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**On being aeromobile:  
airline passengers and the affective experiences of flight**

The advent of heavier-than-air powered flight and the subsequent inauguration of regular passenger air services at the beginning of the twentieth century transformed not only the practical geographies but also the affective human experiences of travelling. Aircraft enabled passengers to accomplish journeys, which would once have taken many days or weeks to complete, in a matter of hours, and transformed the sensory experiences of being mobile. However, while much has been written about the development of global commercial aviation and the metaphorical compression of time and space air travel has effected, research into the individual embodied human experiences of being aeromobile remains relatively scarce. Drawing on powerful theoretical arguments inspired by the mobilities turn within the social sciences and recent concern with the 'affective' dimensions of everyday life, this paper uses firsthand written historical records of passengers' experiences of travelling by air during the 1920s and 1930s to uncover the diverse kin/aesthetic and affective experiences of flight. While recognising that such experiences are shaped, at least in part, by gender, age, nationality, race, and past experiences of air travel, passengers' descriptions of the unique bodily (dis)comforts, fears, and anxieties associated with flying are used to illustrate how aeromobile bodies experience their airborne environment in ways which have yet to be adequately addressed. The paper concludes by calling for a more nuanced understanding of air travel that recognises that the advent of powered flight has fundamentally changed our perceptions of time, space, distance, and speed, and transformed what it means to be mobile.

Keywords: air travel; aeromobility; airline passengers; affect

## **Introduction - Becoming aeromobile**

The advent of heavier-than-air powered flight and the subsequent inauguration of regular passenger air services at the beginning of the twentieth century transformed the practical geographies of movement and the affective human experiences of mobility. Yet, while transport historians and transport geographers have long explored the implications of new aeronautical technologies on the development of individual airport nodes, airline companies, and route networks (see Sealy, 1957; Brooks, 1975; Birkhead, 1958; Higham, 1959), it is only relatively recently that social scientists have begun to examine the affective human experiences of aeromobility, a term Adey *et al* (2007: 774) define as ‘the dominance of flying as the normal international mode of travelling’. Taking the recent ‘mobilities turn’ within the social sciences, and the growing awareness of the need to consider the subjective human experiences of travel and mobility as its starting point, this paper contributes to emerging debates concerning the affective responses different modes of transport and travel engender by discussing subjective human experiences of flying. This approach informs current work on the ‘affective’ dimensions of different forms of mobility (Bissell, 2010a, 2010b) and argues that commercial aviation not only enables and sustains international flows of people, goods, and information but also actively creates new ways of becoming and being mobile which transform human experiences of travel and movement.

Following Wilbur and Orville Wright’s first successful heavier-than-air powered flights in 1903, successive developments in aerodynamics, propulsion, avionics, navigation, and material sciences have enabled commercial aircraft to fly progressively further, faster, longer, and higher, overcoming the ‘tyranny’ of distance and enabling journeys that would once have taken many months or weeks to complete by road, rail, or sea, to be accomplished in a matter of hours by air. However, while much has been written about the evolution of aircraft design, the spatial dynamics of the global airline network, the metaphorical compression of time and space, and the degree of global cultural homogenisation that air travel has (or has not) effected (see Bowen, 2002; Amin, 2002), it is only relatively recently that investigations into the multiple affective experiences of flying and the embodied subjectivities of what it means to be aeromobile have begun to emerge (Millward, 2008; Rust, 2009; Budd and Hubbard, 2010). Building on Derek McCormack’s (2008, 2009) studies of hot-air ballooning (or ‘*aerostatic*’ flight), this paper explores the affective human experiences of flying in *aeromobile* passenger airships and aircraft during the 1920s and 1930s as revealed through passengers’ firsthand written accounts of journeys by air. The analysis that follows intentionally excludes considerations of military or general aviation (in all their diverse manifestations) to focus on the aeromobile experiences of the end user of the commercial aviation product – the paying passenger.

The paper begins with a discussion of how geographers have traditionally studied the air transport sector and how these approaches have resulted in a significant gap in the coverage of air transport geographies and a near absence of research into the travel experiences of ordinary passengers. This is followed by a discussion of how the recent the mobilities turn within the

social sciences has brought questions of human experience to the forefront of academic inquiry and stimulated innovative research into the individual and subjective experiences different forms of travel and mobility engender. Using firsthand written accounts of passenger journeys by air in the 1920s and 1930s, the paper then explores the ways in which evolving aircraft technology and the physical and social environment of aircraft cabin worked to shape (or 'affect') passengers' embodied experiences of being aeromobile. Here, important questions relating to the implications continual developments in aeronautical sciences had on airline passengers' perceptions of space, time, distance, and speed of mobility, are discussed. By identifying particular bodily discomforts associated with flying, the paper emphasises the value of addressing the 'affective' geographies of flight and offers new insights into the corporeal experiences of being an aeromobile airline passenger.

### **Aeromobile geographies and geographers, 1903 to the present day**

Over the last one hundred years, academic researchers from a variety of disciplines within the physical and social sciences have commented upon the rapid development of aeronautical technology and the subsequent construction of a global airline network. The first geographic studies into the emerging field of heavier-than-air aeronautics appeared in the late 1910s and early 1920s and addressed largely practical issues, including the suitability of landing grounds, the effects of different atmospheric phenomena on aircraft performance, and the physical and cognitive demands long-distance surveying flights placed on the human body (Taylor, 1919; Walmsey, 1920; Blake, 1923).

By the middle of the 1920s, Britain, and other leading aeronautical nations, sought to demonstrate their aeronautical capabilities and reinforce their sphere of territorial and cultural influence through the medium of flight (see Thomas, 1920; Sykes, 1920) and a number of new passenger airlines were formed for this purpose. These airlines enabled wealthy and/or high-ranking members of European society to experience flight for the first time and many passengers chose to document their experiences inform the non-flying public about the advantages and sensations of flight. Yet, despite the publication of a large body of popular literature that focused on passengers' personal experiences of travelling by air, professional geographers largely ignored these subjective accounts in favour of undertaking socio-cultural and/or topographic studies of different countries as they appeared from the air.

It was not until the 1940s that a distinctive geographic discourse of commercial flight emerged. The publication of influential works by Renner (1942), Van Zandt (1944), Balchin (1947) and Huntingdon (1947) drew attention to the complex interactions between aviation and geography at a variety of spatial scales and Hinks et al (1944), Spoehr (1946), and others, discussed the prospects for transnational aviation and the formation of early airline networks. By the 1950s, geographic research into air transportation was increasingly being shaped by a scientific philosophy that privileged objective data collection and analysis over qualitative subjectivity. The quantitative revolution of the late 1950s stimulated the publication of a corpus of work that examined and mapped the network attributes (in terms of cost,

distance, and time relations) of airline operations. In the United States, Edward Taaffe (1956, 1958a, 1958b, 1959, 1962) pioneered the description and visualisation of the new spatialities of movement and interaction that the post-war growth of passenger aviation had created; Kish (1958) demonstrated the primacy of Moscow in the USSR air network by means of an isochrone map based on flight times to and from the Soviet capital; Percy and Alexander (1951; 1953) described new patterns of commercial air service availability in the western and eastern hemispheres; and Kenneth Sealy (1957) pioneered research into airport location.

The 1960s saw a gradual shift away from such network-based studies and the diversification of geographic research into air transport (Vowles 2006). By the 1970s, issues of aircraft noise (Adams 1971; Harvey *et al* 1979) and airport expansion were firmly on the geographical research agenda (Adams, 1970; Hall, 1974; Hoare, 1974, 1975; Lancaster, 1974; Sealy, 1979). Interestingly, this decade also saw the emergence of a limited number of more 'humanistic' studies into the behavioural geographies and human experiences of flight (see Borgstrom, 1974). Though innovative, these studies failed to make a widespread impact as, throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, studies of air transport deregulation came to dominate. Geographers were well placed to discuss the changes this regulatory reform enacted, commenting on the implications of the formation of new hub-and-spoke networks for passengers, airports, and the regions they served (Smith, 1981).

By the 1990s, the founding of dedicated transport geography journals and growing awareness that deregulation had fundamentally changed the patterns and processes of flight, had led to a significant increase in geographic research on commercial aviation (Vowles, 2006). By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the ready-availability of airline route data (particularly on the Internet) enabled scholars including John Bowen (2002); Guillaume Burghouwt and colleagues (Burghouwt and Hakfoort, 2001; Burghouwt *et al*, 2003), Matthew Zook and Stanley Brunn (2005, 2006), and Ben Derudder and Frank Witlox (Derudder and Witlox 2005a, 2005b) to depict evolving airline networks in increasingly innovative ways at a variety of spatial scales. However, it is only within the last few years that the rich sociality of air travel has begun to be recognised (see Adey *et al*, 2007). In particular, research by Ken Parker (2002), Tim Cresswell (2006), and Peter Adey (2006, 2008, 2010) into the mundane but often 'hidden' routines of airport workers, airline staff, asylum seekers, and aircraft enthusiasts, has been instrumental in exposing the social diversity of air travel and has provided a valuable platform from which new empirical analyses of passenger aviation can be advanced.

### **Embodying aeromobility**

The increasing attention that has been afforded to the social and cultural dimensions of air travel in recent years has, in part, been inspired by the 'mobilities turn' within the social sciences. This body of work, famously associated with the seminal work of sociologist John Urry (2000; 2007), provides a convincing argument for exploring the roles culture and technology play in practices of movement and investigating the social spaces that organize, control, and affect different forms of physical and virtual mobility. By

suggesting that mobility is not just about objects and people moving *between* fixed locations, Urry makes a compelling case for studying the complex networks and topologies that link the immobile and the mobile to create new experiences of movement (see also Bissell, 2009a, 2010a). Such approaches help inform understandings of different types of journeys, from the excitement of foreign vacations to the mundane dimension of routine commutes (Sheller and Urry, 2006; Edensor, 2006).

In the context of passenger aviation, this approach has stimulated analyses into, amongst other things, the connections between air travel and the infrastructure of airports, systems of air traffic control, and security screening protocols in the production of twenty-first century aeromobilities (Dodge and Kitchen, 2004; Budd, 2008; Budd and Adey, 2009). Yet the suggestion that most (if not all) forms of human mobility involve a co-evolution of technological and social networks is itself informed, to a significant degree, by Actor Network Theory and non-representational theories that focus on social practice (Lorimer, 2004). Such frameworks help challenge the notion that the world is continuously 'speeding up' and advocate a more considered understanding of the production and consumption of different spaces, speeds, and forms of human mobility (Hubbard and Lilley, 2004).

The implication of this new mobilities paradigm for geographies of air transport and aeromobility is profound as it enables commercial aviation to be theorized not just as a mode of transportation that moves people between places but also as an infrastructure that produces new social spaces and practices of movement. Iyer (2000), Gottdiener (2001) and de Botton (2010), for example, have alerted us to the diverse social practices performed in airport terminals and acted as an effective counterweight to empirically unsustainable claims that airports are emblematic 'non-places' of speed and mobility (Augé, 1995) that are filled with 'identikit' architecture and global franchised retail chains and are hence bereft of any local interest or cultural connection. While some have posited that the departure lounge and the arrivals hall are prime examples of the 'world of places' being replaced by a 'space of flows' (see Castells, 1996), other, more nuanced, accounts suggest that airports are neither local or global spaces but the complex conjunction of both which have the capacity to affect the physical and psychological states of users (Kaplan, 1994; Gottdiener, 2001; Pascoe, 2001; Lloyd, 2003; Wood, 2003; de Botton, 2010). Peter Merriman (2004: 152), in particular, challenges the notion that airports are bereft of meaning and sociality, arguing that 'frequent flyers, baggage handlers, flight crews, first-time flyers, first class passengers, refugees, air traffic controllers, police officers and the homeless are likely to have very different experiences of movement, dwelling, security, familiarity and belonging in these places'. Yet, despite such assertions, Colin Symes (2007, 447) commented that the mobility turn was slow 'to engage with the actual experience of travel', a criticism more recent publications have started to address (see Vannini, 2010).

Critically, though taking its cue from the theoretical literatures on mobility, this paper also seeks to contribute to ongoing work within human geography on *affect* (Bissell, 2009b, 2010a; Pile, 2010; Adey, 2010). This body of work

suggests that there is a constant push and pull of affect between a human body and its surroundings (Thrift, 2004). This concept differs from emotion (experiences that emerge from within a body) as it emphasises that the environment surrounding an individual body has the capacity to affect it. In the context of air travel, Liz Millward's (2008) research into passenger aviation in the 1920s and 1930s alerts us to the physicality of aviation and reminds us that pilots and airline passengers were living, breathing, human bodies who variously experienced feelings of excitement, anticipation, and fear, and encountered (often unnerving) three-dimensional kinaesthetic sensations during the course of a flight, including pitching (nose moving up and down), rolling (wings moving up and down), yawing (aircraft sliding from side to side), acceleration, climb and descent. As Millward was quick to appreciate, not all passengers experienced these kin-aesthetic sensations in the same way, with individual aeromobile bodies variously describing flight as being smooth and invigorating or nauseating and violent – inconsistencies which may only partly be explained by weather conditions and pilot competence.

In order to uncover passengers' varying affective experiences of flight, original accounts of passengers' journeys by air in the early days of commercial aviation were examined. The empirical material on which this research is based was sourced from the Transport History Archive at the University of Leicester and the British Airways Heritage Collection at Heathrow Airport. 28 English-language titles, published between 1920 and 1939, which were written by passengers for passengers (or addressed the passenger experience of flight) in aeromobile commercial aircraft or airships, were selected for analysis. All the books were originally published in the UK, US, or Germany within months of the recorded flight, though some were subsequently reproduced in (in whole or in part), and accessed from, more recent travel anthologies.

The period from 1920 to 1939 represents an important phase in the history of commercial aviation. Higher performance metal multiengine monoplanes were progressively replacing the first generation wood and canvas single-engine biplanes, and pioneering airline companies were rapidly expanding their route networks around the world. In order to be informed of the latest developments in aeronautical technology and learn appropriate airborne etiquette, many first-time airline passengers consulted published accounts of air journeys to learn about the practicalities of dress and deportment and receive advice on how to condition one's physical and psychological response to the new kinaesthetic sensations of aerial movement (Millward, 2008). Though varying in their literary style and intended purpose, these first-hand experiences of being aeromobile indicate the diverse and ever-changing kin/aesthetic, audio-visual, and olfactory dimensions of flight and, by revealing how airline passengers in the interwar years moved through, inhabited and transformed the spaces of air travel, these publications offer a rich insight into past mobility practices.

Clearly, the aeromobile recollections on which this research is based were shaped, at least in part, by complex interactions of gender, age, nationality/race, and past flying experiences. Yet they also reveal how

individual experiences of flying were (and, it could be argued, to a large extent, still are) contingent on the year in which the flights were undertaken, the route and time of day, the aircraft type, the airline, the ability and experience of the flightcrew, prevailing weather conditions, the behaviour of fellow passengers, motivation for travel, and international geopolitical relations (see Pirie, 2008). However, far from being undermined by such diversity, the individual benefits, bodily (dis)comforts, and anxieties these personal aeromobile accounts convey illustrate both the multiplicity of ways in which individual aeromobile bodies experienced and interacted with their immediate airborne environment and the importance of recognising that far from being inert 'pax' (in contemporary aviation parlance), airline passengers are living, breathing, human subjects whose individual embodied and affective experiences of flying are worthy of investigation.

### **(Dis)comfort in the air**

'It would be regrettable', wrote Stanhope Sprigg in 1933, 'if a concentration on the speed of modern aircraft were allowed to obscure an equally important need, namely, the provision of an ample measure of comfort for the passenger' (1933: 11). Of all the new stimuli air travel created, increased altitude and the time-savings associated with accelerated speed are often cited as being the most important as they opened up a new world of travel opportunity and sensory experience. However, while these factors undoubtedly altered cultural understandings of time, space, and distance (Simonsen, 2005), progressive developments in aircraft design and performance and cabin service innovations also had the capacity to affect aeromobile bodies in unpredictable and sometime contradictory ways by promoting particular bodily discomforts including nausea, cramp, and claustrophobia, as well as feelings of fear, anxiety, exhilaration, and boredom.

As Liz Millward (2008: 8) appreciates, the benefits associated with being able to quickly travel vast distances by air in the 1920s and 1930s were all too often offset by particular bodily discomforts, including 'vomit, noise, temperature, food, air quality, and the [poor] state of ground facilities'. In an effort to convince would-be passengers that air travel offered considerable benefits over surface transport (and dispel any fears prospective passengers might harbour towards the new mode of transportation), airlines and 'air-minded' individuals were keen to reassure potential passengers that flying was a modern and perfectly pleasant way to travel that not only conferred significant time-savings but could also (under agreeable weather conditions) offer higher levels of comfort than most competing forms of surface transport. While airlines and a few air-minded individuals sought to promote air travel as a comfortable and safe alternative to road, rail, and sea transport, the undeniable truth was that, in the early years of commercial flight at least, few concessions were made to passenger comfort and flying was a mode of transport to be endured rather than enjoyed.

One of the key new sensations to which the aeromobile body was exposed was that of 'bumps' as aircraft encountered regions of turbulence or flew over mountainous or desert terrain. Unlike the vibration experienced during the course of a railway journey (Bissell, 2010a, 2010b), airborne turbulence and



vibration was less predictable and more likely to unnerve passengers. These 'air pockets' could appear without warning and cause an aircraft to drop several hundred feet in a matter of seconds (Quinn, 2003). German aviator Peter Supf (1933: 28) described the sensation of flying as often 'very much like a voyage in an ocean liner through a sea that is tranquil or slightly rough' but reassured would-be passengers that it was only 'in the most extreme conditions' that any sustained discomfort or nausea was experienced.

In a refrain that was to become common in much of the pro-aeronautical literature of the period, Sir Samuel Hoare, four times UK Secretary of State of Air, praised the smoothness of air travel vis-à-vis rail. On spying an express locomotive from the air during a flight over France in 1927 he wrote 'there was not one of us who did not prefer the occasional bounces of the Hercules to the continuous rattling and jolting of a Riviera express' (Hoare, 1957: 131-132) while others similarly reported that 'sailing' through the air was infinitely preferable to a 'galloping horseback ride' by rail or road (cited in Botting, 2001, 206). Not all passengers shared such sentiments, however, with many reporting that they suffered acute bouts of airsickness during flight and repeatedly wished that they were safely on the ground. While accompanying her husband on a pan-European air tour in 1927, Mrs Lowell Thomas endured a period of severe turbulence which unsettled her to such an extent that she 'clutched the chair with both hands and sat rigid and tense' before availing herself of the airsickness bowl that was positioned 'discreetly under her seat' (Thomas, 1927: 36). Interestingly, while undoubtedly unpleasant, airsickness was considered preferable to others forms of motion sickness, with novelist Elvyn Waugh noting that 'one does not feel nearly as ill being air-sick as sea-sick' as the former is 'much more sudden and decisive' (cited in Kennedy, 1983: 191). Some travellers found that relief could be obtained by opening the cabin windows, but other passengers often complained about the cold (Olley, 1934).

In the early days of flight, the drafty, unheated, and unpressurised passenger cabins obliged passengers to dress warmly to combat the cold and, on occasion it was necessary for passengers to be given oxygen to counter the effects of hypoxia at high altitudes (Sims, 2000). The aeromobile body was often placed at the limits of its endurance and thick overcoats, gloves, and scarves were recommended, as were foot and earmuffs for ladies, and blankets for young children (Quinn, 2003). In addition to the cold, passengers also had to contend with the incessant, and often overwhelming, noise and vibration from the engine(s) (Rust, 2009). While temporary relief could reportedly be obtained by placing cotton wool in the ears, passengers expressed frustration that this rendered normal conversation impossible (Thomas, 1927; Olley, 1934). Airships, in contrast, provided a more sedate and peaceful journey, with a passenger on the Graf Zeppelin in 1929 welcoming the 'utter absence of noise and vibration; [and] the general freedom from even mild motion or lurching' (cited in Botting, 2001, 163).

By the early 1930s, new flying boats and other fixed-wing passenger aircraft were beginning to enter commercial service. Unlike previous designs, these machines featured fully enclosed and insulated passenger cabins and made

some concessions to passenger comfort. Redolent of the real ocean liners they displaced, flying boats arguably provided an 'intermediate' experience for passengers who were transferring from ships to planes (Sims, 2000). Britain's Imperial Airways installed dedicated promenade decks in their Empire flying boats and provided binoculars to encourage passengers to look out of the window at the passing landscape below (Quinn, 2003). Airlines were keen to reassure female travellers that the issue of in-flight comfort had been considered. 'There is no need to wrap yourself up. All aeroplanes are heated and air-conditioned...and there is no need to worry about noise, for the walls are insulated, allowing conversation to be carried on in a normal voice (Imperial Airways, 1939). Perhaps inevitably, such promises did not always reflect the reality, with many passengers complaining about the noise, vibration, and cold they endured. However, far from dissuading people from flying, such accounts merely helped reinforce the idea that air travel was adventurous, modern, and progressive, and any bodily discomforts were a price worth paying for speed and progress.

While the airlines could do little about prevailing weather conditions (it was not until the introduction of pressurised jet aircraft from the late 1950s onwards that the most turbulent weather could be overflowed), they nevertheless sought to improve the passenger experience in other ways by making the seats more comfortable, the food more appetising, and the in-flight entertainment more diverting. Unlike rail or sea journeys, safety considerations obliged airline passengers to spend the majority of their time seated. However, as Budd and Hubbard (2010: 87) note, the fact that air travellers 'spend the vast majority of a flight in a sedentary state, strapped into their seat...does not mean that the body in flight is passive'. To the contrary, as David Bissell (2008) has shown, the travelling body has to actively work to 'get comfortable' and some aeromobile bodies had to work harder than others to achieve a degree of corporeal comfort in the air depending on their height and girth, the size and material construction of their seat, and the space that was available to them. Yet while the early airlines sought to offer a desirable travel experience, the physical airborne environment retained the capacity to affect passengers' physical and psychological wellbeing by promoting particular discomforts and physiological effects, including ear pain, joint stiffness, dizziness, soar throats, headaches, back ache, nausea, and hypoxia<sup>1</sup>. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the young, the elderly, and those with chronic health conditions were discovered to be particularly susceptible to such complaints and a range of health advice – from swallowing hard and chewing gum to combat ear pain, to remaining hydrated, was proffered by passengers and aircrew alike (Olley, 1934; Sims, 2000).

Then, as now, the availability of natural light and 'fresh' air, the size, appearance, physical configuration of the cabin (especially a passenger's position relative to the lavatories, access to the aisles, and the quality of the cabin furniture), the acoustic environment (particularly engine noise but also the sounds of announcements and other passengers' conversations), in-flight

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<sup>1</sup> Other familiar flight-related complaints, including jet lag and, more recently, Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT), only began to be experienced after the introduction of longer-range jet aircraft in the late 1950s.

entertainment, and the behaviour and appearance of fellow passengers, all had the capacity to affect the interwar aeromobile body. The airborne traveller was also affected by bodily sensations of hunger and thirst and emotional responses associated with fear, anxiety, boredom, and (occasionally) lust. Today, inappropriate in-flight behaviour, including 'air rage' and inappropriate sexual conduct is usually attributed to a potent combination of anxiety, disorientation, jet lag, claustrophobia, alcohol, and stress (Rajan, 2007) whereas, in the inter-war years, a passenger's seemingly irrational or frightening behaviour was often explained as a product of disorientation or psychological disturbance precipitated by a lack of understanding about the normal protocols and sensations of flight (Olley, 1934).

### **Fear, anxiety, exhilaration, and boredom in the air**

In the early years of commercial flight, passengers were understandably fearful of crashing. Many considered flight to be an unnatural proposition, forced landings were common, and the changing pitch and intensity of engine tone had the capacity to unnerve even the most apparently confident and experienced of passengers. The physical process of becoming airborne, flying, and landing was fraught with potentially alarming sounds and physical sensations. Before take-off, an aircraft would bump over uneven ground, there was the controlled roar of take-off, the sound of flaps retracting into the wings, and the noise of airflow over the airframe. Once in the air, periods of sudden and unexpected turbulence could cause the aircraft to plunge hundreds of feet, while landing emphasised the speed with which passengers were travelling (Quinn, 2003). For Schivelbusch (1979: 161), 'every airplane traveller experiences [anxiety]' and 'anxiously and attentively observes the mighty vibrations of the machine in its take-off phase...and then again, when it is time to land, attentively listens to the technological noises to detect any irregularity that might herald a catastrophe.' Interestingly, many passengers remained stoic in the face of danger and rarely admitted to being afraid even when a forced or otherwise unscheduled landing appeared imminent (Thomas, 1927).

In addition to promoting feelings of fear, aircraft also had the capacity to engender feelings of excitement and exhilaration among passengers. Just as railway carriages had afforded passengers a new and fleeting panoramic vision of the landscape (Schivelbusch, 1979), aircraft created a new way of seeing the earth. For many early air travellers, watching the landscape unfold beneath the windows of their aircraft was one of the principal highlights aerial travel afforded and many documented the exciting new visual impressions that air travel afforded (Budd, 2010). However, while many expressed delight at being able to see the earth from the air and wrote vivid 'pen pictures' of the views that could be obtained from air (Olley, 1934; Samson, 1931; Childers, 1937), others reported being terrified at the vast spaces they encountered (Brittain, 1933) or expressed disappointment that the aerial view did not always live up to expectations (Millward, 2008).

Significantly, while many considered aviation represented an exciting mode of transportation, the introduction of new long-range aircraft and the progressive 'normalisation' of flying as the dominant mode of long-distance travel in the

interwar years meant that air travel was also viewed as a boring mode of transportation (see also Siddall, 1987). As Holt Thomas remarked as early as 1920:

‘aeroplane flying is rather a dull business. You are removed entirely from the life and incident of earth-bound folk. The traffic and distractions of a main roadway, the ever-changing vista, are absent when you fly in an aeroplane. You just go up and up until the land below becomes like a huge flat map; and then you whirl on, the map-like stretch of earth slowly changing beneath you, and nothing around you but empty air...These facts...conspire to make a journey by air, when once the first novelty has worn off, a matter of business expediency rather than a “joy-ride”’ (Holt Thomas, 1920: 89-90).

### **Discussion and conclusion**

In the space of a few years, passenger air travel evolved from an uncomfortable and dangerous proposition into a safe and routine mode of transportation for growing numbers of passengers. Most of these travellers flew not because they particularly wanted to or necessarily enjoyed the experience (although some did), but because they wanted to reach their destination as quickly as possible to conduct business, visit friends and relatives overseas, or travel to foreign countries on vacation. Following the advent of heavier-than-air powered flight in 1903, continual innovations in aircraft design and performance progressively ‘shrunk’ distance and ‘annihilated’ time by enabling journeys, which would once have taken many weeks by sea, road, and rail, to be completed in a matter of hours by air. Yet, in addition to transforming patterns and practices of movement, aircraft also altered the sensory experiences and affective dimensions of flight by exposing passengers to new physical sensations and bodily discomforts associated with increased speed, altitude, and three-dimensional movement through space.

By drawing on passengers’ accounts of flying in the 1920s and 1930s and emphasising the affective subjectivities of what it meant to be an airline passenger or ‘flier’, this paper has acted as a counterpoint to existing research that has merely considered commercial aviation in terms of its economic and functional rationality. When one considers the extent to which aviation has permeated our everyday language and discourse - we talk of being on ‘autopilot’ when conducting routine activities, of ‘flying high’ when things are going well, and ‘taking off’ on new adventures when we have no intention of leaving the ground – the need to ‘flesh out’ the realms of transport geography and bring the human experience of mobility to the forefront of academic inquiry are obvious and pressing. Arguably, it is only by exploring the narratives, memories, and experiences of becoming and being mobile, on land, sea, or air (see McCormack, 2008), that we can begin to appreciate how different modes of transport have shaped, and continue to influence, our world and our lives.

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