—more specifically three iconic stories of flights—than their public memory because, with the exception of the origin story of flight, public memory has come to redefine or obscure the original circulation of texts of Amelia Earhart and the black pilots of WWII. However, it is essential to engage with their public memory in order to see how the story has been appropriated and adapted over time. This work, then, contributes to Communication research as rhetorical analysis that stands at the pivot point of theoretical concerns regarding the social imaginary and public memory.

Methodology and Terminology

For my project, I conducted extensive archival and historic site research. Gaining proficiency with the more than forty years of history covered by my three iconic stories of flight has been essential to the rhetorical inquiry. At each research site, I focused on those texts that represent aspects of the rhetorical construction of the three iconic stories of flight's safety. This journey included visits to Amelia Earhart's birthplace in Atchison, Kansas; the 99s⁶⁹ Museum in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; the National Air and Space Museum Archives; the Library of Congress; the American Heritage Center in Laramie,

⁶⁹ In 1928, Earhart founded and served as the first president of the 99s, an organization that continues to encourage and support women aviators.

Wyoming; the Tuskegee University Archives; and the National Park Service Archives at Tuskegee Airmen Historic Site. While in Tuskegee, Alabama, I traveled to Montgomery to conduct research visits at the Air Force Historical Research Agency at Maxwell Air Force Base. I made several trips to the Wright Brothers National Memorial and conducted research at the nearby Outer Banks History Center. In Dayton, Ohio, I visited several sites at the Dayton Aviation Heritage National Historic Park and the National Museum of the United States Air Force. Additional archival visits included the Women Air Service Pilots (WASP) Collection at Texas Woman's University, the Amelia Earhart Papers at Purdue University, the Robert H. Hinckley Collection at the University of Utah, the Collett E. Woolman Collection at Louisiana State University Archives, and the Charles A. Lindbergh Papers at the Missouri History Museum.

This rhetorical inquiry of flight's safety depends upon the texts and images found at the above archival sites. How they circulate and recirculate to shape public perspectives and beliefs about safe flying is what I refer to as the social imaginary of flight. This naming represents the union of Taylor's theoretical construct of the social imaginary and my study's particular concern with how human flight required constant and changing reassurances of its safety in order to be widely adopted by the public.

While I examined both public and private communication during archival visits, the texts of this study are mostly public documents from 1903 to 1945, meaning there is evidence that they circulated, as Taylor would say, among strangers. However, the private communications that I discovered informed my understanding of the period and of the development of commercial aviation. Telegrams sent and received by Earhart, for example, give clues regarding her public speaking duties and showcase her daily

logistical negotiations with her husband and with other colleagues, such as Eugene Vidal, the director of the Bureau of Air Commerce. The Wright brothers were prolific diarists and correspondents. Much of their correspondence did not circulate until after Orville Wright's death, making them influential to their public memory, but only after 1948. Some of these observations have been included in this study.

I identify the three stories of this study as iconic. They have reached a wide audience and continue to recirculate in public memory. This appropriation of what it means to be iconic follows Hariman and Lucaites's logic of iconicity, that like the photographs in *No Caption Needed*, the iconic stories of flight are "recognized as such immediately," and that they do the "heavy lifting required to change public opinion," which in the case of these particular iconic stories of flight has influenced public opinion with regard to flight's safety.⁷⁰ I borrow Hariman and Lucaites's observations about the appropriation of iconic photographs—how images become part of our everyday culture—to further define how iconic stories have circulated within the social imaginary of flight.⁷¹ While there are other iconic stories of early human flight, the three in this study attain the same measures of iconicity as the photographs identified by Hariman and Lucaites. Just as photographs get appropriated to frame and amplify tenets of a Democratic Society, so too these iconic stories of flight that evidence perceptions of safety.

⁷⁰ Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, pp. 12-13.

⁷¹ Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, pp. 35-36.

Limitations of this Dissertation

It goes without saying that Charles Lindbergh is a central figure in aviation history. He was internationally famous, wrote five memoirs, and inspired a generation.⁷² He was the superhero of the 1920s. If I were not focused on the dialectic of risk and safety in the manner in which I am, I might have included a separate chapter on Lindbergh. This dissertation is strengthened by his presence in each of the chapters. That being said, Lindbergh's contribution to a discourse of safety was limited to the safety checklist he made for pilots.⁷³ He saw himself as a record-breaking pilot and an inspiration to the public, but he broke records without reassuring fearful flyers of flight's safety. He was a solitary figure and he did not make it a point to address the issues of the public's safety in flight.

A longer project would also examine the commemorative sites marking the contributions of Earhart and the Tuskegee Airmen, since those sites tell a story about the aviators' role in public memory. Although I do not have space in this project to treat these important sites, I acknowledge the ways that they influenced me. The Tuskegee site, in particular, deserves treatment, but since it is relatively new and in a state of development right now, it did not seem prudent to analyze it here. When I first visited the Tuskegee site in 2010, the visitor's center was a temporary structure, no larger than a one-room schoolhouse, with an introductory film and a small exhibit, and a book listing biographical information about the airmen. Since then, the site has added two hangars,

⁷² See Scott A. Berg, *Lindbergh* (New York: Putnam, 1998).

⁷³ Lindbergh's daughter, Reeve Lindbergh, said, "Some people believe the most important thing Charles Lindbergh contributed to the field of aviation was not the flight in the *Spirit of Saint Louis* but the safety check list"; qtd. in David Courtwright, *Sky As Frontier: Adventure, Aviation and Empire* (New York: Texas A & M U P, 2005), p. 74.

each housing a separate exhibit. The focus of the site, particularly with the addition of the second hangar, is the heroic narrative of the Tuskegee Airmen, and over the course of my several visits there, I became convinced that to do justice to the enormously complicated history of the Tuskegee Airmen Historic Site would send me beyond the scope of this project. The Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site will eventually warrant the same treatment I give in Chapter Two to the Wright Brothers National Memorial.

A third limitation of my project concerns the treatment of air combat. In my prospectus, I set a research boundary that I soon realized was naive. I said that, “while effective representations of flight do come from fighter pilots, I will not focus on military flight in this project and will instead concentrate on exemplary missions in civilian life.”⁷⁴ This statement suggests that it was possible to interpret discourses of flight’s safety to the exclusion of air combat. For a long time, I tried to avoid representations of combat. In order to represent the story of the Tuskegee Airmen prior to their 1943 entrance in WWII, I emphasized the Civilian Pilot Training Program and domestic flight training and its public memory. However, after reviewing black and white newspapers from 1938 to 1945, I became fascinated by the purported relationship between the white bomber pilots and crew and the black escort pilots—and also the expectations white bomber pilots had of their black escort pilots. I saw how this relationship was represented, most especially in newspaper articles about air combat. While I had little prior knowledge about military aircraft or air combat, I knew that it would be irresponsible to sidestep representations of air battle. With regard to air combat, there are still concerns about safety. After all, it was not just commercial air passengers who hoped

⁷⁴ Julia Scatliff O’Grady, “The Social Imaginary of Flight: Exemplary Missions as Trope of Social Uplift,” 2011.

for safety; it was also the bomber pilots. The presence of the escorts offered some level of reassurance regarding their safety while in combat. Chapter Four deals with issues of flight safety, but does so in a manner that chapters Two and Three cannot.

Conclusion

To date, motorized human flight has been interpreted within Communication research primarily as a phenomenon characterized by possible or actual disaster. In this study, the risk associated with flight has been tempered and mediated through rhetorical constructions of safety. The study has been inspired by Burke's framing of the dialectical relationship between the codependent states of risk and safety in the telling and retelling of three stories that make us feel safer about flying. The stories—the Wright brothers and the origin story of flight, the story of Earhart's aviation career, and the heroic narrative of the Tuskegee Airmen—contributed to the public's belief in flight's safety. This study sets out to demonstrate that taking the risk of flying has been the result not only of technological advancement but also confidence-building narratives. This study has the potential to encourage future research on how stories about risk, adventure or technological advances have the power to shape the public's perception about the safety of those pursuits.

Chapter Two

THE WRIGHT BROTHERS AND THE ORIGIN STORY OF FLIGHT

“We had taken up aeronautics as a sport. We reluctantly entered upon the scientific side of it.”
—Orville and Wilbur Wright¹

Most of the inventors who built and flew the earliest aircraft models could be described either as quixotic, madcap, or flamboyant, or as clever, wealthy adventurers. The earliest devices—hot air balloons, dirigibles, and gliders—along with their

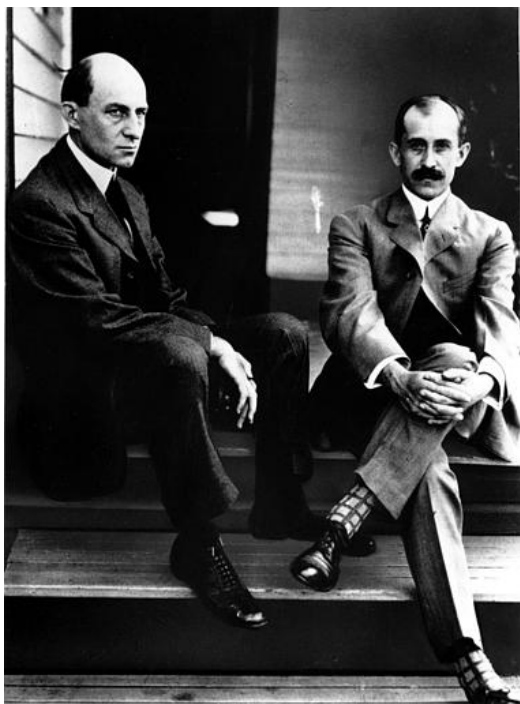


Figure 1: Orville and Wilbur Wright, 1909
(Library of Congress)

passengers, made it possible to enter the skies during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some of these early, lighter-than-air aircraft made extensive trips and elevated to impressive heights. However, inventing heavier-than-air aircraft that could successfully get up in the air—with a man or woman aboard and then safely land—eluded every one but two brothers. These brothers came to be known to the public as a pair of hardworking, sober preacher’s sons from the Midwest who worked

¹ Orville and Wilbur Wright, “The Wright Brothers’ Aeroplane: with pictures from photographs supplied by the authors” in *New Century Magazine* 5 (Sept. 1908), n.p., 15 pp. The photograph featured on this page of Orville and Wilbur Wright is archived at the Library of Congress. I have not sought institutional permission to publish the images in this dissertation because they are in the public domain or are archived in government repositories, and all follow the guidelines of the Fair Use Statute, which follows trends in court decisions that define fair use in academic settings.

with singular focus and who shunned the limelight.

When the Wright brothers first decided to dedicate themselves to solving “the problem of flight,” as it was called at the turn of the twentieth century, they first assessed the state of aeronautics.² At the time, in the U.S., the best-known and most amply funded attempt at advancing human powered flight came from Samuel Langley. Langley, the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, had garnered a great deal of public attention for having invented—and, in 1896, having successfully launched—his steam-powered aircraft, the Aerodrome. The Wrights acknowledged Langley’s—and others’—contributions, but pointed to three critical problems that needed to be solved before a human could safely fly. Putting aside for a moment the technical terms for the items on their wish list—such as “wing warping” and “airfoil curvature”—the Wrights’ greatest contribution was, perhaps, their recognition that the pilot needed to be able to exercise control over the aircraft.³ With six years of research and experimentation, they broke the code.

Their first successful motorized flights in Kitty Hawk proved that they had begun to solve the “problem of flight.” However, their success was not readily apparent to a public used to stories of lighter-than-air balloons and dirigibles that went up thousands of feet in the air and stayed up for a long time. Indeed, Alberto Santos-Dumont’s stunning flights around the Eiffel Tower in his dirigible in 1901 seemed to have pushed the envelope with regard to the public’s understanding of human flight. Dumont’s flights

² The “problem of flight” circulated frequently during this era to represent the hopes and concerns faced by early aviators in their quest for greater and greater altitude and control. See “The Problem of Flight,” *Washington Post* (May 6, 1907), p. 6.

³ Tom D. Crouch and Peter L. Jakab, *The Wright Brothers and the Invention of the Aerial Age* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2003), p. 48.

around the towering structure of the 1889 World's Fair honored the traditions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century balloonists who always flew in the whirr of spectacle.⁴ That is why when the Wrights successfully achieved their goal of human powered flight on December 17, 1903, near remote and sandy dunes with the few eyewitnesses, the reading public expected to hear about spectacle, not about four flights that that flew only 852 feet. The earliest newspaper report greatly exaggerated their accomplishment citing the brothers had soared three miles over land and sea.⁵

How could the Wrights help the public view their simple Flyer as revolutionary—and help it appreciate the invention of human powered flight, despite the fact that their aircraft neither ascended very high nor stayed aloft very long? Since they made their initial, successful flights far away from the crowds that had so often gathered to watch the lighter-than-air feats that preceded their heavier-than-air flights, could they convince the public that the future of human flight was a sober, unglamorous venture that rose above the spectacle and sport that had characterized the efforts of their predecessors and contemporaries? This chapter grapples with these questions and follows the rhetorical public conversation that trailed the Wrights' first flights. The circulating texts of the opening decades of the twentieth century tell a fascinating story about the effort and twists and turns that went into crafting an origin story for human flight that has long since entered public memory. The Wrights told and retold their simple tale of their hard work, discipline, and research, and of the resulting first four flights. That simple story came to be adopted as a national touchstone of pride, especially as it was crystallized, interpreted,

⁴ See Alberto Santos-Dumont, *My Airships: The Story of My Life*, 1904 (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1973), p. 68.

⁵ "Flying Machine Soars," *Chicago Tribune* (Dec. 19, 1903), p. 3.

and celebrated at the Wright Brothers National Memorial in Kill Devil Hills, NC. In this chapter, I argue that the circulation and recirculation of the Wright brothers' origin story of flight reframed successful flying as privileging safety over spectacle. While the story about two, methodical, hardworking men from America's heartland, who traveled to a remote location in North Carolina to solve the "problem of flight" was first shared with the public on December 18, 1903, it continues to circulate not only to mark invention but also to genuflect toward the promise, if always provisional, of flight's safety.

Predecessors in Flight

Before focusing on the Wrights and the origin story of flight they crafted, it is helpful to place the Wrights in the context of the greater story of human attempts to fly. Remember the story of Daedalus and Icarus, whose sun-melted waxen wings seemed ever-more cautionary now that the Wright brothers were attempting similar endeavors in Kitty Hawk. The mythology of Icarus presented the spectacle of flight, but also warned that without moderation, flying can end in disaster.

Despite the many disasters, there were successful aerial events along the way that did reinvigorate the seemingly innate longing to gain the perspective of birds. A little more than one hundred years before the Wrights, another pair of brothers, Joseph and Etienne Montgolfier, both French paper manufacturers, began to experiment with hot air balloons. In June 1783, they launched their first balloon in a public demonstration of flight in Annonay, France. Their paper-lined silk hot air balloon flew 1.5 miles for twenty-eight minutes, reaching an altitude of 3,000 feet. The Montgolfiers prepared for their public demonstration by first testing flight with non-human passengers: a sheep, a

duck, and a rooster. They launched the animals up in the air from the palace at Versailles in order to test the strength of their trial balloon.⁶ The Montgolfier brothers are credited with inventing the hot-air balloon, but for this honor they competed amid a field of other French inventors, some who were powering their balloons with helium gas. Public memory can typically accommodate only one inventor (or pair of inventors), and so it was the Montgolfiers who achieved credit for the first successful human flight in a balloon.

⁶ See Thomas Crouch, *Lighter than Air: an Illustrated History of Balloons and Airships* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins U P, 2009), pp. 16-62.



Figure 2: The Montgolfier brothers' hot air balloon flight at Versailles, 1783

A second pair of brothers who also preceded the Wrights—Otto and Gustav Lilienthal from Germany—modeled the kind of rigorous testing that the Wrights would emulate. Otto researched the physics of flight, built his own monoplane glider, and made thousands of test flights, which he and his brother meticulously recorded and studied. In 1889, Otto published his book, *Bird Flight as the Basis of Aviation*, which was the most advanced study of the era about the mechanics of flight.⁷ Wilbur Wright believed that Lilienthal was the most influential thinker and actor in the field of aviation, in part because he continued to let the direct experience of flight inform his research. Otto believed that advances in aviation warranted the taking of risks. When he died from injuries sustained after a glider accident, he was credited as saying from his deathbed that “sacrifices must be made.”⁸ It was on this point that the Wrights disagreed. They intended to solve the “problem of flight” as meticulously, but would temper the possibility for physical risk with measures of safety.

While there were aeronauts like the Wright brothers who bet on gliders to solve the problem of flight, there were still others who banked on dirigibles. Alberto Santos-Dumont, who flew around the Eiffel Tower in a dirigible in 1901, had an aeronautical career that was mixed with high-profile success and failure. He made front-page news in the *New York Times* after a near disaster in Monaco when his dirigible crashed into the Mediterranean Ocean. From his yacht, the Prince of Monaco, who along with a crowd of spectators was watching the flight, rescued Santos-Dumont.⁹ Of his survival, The *Atlanta*

⁷ Lawrence Goldstone, *Birdmen: The Wright Brothers, Glenn Curtiss, and the Battle to Control the Skies* (New York: Ballentine Books, 2014), p. 3.

⁸ Goldstone, *Birdmen*, p. 5.

⁹ “Santos-Dumont’s Mishap,” *New York Times* (Feb. 15, 1902), p. 1.

Constitution said, “Santos-Dumont was more fortunate than Icarus [sic] for it seems that his friends never trusted him,” as they were waiting in the boats to rescue him.¹⁰ The Monaco near-drowning demonstrated the potential peril of all spectacle, when an event designed for the public’s entertainment could just as easily turn into a disaster. Santos-Dumont would have to diversify his tactics, in order to be seen as a viable aeronaut.

After the “mishap,” to quote from the headline in the *New York Times* report, Santos-Dumont diversified his flying campaign in efforts to educate the public about the potential everyday use of flying.¹¹ Just a few months after the accident in Monaco, Santos-Dumont extended his public campaign to the U.S. in order to meet Thomas Edison to discuss the possibility for motorized flight. Santos-Dumont brought along a motor and started it for Edison. But instead of feeling great enthusiasm, Edison said he “did not care to spend time on an invention that was of no commercial value.”¹² Edison’s response seemed consistent with the reaction Santos-Dumont had met from others on his visit to the U.S. It appeared that most did not want to back someone who demonstrated a greater appetite for risk over any sense of reason or business smarts. While Santos-Dumont had developed a motor and had proved his competence as a pilot, he had yet to succeed at convincing the public that human powered flight could be adopted for purposes greater than the spectacle of competition.

¹⁰ “Santos-Dumont in the Role of Icarus,” [sic], *Atlanta Constitution* (Feb. 27, 1902), p. 6.

¹¹ The *Baltimore Sun* included an article about Santos-Dumont’s use of his “Little No. 9 Air Ship” as “practical as an automobile” and how he intended to launch it from a landing stage outside the window of his Paris apartment; See Sterling Heilig, “Santos-Dumont’s Airships,” *Baltimore Sun* (Jul. 12, 1903), p. 12. See also fn. 9 for the *New York Times* headline.

¹² “Santos-Dumont at Edison’s” *Baltimore Sun* (Apr. 14, 1902), p. 2.

Another competitor, the aforementioned Samuel Langley, shared the same proclivity for spectacle as Santos-Dumont. While Langley methodically researched and studied the basic laws of aerodynamics and published a book, *Experiments in Aerodynamics*, in 1891,¹³ he also staged events in order for spectators to view his Aerodrome, a steam-powered flying machine with two pusher propellers that resembled two oversized seagulls flying in formation over a fifty-two-horsepower, five-cylinder radial engine that launched from a houseboat.¹⁴

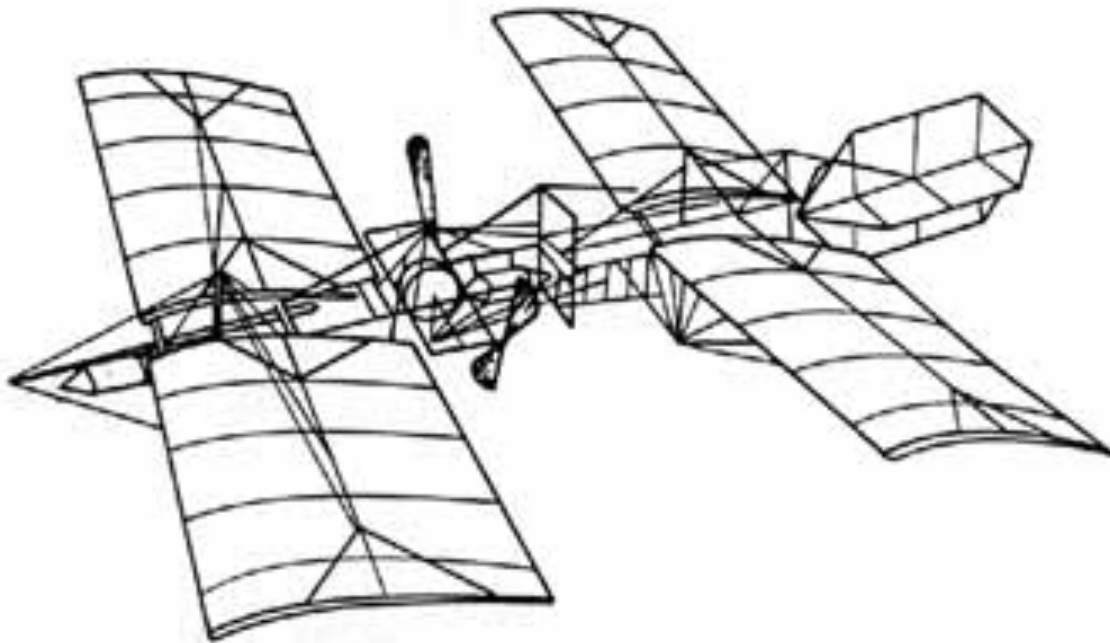


Figure 3: Outline of the Langley Aerodrome (NASA)

¹³ Crouch, *Lighter than Air*, p. 54.

¹⁴ See Langley Aerodrome A, “Smithsonian Institution”; accessed Feb. 7, 2015: http://airandspace.si.edu/collections/artifact.cfm?object=nasm_A19180001000

The aircraft traveled, on average, 3,000 feet through the air at 20-25 mph, from an island in the middle of a lake near Quantico, VA.¹⁵ Unlike the Wright brothers, Langley had ample financial support for his aeronautical pursuits. President McKinley became interested in his experimentation and directed the War Department to give him \$50,000.

When Wilbur Wright wrote to the Smithsonian on May 30, 1899 to inquire into the published research on human aeronautics, he was directed to Langley's book.¹⁶ Langley's career in aeronautics reemerged around the same time that the Wright brothers were planning their motorized flights. On October 7 and on December 8, 1903—just days before the Wrights' first four flights—Langley recruited a pilot to attempt the first manned flight of the Aerodrome. The Aerodrome twice crashed upon takeoff into the Potomac River. After the disaster, the Aerodrome was stored at the Smithsonian.

The Origin Story

On December 17, 1903 at 10:35 a.m., Orville Wright lay prostrate on a heavier-than-air, motored biplane glider for a twelve-second flight in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina.¹⁷ Wilbur took strides alongside the aircraft, as ground control. Wilbur and Orville had asked a member of the local life-saving station to document the first flight. The photograph that John T. Daniels snatched would become iconic:¹⁸

¹⁵ William Baxter, "Samuel P. Langley: Aviation Pioneer" (*Smithsonian Libraries*, n.d.) Web. Subsequent references to this source will be cited as "Samuel P. Langley."

¹⁶ Wilbur Wright to the Smithsonian, May 30, 1899, and June 14, 1899, "Stories From the Smithsonian: The Wright Brothers: Pioneers in Aviation," Smithsonian Institution Archives; accessed Jan. 29, 2015. <http://siarchives.si.edu/history/exhibits/stories/letter-dated-may-30-1899>

¹⁷ The engine was 12 horsepower and 180 pounds.

¹⁸ For the criteria for an iconic photograph, see Robert Hariman and John Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2007), pp. 243-86.



Figure 4: Photograph of the First Flight, Dec. 17, 1903

The brothers alternated as pilots for three more flights, the fourth of which lasted 59 seconds and covered a record 852 feet. As the Wrights paused to consider an even longer flight, a sudden gust of wind mangled the flyer.¹⁹ Later that day, the Wright brothers sent a telegram to their father: “SUCCESS FOUR FLIGHTS.”²⁰ Upon receipt of the telegram, their sister Katharine telegraphed Octave Chanute, an engineer and aviation enthusiast from Chicago and one of the brothers’ greatest promoters. In the next day’s morning

¹⁹ Thomas Crouch, *The Bishop’s Boys: A Life of Wilbur and Orville Wright* (New York: Norton, 1990), p. 269.

²⁰ Ed Dean, “Flying Machine Soars 3 Miles in Teeth of High Wind over Sand Hills and Waves at Kitty Hawk on Carolina Coast,” *Virginian-Pilot* (Dec. 18, 1903), p. 1; qtd. in Crouch, *Bishops’ Boys*, p. 270.

edition, the *Virginian-Pilot* published a story based on that three-word telegram, exaggerating the brothers' feats. In this first public communication of the Wright brothers' origin story of flight, the assumption that flight meant spectacle seemed to lead the *Virginian-Pilot* to vastly overstate the truth.

Stories—mythic or human—endure in public memory. Like no other story of invention, the first four flights of the Wright brothers have circulated throughout the U.S. and abroad, in exclamations such as “twelve seconds that changed the world.”²¹ That story, which lives in public memory, comes to us today as a simple transcription of memory. However, the Wright brothers actually constructed an origin story that not only would represent the wonder of flight but would also enhance the perception of safety in the air.

The Wright brothers knew that in order to be remembered as the inventors of flight and as safe-minded flyers, they had to carefully document their story and share it in a way that would bring them credit for their work. Perhaps they knew that inventors who have a great story to accompany their inventions are more memorable. Rare it is to find a well-crafted story about major advances in transportation history. For example, the name Richard Trevithick (inventor of the steam engine) is obscure, and there is no single person credited with the invention of the automobile. As contrast, Wilbur and Orville Wright had every intention of being remembered.

In order to construct the origin story of flight, the achievement of the Wright brothers has been compared to the advancements and struggles found in the narratives of lighter-than-air aviators. Even though mythological, the figures of Daedalus and Icarus,

²¹ “The Road to First Flight,” Wright Brothers National Memorial, National Park Service, accessed Feb. 3, 2015: <http://www.nps.gov/wrbr/historyculture/theroadtothefirstflight.htm>

by contrast, resonated with the origin story of flight. Daedalus had cautioned his son to fly neither too near the sun nor too close to the water, but it was Icarus who became ecstatic with the ability to fly and forgot his father's warning. Like Daedalus, the Wrights' father, Milton Wright, had inspired his sons' fascination with flying—with the gift of a wooden toy helicopter in 1878.²² Likewise, as a preacher and a bishop, Milton encouraged his sons to use self-discipline and to practice moderation. Unlike Icarus, though, the Wright brothers are remembered for having heeded their father's guidance.

Because I argue that the origin story not only represents the wonder of invention but is also a cautionary tale to the public that flying depends more on the privileging of safety over spectacle, it helps to step back and think about the components of an origin story. One of the first ingredients of the origin story of flight was the Wrights' emphasis on experimentation in a remote and desolate location. The Outer Banks was an ideal location for the Wright brothers' flight experimentations with kites, gliders, and manned aircraft. The only way to access the Outer Banks was by ferry, a sand bar prevented access by commercial vessels. The nearest railroad station and town for provisions was thirty miles away. Kitty Hawk—the site of the first four powered flights— was a fishing community of 300 residents. The village postmaster at Kitty Hawk encouraged the brothers to come, touting in his letter to Orville the “stretch of sandy land one mile by five with a bare hill in center eighty feet high, not a tree or bush anywhere to break the evenness of the wind current.”²³ The postmaster offered the brothers accommodations and the help of the life-saving station. The brothers were attracted to the 200 miles of

²² “Orville Wright’s Story,” Dayton Aviation Heritage, National Park Service, accessed Feb. 7, 2015: <http://www.nps.gov/daav/learn/historyculture/orvillewrightslifestory.htm>

²³ Qtd. in John Hairr, *Outer Banks* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 1999), p. 31.

barrier islands, which sat between the Atlantic Ocean on one side and the Albemarle and Currituck sounds on the other.

On December 14, 1903, three days before their successful flights, Wilbur Wright made his first attempt at flight. After the flyer lifted from a sixty-foot-long monorail, the left wing hit the sand and the aircraft broke into several parts. Instead of continuing on that day, the brothers decided to wait until they could properly repair the flyer and the weather conditions were better.

The weather conditions were considered to be optimal on December 17, 1903, at least from the perspective of wind, which that day had a velocity of 20-27 mph. The wind added potential dangers to flying, and yet, the brothers considered the velocity to be an advantage in the resistance it would provide for landing. When Orville Wright reflected back in 1913 on the first powered flight, and from the vantage point of thousands of subsequent flights since, he said he would never again fly under the wind conditions they endured that day:

I look with amazement upon our audacity in attempting flights with a new and untried machine under such circumstances. Yet faith in our calculations and the design of the first machine, based upon our tables of air pressures, secured by months of careful laboratory work, and confidence in our system of control, developed by three years of actual experience in balancing gliders, had convinced us that the machine was capable of lifting and maintaining itself in the air and that with a little practice it could be safely flown.²⁴

²⁴ Orville Wright, "How We Made the First Flight," *Flying*, Dec. 1913, excerpt found in Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum's online article, "The Wright Brothers, The Invention of the Aerial Age," (Web): http://airandspace.si.edu/exhibitions/wright-brothers/online/classroomActivities/8-12_excerpt.cfm

This characteristic of the Wrights—to make careful calculations and to study the materials and environment obsessively—made them practical, prudent flyers and inventors. By relating this method in their first statement to the public, they demonstrate their eschewal of spectacle. During their early flight trials, they did not believe that human powered flight could be safely achieved if intended to thrill onlookers, the kind of conditions courted by lighter-than air aviators. The Wrights' flyer overturned right after its successful four flights, and crumpled. Thankfully, it took no lives with it and there was no discerning public that would emphasize the near disaster over the success of four flights.

Proof Beyond Doubt

Because the origin story of flight took place in a remote geographic location and far away from any crowds, some form of proof would be required beyond the two brothers' word. There were the men from the life-saving station who witnessed and could vouch for the flights. The Wright brothers arranged for a photograph, which would plant the image of the successfully flying plane in the imaginations of all who saw it in circulation. When John T. Daniels, one of the members of the life-saving station was asked about serving as the photographer, he said he would. At the moment of flight, however, he almost forgot to squeeze the bulb. Similar to the text of the origin story, the photograph demonstrated both the risk and safety in the moment of first flight. The five life-saving station crewmembers and two children stood both behind the Wright Flyer and the camera. The photograph shows the desolation of the windswept, cloudy Outer Banks, and the dark sand where water had previously pooled. The terrain was devoid of

life. In the photograph, Orville is lying prone in the aircraft, in the hip cradle. While it is possible to see his outstretched body, the most prominent feature being the soles of his shoes, with his head obscured. The photograph was taken at lift off, as the Flyer elevated from the rail that were guiding its motorized departure into the air. In contrast to earlier photographs of the gliding experiments of 1901-1902, the flyer on December 17, 1903 barely lifted off the ground. Wilbur ran alongside his brother, a forty-foot run, to hold the wing of the plane steady until it released from the track. Wilbur's stance is active, watchful over his younger brother, as he lies on top of the canvas.

After December 17, 1903

Even though the flights were conducted in secrecy, in order to legitimize the event, the Wright brothers knew their accomplishment had to circulate. Upon receipt of the telegram, "SUCCESS FOUR FLIGHTS," Bishop Wright had his son Lorin contact the editor of the *Dayton Daily News*. The editor, however, evidently deemed a 57 second flight not newsworthy. On December 19, 1903, the *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot* ran an article that was picked up by a few other newspapers about the four flights, saying Wilbur Wright flew for three miles along the ocean. The article also said the aircraft launched from the summit of the 100-foot sand dune.²⁵ Instead of getting the details wrong, like the *Virginian-Pilot* had, most prominent newspapers, including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, did not run a story the next day.²⁶

²⁵ "Flying Machine Soars," *Chicago Tribune* (Dec. 19, 1903), p. 3.

²⁶ Lawrence Goldstone, *Birdmen* (New York: Ballentine Books, 2014), pp. 82-83.

After the first four flights in North Carolina, there was confusion among journalists over whether it was the Wright brothers or Santos-Dumont who could claim the title as inventor of powered flight. It was not only the French who added to the confusion. The *Dayton Daily News*, when they did publish an article, titled it, “DAYTON BOYS EMULATE GREAT SANTOS-DUMONT,” indicating that the “local boys” had accomplished something that had been attained already by the world famous Santos-Dumont.²⁷ Whether it was a lack of information or an inability to distinguish between lighter and heavier-than-air flight, the headline in the Dayton newspaper suggested that, from its first circulation, there was confusion over the achievements of the Wright brothers and its relation to the lighter-than-air flights of Santos-Dumont.²⁸

Nearly three weeks after the first four flights, circulating rumors and exaggerated reports about their first flights prompted the Wrights to publish an official statement, which was picked up by the Associated Press and reproduced in American newspapers across the country. Their response was four rather long paragraphs with attention paid to such factors as the wind conditions, the length of the monorail, and the distance of the fourth flight (see Appendix B).²⁹ The Wrights’ prepared statement also cited the height off the ground as only eight to ten feet, a statistic rare to see circulate then and since, perhaps out of a fear that such a meager height would diminish the overall achievement, among a public grown accustomed to spectacle. The Wright brothers’ account describes

²⁷ Qtd. by Crouch, *Bishop’s Boys*, p. 272.

²⁸ The Wrights evidently have a second contender besides Santos-Dumont, Connecticut lawmakers have passed a bill for “powered flight day.” They claim Gustave Whitehead flew for two miles over Bridgeport, CT, on August 14, 1901. See Catherine Cozak, “Connecticut Reigniting the Controversy over Who Was First in Flight,” *Island Free Press* (June 12, 2013).

²⁹ “Four Trips in the Air: Wright Brothers Tell of Their Flying Machine,” *Washington Post* (Jan. 7, 1904), p. 5. It also ran in such papers as *Atlanta Constitution* and *Baltimore Sun*.

how the aircraft addressed the wind, as “into the teeth of a December gale.” The brothers justified or explained why the plane remained so low to the ground: “It had previously been decided that for reasons of personal safety these first trials should be made as close to the ground as possible.” The goal in such a statement was to make flight just as safe in “boisterous winds” as “calm air,” but also to manage the public’s higher expectations. At the end of the statement, the brothers say they are not prepared to distribute pictures of the “machine” as they do not have individual or institutional backing beyond themselves, seemingly a direct reference to Langley.³⁰ The Wright brothers began to fly again once they returned to Ohio. A few journalists made their way to Huffman Prairie, where the Wrights flew. In a May 1904, article, the *Washington Post* described the Flyer as a “box-like machine, having the appearance at a distance of an open streetcar.”³¹ Without a circulating photograph, the Wright Flyer would necessarily be compared to current transportation options in everyday life.

In the wake of the Wright brothers’ first four flights, Santos-Dumont was determined to conquer heavier-than-air flight. In 1906, he took off from a Parisian Air field and flew into Paris in a self-designed bi-plane. He was the first European to accomplish motorized flight. Even though Santos-Dumont achieved his first heavier-than-air flight three years after the Wright brothers, he did so in the presence of thousands of spectators, increasing the likelihood that word of his achievement would circulate among the public. To this day, there are historians that say Santos-Dumont was first, in the absence of what they characterize as a reliable witness to the first four flights in Kitty

³⁰ *Washington Post* (Jan. 7, 1904), p. 5.

³¹ “Machine Flew Thirty Feet,” *Washington Post* (May 27, 1904), p. 3.

Hawk.³² Earlier circulation of the photograph that documented the first flight may have helped, but the Wrights refused to publish it until 1908.

A First Fatality

By September 1908, the Wrights had a refined flyer, and they were seeking to monetize their invention to recoup the time and money they had invested in their endeavors. They conceded to separate, in order to give demonstration flights on both sides of the Atlantic. Their star was on the rise, particularly after publishing a long essay, that month in *The Century Magazine*. In that essay, the Wrights traced their interest in flight and how that interest had matured from sport to science.³³ The article included the first-ever publication of the photograph taken by John T. Daniels, five years before. Its publication not only provided visual proof of the origin story of flight, but it also signaled that the Wright brothers appeared to be less worried about the competition stealing their flyer specifications. While the article did detail a number of technical concepts, it also alluded to problems that they had encountered that were “too technical for explanation here.” They promised that once they had recouped their losses, they would prepare for publication the “results of our laboratory experiments, which alone made an early solution of the flying problem possible.”³⁴ For contemporary audiences curious about these two brothers and the growing interest in their work, the lengthy article demonstrated the Wrights’ competence and perseverance, and, just as importantly,

³² Andrew Downie, “A Century On, Brazil Still Claims Flight’s First,” *Christian Science Monitor*, Oct. 23, 2006: <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/1023/p07s02-woam.html>

³³ Orville and Wilbur Wright, “The Wright Brothers’ Aeroplane: with pictures from photographs supplied by the authors” in *New Century Magazine* 5 (Sept. 1908), 15 pp.

³⁴ Ibid, pp, 8 and 14.

included, for the first time, photographs of the Wrights' flying machines, beginning with their original glider, then their motorized glider from the December 1903 flights, and then the successors.

The same month that the article appeared—September 1908—Wilbur traveled to Le Mans, France, to participate in air races with French aviators, while Orville traveled to Fort Myer, Virginia, to conduct trial flights for the military. Both were exhibiting their latest machine, one that they had built to the specifications of the Army Signal Corps in hopes of attaining a lucrative \$25,000 military contract.³⁵ During his first week of flight demonstrations, which began on September 3, Orville attracted small crowds, but—perhaps because word was leaking of the records he was setting for distance, height, and duration of passenger flights—by September 17, he had a crowd of 2,000 onlookers.³⁶ It was before this record crowd that Orville carried the young Lieut. Thomas E. Selfridge, a self-professed flight enthusiast, a secretary of the Aerial Experiment Association (AEA), a propeller engineer, and one of the three military officers assigned to overseeing these flight trials. The flight did not rise as quickly as previous two manned flights had done, but it nonetheless made its ascent and successfully rounded the parade grounds three times before the left propeller broke off and the plane crashed. While the cause was never definitively declared, the *Times* speculated that the weight of two men, along with the full tank of fuel, and the engine, “may have been too much a strain upon the blades.” The *Times*’s detailed account of the event and the crash described how the police cavalry had to run over the crowds of people to get to Orville and Selfridge.

³⁵ The Wrights' machine had to maintain an average speed of 40 miles per hour during the tests. There would be a bonus of \$2,500 for each additional mile per hour and a similar penalty for each mile per hour less.

³⁶ See “Fatal Fall of Wright Airship,” *New York Times* (Sept. 18, 1901), p. A-1.



Figure 5: Crash of the plane piloted by Orville Wright carrying Lt. Selfridge, 1908 (Library of Congress)

Orville survived—though the injuries he sustained to his thigh and ribs gave him pain the rest of his life—but Selfridge died at the hospital just hours after the crash. Selfridge's death was to be the first military air casualty.



Figure 6: Injured Lt. Selfridge, attended by doctors, Fort Myer, VA, 1908 (Library of Congress)

The question of how to defend the competence of Orville Wright in light of this very public crash was a conundrum, but, ultimately, the story continues to circulate within public memory as forgiving of Orville. In *Bishop's Boys*, Crouch writes that upon hearing the news "Wilbur was convinced that things went wrong when he was not there to prevent it."³⁷ Both the photograph and the written accounts show that it was not only the absence of his brother but also the large crowd present that day that were unfamiliar to Orville Wright. Finally, there is often an emphasis on how Selfridge's status as competitor may have addled the pilot. Regardless of such conjectures, the tragedy became ignominiously known as the "Selfridge Incident," and it shook the confidence of

³⁷ Crouch, *Bishops Boys*, p. 377.

both Wrights, but it eventually became a footnote to the larger story of their accomplishments.

After Langley's death, their greatest competition was Glenn Curtiss, an aviator who owned a competing aircraft company. In 1914, Curtiss requested the use of the Langley Aerodrome, which was at the time stored in the Smithsonian Institute basement and retrofitted it with one of his own engines, added pontoons, and then flew it short distances over a lake in New York State. After Curtiss's successful flights, the Langley Aerodrome was put on display at the Smithsonian with a plaque that said, "capable of sustained free flight." The claim exacerbated a controversy between Orville Wright and the Smithsonian that lasted until Orville's death. The celebrated Aerodrome once again haunted the Wrights and threatened to supersede their Flyer's place in history. In response, Wright made an extended loan of the 1903 Flyer to the South Kensington Science Museum in London in 1928. Much later, in 1946, Lindbergh would honor the Wrights' legacy by requesting that his plane, the *Spirit of Saint Louis*, be moved within the Smithsonian to make room for the arrival of the 1903 Wright Flyer.

Wright Brothers National Memorial: Place of Origin

The first half of this chapter traced the evolving understanding about the Wrights and their place in the history of aeronautics in the first decade of the twentieth century. This second half of the chapter makes bigger leaps in chronology in order to document the decisions debated in Congress and the National Park Service about how to commemorate the Wrights' contributions and their story of the origin of flight. In this

half of the chapter, I will interpret the major commemorative structures that have been erected at the Wright Brothers National Memorial beginning in 1928.

Because the Wrights hailed from Dayton, Ohio, but made their first successful flights on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, public commemoration of them is split, somewhat rancorously, between Ohio (“Birthplace of Aviation”) and North Carolina (“First in Flight”).³⁸ My focus here is on the Wright Brothers National Memorial (WBNM) in Kill Devil Hills, NC, because it commemorates the origin story of flight, at its location. Visitors to the site—who venture to one of the most isolated geographic locations in the Eastern United States—will likely feel the nearby ocean’s wind and the shifting sand and will experience some approximation of the origin story of flight. The Dayton [Ohio] Aviation Heritage National Historical Park may claim to be hometown of the Wright brothers, but only the WBNM can claim the place of human powered flight’s origin.³⁹

The Outer Banks of North Carolina afforded a temporary—and perfectly secluded—home for many of the Wright brothers’ flight experiments. From 1900 to 1908, the brothers experimented with gliders and motorized flyers and purposefully did not enter innovation contests with monetary prizes in order to protect their research from competitors.⁴⁰ They chose to come to North Carolina—to the remote location of the Outer Banks—where the sand dunes afforded soft landings and predictably high winds:

³⁸ These mottos have been adopted by their respective states and appear on license plates.

³⁹ Other NPS National Historic Sites commemorate both the space of invention and the inventors. For example, the Thomas Edison National Historical Park in West Orange, NJ, includes the laboratory, where he invented electricity; the George Washington Carver Museum, part of the Tuskegee Institute National Historic Site, focuses on Carver’s innovations in agriculture and education.

⁴⁰ *Bishops Boys*, p. 278.

the ideal conditions to aid powered flight. It was on these dunes that they birthed the origin story of flight.

I interpret the Wright brothers' origin story of flight through its commemoration at the WBNM as a means to explore how such perspectives about flight—both in its spectacle and its expectations of safety—appear as unique and interrelated trajectories at the WBNM. In her book *For Space*, geographer Doreen Massey argues that trajectories maintain the connection between the present and future in the form of adaptable stories.⁴¹ Through this conceptual frame, she demonstrates the importance of the physical place of invention. I depend on Massey's spatial turn in arguing how the WBNM has represented the origin story of flight through various forms of commemoration at its location.

The WBNM is situated in Kill Devil Hills, and from North Carolina Hwy 12, it is possible to see the monument atop the fortified Big Kill Devil Hill. The Visitor Center and the parking lot serve as the first point of entry. Inside the Visitor Center is a reproduction of the 1903 Flyer, a portrait gallery of aviators, an exhibit about the Wright brothers, and a gift store. Beside the Visitor Center are the First Flight Field and the Wright brothers' living quarters and hangar. Straight paths lead south from the camp and hangar to a road that circles the monument with curvilinear paths to the top of a fortified Big Kill Devil Hill and the Wright Brothers Monument. On the south side of Big Kill Devil Hill is the sculpture representing the December 17, 1903 flight based on John Daniels's photograph of Orville Wright's twelve-second ascent with the addition of cheering North Carolina citizens who were not featured in the photograph but present as

⁴¹ Doreen Massey, *For Space* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2005).

witnesses to the first four flights. An operating airport is to the west of the First Flight Field.

A Commemorative Site for the Golden Age of Aviation

During the late 1920s, commercial aviation had only just begun. With the exception of mail delivery, there was little air commerce and few air passengers. Therefore, to keep the story about the Wrights in circulation, the origin story of flight had to be rhetorically reframed as the predecessor and *sine qua non* of the popular aerial entertainers. Pre-World War I aviators, such as Louis Bleriot, a French aviator, and Harriet Quimby, the first woman to attain a pilot's license, were celebrated for their record-setting flights over the English Channel in 1909 and 1912, respectively. But by the late 1920s, there was greater societal enthusiasm for a new generation of aviators.⁴² Between 1903 and 1927, a roll call of accomplished aviators made record-setting flights, but it was not until Charles Lindbergh—and, soon thereafter, Amelia Earhart—became household names that there was a perceived need to trace their lineage back to the Wrights. At this juncture, there began to be interest in commemorating the origin story of flight at the very site of its occurrence. A permanent site there would ensure that the Wrights' story would remain in public memory and not get lost, forgotten, or overshadowed by subsequent record setting flights.⁴³ Thus, Rep. Hiram Bingham (R-CT) introduced a House Bill for the construction of a memorial at Kill Devil Hills. On the

⁴² Joseph J. Corn, *The Winged Gospel: America's Romance with Aviation, 1900-1950* (New York: Oxford U P, 1983).

⁴³ Charles Lindbergh's record-setting transatlantic flight was 3,600 miles and up in the air for 33 hours, 30 minutes, dwarfing any of the Wright brothers' aerial achievements, especially the time and distances set at Kitty Hawk.

same day, Dec. 17, 1926—the 23rd anniversary of the first four flights—he introduced legislation in Congress to “commemorate the first successful attempt in all history at power driven airplane flight.”⁴⁴ The Wright Brothers Memorial Act passed unanimously on March 2, 1927 and was signed into law by President Calvin Coolidge.

The decision to invest money constructing a memorial at Kill Devil Hills was not wholly uncontroversial, however. The Dayton magazine *Slipstream* published the following commentary in its November 1927 edition:

We wonder if those who voted for the measure knew that Kill Devil Hills were inaccessible to the motoring public? We wonder if they knew it would require a huge subscription of funds to build roads and a great bridge in order that those few who happen to travel in this out of the way tract could get to the memorial? Furthermore, we wonder if they knew that citizens of Dayton, Ohio, the home town of the Wright brothers had already bought and set aside a tract of ground on the very spot where the Wrights first assembled their flying machine. . . .

Certainly it is in Dayton that a Wright Memorial should be located.⁴⁵

This argument did not gain traction beyond Dayton, but it does register the beginning of the decades-long contest between Ohio and North Carolina over which state has the greater claims to the Wrights’ successes.

A subsequent congressional act appropriated \$25,000 for the design competition of the Wright Brothers National Memorial (WBNM), to begin in 1928 with the 25th

⁴⁴ Hiram Bingham, “To Commemorate The First Successful Flight By Power-Driven Aircraft,” S.4876, 69th Congress, Second Session, Jan. 8, 1927.

⁴⁵ “In Honor of the Wrights,” *Slipstream* 8.11 (Nov. 1927): 9-10; qtd. in Ann Honious, *What Dreams We Have: The Wright Brothers and Their Hometown of Dayton, Ohio* (Eastern National for the National Parks Service, 2003), Chapter 12 (Web), accessed Feb. 10, 2015: http://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/daav/chap12.htm.

anniversary of the first four flights. For that anniversary, the National Park Service introduced the First Flight Marker, a six-foot high, rock-faced granite marker placed at the approximated site of that historic first liftoff. Also on that day, they dedicated the cornerstone of a proposed larger monument, which would be constructed between 1931 and 1932. Over the subsequent decades, new structures were added to the Memorial, designed to respond to the different societal exigencies of each decade.

Each trajectory enmeshed at the WBNM represents a historical accretion of meaning through an additive process of commemorative structures that reflect the origin story of the First Flight, but in response to different exigencies. In the bounded space of the North Carolina Outer Banks, next to a well-trafficked beach highway, multiple trajectories course through the WBNM, defining it not only as the place where something big happened on a December morning in 1903, but also as a location where the story of First Flight has been represented by a great convergence of varied trajectories. After a granite Monument was completed on October 15, 1932, many of the other commemorative structures were also built as separate but interrelated representations of the origin story of flight in a historic mall of commemoration.

Setting the Stage for the Origin Story of Flight

While the commemoration of the origin story of flight is in its geographic location, there remains a great paucity of related artifacts on site. The importance of authenticity for commemoration must be considered, and nothing signals authenticity better than artifacts.⁴⁶ The artifacts related to the origin story of flight have been

⁴⁶ See Michael S. Bowman, "Tracing Mary Queen of Scots," *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials*, eds., Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott (Tuscaloosa, AL: U of

disbursed primarily to three locations: the National Air and Space Museum of the Smithsonian, the Aviation Trail in Dayton, Ohio, and the WBNM. Visitors to the WBNM might be surprised to learn that the original 1903 Flyer that performed the first four flights is actually housed at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. The Wright brothers' possessions and bicycle shop tools are in Dayton. The fact that the artifacts related to the origin story of flight are scattered threatens to detract from the authenticity of the WBNM site.

The question of authenticity has plagued the WBNM in its inability to claim the majority or most essential of the material artifacts of the origin story of flight. The artifacts of the origin story of flight have been fought over, whisked away overseas, replicated, reproduced, and mostly disbursed to other locations.⁴⁷ With the exception of the Big Kill Devil Hill (the original sand dune), and the sewing machine that Wilbur Wright used to repair a tear in a wing, every other object had to be reproduced or replicated in order to dramatize the origin story of flight.⁴⁸ In the absence of artifacts, most especially the Flyer, the origin story of flight has had to be reproduced and reenacted at the WBNM.

The original landscape of 1903, as depicted in Daniels's photograph, had been constituted of wind, water, and sand, but in the intervening years, different landscape

Alabama P, 2010), pp. 191-215; Carly S. Woods, Joshua S. Ewalt, and Sarah J. Baker, "A Matter of Regionalism: Remembering Brandon Teena and Willa Cather at the Nebraska History Museum," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 99.3 (2013): 341-363.

⁴⁷ Kirk Savage characterizes the skirmishes and battles over the design, placement, and reception of monuments in Washington, DC as disputes that will "never cease to evolve" (p.22). See Savage, *Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape* (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 2009).

⁴⁸ The WBNM has a local family's sewing machine that Wilbur Wright used to fix a wing on display. Big Kill Devil Hill was fortified in 1930 as proof of the Wright Brother's gliding experiment location from 1899 to 1901.

designs had significantly changed the “stage” of the first flights. Before the dedication of the Monument in 1932, residents planted shrubs and sand grass.



Figure 7: Dedication of the Wright Brothers National Monument, 1932 (Library of Congress)

In 1980, in an effort to restore the land to its original condition, a “low profile vegetative cover” was planted and 170 acres of trees and shrubs were removed from along the First Flight Field.⁴⁹ Presently, most of the historic sand cover has been replaced with grass. The intent of such actions may be less about beautification of the property and more about sand retention and erosion of the “stage” of first flight. Such adaptations, however, take away from any sense of the ground conditions in 1903. With plans for a monument, any expectation for authenticity was gone.

⁴⁹ Susan L. Hitchcock, *Wright Brothers National Memorial: Cultural Landscape Report* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 2002), p. 48.

Building the Monument

The commemoration of the origin story of flight began with a design competition for a Monument, and the New York design firm Rodgers and Poor edged out 34 other competitors with its design, which the *New York Times* described as “a symbolic bird’s wing in its elevation scheme.”⁵⁰ In the sepia-toned drawings submitted for the competition, marine beacons shine on top of the Wright Brothers Monument (hereafter, Monument), transforming the structure into the image of a lighthouse. The Hon. Patrick Hurley, Secretary of War, said the monument was going to look impressive when viewed from the sky.⁵¹ The comment seemed to undergird the importance of a site that commemorated both the origin of flight and the ability of humans to access an aerial perspective.

⁵⁰ “Work on Wright Pylon To Start, Now Sand Has Been Anchored,” *New York Times* (Feb. 18, 1930), p. 6.

⁵¹ *New York Times* (Dec. 28, 1930).

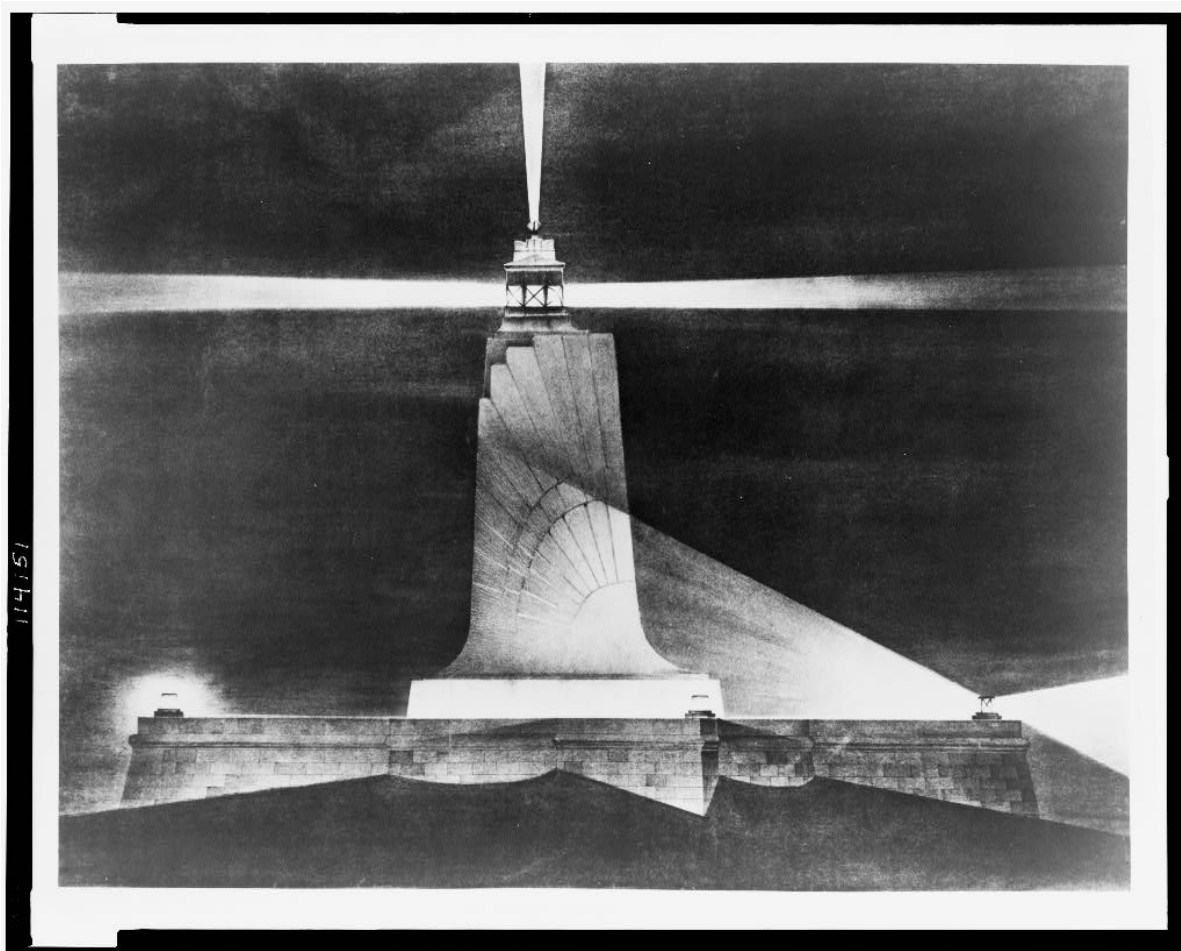


Figure 8: Artist's rendering of the Wright Brothers National Monument, 1930 (Library of Congress)

The dignitaries and celebrities who gathered on Kill Devil Hill to commemorate the 25th Anniversary of the Wrights' first flights laid the cornerstone for the Monument. Orville Wright, Hiram Bingham, Lindsey Warren, and Amelia Earhart were among the 1,000 participants in attendance. Two hundred aviation leaders traveled together from Washington, DC, on a chartered steamboat for the two-week celebration. On the anniversary day (December 17, 1928), Earhart—herself a newly celebrated aviation passenger, as Chapter Three will describe—dedicated the 1928 Boulder.⁵² The 1928 Boulder symbolized the future Monument to honor of the Wright brothers' first four flights.

The Monument sits atop the ninety-foot Big Kill Devil Hill, which as has been established is one of only two artifacts at the WBNM. It was on Big Kill Devil Hill where the Wrights had laid the sixty-foot long rail that guided the first aircraft into powered flight, and, since they flew their gliders from the dune, this hump of sand was hallowed, at least in the eyes of those who imagined this place to be a pilgrimage of sorts. The dune is visible in the photographs of the Wright brothers, and, thus, was essential to the origin story of flight. In fact, it was on this dune that the Wright brothers discussed their methods of control over their aircraft, which differentiated their efforts from their competitors, who built vehicles with limited maneuverability.⁵³

In preparing for the placement of the 60-foot-tall trapezoidal white and gray Monument, the ninety-foot tall and 26-acre wide Big Kill Devil Hill first had to be fortified and protected from future erosion. Described as a “high mound of shifting sand,”

⁵² See “The Wright Brothers and the Invention of the Aerial Age,” Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum (Web): accessed Feb. 11, 2015, <http://airandspace.si.edu/exhibitions/wright-brothers/>

⁵³ “Glider Experiments 1902,” Wright Brothers National Memorial, (Web): accessed Feb. 11, 2015, http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/hh/34/hh34j.htm

Big Kill Devil Hill had, due to strong prevailing winds, reportedly moved 450 feet south in the twenty-five years since the Wright brothers used it for more than 1,000 glider experiments.⁵⁴ If left unfortified with shrubs and grass, the hill would continue to migrate further from its location at the time of their experiments and thus further from the location of the first powered flight. L. H. Bash, Brigadier General of the War Department, who was overseeing the fortification project, directed the planting of native and exotic grasses, wood mold, and shrubs. Monument construction began in December 1931 with 1,200 tons of white and grey granite that had been transported by railroad from Mount Airy, NC, over to the eastern part of the state in Elizabeth City, then by truck and barge to Kill Devil Hills.

The Monument, described by the *New York Times* after the 1932 dedication as an “aspiring shaft, a rugged triangular pylon,”⁵⁵ contained symbolism that would have responded to the contemporary enthusiasm for air shows. At the time of the Monument’s design and construction, pylons were being used in air shows to direct and provide boundaries for the pilots who competed in races. Pylons were tools that had hardly been necessary for the first four flights, but given their significance at the time of the Monument’s design and construction, choosing that shape for the Monument was a nod to the new era in flight, as was the selection of the Art Deco motif. The Monument was intended to capture the attention of a younger generation, just as the Wrights were supposed to be the geniuses teaching and inspiring their pupils (such as Lindbergh and Earhart).

⁵⁴ “Aviation Leaders Off to Kitty Hawk” [Washington, D.C.] (Dec. 16, 1928).

⁵⁵ *New York Times* (Nov. 20, 1932).

The Monument's southern façade features the Wright brothers' names in uppercase bold lettering at the top. Just below their names is a stainless steel door that once opened to a visitor center. Inside the Monument is a metal spiral staircase that once transported visitors up to the observation platform.⁵⁶ Around the Memorial's base runs the inscription, "In commemoration of the conquest of the air by the brothers Wilbur and Orville Wright, conceived through genius and achieved through dauntless resolution and un-quenching faith."⁵⁷ The Monument sits on top of a five-pointed star base that was modeled after the one under the Statue of Liberty, thus making a symbolic union between the Wright brothers' story and one of the greatest symbols of U.S. citizenship. The design of the Monument evokes the Art Deco movement. Hans Wirz and Richard Stringer describe the great diversity found in the Art Deco style as one that gestures to the modern in its "symbolism, feeling of velocity, and machine aesthetics."⁵⁸ The Monument's sides look like sculpted pin-backed wings in bas-relief, with sunrays and thunderbolt patterns, and with a marine beacon resting on top. Because Art Deco was a popular style of the era in which the Monument was constructed, it seems to signal a generational salute from a younger generation of aviators to the Wright brothers.

Despite the effort that went into the planning of the monument and its dedication day, a Nor'easter forced organizers to scale back plans. They cancelled a fly-over from the Second Bombardment Wing of the Army Air Corps from Langley Field; Orville Wright predictably gave no formal statement; Pres. Herbert Hoover, who was supposed

⁵⁶ The inside of the Monument is no longer open to the public. The Visitor Center was moved to a new building in 1960.

⁵⁷ Originally, the inscription was supposed to be one from Leonardo da Vinci saying more simply, "there shall be wings."

⁵⁸ Hans Wirz and Richard Stringer, *Washington Deco: Art Deco Design In The Nation's Capital* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution P, 1984), pp. 35-36.

to speak and unveil the Monument, did not attend; neither Lindbergh nor Earhart made it. Instead, Ruth Nichols, an aviatrix and Earhart's understudy of sorts, stood in a semi-circle of male dignitaries, including Orville Wright and Brigadier General L. H. Bash, unveiled the Monument, and, according to the *New York Times* report, offered "reverent appreciation of the amazing progress and far-reaching values of present-day aviation."⁵⁹ At the dedication, Secretary of War Patrick J. Hurley paid tribute to the "wizardry of the two Ohio bicycle mechanics":

As a direct result of their successful flight right here at Kill Devil Hill, the conquest of the air is to be achieved. I use the future tense advisedly. Great as has been the progress since these intrepid men achieved the first successful flight in a power-driven plane, air transportation is yet in its infancy.⁶⁰

The Wrights, Hurley suggested, were unlikely heroes, not because the skills of mechanics were not suited to invention—they certainly were—but, rather, because the brothers possessed the exact range of skills, creativity, determination, and daring necessary to achieve their goals but not the funding of more "likely" competitors, such as Langley.

Monument's Door Panels and the Origin Story's Ancestors

At this point, I will devote extra attention to a study of the relief door panels that adorn the tall granite Monument at the WBNM. These eight reliefs—made of stainless steel over nickel—depict different moments in the history of flight that occurred before the Wrights' first flights. The selection of the subjects for these panels reflects a

⁵⁹ "Shaft to Wrights Dedicated in Storm," *New York Times* (Nov. 20, 1932), p. 2.

⁶⁰ Ludington [Michigan] *Daily News*, "Memorial Dedicated to Wright Brothers" (Nov. 20, 1932), p.1.

rhetorical construction of mostly lighter-than-air flight that is, I believe, emblematic of similar rhetorical decisions employed elsewhere at the WBNM. The door reliefs, along with the other components of the WBNM, are meant to create a guiding narrative and to give visitors impressions of the primacy of the Wright brothers' feat in the history of human flight and to keep the origin story of flight in active circulation. The eight relief panels on the door of the Monument catalogue humanity's long interest in flight—the “steps of human flight”—and this creative and evocative inventory makes the Wrights' accomplishment that much more interesting. The relief panels depict stories of lighter-than-air flight that either cannot match the achievement of human powered flight or demonstrate previous failures in flight. The first panel illustrates the story of Daedalus and Icarus, who died attempting to fly. Another panel pays homage to Otto Lilienthal, who also died in flight. Other panels show propellers, kites, planes, and paddles—all tools of mythical or real flight. The relief panels catalogue humanity's long interest in flight, and underscore the enormity of the Wrights' accomplishment, contrasting the unsuccessful risk-taking of earlier aviators to the demonstrated safety of the two brothers.

With the exception of a single relief panel depicting propeller design, the door panels illustrate key moments in the history of lighter-than-air flight. Birds fly in two panels while on another Icarus plummets toward the sea as a kite draws nearer to the sun. Thousands of years of dreaming, failed mythological and actual attempts at flight, followed by the two boys from Dayton. When visiting the Monument, the eye travels from the door back up to the bold wrapping letters that celebrate the brothers' “conquest of the air.” Considered alongside the panels inventorying previous attempts at flight, the brothers' accomplishment is that much more powerful.

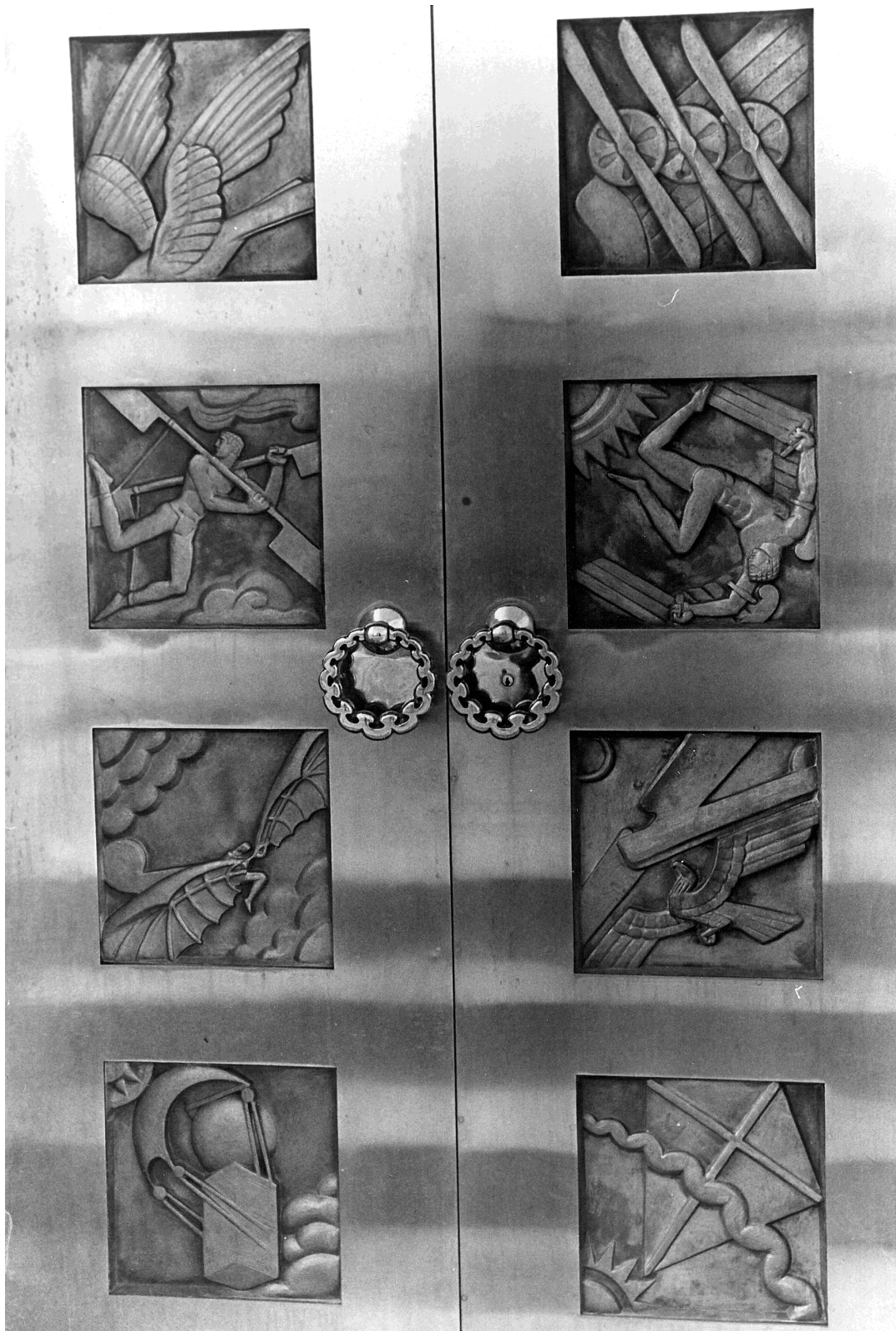


Figure 9: Detail of the door panels, Wright Brothers National Monument, 1969 (National Park Service, Outer Banks History Center, Manteo, NC)

To anyone familiar with the history of flight, it is immediately apparent that certain notable events are not depicted on the panels. Notably missing are Leonardo da Vinci's drawings of human flight and images of the Montgolfier brothers or other early balloonists. There is only an image of Jacob Besnier, the French locksmith who attached four wings on the ends of two wooden poles, placed them over his shoulders, and attempted flight from window sills and rooftops. Additionally, none of the panels depict air or helium balloons or dirigible airships: all feats that predated 1903. Arguably, those planners and artisans who were crafting the rhetorical message of these panels wanted to steer clear of stories that might overshadow or destabilize the Wrights' accomplishment.

The selection of the panels reinforces the Wrights' success by counterpointing it with stories of failures. What set the Wright brothers apart from many of the images on the Monument door was not only their successful introduction of an engine to flight but also the fact that they did not die inventing flight. The dialectic between risk and safety is at work in these panels, which symbolically represents a timeline leading up to the first four flights. The panels represent past efforts, some successful and others not, that culminate to prove the Wright brothers' piloting skills were superior to the other aviators. These panels reaffirm the origin story while at the same time affirming the risks inherent in flight itself. The paneled door salutes the Wright brothers as the first who were able to successfully traverse that dialectic and thereby enshrine their origin story in the location of its invention.

The 1932 granite Monument updated and represented the origin story within a 1930s frame, and one that reflected the spectacle of flight much more than its requisite protocol for safety. In its spectacle, it recognized and accommodated the exigencies of

the era so as to keep the origin story fresh, and of equal grandeur to the milestone flights of the 1920s, within an evolving public memory. The 1932 addition seems to reinforce the importance of the origin story in anticipation of future advances in aviation, including the expansion of commercial flight.

The Origin Story Across the Generations

The 21 years that passed between the construction of the granite pylon and the development of the next commemorative buildings at the WBNM was a turbulent period in U.S. history. This tumultuous period spanned the Great Depression, World War II (which used airplanes to unleash the nuclear era), and the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement. And this period witnessed the record-setting flights of Charles Lindbergh and Amelia Earhart and her disappearance, as well as the first African-American Army Air Force. This chapter will now look at how these events helped to shape future commemoration of the origin story of flight at the WBNM.

The economic and social upheavals of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s required the WBNM to adapt in order to keep the origin story of flight relevant to a new generation. The public no longer craved stories about record-setting flights. So many records had been set by that point that there was a kind of records fatigue, and after Earhart's disappearance, the public began to question whether or not heroic feats in the skies were worth the risk they entailed.⁶¹ The air and sea search for Earhart, which yielded no plane and no body, had been costly. Furthermore, technological advances, such as more powerful and reliable engines, the introduction of lighter and sturdier materials, and the invention of navigational radar made it safer and cheaper to move people commercially.

⁶¹ William Leuchtenberg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* (New York: Harper, 2009), p. 340.

Consequently, with more airline passengers, greater assurances of safety were necessary, and commercial ventures and public adventure were being privileged over risk taking. This shift is evident when viewed through the lens of the commemorative practices at the WBNM.

Responding to these changes, the WBNM shifted focus—in the 1950s and 1960s—to commemorate the tremendous growth in commercial flying by encouraging visitors to participate in the experience of flight as passengers and as private pilots. During this twenty-year period, a number of new commemorative features were added to the Memorial site. Now, instead of the spectacle of a vertical monument on top of a fortified sand dune, the WBNM became a horizontal mall that was 2,852 feet long by 750 feet wide.⁶²

For the fiftieth anniversary in 1953, the WBNM reconstructed the living quarters that housed the Wrights during their experiments at Kitty Hawk. The spartan living quarters recreated there telegraph the ruggedness of the Wright brothers, whose commitment to technological progress clearly trumped their desire for physical comfort.⁶³ These structures were meant to help visitors imagine how the brothers lived while making history on the Outer Banks. Accompanying pictures of the original hangars used by the Wright brothers depict how they “lived simple, methodical lives, dividing the camp duties between each other . . . [and how] neither shirked or passed the buck. . . .

⁶² Hitchcock, *Wright Brothers National Memorial: Cultural Landscape Report*, p. 75; the mall runs north to south between the Monument and the fourth landing site marker on the First Flight Field (1953).

⁶³ The reconstructed hangar and living quarters had to be rebuilt four times due to man-made and environmental destruction (1953, 1964-65, 1976-77, and 1993).

Cleanliness was next to if not ahead of godliness with these brothers.”⁶⁴ The reproduction living quarters include the Wrights’ beds, kitchen area, shelves for food, and chairs. To honor the fiftieth anniversary in 1953, the National Canners Association (NCA) prepared a press release about the critical role canned food played during the Kitty Hawk experiments. In photographs of the Wright brothers’ living quarters, the NCA was able to relay proof that canned foods were critical to “major explorations and expeditions of the past 150 years.”⁶⁵ The NCA reported that they had found labels to replicate all of the Wright brothers’ provisions from the turn of the twentieth century, except for a can of asparagus tips.

While a visitor can peer into the living quarters of the brothers, the First Flight Field (1953), built during the same year, was an interactive commemorative structure.⁶⁶ This new field built on to the 1928 Boulder (which marked the Flyer’s point of lift off), featured a path of four granite flight markers that marked the order, distance, and time of each of the four powered flights. In *Getting Back Into Place*, Edward Casey writes, “An event is at once spatial and temporal.”⁶⁷ The origin story of flight encapsulated in those first four flights becomes more believable within a temporal and spatial scenario meant to draw a visitor in. Because the Wrights’ first flights had few eyewitnesses, the claims of the origin story of flight must be substantiated, beyond the assurances of the brothers’

⁶⁴ “Wrights Were Good Cooks and Dish Washers: No Task Too Menial, No Problem Too Intricate For the Flier to Tackle, Says One Who Knew Them,” *The Independent* (Nov. 13, 1932).

⁶⁵ “Canned Foods Helped Wright Brothers during Kitty Hawk Experiments” (Washington, DC: National Canners Association, 1953).

⁶⁶ Each marker lists the length and distance of each flight. Marker 1= 12 seconds, 150 feet; Marker 2=12 seconds and 175 feet; Marker 3= 200 feet and 15 seconds; and Marker 4=852 feet and 59 seconds. Along the beginning of the marker is a sixty-foot monorail, from which the flyer took off.

⁶⁷ Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back Into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place World*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana U P, 2009), p. 339.

notebooks. Each flight becomes substantiated along a field that demonstrates the exact time of lift off and landing.

Encouraging visitors to perform certain aspects of a historical narrative and its related public memory is not unique to the WBNM. In the essay Michael Bowman contributed to the book *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials*, he describes the importance of performativity at historical sites. In “Tracing Mary Queen of Scots,” Bowman illustrates how the Mary Queen of Scots House and Visitor Centre site in Scotland dramatized Mary’s one-month visit there, before her reign unraveled.⁶⁸ A walk through her home affords the opportunity to share dramatic stories from her time there, including a fateful fall from a horse. As visitors take the tour, they also are encouraged to imagine the fears and the risks that befell Mary.

Like Mary Queen of Scot’s Visitor Centre, the WBNM invites visitors to interact with a chapter from history. The First Flight Field invites such interactivity as visitors begin at the 1928 Boulder and pace the 852 feet, along a grated plastic walkway, to the site of Wilbur Wright’s fourth safe landing. At the WBNM, visitors are invited to meditatively step, walk, or run all the way to the fourth marker, following the flight line of the very first flights. The performativity of the First Flight Field has a dual effect of being both an interactive, educational experience for the visitor and entertainment for people in the Visitor Center who watch from inside. With a little imagination, the Wright brothers would be perpetually switching back and forth in the First Flight Field preparing to take off on the next first, second, third, or fourth flight.

⁶⁸ Comparably, after many interviews with tourists at the Mary Queen of Scots Visitor Center in Scotland, Michael Bowman discovered that most visitors came with varied knowledge of Mary’s life prior to their visit. These *a priori* stories helped to shape the way they addressed the commemorative space. See Bowman, “Tracing Mary Queen of Scots,” *Places of Public Memory*, pp. 191-215.

The First Flight Field encourages visitors to perform the origin story of flight in the presumed location of its occurrence. At the Field, visitors are encouraged to walk the very path the Wright Brothers flew. Being able to take the plastic mesh walkway from the first to the fourth flight marker reinforces a visitors' confidence in the story's authenticity. When visitors pace, walk, skip, run (often with arms extended like wings), they reach the first three markers quickly. The fourth marker, just like the dramatic fourth flight of Wilbur Wright, is a much greater commitment that not all visitors choose to make. The First Flight Field demonstrates the principles of Massey's trajectory in a space that affords the retelling of the same story on a journey encouraged of each visitor, as they walk along the flight path to Marker 4. Like a pilgrimage to a shrine, this journey is one that can only be taken in the designated location of its commemoration, for all who travel to the WBNM. The need for the plane, the actual artifact of the first flight, diminishes when the visitor travels its flight path instead. The First Flight Field, then, affords a stage for this iconic story, made more believable each time a visitor reenacts the journey.

Growth in tourism at the Outer Banks has changed the setting of the WBNM. The location of the first four flights has transitioned from being situated in the town of Kitty Hawk to the town of Kill Devil Hills. The tourism industry has transformed this once remote location into a popular vacation destination, replete with a grocery store, a car dealership, a Brew Thru, Duck Donuts, and Captain George's Sea Food Restaurant. Travel literature reminds us that it may not even be the Monument or Poor's design that motivates people to hike to the top of Big Kill Devil Hill. For many, visiting the Monument is an opportunity to experience an expansive view of the ocean. One guidebook describes the Monument as "imposing" and recommends the most important

action to take when visiting the site is to “stand on the grassy dune and feel the breezes rise off the water.”⁶⁹ Visiting the WBNM has come to mean, for some, the opportunity to get a good view of the ocean. Such comments found in travel literature are a useful cautionary in the interpretation of the WBNM as always meaningful to tourists in its historical significance. Instead, what appears evident is that some of the trajectories followed at the WBNM have little to do with the origin story of flight but more to do with its location, a historic site situated within a beach landscape, a destination that provides an opportunity to view the natural beauty of the sea. It is unlikely that a visitor to a site designated as historic who seeks a pleasant view or ocean breeze would completely fail to recognize the site’s affirmation of flight’s origin story. However, by emphasizing good views over historic significance, some tourist literature threatens to diminish the origin story of flight.

The Visitor Center: Reflecting the 1960s

The WBNM includes a Mission 66 Visitor Center (built in 1960) near the park’s entrance. When federal funding was made available to build visitor centers at national park sites all around the U.S., the WBNM became one of the sites to receive funding. The design of the Visitor Center reflected the increase in commercial flight and the new way of flying.⁷⁰ It resembles an airport terminal: a one-story, reinforced concrete, steel, and glass structure modern building that includes a domed flight room for presentations, a

⁶⁹ Holly Hughes, *Frommer’s 500 Places to Take Your Kids Before They Grow Up* (New York: Frommer’s, 2009), p. 295.

⁷⁰ The Visitor Center was constructed between 1957 and 1960 as a part of “Mission 66,” a federal initiative to improve national parks, in large part through the development of approximately one hundred Visitors Centers.

lobby, and a museum area.⁷¹ The windows inside the Visitor Center look out onto the First Flight Field. Indeed, visitors to the Center appear to be passengers waiting for a flight in an airport terminal (or for a flight with Wilbur and Orville). The airport terminal setting emphasizes the connection between the experience of flight today and the origin story. The first exhibit panel features a magnified version of a handwritten letter from Wilbur Wright to Octave Chanute. The other exhibit panels highlight the singular imagination of the Wright brothers and the steps that led them to the first four flights.



Figure 10: Visitor Center at the Wright Brothers National Memorial Historic Site, the night of the first man on the moon landing, 1969 (Outer Banks History Center, Manteo, NC)

By the 1960s, the commercial flight industry had fully entered the jet age. Pressurized cabins and increased speed meant more efficient and comfortable travel. Celebrating the role of commercial flight passengers in the commemoration of the origin

⁷¹ The Visitor Center was designed by the architectural firm Mitchell/Giurgola of Philadelphia.

story of flight provided an opportunity to herald these changes and to encourage more people to become air passengers.

The airport terminal-like Visitor Center showcases many technological advances that allowed commercial flight to overcome many of the risks characteristic of the era of early aviation. By 1960, commercial flight had radar in order to prevent collisions, and transponders to relay a plane's call signal to air traffic control, reliable instruments made flight possible, regardless of weather conditions.

Like a nested doll, the Visitor Center reverts back to historical representations of 1903 on the inside. Cordoned off by a rope in the Visitor Center, a reproduction of the 1903 Flyer serves as the focal object for NPS rangers' interpretation of the site and the origin story. NPS rangers demonstrate various controls through protective white cotton archival gloves as though they were preparing it for Orville or Wilbur's return. Rangers describe and demonstrate how the Wright brothers controlled the 1903 Flyer by lying on the wing beside the engine and shifting their hips side-to-side to warp the wings. If visitors did not know that this plane is the reason for the WBNM site, then they would know it by the time the interpreter had completed her or his presentation. These Flight Room talks take place with tourists standing around the Flyer and with the ranger positioned inside of the rope. The NPS rangers' presentation reviews the Wright brothers' life in Ohio and the details of the first four flights. These presentations by the rangers recount the origin story of flight and demonstrate Massey's sense that history is made up of a narrative that evolves in public memory. The Flyer serves as the focal point to both include and exclude aspects of the origin story of flight while also serving as the inspiration for stories about the Wright brothers. There are other artifacts and

reproductions incorporated into NPS ranger talks, such as the piece of wood and cloth from the 1903 Flyer that Neil Armstrong carried with him on the Apollo 11 mission, now framed in the Visitor Center Lobby. By incorporating the framed piece of wood and cloth into stories about the origin story of flight, the rangers reify a trajectory that begins with the Wright brothers in 1903 and extends to the 1969 landing on the moon.⁷²

In a memo to the WBNM staff in 1969, Paul Garber, Historian Emeritus of the National Air and Space Museum (NASM), provided commentary and critique for the park rangers after attending a tour.⁷³ Concerned that visitors thought the 1903 Flyer on exhibit at the WBNM was the original, Garber suggested they put on display a photograph of the original 1903 flyer at the NASM in order that the flyer on display at the WBNM could be identified as a reproduction. To ensure that his request would be honored, Garber wrote, “I may be able to have [the photograph] prepared on a pedestal so that it could be exhibited without further preparation.” To further reinforce the flyer’s status as a reproduction, Garber recommended they put on display another photograph of the volunteers who built the 1903 Flyer.⁷⁴ In his letter, Garber concluded by reminding the WBNM staff about the difference between a replica—constructed by the original craftsmen—and a reproduction—made by unrelated others. Garber was sensitive about precise classifications possibly because of the battle that had ensued years earlier in the retrieval of the Wright Flyer from London. After several overtures made to Orville Wright by the Smithsonian Institution, the successful proposal was one that enlisted the

⁷² Such a trajectory is also affirmed by Bilstein in *Flight in America*.

⁷³ Paul Garber, “Thoughts While Enjoying a Visit to the Wright Brothers Museum at Kill Devil Hills,” Dec. 8, 1969. Outer Banks History Center, Manteo, NC.

⁷⁴ At the bottom of the memo, Garber wrote that his memo was not “intended as adverse criticism but ...personal impressions during a most enjoyable visit.”

help of Charles Lindbergh as an emissary who would fly to London and retrieve the Flyer. As reported in the *New York Herald Tribune*, “Asked how he would view the negotiations between himself and the Smithsonian through Colonel Lindbergh . . . Wright said he had the greatest confidence in the Colonel.”⁷⁵ In January 1948, Orville Wright died, and Lindbergh returned the Flyer to the Smithsonian. According to Wright’s terms, the Flyer would always be displayed in the most prominent location at the Smithsonian, in front of Lindbergh’s aircraft, the *Spirit of Saint Louis*. In celebration of its return on December 17, 1948, the 35th anniversary of the origin story of flight, blimps and helicopters formed a “circular wreath” around the WBNM.⁷⁶ That the 1903 Flyer housed at the WBNM is a reproduction and not the original is important because it threatens the authenticity of the origin story in its geographic location and indicates the continuing preeminence of the Smithsonian over the WBNM in commemorating the origin story of flight.⁷⁷

In 1963, at the sixtieth anniversary celebration, the First Flight Airport (KFFA) was dedicated, allowing pilots of small aircraft to participate in the origin story by taking off and landing on a runway parallel to the First Flight Field. Advocates of the KFFA Airport recognized that the proximity of the landing strip to the Visitor Center would promote the origin story for non-pilots, too, by adding a sense of authenticity as now visitors regularly see the offspring of the 1903 Flyer in action. Plans for the airport were in the original designs by Alfred E. Poor in his Monument submission in 1930, but they

⁷⁵ *New York Herald Tribune* (Dec 18, 1945), n.p.

⁷⁶ “Kitty Hawk Marks First Brief Flight,” *New York Times* (Dec. 18, 1948), p. 3.

⁷⁷ Poor did not attend the dedication ceremony in Nov. 1932. His letters reflected disgruntlement over a lack of recognition for his Monument design.

were delayed by budget cuts during WWII. The airport is located on the western side of the park with a runway only suitable for small aircraft. While fully operational, it has always been intended as more than a symbolic link to the origin story of flight. The airport affords a pilgrimage site for private aviation where pilots can move beyond performativity to the actual embodiment of flight. Because the runway was built for planes with less power and heft than most modern aircraft, most takeoffs and landings require great skill from pilots who must land on a much shorter runway than that to which they are accustomed. The experience of takeoff, in particular, encourages interaction with the origin story of flight. Intended or not, the airstrip was constructed so that airplanes could only travel down the runway just shy of the fourth flight marker on the First Flight Field (Wilbur Wright's second flight) before they must make a quick U-turn back in the other direction to taxi for takeoff, as if to symbolize that no plane will travel further, or at least not in the same direction as the longest of the four flights of the Wright brothers. This act, while symbolic, continues to reify the location of first flight as a pilgrimage site, where all pilots who visit will, by design, travel down the runway just short of Wilbur Wright's last flight as represented in the origin story of flight. Similar to representations of intrepid Europeans who settled Roanoke Island across the Pamlico Sound from WBNM and established an early narrative of freedom and citizenship, modern day pilots at KFFA extend the origin story, even for non-pilots. The origin story of flight circulates in everyday modern enactments by current pilots who have no choice but to fall just shy of the Wright brothers' achievement in each takeoff and landing at KFFA.

Trajectories, according to Massey, represent stories whose symbolic understandings remain in constant flux. By the late 1960s, the Visitor Center had become

the primary attraction at the WBNM, as opposed to the Monument.⁷⁸ Forty years later, most guidebooks described the experience of the Visitor Center over the Monument. In their *Guide to the National Parks Area, Eastern States* (2004), David and Kay Scott open with the origin story of flight but quickly shift to a description of the Visitors Center with its reproduction of the 1903 Flyer and the portraits of historical figures in aviation in the Paul E. Garber First Flight Shrine.⁷⁹ The people who are honored represent “significant firsts,” beginning with a portrait of the Wright brothers. Five years later, they added a portrait of Thomas Selfridge. By commissioning a portrait of Selfridge in 1971, among other record-setting aviators such as Chuck Yeager and Lindbergh, the First Flight Society honored a man for being both the first military officer to pilot a plane and the first fatality in powered aviation.



Figure 11: First Flight Shrine, Visitor Center, Wright Brothers National Memorial Historic Site, 1969 (Outer Banks History Center, Manteo, NC)

⁷⁸ Sarah Allaback, *Mission 66 Visitors Centers: The History of Building Type* (Washington, DC: National Park Service. 2000).

⁷⁹ David and Kay Scott, *Guide to the National Park Areas, Eastern States* (Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot P, 2004). Regarding the First Flight Shrine, it was built in 1966 by the First Flight Society as something to surround the 1903 Flyer in the Visitor Center.

One Hundred Years of Telling a Story

Because public memory is always in process, the centennial celebration is important as it sheds light on how the origin story of flight has continued to respond to the exigencies of flight safety and has served as a vessel for patriotism more broadly. During the six-day centennial event (December 12-17, 2003), 120,000 people were in attendance at the Outer Banks, including Pres. George W. Bush, Gov. Mike Easley (NC), senators, congressmen, astronauts, and celebrities, such as John Travolta, who served as master of ceremonies.⁸⁰ Travolta, a private pilot as well as an actor, welcomed the rain-logged crowd and, after citing some of the achievements of the Wright brothers, compared Neil Armstrong's walk on the moon to the Wright brothers' first four flights. Pres. Bush spoke next, comparing the Wright brothers to patriotic dreamers who always took chances and never gave up.⁸¹ Both Travolta and Bush invoked patriotism in their shaping of the narrative.

After the official programs, organizers attempted to reenact the Wrights' first flight, using a reproduction of the 1903 flyer. The first unsuccessful attempt occurred at 10:35 a.m., the time recorded by the Wright brothers for their first flight. Two other attempts, made at 12:30 p.m. and at 3:30 p.m., also failed because of inadequate wind and weather conditions. One of the organizers said of the attempted reenactment, "One hundred years ago, the Wrights had the opportunity to wait for the optimal weather to fly.

⁸⁰ The First Flight Centennial Commission included Governor Mike Easley (North Carolina) and Governor Bob Taft (Ohio), NC Sens. Jesse Helms and John Edwards, Hooters Air, Wright Family Members, and the descendants of witnesses.

⁸¹ "First Flight Ceremony: White House Event," *C-Span Video Library* (Dec. 17, 2003) (Web): <http://www.c-span.org/video/?179551-1/first-flight-centennial-ceremony>

... We gave it our best effort.”⁸² While there was no doubting their effort, the interpretation of the origin story—even at its centennial celebration—had been adapted in order to soften the defeat of the twenty-first-century aeronauts. As you might recall from earlier in the chapter, the weather was not optimal on December 17, 1903. Yet, because they had committed to return to Dayton by Christmas, the Wrights did not have the luxury of waiting for good weather. The justifications of 2003 were based on the same factors as the Wrights, and, yet, the outcomes were different.

Despite the botched attempts at reenactment, the centennial of the first four flights in 2003 provided an opportunity to further solidify the narrative ties between the Wright brothers’ legacy and the state of North Carolina and the rest of the U.S. Massey argues that our understanding of particular spaces is always in process. Such has been the case with the WBNM, which has been a tourist destination since 1932, and for North Carolina residents, who have had “First in Flight” on their license plates since 1982. Hosting the Centennial celebrations, however, afforded the opportunity for celebrities, politicians, and the public to gather in the location of first flight. Notwithstanding the influence of pride, the centennial celebration with its large attendance, an attempted flight reenactment, and speeches that linked the location of the first flights to Neil Armstrong’s moon landing all reinforced North Carolina’s claim to the origin story.

For the centennial, the state of North Carolina commissioned a sculpture—inspired by the First Flight photograph taken by John T. Daniels—that would further establish the site and, by extension, the state, within the origin story. Smith’s bronze and stainless steel sculpture, which he created from 10,000 pounds of stainless steel, was

⁸² “Mother Nature Just Doesn’t Cooperate in Effort,” *Countdown to Kitty Hawk* (Dec. 17, 2003) (Web): <http://mail.countdowntokittyhawk.org/news/12-17release.pdf>

unveiled at the Centennial celebration and now resides on the south side base of Big Kill Devil Hill and the Monument. The source photograph documents only Orville in flight and Wilbur running just behind. For his sculpture, Stephen H. Smith, however, decided to include Daniels, who was behind the camera, as well as the other witnesses from the Kill Devil Hills Life-saving Station, thus adding a new emphasis on the North Carolina residents.

The sculpture was one of the planned highlights of the Centennial of Flight commemoration. After the dedication ceremony on December 16, 2003, Gov. Mike Easley (NC) and then-Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton went to have their photograph taken at the *December 17, 1903* sculpture. However, instead of standing in front of or beside the sculpture, as Ruth Nichols, Orville Wright, and other officials had done in 1932 at the base of the Monument, the two government officials laid down next to the bronze cast of Orville, between the two wings of the aircraft. With thumbs high up in the air, the former Governor and Cabinet Member attempted a twelve-second ride that never left the ground. In addition to cultivating state pride and claiming North Carolina's full share in the origin story, this statue reinforces the claim that the first human powered flight represents twelve seconds that changed the world.

While the geographic location of the sculpture, which sits at the base of Big Kill Devil Hill and the Monument, is perfectly situated for visitors, who arrive by foot or car, the sculpture's optical illusions (or confusions) become evident when interpreting the WBNM through Massey's trajectories. The *December 17, 1903* sculpture seeks to build state pride in North Carolina's role in the story of First Flight, and also national pride. But in so doing, it takes liberties in the representation of North Carolinians who were not

featured in the one photograph of the origin story of flight. By adding them to the sculpture, it makes it seem as if an omniscient narrator was there too, to capture the moment.



Figure 12: Photograph of *December 17, 1903* sculpture by Steven Smith, 2003 (Julia Scatliff O’Grady)

As the photo reflects, how this sculpture relates to the original monument is also problematic. Is the Lifesaving station cheering for the aircraft, or for the monument atop Big Kill Devil Hill? If the First Flight Field represents the trajectory of the first four flights, one that is nearby but headed in another direction, then what is this stainless steel plane doing on the other side of the dune? Here on this Mall that commemorates the origin story of flight, trajectories are flying through the air like arrows.

As argued earlier in this chapter, the origin story of flight continues to circulate and is deemed the inspiration for other record-setting flights and aviators. At the 25th anniversary of the origin story of flight, Amelia Earhart was in attendance as a symbolic link between the origin story of flight and her recent achievement as the first woman passenger on a transatlantic flight. When Earhart did not return for the dedication of the 1932 Monument, this absence also sent a signal of discontinuity. After reflecting upon the origin story of flight, its threats, contests, and relationship to citizenship, it is possible now to imagine the 1903 story as a template for Golden Age of Aviation aviators.

Over time, the WBNM has come to be understood as a place of ritual, with religious associations; it has been called an “aviation shrine.”⁸³ The concept of pilgrimage is a fundamental organizing principle at the WBNM, as visitors return each December 17 to honor the anniversary of first flight by climbing up to the top of Big Kill Devil Hill to the Monument. People reenact the first flight in reproductions of the 1903 Flyer, including singer John Denver, who came to the site dressed like the Wrights, and laid down on his plane to attempt flight.

⁸³ The WBNM as shrine is evidenced in stories that include a tradition of “reenactors,” and people who drop ashes of relatives over the Monument. See W.O. Saunders, “Two Historic Shrines,” *The [Elizabeth City, NC] Independent* (1937).



Figure 13: Marching band headed to the Wright Brothers National Memorial Monument for the First Flight Celebration, 1969 (Outer Banks History Center, Manteo, NC)

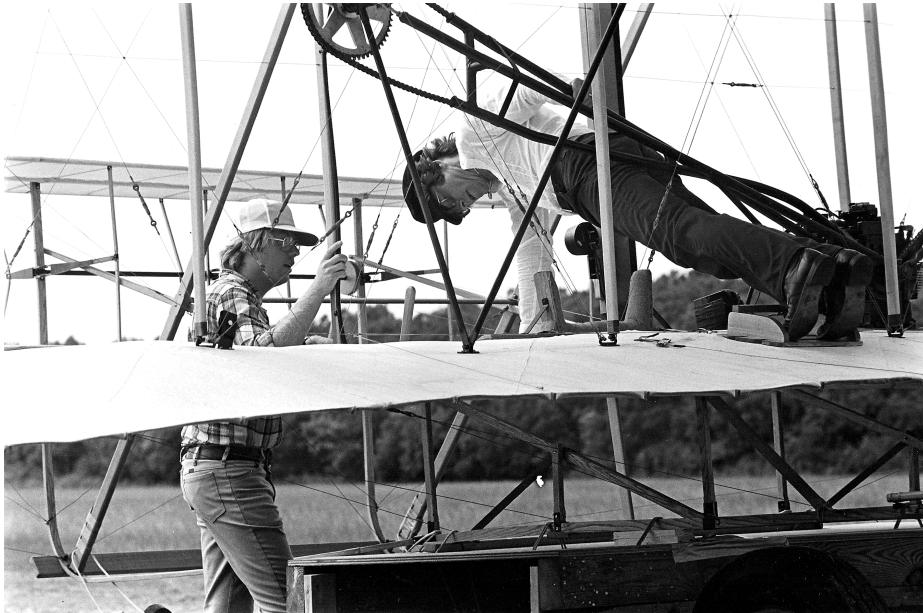


Figure 14: John Denver and Ken Kellet on the Wright Brothers' Flyer (reproduction), 1969 (Outer Banks History Center, Manteo, NC)

The Visitor Center encourages a performativity in kite flying contests and the spinning of toy helicopters, such as the one the Wright brothers' father gave to them as boys. The performances are meant to encourage the visitor to engage in activities similar to those of the Wright brothers in order to experience first hand some of the influences that led to the possibility of flight.

Conclusion

During the era of ballooning and dirigibles, the public came to associate flying with expectations for spectacle. Aviators fed this appetite by marking progress in their flying with events to demonstrate their next success (or failure) in the presence of a crowd. While safety measures were, no doubt, considered and attempted, the events were focused more on representations of greater altitude and sport than on the potential for the practical applications for flight. In 1903, the Wright brothers defied the expectation for spectacle, as they planned their first four flights in a remote location, and without a crowd. In their flight experiments, they privileged a rhetorical discourse of safe flying over spectacle, later applied in commemorative acts at the WBNM to encourage commercial flying among the public. Since then, successful flight has become represented as an abiding dialectic between risk and safety. This origin story of flight, and how it has been represented to subsequent generations of pilots and passengers, both in the press and at the national park site, continues to demonstrate the relevance of representations of risk balanced by assurances of safety.

Spectacle has never fully retreated from human flight. While the Wright brothers were the first aviators to both demonstrate a careful understanding of flight and to

successfully fly their own gliders, they too found themselves flying for crowds once the word got out, especially Orville's flights at Fort Myer and Wilbur's in France in 1908. Both Wright brothers were unnerved by crowds, especially the 1908 flights of Orville at Fort Myer and Wilbur in France. In the next chapter, we will see how an aviator such as Amelia Earhart struggled to attend to measures of safety as she gave the public what they wanted: spectacle. While the tension between spectacle and safety becomes challenged in the brief aviation careers of the Wright brothers, the stakes grow even higher with the introduction of planes during the 1920s and 1930s that could traverse not just a few miles, but a wide ocean.

Chapter Three

EARHART: REASSURING A SKITTISH PUBLIC OF FLIGHT'S SAFETY

"Trouble in the air is very rare."
—Amelia Earhart¹

To interpret the Wright brothers' contributions to safe human flight demands the long view, one that considers not only the first five years of successful flying—1903-1908—but also the construction of public memory of those earliest flights instantiated in the Wright Brothers National Memorial. With the passage of time, public indebtedness to the Wright brothers' legacy of safe flying has only increased. By contrast, although Amelia Earhart figured prominently in newspaper and media accounts of feats in early aviation during her lifetime—she was, for instance, widely known as “Lady Lindy,” after Charles Lindbergh—the public memory of her has focused more on her disappearance. Throughout her aviation career, that nine-year period from 1928 to 1937, Earhart was not only a record-setting pilot and national icon, but also a celebrity spokesperson for commercial aviation in the U.S. when the industry was in its infancy. Accordingly, I argue that news accounts about Earhart's aviation career and her own reflections on flying highlight the rhetorical role she played in reassuring the public that it was safe to fly and that these messages were as essential to the continued development of the aviation industry as were technological innovations.

Since 1937—when Earhart's plane in her round-the-globe trip disappeared—her prolific and public role as spokesperson and author has been largely overlooked or parsed

¹ Amelia Earhart, *The Fun of It: Random Records of My Own Flying and of Women in Aviation* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1932), p. 42.

out in only brief mentions. In the recovery and critical analysis of her memoirs, public lectures, magazines stories, and newspaper interviews, what emerges is the critical role she played in the rhetorical construction of aviation safety, a persistent effort on the part of Earhart that has seemingly disappeared along with her plane. When historical or public accounts of Earhart's appeals to air safety do appear, they often minimize the critical nature of her role in encouraging a skittish public to fly. It is important to note from the start that there are reasons for the absence or downplaying of Earhart's effective appeals to flight's safety. First of all, how could it be possible for a pilot who disappeared to remain a public symbol for safe flying? The irony or the dissonance of characterizing Earhart as a purveyor of flight's safety has come to distance Earhart's public memory from the impact of her advocacy. This drift has been accentuated by the fact that much of her public memory has focused on the pursuit of finding her plane or in solving what has been described as one of aviation's greatest mysteries.²

Setting aside the mystery and the public memory of Earhart, this chapter will focus on those rhetorical discourses spoken or penned by Earhart, or reflected in texts that circulated during her lifetime, which, I argue, were her strategic tactics of reassurance that encouraged a skeptical public that it was safe to buy a ticket and fly. Inspired by recent scholarship that proves that "logics of circulation" are "fundamental to the study of public address,"³ this chapter interprets the discourse of safety that circulated in the social imaginary of flight during Earhart's career. To do so, I investigate the discourses and texts that circulated during the 1920s and 1930s that were intended to persuade non-flyers to fly. Like the circulating texts regarding the Wright brothers' first four flights, this chapter draws

² Emma Lacey Bordeaux, "Group: Piece of Metal May Solve Mystery of Amelia Earhart's Disappearance," *CNN U.S. Edition*, Oct. 30, 2014.

³ Mary E. Stuckey, "On Rhetorical Circulation," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 15 (2012): 609-12.

inspiration and guidance from Warner's accounts of public formation and Taylor's construction of a social imaginary.⁴ Biographer Susan Ware sums up this social imaginary by addressing how Earhart's discourses of reassurance were designed to assuage fears: "Many of Amelia Earhart's public activities between 1928 and 1937 were directed at overcoming popular fears about commercial aviation."⁵ This ability to build her rhetorical persona, not only as a daredevil, but also as an advocate for flight's safety, became Earhart's trademark during an era that was not only "boiling with new enterprises"⁶ but also contending with skeptical consumers. While Ware and other biographers have identified the way Earhart quelled public fears, they rarely support such claims. What has been missing in Earhart scholarship is a comprehensive, critical analysis of the thousands of newspaper and magazine articles that circulated and represented Earhart's aviation career. Such is the work of this chapter. The "discourse of reassurance," that Earhart embodies, can be characterized as persistent coaxing or reflected optimism meant to distract the public from any real presence of risk in the air. In this discourse, Earhart consistently reassured the public that any of their concerns—bad weather or accidents—could be overcome by the mitigation of their own fears. This discourse of reassurance helped a skittish public begin to embrace the idea of commercial flight in greater numbers.

Record-setting male pilots were not expected to reassure the public of flight's safety in this way. Throughout his career, and in his book *Flight and Life* (1948), Lindbergh privileged the risks of flying over the precautionary measures he took as a pilot, exemplified in a comment made about a particular flight as returning "from the border of death."⁷

⁴ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*; Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, p. 23.

⁵ Ware, *Still Missing: Amelia Earhart and the Search for Modern Feminism* (New York: Norton, 1993), p. 68.

⁶ Ware, *Still Missing*, p. 105.

⁷ Charles Lindbergh, *Of Flight and Life* (New York: Scribner's, 1948).

Lindbergh did not make public reassurances about the safety of flight, rather, he emphasized the risk of flight in recollections of his barnstorming days. While Earhart engaged in risk-taking comparable to the male record-setting pilots, her discourse was positioned as one meant to reassure the public of the safety in air over its proven risk. One of my jobs is to parse out why this was so.

Throughout Earhart's career and into the present, the aviation industry has been mostly a man's pursuit and profession. In order for Earhart to be accepted as a pilot and to gain advertising endorsements and lecture gigs, she had to demonstrate that she both understood the limits of being a woman in aviation and continue to set and break the flying records of male pilots, all while projecting a humility that made it seem as if she was just darn lucky. The "feminine style" that Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's speaks to describes the gendered practices of women public figures.⁸ In "Gender and Genre: Loci of Invention and Contradiction In the Earliest Speeches by U.S. Women," Campbell argues that women have been cast as "ill-suited to the role of rhetor historically."⁹ Women engaged in public address find themselves in a "double bind": "Every occasion when a woman speaks, there was an awareness of taboos being violated and an expectation that the woman would act rhetorically to reaffirm traditional notions of womanhood."¹⁰ This "feminine style" was meant to reassure the audience of the speaker's femininity, through inductive arguments, a woman speaker was expected to give the audience the impression that the conclusions they were drawing were their own. Furthermore, a woman speaker was only supposed to discuss experiences appropriate to women and demonstrate their reliance on male expertise to support their claims. Such was the case for Earhart. She came to master a gendered

⁸ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "What Really Distinguishes and/or Ought to Distinguish Feminist Scholarship in Communication Studies," *Women's Studies in Communication* 11.1 (1988): 4-5.

⁹ Campbell, p. 479.

¹⁰ Campbell, pp. 479-80.

discourse of flight's safety in the appeals she made to reassure the public in order to support a fledgling commercial industry.

In this chapter, I draw a circumference around the circulating texts of Earhart's aviation career.¹¹ Because Earhart's rhetorical persona has been overshadowed by her disappearance, this chapter reclaims a discourse that supported a growing enthusiasm for flight during the Golden Age of Aviation. The civic identity that Earhart maintained before she disappeared can be found in the thousands of articles that Earhart and Putnam collected in a series of scrapbooks that are archived at Purdue University. These collected articles include accounts of Earhart's lecture circuit, which took her all over the U.S., articles that record the public reception of her record-setting flights, Earhart's own perspectives on flying, and articles that demonstrate her advocacy for women's equality, considered together, these demonstrate Earhart's ongoing rhetorical constructions of flight's safety.

Earhart was a critical part of a broader discourse of reassurance employed by the nascent airline industry that both encouraged enthusiasm for flight and constructed a new civic identity of the airline passenger. I will focus on three instantiations in Earhart's rhetorical practices of reassurance: First, the public persona she promoted for herself, using gender performativity to play up or play down the feminine and masculine aspects of herself when one appeared to be more advantageous than another. Second, her association with men, both in her personal life and in her aviation adventures, who could lend her work additional credibility. Third, her advocacy work to get women to embrace flight as a new mode of transit, a "discourse of domesticity" that appealed to both women passengers and women who might sway other family members to fly, by comparing flight to household responsibilities.

¹¹ See Jensen, Erin F. Doss, Claudia I. Janssen, and Sherrema A. Bower, "Theorizing the Transcendent Persona: Amelia Earhart's Vision in *The Fun of It*," *Communication Theory* 20 (2010): 1-20.

All three of these rhetorical strategies of reassurance depended upon a dialectical relationship between safety and risk. Kenneth Burke's perspective on dialectics in his *Grammar of Motives* (1945) provides a means through which to interpret such discourses and their public significance in Earhart's aviation career.¹² During Earhart's aviation career, appeals to safety were always embedded within the logics of adventure and risk. Before Earhart, record-setting flights had been interpreted solely as enactments of risk. Consider, for instance, Charles Lindbergh's 1927 transatlantic flight: this feat proved to the American public that such a flight was technically possible and that Lindbergh was a brave and skilled pilot, but it was not intended to help everyday members of the public to imagine themselves in his shoes. Earhart, however, in her lectures, memoirs, magazine stories, and interviews, articulated a relationship between safety and risk that made flying seem more appealing to potential new airline passengers, as if the risk of taking a seat on a commercial flight was somehow on par with Earhart's decision to fly across the Atlantic Ocean. Within dialectics, Burke described the possibility for a "transposition of terms," an ambiguity making it possible for two words to take on new or enhanced meaning as a result of their "interplay" with each other.¹³ Taming flight within public discourse meant representing just enough of risk to make the experience seem appealing to airline passengers, but always in concert with reassurance of safety. The risk inherent in tropes of transportation could be contained by the safety discourses fundamental to Earhart's rhetorical constructions of flight.

When delineating Earhart's role in aviation history, it is helpful, too, to consider how her identity as a female aviator affected her experience. Feminist standpoint theory offers a language for understanding Earhart's situation. In a male-dominated sky, Earhart was given a subordinate role, but she acknowledged the gendered strictures and strategized a way to

¹² Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*.

¹³ Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, pp. 402-03.

work within them in order to achieve her goals. Feminist standpoint theory—a subset of other standpoint theories that focus on other identities, such as race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation—provides a theoretical structure through which distinctions between men and women can be seen as reflective of greater forces related to patriarchy, ones that have rendered women as subordinate to men. While social location determines and shapes one's life, it does not determine one's particular standpoint, which is the result of "critical reflection on power relations." Earhart, to use this theoretical language, developed an "oppositional stance" formed out of struggle.¹⁴ Like Warner's counterpublic, feminist standpoint reflects the experience of life looking from the "outsider-within."¹⁵ The rest of this chapter will demonstrate Earhart's strategies for successfully navigating a male-dominated realm.

Charles Lindbergh

Because of his transatlantic flight in 1927, Charles Lindbergh became the first and most enduring archetype of a record-setting pilot, sparking a public enthusiasm for flight both in the U.S. and abroad. After Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic Ocean solo in the *Spirit of Saint Louis*, throngs of cheering spectators greeted him in Le Bourget, France. That public fervor was matched in communities across the U.S. in the national tour he made after his return. Not everyone cheered him on, though; Lindbergh had to defend himself against accusations that circulated in the press that he acted too much like a daredevil in his piloting. A letter from business tycoon and philanthropist John Hays Hammond to Harry

¹⁴ Julia T. Wood, "Feminist Standpoint Theory and Muted Group Theory: Commonalities and Divergences," *Women and Language* 28.2 (2005): 61-64.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 62. See also Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, ed. Sandra G. Harding (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 103-26.

Guggenheim, the sponsor of the national tour, raised the concern that Lindbergh was too daring—that he was performing air stunts on his national tour—and that it would be a “national calamity if anything happened to him.” Hammond asked Guggenheim if he would be willing to “drop a word of caution” to his friend Lindbergh.¹⁶ Seeking to reassure Guggenheim, Lindbergh wrote to report that he was “not taking as many chances flying on this tour as I would be flying the mail,” and that reports of his stunts during the national tour were unfounded.¹⁷ Despite his protests, news reports about the tour also cited Lindbergh’s foolish risk-taking. The *Minneapolis Star* called Lindbergh’s stop there one of many “sensational hops over the country,” and that the Colonel was “actuated by only one purpose—the promotion of interest in aviation.”¹⁸ Guggenheim understandably would be alarmed by the reports of his friend Hammond and by those appearing in newspaper accounts. He wanted Lindbergh’s victory lap to showcase the safety of flying and to inspire future new passengers—not future daredevils. The commercial air industry depended upon Lindbergh to serve as the poster boy for an industry that sought to popularize air travel.

Changes in Aviation History during Earhart’s Career

So far, I have considered peripheral matters in the state of early aviation when Earhart was becoming a public figure. Before turning to Earhart herself, I will briefly preview the state of aviation technology and the advances that were being made in technology and regulation during the course of her nine-year career. In 1930, Congress passed the Air Mail Act, which gave almost dictatorial powers over the air transportation system to the

¹⁶ From John Hays Hammond to Harry Guggenheim, Box 27, F-14, July 27, 1927, Lookout Hills, Gloucester, MA, Missouri Historical Museum.

¹⁷ Charles A. Lindbergh to Harry Guggenheim, 1927-28, from the Brown Hotel, Louisville, KY, Aug. 7, 1927, Box 2, Harry Frank Guggenheim Papers 1900-1972, Library of Congress.

¹⁸ “Lindbergh’s Unhappy Lot,” *Minneapolis Star* (Sept. 1, 1927).

Postmaster General. The main provision of the Act, which concerned how airmail carriers' rates were computed, made it financially advantageous for the contract carriers to fly larger planes, thus creating room for passengers. The Postmaster, Walter Folger Brown, then wielded his power and consolidated airline routes to only three companies. Those companies would eventually become United Airlines, which flew the northern routes; a merger of Transcontinental Air Transport (TAT) and Western Air Express, which became Transcontinental and Western (TWA) and covered the middle of the U.S.; and American Airways, whose routes included the southern and western routes.¹⁹ The demands of carrying letters and packages necessitated improvements to aviation safety that would eventually radically transform commercial air service after a political fallout between President Roosevelt and Postmaster Brown in 1934. Still, the airlines had begun to grow in wealth and power. The commercial airline industry had taken off.²⁰

Advances in safety measures are a critical component in this narrative. During the 1920s, the country had begun installing lines of beacons from coast to coast in order to light the airways. Navigational aids and instruments for night flying were still rudimentary or nonexistent, and rotating lamps and mirrors standing atop 50 ft.-tall steel towers set about 10 miles apart meant that pilots flying in clear weather were always within visible range of a beacon. However, with the development of airmail routes, floodlights were added, such that by 1933—not long after Earhart had made history as the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic—the United States boasted 18,000 miles of lighted airways.²¹ Therefore, passengers

¹⁹ "Airmail and the Growth of the Airlines," U.S. Centennial of Flight Commission. (Web). Accessed Nov. 16 2014: <http://www.centennialofflight.net>.

²⁰ For more on commercial aviation history, see Henry Ladd Smith, *Airways: The History of Commercial Aviation in the United States* (New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1965); and for more on the history of air mail, see James H. Bruns, *Mail on the Move* (Polo, Ill: Transportation Trails, 1992).

²¹ See Grant, *Flight*, p. 117.

could fly coast to coast without needing overnight train service, thus making flying competitive with rail travel.

Despite making travel safer at night, the beacons were invisible during bad weather. Therefore, in the late 1920s, American scientists and engineers began experimenting with a radio-based navigation solution using a network of directional radio beams. By the early 1930s, planes were equipped with AM radio receivers that picked up the low frequency radio waves transmitted from the ground, which allowed pilots to navigate the skies even when weather conditions were blinding.²² The industry established radio navigation stations transmitting radio beams at 200-mile intervals along U.S. airways.²³ By the mid-1930s, in fact, most passenger aircraft in the U.S. were equipped with two-way radios that allowed communication with ground controllers.²⁴ Therefore, Earhart's career coincided with this milestone development of a navigational system, however rudimentary, that allowed pilots to "fly blind" through storms.

As traffic at some airports increased in volume, the need for air-traffic control emerged. The first air-traffic control tower was built in 1930 at the Cleveland Municipal Airport, and by 1935, 20 airports in the U.S. had similar systems in place.²⁵ Under this system, approaching pilots would radio in information about their position, and controllers would alert them if there was any concern and also give permission to land. However, since there was no control of aircraft until they approached the airport, controllers sometimes had to coordinate the landings of numerous planes arriving at zero visibility at the same altitude, and at some underfunded airports, controllers doubled as switchboard operators and baggage

²² Charles Wood, "On the Beam," Flight Simulator Navigation (Web): accessed 16 Nov. 2014: <http://www.navfltsm.addr.com/ndb-nav-history.htm>.

²³ See R. G. Grant, *Flight: 100 Years of Aviation* (New York: DK Publishing, Inc., 2002), p. 139.

²⁴ See Grant, *Flight*, p. 142.

²⁵ Grant, *Flight*, p. 142.

handlers. A series of highly publicized crashes in the mid-1930s—particularly that of New Mexico Senator Bronson Cutting in 1935—underscored the critical need to develop a national air traffic control system.

It is hard to overestimate the impact of media accounts of crashes such as that involving Sen. Cutting and how such reports stoked fears in the American public that figures like Earhart would have to work hard to diminish. The May 7, 1935 *New York Times* report about the flight that killed Sen. Cutting gives a flavor of the kind of bad publicity with which the airlines contended, and, for that reason, I will quote the entire news report:

ATLANTA, Mo., May 6 — Out of fuel and desperately groping through a dense fog for a landing place, a twin-motored Transcontinental & Western Air liner crashed early today at the edge of a pasture here and killed United States Senator Bronson M. Cutting, the two pilots and a woman passenger. All the other nine passengers, including a baby, were injured. The crash was within fifteen miles of the Kirksville emergency field, which company officials had hoped the craft would reach when it was warned not to land at Kansas City because of the “soupy” condition of the air.

Senator Cutting’s death was instantaneous.

His crushed body was identified from the contents of his pockets, which held a card with his name, a check for a telephone bill bearing the name of his mother, Mrs. W. Bayard Cutting of New York City, and almost \$600 in cash. He also carried a photograph of his mother. He was hurrying to Washington to vote on the veterans’ bonus. His body is being sent to New York from Macon, Mo. Burial will be near his birthplace, Oakdale, L. I.

The other dead were: BOLTON, HARVEY, the pilot, Kansas City.

GREESON, KENNETH, co-pilot, Kansas City.

HILLIAS, Miss JEANNE ANNE, 20, Kansas City.

The injured are: METZGER, Mrs. DORA L., Los Angeles. Her 3-months-old daughter.

WALLACE, RICHARD, motion-picture director.

WING, PAUL, motion-picture official.

KAPLAN, WILLIAM, motion-picture executive, KAPLAN, Mrs. WILLIAM.

DREW, C. G. (PAT), motion-picture electrician.

SHARPE, HARRY, motion-picture camera man.

MESKER, Mrs. D. L., Kansas City, wife of a TWA pilot.

All except Kaplan were dangerously hurt.²⁶

As a result of the crash, the congressional Subcommittee of the Senate's Committee on Commerce held hearings to investigate certain airplane accidents and interstate air commerce. In 1936, closing in on the year of Earhart's last flight in 1937, the federal government granted control of the national airways to the Commerce Department.²⁷ From 1936 to 1937, Congress held its "Safety in Air" hearings.²⁸ By this point, the industry had grown up and no longer flew under the proverbial radar. Earhart's work to encourage a reticent public to fly—to which this chapter will soon turn—must be read alongside this history.

²⁶ "Senator Cutting is Killed in Air Crash Fatal to 4," *New York Times* (May 7, 1935).

²⁷ "Airline Expansion and Innovation, 1927-1941: The Beginning of Air Traffic Control," Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum Online Exhibition: America by Air (2007) (Web): accessed Nov. 16 2014: <https://airandspace.si.edu/exhibitions/america-by-air/online/innovation/innovation12.cfm>.

²⁸ For the full report, see Safety in Air: Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Commerce, United States Senate, Seventy-fourth Congress, second session, pursuant to S. Res. 146; digitized via Hathi Trust Digital Library (Web): accessed Nov. 16 2014: <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001039585>

The Role of Women in Aviation in the 1920s

Before turning to Earhart, I will also sketch out the role of women in aviation just before she became a national figure. From 1903 to 1927, women aviators appeared mostly within the social imaginary at risk-taking events as barnstormers, wing walkers, and pilots.²⁹ There had been many women aviators who died in these events. However, two accidents and the reported details of those accidents were so gruesome that the memory of their crashes likely added to the public's skittishness about flying. In 1912, Harriet Quimby flew over the Boston Harbor in a purple flowing gown with a hood and laced boots in a trial flight for an upcoming air show. In the presence of 5,000 spectators, she lost control of her monoplane and fell into the water, along with her male passenger, the organizer of the air show.³⁰ A group of men, including her flight instructor, ran into the water to rescue her, only to discover her dead in the harbor. One of the men threw her corpse over his shoulder and walked toward an empty stretcher. The *New York Times* reported that the "two bodies shot downward, striking the water 200 feet from the shore."³¹ The article continued with an account of the male passenger's young son, who "was frantic and would have tried to swim out in the bay had he not been restrained." Both observations reflected a propensity toward the sensational and gruesome in accounts of aviation disasters.

In 1926, African-American pilot Bessie Coleman had herself gained notoriety for her daring flights. In preparation for a 1926 air show in Jacksonville, Florida, Coleman fell out

²⁹ See Janaan Sherman, *Walking on Air: The Aerial Adventures of Phoebe Omlie* (Jackson, MS: U of Mississippi P, 2011), pp. 3-23. The career of Omlie and her husband, Vernon, afford a window into early aviation, as entertainment, business, and peril.

³⁰ Quimby was the first woman to receive a pilot's license in 1911 and the first woman to cross the English Channel. She was also a screenwriter for the film *Birth of a Nation*.

³¹ "Miss Quimby Dies in Airship Fall: Noted Woman Aviator and WAP. Willard, Passenger, are Thrown 1,000 Feet," *New York Times* (July 2, 1912), p. 1.

of her plane at 500 feet, and, along with William T. Wills, a white pilot, died.³² Their deaths were reported on the front page of the *New York Amsterdam Times*, an African-American newspaper, which began the article with the sentence, “death rode in an airplane.”³³ Like the articles that circulated after Quimby’s death, reports about Coleman’s accident explicitly described both pilots’ charred remains. Two years after Coleman’s death, Earhart made her first headlines.

It is also important to contextualize Earhart’s aviation career in a second occupation developed for women in planes: as flight attendants. In 1930, women assumed a new role in aviation. Boeing Air Transport became the first airline to hire women for the aircrew. The first flight attendants were trained nurses, dressed in light gray nurse uniforms with matching nurse’s caps.³⁴ Passengers almost certainly welcomed seeing medically trained staff on flights that were rough and dangerous, and the presence of these female flight attendants offered comfort and reassurance. The Boeing 80s were the latest in trimotor design, had passenger cabins outfitted to resemble luxury Pullman railroad cars—with wood paneling, upholstered seats, lights with shades—and served in-flight meals on elegant china dishware. However, as R. G. Grant reminds us, “despite this surface slickness, much of the experience of flight remained stubbornly discomforting”: deafening noise, chairs without shock absorbers, an inefficient heating system, crude toilets, and, since planes could not yet fly above the weather, airsickness-inducing turbulence. In fact, Grant continues, “one of the stewardess’s prime tasks was to care for people emptying their stomachs into the coyly named ‘burp cups’ Sitting among vomiting passengers and disintegrating crockery, a

³² Coleman got her pilot’s license in France.

³³ “Aviatrix Killed by Fall: Bessie Coleman and White Pilot in 2000 ft. Crash,” *New Amsterdam News* (May 5, 1926), p. 1.

³⁴ For information about the role of stewardesses in advertising, see Peter Lyth, “‘Think of her as your mother’: Airline advertising and the stewardess in America, 1930-1980,” *Journal of Transport History* 30.1 (Manchester, UK: Manchester U P): 1-21.

‘bad flight’ was as hellish an experience as the worst sea crossing.”³⁵ Furthermore, in the early 1930s it was still common for planes to make emergency landings in remote emergency airfields—or in cow pastures.

By the end of the 1930s, Grant says, “U.S. airlines were carrying three million passengers a year,” and those passengers enjoyed heated sound-proofed cabins, sat in padded seats, ate hot in-flight meals, played card games, and sometimes wrote cards or letters in flight that would be carried via airplane.³⁶ During the period of Earhart’s career, the commercial air industry grew from an estimated 95 million revenue passenger miles in 1932 to 270 million in 1935.³⁷ Three years after Earhart’s career ended, Boeing introduced the four-engine B-307 Stratoliner, the first commercial airplane able to fly in the stratosphere, above the weather. Therefore, the kind of smooth airplane travel that we know now was not yet available during Earhart’s aviation career, when she was trying to sell customers on the flying experience.³⁸ Earhart’s aviation career—1928-1937—coincided historically with the growth of the commercial airline industry and its awareness of the need to downplay the risks—which were being addressed—in flying.

Earhart and the Airline Industry

By the end of her career, Earhart would be able to claim fourteen record-setting flights, including the first transatlantic flight as a woman passenger in 1928 and the first transatlantic flight as a solo woman in 1932. In addition to her two transatlantic flights, she was the first to fly round-trip across the U.S. in an Autogiro in 1931, the first to fly from

³⁵ Grant, *Flight*, p. 145.

³⁶ Grant, *Flight*, pp. 147-49.

³⁷ Bilstein, *Flight in America*, p. 104.

³⁸ Grant, *Flight*, p. 149.

Hawaii to California, and the first to fly over the Gulf of Mexico to New York City, all in 1935.

It all began, though, when Earhart responded to a call in 1928 to become the first-ever woman passenger on a transatlantic flight. The flight had been organized and sponsored by Amy Phipps Guest, an American heiress to the Pittsburgh Steel fortune who was married to a British man and living in London. She owned a plane she called *Friendship*, which she hoped would demonstrate the friendly ties between the United States and Britain. However, when family members of the American heiress decided that the flight would be too perilous for Guest, she contacted book publisher and publicist George P. Putnam about finding another woman to fly in the plane across the Atlantic.³⁹ Guest wanted to find a woman with the right image and personality in order to promote the flight of the *Friendship* and future possibilities for commercial transatlantic service. Putnam, who had published Lindbergh's memoir *We* (1927) after his transatlantic flight, stepped in to reorganize Guest's trip and to select another woman passenger. At the time, Earhart had been working as a social worker in Boston. In her interview with Putnam and three committee members, Earhart made an impression, in part because of her physical and temperamental resemblance to Lindbergh. Her poise, modesty, clean looks, and cheerfulness—as well as her experience as a pilot and her comfort flying—made her a natural replacement for Guest. The committee selected Earhart to serve as “captain” of the flight. In fact, the role was merely ceremonial, and Wilmer Stultz, a test pilot for one of Admiral Byrd's planes, was compensated \$20,000 for flying the plane. Earhart would receive no financial reward—even the fees she would earn from her newspaper articles after the flight had to be returned to help cover the costs of the

³⁹ Doris L. Rich, *Amelia Earhart: A Biography* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1989), p. 46.

flight.⁴⁰ After the *Friendship*'s successful passage across the Atlantic, Earhart became an international hero who was celebrated with tickertape parades, lecture invitations, and other adventurous gambles such as a deep sea diving expedition in the waters off of Manhattan.⁴¹ Soon thereafter, with Putnam's grooming, she released her first memoir, *20 Hrs., 40 Min.: Our Flight in the Friendship*.



Figure 1: Amelia Earhart dressing for deep-sea diving, 1929 (*New York Times Mid-Week Pictorial*)

Discourse of Safety

Amelia Earhart's career began just a few years before commercial flying took off in earnest in the U.S. During this era of growth, Earhart became the face and figure of safe flying. Having a woman to promote flying as a passenger, as Earhart had been so prominently in 1928, was critical to making a shift in public perception. If it was safe for a woman to fly as a passenger, then it could be argued that it must be safe for all citizens. Over time, this discourse targeted at women, focused on encouraging American wives to

⁴⁰ Rich, *Amelia Earhart: A Biography*, p. 49.

⁴¹ "A Famous Aviatrix Explores the Bottom of the Ocean," *Mid-Week Pictorial* (Aug. 10, 1929), p. 1.

reassure their husbands and families that flying would be a safe mode for business travel, Earhart—as both passenger and solo pilot—continued to play an important role in this endeavor throughout the length of her career.

As the nation’s most celebrated female air passenger—a designation that troubled Earhart-the-pilot for the rest of her career—she conveyed the image of someone with the necessary competence, agency, and willingness to take calculated risk. Earhart embodied safety and clean living, and the public persona that developed represented her both as a record-setting pilot and as an everyday woman, who, for instance, favored buttermilk and eschewed drinking and smoking. Nothing in this collection of attributes was as critical, however, as the public seeing that she put her trust in the *Friendship*’s pilot Wilmer Stultz, even though she was a pilot too. As a pilot who agreed to be a passenger, she could model the trust necessary for others to consider flight themselves.

Earhart’s Memoirs

Earhart’s perspectives on flight and safety circulated through interviews with her and stories about her in newspapers and the three memoirs she wrote (the last of which was taken from her final flight log and published posthumously). In these memoirs—*20 Hrs., 40 Min.: Our Flight In the Friendship* (1928); *The Fun of It* (1932); and *Last Flight* (1937)—Earhart shared her own perspectives about the opportunity afforded by flight.⁴² Earhart’s ability to develop an effective discourse around flight’s safety is evident in her capacity to tell stories, ones that enhanced the public’s ability to imagine their own entrance into the skies as pilot or passenger.

⁴² Amelia Earhart, *20 Hrs., 40 Min.: Our Flight in the Friendship: the American Girl, First Across the Atlantic by Air, Tells her Story* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1928); *Last Flight: Amelia Earhart’s Flying Adventures* (New York: GP Putnam, 1937); and *The Fun of It: Random Records of My Own Flying and of Women in Aviation* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1932).

Recent biographers, such as Doris Rich and Susan Ware, have dismissed Earhart's memoirs with statements such as: "In spite of brisk sales and generally flattering reviews, the book [*20 Hrs 40 Mins*] was not very interesting. Other than entries from Amelia's diary, it was a dull summary of the problems of commercial aviation and a plea for more support from the government and the public."⁴³ As this critique suggests, the memoirs seem rather vapid. However, it is clear that Earhart was privileging a discourse of reassurance over any literary imperative. Earhart's biographers may dismiss Earhart's folksy anecdotes as offering little more than passing amusement, but I argue that knowing that Earhart was also responding to the imperatives of safety lends a more nuanced reading to her words.

In her memoirs, Earhart relates advice and enumerates simple steps toward participating in air travel. In her first memoir, *20 Hrs., 40 Min.: Our Flight In the Friendship*, Earhart constructs a rhetorical persona of herself as a cheerful helper: she seems clearly motivated to become a well-regarded pilot. Her self-deprecating tone, one evocative of Campbell's "feminist style," helps to create a rhetorical persona that reflects both personal humility and a desire to achieve. It was a strategy perhaps designed to relate to a public that was threatened by the abilities of a woman pilot. Earhart shares both accounts of her transatlantic flight and perspectives about flying for the domestic traveler. In *20 Hrs., 40 Min.*, she acknowledges that there is risk in flight, but her dominant message is that flight has become much safer. Her words offer courage to those individuals still undecided about flying.

The precedent set in this first financial arrangement—of financing Earhart's record-setting flights through her own creative labor—became the manner in which Putnam and Earhart collaborated throughout her aviation career. Earhart developed a rhetorical persona,

⁴³ Anne Hermann, "On Amelia Earhart: The Aviatrix as American Dandy," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 39.1 (2000): 76-107.

in part, through her writing and speaking about the wonder of flight and her ability to overcome its risk. Putnam promoted these messages to a public both intrigued by Earhart and the possibility that they too could join her in the skies as passengers.

Because of the public influence of Putnam's celebrity circle of friends, including Hollywood directors and actors, Earhart's fame has often been attributed to Putnam's network.⁴⁴ After Earhart and Putnam's marriage in 1931, their relationship provided a platform on which they were able to bolster the public's confidence in flight's safety. This relationship—one represented in accounts of them prior to and after her milestone flights, on the lecture circuit, and in product endorsements—telegraphed to readers that, as a wife, Earhart had the impetus to return from her flight, in tact, to the expectant arms of a loving husband.⁴⁵

Because so few people had flown in a plane in 1928 very few people had seen the sky up close. Therefore, Earhart's descriptions of the sky suggested the purpose of inviting calm in order to recruit future passengers. In her first memoir, she wrote, "There is a light haze and the ocean is smooth, with little color....From a height it looks quiet, almost like ice with flecks in it."⁴⁶ Earhart promised the air passenger entry to "another world" when flying above the clouds and "playing hide and seek" through the clouds.⁴⁷ The sky, she suggests, is a peaceful habitat. This perspective promised views of the Earth just by looking out a cabin window. Through images that conjured up the exoticism of the sky, Earhart encouraged the public to covet the experience of flight. The book devotes a couple of chapters to recounting

⁴⁴ Mary Franklin, "Amelia Earhart Looks at the Films," *Screenland: The Smart Screen Magazine* (June 1933), p. 31.

⁴⁵ See Jensen, Erin F. Doss, Claudia I. Janssen, and Sherrema A. Bower, "Theorizing the Transcendent Persona: Amelia Earhart's Vision in the Fun of It," *Communication Theory* 20 (2010): 1-20.

⁴⁶ Earhart, *20 Hrs., 40 Min*, p. 53.

⁴⁷ Earhart, *20 Hrs., 40 Min*, p. 133.

the flight from Nova Scotia to Wales, and then flashes back to Earhart's life prior to being selected as a passenger and speculates about the future of aviation, especially for women. It becomes clear in the book's text that Earhart's mission is not only to represent her own heroic journey but also to present a case for the safety of flying for all citizens.

After the release of *20 Hrs., 40 Min.*, Earhart embodied the new civic identity of the airline passenger. In the chapter "Aviation Invites," Earhart makes specific recommendations for how to move from the "airmindedness" of a non-flyer to becoming an air passenger. While she encouraged spectatorship at airshows and stunt flights, she also recognized that becoming an air passenger meant engaging in practices of civic agency. The first of these acts was, simply, sending letters by airmail.⁴⁸ From the act of mailing a letter, the "airminded" citizen might consider taking the next step of becoming an airline passenger. Earhart corrected some popular misconceptions about flight, namely that it was comparable to a roller-coaster ride or to peering over a tall building: "Flying is so matter-of-fact that probably the passenger taking off for the first time will not know when he has left the ground."⁴⁹ Citing testimony of former "non-flyers," Earhart emphasized the normalcy of flight: "I heard a man say as he left a plane after his first trip, 'Well, the most remarkable thing about flying is that it isn't remarkable'."⁵⁰ While the memoir conceded the fact that poor weather could affect a flight, she downplayed the risk: "There are bumps. Bumpiness ... or a good time for strong stomachs."⁵¹ The greatest threat to passenger safety, she claimed was flying with an unlicensed pilot. She included a chart, "Accidents and their Causes," which drew a distinction between licensed and unlicensed planes and pilots and

⁴⁸ Earhart, *20 Hrs., 40 Min.*, p. 124.

⁴⁹ Earhart, *20 Hrs., 40 Min.*, p. 125.

⁵⁰ Earhart, *20 Hrs., 40 Min.*, p. 125.

⁵¹ Earhart, *20 Hrs., 40 Min.*, p. 132.

links the majority of accidents with the unlicensed pilots.⁵² The chart implied that flight had become safer with the increased number of licensed and trained pilots operating licensed aircraft.

ACCIDENTS AND THEIR CAUSES		
<i>Planes Involved in Accidents</i>		
Licensed.....	34	
Unlicensed.....	<u>166</u>	200
<i>Pilots Involved in Accidents</i>		
Licensed pilots.....	35	
Unlicensed pilots.....	<u>165</u>	200
<i>Probable Causes of Accidents</i>		
Pilots.....	34	
Mechanical defects.....	43	
Structural failure.....	23	
Weather.....	12	
Other causes.....	14	
Unknown.....	<u>8</u>	200

Figure 2: Chart: “Accidents and their Causes,” published in *20 Hrs., 40 Min.*, p. 147

Repeatedly in this memoir, Earhart told non-flyers that the best way they could support the advancement of aviation was to become air passengers. Citing conditions such as air timidity, Earhart suggested that commercial aviation’s future development depended equally upon a public reckoning with its fears and embracing technological advance. As the confidence of each new airline passenger grew, so, too, would grow the airline industry.

Earhart’s second memoir, *The Fun of It*, came out four years later. While it was promoted as the memoir of her solo transatlantic flight, only the last ten pages focus on that

⁵² Earhart, *20 Hrs., 40 Min.*, p. 147.

feat, due to the fact that it was released almost immediately after the flight. Earhart's discourse of reassurance, with regard to flight's safety, is evident in the manner in which *The Fun of It* was promoted. One promotional advertisement featured a full-length photograph of Earhart wearing aviator goggles on top of her head, and a leather jacket and boots. The ad promised a phonograph recording of Earhart's broadcast in London 72 hours after her take off.⁵³ Arguably, this commercial gimmick was intended not just to sell copies of the book, but also to offer additional reassurance to an anxious public that Earhart would, indeed, reach her destination and that they would get audio proof.

The memoir itself, released with record speed the day after Earhart returned from the very flight that the promotional material about it touted, sought to assuage non-flyers of the relative safety of air travel. In it, Earhart cited what she had heard so many people say—that they “would gladly fly if [they] could stay very close to the ground”—and tried to dispel the myth that flying close to the ground was safer than flying with substantial altitude: “Trouble in the air is very rare. It is hitting the ground that causes it. Obviously, the higher one happens to be, the more time there is to select a safe landing place in case of difficulty.”⁵⁴ The added credibility she had gained through her solo transatlantic flight had given her a platform and an audience, and she used her newfound position to offer instruction to the public, as an expert pilot. With her first memoir, she did not have this kind of platform, since her fame at that time stemmed from her role as a passenger, not pilot.

Even in her role as pilot, Earhart in her second memoir continues to draw a comparison between ground and sky from the perspective of being an air passenger. For example, Earhart cited instances in which the “non-flyer” had to choose between flight and

⁵³ “Amelia Earhart’s *The Fun of It*” (Advertisement). Scrapbook 7, The George Palmer Putnam Collection of Amelia Earhart, Papers, Archives and Special Collections, Purdue University Libraries, West Lafayette, IN. Hereafter, I will denote articles found in this Scrapbook Collection with the marker “Earhart’s Scrapbooks.”

⁵⁴ Earhart, *The Fun of It*, p. 42.

ground transportation. On certain airline routes, the travel time by railroad was comparable to that of an airplane. In order to make flight seem like a viable option for commercial transportation, the safety of the journey was not the only variable to consider. During the early 1930s, traveling cross-country via plane required 10 stops and took 24 (down from 36) hours. If airplane technology was only recently out of its infancy, so was automobile technology, which itself could be blamed for its share of fatalities.⁵⁵ As Earhart advised her readers, “If you want to go more than forty-five, better take it to the air. It isn’t safe on the ground.”⁵⁶

Offering reassurance also came in the form of correcting public assumptions about women pilots. This tendency to scapegoat women for their own deaths was not lost on Earhart. In *The Fun of It*, she wrote:

Speaking of plane accidents in general, I might add that women are often penalized by publicity for their every mishap. Any disproportionate “breaks” they get when they accomplish something are nullified in crash headline.⁵⁷

For Earhart, the necessity for reassurance was not only a measure targeted at the non-flyer hesitant to take on the risk of flight. It was also necessary for a public that was skeptical of those women who chose to pilot aircraft.

Since the time of the Wrights’ first four flights, the weather was a constant concern. In both of her first two memoirs, Earhart reframed and dismissed or downplayed such matters as threatening weather conditions as “bugaboos.” This strategy acknowledged the possibility of various risks in flying, yet minimized them. She also drew her readers’

⁵⁵ Kenneth Hudson, *Diamonds in the Sky: A Social History of Air Travel* (London: Bodley Head: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1979), p. 145.

⁵⁶ “Amelia Earhart signs safety plea, but wishes it were more drastic,” *Indianapolis Star* (Oct. 23, 1935); Earhart’s Scrapbooks.

⁵⁷ Earhart, *The Fun of It*, p. 136.

attention to advancements in air safety, such as instruments for blind flying and radio equipment.⁵⁸ Thus, in her memoirs, Earhart celebrated the wonder of the sky and touted those technological advancements meant to strengthen the safety record in aviation.

Earhart's Public Lectures

Earhart's public career as an advocate of flight and flight's safety served as an essential companion discourse to the growth of commercial air travel. As an advocate for flight's safety, Earhart encouraged the "stay-at-homes" or "non-flyers"—period language for those who were fearful of air travel—to take the risk of becoming commercial air passengers. While there were many technological advances that contributed to the safety of flying, the rhetorical work of reassurance remained a necessity for future growth in commercial flight.

After her 1928 transatlantic flight, Earhart was constantly on the lecture circuit, giving lectures that took place in performance halls, college campuses, and churches across the country. While frequent mention of her lecture itinerary circulated in the news, there are far fewer examples of the content in Earhart's lectures. On June 7, 1935, Earhart addressed 3,500 people in her hometown of Atchison, Kansas.⁵⁹ In her lecture, she employed her discourse of reassurance to encourage women to fly, to coax women to encourage their husbands to fly (or at least not be a barrier), and to choose flight over ground transit. She began by dispelling the many myths circulating in the media about the reasons she flew. She cited one question she had been asked in particular: if she had flown over the Pacific Ocean because she was bored with her husband. After relating a few other stories about the public's

⁵⁸ Earhart, *The Fun of It*, p. 115.

⁵⁹ "Flies Because She Enjoys It; Amelia Delights Audience at Memorial Hall," *Atchison Daily Globe* (June 7, 1935).

suspected reasons for her flights, Earhart went on to emphasize that she flew for her own “personal satisfaction,” not for any higher purpose such as the collection of scientific data, as so many had queried of her while in the audience of her prior lectures.

In the rest of the speech, Earhart focused on recruiting new air passengers by dispelling what she considered to be the popular myths or misperceptions of flight. The first myth was that worry could be in any manner productive to flying. Calling worry a “potent poison,” she said it “retarded reactions” in pilots and kept people from becoming air passengers. She emphasized her point by speculating that Hamlet would not have been a skilled aviator. She concluded her lecture with an appeal to flight’s safety, saying, “You would have to travel by air 12 million miles for an accident, which is practically safe!” Since Earhart attracted sometimes large crowds for her lectures, which were many, she was able to convey her confidence about flight in person to diverse audiences across the country.

Safety in Air Congressional Hearing

Earhart’s role of reassuring the public about flight’s safety reached its apex in 1936-37 in her testimony before a congressional hearing on safety in air. The Senate Committee on Commerce blamed the crash of the plane carrying Senator Cutting to his death on a faulty navigational aid and poor leadership within the Bureau of Air Commerce. Prior to the accident and under the leadership of Eugene Vidal, the Bureau of Air Commerce had installed navigational aids for pilots, such as air-to-ground communication and beacon lights. When these aids failed, as was the case with the crash in Missouri, the public blamed the negligence of aviation bureaucrats in Washington, D.C. While the hearings were prompted by the death of Sen. Cutting, as documented in the introduction to this chapter, accounts of the accident responded to the need to support and promote the burgeoning civic identity of commercial air passengers by publicly investigating the safety of flight. At the hearings,

there were many articulations of safety over risk, meant to stabilize the perception of commercial flight as a viable and growing commercial industry.

Toward the end of the three-month-long hearing, Earhart gave her testimony. The modus operandi of her testimony was the necessity of reassuring the public of safe flying practices of commercial air personnel and also translating the experience of flight from the air back to the ground. As she had done so often on the lecture circuit, she made frequent comparisons between flying and driving as a way to discuss the challenges of nascent navigational aids:

In the early days, curve signs were not necessary along the highways for the slow-moving automobile. As the speed increased those signs became more important, in order to push performance to a higher level. . . . Theoretically, should not [aviation] aids be considered in the same light as the highway signs?⁶⁰

Because the U.S. public in 1936 was largely reticent to fly, Earhart translated for them the experience of the sky by talking about it in terms of the automobile, hoping that reassurance would bring the perspective that flying was just like driving, but only safer.

Toward the end of her testimony, Earhart warned committee members about those initiatives to address safety in flight that she believed would not increase the number of passengers in the air. She shared her disdain for the “musty laboratories” of academics that projected opinions about the “scope of the safety problem” without addressing the adventure of flight. It was, she argued, the skill of the pilot that would make aviation safe.⁶¹ Earhart’s congressional testimony signaled a turning point in the public’s relationship with flying.

⁶⁰ *Safety In Air, Hearings Before A Subcommittee of the Committee on Commerce United States Senate*, 74th Cong (1936) p. 911.

⁶¹ *Safety In Air*, p. 911. On March 1, 1937, one year after the initial hearings, Vidal, the Director of the Bureau of Air Commerce and Earhart’s close colleague, resigned, yielding his position to Fred Dow Fagg, Jr., counsel to the Senate committee investigating the Cutting accident and a professor of Air Law, from the “musty laboratories” of Northwestern University.

Before this point, public discourses about flying privileged adventure, heroism, and record-setting flights.

Earhart's many rhetorical strategies of reassurance in flight's safety at the hearing registered her dissent. A *New York Herald Tribune* headline summarized Earhart's testimony accordingly: "Overemphasis on Safety Called Bad for Aviation: Too Much Talk about Aids Frightens Public, Miss Earhart Tells Senators. Defends Beacon System; Facilities Better Here Than Abroad, Girl Flyer Says."⁶² Nowhere in Earhart's testimony did she insinuate that safety was overemphasized. What she did articulate was a need not to rely on the recent addition of navigational aids. This distinction, however, was too subtle for the *New York Herald Tribune*.⁶³ Because so much emphasis had been placed on a faulty navigational aid in the Cutting accident, Earhart emphasized their "relative importance" for cautious pilots. With this congressional hearing, the adventure of flight had to be tempered with assurances that aviation safety would increase with the advancement of navigational aids. Flight had to appear safe in order for the commercial air industry to flourish.

Earhart as Employee of the Commercial Air Industry

As a woman, and as a competent pilot, Earhart could lend her celebrity status to sell commercial products. In the course of her career, she endorsed a clothing and luggage line to support the mobility of the air passenger, spark plugs, an airplane engine, an automobile, gasoline, oil, and Kodak cameras.⁶⁴ She was the "it-girl" of aviation, and a wide range of commercial producers sought her endorsement. With the ubiquity of her name and image in

⁶² *New York Herald Tribune* (May 2, 1936); Earhart's Scrapbooks.

⁶³ *Safety In Air*, p. 911.

⁶⁴ Rich, *Amelia Earhart: A Biography*, p. 174.

the American media in the years 1932-37, Earhart's star status was strong and her words carried weight. And because the products she endorsed were meant for everyday use, their utilitarian nature transferred over to the perception of flight, by association, as a quotidian pursuit.

As a vice-president for three commercial aviation ventures, Transcontinental Air Transport (TAT), Ludington Airline, and the Boston and Maine Airways, Earhart's job was not only to add credibility through her own fame but to reassure the public of flight's safety.⁶⁵ Biographer Susan Ware described Earhart's roles with each of these commercial ventures as "more ceremonial than substantive." She joked that she was a "chronic vice-president" in each venture.⁶⁶ Despite the self-deprecation she herself frequently and rhetorically employed, Earhart helped the commercial aviation industry to grow and, in turn, these professional responsibilities secured her financial stability. By the end of its first year in 1931, with Earhart as a Vice-President, Ludington Line had shuttled about 66,000 passengers on about 28 flights a day without accident or injury.

Earhart's first business association was with Transcontinental Air Transport (TAT), also known as the Lindbergh Line, established in 1929.⁶⁷ TAT sold coast-to-coast package flights with the duration of 48 hours, flying during the day and having passengers take the train at night. In 1930, Earhart joined up with a second venture, led by Gene Vidal and Paul "Dog" Collins, who had convinced brothers Charles and Nicholas Ludington to invest in an hourly service airline, the Ludington Line, that would provide ten round trips a day between

⁶⁵ In *The Fun of It*, Earhart shared stories about animals as air passengers. For example, she wrote about flying with a frightened canary. Earhart seemed to challenge readers that the American public could be braver than a caged bird in flight. On another flight, a horse was sold two seats and stood in the aisle. People hid their small dogs in their coats.

⁶⁶ Ware, *Still Missing*, p. 66.

⁶⁷ For more about this airline, see Robert F. Kirk, *Flying the Lindbergh Line: Then & Now* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2013).

New York and Washington, the first frequent service airline in the world. From 1930-1931, Earhart served as one of three Vice-Presidents. When it failed to get a mail contract, Ludington Line was sold to Eastern Transport in 1933. Earhart's third commercial aviation venture operated flights between Boston and several cities in Maine.

A Woman Speaking to Women

The traveling public had to be "sold" on flight, and women became the most dependable messengers.⁶⁸ Earhart's role with those airlines was to sell flight to women. Airline executives identified women not only as potential commercial flight passengers, but also as the ones who could allow and persuade the men in their lives to be air passengers. Earhart had acknowledged this fact in *The Fun of It*, quoting a girl who had told Earhart that her "father won't fly, if Mother says he can't."⁶⁹ In her speech given to a hometown audience in Atchison, Kansas, Earhart said:

Women have been labelled [sic] the greatest sales resistance in flying. They won't go up and they won't let their men go up. If mother says father will stay down, father stays down. The last few years this situation has improved somewhat. It may be true that father used mother's attitude as a general excuse.

In this prodding, Earhart sought to empower women to be in solidarity with her public campaign to accept the opportunity of flight.

As part of her role as the national representative about flight to other women, Earhart also appeared frequently in women's magazines, often with her husband. Acknowledging that their unconventional marriage could provoke public discomfort, Earhart and Putnam

⁶⁸ Earhart, *The Fun of It*, p. 105.

⁶⁹ Earhart, *The Fun of It*, p. 106.

worked hard to craft an image of a more traditional marriage. Being safe meant that she had to project herself as a woman with traditional values, despite having a career, being married to a divorced man, and not having children of her own. Being married afforded Earhart access to the traditional role of wife and stepmother to Putnam's two sons, despite the autonomy of her aviation career.⁷⁰



Figure 3: Amelia Earhart with husband and a stepson, 1933

⁷⁰ "Drop in—for Warm Reception," *Chicago American* (June 1, 1933); Earhart's Scrapbooks.

In order to navigate any public discomfort in a marriage with more autonomy and mobility than most couples of the 1920s and 1930s, Earhart and Putnam wrote articles about their relationship for women's magazines in which they discussed how they approached the subject of being apart, and their two surnames. Even though these topics had nothing materially to do with the safety of flight, these essays reflect Earhart's overall safety discourse. Women's magazines afforded an audience that was captivated by Earhart and wanted to know more about the details of her life in order that they too could share their "airmindedness" among family and friends.

In order for Earhart to advocate for the safety in flight and to be considered a safe pilot, the public had to see her as someone who also inhabited and embraced more traditional, domestic, roles such as being a wife. Because Earhart was both a wife and a pilot, women's magazines tried to make sense of her unusual marriage arrangement. Through their public dialogue, Earhart and Putnam seeded such considerations in the minds of a broader audience. George Putnam published columns about being the husband of Amelia Earhart and what happened to relations between sexes when both had public careers. In companion columns in *Redbook Magazine* entitled "My Wife" and "My Husband," Putnam confided some of the negotiations he and Earhart made within their marriage as a means perhaps to encourage other women to fly, or to let their husbands fly for business, despite the possibility of marital tension or discord. Putnam explained why he encouraged Earhart to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean and why a wife did not need her husband's permission to do something she really wanted to do, whether pursuing aviation or something else. He wrote, "Why did I let her do it? In the first place, I didn't 'let' her. Yes doubtless I could have prevented the flight. But when the person who happens to be my wife wants very much to do something, she doesn't have to get my permission—her husband's royal sanction—any

more than I have to get hers if I want to fly down to Washington or take a lady to lunch.”⁷¹

In his columns, Putnam both affirmed and found humor in the dual identity of Earhart as both a record-setting pilot and his wife in such comments as “she’s gone domestic—for a couple of minutes, anyway.”⁷² In her companion column, “My Husband,” Earhart shared her perspectives on how a wife, after doing what she really wanted to do, might acknowledge the support and encouragement of her husband. Earhart conceded that she had placed a great strain on her husband and acknowledged her husband’s support in helping her to be a safe pilot. In the two columns, we see both Earhart’s and Putnam’s efforts to represent their relationship as one traditional enough to reflect the mores of the era, yet strong enough to withstand the pressures of their high profile partnership.

Earhart’s retention of her maiden name remained of active public concern. She was Amelia Earhart was Miss Earhart in public and Mrs. Putnam in private.⁷³ To represent a public united front concerning their different surnames, Putnam introduced his wife as Amelia Earhart. In response, Earhart said her husband had given her permission to use Miss Earhart. The *Bay City Daily Times* quoted Earhart as saying, “I’d rather be Miss Earhart. Why drag Mr. Putnam into aviation?”⁷⁴ Earhart justified the keeping of her maiden name as a way to accept responsibility in her own aviation career and to minimize any risk by association to her husband.

As a couple, they were deliberate about a departure protocol that suggested Putnam’s full support of the next flight. Before all of Earhart’s record-setting flights, Putnam staged a

⁷¹ G. P. Putnam, “My Wife,” *Red Book Magazine* (Sept. 1932).

⁷² “Miss Earhart Domestic for Once, Putnam Finds,” *New York Herald Tribune* (Sept. 11, 1935); Earhart’s Scrapbooks.

⁷³ Gibson R. Hubbard, “Scribe Learns Miss Earhart is Very Feminine,” *Oregon Journal* (Feb. 1, 1933); Earhart’s Scrapbooks.

⁷⁴ “Former Censors Sing Her Praises,” *Bay City Daily Times* (June 21, 1932), p. 1; Earhart’s Scrapbooks.

public goodbye to Earhart, presenting his public identity as the worried, loving husband. Putnam stood by her plane or on the wing, ready with a handshake, a few words, and a smile to reassure the public that her safety in the air depended upon this public expression of marital concordance. In *Illustrated Love Magazine*, Earhart is able to narrate her experience of their separations saying, “Of course, I hate to be separated from G. P. on my trips. But he understands what aviation means to me and is willing to be generous about my career—that is, if I don’t plan trips that are too long.”⁷⁵ Putnam shared his own concerns, saying he identified himself as someone who kept vigil on the ground and always waited for her return.

In certain essays, Putnam leads with his own reaction to the risk of his wife’s milestone flights as a way to acknowledge to the public that while he, along with Earhart, promoted the safety in flight, he also understood and was willing to reflect the dangers. In an article entitled “A Flyer’s Husband,” Putnam discussed his reaction to his wife’s record-setting 1935 flight from Hawaii to California, saying:

Take my wife’s most recent flight, across the Pacific. It stirred up an unconscionable lot of trouble for me. . . . When my better half—by name Amelia Earhart—shot her plane off the muddy field in Honolulu and headed for California, someone asked me how I felt. I’d rather have a baby was my reply From my prejudiced masculine viewpoint, I cherished the notion that giving birth to an infant would be easier (for me) than waving a wife off on a transoceanic hop.⁷⁶

Projecting himself as a concerned, supportive husband, Putnam’s public persona added to Earhart’s dual persona as a risk taking record-setter and an advocate for safety as he watches her plane depart.

⁷⁵ Laura Benham, “Amelia Earhart Answers the Call of Fate,” *The Illustrated Love Magazine* (Jan. 1932): p. 24; Earhart’s Scrapbooks.

⁷⁶ George P. Putnam, “A Flyer’s Husband,” *Forum and Century* (June 1935): 330-32; Earhart’s Scrapbooks.

Gender Performativity

As Earhart transformed the depiction of woman aviators within the social imaginary of flight from barnstormers to advocates of flight's safety, women pilots not only had to learn how to represent flight's safety in partnership with men, but they had to learn how to deploy gendered performances of both masculinity and femininity strategically, in part, upon which gender performance might best convey flight's safety or be more persuasive to the "non-flyer." Earhart discussed such performances as necessary in this transition from women being risk-takers in air to being advocates of flight's safety.

In response to being a pilot, in a profession scarcely populated by other women, Earhart's persona reflected a fluidity of gender identity as a strategy, I would argue, to appear safe or typical.⁷⁷



Figure 4: Amelia Earhart with George Putnam, 1933

⁷⁷ "Earhart Spans U.S. For New Air Record: Husband Greets Woman Flier On Arrival Here," *Newark Sunday Call* (July 9, 1933), p. 1; Earhart's Scrapbooks.

When selected as a passenger in 1928, it was certainly because of her poise, strength, beauty, and femininity. Over time, as her fame as a pilot—not just passenger—grew, she could represent a more masculine identity with her short hair, ties, leather jacket, and pants.



Figure 5: Caricature of Amelia Earhart, 1932

This ability to shift back and forth between gender identities further amplified the mystery of her public persona. Within the social imaginary of flight, women aviators engaged in practices of gender performativity as a rhetorical strategy to represent flight's safety, evident in caricatures of Earhart with masculinized physical features. Privileging the traits of a masculine pilot was one way for women aviators not to be "penalized by publicity for their every mishap."⁷⁸ As frequently as Earhart was represented wearing a tie under a mechanic suit, she was also captured in photographs in ball gowns, pearls, and fur. After her first transatlantic flight in 1928 landed in Wales, Earhart appeared in the crowd wearing a dress, feminine hat, and fur stole, having changed before leaving the plane from her flight suit—her goggles, helmet, and leather jacket—that she, like the male crewmembers, wore during the flight. Newspapers reinforced representations of Earhart's masculine identity in articles that document Earhart's habit of getting her hair cut at a barbershop, instead of a beauty parlor.⁷⁹

While Earhart may have complained about the practice, another gendered performance deployed in relation to journalist queries was to exaggerate her femininity. After the 1928 transatlantic flight, photographs circulated of Earhart in fashion magazines such as *Vogue*, dressed in ball gowns. Many images combined aviation gear with glamorous outfits, as if to suggest that the experience of flight afforded not only an elevation in altitude but also in social status or desirability. It was not only Earhart who wrote about the burden of representing femininity. Anne Morrow Lindbergh was a bestselling author, the first woman to earn a glider pilot license in 1930, and the wife of Charles Lindbergh. In her *North of the Orient*, she documented the experience of serving as navigator for her husband

⁷⁸ Earhart, *The Fun of It*, p. 136.

⁷⁹ "Getting a Haircut is the Job AE Dislikes Most: Former Aviatrix Prefers Men's Barber Shops to Beauty Parlors, but Would Like to Find One Where She Won't be Recognized and Cheered," *Springfield Daily Republic* (Dec. 4, 1932), p. 14; Earhart's Scrapbooks.

on a flight from Long Island to Russia, Japan, and China. She reflected on the fact that she was often defined more by her fashion choices than by her navigational skills.⁸⁰ Instead of refusing to respond to questions from the public, however, she seemed to accept the public's expectation that she show her feminine normativity through discussions of fashion. Women aviators, like Earhart and Lindbergh, knew that they had to talk about topics that might interest women readers in order to bolster their appearance as safe pilots.

As "Lady Lindy," Earhart assumed a masculinized public persona created by her physical similarity to Charles Lindbergh. This identity—while founded in similar looks—was intentionally amplified by its mention in newspaper articles. The *Chicago Daily Tribune*, for example, made frequent comparisons between Earhart's and Lindbergh's physical features and dispositions: "She looks enough like that famous bird man Charles Lindbergh to be his sister. Both faces have an expression of quiet, somewhat aloof, . . . both have similar features, straight, level brows, small mouths with well-formed lips, . . . long, supple bodies and are what the Scotch would call 'bonnie'."⁸¹ When asked by reporters if she knew Lindbergh, Earhart responded that she had never met the Colonel, that she did not look like him, and that she would "apologize to him for innocently inflicting the idiotic comparison. The idiotic part is all mine, of course."⁸² Despite Earhart's protests, the two aviators did favor one another in their tall leggy physiques, angular and boyish good looks, coloring, and determined stare.

Symbolic comparisons continued to be made between Earhart and Lindbergh throughout her aviation career. Her physical resemblance to Lindbergh seemed to telegraph

⁸⁰ Anne Morrow Lindbergh, *North to the Orient* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1935), p. 39.

⁸¹ Mme. X, "Writer has Close-up of Amelia Earhart: Like Lindy, Flyer is Quiet, Modest, and Almost Aloof," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Dec. 2, 1928), p. 13.

⁸² Earhart, *20 Hrs., 14 Min.*, pp. 115-16.

to the public that Earhart was a safe pilot. By scheduling her solo transatlantic flight around the anniversary of his transatlantic flight, which occurred May 20-21, 1927, she seemed to invite this comparison. *The Rochester NY Democrat and Chronicle* opined, “It is appropriate that this [flight] should be done in the tenth anniversary year of the Lindbergh flight,” calling Earhart “America’s favorite flying daughter.”⁸³ Newspaper articles affirmed a synchrony between the two aviators, as if Earhart’s flights would somehow be safer when proximate to the anniversary of Lindbergh’s flight.

Women, as aviators and passengers, were also interpolated into a discourse of safety, not only in their safe flying but also in demonstrations of femininity up in the air. Dressing up made flying appear to be refined enough for a woman’s presence in the cockpit and cabin. Because flying represented a new domain for women, more conservative dress made the innovation seem appropriate and safe. After her first transatlantic flight in 1928, Earhart was photographed in highly stylized images wearing her aviator helmet and goggles while also wearing a fur stole and a pearl necklace. She was frequently, photographed in ball gowns and hats. After a White House dinner on April 20, 1933, Earhart and Eleanor Roosevelt flew together on a round trip flight from Washington, DC to Baltimore.⁸⁴ The *Washington Post* quoted Eleanor Roosevelt, who said of Earhart, “It’s amusing to think of a girl in white evening dress and high-heeled shoes flying a plane.”⁸⁵ In contrast to Anne Morrow Lindbergh, who found fashion queries of women aviators a distraction, the First Lady seemed to use the topic of fashion and flight as a way to point out the predicament of

⁸³ “Off on the Great Circle,” *Rochester NY Democrat and Chronicle* (March 1937); Earhart’s Scrapbooks.

⁸⁴ Earhart was not trusted to pilot a plane with the First Lady as passenger. Pilots E. H. Parker and co-pilot Earl Steele flew the plane at take off and up to a cruising altitude of 5,000 feet. “First Lady on Night Ride In Plane of Miss Earhart: Mrs. Roosevelt Thrilled By Flight in Huge Cabin Craft Piloted by Famous Transatlantic Flier in Evening Clothes and White Gloves,” *Washington Post* (April 21, 1933), n.p.

⁸⁵ “First Lady on Night Ride in Plane of Ms. Earhart,” *Washington Post* (April 21, 1933).

women aviators who, despite their many accomplishments, remained suspect, once they became citizens of the air.

Flying with Men On Board

By incorporating the help of men, both on the ground and up in the air, Earhart was able to appear more competent. From her first flight as a passenger across the Atlantic Ocean in 1928, Earhart worked closely with male aviators and colleagues to be represented as a safe and prudent flyer. Demonstrating how she built and sustained partnerships with men was essential to her rhetorical constructions of flight's safety. In her partnerships with men, she demonstrated that she understood the perceived and real risks of flight, and by asking male aviators to serve as her navigator or co-pilots, she signaled the public that she saw men as an essential aspect of her own safety in air. On the ground, she enlisted the counsel of men, in both symbolic and behind-the-scenes work. As mentioned earlier with regard to the ritual prior to most flight departures, Earhart rarely left the ground without a handshake from Putnam.⁸⁶ This handshake seemed to signify both that he approved of his wife's decision to take such risks and that he had confidence in her safety and would await her return.

⁸⁶ "Amelia Earhart on the wing of her plane," The George Palmer Putnam Collection of Amelia Earhart, Papers, Archives and Special Collections, Purdue University Libraries, West Lafayette, IN.



Figure 6: “Mr. Amelia Earhart,” 1937

Putnam’s ritual of shaking Earhart’s hand, from his subordinate position on the ground, telegraphed his implicit belief in his wife and by extension, the potential competency of women pilots more broadly. In *20 Hrs., 40 Min.*, Earhart writes that she

would never ask men to fly with her because out of “gallantry” they would accept her invitation even if “they [did] not trust” her. “So,” she concluded, “my male passengers have always had to do the asking.”⁸⁷ Earhart’s statement points to a dilemma she faced in representations with other male aviators and aviation enthusiasts. While there were more and more women aviators, there remained skepticism regarding their ability to be safe pilots.

Another way to demonstrate flight’s safety was to stage flights between Earhart and other air-minded public figures, most notably Eleanor Roosevelt.⁸⁸



Figure 7: Amelia Earhart and Eleanor Roosevelt, 1933 (National Portrait Gallery)

⁸⁷ Earhart, *20 Hrs., 40 Min.*, p. 25.

⁸⁸ “Amelia Earhart and Eleanor Roosevelt,” Exhibit: One Life: Amelia Earhart, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian.edu (Web), 29 June 2012-May 27 2013: <http://www.npg.si.edu/exhibit/earhart/pop-ups/09.html>; accessed 26 Nov. 2014.

The flight with Earhart and Eleanor Roosevelt came to be characterized as one between the first lady of the nation and the first lady of the air. Earhart may have had the platform for advocating the safety of flight to a skittish public, but that did not mean that she was fully trusted as a pilot. A *Washington Post* reporter asked Roosevelt if she felt “just as safe out here knowing a girl may be flying this ship?”⁸⁹ With her affirmative response, the First Lady—“one of the most ‘airminded’ women passengers we have ever seen”—both vouched for the safety of flight and for the competency of women pilots.⁹⁰ A week later, however, the “Talk of the Town” column in the *New Yorker* cast doubt on the significance of Roosevelt’s flight with Earhart. The column mused over whether or not the flight did indeed signal a change in the perception of aviators:

When a girl in evening dress and slippers can pilot a plane at night? We agree that it does mark an epoch. But to every new epoch some of the quaint old customs of the former epoch still cling. We noticed that the take off and landing of the big new Curtiss Condor plane were in charge of regular pilots of the Eastern Air Transport Company. We men don’t give up without a fight.⁹¹

This column encapsulated the tension the media felt between, on the one hand, wanting to acknowledge the possibility of women’s equality in the air and, on the other hand, not being able to trust that Earhart would be able to return the First Lady back safely to the White House. The *New Yorker* interpreted this tension as an inability among men to relinquish control. As the column suggested, regardless of each new epoch, men still positioned themselves to keep women out of the cockpit.

⁸⁹ “First Lady on Night Ride in Plane of Ms. Earhart,” *Washington Post* (April 21, 1933).

⁹⁰ Bob Ball, “First Lady Gets Big Thrill in Air Ride with Amelia,” *The Washington Daily News* (April 21, 1933); Earhart’s Scrapbooks.

⁹¹ “Talk of the Town,” *New Yorker* (April 29, 1933).

The Discourse of Domesticity

Speculations about Earhart's romantic relationship with and subsequent marriage to George P. Putnam have distracted many Earhart biographers and analysts, from investigating the important role she played as spokesperson for the commercial aviation industry. Several Earhart biographers have focused much of their analysis on the relationship between Earhart and Putnam. Mary S. Lovell credited George Putnam and his marketing abilities with Earhart's durable legacy.⁹² Susan Butler characterized the marriage as utilitarian.⁹³ Lori Van Pelt cited Putnam's "keen promotional efforts" and also underscored Earhart's determination to bolster her own career during an era "when it was considered unfashionable for women to seek careers, she demonstrated through her own example that opportunities thought to have been reserved for men were available to women as well."⁹⁴ The nature of their private relationship is outside the purview of my study on Earhart's (public) rhetorical roles, but the public perception of that relationship, which they helped to craft through their incessant engagement with the press, does come to bear on my study. I will look at how reflections upon their interpersonal relationship provided content for Earhart's reassurances to the public regarding flight's safety.

News reports and magazine stories about Earhart that were published at the height of her career reflect a discourse of domesticity that pitched Putnam and Earhart as not only promoter and aviator, but also as husband and wife. The published stories reflected a stylized public conversation between Putnam and Earhart, evidenced in Earhart's frequent appeals to a dual identity as both pilot and housewife, one a thrill-seeking, powerful position, the other a counterbalancing submissive role. Earhart emphasized her responsibilities as a

⁹² Mary S. Lovell, *The Sound of Wings: The Life of Amelia Earhart* (New York: St. Martin's P, 1989).

⁹³ Susan Butler, *East to the Dawn: The Life of Amelia Earhart* (Reading, MA: Addison, 1997), p. 254.

⁹⁴ Lori van Pelt, *Amelia Earhart: The Sky's No Limit* (New York: Forge, 2005), p. 221.

housewife, often citing concerns over the remodeling of her home in Toluca Lake, near Los Angeles as a possible reason why she was not able to set a date for her upcoming world flight. She said, “Next year? Well, one never knows.”⁹⁵ Reassurances of flight’s safety came to be reflective of representations of Earhart as someone who now made home-making her priority, as a gardener, resting in her study, and cooking in the kitchen.⁹⁶ If Earhart appeared as a tomboy at the hangar in photographs one day, another set of photographs would follow of her cooking and cleaning back home. In some representations of Earhart, a domestic impulse took precedence over the desire to fly, as in the *Herald Tribune*, which claimed, “A kitchen apron superseded the mechanic’s overalls in AE’s life, and the charts she’s studying now are blueprints of a new home instead of weather maps.”⁹⁷ The safety in domesticity was constantly represented as a counterweight to the risk of flight.

With the platform of her fame, Earhart encouraged a reluctant public to see flight as a family affair. She often referred to her mother and her stepfamily in the media. One magazine advertisement featured Earhart’s mother, who said that her daughter’s favorite meal was chicken and biscuits. Earhart invited her mother, Amy Earhart, to fly with her and reported that her mother thought flying was so calm that she “needed to bring entertainment along.”⁹⁸ Earhart urged mothers to encourage their children to fly, telling them not to raise a boy to be a “ground aviator.” She also urged wives not to hinder their husbands from flying. Even preparations for Earhart’s record-setting flights featured a discourse of domesticity that compared the responsibilities of a record-setting pilot to the chores of a housewife. In all of

⁹⁵ “Earhart May Circle Globe,” *Associated Press* (Sept. 16, 1936); Earhart’s Scrapbooks.

⁹⁶ “Gardener: Amelia Earhart Putnam,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (May 19, 1938); Earhart’s Scrapbooks.

⁹⁷ “Amelia Earhart Goes Domestic,” *Herald Tribune* (1935); Earhart’s Scrapbooks.

⁹⁸ “Mothers Urged to Aid Flying,” *The Pittsburgh Press* (April 6, 1930); Earhart’s Scrapbooks.

these comments, Earhart projected her belief that people would feel safer about flying when reassured by friends and family.

Earhart's mothering role on the ground offered reassurances regarding the safety of flying. Earhart was never a biological mother, but upon her marriage to George Putnam, she gained stepchildren. In the media, Earhart would invoke her experiences as a former social worker and role as a stepmother to represent herself as a caring woman and mother, who, naturally, was invested in the health and safety of those under her charge. In order to reflect these maternal attributes, Earhart was photographed repeatedly with children she knew from the settlement house where she had previously worked in Boston. On occasion, Earhart's mentoring of other younger women pilots was compared to mothering. Instead of characterizing Earhart's risk-taking flight as the endeavor of a lone pilot standing in front of an airplane, Earhart demonstrated a proclivity toward domesticity in photographs with her two stepsons as a soon to be step-grandmother.

Earhart's Disappearance and the End of her Discourse of Reassurance

When Earhart decided to fly around the equator, there were no ready investors to bear the cost of a new plane and the expenses of the flight. Record-setting women aviators such as Earhart did not have the same easy access to capital that male aviators had when fundraising for their aircrafts, crews, and supplies for such expeditions. When Charles Lindbergh decided to fly across the Atlantic Ocean, investors from Saint Louis, Missouri, paid for the *Spirit of Saint Louis* without any expectation of repayment. Earhart, however, depended upon revenues from the lecture circuit, her memoirs, and other partnerships. This difference between Earhart and the leading male record-setting aviators meant that Earhart had to invest more time and travel in the acquisition of funds, spending less time and attention on developing the skills necessary to be successful at girdling the globe as a pilot.

Perhaps for this reason she was not as versant in the navigational aids that could keep her safe in the air. The irony here is quite obvious but important to name. So much of Earhart's rhetorical identity was focused on the safety and reassurance of passengers as she continued to put herself at risk in flight.

Purdue University sponsored Earhart with the stipulation that she give the university a two-year commitment as a consultant focused on women in careers. The Purdue Research Foundation put up \$40,000 toward the purchase of Earhart's "Flying Laboratory," the all-metal, 10-passenger, bi-motor Lockheed Electra transport plane, with a normal cruising speed of about 190 m.p.h. and a top in excess of 210 m.p.h. Compared to the Vega that Earhart had flown across the Atlantic Ocean and on other record-setting flights, the Electra was much more technologically sophisticated with better design and handling. However, to finance the plane required personal commitments to the Purdue community and beyond that could serve as a distraction to the planning of the world flight. The implicit expectation in the "flying laboratory" proved to be hollow in a flight that did not include scientific pursuit, a goal Earhart had committed to but could only muster the plan of observing her own food intake throughout the flight.

What the Purdue residency afforded, however, were representations of Earhart as a safe and lauded pilot, captured in photographs that represented her as more like a big sister than an aviator, sitting on residential hall floors and around her plane with Purdue students. In addition to teaching classes on aviation, Earhart was hired as a career counselor for women. While the Purdue community lent great enthusiasm and support for her aviation career, the time she spent teaching Purdue students, speaking in the chapel, and eating meals with students while fulfilling the terms of the residency was time she was not able to use in preparation for her flights, such as learning Morse code or navigation.

Before Earhart's first attempted world flight in March 1937, she and Gene Vidal were pictured in newspapers flying a kite that Vidal had designed in the event of an emergency landing over the Atlantic or Pacific oceans. The staged event exemplified a continuing belief among Earhart, Putnam, and Vidal that record-setting flights—as long as they were meticulously planned—were still viable demonstrations of flight's safety. In comparison to a growing sophistication in navigational aids, however, the kite intervention seemed wildly insufficient, particularly amid mounting public criticism that Earhart was being reckless in her planned world flight.

Given the lack of preparation, it is not surprising that Earhart's March 17, 1937 attempt to fly around the world ended in an accident in Hawaii after a successful hop from Oakland, CA, to Honolulu. Putnam attempted to mitigate public concerns with regard to the next attempted world flight and the competence of the pilot. Putnam sent a telegram to Earhart, "So long as you and the boys are o.k. the rest does not matter. . . . Whether you want to call it a day or keep going later is equally jake [alright] with me."⁹⁹ In his choice of words, Putnam distanced himself from Earhart as if he was more a devoted fan than a husband, calling her a "swell gal."¹⁰⁰ After the first attempted world flight failed in an accident upon take off from Honolulu, it seemed that not only Earhart's planned flight but also her rhetorical constructions of safety could no longer have the same credibility.

On June 1, 1937, Amelia Earhart departed on a second attempted world flight from Miami, Florida, on a route to circumnavigate the equator.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Earhart, *Last Flight*, p. 73.

¹⁰⁰ "A Great Gal," *Monterrey Progress* (March 26, 1937); Earhart's Scrapbooks.

¹⁰¹ "Amelia in Front of Map," The George Palmer Putnam Collection of Amelia Earhart, Papers, Archives and Special Collections, Purdue University Libraries, West Lafayette, IN.



Figure 8: Amelia Earhart, in front of a map before her attempted world flight, 1937 (George Palmer Putnam Collection of Amelia Earhart Papers, Purdue University)

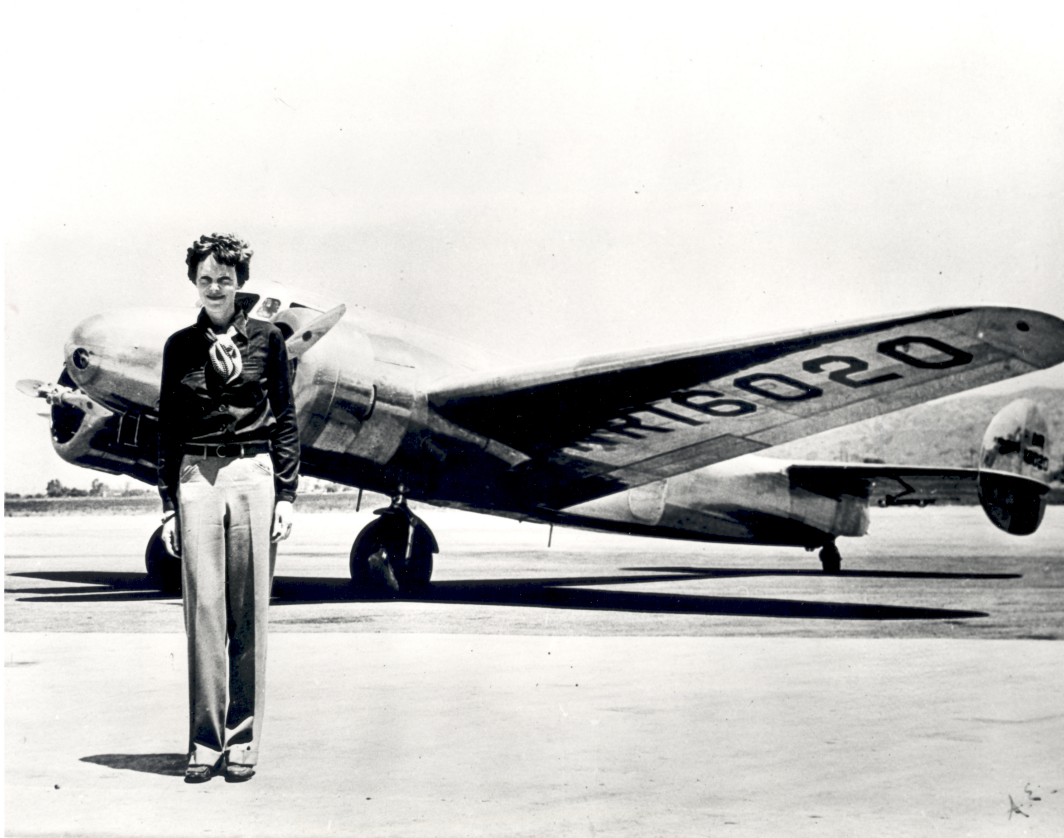


Figure 9: Cover photograph from *Last Flight*, 1937

Earhart and navigator Fred Noonan's path took them down to South America, across the Atlantic Ocean to Khartoum, Karachi, Bangkok, and Singapore. On July 2, Earhart and Noonan took off from Lae, New Guinea, with plans to refuel at Howland Island, one of the Marshall Islands in the Pacific Ocean. Howland Island, as a destination in the Pacific, one of thousands of Marshall Islands in the Pacific, was described as a "spec of land" 1,800 miles southwest from Hawaii.¹⁰² Not only was it difficult to situate on a map, its location was close enough to the international dateline that Earhart's flight on July 2, 1937 came to be known as a "flight into yesterday." Flying in the direction of Howland Island, Earhart radioed that they were flying at 1,000 feet and running low on gas. Her last official radio transmission was recorded at close proximity to Howland Island, after having flown 22,000 miles of a 27,000-mile attempted world flight.

Soon thereafter, the U.S. Navy commenced a four million dollar search for the *Electra*, the most expensive oceanic search ever organized up to that time. After her attempted world flight and last radio transmission over the Pacific in 1937, the subsequent cost to the U.S. Government in the Navy's search and recovery efforts on and around Howland Island were not seen by many in the public as a prudent expense. Instead, many of the discourses and texts that circulated with regard to Earhart and her flight concluded that her efforts had been excessive and self-centered.

During the early days of Earhart's second attempted world flight, she weathered critique as a pilot, wife, and public figure. Such criticism stood in stark contrast to the public adulation she had received after her earlier record-setting flights. This sudden shift in perspective seemed to reflect a societal shift that reflected a concern over unnecessary

¹⁰² C. B. Allen, *New York Herald Tribune* (Feb. 28, 1937); Earhart's Scrapbooks.

spectacle, be it in flight or on the ground. And yet, even after the public critique and disappearance, her reflections from the series of flights around the globe were published (perhaps posthumously) in the memoir *Last Flight*. Thus, even though she was physically absent, her voice was present and she was criticized. In an effort to perpetuate her role in offering reassurance (despite great risk), Amelia Earhart never wrote about flying over jungles and swamps without returning to appeals to flight's safety during her attempted "globe-girdling" flight. In Java, Earhart wrote she was "filled with housewifely determination" to make a dish she was served at a feast in Indonesia, just days before her disappearance.¹⁰³ And yet, the public response to her appeals to domesticity was different from earlier flights. Journalists that once embraced Earhart's renderings of familial ties and domesticity now criticized her for her absence in her personal relationships. While praise poetry was customary in response to earlier record-setting flights, as evidenced in Lindbergh's receipt of thousands of poems after his transatlantic flight in 1927, editorial pages in newspapers throughout the United States published poetry critiquing Earhart as she attempted her world flights.¹⁰⁴ A reader of the *Greenwich Press* satirized Earhart's attempted world flight in a poem that taunted her for thinking it was possible for her to leave her husband at home while she flew with three "attractive men."¹⁰⁵ Each line of the poem took aim at Earhart, an aviator who, once celebrated as an advocate of flight's safety, had become an affront to former fans. In her disappearance, a poem like the one above transformed prior admiration into articulations of jealousy. A modern marriage between George Putnam and Earhart was no longer a model but a threat.

¹⁰³ Earhart, *Last Flight*, p. 213.

¹⁰⁴ The Charles A. Lindbergh Papers of the Missouri History Museum archives examples of this praise poetry.

¹⁰⁵ Margery Reid, "Smiling Up Her Sleeve," *Greenwich Press*, n.d.; Earhart's Scrapbooks.

Both world flights drew criticism of her as an aviator. Earhart's reflexive practices of optimism were often deemed suspect. That she flew for the "fun of it," a repeated reason she gave for flying, was criticized by the *Raleigh News* as "careless bravado" after her disappearance, and in light of the effort and money then being expended to search for her.¹⁰⁶ The *Worcester Post* shared the sentiment of a former Navy man who said Earhart treated her attempted world flight as if it were a vacation cruise.¹⁰⁷ Because Earhart had acknowledged the security she found in her own family during her aviation career, the most pointed critique after her disappearance regarded her own lack of concern for family. Such criticism revolved around Earhart's decision to leave her husband behind in order to attempt the flight. The *Winston-Salem Sentinel* questioned Earhart's unconventional priorities: "Women safe at home with husband and children will wonder why she should have left the security that is hers to blaze new trails and make new records in flying."¹⁰⁸ The shift in public sentiment was dramatic in accounts that exaggerated Earhart's abilities to remain stalwart in the "face of danger."¹⁰⁹ Public reaction to her disappearance surfaced a public anxiety and punitive edge toward the original intent of Earhart's attempted world flight. The attempted world flights were now framed as selfish endeavors, instead of a journey taken by a cautious and skilled pilot.

Conclusion

Because Earhart disappeared on her attempted world flight, it is ironic that she had been celebrated in her lifetime as an advocate for air travel who widely shared her

¹⁰⁶ "In Demonstration," *The Raleigh News* (July 7, 1937); Earhart's Scrapbooks.

¹⁰⁷ "Just for Fun," *Worcester Post* (July 7, 1937); Earhart's Scrapbooks.

¹⁰⁸ "Something Calls," *Winston-Salem Sentinal* [sic] (July 4, 1937); Earhart's Scrapbooks.

¹⁰⁹ "A Casual Amelia E Wings Way Around World," *Raleigh Times* (July 1, 1937); Earhart's Scrapbooks.

conviction of the relative safety of human motorized flight. In response, this chapter has begun the critical work of recovering, recuperating, and analyzing Earhart's archival record in order to assess her role as an advocate of flight's safety during her career.

The public memory of Earhart has been obsessed with her disappearance. Many have speculated about her whereabouts and what might have become of her. She would have been 118 years old this year, and since she never aged above 40 years old in her photographs, fans have enjoyed imagining a life for her post-crash. Indeed, searches for her physical remains and the Electra she was flying have overshadowed critical analysis of her nine-year aviation career. Texts from her years as a record-setting pilot, popular lecturer, author, and media respondent all give us a different perspective on Earhart's formal and informal role as national spokeswoman, an internationally known hero who was also essential to the commercial airline industry's campaign to encourage more Americans to try flight.

Biographers have largely ignored or downplayed this aspect of her career and before now, no one has offered a thorough critical study of the media that circulated within her lifetime to assess her role in this campaign. What this study of Earhart reveals uniquely is that women aviators and airminded enthusiasts such as Eleanor Roosevelt were expected not only to fly safely, but also to reassure the public that they too would be safe as passengers. Technological advancements depended upon such rhetorical messages to encourage a mostly skittish public to fly.

Within the social imaginary of flight, Earhart, as a woman and an aviator, was part of a counterpublic, one that was both aware of societal expectations of femininity but also able to strategically maneuver around such barriers in order to join, and, in moments, even surpass the achievements of other male aviators.¹¹⁰ Through the lens of Feminist Standpoint Theory, it is possible to see how Earhart understood perceptions of her social location as subordinate

¹¹⁰ Earhart was the first person to fly solo between Mexico City, Mexico and Newark, NJ (1935).

to male aviators but was still able to deploy strategies that made it possible for her both to experience the freedom necessary to achieve milestone flights and to serve as a reliable public advocate for flight's safety. In order to do so, she became adept in depicting a more fluid gender identity alternately as androgynous (or masculinized) or as an overly feminine, in fur stoles and ball gowns. Earhart had the burden of balancing representations of courage and determination up in the air with the gendered responsibilities of the domestic sphere. Stories about her in women's magazines showcased her domestic side in order to make her a palatable hero for other women. In order to reflect upon this gendered burden, contrast Lindbergh's stance with the public, one that was aloof and free of any need to demonstrate domestic prowess.

The fur stoles, crushing crowds, and tickertape parades all signal the way that Amelia Earhart and her aviation career served as national spectacle. While she is remembered as this heroic woman aviator, the behind-the-scenes work hidden by the glitz and glamour presents a more complicated picture of someone who, unlike her male peers who enjoyed ample financial sponsorship, had to earn her own keep through advertising and the lecture circuit. Despite the complexity found in her public record, her public memory has become awash in her disappearance and that is what she is remembered for.

In the next chapter, I will investigate the shift that occurred in discourses of aviation during wartime. As the chapter will detail, African Americans had served in the trenches of WWI and were hopeful to participate in the air combat of WWII. Racial prejudice, both within the armed forces and out, made this desire difficult to attain. Once an airbase for the training of black pilots was established and even when those pilots went to war, the oppression continued. While serving as escort pilots to white bombers, the black aviators, crew, and ground crew, gained recognition for their protection of the white pilots and crew, but also faced the imbalanced scrutiny of the U.S. War Department and the American public.

Chapter Four

THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN AND THE COLOR LINE IN THE SKIES

“He can not control himself in the face of danger to the extent the white man can.”¹
—*The Army War College Report, 1925.*

The Wrights effectively opened the sky to human aviators. Charles Lindbergh demonstrated what was possible, and Amelia Earhart reassured the broader public that it was safe to take the risk to fly. The androgynous, well-financed Earhart was an exception to the widespread belief in her era that women were unfit to pilot aircrafts; only white women with resources figured out a way to fly. In this chapter, I explore the fact that African Americans were likewise considered a safety risk. In this pre-Civil Rights era, there was a pervasive societal belief that blacks were inferior to whites and lacked the cognitive flexibility to safely respond to the unforeseen dangers that pilots encountered.² When the Roosevelt Administration established the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP) in 1938, however, many white women and African Americans hoped that this program would provide greater access to flight training and careers in the aviation industry for all Americans.³ Soon thereafter, when the exigencies of war prompted the Army Air Forces (AAF) to propose the creation of a segregated base to train “airminded”

¹ Major General H. E. Ely, “The U. S Army War College Report: The Use of Negro Manpower in War, 1925,” U. S. Army Heritage and Education Center Digital Collections.

² The Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) created opportunities for more than 1800 white women to fly in U.S. non-combat missions. The WASP excluded all African-American women pilots.

³ Dominick Pisano, *To Fill the Skies with Pilots* (Urbana, IL: U of Illinois P, 1993), p. 3.

African-American men to participate in military aviation, military leaders settled on Tuskegee, Alabama.

The rural, remote Tuskegee had, since 1881, been home to the Tuskegee Institute and seemed a fit place to train African-American pilots and mechanics to see if they could disprove a post-WWI study that had concluded that all WWI black soldiers were inferior in battle.⁴ This military initiative was called the “Tuskegee Experiment,” and more than 15,000 black men trained there—most as ground personnel, but almost 1,000 as pilots, too.⁵ On their first mission in the European Theatre, in 1943, five Tuskegee-trained black escort pilots were disciplined for abandoning their assigned bomber planes, which were flown by white pilots, in order to attack German planes. This event, which blew up in the press, began a shift in the rhetorical evaluation of the Tuskegee Experiment. The black pilots realized that their ability to fly in combat missions depended on their maintaining the subservient role of keeping the white pilots and crew safe during air combat. For this reason, they became known in public memory as the “Tuskegee Airmen,” the WWII veterans who, it has often been said, “never lost a bomber” to enemy fire.⁶

The heroic narrative of the Tuskegee Airmen has sought and found a place within war memory. However, the military and historical record of the Tuskegee Experiment, which is rarely attached to the public memory of the Tuskegee Airmen, problematizes

⁴ House Memorandum: 99th Pursuit Squadron Combat Efficiency, 1943,” ABC CLIO: History and the Headlines,” (Web); accessed Dec. 4, 2014: <http://www.historyandtheheadlines.abc-clio.com/ContentPages/ContentPage.aspx?entryId=1687628¤tSection=1687640>

⁵ Joseph Caver, Jerome Ennels, and Daniel Haulman, *The Tuskegee Airmen: an Illustrated History, 1939-1949* (Montgomery, AL: NewSouth Books, 2011).

⁶ Prior to being named “Tuskegee Airmen,” there were other collective identities such as the *Schwartz Vogelmenschen* (“Black Birdmen”), the “Black Eagles,” and the “Red Tails.” These names—military or civilian—have mostly collapsed or become synonymous with the collective identity of Tuskegee Airmen.

both the critique and praise the Tuskegee Airmen have attracted. The inflated claim that the Airmen “never lost a bomber” originally referred to the first one hundred missions of the 332nd Fighter Group. Over time, though, that number grew and entered the popular consciousness, such that by the late twentieth century, the superlative claim was made of all 989 missions of the Tuskegee-trained 99th Pursuit Squadron and the 332nd Fighter Group. Eventually, the disclaimer was added that the escort pilots never lost a bomber in enemy action—a clarification that effectively focused public accolades and attention on the black pilots’ combat action and, perhaps, deflected attention from any domestic and training accidents that occurred stateside.

What, then, has been the rhetorical effect of this popular, oft-repeated claim that the Tuskegee Airmen “never lost a bomber”? In the early years, the claim insinuated that the white American bomber pilots of World War II were safer navigating enemy fire when escorted by black pilots. The black pilots themselves were discouraged from seeking glory in war by attacking enemy aircraft themselves, but when they stayed close to and protected the white bomber pilots, they became heroes. Many of the Tuskegee Airmen who told their accounts in an oral history project funded by the National Park Service reported having earned livings as chauffeurs and butlers prior to becoming part of the Tuskegee Experiment, and, despite the allure of new careers in aviation, it soon became clear that, for black pilots, the coveted skyscape was reflecting and mirroring the racial segregation and subordination on the ground.⁷

In order to analyze this dynamic, I depend on Kirt Wilson’s theoretical analysis of race relations in the U.S. and his definition of a “rhetoric of equality,” or a “rhetoric of

⁷ The Tuskegee Airmen Oral History Project and Oral History in the National Park Service (2001); accessed on site in April 2012.

place.”⁸ By “place,” Wilson does not mean a geographical location, but, rather, a societal location. African Americans, Wilson argues, were expected to “remain in their proper place”—an expectation among whites certainly at work during WWII and arguably present today. In coining the phrase “rhetoric of place,” Wilson draws inspiration from the observations of abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who first identified this “cultural conflict” when writing about being thrown off the railroad for failing to comply with segregation policies.⁹ According to Douglass, “people in general . . . will say they like colored men as well as any other, *but in their proper place*. . . . They assign us that place; they don’t let us do it for ourselves.”¹⁰ While Wilson outlined this rhetoric of place to evaluate the desegregation debates during post-Civil War Reconstruction, the phrase perfectly describes how the white military brass viewed the African-American pilots under their supervision in WWII. African Americans had a place, and that place was to support and protect the white bombers.

In this chapter, I first investigate the state of black aviation in the 1920s and 1930s, and then interpret the origins of the Tuskegee Experiment, which has effectively been minimized—if not elided—from the public memory of the Tuskegee Airmen.¹¹ In order to bring this era to life and to reanimate the rhetorical conversation that circulated, I

⁸ Kirt Wilson, *The Reconstruction Desegregation Debate: The Politics of Equality and the Rhetoric of Place, 1870-1875* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State U P, 2002), pp. 7-8.

⁹ In a review of Wilson’s *Reconstruction Desegregation Debate*, Angela Ray writes that the book “departs from standard rhetorical approaches to frame the debates as a cultural conflict.” See her “Public Argument in the Nineteenth-Century United States,” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 39 (2003): 274-82.

¹⁰ Wilson, *Reconstruction Desegregation Debate*, pp. 7-8; emphasis is original.

¹¹ See Kendall R. Phillips, ed., *Framing Public Memory* (Tuscaloosa, AL: U of Alabama P, 2004), p. 2; and Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott, eds., *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials* (Tuscaloosa, AL: U of Alabama P, 2010), p. 6.

evaluate two aviator memoirs, and the military reports from WWI and WWII that addressed the performance of black soldiers and airmen. In order to investigate the rhetorical conversation about the Tuskegee Experiment, which circulated from 1938 to 1945, this chapter also evaluates the news articles that ran in both white and black presses during this era. A critical race analysis of these texts shows how print media depicted Tuskegee-trained pilots as courageous pilots accountable for the safety of the white bomber pilots they escorted. By the 1980s, the essential claim that the Tuskegee Airmen “never lost a bomber” began to be invoked in prominent exhibits, documentaries, and motion pictures, while the Tuskegee Experiment, and its rootedness in the assumed inferiority of black men, was downplayed in these media. In the end, it was the safety of the white bombers that became most critical to claims of their heroism within public memory.

The Color Line in the Skies

During the 1920s and 1930s, even if an African American aspired to become a pilot, there were social barriers that made such hopes nearly impossible. At the time, there were two key gatekeepers to the skies: first, the prohibitive cost, which most African Americans could not afford; and, second, the military, which in WWI had rebuffed blacks from serving in the Army Air Corps. The African Americans who sought pilot training faced societal barriers that stemmed from the irrational fears and cultural norms of segregation. Jim Crow laws, enacted after Reconstruction, mandated segregation in the schools, on public transportation, and in restaurants throughout the South. In 1903—the same year the Wrights first flew in Kitty Hawk—W. E. B. Dubois published *The Souls of Black Folks*, the treatise on race in the U.S. in which he identified

the “problem of the color line.” The “color line”—that socially constructed division between blacks and whites that influenced every aspect of life, from interpersonal to economic relationships—was experienced by African Americans as a veil or as a “double consciousness” that influenced all inter-racial interactions. Robert Terrill explains double consciousness as a phenomenon distinct to African Americans, who were “always forced to see oneself through the eyes of others,” which Dubois saw as a potentially alienating act.¹² Blacks in the 1920s and 1930s who looked up to the sky would have seen only white pilots and mostly likely could not have imagined themselves as passengers, much less in the cockpit.

Dreams of flight among African Americans, who sought to make air combat a possibility for young black men, were deeply influenced by the ongoing debates between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Dubois over how best to support African Americans in their quest to escape racism and economic oppression. Both espoused the trope of the “New Negro,” a term that gained parlance at the turn of the twentieth century to represent the fight to gain greater social equity for African Americans.¹³ According to B. T. Washington, the New Negro must accommodate the white population while adhering to the principles of self-help. In *Hearing the Hurt*, Eric K. Watts characterizes B. T. Washington’s New Negro, however, as an “aesthetic artifact...steeped in the affects of the past—throwback sentiments of paternalism and domestication.”¹⁴ By contrast, Dubois’s New Negro would be a person of letters, someone who was prepared to

¹² Robert E. Terrill, “Unity and Duality in Barack Obama’s ‘A More Perfect Union’,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 95.4 (Nov. 2009), 363-86.

¹³ The New Negro Movement of the 1920s and 1930s only later came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance after subsequent scholarly publications. See, for example, Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford U P, 1971).

¹⁴ Eric K. Watts, *Hearing the Hurt* (Tuscaloosa, AL: U of Alabama P, 2012), p. 11.

“transform America.”¹⁵ Most certainly, any African American who could learn how to fly successfully would, according to both DuBois’s and B.T. Washington’s definition be identified as a New Negro.

The Legacy of World War I on Black Aviation

To understand why blacks in the 1920s and 1930s found it difficult to imagine flying, it is important to evaluate the effect of policies in WWI on black Americans—particularly on those who hoped to serve their country. As the U.S. prepared to enter WWI, a great debate played out in Congress and spilled into the white—and especially the black—press about what role blacks should play in the war effort. As the leading black spokesman against white oppression, DuBois, in addition to other black leaders, wanted the Army to employ black combat troops, black officers, and end segregation; the recent death of B. T. Washington, who had espoused accommodationist policies urging blacks to work with white people, sparked a renewed determination among blacks to achieve equality. There were only four black regiments that existed since the Civil War, and once those spots were filled, the only avenue for blacks to serve was in the National Guard. When the War Department announced the organization of fourteen officers’ training centers that would not train black officers, morale in the African-American community flagged as they felt that their country did not welcome their contributions. Acknowledging that the only possible way to get black officers trained was to advocate for a segregated training camp for black officers, DuBois did so, and the Army agreed to open one such camp at Fort Des Moines. Only begrudgingly did the black press get behind the effort to encourage blacks to embrace segregated training.

¹⁵ This chapter traces Booker T. Washington’s conceptualization of the New Negro. Ibid, p. 12.

Black leaders justified the effort by arguing that certainly the U.S. would reward blacks for contributing enthusiastically to the war effort by giving them full citizenship rights after the war. Because of their efforts, Congress passed the Universal Service Bill, which would make provisions for the drafting of blacks on a segregated basis in WWI.

The debate over the proper role that blacks should play in the war animated Southern congressmen, in particular, and would have ramifications for the role given to black aviators in WWII. *The Crisis*, the official publication of the NAACP and founded by W.E.B. Dubois in 1910, quoted Congressman Nicholls of South Carolina, who warned in the debate over the Conscription Bill, “if you put a boy from Mississippi in a Negro regiment from Massachusetts, you won’t have to go to Germany to have a war. You will have it right here.”¹⁶ That same article quoted Senator James K. Vardaman, who also cautioned his fellow Southerners that the draft “means the millions of Negroes who come under this measure will be armed. I know of no greater menace to the South than this.”¹⁷ Whether or not it would prudent to train and arm blacks, who, some feared, would be equipped to turn on their white oppressors in the U.S., was a pervasive worry in WWI, and one that would reappear in the lead-up to WWII. However, in the 1940s, the fear was not just that armed black soldiers would be trained, but that armed black pilots would be given the knowledge and the tools to attack from the sky.¹⁸

¹⁶ Qtd. in *The Crisis* 14 (May 1917): 37, which is qtd. in Lee Finkle, *Forum for Protest: The Black Press during World War II* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson U P, 1975), pp. 43-44.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ While there is no one document that definitively proves this assertion, the circulating newspaper articles from this era reflect the wariness and fear that some whites—particularly in the South—felt about the prospect of training black fighter pilots.

First-hand Accounts of the Color Line for Aviators

The “color-line” that Dubois identified extended up from the ground and into the skies during the years of early aviation, as attested by the first-hand accounts of white and black aviators. After his transatlantic flight in 1927, Charles Lindbergh became iconic as the world’s most celebrated pilot. With his tousled hair, boyish good looks, and white skin, Lindbergh came to embody the image of the ideal pilot, and with his memoir *We*, he ascended to international fame. This memoir is pertinent to my study for its casual racism, which, arguably, serves as a bell-weather for what was popularly acceptable in the U.S. in the 1920s. One anecdote from Lindbergh’s memoir, in particular, suggests how hard it would have been for an aspiring African-American pilot to be taken seriously in the 1920s. Lindbergh related a story from his early days of barnstorming in the countryside prior to his transatlantic flight. On that occasion, a group of white spectators in Mississippi bribed him to fly with a black spectator who had come to watch the air show. The group of whites, Lindbergh wrote, “chipped in fifty cents a piece to give one of the Negroes a hop [ride], provided, as they put it, I would do a few ‘flip flops’ with him.”¹⁹ Whether or not the African-American man wanted to play this role Lindbergh does not report, but the man was instructed to wave a red handkerchief throughout the flight to demonstrate that he was not afraid. After the plane took off, Lindbergh recalls, the black passenger had his head down on the floor of the cockpit but still waved the red handkerchief as directed. As the story makes clear, the group of white spectators felt empowered to objectify and demean their fellow black spectator, as much in flight as would have been customary on the ground. Lindbergh narrated this story without

¹⁹ Charles Lindbergh, *We* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s, 1927), p. 56.

editorial—not saying, for instance, that it was odd to receive such a request to fly with a black passenger or to make him wave a handkerchief—and by choosing to include it in his memoir, Lindbergh flaunted the white privilege he enjoyed in the Jim Crow South.

This anecdote reflects certain truths about the plight of blacks in the 1920s, a time in which they struggled within a culture that could not imagine them in this new context of aviation as anything more than barnstorming props, useful only for the thrill of white spectators who were too afraid to venture up into the air on their own. Blacks, like women, found access to the skies made more difficult by the widespread cultural belief that only white men could be safe pilots.

A contemporaneous memoir by a pioneering black aviator and civil rights activist tells a different story about African Americans in early aviation. As one of only a handful of licensed black pilots in the early 1930s, William J. Powell not only proved the dependable flightworthiness of his race, but he also encouraged other black Americans to participate in the exciting new venture of aviation—as pilots, designers, engineers, and mechanics. In his memoir, *Black Wings*, which he called a fictionalized version of his life, Powell wove stories about flying with appeals to his fellow African Americans to join the small but growing movement of blacks in aviation.²⁰ In the appendix, he cites the statistic that, in 1932, for instance, only 20 aviation licenses were issued to African Americans, but by 1936, 47 were issued. Here is a scan of that page in the book:

²⁰ William J. Powell, *Black Wings* (Los Angeles: Ivan Deach, Jr., 1934). In the appendix, he cites the statistic that, in 1932, for instance, only 20 aviation licenses were issued to African Americans, but by 1936, 47 were issued; see p. 65.

APPENDIX

A list of Negroes in the United States holding licenses December 31, 1932, is herewith presented through the courtesy of Congressman Oscar Depriest and is compiled from records of the United States Department of Commerce.

TRANSPORT LICENSE

C. Alfred Anderson.....Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
License No. 7638

LIMITED COMMERCIAL LICENSE

John W. Green.....Boston, Massachusetts
License No. 15,897

INDUSTRIAL LICENSE

Mrs. Jany Harmon Waterford.....Chicago, Ill.
License No. 7934

PRIVATE LICENSE

James Herman Banning (Deceased) ..Los Angeles, Cal.
License No. 1324

Leon ParrishNew York City
License No. 16,069

Hubert JulianNew York City
License No. 21,512

Lincoln Payne.....Philadelphia, Pa.
License No. 23,575

William J. Powell.....Los Angeles, Cal.
License No. 24,335

James Hoard.....San Francisco, Cal.
License No. 26,035

John C. Robinson.....Chicago, Illinois
License No. 26,042

Figure 1: Appendix from William Powell's memoir, *Black Wings*, p. 216: List of Negroes holding pilots' licenses in the U.S. in 1932

From Powell's perspective, only racism and financial insecurity kept blacks out of the cockpit.

Powell opened *Black Wings* with an allusion to Lindbergh's transatlantic flight, noting how Powell arrived at Le Bourget Field three months after Lindbergh's landing. It was his first airplane ride, and, for Powell, his personal triumph was made all the more meaningful for having taken off from the very field where Lindbergh had landed at the end of his world-famous flight. It is as if Powell needed to link his story to Lindbergh's to substantiate the strength of his own story.²¹ As Powell's memoir suggests, the "airmindedness" of African Americans would open the gates to the skies, but only when they showed proper deference to the prior accomplishments of white aviators.

The contrasting aviation experiences recounted by Lindbergh and Powell, respectively, reflect the cultural norms and limitations of the 1920s and 1930s. If Lindbergh even knew of Powell we can never know since he did not mention the black aviator in any of his three memoirs; Powell, however, not only invoked Lindbergh in the opening scenes of *Black Wings* but he suggested that he was inspired by Lindbergh to likewise accomplish uncharted milestone flights and the national and international acclaim that would follow. Powell relates an anecdote from 1932, when several fellow African-American aviators had decided to compete in a transcontinental flight that began in Los Angeles. Powell and co-pilot, Irvin Wells, flew only as far as New Mexico. After a night of camping, the two pilots awoke to a Texas ranger, who, Powell recalls, told them, "I never heard of a Nigger flyer anyway, and furthermore I believe youse are the fellers that killed the milkman in El Paso night before last, and that you are trying to disguise

²¹ By contrast, Lindbergh makes no mention of black aviators, even though Bessie Coleman had died preparing for an airshow one year before his transatlantic flight.

yourselves in flying suits.”²² As the ranger’s reaction registered, black aviators—any aviators, really—were uncommon, unlikely, and unexpected. After Powell and Wells showed the ranger their pilot licenses (with their photos), they were set free, but they still had a disabled aircraft and no money. Meanwhile, another black flying team that called themselves the “Flying Hobos” begged for money and food across the country and finished first in the race. The money and fame that followed the likes of talented and daring white aviators, like Lindbergh and Earhart, were entirely absent in the experiences of talented and daring black aviators. Powell’s first-person account makes pointed how disparate were the worlds of black and white aviators.

There are so few first-person accounts by black aviators from this era that Powell’s insightful memoir is key in exposing the racist and discriminatory practices in pilot licensure. In it, he related a story he heard from James Herman Banning, one of the two “Flying Hobos,” who did eventually pass his transport pilot’s examination, but only after repeatedly failing for reasons he knew were discriminatory. Before one such pilot license exam, Banning sat outside the room with an underprepared white examinee, who asked him to define a “rhumb line.” Banning recognized this as an opportunity to throw off his colleague in order to test his hypothesis about the arbitrariness of passing a pilot licensure exam. He told the white examinee that a rhumb line “is a line three miles out in the ocean, this side of which it is illegal to possess or sell rum.” (The term meant, a “line on a sphere which makes equal oblique angles with all meridians.”²³) The experiment proved Banning’s hypothesis: the white pilot passed, and Banning failed. Powell repeated this story in his memoir to illustrate how much much more difficult it was for blacks to

²² Powell, *Black Wings*, p. 166.

²³ Powell, *Black Wings*, p. 169.

get licenses. As Powell wanted his readership to conclude, the lack of black pilots was not the result of a lack in intelligence, but, rather, due to the racially oppressive institutional practices within the Bureau of Air Commerce.

Powell's memoir instructed readers not only about the many barriers to flight faced by aspiring African Americans, but also about how the double-consciousness required of the black aviator to reach goals that seemed out of reach. When he was not flying, Powell spent a lot of time with the president of the flying school, in his office, gaining perspectives on what whites thought about black people. The president told him, "the great trouble with many of your race is that they step out into things without being fully prepared."²⁴ Later, Powell's instructor told him, "you are the dumbest flyer I ever met. You'll never learn to fly."²⁵ Powell pointed to that insult as the impetus to complete his training and to attain his license. His memoir offers a rare glimpse into the barriers faced by African-American aviators in the early years of aviation. His memoir considered alongside Lindbergh's, makes those barriers especially clear. Lindbergh conveyed the story of his jolly hop through the Jim Crow South, while Powell used serious anecdotes to guide fellow blacks in how to overcome the barriers to flight.

The Exigencies of WWII

When Powell got his pilot's license, he really was a pioneer, but at the end of the 1930s, as WWII broke out in Europe, and as the U.S. considered the possibility of being drawn into the conflict, Congress created a program meant to widely recruit and train U.S. citizens to fly. The Congressionally funded Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP)

²⁴ Powell, *Black Wings*, p. 53.

²⁵ Powell, *Black Wings*, p. 77.

was formed in 1938 and was open to all citizens, regardless of sex or race.²⁶ It trained 435,165 pilots from 1938 to 1944 at 1,132 colleges and universities and 1,460 flight schools nationwide, including four women's colleges and six historically black colleges and universities (Howard University, Delaware State University, Hampton University, North Carolina A&T, West Virginia State College, and Tuskegee Institute).²⁷ The CPTP also funded the Coffey School in Chicago, one of the few black-owned flight schools. Through the CPTP, the number of black pilots grew to approximately 2,000, and the number of women pilots grew from 675 in 1939 to approximately 3,000 in July 1941.²⁸ The CPTP sought to identify and train a generation of pilots, crew, and mechanics to match the growing threat from German youth air power. As CPTP director Robert Hinckley wrote to Congressman Clarence Lea (D-CA), "There are 100,000 youths between 13-17 who are members of the 'Hitler Youth,' all destined for aviation service."²⁹ With the entry of the U.S. in WWII in 1941, the CPTP focused its training only on those who were qualified to serve in air combat. From 1942 to 1944, the CPTP was renamed the War Training Service and tasked with screening potential pilot candidates. White women were able to enlist as Women AirForce Service Pilots (WASP) in 1943 and African-American men could become airmen, but the few African-American women who had trained to be pilots in the CPTP no longer had access to military or

²⁶ CPTP was the brainchild of New Deal Administrator Robert H. Hinckley, a member of the Civil Aeronautics Authority (CAA). See Pisano, *To Fill the Skies with Pilots* (Urbana, IL: U of Illinois P, 1993), p. 3.

²⁷ Four women's colleges were in the CPTP: Lake Erie, Adelphi, Mills, and Florida State University at Tallahassee. See "Civilian Pilot Training Program," National Museum of the Air Force, Feb. 8, 2011: <http://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil/factsheets/factsheet.asp?id=8475>

²⁸ Pisano, *To Fill the Skies with Pilots*, pp. 76-77.

²⁹ Robert Hinckley to Congressman Clarence Lea, Mar. 27, 1939, Box 62, Folder 1, Robert H. Hinckley Papers, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

civilian flight training.³⁰ Eleanor Roosevelt fought on their behalf, telling the CPTP director that “there are one or two colored women pilots in this country. They had better be prepared to accept them.” Hinckley’s response—that any military flying would be too difficult for black women pilots—no doubt reflected the majority opinion of the era.³¹ The integrated CPTP, where all citizens could participate if they developed the skills to fly, was put on hold.

The Tuskegee Experiment

By 1940, the year of Roosevelt’s second bid for reelection, the Department of Commerce registered 231 black aviators listed with the Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA).³² Because Roosevelt both needed the black vote and was a proponent of aviation, Executive Order 8802 ended racial discrimination in defense industry hiring, and the War Department allowed African Americans into the Army Air Forces training.

As the Roosevelt Administration began to adapt governmental infrastructure to accommodate the participation of African Americans in the event of war, the Army Armed Forces also began considering enlisting African Americans, thus sparking a debate about how and where to train black military pilots in an era of segregation. The decision to establish a segregated military unit of the Army Air Corps became known

³⁰ The WASP included 1,074 women pilots who ferried military aircraft within the U.S—thus freeing up more white airmen and cadets to fly in air combat in WWII.

³¹ Robert Hinckley and Eleanor Roosevelt, Dec. 5, 1941, Box 38, Robert H. Hinckley Papers, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

³² Powell, *Black Wings*, p. 65.

within military leadership as “The Tuskegee Experiment.”³³ The War Department announced the formation of the 99th Pursuit Squadron with a military base in Tuskegee, Alabama, in January 1941.

The rhetoric of place, as it related to military policy, was substantiated in an earlier document—the 1925 Army War College Report on the “Use of Negro Man Power in War”—which had asserted that, while African Americans were full citizens of the U.S., they lacked the ability to take on leadership or technical roles in war due to their inferiority to white soldiers.³⁴ The memorandum cited anatomical evidence to argue the inferiority of black men, drawing on the pseudo-scientific field of ethnology, which legitimized the practice of racial hierarchies based on anatomical differences. Such rhetoric had circulated at least since 1839, when Samuel Morton argued in *Crania Americana* that factors such as craniotomy, facial angles, and skull capacities demonstrated the inferiority of Africans.³⁵ The 1925 Army War College Report also cited what they considered to be worrisome behaviors among the black soldiers’ in WWI: that they were too cowardly for battle and seemed to experience a sense of inferiority around white men. Based on this pre-existing memorandum, the military leadership in 1941 decided to sanction segregating the pilots.

³³ See *Double V*’s historical narrative about the AAF’s segregation policies and their implementation through the regulations of the Tuskegee Experiment in a chapter on “The Experiment: The Smoke Screen” (pp. 147-84); Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, Sr., *Double V: The Civil Rights Struggle of the Tuskegee Airmen* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State U P, 1994). The Army Air Corps’s Tuskegee Experiment is unrelated to the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiments, conducted in Tuskegee between 1932-1972. See Martha Solomon, “The Rhetoric of Dehumanization: An Analysis of Medical Reports of the Tuskegee Syphilis Project,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 49.4 (1985): 233-47.

³⁴ Major General H. E. Ely, “The U.S. Army War College Report: The Use of Negro Manpower in War,” 1925.

³⁵ Wilson, *The Reconstruction Desegregation Debate*, p. 80.

The “Tuskegee Experiment,” therefore, became a rhetorical framing that ostensibly invited African Americans to serve in the AAF while also perpetuating the premise of their inferiority. In order to gain the confidence of the oppositional military leaders, the Tuskegee Air Force base was rhetorically framed as an “experiment.” At its core, the Tuskegee Experiment sought to find out if black pilots could be safe, obedient, and effective pilots.

Because the enforcement of inferiority necessitated containment and control, the location for the air base would not necessarily fall along the lines of greatest access to aviation resources. The AAF narrowed its search for an air base location to two sites: a Chicago airfield, and the Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama. At face value, Chicago was the better location for the first African-American AAF. Since the post-WWI Great Migration of blacks out of the South and into the North, metropolitan Chicago had developed a tradition in black aviation. Bessie Coleman, the first African-American woman to receive a pilot’s license, was from Chicago and was the symbolic founder of black aviation. Likewise, throughout the 1930s, black and white aviators trained at the Coffey School of Aeronautics in Chicago, a school that was awarded contracts to train pilots through the CPTP. Chicago had the leadership and the infrastructure to militarize their civilian efforts in preparation for WWII. Furthermore, Chicago’s Harlem Airport had many runways ready to be used, whereas Tuskegee had none. However, because the Army Air Corps sought a segregated military unit, Tuskegee’s rural location, temperate climate, and, most especially, its location in the Jim Crow South made it the best laboratory for the Tuskegee Experiment. There, the expectations of inferiority could be observed and disciplined, as it had been during WWI.

Because the War Department had no experience with training black pilots, it would be easier to enforce segregation policies in Alabama, where there were *de jure* Jim Crow Laws. After all, there would be black airmen coming from the North and the West to Tuskegee, who, prior to military service, would have experienced greater mobility and freedom without the same discrimination based on race. What men on base discovered were laws to separate the races in almost every aspect of public and private lives. There were, for instance, white and black trainers and an all-black training squad. “Colored” and “white” signs labeled all water fountains, restaurants, train cars, and busses. Jim Crow laws even prohibited blacks and whites from playing cards or dice together and prohibited white barbers from cutting the hair of black men.³⁶ In Tuskegee, there would be consistent measures to enforce segregation, both on the airbase and in the surrounding community.

Selling of Tuskegee (1939-1941)

The decision to militarize Tuskegee, as opposed to Chicago, resulted in a debate, both within and outside the African-American community. Once plans for a pursuit squadron—an aviation military unit that includes 12-24 aircraft—became public knowledge, several African-American civil rights advocates spoke out against any plan for a segregated air base—much like the debate in WWI in the black community over the prudence of accepting segregated officer training. Willa Brown, founder and secretary of the Chicago-based National Airmen’s Association (NAA), which had never barred membership to white people, issued a resolution condemning the War Department’s plans

³⁶ “Separate is Not Equal,” Smithsonian National Museum of American History: accessed Jan. 12, 2015: <http://americanhistory.si.edu/brown/index.html>

for segregated units; she argued instead for the integration of flight training.³⁷ Leaders such as William Hastie, Walter White, Executive Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), representatives of the National Urban League, and African-American higher education administrators debated the pros and cons of a segregated military unit, concluding that the only acceptable outcome was the formation of an integrated fighter squadron, instead of what some derisively called the “Jim Crow Air Squadron.”³⁸

The decision over whether or not to segregate remained contested well into the early months of training in 1941, and, by some measures, into 1943 and beyond. While many African-American leaders were divided over the War Department’s decision to establish a segregated air base and pursuit squadron for black men, top administration at Tuskegee advocated consistently for a segregated air base, which they saw as a prudent step of “expedience.”³⁹ Tuskegee officials, however, found themselves frustrated over national leaders within the African-American community who spoke out in opposition to segregation. In his unpublished autobiography, G. L. Washington, Tuskegee’s first Civilian Flight Manager, characterized FDR’s Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War as the “militant William Hastie” for his opposition to segregation, a slight that indicated just how divided national leaders within the African-American community had become.⁴⁰

³⁷ WW II provided more extensive flight training opportunities not only for African-American men, but also for white women. The Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) archival record is almost exclusively maintained at Texas Woman’s University (TWU) in Denton, Texas.

³⁸ “Ten Flying Cadets Join U.S. Army Jim Crow Air Squadron on July 19,” *Chicago Defender* (July 19, 1941), p. 5.

³⁹ G. L. Washington, *Memoir*, Tuskegee Airmen Collection, Box Number 339.001, Tuskegee Institute, p. 131. He was no relation to Booker T. Washington.

⁴⁰ G. L. Washington, *Memoir*, p. 119.

As the debate continued, G. L. Washington realized that he could not just be against the integration of troops, but he had to be for segregation—even if merely on the principle of expedience—in order to maintain Tuskegee’s frontrunner position. DuBois had found himself in a similar position in WWI. In the lead up to and during World War I, DuBois—who succeeded B. T. Washington as the leading black voice in America—crafted a rhetoric about black involvement in the war that would shape the military’s strategy. He lobbied the black press to advocate for a segregated training facility for black officers, recognizing the expediency of it, warning that, otherwise, the War Department would not train black officers. Once the majority of black leaders adopted this point of view, they had to battle the fears in The South that training blacks to shoot at (European) whites would be disastrous. Robert R. Moton, who had succeeded B. T. Washington at Tuskegee, assured President Wilson of the loyalty of the majority of blacks.⁴¹

G. L. Washington promoted Tuskegee as a community where blacks both honored whites and accepted the rhetoric of place. If the air base were to be established in Tuskegee, he argued, the white military leadership would feel safe and appreciated. G. L. Washington had to continue to make a case for why Tuskegee was the best location to fulfill the operational philosophy embedded in the AAF “experiment,” recognizing that such an approach would test Tuskegee’s alliance with other African-American national organizations. The Roosevelt Administration recognized that even though the Tuskegee Institute was the only CPTP site with no runway or hangar, at first, the idea of locating the air base there was appealing rhetorically as a location where blacks were learning

⁴¹ See Finkle, *Forum for Protest*, pp. 40-43.

how to become productive members of society and where, as a remote location in the South, segregation policies could be enforced.⁴²

An association with the Tuskegee Institute and the accommodationist philosophies of Booker T. Washington would enhance the public perception of the AAC's "Experiment." During his lifetime, B. T. Washington was considered to be the most influential black man in the U.S. He had advised presidents William Taft and Theodore Roosevelt and had garnered funding for the Institute from Andrew Carnegie and other prominent philanthropists. He had first arrived in Tuskegee in 1881, invited by a group of white people to start a school for blacks. He sought to train teachers, who would in turn fan out into their local communities, teaching African Americans industrial skills, such as sewing, cooking, bricklaying, and farming.⁴³ The original school became the Tuskegee Institute and it nurtured B. T. Washington's legacy of training blacks for positive contributions to society and his political stance of racial assimilation. To a military leadership keenly aware of the racial tension in the country and the disapproval of some activists that the Army Air Force would be segregated, the accommodationist stance embedded in the philosophy of the Tuskegee Institute assuaged them that the blacks trained to be military pilots there would be kept in their place, so to speak, and not, as some whites almost certainly silently feared, trained, and then empowered to turn against their own country. This accommodationist stance was critical assurance to a military leadership concerned that once African Americans learned how to fly they would

⁴² Tuskegee was geographically remote, and yet, known to FDR. Warm Springs, the Little White House, was less than two hours away by car.

⁴³ Booker T. Washington, The Tuskegee Institute, dir. Richard Wormser, PBS.org: "Jim Crow Stories" (2002); accessed Jan. 16 2015: http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_events_tuskegee.html

take up arms from the skies. The African Americans being trained as pilots would not be allowed to pilot bomber aircraft. It was this prohibition that sent Eugene Bullard from Columbus, Georgia, to fly for the French Lafayette Flying Corps in WWI, becoming the first black combat pilot.

The accommodationist stance that made Tuskegee so attractive was rooted in B. T. Washington's philosophy of social change, which he had described in his 1895 Atlanta Exposition Address, which Du Bois later mocked as the "Atlanta Compromise."⁴⁴ In this address, B. T. Washington told the story of a ship lost at sea, whose passengers shouted to a "friendly vessel" that they were dying of thirst and that they needed water. The reply to the dying people was that they must "cast down their bucket where they were," as their ship, unbeknownst to them, had moored into the freshwater of the Amazon River. B. T. Washington then appealed to the crowd:

To those of my race who depend on bettering their condition in a foreign land or who underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the Southern white man, who is their next-door neighbor, I would say: "Cast down your bucket where you are. . . . Cast it down in making friends in every manly way of the people of all races by whom we are surrounded."⁴⁵

After addressing a pressing need for the Negro (to use period terminology) to become trained in such pursuits, B. T. Washington asserted his belief that the "wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremist folly," that progress must be the result of "severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial

⁴⁴ For more on DuBois's battle against B. T. Washington's rhetoric and how the controversy played out in the black press, see Lee Finkle, *Forum for Protest*, pp. 34-39.

⁴⁵ Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (Boston: Bedford, 2003), p. 106.

forcing.”⁴⁶ That logic—that agitation among the races over social equality was folly—would guide the leadership at Tuskegee in their relationship with the War Department as they planned to accept the terms of segregation at the air base.

Central to his legacy was B. T. Washington’s belief in amity among black and white people, stemming in part from a conviction that social equality would come to African Americans as a result of greater efficiency and work ethic. In *From Slavery to Freedom*, John Hope Franklin writes, “As [B. T.] Washington saw the salutary effects that his program was having on the white South as well as on his black students, he became more and more convinced that this was the pattern for strengthening the position of African Americans throughout the area.”⁴⁷ This educational philosophy was compatible with the AAF’s desire to train black pilots and crew but to do so within the terms of segregation.

Kirt Wilson argues that the rhetoric of place triumphs over the rhetoric of equality, not only because whites upheld this cultural belief but also because of the advocacy of key figures in the African-American community. Specifically, Wilson focuses on B. T. Washington’s role during the post-Reconstruction era in order to demonstrate how he participated in the rhetoric of place as a result of his accommodationist stance. While B.T. Washington’s notoriety and beliefs cultivated resources for the Tuskegee Institute, he himself became a symbol to both Southern conservatives and Northern politicians that African Americans were willing to accept a subservient place in society, in relation to whites. Wilson points out that presidents

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 108.

⁴⁷ John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom, Seventh Edition* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1994), p. 270.

Cleveland, McKinley, and Roosevelt built strong working relationships with B. T. Washington, and ignored those leaders in the black community who advocated for equal rights.⁴⁸ In his relations with U.S. presidents and with industrialists such as Andrew Carnegie, B. T. Washington, Wilson reminds us, “failed to recognize that his vision for the black community was being co-opted by those who used the rhetoric of place to affirm black inferiority as well as separation.”⁴⁹

President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who understood the long and productive political alliance between B. T. Washington, the Tuskegee Institute, and the white public, traveled to Tuskegee on March 30, 1939. The Tuskegee Choir sang to the President as he sat in an open car. In his subsequent speech, Roosevelt recalled his thirty-year-old pledge to B. T. Washington that he would make the journey to the Tuskegee Institute. Roosevelt’s long-anticipated visit to Tuskegee occurred only a few months before Germany invaded Poland, when the possibility of war became a fixture on the horizon. In his speech, Roosevelt expressed his wish “that almost every American could come to Tuskegee and see what has been done.” The “almost” served to exclude perhaps those who harbored prejudice or ill will toward African Americans. “I did not come to make a formal address to you,” he said, “This is a homey gathering. Tuskegee is a homey place.” In a manner that only an accommodationist stance could evoke—from a white president to his African-American audience—FDR expressed his personal comfort in a place that made him feel at ease. With his express intention of not making a formal address, Roosevelt

⁴⁸ Wilson, *The Reconstruction Desegregation Debate*, pp. 190-91.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 192.

made it clear that he had come to be among African Americans, in a “homey place” such as Tuskegee.

Soon after military leadership announced its plans to establish a segregated air base at Tuskegee, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt was dispatched there to visit and publish her impressions in a pair of her acclaimed “My Day” columns.⁵⁰ Prior to her visit, she was one of the few white national figures who consistently addressed the need to end racial inequality in the U.S. In her visit to Tuskegee, she could demonstrate support for the African-American pilots. While at Tuskegee, Eleanor Roosevelt observed flight training at Kennedy Field.

⁵⁰ Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day: Put Your Bucket Down Where You Are,” *Atlanta Constitution* (Apr. 2, 1941), p. 14. For more analysis on the phenomenon of Eleanor Roosevelt, see Diane Marie Blair, “I Want You to Write Me”: Eleanor Roosevelt’s Use of Personal Letters as a Rhetorical Resource,” *Western Journal of Communication*, 72.4 (2008) 415-33.



Figure 2: Eleanor Roosevelt and Charles "Chief" Anderson, 1941, cropped photograph (Tuskegee Airmen Collection, Tuskegee University)

She asked Charles “Chief” Anderson, Tuskegee’s head trainer and the first black pilot to hold an air transport license, if “Negroes really fly airplanes?” Anderson offered her a ride in his J-3 Piper Cub, and she accepted. After the ride, Mrs. Roosevelt reportedly concluded, as public memory reflects, “I guess Negroes can fly.”⁵¹ Taking to the skies in order to demonstrate social equality was not a novel practice for the First Lady. In 1932, she had flown from Washington, D.C., to Baltimore with Amelia Earhart. The difference this time was that, unlike Earhart, who had not been trusted to actually fly the plane, Anderson was allowed to demonstrate how a black pilot could safely take off and land with the First Lady on board. Reflecting upon her flight with Chief Anderson, Eleanor Roosevelt wrote simply: “These boys are good pilots.”⁵² In her column, Roosevelt affirmed the possibility for social equality, touted Tuskegee’s philosophy of racial accommodation, and reported on her “comfortable” stay at the Institute’s guesthouse, where she was pleased to see a portrait of her uncle, Teddy Roosevelt.

Seven months after the First Lady’s visit, the Tuskegee Institute appeared on the radar of the mainstream white public once again with the *Time* Magazine story about Tuskegee professor George Washington Carver.⁵³ Carver, a scientist who had come to teach at the Tuskegee Institute in 1896, was dubbed the “black Leonardo” by *Time*, and had just published a cookbook on edible weeds. The article celebrated both Carver’s resourcefulness and his frugality in finding uses for ingredients such as rabbit tobacco

⁵¹ For an example of the circulation of this quotation in public memory, see, for example, the 1995 HBO-produced historical film *Tuskegee Airmen*, dir. Robert Markowitz.

⁵² Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day: How Tuskegee Helps Its Neighbors,” *Atlanta Constitution* (Apr. 1, 1941), p. 14.

⁵³ “Art: Black Leonardo,” *Time* 38.1 (Nov. 24, 1941), p. 83.

and sour grass leaves—items that “no housewife would ever recognize.”⁵⁴ Carver’s ingenuity was depicted as representative of the kind of resourcefulness the Tuskegee Institute fostered among African Americans. Carver’s kitchen tour, given to a white reporter from Atlanta, demonstrated the legacy of B. T. Washington’s rhetoric of place in operation. Through a folksy spin, Carver continued, into the last years of his life, to draw resources and attention to Tuskegee, in his own version of making whites comfortable enough to appreciate the school.

The efforts of the Roosevelts, combined with the *Time* Magazine coverage of Carver, amounted to an uncoordinated public relations campaign to make Tuskegee a household name on the eve of the U.S.’s entry into WWII. War would demand manpower, and Tuskegee could train a labor force willingly subordinate to white leadership and eager to work where needed. Frederick Douglass had once said that, as long as African Americans were willing to be assigned their place, they would be liked, and—at least in the (untested) early years—Tuskegee was well liked among the white public.⁵⁵

“Experiment Proved?”

The goal among the African-American leadership and the men of the 99th Pursuit Squadron was to demonstrate the success of the Tuskegee Experiment through excellence in air combat. Authors of the 1925 Army War College Report had based their measures of African-American inferiority on their observations of ground warfare during WWI. In the skies, there was the potential for the segregated AAF to present themselves as

⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 83.

⁵⁵ Wilson, *The Reconstruction Desegregation Debate*, pp. 7-8.

superior in war tactics, an opportunity that had not been possible for the black soldiers in WWI. And yet, rhetorical constructions of what was called the “negro problem” permeated most reflections in the mainstream media of the “Tuskegee Experiment.”

During the first two years of training at Tuskegee, the program did not attract external scrutiny. Its first fatality, in 1942, was not even picked up by mainstream papers (although it was covered by the black press), perhaps because the remoteness of rural Alabama might have assuaged a skittish white public that any rookie pilots falling out of the sky would fall into fields of sweet potatoes, corn, beans, cotton, and peanuts—not into a populated metropolitan area.⁵⁶ Therefore, the events leading up to the very mainstream Sept. 1943 story in *Time Magazine* deserve careful scrutiny.⁵⁷

For two years, the men of the 99th waited in Tuskegee to enter the war. Once the 99th set sail for Fez, Morocco, in April 1943, both the black and mainstream presses debated whether or not African Americans could succeed. On June 2, 1943, one month after arriving in North Africa, the 287 enlisted men and 42 officers set out for their mission over Pantelleria Island in Italy. In the grand scheme of the war, this was a relatively minor operation. The European theatre had become a site of massive destruction, but “Operation Corkscrew”—the Allied mission to take Pantelleria from the Axis Powers was the 99th’s first combat mission.

The 99th Squadron was a latecomer to air combat, and because of the wait in Tuskegee, had received more training than most of the white squadrons. However, one pernicious byproduct of the Tuskegee Experiment was that there were no veteran pilots: segregation made it impossible to add veteran white pilots to an all-black rookie

⁵⁶ See John W. McGaffey, “Many Attend Rites for Flyer,” *Atlanta Daily World* (June 26, 1942), p. 5.

⁵⁷ “Experiment Proved?” *Time Magazine* 42.12 (Sept. 20, 1943), p. 66.

squadron.⁵⁸ An all-rookie squadron was atypical of other air units serving in the European theatre, making the black airmen vulnerable to the charge of inferiority, if and when their mistakes in combat were more the result of inexperience than intentional disobedience. A week into their assignment in Pantelleria, thirteen black escort pilots approached German planes and five broke away from the bomber planes they were escorting in order to attack the Germans themselves. As the German aircraft retreated, the black pilots went rogue from their assigned white bombers, in hopes of gaining their own first “kills.”⁵⁹

After the surrender of Pantelleria Island to Allied Forces, the 99th was assigned fewer and fewer opportunities for air combat. That September of 1943, the War Department reorganized the leadership structure of the 99th Pursuit Squadron and sent its leader, Col. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., back to the U.S. to become the first black Commander of the segregated 332nd Fighter Group, also stationed at Tuskegee.⁶⁰ In Washington, D.C., Davis held a press conference in which he conveyed to reporters that the black pilots in Pantelleria had, as one news article reported, “made the grade, and training them should no longer be regarded as an experiment,” that in “every mission his men met superior enemy forces and managed to break a little better than even.”⁶¹ Davis concluded that the Allied victory over the Axis powers for Pantelleria Island had proven that the “Experiment” had “ended.”⁶² Davis also told reporters that “members of the 99th

⁵⁸ J. Todd Moye, *Freedom Flyers: The Tuskegee Airmen of World War II* (New York: Oxford U P, 2010), p. 98.

⁵⁹ Moye, *Freedom Flyers*, p. 101.

⁶⁰ The 332nd Fighter Group had four pursuit squadrons: 99th, 100th, 301st, and 302nd.

⁶¹ *Time Magazine*, “Experiment Proved?,” p. 66.

⁶² “Ben Davis, Jr. Declares Experiment is Ended,” *New York Amsterdam News* (Sept. 18, 1943), p. 1.

realized that the unit was a test to determine whether the Negro pilot was physically, mentally, and emotionally suited to the rigors of combat flying,” an acknowledgement and rebuke of the criteria cited to prove racial inferiority in the 1925 Army War College Report.⁶³ Davis memorably added that his men no longer dreamed about the girls back home, but instead about encounters with German pilots.



Figure 3: Benjamin O. Davis Jr. and Sr., photograph accompanying the article “Experiment Over,” 1943

⁶³ Ibid.

Kathleen Campbell argues that a speaker's presence can come to embody a rhetorical argument.⁶⁴ This rhetorical strategy of enactment was evident at Davis's initial press conference, which was attended by both the black and white press. *Time Magazine* described Davis as "lath-straight" and a "West Pointer," two attributes that lent credence to his commentary.⁶⁵ Through enactment, his example alone would have made it impossible to claim the inferiority of all black pilots. If it was, then could the men of the 99th and the eventual 332nd be seen in the same light as their fellow white airmen? The *Time Magazine* article concluded only with more questions. Although *Time* complimented Davis's leadership, it also gestured toward what had all along been identified as the "negro problem" of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries⁶⁶:

[T]he question of the 99th is only a single facet of one of the Army's biggest headaches: how to train and use Negro troops. No theater commander wants them in considerable numbers; the high command has trouble finding combat jobs for them. There is no lack of work to be done by Negroes as labor and engineering troops—the Army's dirty work. But the American spirit of fair play, which occasionally devotes some attention to Negro problems, would be offended by a policy of confining Negroes to such duty, and the Negro press has campaigned against it. There are plenty of Negro combat troops, but almost none of them have been tested under fire.

⁶⁴ See Kathleen Campbell, "Enactment as a Rhetorical Strategy in The Year of Living Dangerously," *Central States Speech Journal* 39 (1988): 258-68.

⁶⁵ *Time Magazine*, "Experiment Proved?" p. 66.

⁶⁶ For perspectives on U.S. race relations during the WWII era, see Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: the Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944). See also Michael Rudolph West, *The Education of Booker T. Washington* (New York: Columbia U P, 2006), p. 31.

Most thoughtful Army officers probably would agree that the Negro will never develop his potentialities as an airman or any other kind of soldier under the system of segregation in training. But the Army is convinced, rightly or wrongly, that any major effort to break up the system now would touch off outbreaks of race prejudice and hobble the war effort. (p. 66)

While the *Time* article called to question the efficacy of segregation within the armed forces, it also seemed to express sympathy with the white military leadership tasked with supervising black troops.

Soon after Davis's press conference, a confidential AAF document began to circulate in the press and among congressional leadership. The Report on Combat Efficiency of the 99th Fighter Squadron—a memo drafted by Col. William Momyer under the signature of Maj. Gen. Edwin House—circulated first among military leadership, ostensibly to assess the military performance of the 99th Squadron.⁶⁷ While the memo was complimentary of Davis's leadership and the 99th's "ground discipline and their ability to accomplish and execute orders," it cited certain critical instances where combat efficiency was not "completely satisfactory."⁶⁸ Members of the Pursuit Squadron, it said, failed to display a desire for "aggressiveness" and "combat," and lacked "the proper reflexes" to make first-class, fighter pilots. Citing the air war over Pantelleria Island, it said that "their formation flying has been very satisfactory until jumped by enemy

⁶⁷ "Edwin House Memorandum: 99th Pursuit Squadron Combat Efficiency, 1943," ABC CLIO: History and the Headlines"; accessed Dec. 4, 2014 (Written by Col. William W. Momyer.): <http://www.historyandtheheadlines.abc-clio.com/ContentPages/ContentPage.aspx?entryId=1687628¤tSection=1687640&productid=45>

⁶⁸ "Edwin House Memorandum: 99th Pursuit Squadron Combat Efficiency, 1943." I will heretofore refer to this document as the Report on Combat Efficiency.

aircraft, when the squadron seems to disintegrate.”⁶⁹ The five black pilots’ abandoning of the bombers they were escorting was interpreted not as inexperience but as inefficiency at best and insubordination at worst. The memo recommended ending black escort missions and aborting plans for the (black) 477th Bomber Group. It also raised the concern that “rapid moves” in war might make it necessary that black and white airmen would need to mess and sleep together, which would break the codes of segregation.⁷⁰

Given the content of this memorandum, the *Time* article “Experiment Proved?” was timely. Questions of whether or not the “Experiment” had proved anything conclusive were being debated within the military and in the mainstream press.

The Report on Combat Efficiency was discussed by the War Department’s Advisory Committee on Negro Troop Policies in October 1943. The Advisory Committee welcomed testimony by Davis, whose presence seemed to transfer a confidence to the committee members that neutralized the critique of the Report on Combat Efficiency. Davis represented the success of the 99th Pursuit Squadron, and his recent return from air combat seemed to elevate his authority. Historian J. Todd Moyer argues that it was also Davis’s testimony to the Advisory Committee that refocused the black press’s attention on the War Department’s use of the 99th. With the vocal support of black papers—and given the not fully substantiated claims of the House Memorandum—the 99th was allowed to continue, and was reassigned to the 79th Fighter Group. After the transition, performance evaluations of the 99th improved, and black officers were purportedly treated equally to white officers. Additionally, the black escort pilots were provided with

⁶⁹ Ibid. See also Barrett Tillman, *Forgotten Fifteenth: The Daring Airmen Who Crippled Hitler’s War Machine* (Washington, DC: Regnery History, 2014), p. 61.

⁷⁰ Daniel Haulman, “Correcting a Historical Myth,” *Five Airfields of Tuskegee During World War II* (Dec. 2013), Air Force Historical Research Agency, p. 21.

the P-51 Mustang, arguably the best fighter aircraft of WWII, especially when compared to the P-39 or P-40 aircrafts assigned to them upon entrance to the war.⁷¹

Looking back on the timeline of the 99th, it trained for two years, finally got the chance to fly in combat over Africa and Italy, and, after five pilots made the rookie mistake of leaving their positions to attack a German plane, the entire squadron was almost immediately reprimanded. Because their participation in the war was an experiment, all eyes were on them, ready to pounce if and when they made a mistake.

Circulating Text at the Color Line

In order to interpret the rhetorical conversation about the Tuskegee Airmen that occurred in both the mainstream and black presses, I reviewed black and white newspapers from 1938 to 1945. Because the term “Tuskegee Airmen” only entered common parlance in 1955, I did a search for the keywords “negro pilots,” “Tuskegee,” “99th Pursuit Squadron,” and the “332nd Fighter Group.”⁷² Each search term appeared more in stories printed in the black press than in the white press.

Before turning to these findings, it is productive to consider the state of the black press during this era more broadly. During WWII, the black press was at its zenith of power and readership. It had become the most established forum for expression of blacks, boasting, in 1940, a combined circulation of about 1,276,000—double that of 1933—and,

⁷¹ See Stephen Sherman, “North American P-51 Mustang,” AcePilots.com (Apr. 2002; updated Sept. 26, 2012), http://acepilots.com/planes/p51_mustang.html, retrieved Dec. 29, 2014. There are many animated debates comparing the P-40 and the P-51. See www.ww2aircraft.net/forum/polls/mustang-mk-51-51a-allison-engined-vs-40-a-24379.html

⁷² First mention of “Tuskegee Airmen” in the black press: “Tuskegee Airmen With ICBM Wing,” *Pittsburgh Courier* (Nov. 10, 1962), p. 8; and in the white press: Jerry M. Flint, “Black Ex-Pilots Recall Bias in World War II,” *New York Times* (Aug. 14, 1972), p. 12. See Charles E. Francis, *The Tuskegee Airmen: the Story of the Negro in the U.S. Air Force* (Boston: Humphries, 1955).

by 1945, a circulation of 1,808,060.⁷³ The papers were printed weekly and featured stories about black servicemen, as well as a wide range of columns by a diversity of columnists. The editorial and columnists' page in black papers provided a forum for militant and conservative opinions, often paired side-by-side, and penned by a range of professors, race leaders, businessmen, labor leaders, and politicians, as well as syndicated columnists; the white papers, by contrast, largely printed columns by professional journalists.⁷⁴

The black press, which carried a mission to fight discrimination and to help carve a way toward equal rights and fair treatment in the U.S., warily eyed the way that the war against fascism in Europe was creating more fascist policies stateside, as the military sanctioned the growth of Jim Crow into the North and West.⁷⁵ It is important to remember that all black papers did not express the same political viewpoint with regard to the U.S. entrance into WWII. Some supported the fight against fascism and for democracy, and others voiced concern about contributing to a war between two aggressive colonizers.⁷⁶ The press, therefore, adopted the Double V campaign, which pushed for a Victory at home (against racism) and abroad (against fascism), and, to

⁷³ See Finkle, *Forum for Protest*, p. 52 and n.3.

⁷⁴ Finkle, *Forum for Protest*, p. 55.

⁷⁵ Finkle, *Forum for Protest*, p. 62.

⁷⁶ Finkle, *Forum for Protest*, pp. 194 and 193.

promote those goals, pushed to include blacks in every aspect of the war movement.⁷⁷

The federal government monitored the black presses for seditious sentiment.⁷⁸

Because this chapter examines the differing reception of African Americans in the Army Air Force among black and mainstream presses, I have chosen to focus primarily on certain stories that afford insight into the differences between the two publics. I will focus on certain case studies that reflect a way not only to better understand how the rhetoric of place guided war coverage, but also to evaluate what appears to be a split screen of perception between black and white communities prior to and throughout WWII as it related to the segregated Air Corps. Quite simply, white newspapers ran relatively few articles before the war about the training or war combat of African-American pilots. It was, as Tuskegee historian Moye has speculated, “entirely possible for white Americans, even relatively informed ones, to have no idea that the Air Forces trained black pilots in the war at all.”⁷⁹ While the black press covered every step toward the recruitment, training, and combat record of the 99th and of the 332nd Fighter Group—and while the black public often read both the black and white newspapers—the mainstream press only began to focus on the black pilots once they entered air combat in June 1943.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Finkle, *Forum for Protest*, p. 64.

⁷⁸ For more information on the monitoring of the black presses, see Patrick Washburn, *A Question of Sedition* (New York: Oxford U P, 1986).

⁷⁹ J. Todd Moye, Guest Scholar, “Hollywood Rediscovered the Tuskegee Airmen,” *Oxford African American Studies Center*, retrieved Dec. 29, 2014: http://www.oxfordaasc.com/public/featured/guest_8.jsp

⁸⁰ See Finkle, *Forum for Protest*, p. 192.

Stories Circulated only in the Black Press

If the mainstream press cast mostly dispassionate interest and fleeting enthusiasm for the prospect and eventual reality of African Americans in air combat, the black press inked constant hope for the expansion of flying opportunities from the beginning of the CPTP in 1938 until the end of the war in 1945. Even as the 99th Pursuit Squadron waited in Tuskegee for their chance to fly in air combat, the anger present in many of the articles I found seems mixed with the belief that their efforts in the media would eventually turn the tide. Unlike the white press, which documented the progress of the Tuskegee Experiment from a distance, the black press advocated for change when they saw weakness or prejudice within the AAF.

In order to advocate for African Americans and flight, the black press assembled rhetorical constructions of the ideal black pilot. The ideal black pilot aligns with B. T. Washington's philosophies about the New Negro. During the first year of the CPTP, the NYC-based *New York Amsterdam News* reflected a hope among the African-American community that flight training would serve as a means to building character among the young people who trained to be pilots at other historically black colleges and universities:

Airplanes will spread wide their wings over two Negro college campuses this fall and colored student pilots, eager and courageous, will be at the controls. Never before in all the romantic history of aviation has colored youth had such an opportunity to learn the rudiments of flying.⁸¹

Black newspapers featured regular articles beginning in 1939 that urged the federal government to increase opportunities for black pilots to fly. The possibility that African

⁸¹ See Marvel Cooke, "Now Up Into the Blue: Bill Creates Opportunity," *New York Amsterdam News* (Sept. 23, 1939).

Americans might participate in WWII through aviation spawned much discussion of the possible future benefits of a training program. James L. H. Peck, an African-American pilot and aviation journalist, discussed the possibility that black graduates of the CPTP might become aeronautical engineers. Peck acknowledged that black youth were more inclined to favor the glamor of flying over support roles in aviation, but he emphasized that there were so many other opportunities for young people interested in aviation besides being a pilot.⁸²

In the years prior to WWII, the Army Air Corps' lack of public support for black pilots continued to be a theme across black newspapers. In an article titled "Do They Mean Negroes?" the author wrote, "It has always seemed funny to us that certain business institutions and places of amusement go to such length to advertise . . . then, when someone who has read the ad or heard the invitation turns up, he is refused because of his color. While the army is begging for this number of men for the air corps, Negroes, well qualified in every respect are being forced to go to Canada to join the Royal Air Force."⁸³ Over and over, the black press appealed to the reader that the Army Air Corps must be open to black recruits, or else the most promising would move to Canada or Great Britain instead.

The concern all along was that there was a "color line" developing both on the ground and also up in the sky. Sometimes the represented need to fight against a color line emanated not from the U.S. but from Hitler's racial ideologies. In a 1939 article, the *New York Amsterdam News* quoted Hitler's autobiography *Mein Kampf*, to say that it was

⁸² James L. H. Peck, "Plane Talk," *Atlanta Daily World* (Sept. 10, 1940), p. 2.

⁸³ "Do They Mean Negroes?" *New York Amsterdam News* (Feb. 8, 1941), p. 14.

“criminal madness to train a born semi-ape to become a lawyer.” But instead of placing the blame of racial prejudice on the Führer alone, the column continued, “Hitler’s idea of Negroes doesn’t, however, sound so strange to United States Negroes.”⁸⁴ Early into the argument for black pilots was the argument that in order to defeat the Germans, the U.S. could not share their racist ideologies. This fear tactic continued to circulate in the black press in an article from 1940, which suggested that Harlem would be bombed first because of a German belief that “colored people are inferior.”⁸⁵ The author seemed to offer only one logical response to the threat: to allow young black men to fly for the Army Air Corps.

As the wait continued for the War Department to respond to advocates for black militarization of the Army Air Corps, another reason established for the training of black pilots was the need to make amends for the injustices of WWI. The *Philadelphia Tribune* asked whether “conditions are any different from conditions that existed in 1917.”⁸⁶ The article’s author, John A. Saunders, wondered how it could be possible for blacks to be any better off twenty-two years later when they have been relegated once again to such jobs in the U.S. Army as “kitchen mechanic” or “boot slinger.”⁸⁷ “Few power whites,” Saunders added, believe there is an advantage to sending African Americans to war in

⁸⁴ “Topics of the Week,” *New York Amsterdam News* (July 1, 1939), p. 10.

⁸⁵ “Destruction of Harlem By Air Would Be Easy,” *New York Amsterdam News* (June 1, 1940), p. 3.

⁸⁶ John A. Saunders, “No Vacancies for Negroes Blurt War Lords, as World War 1 History Repeats,” *Philadelphia Tribune* (July 4, 1940), p. 1.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

order to keep black men away from the many white women at home.⁸⁸ While his tone is somewhat tongue-in-cheek, his message of urgency crossed over any guffaw.

In December 1940, *The Crisis* published the cover story “When Do We Fly?” The author, James L. H. Peck, reproduced the acceptance letter to the Air Corps that he received from First Lieutenant Herbert M. West, Jr., who mistakenly assumed Peck was white.⁸⁹ Peck’s article was one of two in the December issue that focused on critical race concerns within the U.S. Armed Forces. The other article led with the headline, “Jim Crow in the Army Camps.”⁹⁰ Even before the U.S. entered WWII, there was concern among civilians that serving for one’s country might lead to greater injustices for African-American soldiers.

Once it was clear that black pilots would be allowed to enlist, the public discussion shifted from demanding inclusion to raising concerns about what inclusion would mean under the terms of segregation. On January 30, 1941, the National Airmen’s Association, headquartered at Harlem Field in Chicago, launched a campaign with the slogan, “Let’s not begin segregation in the air force.”⁹¹ Aviation leaders in Chicago spoke powerfully about the irony that the CPTP had functioned as a fully integrated program, and that, according to Cornelius Coffey, “Negroes and whites have worked harmoniously

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ James L. H. Peck, “When Do We Fly?” *The Crisis* (Dec. 1940), p. 378.

⁹⁰ Peck’s sentiments can be seen rendered as political cartoon. See Holloway, “Grounded,” *Pittsburgh Courier* (Dec. 7, 1940), p. 6.

⁹¹ “Color Line in Aviation Being Fought,” *Philadelphia Tribune* (Jan. 30, 1941), p. 2.

together in the CPTP, even in the South.”⁹² Such terms of inclusion were no longer acceptable in military service.

When the Tuskegee Airbase prepared to send airmen of the 99th Pursuit Squadron to war, and even after they entered air combat, there were only brief reports within the mainstream press, mostly framing the participation of African-American pilots within the larger frame of air battle across the air forces. However, the *Chicago Tribune* ran a series of articles by Roscoe Simmons, a former columnist from the *Chicago Defender*, who provided more detailed information about the 99th Pursuit Squadron. Simmons, a nephew of Booker T. Washington and a Tuskegee graduate, compared the Tuskegee flying school to a “citadel.”⁹³

How the Black and White Presses Reported on the Same Events

During the Roosevelt Administration, African Americans became essential advisors to the Executive Branch. After a distinguished career as the first African-American federal judge, William Hastie became the Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War in 1940. During his tenure, he made recommendations on how to incorporate and treat African Americans in the Armed Forces. He spent two years trying to convince the Army to integrate Tuskegee. Frustrated by the military’s adherence to policies of segregation, Hastie resigned in January 1943, prompting a flood of articles in the black press, including the publication of a letter written by Hastie to explain the circumstances surrounding his decision. To the *Afro-American*, Hastie said that, having appealed to the

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Roscoe Simmons, “Combat in Air Is Single Aim of All Tuskegee,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (April 4, 1943), p. W1.

War Department, he saw the more strategic route was to appeal to public opinion instead, a route that would only be open to him after his resignation. Hastie discussed discrepancies in training between black and white units, saying, “men cannot be humiliated over a long period of time without a loss of combat efficiency.”⁹⁴ In effect, the conditions of segregation had diminished black pilots’ ability to succeed.



Figure 4: Editorial cartoon: “Who Will Fly with Them,” 1943

Three weeks later, the *Pittsburgh Courier* published a column written by Hastie. The column was written in a much more direct manner than the earlier letter that detailed many of Hastie’s concerns but with a more measured tone: “There is not now and never

⁹⁴ John Jasper, “Discrimination in Air Forces Caused Dr. Hastie to Resign from War Dept,” *Afro-American* (Feb. 6, 1943), p. 1.

has been any good reason for the segregated training of Negro Flyers at Tuskegee. . . . It is not possible to train flyers in one small area as foot soldiers can be trained.”⁹⁵ Combat in the sky simply cannot be contained in the same manner as battle on the ground.

In addition to more expansive coverage regarding Hastie’s resignation, the black press informed readers about low morale at the Tuskegee Base, partially because of Hastie’s departure and cited several reasons given for the malaise. The *Pittsburgh Courier* reported that those based at Tuskegee were “soul sick” over the hatred they faced by white Alabama, that there was no reason for segregation policies on base, and that the wait to depart for WWII combat weighed heavily on everyone.⁹⁶

In articles that circulated in the white press, Hastie appears to be more circumspect about his future. The *Chicago Tribune* printed an excerpt of Hastie’s resignation letter. Hastie declined to tell the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* the reason for his resignation while he was still at his post. Hastie declined to say why he planned to resign until after he left his post.⁹⁷ He also mentioned that two of his assistants would continue in order to ensure a smooth transition.⁹⁸ Unlike the black press, there is no mention of low morale at the Tuskegee Air Base, only a brief analysis of Hastie’s resignation. The story of Hastie’s resignation—a front-page story in black newspapers—was tucked away at the bottom of page 15 in the *New York Times*, between stories about the sale of intoxicants at Army and Naval bases and an ad for Arthur Murray dance lessons. In this act of dissent, we can see how much more this act of protest mattered to a

⁹⁵ William H. Hastie, “Hastie Raps Army School at Tuskegee,” *Pittsburgh Courier* (Feb. 27, 1943), p. 1.

⁹⁶ “Blame Command for Low Morale at Tuskegee Base,” *Pittsburgh Courier* (Feb. 20, 1943), p. 1.

⁹⁷ “William H. Hastie, Civilian Aide to Stimson, Resigns,” *Washington Post* (Jan. 19, 1943), p. 7.

⁹⁸ “William Hastie Quits: Negro Civilian Aide to Stimson Defers Explanation,” *New York Times* (Jan. 19, 1943), p. 15.

black public and how it appeared to be just one news item among many in the mainstream press.

Likewise, stories concerning the combat missions of black escort pilots appeared much more in the black press. The first such story to appear in both black and white newspapers featured the first aerial victory credit awarded to a black pilot and his subsequent recognition by General Eisenhower. On July 3, 1943, less than one month after the 99th's mission over Pantelleria, First Lieut. Charles B. Hall distinguished himself as the first African-American pilot to destroy a German airplane while flying with the 99th Pursuit Squadron.



Figure 5: Caricature of Charles Hall, “99th Pilot Downs Nazi Plane,” 1943

Hall's "kill" drew immediate attention, not only because of his aerial victory credit but also because General Eisenhower congratulated him in person. The story circulated in such white newspapers as the *Atlanta Constitution*, *Baltimore Sun*, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, and the *New York Times*. The article quoted from Hall's testimony of the "kill":

I headed for the space between the fighters and bombers and managed to turn inside the Jerries. I fired a long burst and saw my tracers penetrate the second aircraft. . . . I saw [the German plane] crash. He raised a big cloud of dust.⁹⁹

Not only was a mainstream audience being introduced to African-American pilots in combat, but they were also getting a first-hand account of a "kill" from a black pilot, not only a first-of-its-kind victory for a black pilot in WWII but also a rare accomplishment for any pilot.

Even before Hall's victory, the black presses were imagining the first aerial victory credit. On July 3, 1943, the same day Hall shot down a German aircraft, the *Pittsburgh Courier* reported that a Nazi-controlled radio broadcast had said that the black pilots were, "extremely ferocious and cruel," and that "they will be entrusted with the most risky and dangerous of the Allied Air Force."¹⁰⁰ The celebration continued after the aerial victory, when the *Courier* ran a feature-length story about Hall. The black press, which had dedicated increasing coverage to the possibility that blacks would fly in combat, greeted news of Hall's success with jubilation.¹⁰¹ As the first black pilot to destroy an enemy plane, Hall became a symbol proving wrong all those who assumed the

⁹⁹ Seymour Korman, "Hoosier Gets 1st Nazi Plane For Negro Fighters," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (July 4, 1943), p. 3.

¹⁰⁰ Randy Dixon, "Germans Fear Negro Airmen," *Pittsburgh Courier* (July 3, 1943), p. 12.

¹⁰¹ Edgar T. Rouzeau, "99th Pilot Downs Nazi Plane," *Pittsburgh Courier* (July 10, 1943), p. 1.

inferiority of black pilots. Unlike the white newspapers, the *Courier* included a front-page illustration of Hall, dressed in air gear and a sketch of his aerial victory, with his plane shooting at the German aircraft as it falls to the ground. The article includes familial details about his mother and his hometown of Brazil, Indiana, punctuated with exclamation points. Even though Hall's aerial victory circulated within the U.S. mainstream audience, it did not seem to have lasting impact upon the public's memory of the war.

Once Hall returned home, he went on a three-month tour of the U.S. to promote the war bond drive, a mission only covered by the black press. Despite having been mentioned in the mainstream press for his aerial victory credit, Hall noticed on this tour that few of the white people he encountered even knew that there were black pilots in WWII combat, let alone that Hall had destroyed a German plane. Hall said, "It was a common thing" to be unknown to his audience before he shared his story of victorious air combat.¹⁰² While there was much interest in and articles about black pilots in the black press, as war heroes and as three-dimensional personalities, there remained few among the white population who knew of Hall's accomplishment, until they heard about his war service from him.

As the story of Hall's air combat illustrates, the black pilot in WWII had become a symbol of bravery among black audiences. Hall gave a speech at the December 1944 All Southern Negro Youth Congress for 3,000 youth in Atlanta, GA, in which he said he saw "no difference between a white and a Negro pilot. Under fire, all are brothers, all

¹⁰² Collins George, "Captain Hall Says Our Pilots To Figure In Post-War Aviation," *Pittsburgh Courier* (Sept. 30, 1944), p. 3.

Americans.”¹⁰³ Hall’s attention to civil rights extended now to the manner in which he charted the accomplishments of the 99th, not only within his segregated squadron but also within the larger fighter group of both white and black men. Hall said, “Our fighter group shot down more planes than any other allied pursuit squadron in the European Theatre. . . . Our men have proved themselves equal to the task under the most rigid of combat tests.”¹⁰⁴ In his speech, Hall asserted his individual equality with the white pilots he fought alongside in WWII. This moment, in which a single, named individual recounted his personal experience, was a stunning one when we consider that, with time, the experiences of all of the individual black pilots would be collapsed into the nameless, collective identity called “Tuskegee Airmen.”

Coverage about Tuskegee in Mainstream Magazines

In addition to *Time*, the Tuskegee-trained pilots were covered in at least one other mainstream newsmagazine: *Liberty Magazine*. African-American War correspondent Roi Ottley published the article “Dark Angels of Doom” in March 1945.¹⁰⁵ With a weekly circulation of three million readers, *Liberty* had the potential, like no newspaper, to reach a broader, and potentially more diverse, audience.¹⁰⁶ Ottley introduced the concept of black aviators to the papers’ predominantly white readership and highlighted the fact that

¹⁰³ “New World Order Coming, Says Dr. Bethune: Admonishes Youth To Get Ready For The Great Event” *Atlanta Daily World* (Dec. 2, 1944), p. 1.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Vincent Lushington “Roi” Ottley, “Dark Angels of Doom,” *Liberty* (Mar. 10, 1945): 53-54. *Liberty Magazine Historical Archive, 1924-1950*, “Quick Summary,” Gale Digital Collections: Where History Lives On Line; accessed Dec. 30, 2014, <http://gdc.gale.com/products/liberty-magazine-historical-archive-1924-1950/>

¹⁰⁶ Roi Ottley was one of the few African-American war correspondents who wrote for predominantly white publications. See Mark Huddle, *Roi Ottley’s World War II: the Lost Diary of an African-American Journalist* (Lawrence, KS: U P of Kansas, 2011).

they were highly educated and skilled individuals prior to their training at Tuskegee. As one of the few black war correspondents, Ottley wrote extensively about African Americans in WWII. Visiting Ramitelli Air Base in Italy presented an opportunity for Ottley to showcase what the black press already had covered extensively: the military record of the 332nd Fighter Group. In his article, Ottley drew attention to certain people on the base that he knew a white audience would admire. He described his tour guide, Lieutenant Jack Holsclaw, as a “poised, self-confident flier.” Another airman was a star football player from Northwestern University. In the midst of his tour narrative, Ottley said of the 332nd Fighter Group, “In more than 100 combat missions on which the Red Tails [African-American pilots] have given escort cover to their ‘Big Friends’ [the bombers], they haven’t lost a single ship.”¹⁰⁷ When the article was reprinted in the *Chicago Defender*, the number of missions reported without losses had grown from 100 to 200. That estimate was never contested. The “never lost a bomber” claim can trace its lineage to Ottley and to his piece in *Liberty Magazine*.

Stories of Black Escorts and White Bombers

In June 1944, both the 332nd Fighter Group and the 99th Pursuit Squadron attached to the Fifteenth Air Force. In order to evidence the “rhetoric of place,” one need not look further than to what circulated about the relationship between black escort pilots and their “big friends,” the white bombers.¹⁰⁸ Despite a range of escort pilot policies across the Air Force, Lieutenant General Ira Eaker, the Commander of the Eighth and later, as Mediterranean theatre air command, the Twelfth and Fifteenth Air Forces adhered to a

¹⁰⁷ Ottley, “Dark Angels of Doom,” pp. 53-54.

¹⁰⁸ “Big Friends” was a common nickname in the period to denote the white bombers of WWII.

policy that insisted that the escort pilots “stick with the bombers.”¹⁰⁹ The 332nd Fighter Group was one of seven fighter groups, all providing escort capabilities to the bombers. As close and roving escorts to white bombers, the mission of the black pilots was to protect the bombers during aerial combat with the Germans. In each individual Air Force, including the Fifteenth, there were white escort pilots whose mission it was to protect the bombers.

In order to adhere to an Air Force policy within the Fifteenth Air Force, escort pilots were instructed to fly close to the white bombers instead of breaking off to attack German planes further away. While there were several black pilots who achieved four aerial victory credits, none achieved the necessary five to earn the title “pilot ace.” That fact may be attributed to racist policies within the military; two black pilots who had scored their fourth aerial credits were quickly deployed back to the U.S. There were two other pilots who were not sent home immediately after their fourth aerial victory credit, making the question of injustice difficult to discern within the military record but easier to nuance in the analysis of war reporting. It is in the reports that document the relationship between black escorts and white bomber crews that the “rhetoric of place” is unmistakable.

While the relationship between a bomber pilot and his escort pilots should be one of interdependence—not subservience—Kirt Wilson’s rhetoric of place reminds us that “even under the best of circumstances, segregation communicated white supremacy”¹¹⁰ and that there could be no equality in the bomber-escort relationship. For the black pilots

¹⁰⁹ Daniel Haulman, “Tuskegee Airmen Myths and Realities” (Montgomery, AL: Air Force Historical Research Agency, Jan. 8, 2014), p. 30.

¹¹⁰ Wilson, *The Reconstruction Desegregation Debate*, p. 7:

so excited for the opportunity to finally fly and fight in aerial combat, there was no opportunity to transcend institutional racism. No matter how great a hero one man is over the air in Pantelleria, he would come home to the same racism and the same subservient position he left.

The black newspapers focused not only on the military record of black and white pilots, but also on the interpersonal gestures of loyalty evident on the part of the black pilots toward the white bombers of the Fifteenth Air Force. Just after the black pilots were first involved in air combat over Pantelleria Island, a story ran in June of 1943 in the *Chicago Defender* about Lt. Paul Adams from Greenville, SC, who had just received his wings at Tuskegee. The impetus for his military service, he said, was to avenge the death of his white childhood friend Odus Stone, Jr., who had served in WWII. Adams had worked for Stone's grandmother as a houseboy. Growing up together, Adams and Stone built model airplanes, from which Adams developed "the strong urge to become a flier."¹¹¹ The story testified to the loyalty between this black pilot and his white friend, and inherent in the story is the hope that black escorts would do the same for their white bombers.

One year after the story about the loyalty of an African-American pilot toward his white childhood playmate, the *Courier* featured the story of Lt. Harris, a black pilot who "spotted two Nazi bandits working over a desperately twisting Liberator (B-24 bomber)" and "dived in on them and broke up the attack."¹¹² After Lt. Harris got close to the bomber, the turret gunner fired a warning burst. Harris then "wagged his wings at the

¹¹¹ "Wins Wings As First Step To Avenge White Friend," *Chicago Defender* (June 19, 1943), p. 5.

¹¹² The B-24 Bomber is also called *The Liberator*.

Turret gunner” in order to let the bomber know that he was a friendly aircraft.¹¹³ After saving the U.S. bomber from a tragic end, Harris led the pilot and crew safely to an aerodrome. After both aircraft were on the ground, the navigator of the bomber pulled Lt. Harris from his cockpit and held him in his arms while the turret gunner—the same one who fired a warning shot at the black pilot—kissed the black pilot on both cheeks. The last line of the article informed readers, that “and the turret gunner was from Texas.” Racial prejudice had been set aside with the peril of war as a white Texan kissed a black man.

Toward the end of the war, the *Courier* published another story of loyalty about a white pilot who was looking for Capt. Luke Weathers, a black pilot who saved him before he returned home to the U.S.:

A white pilot came over with his Mississippi drawl to thank Weathers (the black pilot). “One of you fellows saved my life.”

Weathers soon realized he was the one who saved him. The white pilot begged Weathers to visit Mississippi. “Nobody’s going to hurt you there. I’ll see to that.”¹¹⁴

Like the story of the Texas turret gunner, both stories suggest the possibility that the bonds built between white and black airmen of the Fifteenth Air Force would carry over to everyday relations back in the U.S. The article about Weathers and the white pilot ends by suggesting that their encounter just might cast “down a little piece of prejudice” back

¹¹³ Ollie Harrington, “Race Pilot Leads Crippled B-24 To Safety, Gets Kiss From Texan,” *Pittsburgh Courier* (Aug. 5, 1944), p. 2.

¹¹⁴ Collins George, “Keys To Mississippi Offered Flier Who Saved Dixie Pilot,” the *Pittsburgh Courier* (March 24, 1945), p. 11.

home.¹¹⁵ Both stories demonstrate a hope that the experience of air combat would erase any prior misinformed notions of inferiority.

Air combat was not the only way for an airman to die. According to an AAF Statistical Digest, there were more than 5,533 fatal accidents involving military aircraft flown by airmen in the Continental U.S. from 1941 to 1945.¹¹⁶ When an aviation fatality involved solely pilots and crew of the 332nd and the 99th, as was the case with the first fatality at Tuskegee Air Base, it was tragic. But when an air collision involved a black pilot and a white bomber pilot and his crew, a tragedy of this nature threatened the potential for all black pilots to continue to serve as airmen.

The event that received the most attention in the mainstream press was an air crash on a training mission near Charleston, SC, in December 1944, when a black pilot collided with a white pilot and his eleven crew members, killing all. The *Baltimore Sun* published a letter written by Earl C. Knowlton, the father of the white pilot, who expressed grief over his son but also anger over the inclusion of black pilots in WWII. The father protested the “sudden elevation of the Negro to duties he is not yet qualified to perform.”¹¹⁷ He knew that his son might have to give his life for his country but not for “the fanatical idea that all men must be allowed to perform on the same level regardless of background qualifications.” He went on to say, “My father’s people fought for the North; my mother’s for the South. . . . I hold no blame against the Negro who flew a

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Army Air Forces Statistical Digest—WWII, “Table 214—Airplane Accidents in Continental US, by Principal Model of Airplane-Numbers and Rate: 1942-1945,” accessed Jan. 2, 2015: <http://www.strategypage.com/militaryforums/6-55071.aspx#startofcomments>

¹¹⁷ “Father of White Crash Victim Protests Use of Negro Pilots,” *Baltimore Sun* (Dec. 17, 1944), p. 2.

fighter plane into a bomber.” The father claimed he harbored no implicit anger for the black pilot. Instead, he said, he targeted his anger at the federal government.

Incorporating the spirit of the 1925 Army War College Report, the father argued against the trustworthiness of black pilots: “with rare exceptions, his mind is not prepared to make the split-second decisions which mean life or death in the operation of so swift and so complicated and so deadly a mechanism as an airplane.” The father denied that racial prejudice animated his emotions: “They loved him. He loved them. So, this is not a letter of hate.” Instead, he argued that the federal government’s decision to train black pilots was nothing more than “fetishism.” While the father’s critique of the federal government was strident, his appeal seemed to be founded more in anger and personal pain than any cogent plan to dismantle the black flying corps.

While black newspapers also described the accident as a tragedy, the incident appeared to be interpreted as a potential threat to the overall inclusion of black pilots in air combat. Fear and a defensive tone characterize the articles in black newspapers, which not only narrated the incident but also reminded readers that it occurred in the South. Accounts in the black newspapers depicted a grieving white father who could possibly have the influence to end the service of African-Americans in the War: “The South has had enough! Now they want a color line in the sky. . . . The War department was asked to bring down the Negro birds by an Anniston business executive whose son was killed in an air collision involving a plane piloted by a colored flier.”¹¹⁸ Both white and black newspapers extensively quoted the father as he pled with the War Department to stop using black pilots. The difference between the black and white presses is that within the

¹¹⁸ “Dixie White Asks Ban on Negroes in Air Corps,” *Chicago Defender* (Dec. 23, 1944), p. 1.

black community, the anger of the father appeared as a potential end to the black pilot program, while the *Baltimore Sun* presented it as a human-interest story.

Accounts of the incident in both the black and white newspapers depended upon the opinions of Roy Wilkins, Acting Secretary of the NAACP, to function as a racial mediator for the two audiences. In the *Baltimore Sun*, Wilkins said, “We can understand the grief and disappointment of a father who expected that if his son should lose his life in serving his country, it would not be in an accident.”¹¹⁹ About the father, Wilkins wrote, “Mr. Knowlton says his letter is not one of hatred and we believe him so far as his feelings for this one Negro pilot is concerned, but his main thesis which is that the Negro is still a kind of uncivilized, lower animal incapable of adjusting himself to civilization, is an underhand cut at the whole Negro race.”¹²⁰ In his response, Wilkins made efforts both to address the private grief of the father and to address the racism that extended beyond the circumstances of the accident.

In this story, it was not only the increased amount of coverage but also the additional content in black presses that is worthy to note. The *New York Amsterdam News* included a letter from a well-known minstrel show actor and playwright, Billy King, who responded to Knowlton’s letter:

Death by accident is not a stranger to human existence. . . . Please be advised that aeroplane gears are color blind—and are liable to jam up on any pilot, regardless of race, creed or color.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ “Father of White Crash Victim Protests Use of Negro Pilots,” *Baltimore Sun* (Dec. 17, 1944), p. 2.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ “Answers ‘Bama Father, States He Is All Wet: White Man Whose Son Was Killed in Plane Crash with Negro Pilot Goes Anti-Negro” *New York Amsterdam News* (Jan. 20, 1945), p. 13.

The letter sought to remove guilt from the black pilot by insinuating that a tragedy could occur in the air to any pilot, not just a black pilot. The letter echoed the same comments made by Charles B. Hall, the first pilot to receive an aerial victory credit, when he addressed a youth conference in Atlanta. Both King and Hall considered the nature of a sky that had been demarcated by a “color line,” where even with the victories of WWII, flying was not a color-blind pursuit. King asked the grieving white father, “Mr. Knowlton, would you have had the same bitterness toward the cause of your son’s death had the plane been in the hands of a white pilot?”¹²² King’s comment—read by a mostly black audience—sought a stance of neutrality or innocence until proven guilty for the black pilot. And yet, because the Tuskegee Experiment could never be fully proven, but, rather, tested and re-tested each time a black pilot climbed into his cockpit, it would be assumed that a black pilot flew in front of a white bomber.

One month after Knowlton’s letter was published in the *Baltimore Sun*, the *Chicago Defender* published a response from Luther H. Johnson, the father of the black pilot. Johnson’s letter took Knowlton to task for race baiting:

Did the tragic death of your son mean no more to you than an excuse to give voice to your prejudice against colored people? It was unfortunate that your son was killed in that fateful crash. My son was killed too. Your sorrow and your anguish cannot possibly be greater than mine. . . . During the past three years airplane crashes and collisions have occurred in various parts of this country almost every week, with no colored flyers involved.¹²³

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

Johnson's letter ends in a less conciliatory tone, signing off with "We loyal Americans can thank God that you belong to a group as sure to vanish from American soil as America is to win this war." By adding his voice to the national discussion of this accident, Johnson registered the humanity of his son in the midst of a tragedy. And we learn the name of his son, Robert M. Johnson, a man who had been identified only as "Negro" prior to the publication of his father's letter.

Conclusion

It is crucial to reconcile the Tuskegee Experiment of the 1940s with its diminished presence in public memory. Public memory depends upon a resolution or victory that the Experiment could not provide. The airmen are claimed to have "overcome segregation and prejudice" by the end of the war.¹²⁴ What this chapter makes clear, however, is that yes, African Americans were able to serve in WWII, and that a subset of pilots managed to achieve one or more aerial victory credits, meaning they were able to shoot down an enemy plane. And because the rhetorical strategy of inferiority influenced every aspect of the "Tuskegee Experiment," there could be no overcoming of racism during the war, only later in its retelling through public memory.

While the term "Tuskegee Airmen" has mostly supplanted any mention of the "Tuskegee Experiment," in fact, most associate any experiment in Tuskegee with Syphilis, not flying. At the time, however, there was no overlapping or confusion. In both black and mainstream newspapers, the term "experiment" was associated with every person and action related to the Tuskegee Air Base. While the term was grudgingly

¹²⁴ "American Visionaries: Tuskegee Airmen," National Park Service (Web) (April 10, 2000): <http://cr.nps.gov/museum/exhibits/tuskegee/airoverview.htm>

accepted to reflect the work of the air base, once the 99th Pursuit Squadron began to fly in air combat in 1943, the term “experiment” began to be contested. In his regular column, Roy Wilkins was one of the first to ask if the work of the 99th was “still an experiment,” when pilots were beginning to fly in North Africa and Europe.¹²⁵ Wilkins argued that if the term could be lifted, then more men could fly and more men could bomb strategic targets. To acknowledge any victory or end to the Tuskegee Experiment would mean transitioning toward a rhetoric of equality, when the prerequisite gateway to war combat was an assumed subservience from black escorts to white pilots and their crew.

The “never lost a bomber” claim continues to circulate today and was stated as the primary reason for the Tuskegee Airmen’s receipt of the Congressional Medal of Freedom in 2006. At the same time as the awarding of the Medal of Freedom, however, research by an Air Force historian pointed to military records that black escort pilots had actually lost 27 bombers to enemy fire.¹²⁶ While the “never lost a bomber” claim has been proven false in the rediscovery of the military record, the tenacity of the claim’s circulation within the public memory of the Tuskegee Airmen continues into the present.

While public memory has raised these pioneer pilots of color to heroic status, the circulating texts of their day reflect instead a more nuanced picture of race relations and an ongoing plea for respect. How white newspapers and black newspapers reported on the Tuskegee Airmen in their day is revelatory in that the latter documented a cultural revolution in the war presence of black men while the white press paid little attention at all. This chapter complicates the public memory of the Tuskegee Airmen by reading their

¹²⁵ Roy Wilkins, “Wilkins Describes Trip in Big US Army Bomber,” *New York Amsterdam News* (May 15, 1943), p. 13.

¹²⁶ Daniel Haulman, *Eleven Myths about the Tuskegee Airmen* (Montgomery, AL: NewSouth Books, 2012).

history through the lens of Kirt Wilson's "rhetoric of place." Remember that in Douglass's understanding of the rhetoric of place, African Americans must situate themselves, always, at the pleasure of white men and women. Looking critically at the war record of the black pilot hardly detracts from their heroism in public memory. Instead, it casts a rhetorical and nuanced eye on the relations between black and white, both in combat and stateside.

Chapter Five

CITIZENS OF AIR AND SPACE

*“Without the spirit of adventure that animated these heroes of aviation, . . . [m]an would have remained forever a slave to gravity, a prisoner of two dimensions on the Earth’s surface.”*¹

—Walter J. Boyne, Colonel United States Air Force,
Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum Director (1981-1986)

Technological advances can revolutionize how we see possibility in our everyday lives. In *The Shallows*, Nicholas Carr assesses the cognitive effect of the Internet on its users. He identifies computers as the most recent of five tools of the mind that have most shaped human thought. Carr points to the invention of the alphabet, the map, the printing press, the clock, and the computer.² A corollary list of the most transformative, perspective-shifting, identity-shaping inventions would have to include the airplane. Once humans had the power of controlled, sustained, motorized flight, a revolution occurred that opened up a new public sphere and a new civic identity. It has been the work of this dissertation to identify the citizens of the air and to acknowledge the role that circulating texts, images, and stories have played in helping everyday citizens imagine themselves airborne. While the scope of this project is largely limited to the period beginning with the Wright brothers’ first successful flights and ending with the conclusion of World War II—1903-1945—the three iconic stories I highlight that circulated during these years have traveled through recirculation into the present, where

¹ Lon Tuck “The Shining Aura of Air and Space: After 10 Years, the Most Popular . . .,” *Washington Post*, Jul. 1, 1986, p. C1.

² Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010).

they haunt and inspire and continue to telegraph messages about the triumph, wonder, and safety of flight.

In order to understand the lasting impact of this social imaginary of flight and its messages of safety, I land at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum (NASM), the most visited site on the National Mall and the repository of many of the most iconic air and spacecraft in American history. The museum promotes stories about epic flights and their safe landings, demonstrating how the dialectic of risk and safety has been popularized through enactments of public memory. As a way in, I draw your attention to a particular scene from the 2009 movie *Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian*, which features, among other characters, the Wright brothers, Amelia Earhart, and the Tuskegee Airmen.³ Admittedly, I recall scenes from this Hollywood fantasy adventure comedy with a certain sense of smug satisfaction since they coincidentally illustrate the very argument I make in this project: that the revolution ushered in by the invention of human flight has depended not only upon technological advancements but also upon a rhetorical construction of flight's safety, and that three stories in particular prove it.

In the film trilogy, actor Ben Stiller plays a museum guard named Larry Daley who discovers that the exhibits come to life at night. In a rollicking set of adventures, Larry ends up at the National Gallery of Art with the beguiling Amelia Earhart, played by Amy Adams.⁴ In their dialogue, Daley and Earhart allude to the problematic fact that Earhart, though fully in the flesh, cannot possibly be human; Daley knows that she disappeared in 1937. The fact of her disappearance opens the door for humorous

³ Shawn Levy, dir., *Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian* (United States: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 2009).

⁴ In order to hide from the enemy, Daley and Earhart “dive” into Alfred Eisenstaedt’s V-J day photograph of the “kiss,” one of the eight iconic photographs Hariman and Lucaites highlight in *No Caption Needed*.

doublespeak, such as when Earhart kisses Daley and declares, “I just feel as if I have been asleep for a long time and now I am awake.”⁵ This theme of presence and absence continues throughout the entire movie, suggesting that the movie’s storyline has proffered the missing Earhart after all of these years.

The movie’s plot also incorporates the Wright brothers at the Smithsonian NASM. In order to rescue a friend who is being held against his will at the Smithsonian’s Castle, Daley and Earhart commandeer the Wrights’ 1903 Flyer. In order to make their escape, Daley and Earhart depend on the protection of the Tuskegee Airmen, who—just as in public memory—appear in the movie as a collective identity and are protecting white pilots. The nameless Tuskegee Airmen, led by actor Cuba Gooding, Jr., block a potential attack by Attila the Hun, Napoleon, and Al Capone, thus enabling Daley and Earhart to escape the museum using the Wrights’ Flyer.⁶ From below, the Wright brothers say, “God Speed, Amelia Earhart. God Speed,” echoing the real life Scott Carpenter’s send-off before the first manned orbital mission of the Friendship 7: “God Speed, John Glenn. God Speed.”⁷ Thus, in this one cinematic scene, we witness the confluence of the three iconic stories of flight, along with an astronaut, in a mishmash of storylines.

The *Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian* did well in the box office, in part because the public recognizes and celebrates the historical figures that the film brings to life. How the nonfictional NASM has treated these historical figures and their

⁵ Levy, dir., *Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian*.

⁶ Actor Cuba Gooding, Jr., was in *The Tuskegee Airmen* and *Red Tails*. See Robert Markowitz, dir., *The Tuskegee Airmen* (United States: HBO, 1995); and Anthony Hemingway, dir., *Red Tails* (United States: Twentieth Century Fox, 2012).

⁷ Levy, dir., *Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian*.

stories, though, deserves attention. In Chapter Two of this dissertation project, I wrote about how the NASM staff made the decision to move the 1903 Wright Flyer—once suspended next to Charles Lindbergh’s *Spirit of Saint Louis* aircraft and flying over the Apollo 11 command module in the Milestones of Flight Gallery—to a second-floor room dedicated to the history of the Wright brothers.⁸ While this exhibit do-over could be cast as a promotion, especially since it ostensibly took place to honor the centennial of human flight, it also broke a promise made to Orville Wright in 1948 that his aircraft would fly in perpetuity just in front of Lindbergh’s *Spirit of Saint Louis*. In its current presentation, the flyer rests on the ground, a demotion of sorts in a museum that honors particular aircraft of distinction by “flying” them from the ceiling. Though there is an extensive exhibit surrounding the airplane, the museum patrons no longer see the 1903 aircraft “flying” from the rafters alongside other milestone aircraft.

The public memory of Amelia Earhart at the NASM has also been controversial. In March 2003, the Smithsonian released a list of Ten Great Pilots, which included such iconic figures in aviation as Jimmy Doolittle, Charles Lindbergh, and Chuck Yeager.⁹ After naming six additional male pilots who have little to no name recognition beyond the enclaves of aviation buffs and historians, a woman pilot was honored in tenth place. Based on the legacy and massive circulation of texts related to the iconic story of Amelia Earhart, one might assume it was she who was named sole woman aviator on this list of Ten Great Pilots.¹⁰ Instead, it was Jacqueline Auriol, the first woman admitted to

⁸ “Exhibitions,” *Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum* (Web), accessed March 3, 2015.

⁹ Patricia Trenner, “10 All-Time Great Pilots: Machines Alone Could Not Have Pushed the Airplane Forward,” *Air & Space Magazine* (Web), accessed March 2, 2015.

¹⁰ There also was no mention of the Wright brothers.

France's Military Flight Test Centre, a pilot who swapped speed records with U.S. Pilot Jacqueline Cochran, the first woman to break the sound barrier. On the *Air & Space* website that listed the Ten Great Pilots was a comment section where respondents made recommendations for pilots who were not currently on the list and who, in the opinion of the respondents, deserved the honor. A couple of the responses identified Earhart as a great pilot, including one that opined, "I believe most children that come to this website for information will get zero percent on their exams, homework et cetera." Next to the comment was the following: "EDITORS' REPLY: Amelia Earhart as a great pilot could be a controversial proposition."¹¹ In order to be commemorated as exceptional, a pilot had to not only risk flight but also achieve a safe landing.

Even though Earhart was not identified as one of the ten great pilots, it is her story—the record of her achievements and reassurances of safe flight—that has prompted the many engagements with her public memory at the NASM, certainly many more than Jacqueline Auriol, whose name yields a "no results were found" message in a search of the NASM website, despite her designation as one of the ten great pilots. Earhart's Vega, the plane she flew solo on her transatlantic flight in 1932, is prominently displayed in the Barron Hilton Pioneers of Flight Gallery on the museum's second floor, a gallery dedicated to aviators from the 1920s and '30s whom the NASM has deemed pioneering in the way they pushed the "technological" or "social limits" of flight. Earhart's absence from the ten great pilots list and her framing within the museum as a pioneer pilot, not a milestone pilot, reflects a larger and persistent discourse that questions Earhart's competency as a pilot but also depends upon her reassurances of the wonder and

¹¹ Patricia Trenner, "10 All-Time Great Pilots: Machines Alone Could Not Have Pushed the Airplane Forward," *Air & Space Magazine* (Web); accessed Feb. 15, 2014.

possibility in flight. In the time I have engaged in research concerning the social imaginary of early flight, I, too, have been asked, “Was Earhart really just a bad pilot?”

The Tuskegee Airmen, too, are recognized by the NASM. The exhibit “Black Wings” has been on display and on a national tour since 1983. This exhibit includes a brief video featuring General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., repeating the contested claim of the Tuskegee Airmen that they never lost a bomber. The exhibit helped to gel in public memory this relationship between the Airmen and the superlative claim made about them, even though the claim also threatens the integrity of their war record in its exaggeration.

Describing the treatment of the three iconic stories by Smithsonian’s NASM prompts me to reflect upon, and cement, the social theories at the heart of this project. For nearly forty years, NASM has been the acknowledged home of aviator and astronaut historical narratives. It can also be read as a commemorative site worthy of interpretation through the lens of Taylor’s imaginary, as a place organized by the stories and legends of flight. The NASM has made legible the social imaginary of flight in its broad gestures toward patriotism and freedom, which were so often associated with flying. Interpreting the NASM through the rubric of Warner’s publics and counterpublics, it becomes clear that there are no aircraft in the Milestones of Flight gallery that had been flown by women aviators or by aviators of color. Instead, this counterpublic and their aircraft have been situated in a more muted location on the second floor. While there exists an established tradition of scholarship among aviation historians—several of the premier scholars being at the employ of the NASM—there has been little scholarly analysis of flight as a public imaginary, beyond some historical interpretations. Taylor

and Warner, in separate but also related theoretical understandings of the public, help to interpret aviation's public memory on the National Mall. The NASM has the potential to serve as a critical future commemorative site for public memory research regarding human powered flight.

I see the scholarship of this dissertation as demonstrating the importance of interrelating the historical narrative with both archival research and public memory. Such theoretical commitments afford the possibility for future analysis, not only of the NASM but also of other archival and historic sites related to aviation. These museums and historic sites deserve analyses that both incorporate and extend the reach of historical narrative through the social imaginary of flight and public memory. Such analyses, within rhetorical studies, American Studies, and cultural history, would be both timely and relevant for intervention within academic scholarship and a larger public audience.

It is my hope that readers will see, in a new light, the three iconic stories analyzed herein. In so doing, readers will prove true the first of Dickinson, Blair, and Ott's "consensual assumptions": that commemorative processes pay more attention to the present than the past.¹² The stories I investigate are ones that popular culture has already played with. During the 1990s, for instance, two major advertising campaigns invoked the story and the example of Earhart: Gap's Khaki ads (1993)¹³ and Apple's "Think Different" ads (1997). In 2012, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton held a press conference in which she pledged financial support from the State Department in the

¹² Dickinson, Blair, and Ott, "Introduction," *Places of Public Memory*, pp. 6-11.

¹³ Stuart Elliott, 1993, "The Media Business: Advertising—Addenda; Gap Ads to Feature Celebrities in Khakis," *New York Times*, Aug. 18 (Web); accessed July 1, 2012.

search for Earhart's long missing plane.¹⁴ Earhart's legacy provided Clinton the opportunity to identify with a feminist agenda, just as *Ms. Magazine* had done in the 1970s when it put Earhart on the cover. During television coverage of the Sochi Olympic games in 2014, an advertisement ran of a U.S. woman ski jumper, with a sound overlay of Earhart discussing the importance of taking risks, despite the hazards.¹⁵ The public memory of the Tuskegee Airmen continues to recirculate in films and television movies, such as the HBO made-for-television movie, *The Tuskegee Airmen*, and the George Lucas film *Red Tails*. There have also been several documentaries that feature the WWII veterans.

What do these iconic stories mean to a modern audience? The *Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian*, I believe, proves there is a public that knows the three iconic stories of flight that I analyze, and knows them in relation to the NASM. These stories have come, in fact, to influence the everyday experience of flying, both private and commercial. The public knows Amelia Earhart and we know that she disappeared. We know that two men in suits and caps—one mustachioed and the other not—must be the Wright brothers. Finally, we know that a group of African-American men in bomber jackets most likely are the Tuskegee Airmen. What has often been overlooked are circulating texts within the social imaginary of flight that reveal Amelia Earhart as an aviator who not only broke records but also peddled flight's safety. Such knowledge is simply too ironic in the certainty of her disappearance. Most do not realize

¹⁴ Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Remarks at an Event Celebrating Amelia Earhart and the United States' Ties to Our Pacific Neighbors," *U.S. Department of State: Diplomacy in Action*, Mar. 20, 2012 (Web); accessed June 6, 2013: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBNVjNUdjXo>

¹⁵ "Flying" (television commercial), dir. Michael Spiccia, by Arts & Sciences, produced by BBDO New York Worldwide (2014).

how radical it was for the Wrights to resist the temptation of turning their flying experiments into spectacle, as had the Montgolfier brothers and Alberto Santos-Dumont. Finally, we know the Tuskegee Airmen to be heroes, which they were. What many have never perused are the administrative and public texts that contributed to deep levels of racism undergirding the military record of the black pilots. Some know that they “never lost a bomber,” but in the refutation of this claim, rarely do we consider the “rhetoric of place” that made any military achievement an unsuspected or overlooked victory.

Given the manner in which I have analyzed the rhetorical power of stories to shape the public perception of flight’s safety, I have illustrated how the sky has become a public sphere populated by the people I identify as the citizens of the air. This scholarship brings together the rigor of archival research and theoretical concern in order to interpret a social imaginary of flight and its recirculation in accounts of public memory. This rhetorical construction of the sky—in messages that depend upon both risk and safety—has made it possible for commercial flight to seem mundane, such that being relegated to a middle seat is the greatest risk of air travel most air passengers will ever face. Human powered flight, for pilots and passengers alike, has little apparent risk anymore.¹⁶

When I think about the potential significance of this study for future Communication researchers, I imagine the possibility of gathering together a group of scholars—be they rhetorical, organizational, performance, or interpersonal scholars—to discuss how their research might involve or address the domain of the sky. While the opportunity to discuss common concerns has appeal, it has always seemed to me that any study involving the sky must continue to focus on those concerns related to the everyday matters of citizenship on the ground. My project, if it has done its job, will inspire others

¹⁶ For comparison, see William F. Ogburn, *The Social Effects of Aviation* (New York: Houghton, 1946).

to focus on flight and the sky, but always at its intersection with the earth. While this study draws from a vast literature and archival record of human powered flight, it remains focused on the rhetorical messages of safety related by pilots, passengers, and the airminded public—those who became the citizens of the air.

APPENDIX A: AVIATION TIMELINE

1485	Leonardo da Vinci draws potential aircraft
1783	Montgolfier brothers take first human balloon flight
1834	Birth of Samuel Langley
1856	Birth of Booker T. Washington
1867	Birth of Wilbur Wright
1871	Birth of Orville Wright
1884	Birth of Eleanor Roosevelt
1896	Otto Lilienthal dies in flight
1897	Birth of Amelia Earhart
1900-1903	Wright Glider Experiments
1902	Birth of Charles Lindbergh
1901	“Man will never fly for a 1000 years” (Wilbur to Orville)
1901	Alberto Santo Dumont flies dirigible around Eiffel Tower
1903	Langley attempts flights of the Aerodrome
1903	Wright Brothers-First Four Flights, Kitty Hawk, NC
1905	First Passenger Air Craft
1906	Death of Samuel Langley
1906	Santos Dumont flies fixed wing aircraft in France
1907	Birth of Charles “Chief” Anderson
1908	Thomas Selfridge, Death of first aircraft passenger
1909	Rheims Air Meet
1912	Glenn Curtiss’s flight of Samuel Langley’s Aerodrome
1912	Birth of Benjamin O. Davis, Jr.
1912	Harriet Quimby dies while flying over Boston Harbor
1915	Death of Booker T. Washington
1917	Department of Aeronautics
1918	U.S. Air Mail Service begins
1925	Army War College Report
1926	Air Commerce Act (Pilot License now enforced)
1926	Bessie Coleman dies in flight
1927	Lindbergh Transatlantic Flight
1927	First Air Traffic Controller (no runway)
1927	Lindbergh Tour of US (80 cities, 48 states, travelling 22,000 miles)
1927	Archie League-Saint Louis, First Air Traffic Controller (no runway)
1928	Earhart’s Transatlantic Flight (as passenger)
1928	<i>20 Hrs, 40 Min.</i>
1928	Orville Wright sends 1903 Flyer to London
1928	Boulder put in location of first four flights
1928	<i>Spirit of Saint Louis</i> to Smithsonian
1928	Earhart establishes 99s
1928	Orville Wright sends 1903 Flyer to London.
1928	Kill Devil Hills Monument Commissioned
1930	Anne Morrow Lindbergh earned first glider pilot license for a woman.
1931	Lindberghs in the Arctic

1931	Amelia Earhart and George Putnam Wed
1931	Earhart flies across country in Autogiro
1932	Lindbergh baby taken
1932	Dedication, Wright Brothers Monument
1932	Earhart solo transatlantic flight
1932	<i>The Fun of It</i>
1932	FDR and family fly to Chicago Democratic Convention
1932	Earhart-Eleanor Roosevelt Flight Over DC
1933	Wiley Post flies a northern route around the world.
1935	Earhart flies from Hawaii to California
1935	Wiley Post and Will Rogers crash in Alaska
1935	First aviation casualty of a US Senator (Bronson Cutting)
1935	DC-3 first commercial flights
1936	Safety in Air Hearings (DC)
1937	Earhart First Attempted World Flight Fails
1937	Corrigan applies for permit to fly from NY to London, turned down.
1937	<i>Last Flight</i>
1937	Earhart disappears on second attempted world flight
1938	Howard Hughes makes round the world flight
1939	Earhart declared dead by Putnam
1939	Civilian Pilot Training Program
1941	E. Roosevelt's demonstration flight with Chief Anderson
1941	Chief Anderson-Eleanor Roosevelt Flight
1941	Formation, 99 th Pursuit Squadron
1943	Report on Combat Efficiency
1943	99 th Pursuit Squadron first combat mission
1944-5	Tuskegee Airmen as Escort Pilots in European Theatre, WWII
1945	Publication of Ottley's article "Dark Angels of Dawn"
1946	Lindbergh retrieves Wright Flyer from London
1948	Integration of Armed Forces
1948	1903 Flyer returned to Smithsonian
1948	Integration of Armed Forces
1948	Independent Office of Air Safety
1950	Air Safety Board
1953	Kitty Hawk subdivides into Kill Devil Hills
1954	Jet powered airline
1957	Crash over the Grand Canyon (ATC rules established "on top")
1963	Marlon Green, Continental Airlines, first black pilot
1982	Black Wings (NASM exhibit)
1998	Bill Clinton, 4-Star Ceremony for B. O. Davis, Jr.
2002	Opening of historic site in Tuskegee, AL
2007	Tuskegee Airmen Congressional Medal
2009	<i>Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian</i>
2012	Secretary Clinton Press Conference re: Earhart

APPENDIX B: WRIGHTS' PUBLISHED LETTER, 1904

The Washington Post, Jan. 7, 1904, p. 5

FOUR TRIPS IN THE AIR

Wright Brothers Tell of Their Flying Machine.

STARTED BY ITS OWN POWER

Half a Mile Trip Made After Rising from
the Ground Against a Stiff Wind—
Lack of Skill on the Part of Operators
Limited the Experiments—New Prin-
ciples of Control—First Trial Difficult.

Dayton, Ohio, Jan. 6.—The Wright brothers, inventors of the flying machine, which has attracted such widespread attention, have prepared the following, which they say is the first correct statement of the two successful trials made by them:

"On the morning of December 17, between 10:30 and noon, four flights were made, two by Orville Wright and two by Wilbur Wright. The starts were all made from a point on the level and about 200 feet west of our camp, which is situated a quarter of a mile north of Killdevil Sandhill, in Dare County, N. C. The wind at the time of the flights had a velocity of twenty-seven miles an hour at 10 o'clock, and twenty-four miles an hour at noon, as recorded by the anemometer at the Kitty Hawk weather bureau station. This anemometer is thirty feet from the ground. Our own measurements, made with a hand anemometer at a height of four feet from the ground, showed a velocity of about twenty-two miles when the first flight was made and twenty-two and one-half miles when the last flight was made.

Flew Against Wind.

"The flight was made directly against the wind. Each time the machine started from the level ground by its own power, with no assistance from gravity or other source whatever. After a run of about forty feet along a mono-rail track, which

held the machine eight inches from the ground, it rose from the track, and, under the direction of the operator, climbed upward on an inclined course until a height of eight or ten feet from the ground was reached, after which the course was kept as near horizontal as the wind gusts and the limited skill of the operator would permit. Into the teeth of a December gale the 'flyer' made its way forward with a speed of ten miles an hour over the ground and of thirty to thirty-five miles an hour through the air.

"It had previously been decided that for reasons of personal safety these first trials should be made as close to the ground as possible. The height chosen was scarcely sufficient for maneuvering in so gusty a wind and with no previous acquaintance with the conduct of the machine and its controlling mechanisms. Consequently, the first flight was short. The succeeding flights rapidly increased in length, and at the fourth trial a flight of fifty-nine seconds was made, in which the machine flew a little more than half a mile through the air and a distance of more than 852 feet over the ground. The landing was due to a slight error of judgment on the part of the operator. After passing over a little hummock of sand in attempting to bring the machine down to the desired height, the operator turned the rudder too far and the machine turned downward more quickly than had been expected. The reverse movement of the rudder was a fraction of a second too late to prevent the machine from touching the ground and thus ending the flight. The whole occurrence occupied little, if any, more than one second of time.

First Trials Difficult.

"Only those who are acquainted with practical aeronautics can appreciate the difficulties in attempting the first trials of a flying machine in a twenty-five-mile gale. As winter was already set in, we should have postponed our trials to a more favorable season but for the fact that we were determined before returning home to know whether the machine possessed sufficient power to fly, sufficient strength to withstand the shock of landings, and sufficient capacity of control to make flight safe in boisterous winds as well as in calm air. When the points had been definitely established we at once packed our goods and returned home, knowing that the age of the flying machine had come at last.

"From the beginning, we have employed entirely new principles of control, and as all the experiments have been conducted at our own expense, without assistance from any individual or institution, we do not feel ready at present to give out any pictures or detailed description of the machine."

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