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INTRODUCTION

Christopher Schaberg

The air has never been so heavy. At the same time, it's never been so light, so disposable and eliminable. We think little of a transoceanic flight, and we have come to expect the smallest, most trifling packages to be propelled in wide-body jets across vast geographies before being delivered to our doorsteps. Signals course through the air, transmitting our secrets as well as cataloging our cravings.

This issue of *Criticism* takes on air travel as it exists in many forms—as our history, as our present; as technology, as aesthetic register; as entertainment, as mythology—and brings a range of humanities perspectives to bear on this all-too-transparent medium, this routinized mode of mediation.

Why study flight? There are many ways to answer this question: Because it is a key mode of empire building and national boundary keeping. Because it is one of the primary architectures of modern migrations, both a charged symbol and a material extension of global capital flows. Because flight is now almost unconsciously accepted by travelers of all types: very few people question air travel—it has become mundane. These are all reasons why scholars may be inspired to probe this most common (if also most class-based) mode of transport, and the essays in this issue evince the importance of bringing critical humanities questions and methods to bear on our most routine and accepted activities.

Consider a week's sampling of news headlines filtered by the topics of *air travel* and *airlines*, and you will see what I mean. We haggle over inches between scrunched seats, and we scour the concourses for free Wi-Fi. We debate the worth of airport renovations while simultaneously complaining about the drab interiors of terminals and the lack of electrical outlets for our personal devices. We blandly accept and periodically cheer for the hovering, roving center of governmentality that is Air Force One. We disavow missing planes, then go berserk on our social media

platforms when our aircraft do disappear. We accept minor upgrades in airliner cabins, and we hope for incremental improvements to air traffic control systems. We wonder what to read on planes or what to tune into on our individual screens. Disease, terror, customer service, deals, delays, drones, dining, crashing—so many of our mortal concerns have been translated skyward, and we generally do not pause to consider the jumbo jets that make contrails forty thousand feet above us, technological marvels though they may be.

As someone who writes about airports and the culture of flight, I pay close attention to these things. I have often been amazed to find myself at academic conferences in various locations to which thousands of colleagues have flown, thus all having submitted to the regimes and rituals of air travel—and yet the experiences of flight (beyond the occasional story of a delay or lost luggage) become submerged, collectively repressed. We carry on with our critical inquiries and humanist curiosities as airports continue to recycle passengers and flight plans, functioning as quotidian hubs of power, ideology, and authority.

And so the time was right for an issue of *Criticism* organized around the century-old project of human flight. In this issue, the authors have taken critical approaches to air travel not in terms of scrutinizing on-time departures or griping about lack of legroom. *Critical air studies* are disinterested where it comes to airline loyalty perks or aircraft amenities. The stories in this issue do not revolve around this week's hottest news headlines or the latest disasters. These studies are more elusive, more layered. They reach back into flights past—if also showing how old baggage still weighs on us in certain ways.

Matthew Hart ponders “the way that airports, unlike traditional border outposts, have the effect of internalizing the frontier between domestic and foreign spaces, creating something akin to a portal within the very heart of a territory” (p. 175). Hart reveals how “the airport is a border within which people sojourn and even live” (p. 177).

Joseph Darda demonstrates through an analysis of Andrew X. Pham's travel writing how it is “incongruous to think of air travel as so entangled in society and culture and yet occurring outside of memory and ‘normal time’” (p. 193). Darda explains, “[W]e do not visit airports to remember, and this perceived absence of memory makes them sites from which memory might coalesce and be analyzed at a remove. . . . [T]he airport is a site at which memories are conjured, sifted through, shared, and analyzed as indicators of power” (p. 194).

Forwarding a theoretical inquiry into the power exertions of airports, George F. McHendry Jr. ruminates on the Transportation Security

Administration (TSA) and the vexed thresholds of security screening in the United States after 9/11, probing “the simultaneous desire for secrecy and demands for transparency” (p. 212).

Taking us back toward the so-called golden age of flight, Alan Lovegreen demonstrates how cultural “interest in cutting-edge aviation technologies” manifests itself in the “variable futurisms of the 1930s” (p. 239)—specifically, two quite different versions of *aerofuturisms* that bracket this decade.

Considering a quite different narrative of air travel running across the twentieth century and even preceding it, Katherine Thorsteinson traces “the Flying African myth—variously signifying the limitations of Western technology, the ineffectiveness of cross-Atlantic escape, and the barriers to socioeconomic ascension within the nation” (p. 271).

Focusing on a collection of key modernist texts, Robert Hemmings delineates the ways that “the airplane succeeds in facilitating, ironically, a bird’s-eye view of European empire’s slow demise” (p. 284).

Kevin L. Ferguson turns to air travel on the film screen, showing how “aviation cinema is characterized by its fluidity, exchange, liminal crossings, and other reorganizations of an initial narrative state. The airplane is an ungrounded space of transformation; it is always a different plane that lands, a different passenger who disembarks” (p. 310).

Finally, Nathaniel A. Rivers and Richmond Eustis offer two book reviews that take up air studies at turns figuratively and literally.

Taken together, the pieces in this issue form a necessarily incomplete constellation, but one that nevertheless suggests the scope and vividness of critical air studies. Far more than a neutral mode of vehiculation or a mere background noise, flight is riddled with all the conundrums of modernity, postmodernity, and supermodernity—and this mode of travel shows no sign of ceasing, much less being reimagined. To alternate governing metaphors, rather than providing an aerial view of this outspreading subject, this issue lays groundwork for future investigations.

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