

University of Nevada, Reno

**“The Surly Bonds of Earth”:
Discourses of Transcendence and American Flight Autobiography**

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
English

by

Denice Turner

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THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

We recommend that the dissertation
prepared under our supervision by

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Discourses of Transcendence and American Flight Autobiography**

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Abstract

This project considers problems of self-representation within traditions that share attention to transcendence: aerial discourses and autobiography. A mobile technology that allowed for sustained movement upward, the airplane promised the ability to rise above physical limitations and the confines of the material earth. Similarly, the ideal subject of autobiography “proper” has traditionally been one that secured a kind of timelessness and universality by rising above others. This dissertation shows how metaphorical geographies are linked to subjectivity, agency and experience as it considers the problematic biases of transcendent discourse. Textual analyses in the dissertation include work by iconic American pilots such as Charles A. Lindbergh and Richard E. Byrd, but they also include texts by minority writers who struggled with aerial and autobiographical discourses. Autobiographies by William J. Powell and Jimmy Collins illustrate problems of ethnicity and class, while work by Amelia Earhart, Louise Thaden and Jackie Cochran illustrate problems of gender. These texts, along with others published in the United States by writers such as Anne Morrow Lindbergh, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, and Beryl Markham, show how transcendence—preoccupied as it is with rising above corporeality and materiality—is a gesture that is not only masculine, but one that is fully compatible with imperial discourses as well.

For my mother

Who flew

Acknowledgements

On the fifteenth of August, 2004, I took off in a small Cessna for graduate school. The flight was the first of what would become a three-year weekly commute, four hundred miles across the Great Basin from Logan, Utah to Reno, Nevada. The weekly flight was more than a way to get to school; it was an education of its own—and a constant concern. I taught English courses and attended seminars with part of my attention out the window, checking the clouds, considering the wind. I found the air to be a lonely place, and a terrifying one; but the commute introduced me to a host of exceptional people who are all part of this project.

In her book *The Stars at Noon*, Jackie Cochran acknowledges Floyd Odlum, her husband, as her “wingman.” My wingman has also been my husband, Lan Turner, who fully supported my decision to go back to school and who, against his better judgment, helped me buy an airplane. I credit my ability to fly—both literally and figuratively—to his unwavering love and support. Like their father, my teenage sons Benjamin and Arthur have been a constant source of encouragement. I could not have completed this project without the loving camaraderie of the exceptional men who share my home.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Who are these that fly as a cloud, and as the doves to their windows?

Isaiah 60:8

Before the sky was lined with jet contrails, it was filled with gods of enormous power and wonder. To the ancients, the sky was not a vast void, but a place of volition and sensation that embodied both the location and persona of the highest god. Elemental phenomena such as rain, thunder, hail, and rainbows were divine offspring, manifestations of supreme power, forces that were feared, felt, celebrated and worshipped. Because of its inaccessibility, the sky was not a physical geography as much as it was an imaginative one.

In legend and literature, moving upward signaled that a transformation had taken place, since human bodies do not spontaneously lift from the ground. Whether the ascension was spiritual or supernatural, vertical movement was equated with power, which often presumed contact with the Divine. In contrast to the sky and its associations with mind and spirit were the twin forms of the human body and physical earth, both of which were to be transcended as part of Western discourses of progress. The advent of powered flight literalized the transcendence of man over nature and endowed the new technology with symbolic meaning. In conquering the last of the unruly elements human beings could, for the first time, glimpse the world from the perspective of the gods.

What it meant to be able to rise from the earth and capture the experience in words is the impetus for this project. While it may not seem particularly extraordinary to

stare down at the earth from a Plexiglas window of an airliner today, there was a time when upward movement—albeit a mechanical one—promised more than momentary freedom from the pull of gravity; it promised transformation. A literal act of transcendence, mechanical ascension was linked to all kinds of ideals: progress, rugged individualism, freedom, spirituality, sexuality. The triumph of the human spirit, the exhilaration of altitude, the overwhelming sense of power and freedom, the transgression of physical boundaries—these were the thematic strains of early flight narrative, and they were essential to the success of flight autobiography.

A subgenre of autobiography, flight autobiography had its own creative demands and expectations, and these will become apparent in the course of this project. In the last two decades, autobiographical scholarship has critiqued the implied representative, transcendent, or “universal” subject able to rise above one thing or another—physical limitations, historical and regional contexts, adversity, other human beings. But these studies have necessarily stopped short of asking what happens when transcendence is literal. This question leads to a vital subset of questions that flight autobiography is uniquely suited to address: How is transcendence related to subjectivity? Is transcendence gendered? Is it hierarchical? Is it a colonizing gesture? Did physical ascension allow subjects to transcend cultural limitations imposed by race, gender and class? *And if not, why not?*

Throughout this project, *transcendence* will be a key term, and I will use this word differently than *ascension*. Although ascension can refer to a physical or spiritual movement upward, transcendence implies the ability to exist beyond the material world as a non-material entity or consciousness. I will layer in differently nuanced definitions

of transcendence as they are relevant to each chapter, but for now I want to establish transcendence as detachment from the material world that allows for sustained reflection on it. Transcendence can also imply the ability to rise above various kinds of cultural or physical limitations and this definition is also integral to the study of pilot autobiographies in this study. All of the pilots mentioned in this study saw powered flight as a way of transcending limitations of one kind or another. For some, writing about flight was a creative effort; for others it was political—an attempt to show how mechanical ascension could be proof of transcendent potential.

This study shows that, while many people distinguished themselves by becoming the nation's first pilots, few of them were able to transcend problems of the world or return from the sky transformed. Throughout, I will argue that pilots who became national heroes and bestselling authors did so because of their perceived ability to exist outside of materiality and physicality. Flight autobiographies were popular insofar as the pilot seemed able to rise from mundane to miraculous space, and this ability was directly related to the pilot's control of, and relationship to, cherished geographic metaphors. By looking at how imaginative geographies are linked to subjectivity, this project provides an original and important way of addressing issues of identity, agency, experience, and embodiment that are central to critical studies of autobiography.

Flight autobiographies typically get lumped together with broad surveys of flight literature, and I've several reasons for limiting this project to a study of life narrative. In the first place, there are already a number of excellent surveys of flight literature by scholars such as Robert Wohl, Lawrence Goldstein, and Piero Boitani, but these do not specifically address how issues of subjectivity would have impinged on flying and

writing. Furthermore, anthologies of flight literature typically exclude the voices of women or fold women's writing into larger compilations of "men in the air."¹ No anthologies include work by fliers who were not white or firmly located in the middle or upper classes. A study of flight autobiography allows the pioneers of the air to speak for themselves, as historically and culturally produced subjects with their own limitations and biases. Though many people wrote about flight in its early years, only the aviators themselves faced the beauty and terror—and ultimately the full responsibility—of leaving the solid earth behind. Navigating in all kinds of weather, controlling a complex and often unreliable machine, locating the self in relationship to the earth from an extraordinarily disorienting perspective—these were challenges only the aviators themselves could speak to. Looking at these autobiographies allows for an inquiry into how social geographies are related to transcendence, but it also questions the ideals of transcendence itself.

Given the symbolic loading of flight, it is hardly surprising that many of its early advocates cloaked flight in explicitly transcendent terms. In tandem with exuberant fiction and poetry, popular autobiographies tended to frame flight in terms of its ability to grant the flier access to special identity by taking him or her beyond the temporal, mundane (and sometimes corrupt) realm of the earth. The ability to move beyond the pull of gravity seemed to presume an ability to move beyond other limits as well,

¹ Allusion to the title of arguably the most popular flight anthology: *Men in the Air: The Best Flight Stories of All Time from Greek Mythology to the Space Age*, ed. Brandt Aymar (New York: Crown, 1990). Other anthologies include *Skywriting: An Aviation Anthology* (New York: St. Martin's, 1978), which features no writing by women, and *Plane Talk: Aviators' and Astronauts' Own Stories* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), which includes short excerpts by Amelia Earhart and Jackie Cochran. None of the collections feature writing by Anne Morrow Lindbergh, even though her two flight autobiographies spent more time on American top-ten bestseller lists than work by any other pilot between 1920 and 1940. Tebbel 699-700.

including those of the physical body. By transgressing the laws of gravity, fliers hoped to transcend—and in some ways were *expected* to transcend—problems of embodiment. Rising into the sky seemed to imply that the flier was more spirit than flesh, more hero than human, more able to shed the limitations of skin color, gender and class. And yet the thematic combination of powered flight and material transcendence created narrative expectations that were enormously hard to satisfy.

This project considers the problems of autobiography—a genre that presupposes attention to the “real”—in a hyperreal space loaded with symbolic meaning. It addresses the implications of hierarchical metaphors such as “heaven” and earth, but it is also attuned to how these metaphors influence aerial and textual practices. As environmental criticism, it asserts that a sense of place is made up of deeply interwoven narratives, metaphors, ideologies, and assumptions, all of which contribute to the creation of space that is deeply discursive—one in which relationships between the self and the larger world become complicated and sometimes conflicted. As autobiographical criticism, it considers how social pressures, social geographies and generic assumptions impinge on the construction of identity. My intention in combining these approaches is to show how physical and imaginative geographies interact with genre and the myth history of flight to produce a highly idealized and hypermasculine subject: the individual who transcends materiality in pursuit of a “higher” purpose.

Throughout the project, I will be talking about ascension and transcendence in figurative terms, but I will also maintain that these concepts are more than tropes, that they are discourses with long cultural histories. Pilot writers would have been familiar with—or at the very least vaguely aware of—the symbolic loading of ascension, even if

access to specific narratives and literatures would have differed. There was no question that moving upward implied the ability to move beyond human limitations, and this was central to the ways in which powered flight was portrayed in both fiction and nonfiction. By moving upward, human beings hoped to rise above the mundane realities and social biases that were part of life on earth. How *far* one was able to go in transcending physical and cultural limitations, however, had more to do with the flier's access to cherished metaphors than with mastering the principles of aerodynamics.

As long as the sky could be conflated with heaven—or the frontier or the domain of legend—it was easy to believe that those who entered it were special, if not actually chosen by God to be there. Aviation historian Joseph Corn, for instance, shows that there was a pervasive tendency to attribute religious significance to flight and its practitioners, particularly in America (26). But the mythological landscape that allowed for the emergence of the new modernist hero was the same landscape that would prove to be physically and textually elusive to those less aligned with transcendence or heroic identity.² Those most closely associated with the earth, with domesticity, corporeality and materiality—namely people of color and women—were the first to be denied access to the “crystal-clear empyrean, far away from the troubled confusion of mundane affairs.”³ While the *New York Times* boasted in 1929 that there was “no sex distinction in the realm of the air,” it also claimed that women lacked the endurance to become the nation's transport pilots (Martyn 1). Like ethnic minorities, women in the early years of

² While it was difficult for women to be taken seriously in aviation (as pilots), it was even more difficult for people of color, who were refused flight lessons in the United States until 1928.

³ T.J.C. Martyn's wording in “Women find a Place among the Fliers,” *New York Times*, Sept. 15, 1929.

aviation were largely relegated to roles on the ground, taking dictation and sewing fabric for wing coverings and parachutes.

Although diverse people flew and wrote about it, people associated with “nature” had a difficult time claiming the lofty identity associated with the aviator. In *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body*, Sidonie Smith argues that the more closely people are defined by their physical bodies, the less likely they are to be able to access what she calls “universal” selfhood, a privileged subjectivity that remains independent of external forces. This selfhood, which demands the “banishment” of the body, is deeply complicit with transcendent ideals, since it depends on the ability to exist beyond the particulars of time, place and physicality. “Unique, unitary [and] unencumbered,” this idealized selfhood “escapes all forms of embodiment” (6).

The subjectivity described by Smith is distinct from all others, exceptional and solitary—an essentially rational selfhood that avoids the contamination of historical or regional contexts. An “ahistorical or transcendent phenomenon,” this selfhood is able to remain “autonomous and free” (7). The “transcendent” nature of the universal subject makes it ideal for autobiography, since it appears to be timeless and therefore able to speak to an eternal and universal human nature. This selfhood is fully and inherently compatible with the ideal subject of flight autobiography, since this subject self-defines by his or her ability to exist beyond physical geographies and limitations as well.

The obvious problem with universal selfhood is, ironically, its profound exclusivity, which is as Smith points out, dependant on “implicit hierarchy” and “[f]ounded on exclusionary practices” (9). For, if the universal subject is characterized by what it is, it is also defined by what it is not, which is anything embodied, attached,

irrational, unruly, or exotic—all traits that Smith identifies as “colorful.” Rather than participate in the “bland neutrality of a universal selfhood” (19) then, the “colorful” self can only provide material evidence of its opposite. Because of this, Smith observes that the universal subject and the socially abject mutually constitute each other in a process wherein the “culturally dominant and the culturally marginalized are assigned their ‘proper’ places in the body politic” (10).

Smith’s argument is similar to that of feminist scholars Carolyn Merchant and Susan Griffin who attribute the dominations of women and nature to an ideological conflation between the two. Like Griffin and Merchant, Smith traces the inability of women to secure universal selfhood to Western discourses that position them closer to nature, matter and embodiment. The antithesis of transcendent universality, women in Smith’s view find themselves aligned with nature rather than culture: “[i]nhabiting domestic space (a space located closer to nature and necessity, a space of immanence and immediacy), she exhibits the less authoritative “feminine” mode of engagement with the world, one characterized as intuitive, irrational, particularistic and practical” (14).

Unlike Griffin and Merchant’s arguments, Smith’s attention to the correlation between women and nature is intended to address textual rather than environmental concerns. For her, the presumed superiority of universal selfhood acts as a representational roadblock, consigning the embodied subject to a marginalized or unrecognizable position within autobiography, a genre that privileges a unified and uniquely representative “I.” Because of the transcendent nature of universal subjectivity, Smith argues that the self is not constructed by language as much as it exists outside of it: unique, stable and whole, waiting only for a transition from words to world. As a stable

“prelinguistic and extralinguistic” entity, this self is instantly accessible to representation. Conversely, the embodied subject lacks the “naming, forming, and controlling” mechanisms readily available to the universal subject. In other words, the bold, indivisible, and unitary “I” that marks the selfhood on the page of autobiography (17) becomes a stumbling block for writers unable to exist outside of social geographies that equate them with nature, embodiment, and historical particulars.

Constraints and assumptions about autobiography are vital to this project, and I will address these at more length in the next chapter. But I foreground some of Smith’s scholarship here as a way of introducing a case I will be making throughout: that the stubborn figure of the universal subject was (and in many ways still is) deeply implicated in discourses granting access to aerial and textual spaces. As a way of extending the scholarship, however, I also argue that transcendence is essential to the formation of idealized or “universal” identity, and that it has historically been an exclusive, masculine ideal. Smith suggests that the illusion of universality is linked to the ability to exist apart from “nature,” but I show how transcendence is the result of a variety of privileges that allows the subject to control powerful geographic metaphors. I also show the reverse to be the case: that the more a subject is trapped within or controlled by imaginative geographies, the less likely they are to seem exemplary or transcendent. As it evolves within this project, transcendence becomes a distancing gesture that is fully compatible with imperial discourses. And this is an area that has so far remained unexamined in autobiographical scholarship.

Like Smith, I maintain that the privileging of “universal” subjecthood leads to exclusionary practices that deeply affect women and women’s writing, but I also hold

that men, insofar as they can be associated with feminine spaces or conflated with nature, are also “denied the possibility of escaping the drag of the body” (Smith 17). Non-white and working class pilots grappled with identities that were more peculiar than universal, more terrestrial than transcendent, more chaotic than rational. By proposing that men as well as women worked with and against notions of idealized identity, I do not mean to suggest a binary—that some people had access to “universal” selfhood (and therefore textual representation) and some didn’t—but that there was a continuum of access, one that allowed for different degrees of participation in a space defined in contrast to the material world of mundane affairs.

This is not to say that people who were less able to “perform” transcendence did not write well about flight, but that the disjuncture between expectations and reality came at a narrative cost. Whether it is the black aviator who fictionalizes his own experience, the indigene who disappears at altitude, or the woman pilot who sheds her identity as a wife, lover and mother, the narrative strains of transcendence do not liberate as much as they limit, reinscribing embodied subjects as feminized, unstable, terrestrial beings. The ways in which flight autobiography exposes the biases and limitations of transcendence are valuable here: the voices that point out, intentionally or not, the profound exclusivities of transcendence.

This project is devoted to the exuberant period of the 1920s and 1930s, the Golden Age of Aviation, a time when there was little difference between the field of “aviation” and the romantic ideals of “flight.”⁴ Significant improvements had been made

⁴ Lindbergh’s *Spirit of St. Louis* (1953) and Cochran’s *The Stars at Noon* (1954) were obviously published later, but the life events they follow are firmly anchored to earlier decades and provide important insight into how transcendence is linked to forces outside of the control of the writer.

to the stability of the airplane since the Wrights' historic flight in 1903, and the uncertain world of the "early birds"⁵ looked increasingly secure. Safer machines and fewer fatalities made flight seem a more viable means of travel, transport and recreation. A time would not come again when there would be more hope, more romance, more religious and national zeal attached to flight. And this meant that the opportunity to self-define through flight would never be better. With the Great War over, the airplane could shed its associations with destruction and recover those of transcendence. As "something spiritual as well as practical,"⁶ flight promised more than amusement; it promised the ultimate personal makeover, a transformation of human into hero in what flight historian Robert Wohl describes as a "fairy-tale world not accessible to other human beings" (*Spectacle* 279-80). The unparalleled enthusiasm for flight during this period is matched only by its most persistent problem: that physical and textual access to this fairy-tale world was contingent on hierarchy—dependent upon the ability to "rise above" others who did not have access to metaphoric geographies.

Transcendent plots and the trappings of autobiography are, as Laura Marcus points out, markers of privilege: cultural and literary constructs concerned with people of "lofty reputation" who have something of "historical importance" to say (31-32). The flight autobiographies I have selected speak to the limits of personal transformation within physical and textual discourses designed to keep most people firmly in place, as fundamentally terrestrial beings. Broadly conceived, the project considers the ways in which issues of race, gender, and class crop up in spaces that were never meant to address

⁵ David T. Courtwright defines the "early birds" as American pilots who soloed before December 17, 1916, within 13 years of the Wright brothers' flight. *Sky as Frontier* 30. Generally speaking, the term is applied to American pilots who flew before the United States entered WWI.

⁶ Martyn, "Women find a Place among the Fliers."

them. Each chapter, to one extent or another, considers the problematic biases and exclusions within transcendent discourses.

Chapter Two is divided into two parts. The first section shows how imaginative geographies and autobiographical biases influence subjectivity and determine which subjects are thought of as paradigmatic, while the second section introduces autobiographies by two exemplary pilots, Charles A. Lindbergh and Richard E. Byrd. Using Lindbergh's "*WE*" (1927) as a point of departure, this chapter shows how Lindbergh's autobiography established a rudimentary pattern for flight autobiography in the United States and it discusses how Byrd's *Skyward* (1928) is an extension of similar ideals. These life narratives—along with Lindbergh's later Pulitzer-Prize-winning *Spirit of St. Louis* (1953)—show how transcendence is a direct result of the geographic metaphors available to the pilot, but they also show how the ideals of transcendence are not "natural" to the pilot as much as they are imposed by collective desires and expectations

While Chapter Two examines work by pilots who were national heroes, Chapter Three introduces pilots who struggled with transcendence. By including work by relatively unknown pilots, I point out the inherent biases and exclusivities within the ideal. I address problems that made flying and writing difficult for most people during the "golden" years following Lindbergh's Atlantic crossing, and I address how problems of race and class would have interfered with aerial and autobiographical success. Autobiographies in this chapter include William J. Powell's *Black Wings* (1934) and Jimmy Collins's *Test Pilot* (1935) both of which directly address problems of exclusivity. Powell shows how racial prejudices in American aviation prohibited participation by

black pilots, while Collins's shows how the new industry was virtually inaccessible to working-class subjects. Both of these autobiographies follow and subvert Lindbergh's model, but geographic metaphors—to which the men have limited access—limit the men to terrestrial and domestic spaces in which they seem less transcendent and exemplary than their famous counterparts. Here, I begin to expose transcendence as an exclusive and hypermasculine construct that manages to exclude even highly qualified and competent men.

Chapter Four extends the discussion of transcendence and universal subjectivity as gendered gestures in order to show how these constructs interfered with the ability of women to be taken seriously in the air and in print. Even as women flew and wrote their own life narratives, they were less enabled by geographic metaphors than they were conflated with metaphorical formations that situated them closer to “nature” than culture. Although the American public was fascinated by women fliers, it was also deeply ambivalent. The aviatrix, who was marked in sexual terms, seemed more an aberration of the ideal than its embodiment. In film and flight literature, women were less “transcendent” than they were an impediment to masculine transcendence.⁷ This chapter shows how women challenged normative femininity in their autobiographies, but it also considers the social and political stakes of narrative performance. By analyzing Amelia Earhart's autobiographies, *20 hrs., 40 Min.* (1928), *The Fun of It* (1932), and *Last Flight* (1937), Louise Thaden's *High, Wide and Frightened* (1938), and Jackie Cochran's *Stars*

⁷ F.T. Marinetti's dedication in *Poupeés électriques*, for instance, was to Wilbur Wright “who knew how to raise our migrating hearts higher than the captivating mouths of women” (Paris: E. Sansot, 1909), 36. Wohl traces the roots of misogyny in aviation to Italian futurists and others who believed that flight was “above all a means of escape from the sordid and demeaning world of women” *Passion* 280.

at Noon (1954), I show the difficulties of negotiating female identity within masculine discourses.

Chapter Five returns to “ideal” pilot writers in order to apply the concept of transcendence to colonial flight narratives. By examining how American and European pilots described their experiences on the aerial frontier, I show how geographical metaphors become markers of transcendence and gestures of imperialism. This chapter shows how familiar metaphors feminize and trap indigenous peoples within imaginative geographies as manifestations of “nature,” thereby providing a force against which the Western subjects differentiate. Beginning with Beryl Markham’s *West with the Night* (1942), an autobiography that describes the peoples and landscapes of English West Africa from the lofty gaze of the aviator, I introduce the myth of the empty lands as constructed from the cockpit. The chapter also examines Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *Terre des hommes* (1939), published in English as *Wind, Sand and Stars*, and Anne Morrow Lindbergh’s *Listen! The Wind* (1938) in order to show how transcendent discourses are inherently compatible with imperial discourses.

Chapter Six summarizes the conclusions and contributions of this project by reflecting on Larry Walters’s “failed” lawn chair balloon launch in 1982. This chapter reaffirms that the more feminized the subject, the more incongruous he or she is within aerial and textual discourses—both of which demand a transcendent subject empowered by familiar geographical constructs. The implications of this study show that geographical discourses have real world consequences. Less directly, this project serves to critique an industry that continues to be radically gendered. The modern airspace system may have robbed the sky of its connotations of “heaven,” but it is still maintained

by a host of cultural imperatives that proscribe who has access to the “high untrespassed sanctity of space.”⁸

In his introduction to *American Autobiography*, Paul Eakin argues for the study of autobiography as a way out of the “exclusivist cultural cul-de-sac” of American literary studies. For him, and for other scholars who study life narrative, the importance of examining autobiography is not to promote its “literariness” but to observe what it teaches us about the values and assumptions of the dominant culture—especially in terms of its received models of self and life story (8). This project provides this very kind of analysis. The ability of the pilot to perform aesthetic maneuvers is not nearly as interesting as the factors that grant access to aesthetic space to begin with. The writers included here, who range in ability from those who struggled with writing (and who depended on scribes to complete their autobiographies) to those who earned national and critical acclaim, show how deeply notions of transcendence are embedded within the American culture.

Many of the texts mentioned in this project fell into obscurity shortly after they were written, which betrays the non-universality of their subjects. But all of them speak to the problematic strains of transcendence that excluded many people from aviation and made some life narratives more culturally viable than others. Pilots who crafted autobiographies during the early years of flight did so in spite of astonishingly high expectations. At no other time and in no other industry would transcendent action and transcendent discourse intersect so dramatically, and this made the stakes of physical and narrative performance extraordinarily high. Although the promise of transcending social

⁸ From John Gillespie Magee Jr.’s well-known poem “High Flight.”

and historical difference within autobiographical discourses was ultimately as misleading as the transcendent discourses of flight, the autobiographies included here allow for a unique and valuable inquiry into what it means to be a representative human being.

Chapter Two

Transcendence and the Aerial Subject: American Flight Autobiography in Theory and Practice

Through the far recesses
Where eagles fly
And the plangent wildernesses
Of Sea
And sky.
I am one with immensity.
I cannot die.

Earl Marlatt, “A Chantey for Celestial Vikings” (168)

To confine our attention to terrestrial matters would be to limit the human spirit.

Stephen William Hawking (11)

Geographical and Textual Discourses: Air and Autobiography

Because the air remained inaccessible to human beings longer than any other element, it harbored associations with the divine well into the twentieth century. Rather than debunk the air as mythologized space, however, the advent of powered flight seemed merely to reenergize its metaphors. The tendency to cast flight in romantic, epic, or spiritual terms—and to invoke a host of heroic figures—was widespread and lasted well into the 1940s. In America, it would take the grim realities of World War II to tarnish the image of the airplane as a spiritual vessel—the flying cross—and the aviator as the transcendent hero of the new millennium.

Following Lindbergh’s transatlantic voyage in 1927, firsthand accounts of flight became extremely popular in the United States, since they allowed non-fliers to

participate vicariously in (and at a safe distance from) the conquest of the skies. Through the words of their favorite aviators, “regular” people could imagine what it was like to escape the “sordidness and materialism of everyday earthly life” and take part in the “purity and idealism of the sky.”⁹ In spite of the general feeling that “flying was a sacred and transcendent calling,”¹⁰ however, it took much more than mastering the principles of aerodynamics for a flyer to become an ideal aerial figure.

This chapter examines the cultural factors constituted the ideal and how American pilots embodied the ideal in their life narratives. Part one shows how imaginative geographies were implicated in the construction of aerial subjectivity, while part two introduces autobiographies by Charles Lindbergh and Richard Byrd in order to show how these iconic pilots were able to represent themselves by actively engaging cherished metaphors. Throughout the project, I argue that geographic metaphors and generic constraints produce physical and textual spaces that are enormously exclusive and accessible only insofar as the flier can claim ideal or “universal” selfhood. But I also contend that this ideal selfhood is directly related to transcendence, which is marked by the ability to stand outside of or *control* imaginative geographies.

Imaginative geographies, as I define them, are metaphors with very old histories that overlay physical geographies: lightning, for instance, as fire from heaven, or fog as a mysterious otherworld of spirits. In narrative, these geographies are more powerful than practical or scientific definitions—lightning as a separation of electric charge, or that fog as the convergence of dew point and temperature—because of their appeal to emotion

⁹ A distinction that Robert Wohl observes in much of the firsthand accounts of flight. *Spectacle* 281.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

and story. I borrow the term “imaginative geographies” from Edward Said, who uses it to describe the ways in which the descriptions of landscapes betray the preconceptions and desires of their inventors (*Orientalism* 54-55). Said’s definition will be particularly important to the author studies in chapter four, but for the most part I will use the term broadly to include metaphorical and discursive formations that arrange the world in figurative—and sometimes hierarchical—terms. These terms are often not neutral, but presume specific values and proscribe familiar subject positions. Even if we don’t take them literally or seriously, the metaphors reveal a range of biases that underpin narratives and influence attitudes. The ability to control the metaphors, then, is not just a marker of narrative sophistication, but of transcendence (the ability to exist apart from the material world) and universal selfhood (the ability to exist apart from the physical body).

As Sidonie Smith defines it, universal selfhood is one that “presumes individual participation in an ‘eternal human nature’” (*Subjectivity* 8); but it is also one that is transcendent. That is, it is not limited to the “contingencies of geography, history [and] culture” (7). Timeless and rational, this selfhood also escapes the encumbrances of the physical body. Relegated to the margins, the body becomes invisible, “drained of its chaotic and grotesque potential” (6). Stripped of biological functions, the body is important only insofar as it “serves as a vessel for the soul” (6). The disappearance of the body allows the subject to pursue a unique destiny free from physical constraints. By shaking off anything contingent, contextual, or chaotic, this selfhood presumes to identify with all others, even as it self-defines in contrast to others.

This double movement in which the subject is both “ontologically identical” to others and yet fundamentally “unique” (Smith 8) is unquestionably ironic. What appear

to be “universal” characteristics are in fact the result of a variety of privileges, of which the ability to individuate is crucial. This selfhood may represent all others, but it is also exemplary, which means that it must stand out. The result is a paradoxical figure able to maintain a “threshold of particulars” while bearing “universal marks” (9). Crucial to the development of this selfhood, then, is *which* particulars it takes on—which characteristics are socially valued and therefore mark the subject as exemplary and not just unusual.

A host of particulars made early pilots particularly good candidates for this ideal subjectivity. In the first place, the air itself, associated with spirit rather than matter, provided an ideal space to perform a subjectivity unhampered by the limitations of the physical body. The ultimate symbol of freedom and “higher” purpose, the sky invited a blatantly unattached and transcendent subject who seemed able to exist beyond the confines of the material world. It also helped that flying was a largely solitary and dangerous activity that was not widely shared at the beginning of the twentieth century. As such, it allowed pilots to identify with a space that was adventurous, exclusive, and loaded with symbolic meaning.

Smith’s theorizing of universal subjectivity is essential to my study of flight autobiography, since it defines the ideal and establishes some of its biases; but it stops short of looking at how imaginative geographies are implicated in the creation of this selfhood. The relationship between imaginative space and subjectivity is integral to this project, and I will look at how the air has been configured in the West in order to show how imaginative geographies influence what kinds of stories can be told about flight and by whom. I have sequenced the chapters in this project to progressively reveal the biases of aerial and autobiographical spaces, but first I want to begin with the ideal: the flier

enabled by geographic metaphors. There is no doubt that this subject is rational, but it is also nuanced in American flight autobiography by a quality of spirit—an inner, spiritual quality that makes flight possible—and there is hardly a better example of this than John Gillespie Magee Jr.’s poem “High Flight.”

Unquestionably the most beloved flight poem in the United States,¹¹ Magee’s sonnet captures the enthusiasm and spiritual ideals associated with flight. Magee, who gave up a scholarship to Yale in 1941 to train for combat with a Spitfire squadron in England, scribbled the poem on the back of a letter to his parents shortly before he died. The poem wasn’t titled, but came to be known as “High Flight” or the “Airman’s Creed.” Magee would not live to enjoy the future broad appeal of his poem or learn of the countless airmen who would come to know it by heart. By the time Archibald MacLeish declared Magee to be the “first poet of the war,” Magee had been killed in a training mission over Lincolnshire.¹² Written as the golden age of aviation was giving way to the realities of war, the poem depicts flight as a joyful upward journey in which the pilot transcends time, space, and the limitations of his own body to acquire universal insight. Because of its centrality to the ideas in this project, I include it in its entirety:

Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds—and done a hundred things

¹¹ Magee’s poem is included in virtually every flight anthology, whether or not the anthology is a collection of poetry. “High Flight” also makes an appearance in collections not limited to flight, including *Family Album of Favorite Poems*, ed. Earnest P. Edward (New York: Grosset and Dunlop, 1959); *Favorite Poems Old and New*, ed. Helen Ferris (New York: Doubleday, 1957); and *More Poems from the Forces*, ed. Keidrych Rhys (London: Routledge, 1943). Although the poem is popular, Helmut Reda makes a case for the literary quality of the poem, stressing in the introduction to his collection of flight poetry that “High Flight” should be the “normative standard” by which all flight poetry should be assessed. *Because I Fly: A Collection of Aviation Poetry* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002) xix.

¹² Biographical information on Magee from Reda 222.

You have not dreamed of—wheeled and soared and swung
 High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
 I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
 My eager craft through footless halls of air.
 Up, up the long, delirious burning blue,
 I've topped the windswept heights with easy grace
 Where never lark, or even eagle flew.
 And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
 The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
 Put out my hand, and touched the face of God. (2)

The poem does not portray flight as a means of transportation or combat, but as a way of transcending the restrictions of the material world. The poem works vertically, since Magee's description of flight changes with altitude. As he takes off, word choices connote giddiness, "mirth," and "laughter"—joy that comes from escaping from the earth's clutches. The central portion of the poem shows continued upward movement as the poet climbs through the "long delirious, burning blue." By the time he reaches the higher altitudes, however, the tone of the poem changes significantly. Giddiness gives way to reverence and quiet meditation, and to contact with divine presence.

From the familiar opening lines of the poem, it is clear that there is a tension between the human spirit and the earth. By characterizing the force that binds man to earth as "surly" and the sky as sacred, Magee participates in longstanding Western traditions of dividing the cosmos hierarchically. The sky is imaginatively conflated with eternal, dynamic, and creative forces, while the earth is associated with temporal, mundane, and potentially corrupt forces. By using the word "surly," Magee emphasizes this division, casting gravity as an obstinate, threatening, or dismal force that tethers the spirit to materiality.

Magee is able to take the unusual position of locating himself both literally and figuratively outside of the material world, and this makes him an extraordinarily transcendent figure. Unhampered by the limits of materiality, Magee's consciousness is not confined to mundane concerns but coexistent with eternal ones. Although the poem isn't autobiography proper, it is a form of life narrative that shows how imaginative geography is linked to subjectivity. Were Magee to touch the face of God in a common, collective, or domestic space like the grocery store, the poem would be ludicrous. Central to the success of the poem is the exclusivity of the space and the metaphorical layering that conflates it with heaven. Important too, is the role of the earth, since it provides a dismal counterpart to the fabulous space aloft. Alone and unencumbered, Magee rises from the mundane to the miraculous, and this is believable only insofar as the metaphors allow for it—and insofar as Magee can control them. Were he trapped within the metaphors—i.e., part of the material forces he must escape—he could not actively self-define in contrast. In addition, he would lack the powerful, “objective” gaze of the transcendent observer able to judge the world from a distance. In order to sustain the illusion of transcendence, Magee must have absolute control of the machine, and he must have control over the metaphors. A lack of control would show him to be feminine, unstable, or chaotic, and any of these characteristics would flatly undermine his access to “universals.”

Uniquely able to transform matter into spirit, the sky is an imaginative space in which Magee takes on universal selfhood, representing all “men” even as he distinguishes himself from others. Magee does not merely fly around within this space; he sheds the drag of his own physicality. He does not depend upon his body for flight,

nor is he particularly dependent on the aircraft. The gradual disappearance of the airplane makes it seem as if Magee ascends in spite of it. In the first few lines of the poem, the “laughter-silvered wings” seem a combination of man and machine. Midway through the poem, the “eager craft” becomes a machine that he controls. Otherwise, flight is cast as a natural extension of his own unique identity. Wheeling, soaring, and hovering are expressed in terms of his own movement and not that of the craft. By eliminating the material realities of powered flight—engine noise, radio banter, and the physical manipulation of the controls—Magee portrays flight as a byproduct of spirit rather than a result of internal combustion.

Magee slips beyond the constraints of physicality and materiality, but he also transcends historical and social contingencies, and this lends the flight (and Magee) timeless and universal characteristics. By ignoring the unpleasant particulars of World War II, Magee’s ascension is presented as allegorical rather than literal. Flight is not a way of manipulating a noisy machine, but a way of finding truth. The absence of contextual cues enables Magee to embody a selfhood that rises above not merely Axis powers, but human powers; and the result is both mechanical and spiritual mastery. Tony French alleges that Magee probably plagiarized several of the poem’s most memorable lines,¹³ but questions of authorship have not diminished the poem’s popularity nor tarnished Magee’s reputation as a representative figure. The powerful “universal” ideals that drive the poem—and Magee’s identity, which became even more emblematic due to his premature death—make questions of authorship seem irrelevant.

¹³ French suggests that Magee didn’t just borrow imagery from other flight poems for “High Flight,” but lifted whole lines. In “Magee: The Plagiarist Poet?” *Pilot* 31.3 (1997): 90; and “The Lowdown on High Flight,” *Air & Space Smithsonian* Apr.-May 1997: 7.

Imaginative Geographies and the Aerial Subject

The progression from the mundane to miraculous in “High Flight” is part of an early trend in flight literature that Robert Wohl describes as an inclination to “insert flying machines and aviators into a tradition that reached back at least as far as the Ancient Greeks, their heroes, and their gods” (*Passion* 262-63). In Europe and America people described flight in romantic, humanistic, and spiritual terms, despite the fact that early flight was clumsily mechanical and often deadly. The advent of powered flight revived a host of sacred and secular heroes refigured in goggles and flying suits. Following Charles Lindbergh’s transatlantic flight, for instance, the American public conflated the pilot with every major figure in the Western tradition, from Galahad to Jesus Christ (Goldstein 103-04).¹⁴ Lindbergh’s ability to access universal subjectivity had less to do with the fact that he crossed the Atlantic, since this had been done over a hundred times, than with his ability to perform transcendence. Dramatically detached from the known world and from all other people, Lindbergh embodied the solitary and independent (and chaste) universal subject, more aligned with spirit than body. Laurence Goldstein points out that even though Lindbergh was conflated with a host of heroic figures, he was also “kept as securely immaterialized as possible” in order to maintain his identity as the prime figure in the “New World of the spirit” (103-04). In America, no flier would embody universal selfhood longer or more powerfully than Lindbergh.

¹⁴ Goldstein is referring to the poems in *The Spirit of St. Louis*, an anthology of flight poetry culled from over 4,000 entries submitted in response to a national contest.

I will return to Lindbergh's legacy in the next section, but refer to him here as a way of showing that the subject position of the pilot was decidedly special, particularly if the flier's experience could be cast in terms of spirituality, nobility, or material transcendence—which was already an international trend. In Italy, D'Annunzian aviators rose above the mediocrity of the masses and the sordid world of women in order to find redemption (Wohl, *Passion* 118-20). In France, Edmund Rostand and others figured aviators as “une chevalerie,” the knights of the new century (Wohl, “Bards” 306). In the United States, the concept of the sky-as-frontier produced a pilot who embodied core American ideals of self-sufficiency, individualism, and mechanical mastery over nature (Courtwright 81). Across the West, the sky became the new imaginative space where “‘earthy’ man” became “‘aerial’ man,” who was no longer a “worm of the dust,” but “butterfly, psyche, the risen soul” (Corn 39). Whether the aviator emerged as patriot, knight or explorer, he was popular insofar as his experience could be linked to familiar metaphors and to national or “universal” ideals.

The incarnation of the aviator as the ideal, modern figure was due to a variety of factors, including the fact that the sky was a decidedly symbolic space, and storied traditions had attached power to vertical movement for centuries. In addition, the romantic emphasis on the individual was entirely compatible with the solitary space of the cockpit. Mythological and metaphorical layering produced the air as an ideal space for self-realization. As the “sacred garden of sky,”¹⁵ the air maintained its associations with transcendence, even as it accommodated other familiar geographic metaphors.

¹⁵ The words are Lindbergh's in *Spirit of St. Louis*, and quoted in Courtwright 78.

Terrestrial metaphors such as the garden, the frontier, and wilderness intersected with aerial ones, and it is worth noting how scholars have theorized these imaginative geographies in order to look at the kinds of discursive formations that were at work when pilots began to write about their experiences aloft. Carolyn Merchant, for example, notes that perception of the earth as “fallen” led to Edenic recovery plots in which man, as the new Adam, became charged with transforming (and thus redeeming) nature (36). Leo Marx, on the other hand, follows the tendency of eighteenth-century writers to cast the New World as a garden—the new Paradise, or “Eden” in which the “independent, rational, democratic husbandman” becomes the prime figure (122). Annette Kolodny notes that the feminization of landscape (“virgin land”) produces a rugged, if regressive, masculine subject (6). But the most potent metaphor for landscape in the United States had already been theorized by Frederick Jackson Turner: the frontier, in which the wild, vast and uncultivated American landscape produced citizens who forged a rugged and uniquely American identity through contact with wilderness.

I mention some of the ways in which the American landscape has been textured in order to show the kinds of metaphors and subject positions that were in place by the time the Wright brothers took to the skies at Kitty Hawk in 1903. A combination of these constructs emerges in flight autobiography, and they merge with another powerfully discursive formation: the sky as “heaven.” Unpredictable, wild, peaceful, and vast, the air took on terrestrial metaphors, even as it was situated as being qualitatively superior to earth. The sky was not just the new frontier; it was the new sublime, the modern Paradise, the idealized space for self-reflection. The ethereal counterpart to a corrupt and material earth, sky was also the Empyrean heaven, the realm of rare, incorruptible ether,

the “dwelling place of God and the blessed elect” (Grant 4-5). Because of its associations with spirit, Laurence Goldstein notes that writers typically cast the sky as the “nearest paradise” and the airplane as the means of escaping “earthly entrapment” (134).

Subject positions suggested by these imaginative geographies are remarkably compatible with transcendence and universal subjectivity. The sky as frontier produced a brave, unfettered hero pushing the boundaries of the known world, far from the comforts of civilization. The sky as paradise produced a subject able to leave temporality and physicality behind. As sublime presence, the sky invited a highly individuated romantic subject able to face the dark terrors of a supremely powerful and turbulent nature. The interplay between metaphorical and physical space created what Sidonie Smith refers to as a “sociocultural site,” a context in which the landscape is not merely backdrop, but a force that shapes autobiographical subjectivity and the kinds of stories that can be told (*Reading* 58).

As a sociocultural site, the space that early aviators entered was not neutral, but enormously hierarchical. The last of the unruly elements to be “conquered,” the sky retained its associations with divine power longer than any other natural phenomenon. Its sheer inaccessibility seemed to be material proof of a fall from grace. As long as human beings were relegated to the earth, it seemed reasonable to locate perfection as far away from the material world as possible. The notion of the sky as qualitatively superior to earth had its roots in Greek and Christian cosmologies, both of which conceived of a superior, peaceful, and incorruptible space well above the earth’s surface.

Ancient cosmologies not only assigned value to altitude, but gendered it as well. The cloudy, damp *aer* of the lower atmosphere, the “most air near the ground,” was

conceived of as female, while *aether*, the “bright fiery upper air,” was thought of as male (Hart 3). The air that was regarded with “radical deification” prior to Aristotle retained its hierarchical connotations even after it was reduced to one of the four primary bodies (2). The concentric circles that moved upward from *terra* to *aether* in the Aristotelian cosmos were the same circles that moved from chaos to purity, light, and great calm. Thus moving upward invoked specific *values*. The upward progression conceived by Plato as one of enlightenment was implicit in the Aristotelian system in which “higher elements” assume “superior cosmological status.”

Aristotle’s cosmos imagined the air to be a transitional zone between the “theatre of fallible earthly experience and the purity of the heavens” (Hart 16), and this “hint” of a hierarchy (14) would be fully developed in medieval cosmologies in which spirit was to become a decidedly more powerful concept than matter. The layering of elements within the metaphor, which connoted zones of corruptibility and incorruptibility, was one that with elaboration and modification became central to medieval and Renaissance ideologies. And these ideologies produced the ultimate, vertical metaphor: the Great Chain of Being.

A sixteenth-century construct that cast all creation in vertical terms, the Great Chain organized all creation along a continuum based the potential for perfection. Dependence, for example, was considered evidence of imperfection; therefore, anything construed as dependent was cast in proximal contrast to God, who was “utterly independent” and “absolute” (Suber 1). Spirit, in the Great Chain, is perfect, an unchanging, rational and infallible force personified by God and the angels. Endowed with spirit, but trapped within physical bodies, “Man” in this framework exists as a

conflicted combination of fallibility and infallibility, but he is ultimately redeemable. Further down the metaphor are animals and matter, which are devoid of spirit and ultimately irredeemable. I will return to this metaphor in the next chapter in order to show how this metaphor posed problems for women and people of color; but for now I want to point out that being “lower” on the metaphor locates one closer to “nature”—more closely aligned with animality, materiality and physicality. And these characteristics form the contrast to “higher” qualities, which include spirit, intellect, purity, and independence.

Within the metaphor, signs of corporeality—which are often signs of femininity—are markers of instability, impurity, and imperfectability. As such, feminine markers are antithetical to transcendence, which implies an ability to rise above imperfection. Trapped within the metaphors, people who are closer to “nature”—defined as they are by their physical bodies—are the least able to transcend, or exist outside of, the metaphor. What emerges from metaphorical constructs such as the Great Chain is a self-regulating vertical discourse in which those most associated with spirit and intellect (those most starkly disembodied) maintain control of the geographical metaphors—which allows them to self-define in contrast to those trapped within the metaphors. Control of the metaphors, then, becomes a supreme display of transcendence—of the ability to differentiate from the “earthbound”—and this is *the* marker of ideal aerial subjectivity. Enabled by language and empowered by imaginative geographies, the subject shows his or her ability to exist apart from (and “higher” than) others.

The figurative sky shaped, and was in turn was shaped by, pilot writers who were admired in proportion to their ability to self-define within imaginative space. The public

was less interested in someone who was doing a job than with someone who pushed the boundaries of the known world. Working pilots like Dean Smith, who flew the mail, and Jimmy Collins, who tested airplanes for the Navy, sold a few books; but pioneering pilots such as Charles Lindbergh and Richard Byrd were honored with international acclaim, medals and parades. The value of a pilot's feats—and writing—was not necessarily measured in response to the dangers involved, since all of the flying involved personal risk. It was measured in response to how much control the flier had over the metaphors, and how well the flier was able to embody cherished subject positions within the metaphors. And in the United States, this meant pushing the boundaries of the new aerial frontier and casting it as a sacred and/or scientific endeavor.

Textual Geographies: Autobiography and the Aerial Subject

Hierarchical geographies such as “heaven” or the “empyrean” had remarkable staying power. Even with the correctives of scientific discovery, the sky remained textured by imaginative geographies that made ascension a supremely symbolic gesture. Fliers who wrote about their experiences aloft grappled with a host of problems, not the least of which was that the air they inherited was not empty, but bursting with gods, flying creatures, saints, and supernatural beings—all of which carried symbolic importance. Creating an identity consistent with the space, and with established aerial identities, was no easy task. The ultimate vertical movement in the Western world was, of course, the ascension of Christ, which signaled redemption from earthly imprisonment imposed by the Fall; but short of this were the ascensions of others as well, including the mortal flight of Daedalus and Icarus, the twin figures of master craftsman and intrepid

flier. These figures provided the raw material from which much of the early writing about flight was drawn. Pilots who wrote their own life narratives had to invent themselves in relationship to a space that was fraught with mythological characters and hierarchical metaphors, but they also had to invent themselves within a genre that was laden with inherent values, biases, and suppositions—and these were hierarchical as well.

A relatively new literary form, autobiography didn't even have a name until the very end of the eighteenth century (Marcus 12).¹⁶ During the nineteenth century, autobiography was considered to be a subcategory of biography, a genre that celebrated the lives of great men of historical significance, and the emphasis on greatness created assumptions regarding the “proper” auto/biographical subject. While anyone might dabble in “popular” autobiography, “serious” autobiography was limited to a “‘better’ sort of person” who not only led an exemplary life, but who was also able to engage in sustained self-reflection (Marcus 21). The preoccupation with the *bios*, or life of the (significant) individual, obscured questions about the *autos*, or the creation of self, which remained unexamined until the late twentieth century. Untroubled by questions of subjectivity or self-referentiality, readers in the early part of the century could assume that the written life was the same as the lived life.

The trouble with equating *autos* with *bios* is that it implied that a well-lived life was coterminous with well-written autobiography. The result of the conflation was that “literary men” were often assumed to be the “great” individuals from which ostensibly

¹⁶ Laura Marcus traces the first use of the term back to a 1797 review of Isaac d’Israeli’s *Miscellanies* in which the reviewer (presumably William Taylor of Norwich) contends that “self-biography” as “autobiography” can only be pedantic.

“universal” laws could be drawn (Marcus 49). The ideal autobiographical subject, then, was not only unique and representative, but also adept at the conventions of literature.

Assumptions like these were solidly in place at the beginning of the twentieth century when people began writing about flight. As late as the 1970s, autobiographical subjectivity was still presumed to be dependent on “ideals of autonomy, self-realization, authenticity, and transcendence,” which privileged a “separate” and “complete” individual (Anderson 4). The problematic nature of “universal” ideals and unified subjectivity would not be debated by literary scholars until the 1980s, when theories of psychoanalysis, feminism, and poststructuralism challenged the presumed neutrality of autobiographical subjectivity. Paul de Man’s essay “Autobiography as De-facement” (1979) radically challenged the subjective “truth” of autobiography, arguing that the autobiographical subject was actually a figure or face called into being by the substitutive trope of *prosopopoeia* (926). As a fictional creation, the autobiographical subject becomes little more than a linguistic structure, and autobiographies themselves can only produce fictions or figures in the place of self knowledge. In the essay de Man famously argues that the life does not produce autobiography, but that the autobiographical project produces the life, since “whatever the writer does is in fact governed by the technical demands of self portraiture” (920).

Feminist scholars in the 1980s, concerned by the conspicuous absence of women’s texts within the autobiographical canon, began questioning the genre in other ways, calling the unified autobiographical subject into question as a distinctly male construction. Wrought through inherently “phallogentric” language, autobiography subsumed the feminine into a masculine universal. And, while scholars such as Sidonie

Smith might concur with de Man that autobiographical projects were a combination of various “fictions,” the consensus was that women had trouble fitting into a genre in which women were defined in terms of difference. For Smith, autobiography becomes “one of those cultural discourses that secures and textualizes patriarchal definitions of Woman as Other through which Man discovers and enhances his own shape” (*Poetics* 39). While poststructuralists such as de Man deconstructed the autobiographical subject, feminist scholars Nancy Miller and Nicole Ward Jouve argued that it was premature to deconstruct the female autobiographical subject, since it had not been allowed to be fully constituted in the same ways that the masculine subject had been (Anderson 88). Feminist scholarship also drew on psychological research to expose identity as a social construct. Shari Benstock, for instance, combined autobiographical theory with Lacan’s concept of the “mirror stage” in order to address the ways in which subjective unity is imposed from outside, and to show how that unity—typically associated with masculine identity—is ultimately illusory (14-15).

The effect of poststructuralist interventions like these was to “denaturalize the unitary or Romantic subject and see it as historical instance involved in its own ideological strategies” (Anderson 16). The insights gained from these interventions came well after early pilots were done flying and writing, but they help illustrate the problems embedded within a genre that seems—at least superficially—to be a self evident combination of life and text. The scholarship challenges the ability of autobiography to operate outside of cultural discourses and calls attention to the ways in which outside pressures and values impinge on autobiographical subjectivity. I will include relevant theoretical material as it applies to specific life narratives within this project, but I

mention some of the trends in autobiographical criticism here in order to show that autobiography is not a neutral genre, but one with a history of embedded assumptions. The conversations within autobiographical criticism show how the “natural” convergence of author, narrator, and protagonist¹⁷ is ultimately misleading. By looking at autobiography as a set of complex negotiations between external discourses and personal subjectivity (which is itself a negotiation between the self as subject and object of discourse), I hope to show how difficult it would have been for pilots to represent themselves in ways that were recognizable, and therefore valuable, to their readers. Indirect pressure to conform to “universal” expectations led to specific narrative patterns within flight autobiography, and I address these in the next section.

Cultural Pressures and Autobiographical Patterns

The pressure to assume universal selfhood is evidenced by narrative patterns in which fliers tended to cast themselves as resourceful, independent, solitary, and uniquely suited to the rigors of flight. Robert Wohl describes the early autobiographical “formula” as one that combines carefully selected moments of high drama, autobiographical flashbacks, reflections about the land and people overflown, the spectrum of emotions during the flight, and the reception upon returning to earth (*Passion* 271). I would extend Wohl’s analysis to argue that these elements are part of a larger and more pervasive narrative pattern in which the aviator moves from obscurity to recognition. The common elements in this pattern include a specific, individuating moment when the aviator feels

¹⁷ This from Philippe Lejeune’s 1982 definition in which autobiography is “a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality.” In “The Autobiographical Contract” in *French Literary Theory Today*, ed. Tzvetan Todorov, trans. R. Carter (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982).

“called” to flight, or a particular aerial feat. This is juxtaposed with an initiation that includes the pilot’s first solo flight. Always a high-stakes moment, the solo flight speaks to the flier’s fledgling independence as it foreshadows how the flier will deal with future challenges alone. The initiation phase precedes tests of skill and endurance, and the autobiography culminates—if the aviator is to be renowned—in a supremely dangerous and life-defining flight that pushes the boundaries of the aerial frontier.

The narrative pattern is textured by ideas about vertical space and mechanical mastery over nature that constituted the pilot as a solitary figure able to embody national, cultural and spiritual ideals. Anything that seemed to tether the pilot to the terrestrial space—namely physical attachments, domestic spaces and biological necessities—was therefore eliminated from the narrative. The incompatibility of particular subjectivity with “universal” subjectivity created a narrative space in which women and children (those most closely defined by their physical bodies) simply disappear. The ability to “slip the bonds of earth” was contingent upon the ability to detach emotional and biological encumbrances as well as terrestrial and domestic spaces; and this creates the most dramatic erasure within flight autobiography: the family. As an obvious emotional and biological tether, the family bound the pilot to earth as surely as gravity. In order to maintain the illusion of heroic transcendence and universal selfhood, the aviator had to portray a self unaffected by domestic space. While aviators commonly acknowledged parents or other ancestors who figure into the formation of character, it is virtually impossible to find flight autobiographies by men in which wives or children figure into

the text.¹⁸ Wives, if they are mentioned at all, are limited to the acknowledgments page, even if the aviator was married well before the aerial adventures occurred. It was common for men's autobiographies in the nineteenth and early twentieth century to focus on life in the professional or public sphere, and the sky was an ideal space in which to create a public persona. Far away from the demands of home and family, the (typically) lone protagonist could reflect on the universals of life, not the trivialities of domestic life.

The autobiographical accounts I introduce in this chapter fully erase domestic spaces, and with them all evidence of children and spouses. The erasures allow the aviators to create themselves as fully unencumbered subjects. Their own bodies are invisible unless there is a moment in the texts where the author chooses to show physical needs must be subjugated to spirit or iron will. Most importantly, these aviators are fully in control of themselves, their aircraft, and the metaphors in which they play recognizable and highly respected roles. These men are not encumbered by bodily or social encumbrances, nor are they encumbered by any association with natural forces. As fully transcendent subjects, they exist apart from nature, able to admire it, tame it, grapple with it, push themselves within it. Nature is a theatre in which they build character; it is in no way associated with their own identity. As an idealized space for self-reflection, the air becomes a performative space in which identity and experience can be crafted in tandem with favorite metaphors and in opposition to earthly cares and material attachments.

A quick sampling of pilot writing shows the exuberance people felt as they took to the skies, but it also shows how pilots intuitively responded to an implied demand for a

¹⁸ If they are noted at all, wives are relegated to acknowledgements, where they may or may not be named. Children are virtually never mentioned. Jimmy Collins's *Test Pilot* is a rare exception.

transcendent figure able to exist beyond the mundane realities of the material world. Norman Hall exclaims that from the air “[t]he small, petty disturbances of life become lost in insignificance, as the great, eternal truths become more and more evident” (6),¹⁹ while Dean C. Smith describes flying in terms of its ability to separate him from mundane, earthbound existence: “But what I could never tell of was the beauty and exaltation of flying itself...the patches of ground that show far below through the white are for earthbound folk, and the cloud shapes are sculptured just for you.... It was so alive and rich a life that any other conceivable choice seemed dull, prosaic, and humdrum” (140). Across the Atlantic, British pilot Francis Chichester’s enthusiasm echoed the Americans’: “Flying through space, devouring distance like gods.... By heavens! What an intensity of living! Poor wretches below that had never touched the heart of living” (133).²⁰ In a similar way, French pilot Antoine de Saint-Exupéry begins his autobiography *Wind, Sand and Stars* by pitying the “petty bourgeois of Toulouse” for whom “shabby, domestic cares” define earthbound existence (23).²¹

Each of these quotations shows the sky to be an imaginative space in which the pilot compares the quality of his experience to that of terrestrial others. Flying allows each of the men a variety of advantages, of which emotional intensity—the joy that comes from becoming free from dull, terrestrial, and domestic spaces—is the most obvious. Critical to each is a sense of being *separate* from the material world, since it

¹⁹ The quote is from Hall’s article “The New Perspective” in *Ace I* (Jan. 1920). I am indebted to Joseph Corn’s *Winged Gospel* (50) for this reference.

²⁰ From Tom D. Crouch’s “The Surly Bonds of Earth’: Images of the Landscape in the Work of Some Aviator/ Authors, 1910-1969,” *The Airplane in American Culture*, ed. Dominick A. Pisano (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2003) 201-18.

²¹ All references to Saint-Exupéry’s *Wind, Sand and Stars* are from Lewis Galantière’s 1939 translation unless otherwise noted.

allows the pilot to reflect on it from a distance. Far away, disembodied, and with a perspective not readily available to most people, the pilot does not operate a mechanical contraption as much as he escapes earthly encumbrances. And it is the *ability* of the flier to escape all encumbrances that will be central to the author studies that follow.

Charles Lindbergh and the Inauguration of American Flight Autobiography

No twentieth-century American figure personified transcendence more powerfully than Charles Augustus Lindbergh. His solo crossing of the Atlantic in May of 1927 catapulted him to instant fame and created a uniquely American incarnation of the ideal aerial subject. His two autobiographical accounts of the transatlantic flight, “*WE*” (1927) and *The Spirit of St. Louis* (1953), describe Lindbergh’s transition from obscurity to prominence in very different ways, but both show how universal subjectivity—a unique and independent selfhood able to transcend historical contexts and the limitations of embodiment—is imposed by external forces and reproduced within autobiographical projects. Lindbergh is the natural point of departure because his work provides striking evidence of the ways in which imaginative geographies combine with genre to produce identity. What’s more, his first autobiography, “*WE*,” established a pattern of flight autobiography in the United States.

In the *Bibliography of American Autobiographies*, Louis Kaplan records twenty-two works by civilian aviators between 1915 and 1945, all of which were published in the decades following Lindbergh’s flight with one exception: *Art Smith’s Story: The Autobiography of the Boy Aviator*, a short work that was serialized in the *San Francisco Bulletin* in 1915. The jubilant enthusiasm that followed Lindbergh’s flight created a

demand for first-person flight narrative, and “*WE*” established a textual persona for the aviator and provided a rudimentary narrative pattern. Although Lindbergh’s second account of the crossing, *The Spirit of St. Louis* (1953), was published well after most of the pilot autobiographies I look at in this project, it is vital to this chapter since the rewriting of the voyage dramatically shows how external pressures produce the subject. That Lindbergh’s textual identity changes significantly between the two books speaks to the ways in which identity is not fixed, but fashioned in response to the cultural values and discourses.

Lindbergh’s first attempt at describing his transatlantic flight paled in comparison to the euphoric poetry and prose that others wrote about him. The story of a Minnesota farm boy who, through perseverance and careful planning, became the new American hero took the country by storm. The number of news stories alone numbered in the hundreds of thousands,²² while poets intent on singing the aviator’s praises “ransacked myth’s cupboard, apotheosizing Lindbergh in the name of every divine or heroic figure in western tradition” (Courtwright 80-81). Lawrence Goldstein notes that the number of poems alone, generated in response to a national contest, probably exceeded ten thousand (98), and Lindbergh became the mainstay of other writing as well: letters, essays, sermons, and speeches.

Telling his own story was fraught, given the number of people who had appropriated it in one way or another. The first “personal” account of the flight was not actually written by Lindbergh, but by a ghost writer working out of George Putnam’s

²² David T. Courtwright reports that one clipping bureau amassed 300,000 news clippings in just twelve days—from New York papers alone. *Sky as Frontier* 80.

basement. In response to the demand for an immediate first-hand account of the voyage, Putnam had the galleys ready for Lindbergh to proof within two weeks of his return to the United States. Lindbergh, however, thought the manuscript was “cheaply done” and inconsistent with his own experience. And so, in spite of new demands on his time, he insisted on writing the book by himself (Berg 165). Under pressure from the publisher, and from a prior commitment to fly across the country to promote aviation, Lindbergh allowed himself less than a month to complete the book, a goal that demanded he write 10,000 words a week (166-67).

The pressure to produce an autobiography—and fast—was intensified by the fact that Lindbergh lacked experience as a writer. Not particularly fond of formal education, he had dropped out of high school early to farm²³ and later flunked out of college before joining the Nebraska Aircraft Corporation and US Army Air Corps. He had not taken writing seriously in college, but had turned in cheeky responses to assigned themes and earned poor grades on English papers due to poor grammar (Berg 55). Lindbergh eventually critiqued writing as a poor substitution for immediate, sensory existence—an ironic statement from someone who would eventually write six autobiographies.²⁴ In spite of his apparent disregard for the written word, Lindbergh produced the manuscript for “*WE*” in little more than three weeks, without having had time to reread most of it.

²³ Lindbergh left school as the U.S. entered World War I, a time when young people were encouraged to take agricultural jobs to help the war effort. Lindbergh was awarded his diploma in 1918 even though he did not complete his senior year.

²⁴ Other autobiographical work includes: *Of Flight and Life* (1948), *The Spirit of St. Louis* (1953), *The Wartime Journals of Charles A. Lindbergh* (1970), *Boyhood on the Upper Mississippi* (1972), *Banana River* (1976), and *Autobiography of Values* (1978). In *Spirit of St. Louis*, Lindbergh complains about the artificiality of writing specifically: “Why should one spend the hours of life on formulae, semi-colons, and our crazy English spelling? I don’t believe God made man to fiddle with pencil marks on paper. He gave him earth and air to feel. And now wings with which to fly” (403).

The world would not wait for the words of the hero, even if they were rushed, and even if they may not have been precisely what he wanted to say.

“*WE*” is a linear, matter-of-fact accounting of events that led to Lindbergh’s arrival at Le Bourget, and as such reads more like Lindbergh is checking events off a timeline than developing a narrative. The book begins with Lindbergh’s birth and briefly establishes his family background before introducing the reader to his early interest in aviation. Lindbergh documents his instruction and first solo as well as a variety of tests of skill and endurance, which include his military training and experience as an airmail pilot. Then he flies the Atlantic. The “serviceable prose” (Berg 66) fails to capture anything like drama, and the depiction of the flight to Paris—which takes less than ten pages to recount—is suspiciously dull. Harrowing moments like running out of gas at night in a thick Chicago fog or bailing out after a midair collision are downplayed as Lindbergh dutifully moves through events in chronological order. There is little detail or description, no character development or dialogue. Lindbergh does not reflect on the danger, his role as a pilot, or the meaning of the flight, aside from expressing faith in the future of aviation.

But even though Lindbergh was reluctant to invoke a radically individuated identity in “*WE*,” his admirers were not. The book begins with a Foreword by Myron T. Herrick, US ambassador to France, who aligns Lindbergh with icons Joan of Arc, young David, and the Marquis de Lafayette within the first paragraph. Following Lindbergh’s version of the flight are nearly a hundred pages by Fitzhugh Green chronicling the praise of European leaders and describing Lindbergh’s triumphal return to the United States.

Lindbergh had little trouble claiming a representative selfhood in the modest account of the flight, since his publishers and admirers did it for him.

In spite of its creative weaknesses, the book was enormously successful. It sold over 635,000 copies within the first year and was translated into every major language (Berg 167). If there was a perceived lack of sophistication, it was attributed to Lindbergh's humility, which people had come to admire almost as much as his independence, bravery, and perseverance. Lindbergh had become the incarnation of the WASP hero, whom Martin Green describes as victorious within a narrative of individual enterprise, Protestant piety, hard work, and self-help (24-25). But he was also conflated with a host of other heroic figures—all of whom were firmly located outside of “nature.” Goldstein notes that the heroic allusions to Lindbergh included, but were by no means limited to, Apollo, Prometheus, Hermes, Ulysses, Beowulf—characters who battle or exert power over powerful and chaotic natural elements. As “Master of the empyrean,” “Lord of the air,” and “pilgrim to the future” (104),²⁵ Lindbergh fully transcended the natural world, becoming more god than human, more mythical than material, and this allowed him access to an extraordinary range of metaphors. Lindbergh may not have claimed these metaphors or had much control over them when he wrote his first autobiography—which is utterly devoid of figurative language—but it didn't matter. His position as a fully transcendent hero had already been secured for him by an adoring public.

²⁵ Here, Goldstein is quoting passages from the poetry collection *The Spirit of St. Louis*, (New York: Doran, 1927) 42, 118, 215.

Lindbergh had little trouble gaining access to “universal” ideals because he emerged as a personification of them. The Atlantic had already been crossed by 117 airplanes and airships prior to May 1927 (Courtwright 81), but Lindbergh was the first to do it alone between major cities and against formidable and well-financed competition. His success at the crossing, and his image as a lone, independent, modest, and resourceful young man played into several discourses at once: Algerian optimism, frontier romanticism, rugged idealism. Most obviously, though, Lindbergh’s emergence as a solitary hero placed him squarely within the parameters of universal selfhood—the unique, unitary, unencumbered self that escapes all forms of embodiment.

A man who transcended material, biological, and societal entanglements in a dramatic and unmistakable way, Lindbergh became iconic whether he wanted to or not. Still, the omissions in the book point to societal values and pressures that insist on a hero that is utterly independent and resourceful. Lindbergh does not mention that his mother supported him during college, or that his father helped him buy his first airplane. Hovering above the material earth and apart from family members and domestic spaces, Lindbergh is not tethered to anyone in the text, particularly women. Aside from mentioning his mother and father in the first pages to establish his ancestry, there is no female presence. Half sisters Eva and Lillian are not mentioned, and there is no hint of romantic interest.

The text is virtually devoid of familial support and shows little collegial support. Lindbergh’s flight is not framed as a result of a supportive network, but as a result of his own foresight and resourcefulness. Even though the book’s title “*WE*”—chosen by publisher George Putnam—was intended to refer to Lindbergh and his backers, it was

interpreted as Lindbergh and his airplane; and while Lindbergh complained about the misunderstanding, his own unconscious use of the title suggested a collegial relationship between man and machine, not man and community (Berg 166-67). The combination of his words and those of admiring others in “*WE*” makes his arrival in Paris a byproduct of a supremely independent and visionary selfhood, rather than collaboration and remarkable luck.

Reclaiming the American Ideal: Lindbergh and *The Spirit of St. Louis*

While Lindbergh may have been uncomfortable situating himself in transcendent and “universal” terms in “*WE*,” he seemed quite comfortable with his idealized subjectivity by the time he wrote *The Spirit of St. Louis*. Never entirely happy with the rushed rendition of his voyage, Lindbergh began a second autobiography detailing his New York to Paris trip in 1939, hoping that the second version would be more accurate without the pressing demands of a deadline. Little by little, in every spare moment he could muster, he plotted scenes and sketched out the new manuscript in a creative effort that demanded numerous, substantial revisions over a space of thirteen years (Berg 488). The result was an autobiography that rekindled the devotion of the American people and earned him the Pulitzer Prize.

In contrast to “*WE*,” in which Lindbergh comes across as a man of simple words and actions, *The Spirit of St. Louis* establishes him as universal subject within the first few pages. Watching the twilight turn to night from the cockpit of his mail plane, for instance, Lindbergh reflects that the light “makes the earth seem more like a planet; and me part of the heavens above it” (11). As tiny lighted structures appear below, Lindbergh

imagines himself detached from the “homes and men” beneath the airplane. Of the experience, Lindbergh reflects: “I feel aloof and unattached, in the solitude of space. Why return to that moss; why submerge myself in brick-walled human problems when all the crystal universe is mine? Like the moon, I can fly on forever ... independent of the world below” (12).

In the reflection, Lindbergh is fully transcendent, wholly able to exist beyond the parameters of the material world. His separation from materiality is enabled by his command of geographic metaphors—namely, “heaven” and the “crystal universe”—which place him firmly outside of the “moss” of human existence. Detached from the world, he can make judgments about it, define himself in contrast to it, and take on an identity that is decidedly universal, independent, and unencumbered. His own physicality is fully erased, while the “homes and men” become representative of what he is not: burdened by domestic attachments and familial obligations. And it is in this metaphorical space—far above the tiny specks of familial light—that he decides to compete for the Orteig prize, \$25,000 for the first person to fly nonstop from New York to Paris.

The foregrounding of his decision to compete for the Orteig prize is crucial to understanding the new approach Lindbergh took to his life story. In “*WE*,” Lindbergh had placed the decision to compete for the Orteig prize in chronological order, so it occurs near the end of the book, just before he leaves for Paris—well after stories of wing-walking, parachuting, and flying the mail. The chronological placement of the decision gives it no particular emphasis. Of the moment, Lindbergh simply writes: “I first considered the possibility of the New York-Paris flight while flying the mail one night in the fall of 1926” (198). Sandwiched between a reflection on the future role of

commercial aviation and the relative benefits of multi- and single-engine aircraft, the decision hardly merits a discursive burp. Placed at the beginning, however, the moment becomes one in which he is called to compete in the supreme aerial feat. The moment is profoundly individuating and suggests a kind of preordination; Lindbergh doesn't enter the race because he wants to, but because he is meant to. His decision becomes one of destiny, not chance.

The moment of decision is indicative of how Lindbergh reframes his experience and identity throughout the book. The masterful evocation of metaphors, which conflate the new aerial frontier with heaven, his willingness to inhabit his own heroic subjectivity, his reframing of the voyage as an act of providence—all of these show a Lindbergh who had become comfortable with notoriety, with his stature as an expert in aviation and as an American icon. The more sophisticated stylistic choices also reflect his maturation as a writer, which was due in part to the influence of his wife, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, a gifted and bestselling author, who gave him stylistic advice and edited the manuscript. Most significantly, the differences between the two texts also show an evolution from story to discourse—that is, the narrative is not just a sequence of events, but a fashioning of events that pays close attention to an implied or ideal reader.²⁶ In *Spirit*, Lindbergh shows attention to his imagined audience by masterfully and consistently claiming his identity as a pious and pioneering airman. By doing so, he casts the flight in terms his admirers had done all along: as a spiritual journey of death and rebirth. Juxtaposing

²⁶ Here, the terms story and discourse are based on Seymour Chatman's distinction in *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Chatman explains that story is "what" happens and that discourse is "how" it happens. Discourse is the "statement" made by a particular work, which is mediated by a complicated rhetorical exchange in which an ever present "implied reader" takes an active role. This implied reader is presupposed by the "real" or "implied" author and it offers clues as to the stance of the imagined or "desired audience." (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1978) 149-50.

strategic flashbacks with fabulous landscapes, flight data, and his own mounting fatigue, Lindbergh refashions the flight as a pilgrimage that takes over three hundred pages to relate.

Time in Part I of *Spirit* is compressed and linear. Space is alternatively panoramic (in flight, where he speculates about the voyage) and immediate (on the ground where he enacts his plans). Lindbergh shows himself going about the business of finding investors and aircraft manufacturers before arriving at Roosevelt Field in New York, where he, along with Admiral Byrd's crew, waits for the weather to clear. But it isn't until Part II of the book that the sky becomes a truly miraculous place in which he transcends the earth and his own physicality. From the moment Lindbergh sets foot in the overloaded airplane on the sodden airstrip at 3:00 a.m., under a low, overcast sky in light rain, the journey seems doomed. Lindbergh notes that the airplane looks "awkward and clumsy ... completely incapable of flight" (178), while its pilot is exhausted from the hour or two of interrupted sleep. No one cheers; reporters stand in dripping raincoats. The powerless aircraft anticipates a protagonist who can fly in spite of a "clumsy" machine, while the sendoff that is "more like a funeral procession than the beginning of a flight to Paris" (178) anticipates Lindbergh's "rebirth" on the other side of the Atlantic.

As Lindbergh leaves the coast of the United States behind, the physical earth becomes progressively more distant and irrelevant. Having left "earth and life" (182), Lindbergh notes that the sky becomes indistinguishable from the ocean: "the one [is] mirrored in the other until I can't tell where sea ends and sky begins" (190). As the sea merges with the sky past becomes present, and the air becomes a world of spirit. The movement from familiar to surreal allows for the narrative shifts in time and space that

characterize Part II of the book. While Lindbergh's body remains enclosed in metal and fabric, the view from the cockpit invites images of the past that both compress and extend time: turbulence evokes the memory of his first midair collision; the "wilderness" of Nova Scotia evokes an imagined Minnesota well before he was born, a wilderness his grandparents faced when they emigrated from Sweden; Newfoundland evokes memories of exhibition flying in the Rockies and flying for the Missouri National Guard; and the vast expanses of the ocean evoke memories of parachute jumping, wing-walking as well as childhood memories of climbing trees, working on the farm and playing in the Mississippi river—all images that show him as a brave and solitary unfettered figure.

The shifts between past and narrative present allow Lindbergh to describe his youth in a series of (mostly solitary) events that determine his independent character; but these shifts also allow Lindbergh to comment on the timelessness of his own experience: "Who could look at the sky, at the mountains, at the chart on my knees, at the motionless wings of my plane, and still think of time in *hours*? Here, in the *Spirit of St. Louis*, I live in a different frame of time and space" (228). The "different frame of time and space" that Lindbergh is able to access is implicated in the universal subject, which exists outside of temporality. As an ahistorical and transcendent phenomenon, the universal subject can claim, as Lindbergh does, "I live in the past, the present, and the future, here and in different places, all at once" (390).

The further Lindbergh moves from the solid surfaces of earth, the more the flight takes on spiritual dimensions. It is as if Lindbergh's ability to detach from his own physicality is a natural extension of his departure from the ground. By going beyond the known, physical world, he transcends the limits of embodiment. The "chasm of eternity"

(228) through which he flies becomes more symbolic the further he goes. Clouds that seem like the dragons and tigers of his youth (338-39) become the “sacred garden of the sky” and “inner shrine of higher spirits” (341) as he moves eastward. And it is through this world that he must find his way, fighting the elements and his own physical limitations. As the voyage lengthens and his fatigue increases, he finds that his body has failed him. Only his spirit will see him through: “It seems I’m made up of three personalities, three elements,” he writes. “There’s my body, which knows definitely that what it wants most in the world is sleep. There’s my mind, constantly making decisions that my body refuses to comply with, but which itself is weakening in resolution. And there’s something else, which seems to become stronger instead of weaker with fatigue, an element of spirit” (361).

The realization that his spirit must control his mind and body “as a wise father guards his children” evokes an infallible, paternal force located outside of the body that compensates for physical and mental limitations. The evocation of spirit makes the discourse supremely transcendent, since Lindbergh must not yield to the limitations of his body at all costs. Lindbergh’s emphasis on spirit allows him access to a universal subjectivity that is unequalled by any other American pilot. Magee may have cast vertical movement in spiritual terms, but Lindbergh’s journey is the supreme aerial pilgrimage. At the moment Lindbergh is furthest from land, he is also the most dramatically disembodied, and it is here that the journey takes on its most mythic dimensions. While staring at his instruments inside a bank of clouds, Lindbergh becomes all seeing, able to perceive “ghostly presences” all around him in the cockpit. He explains that the

“friendly, vaporlike shapes” are “emanations from the experience of ages” that offer him “messages of importance unattainable in ordinary life” (389).

The messages remain known only to Lindbergh, but it is clear that the wisdom offered by the figures is only available to the most starkly transcendent and disembodied subject. By crafting the space as one radically removed from familiar and material spaces—even the delineations of sky and sea are lost in the fog—the sky maintains its metaphorical connections with heaven. Lindbergh’s legacy grants him access to this metaphor and makes his claim to the world of spirits plausible. The sky in the text is not a backdrop, but a sociocultural site in which Lindbergh self-realizes. Fully “separated from the earthly life” (390), Lindbergh performs an ascension that invites the comparison between himself and the risen Christ—which had been the most persistent allusion in the flood of poems celebrating his voyage (Goldstein 104). The metaphorical space allows Lindbergh asks a series of questions that reveal his access to transcendence: “Am I now more man or spirit? Will I fly my airplane on to Europe and live in flesh as I have before, feeling hunger, pain, and cold, or am I about to join these ghostly forms, become a consciousness in space, all-seeing, all-knowing, unhampered by materialistic fetters of the world?” (390).

The selfhood Lindbergh creates here is the epitome of the “universal” selfhood able to escape all forms of embodiment. Lindbergh may not have consciously cast himself within the parameters of universal subjectivity, but he did respond to cultural discourses that placed supreme value on the starkly individuated subject able to rise above the limitations of time, place, and physicality. That Lindbergh recast his journey as a spiritual one made it particularly attractive to an American public who wanted to see

their own progression as a people in spiritual terms. The overwhelming success of *The Spirit of St Louis*,²⁷ which became an immediate best seller and Pulitzer Prize winner in spite of Lindbergh's unpopular, isolationist politics, indicates that the man and his solitary journey still struck a deep emotional chord with many Americans well into the 1950s.

Upon the publication of *Spirit*, *New York Times* book reviewer Quentin Reynolds beamed that the book "explains and humanizes Lindbergh," bringing him "into the company of his fellow mortals" (BR1). But the truth is that the book cordons him off from his fellow human beings much more effectively than before, since he self-realizes in a space defined by its distance from the terrestrial and domestic spaces where his fellow "mortals" live and work. In spite of the fact that Lindbergh became even more immaterial and remote in *Spirit*, people loved it, and for Lindbergh it became a second ascension. In his first ascent, Lindbergh rose into the sky to embody the values and dreams of a nation. In the second, he rose from the condemnation of an American public, angered by his fascination with fascism and isolationist politics, to reclaim his legacy as the quintessential modern American hero.

Polar Frontiers and Public Fictions: Richard Evelyn Byrd's *Skyward*

The figure of Lindbergh cast a long shadow. The success of his voyage, and his book, created a boom in aviation and autobiography, and this was good news for people who hoped to make a name for themselves in the new industry. But Lindbergh was

²⁷ Before its release, *The Spirit of St. Louis* was condensed and serialized in *The Saturday Evening Post* as "33 Hours to Paris." The articles generated the largest sales in the magazine's history and the *Post* sold out expanded printings in days, reaching almost 200,000 readers more than usual. The book received only favorable reviews and sold several hundred thousand copies in the first year alone. Berg, 489-90.

obviously a hard act to follow. Life-defining voyages like ocean crossings were still supremely dangerous, and it was not enough to repeat a feat, one had to surpass it. Aviation developed rapidly in the interwar years; technology was constantly improving; aerial records were constantly made and broken, and this made competing in the new aerial theater risky and expensive. One typically had to prove oneself in the air before publishers showed interest in a personal account, and it was very difficult to do so without corporate or governmental support. The most successful pilots were adept at figuring out how to organize and finance expeditions, and no one was better at this than Richard Evelyn Byrd.

Of the American pilots who wrote in the 1920s and 1930s, Admiral Byrd exemplifies the ideal pilot more skillfully than any other figure, with the exception of Lindbergh. If Lindbergh was the iconic pilot driven by a quality of spirit, Byrd was his *rational* counterpart, driven by a quality of mind. I address Byrd's autobiography, *Skyward*, here because of the ways in which it illustrates and extends concepts of transcendence and subjectivity; but I also include this text because of the ways in which it confuses the boundaries between autobiography and biography. Biographer Lisle A. Rose suggests that *Skyward* may have been ghostwritten by Fitzhugh Green or Charles J.V. Murphy (171), but the ambiguity does not hinder the consideration of Byrd as a cultural creation. Byrd's autobiography was one of three that were published the year after Lindbergh's "*WE*," and as one of the few flight autobiographies that has remained in print, it illustrates the kind of life story that continues to be valued in the United States. Whether Byrd wrote his own account of his flight to the North Pole or not, the book

provides striking evidence of the kinds of discursive “fictions” that were at work when the American pilots began vying for a place in the sky.

Byrd was best known for his pioneering expeditions. He was celebrated as a national hero and awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor after purportedly being the first to fly over the North Pole on the morning of May 9, 1926. In June 1927, he and his crew flew from Roosevelt Field to Paris, just a month after Lindbergh.²⁸ Two years later, he was the cross the South Pole by airplane, on Nov 29, 1929. *Skyward* chronicles all but the Antarctic expedition, and ends with Byrd considering the implications of reaching the South Pole. Throughout the autobiography, Byrd is an extraordinarily individuated and thoroughly rational subject, a person who subjugates body to mind in the “battle between man and the elements” that is “exploration” (289). Though Byrd depends on others to help finance his pioneering flights, he is the dedicated visionary and driving force behind each expedition, a consummate planner, fund raiser and patriot. Events in Byrd’s life are juxtaposed with reflective chapters that speculate on the meaning of flight, exploration, and heroism; but all of the chapters show an uncompromising faith in science and progress.

There is no question that Byrd carefully crafts himself as an exceptional individual who rises above the limitations of the body. After a short introductory chapter in which Byrd attributes the safety of aviation to a brave and pioneering past, he introduces his “first aerial adventure,” which is not in an airplane, but on the gymnastic

²⁸ Byrd’s team was in fact favored to win the Orteig prize, but their airplane, the *America*, crashed during its initial test flight, injuring all four occupants. Floyd M. Bennett never fully recovered and died of complications a year later. Although Byrd’s crew was ready to take off well before Lindbergh, Byrd showed an unaccountable reluctance to leave that some attributed to fear. Byrd cast the delay as methodical—in terms of gathering ample scientific data. Rose, *Explorer*, 156.

rings at the Naval Academy gym. In preparation for an upcoming meet, Byrd—who is the captain of the Navy Gym Team—attempts a risky, new move on the rings and falls, shattering the bones in his ankle and foot. After extensive physical therapy, Byrd finds that he can walk, but he also finds himself relegated to a “life of inaction” (25) as a Navy clerk. In desperation, Byrd convinces Navy surgeons to allow him to fly for a month. The month turns into two, and Byrd finds himself fully recovered from the “[f]resh air, zest of flight, and deep joy of achievement” (26).

Byrd’s metamorphosis from “cripple” to (exceptional) pilot takes less than five pages to recount, but it is a defining moment in which he becomes characterized by cunning and perseverance—qualities that subjugate body to mind. Byrd notes that the ordeal teaches him a great life lesson: “it is by struggle that we progress” (24); and this “lesson” underpins his ideas about human achievement in general—that struggle is the key to progress and progress is the key to physical and material transcendence. For Byrd, “spirit” is not a religious phenomenon, but a motivational force that links man inexorably to progress: “Isn’t it possible that this irresistible spirit is nothing more nor less than the *spirit of human progress* that defies nature, peril and death with a blind fury not to be denied?” (10).

The narrative pattern in *Skyward* includes all of the elements typical of American flight autobiography: a specific, individuating moment in which the aviator feels called to flight or a particular aerial feat, an initiation phase that includes his first solo, tests of skill and endurance, and a supreme feat that firmly establishes the aviator’s legacy. Once Byrd’s body is transformed by the “tonic” of achievement, he proceeds to his solo, a major moment in which his instructor cautions him not to stay aloft more than twenty

minutes alone. Heedless of the warning, Byrd flies for an hour and twenty minutes, practicing landings until he is fully satisfied with the results. The solo produces Byrd as a person willing to go well beyond the expectations of others. That he ignores the stern warning from his instructor shows him to be a man motivated by excellence rather than fear—and this foreshadows how he will conduct himself on future expeditions.

Tests of skill and endurance include Byrd's preparations for his voyage to the North Pole, and these are not just aerial, but logistical. Before the voyage, Byrd proves himself to be a remarkable, visionary leader. He secures funding for the expedition, arranges for Navy aircraft, and organizes a team. Once he reaches northern Greenland, he leads his men in building a runway, assembling the airplanes, and planning routes. The dizzying range of activity establishes him as a thoroughly rational and methodical problem solver. Although Byrd writes of the difficulties posed by the weather, he never admits fear or discouragement. Byrd, in fact, never admits any kind of emotion. His persona is strictly rational and unflappable, no matter what the situation. In commenting on Byrd's writing, biographer Lisle A. Rose points out that, for Byrd, "the personal was not the intimate; he kept his readers and listeners at arm's length" (172).

Plot details allow Byrd to perform a variety of cultural ideals: leadership, foresight, dedication, courage, patriotism, and verve. In order to enact these, Byrd places himself within recognizable metaphors, of which the frontier is central. From the first pages of the book, Byrd casts exploratory flight as "research" in which the pilot participates by "pushing out across geographical frontiers" (5). By combining discourses of scientific progress and exploration with frontier ideology, Byrd produces himself as a rugged—and methodical—individual whose character is formed through contact with a

vast and uncultivated unknown. By “conquering the forces of wind and gravity,” he imagines that he has “added to man’s triumph over nature” (32).

Byrd’s control of powerful, geographical metaphors—the frontier and “wilderness”—allows him to do more than fly around and see new places; it allows him to invent himself in transcendent terms. He is not part of “nature”: he is an individual who braves nature—and who improves the lives of others by doing so. Byrd explains that “spectacular flights” are necessary to progress, and that the will to progress is what separates “Primeval man,” who struggles for “life alone,” from “Civilized man,” who struggles for “pleasures over and above his effort for mere existence” (256). Exploration, then, becomes a marker of transcendence, a sign that “man” does not exist as part of nature, but that nature exists as a theater in which “man” self-defines through conquest. The “natural” inclination for discovery and civilization is, for Byrd, what separates “man” from “wild nature” (256).

The aerial feat that establishes Byrd as a subject worthy of autobiographical attention is his flight to the Pole, which he completes with the aid of copilot Floyd Bennett. The flight is cast in unmistakably transcendent terms. Of reaching the Pole, Byrd quotes his original report, cabled to the United States upon his completion of the flight: “‘Here, in another world, far from the herds of people, the smallnesses of life fell from our shoulders. What wonder that we felt no great emotion of achievement or fear of death that lay stretched beneath us, but instead, impersonal, disembodied. On we went. It seemed forever onward’” (180). A sociocultural site, the sky in this passage is an extraordinarily transformative space in which Byrd exists outside of his own body, apart from the ordinary world and petty “herds” of humanity. Like Lindbergh, Byrd becomes

progressively immaterial the further he gets from the known world, and the separation allows the discourse to take on a universal quality—a claim to great understandings unavailable to terrestrial others who are grouped within an unsympathetic livestock metaphor.

The sense that Byrd transcends materiality allows him access to idealized or “universal” selfhood, and this is aided by the fact that he seems to exist outside of normal time as well. Time, for Byrd, becomes timeless as Byrd becomes disembodied. Of the experience, he writes: “Our great speed had the effect of quickening our mental processes, so that a minute appeared as many minutes, and I realized fully then that time is only a relative thing. An instant can be an age, an age an instant” (180). Here, as in Lindbergh’s *Spirit*, time becomes universal. Past and present converge in a way that situates the flight as existing apart from a specific, historical context. By casting himself as “disembodied” and the flight as timeless, Byrd escapes both the limitations of material existence and embodiment. Detached, independent, and ahistorical, he is uniquely suited to take on universal selfhood. Even though Byrd mentions Floyd Bennett, who shares the cockpit with him, the overall impression is one of solo adventure and achievement. Byrd never shows himself to be dependent on the other man, and as the leader of the expedition, he is fully autonomous and independent, even with Bennett aboard.

In order to maintain the illusion of transcendence and universality, which depend on separation from the mundane world, Byrd eliminates references to private or domestic spaces, and this is probably why his wife and children disappear from the narrative.

Richard Byrd married Marie Ames in January of 1915, so she would have been a part of Byrd’s life during every incident described in *Skyward* with the exception of the

gymnastics accident. In spite of this, there is no mention of Mrs. Byrd anywhere in the book, except for in the appendix, where her name appears on a chronology of Byrd's life by Raimund E. Goerler. Marie Ames Byrd is systematically erased from the text, as are Byrd's four children, who do not even make it onto the life chronology at the back of the book. Although Byrd spends a fair amount of time detailing the perils of the North Pole expedition in *Skyward*, he never worries about what will happen to his family if he does not survive. The fact that Marie was expecting the couple's fourth child when he left for the Pole does not appear to be a concern, which is odd for a man who obsesses about the tiniest detail, including the weight of his crew's good luck charms. The "virgin territory"... "never before viewed by mortal eye" (176) is incompatible with a subject steeped in mortality, and the biological realities and responsibilities of fatherhood.

The erasure is typical of the kinds of fictions Byrd created for himself. Byrd's biographer, Lisle A. Rose, notes that Byrd did not lie very often, but that he could manipulate the truth in order to preserve a particular image (18). Byrd's claim of travelling the world alone at age twelve (3), for instance, is checked by documentation that shows Byrd leaving just prior to his 14th birthday with a travelling companion, Mrs. "Wendell" (Rose 19). Though "Wendell" was briefly mentioned (as a friend of an uncle) in an earlier, unpublished portion of the preface to *Skyward* (Rose 19), her disappearance from the published manuscript constructs Byrd as radically independent at a very young age. Throughout the text, women appear to briefly admire or encumber the explorer.

Though women apply for jobs on the expedition, and one woman shows up with bags packed, prepared to write a history of the voyage (154), none are allowed to participate.²⁹

Byrd's penchant for erasing women is symptomatic of the ways in which he removes all references to private, domestic, and earthly spaces. One of the strangest parts of the book, given his role of a father, is a hypothetical conversation with a son who does not exist. Throughout the book, Byrd performs the schizophrenic task of showing aviation to be both safe and extraordinarily dangerous, presumably so he can show how pioneering efforts in aviation have paid off. In order to establish the newfound safety of flight, Byrd writes, "If I had a son twenty years old today and he should come to me with the question: 'Is it all right for me to fly?' I'd answer: 'Go to it. And I hope you get your pilot's license soon because I want you to do a lot of flying before you're through'" (2).

The imagined conversation is odd because Byrd *did* have a son at the time, eight-year-old Richard Jr. or "Dickie," who could have easily asked the question. By constructing an imaginary son in place of his actual son, Byrd maintains his distance between himself as a universal figure and biological encumbrances that tether him to the specifics of time and place and home and family. Byrd gets away with the substitution because he does not, in truth, have a twenty-year-old son. The conversation casts the hypothetical son as an adult choosing among career choices, but it also casts him as deeply dependent on his father's approval. That Byrd's actual son *is* dependent on his father links the explorer to material necessity, and so shatters the illusion of the universal hero unshackled by terrestrial concerns. On the other hand, a son who is old enough to

²⁹ Byrd's chauvinism is discreet throughout the book, but is exposed when he notes that school-age girls outnumbered boys ten to one in asking to go on his Arctic trip, but that boys outnumbered the girls (100 to 1) in asking to go on the Antarctic trip. His evaluation of half of the evidence leads him to stubbornly essentialize: "Looks as if the girls just want to keep warm—or else get to Paris—doesn't it?" (308).

be independent, and yet seeks approval, produces Byrd as a voice of experience not just for his own son, but for all young men.

Byrd's claim to have reached the North Pole was continually plagued by allegations of fraud. In *Oceans, Poles and Airmen*, journalist Richard Montague argued that the flight should have taken twenty hours, but was completed in sixteen and a half. The team, according to Montague, panicked upon sighting an oil leak and merely circled the Spitsbergen coast (Rose 124). Dennis Rawlins later charged Byrd of deliberately doctoring the navigation report, a claim substantiated by an imperfectly erased sextant reading in Byrd's flight diary (127). While *Skyward* does not entertain any of the allegations (some had not yet been made), Byrd does include the findings of a report made by a National Geographic Society sub-committee directly following his own account of the flight. The transcript of the report, which corroborates Byrd's claim, creates a jarring, narrative shift, but it is obviously there to silence his skeptics. The report is followed by further intrusions: a publisher's note introducing the speech given by President Coolidge upon awarding Byrd the Congressional Medal of Honor, and the speech itself. Although the other voices seem strangely intrusive, they do provide a sense of solidarity. The individuated, autobiographical "I" turns into the "we" of a grateful and admiring citizenry well aware of the pilot's great accomplishments in promoting "scientific and mechanical progress" (185).

For the purposes of this inquiry, Byrd's purported reaching the Pole is less important than whether people *wanted him to have*, or not, and why. Similarly, it is less important here whether *Skyward* was written by Byrd himself or by a ghostwriter. Byrd's limitations as a writer had less to do with his ability to write than with a lack of time to do

it. As an extraordinarily busy man with a culturally important story, Byrd was urged to write at length without regard to artistic or grammatical conventions by *New York Times* journalist Howard Mingos—who also advised Byrd on the employment of ghostwriters (Rose 171). Byrd’s ambivalence about employing ghostwriters emerges in *Skyward* as two thinly-veiled arguments for others to help shoulder the writing load. His first argument is one of humility—that “the true explorer usually has ideals enough not to want to commercialize his work” (293). The second is that the physical and logistical rigors of exploration make it so that the use of “some one else [to] write one’s statements” sometimes “can’t be helped” (305). What matters in this study is not how much of the text was written by Byrd, but what cultural values and discourses made him the ideal autobiographical subject to begin with, and why these discourses demand certain fictions—like the erasure of home and family.

The fictions enacted by Byrd’s flight and his autobiography show a fixation on an extreme, pioneering effort wherein a fundamentally rational subject enacts cultural imperatives of progress. As a frontier, the sky allows Byrd to build character by interacting with a kind of aerial wilderness. The “virgin territory” accessed by the airplane feminizes the earth below and defines it by its purity—a place unsullied by the penetration of other men. The combination of metaphors invites an unattached, male presence that exists outside of the comforts and confines of civilization. By leaving the known world, Byrd becomes an exemplary figure able to exist apart from domestic spaces and escape the drag of the physical body. Like Magee’s “High Flight,” *Skyward* is a performance of cultural values that are based on an uncertain amount autobiographical “truth.” Byrd and Magee may have used the words of others to craft

experience and identity, but the words have stood the test of time—which says as much about the beliefs and desires of a nation as it does about the individual contributions of its pilots.

Chapter Three

Imaginative Geographies and the Limits of Transcendence:
Race and Class Difference in the Sanctity of Space

It is the contact with the ground, with that depressingly solid other world, that kills pilots.

Richard Bach *Stranger to the Ground* (23)

With a swift and sunlit thrust,
the dismal earth disappears,
and all signs of small and dutiful humankind
are buried in cushioned, white silence.

Carolyn Berge, "Feeling Compassionate" (30)

Autobiographical Demands and Historical Realities

Real pilots, as opposed to idealized ones, were confronted with several representational problems at the outset. In the first place, pilots usually lacked time and writing resources. The romantic image of the intrepid aviator in film and fiction was checked by actual aviators—real people looking for work in a fledgling industry with few jobs. The jobs that did pay—flight instruction, aircraft testing, exhibition flying, and mail carrying—were often transient and supremely dangerous and did not lend themselves to routine reflection. When pilots weren't in the air, they were often tinkering with engines, mending fabric flight surfaces, watching the weather, drumming up business, or chasing the next job. High mortality rates made it doubtful that pilots would live to complete an autobiography. One in six mail pilots died in 1920,³⁰ and the grim

³⁰ The *New York Times* reports that one aviator died for every 3,500 miles flown in 1910 and one per 4,900 in 1911. The article urges readers not to take this as a sign that airplanes are becoming safer, since the figures fail to account for fatalities that happen on short flights or training flights in which the aviator not had been in the air for a full hour. "Lives and Time are Wasted," September 28, 1911.

odds of survival probably contributed to the fact that pilots were more likely to write short pieces—letters and poetry—than anything else. David Courtwright points out that it was a common practice for American pilots to address letters to friends or family members with instructions that they be opened after their deaths (“I go west, but with a cheerful heart...” [59]). That many pilots felt as if they were uniquely involved in the business of living sometimes precluded the business of writing about it as well. For people who tended to pride themselves on the lived life—the engagement with startling beauty and danger—the performative aspects of flight were more pressing and immediate than those of autobiography.

The biggest hurdle that pilots encountered, however, was that few of them were trained as writers, and some, like Jackie Cochran, were nearly illiterate. An enthusiastic public awaited aviators able to narrate their adventures aloft, but pilots typically had less access to the generic conventions of autobiography than they did to “god’s heaven.” It was one thing to survive a sandstorm, seized engine, or squall and another to give it textual meaning. While pilots were well versed in aerodynamics, mechanics, and weather, they were rarely versed in the rigors of written language and unlikely to be aware of the discursive pressures at work in their narratives. Still, as long as written life and lived life could be thought of as coterminous, a poetic sensibility seemed essential to those who rose from shackles of earthbound existence.³¹

Because of their association with “a magic realm of wings and heavens which, once penetrated, mysteriously transformed their souls” (“Bards” 322), fliers were supposed to be special. And, if the pilot was reluctant to invoke a poetic identity, the

³¹ Wohl, *Passion for Wings*, 27-29.

public would sometimes do it for him. Following Wilbur Wright's successful flights in France, for example, the pilot was referred to by the French as a poet, even though the man, who was distinctly prosaic and practical, entirely resisted such associations (*Passion* 27, 271). The unwillingness of the elder Wright brother to talk about flight in terms of brotherhood, freedom or transcendence frustrated people who wanted a new type of hero, a representative subject able to "master the cold, inhuman machines that the nineteenth century had bequeathed" (29). "Unknown to themselves," writes Robert Wohl, "the Western peoples secretly desired an epic poetry of technological deeds" (29). The incarnation of the pilot as the modern hero was an extension of these desires. As the new pioneer, explorer, and adventurer, the pilot braved the elements and carried on the classic confrontation between man and nature.

In order for an autobiography to be well received by the public, the pilot needed some degree of access to the "epic poetry of technological deeds," and this meant that he or she had to self-define within imaginative space. To do this convincingly one had to control favorite geographical metaphors, which, as the last chapter has shown, were available insofar as the pilot seemed to exist outside of "nature." This chapter will show the reverse to be true as well: that the more materially encumbered or starkly embodied the subject, the less they seemed able to escape nature or participate in the vast empyrean, far from the concerns of human affairs. Imaginative geographies in this regard do not grant the pilot access to transcendence, but relegate him or her to material, domestic, or collective spheres that are incompatible with transcendence. The extent to which a pilot was able to leave the material world behind depended on a host of factors, of which mastery of machine and metaphor was essential.

A form in which the subject constructed personal experience in response to public desires and expectations, autobiography flourished in response to flight—an experience that few people claimed prior to the 1940s. And yet the sense that that the flier should transcend normal, human experience heightened the stakes of narrative performance. A genre that “celebrated the extraordinary lives of ‘great men’” (Anderson 4), autobiography seemed ideally suited to depict the life of the flier, and yet many of the narratives fell short of romantic expectations. The promise of transcending social and historical difference within autobiographical discourses was deeply compatible with—and ultimately as misleading as—the transcendent discourses of flight, which promised a release from the petty concerns of life on earth. Autobiographical transcendence, like material transcendence, would prove to be impossible, or temporary, for the vast majority of fliers. Even though the golden age of flight intersected with what John Tebbel calls the golden age of publishing between the wars (9), only Anne and Charles Lindbergh, Richard Byrd, and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry wrote flight autobiographies that made it onto American top-ten bestselling book lists (696-701).

Early aviators were probably not aware of the conventional demands of autobiography, which required sustained attention to a Romantic selfhood: a unified, unique self which was at once the expression of a universal human nature (Anderson 5). This was a tall order, even for those who seemed to transcend the limitations of the physical world. Social biases and textual expectations conspired to keep most would-be heroes firmly on the ground. Even as fliers earned recognition within the conquest of the air, their own limitations as writers, and as people able to embody “universal” ideals, limited the appeal of their texts. The public wanted the flier to do more than putter aloft

in a sputtering machine; it wanted him to go into the heavens and return transformed, with Truth hitherto unavailable to the earthbound. Expectations like this demanded a textual schizophrenia in which the flier had to construct an identity that was both extraordinarily unique and solidly representative.

Pilots were often encouraged to write about their experiences for a largely non-flying public, particularly if their exploits in the air were dramatic, unusual, or noteworthy. But not all of them were successful in making the progression from mundane to miraculous—or from particular to universal selfhood—personified by the iconic pilots like Lindbergh and Byrd. Some people simply did not seem to have “the right stuff” to turn mechanized flight into transcendent experience. Women and people of color, for instance, had a much more difficult time accessing discourses bent on rising above embodiment and earthly cares when they were identified *by* embodiment and earthly cares. Sidonie Smith’s observation that the more “colorful” the person, the less able he or she is to access the “bland neutrality of a universal selfhood” is relevant here (*Subjectivity* 10), and it helps explain why anyone marked in contrast to transcendent ideals had a hard time being taken seriously as an aviator or as a writer.

Women, people of color, and working-class subjects seemed incompatible with the ideals of transcendence because they were more likely to be trapped within imaginative geographies than they were to transcend them. Anyone who was tied down to materiality or physicality or who seemed synonymous with nature was, to some extent, feminized, and this impinged on the ability to participate in aerial and autobiographical discourses. Problems of feminization are an important thematic thread that I will develop in more detail in each of the following chapters, but for now simply want to point out that

an association with the earth, or with terrestrial or domestic spaces, posed significant problems for people who wanted fly. Black Americans, in particular, had a difficult time breaking into an imaginative space that presumed a transcendent, white subject. Samuel L. Broadnax, in his history of black aviation, points out that prejudices that kept black people from flying were directly linked to ideas about who belonged in the sky: “To even hint that the descendents of slaves would occupy the same spectacular air space would taint and tarnish a highly exclusive avenue that few could tread” (xi).

Biases that restricted access to the sky also interfered with self-representation, since marginalized people did not seem compatible with a realm that had always been associated with power. Metaphors that cast the sky as heaven or the new frontier were necessarily antithetical to subjects who had little money, power, or access to transcendent ideals. The myth history of the air equated verticality with *godlike* power, and this meant that going aloft had divine connotations and textual and political ramifications. While marginalized people flew in spite of prejudices, they were defined by their difference from an assumed ideal that was inherently white and male. Women were denied access to military training and commercial piloting jobs well into the 1970s,³² and black Americans were categorically refused flight instruction in the United States until end of

³²Helen Richey was the first woman to be hired as a commercial pilot for a U.S. airline in 1934, but it wasn't until 1973 that Emily Howell Warner became the first woman to be hired as an Air Transport Pilot for a jet-equipped scheduled airline (Frontier) 20 years after the first jet airliner entered service in 1952. Barbara Allen Rainey was the first woman pilot in the U.S. military in 1974. Although women flew for the WASP program from 1942-1945, the organization lacked the flight training available in other branches of the military. In addition, the WASP program was the only WWII women's auxiliary that was not militarized. Because of this, the women pilots served as civilian volunteers. As such, they were not eligible for veterans' benefits, and those who died in the service were not recognized as wartime casualties. Molly Merryman's *Clipped Wings: The Rise and Fall of the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) of World War II* (New York: New York UP, 1998) 4-5. A brief chronology: “Some Notable Women in Aviation History,” *Women in Aviation International*, <http://www.wai.org/resources/history.cfm>.

the 1920s,³³ decades after Wilbur and Orville Wright's first flight in 1903. As the 1920s and '30s gave birth to an enormous array of visual and print media, the representative aviator emerged as a solitary, independent, and white male subject who had the means to fly.

The conflation of pilot and poet that allowed some pilots to access the technological sublime was slippery and selective, since transcendence is a product of privilege. Noëlle Bisseret Moreau points out that dominant social discourses presume a "hidden referent"—a subject who is "male, bourgeois, Christian [and] white," and that spatial metaphors are markers of how close one is to the ideal (46-47). Moreau argues that dominated subjects, which include women, people of color and working class subjects, typically use tropology that connotes vertical movement: i.e., pulling oneself up, rising into the world, getting out, and opening up. Dominant subjects, on the other hand, do not have to use this kind of language, since "open space" is the "natural" place of the hidden referent (48). Moreau notes, for example, that men don't typically have to point out that they work "outside" of the home, since this is assumed to be normal. Enclosure, then, becomes a marker of non-transcendence, of femininity, confinement, of being "under" or inferior.

Transcendence was readily available to pilot writers such as Magee, Lindbergh, and Byrd, who were able to free themselves from enclosure and confinement. The ability to fully control powerful geographic metaphors—heaven, the frontier, wilderness—situated them well beyond the "surlly bonds of earth," that is, the material, mundane, and

³³ Samuel Broadnax traces the "breaking of the barrier" to the determination of a few black Americans who finally began to get into flight schools in the late 1920s and early '30s. *Blue Skies* 17-20.

domestic spaces that characterize the geographic parameters of most people's lives. These iconic pilots did not rise "into" the world; they went *beyond* the known world. And this is the most significant difference between pilot writers who perform transcendence and those who can't: the ability to exist beyond materiality, beyond physicality and beyond feminine spaces of enclosure and dependency. The pilots I introduce in this chapter illustrate the biases of aerial and autobiographical discourses in ways their famous contemporaries do not, precisely because of the ways in which they fall short of romantic, transcendent ideals.

To be the ideal aerial subject, one had to create the illusion of universality, which Sidonie Smith shows to be an exclusive, masculine formation (*Subjectivity*, 11-17), but ideal pilots also had to create the illusion of transcendence, which Simone de Beauvoir shows to be a masculine prerogative (58). De Beauvoir's discussion of transcendence will be particularly relevant to the women's writing in the next chapter, but I introduce some of her claims here as a way of showing how ideas about universality and transcendence intersect to create an extraordinarily masculine subject. For de Beauvoir, transcendence is defined by willful acts of self-realization—activities which include engaging in projects of an ever-widening scope. Moreover, she argues that transcendent activities are often dangerous, which lends them "supreme dignity" (58).

The transcendence de Beauvoir describes is both expansive and *progressive*. In order to be transcendent, one cannot merely engage in acts of repetition (which she shows to be feminine); one must continually extend one's reach into the world and brave new dangers. Transcendence, then, is not only a masculine gesture, but one that becomes hypermasculine as it is literalized by the airplane. Men who did not have the means to fly

for “self-realization” or who did not share inclination to “rise above” others, but hoped to provide for others or bring other fliers together as a community, were either invisible or suspicious within plots that presumed a radically individuated masculine subject breaching the heavens or pushing the boundaries of the aerial frontier. The hypermasculinization of vertical space meant that most pilots—even male ones—fell short of the ideal.

David Courtwright explains that the sky as the new “superfrontier” invited a subject who was “masculine, competitive, and inclined toward risk” (11, 14). Unencumbered by material, physical, emotional or biological encumbrances, this subject flew in spite of danger—which included attachments to women. Courtwright points out that aviation films of the 1920s and ‘30s typically featured a female lead who posed “a greater threat to the aviator and his pals than enemy fighters. Women sparked feuds, mucked things up, and failed to appreciate the right stuff” (54). While attitudes like this posed particular problems for women, I mention some of biases here in order to show that the new frontier did not tolerate femininity well. Women and children may not have posed a physical threat to the pilot, but they were dangerous insofar as they undermined the illusion of independence and freedom, of transcendence and universal selfhood. The erasure of home and family in the vast majority of pilot writing speaks to the pressures to appear autonomous and free. The more the pilot was aligned with feminine spaces, or synonymous with “nature,” the less ideal he seemed to be.

Autobiographies by Charles Lindbergh and Richard Byrd make it seem as if the space of the cockpit was coterminous with autobiographical spaces, which was hardly the case. The metaphorical conflation of “heaven” and frontier *was* compatible with a

unique, aerial subject able to build character by transcending the known world and engaging with a terrifying new element, but the conflation insisted on a subject that was not weighed down by domestic cares, familial attachments or social problems.

Lindbergh's and Byrd's autobiographies were successful in part because the pilots already conformed to public assumptions about what constituted an exemplary individual—one who was not defined by a job or reduced to a physical body, but by a force of spirit that transcended them.

Lindbergh and Byrd were the first American pilots to pull off the combination of aerial pioneer, national hero, and autobiographer with aplomb, but this ability had less to do with inherent character than with a variety of privileges. Lindbergh and Byrd both had ties to Washington: Lindbergh's father was a congressman and Byrd's father was both a state representative and attorney general for southwestern Virginia (Rose 11-12). Though Lindbergh dropped out, both men had the opportunity to attend college, and Byrd graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis. Lindbergh's family may not have enjoyed the old money that Byrd's family had, but neither knew a life of poverty. The ability of Lindbergh and Byrd to find backers for their extraordinary flights was partly due to the fact that both of them understood how corporate and government monies were channeled. Neither of them would have become a national hero without the ability to enlist support from a host of donors and speculators. It almost goes without saying that both men were white. The privileges of class and race are implicit in the autobiographies, but are certainly not foregrounded, since doing so would disrupt the illusion of flight as an extension of character. The story of Lindbergh's own ascent,

which was seen as material evidence of the American Dream, would have to accommodate a reality that was hardly rags to riches.

In spite of the fact that Lindbergh enjoyed a variety of privileges, he seemed to have come out of nowhere. He lacked Byrd's notoriety and military connections, and he lacked the press coverage enjoyed by the other teams competing for the Orteig prize. His quiet preparations for the Atlantic crossing drew very little attention until he landed at Roosevelt Field fully prepared for the "hop." His astonishing success as the "dark horse" of the race made it seem as if the sky welcomed all comers, which was hardly the case. Still, the skies beckoned, and with them the promise of transcending the limits of earthly cares. The biases of aviation were not particularly obvious until people attempted to join the new industry, and this is when would-be pilots came up against Moreau's "hidden referent," which proscribed the kind of person who would have access to unrestricted movement through space—and the resources to write about it.

Both of the pilots I introduce in this chapter recognized the sky to be a space of privilege, and their autobiographies call attention to biases that relegated some people to lives on the ground. Jimmy Collins's *Test Pilot* (1935) addresses problems of social class, while William J. Powell's *Black Wings* (1934) addresses problems of race. Both autobiographies provide a striking counterpoint to life narratives by Lindbergh and Byrd, in which flight seems to be a natural extension of character. The next two sections show that men like Collins and Powell failed to become national figures because they did not have control over imaginative geographies in the same ways that their iconic contemporaries did. Their proximity to feminine spaces, material demands, and their physical bodies seriously hampered their ability to seem "universal" or transcendent.

Although these pilots invoke Lindbergh as a colleague (Collins) or inspirational force (Powell), both of them are marked in stark contrast to the “Lord of the air.”

Collins and Powell were both troubled by an industry bent on their exclusion, and both created autobiographies that were a combination of personal narrative and social critique. Each saw aviation as a way of rising above cultural barriers, but both were also confronted with social realities that made their work conspicuously fraught and even suspicious. Neither of the men enjoyed the notoriety shared by Lindbergh and Byrd—there are no archived papers lurking in university libraries, no biographers searching for lost interviews and news clips—nor do the texts fit within the parameters of autobiography proper. Because of this, both of the texts are uniquely suited to shed light on the hierarchies embedded in vertical and autobiographical spaces.

Aerial Dreams and Material Realities: Jimmy Collins’s *Test Pilot*

Little is known about Jimmy Collins that is not chronicled in his 1935 autobiography *Test Pilot*. He was born in Warren, Ohio in 1904, orphaned at sixteen, flew a wide variety of flying jobs, became a test pilot for the Navy, and hoped to retire and become a writer. Collins had resolved to make one last test dive in order to fulfill his Navy contract, but he was killed in 1935 when the aircraft he was flying broke apart during the pull out. I include Collins’s book here in order to introduce the physical hazards of flight during the golden age of aviation, but I also include it as a way of addressing the kinds of pressures that Lindbergh and Byrd, as hugely popular and “universal” subjects, were able to ignore. *Test Pilot* provides evidence of the profound exclusivity of transcendence and universal subjectivity. A working-class pilot and writer,

Collins foregrounds financial concerns, and because of this he represents a much larger group of fliers than do Lindbergh and Byrd: those who did not explore the world or touch the heavens, but simply attempted to fly for a living.

Collins's autobiography begins with an introduction that establishes his background as a pilot and his passion for flying, but it also shows how his love of flight is tempered by the difficulty of finding work. The introduction foregrounds the immediate historical context in order to establish a fact that many flight autobiographies ignore: that most of the flying and writing that took place after Lindbergh's flight was done during the Great Depression. Rather than rise above this context, Collins struggles with it, and his life narrative calls attention to how the ability to fly was irrevocably tied up in the ability to afford it. Collins's book begins with a personal introduction, which is followed by a collection of previously written articles, including "Return to Earth," an essay published in *The Saturday Evening Post* that landed Collins a job writing "Flying Stories," a syndicated column with New York's *Daily News*.

The book begins as a typical flight autobiography: that is, it introduces Collins and his training as a pilot, but it does not proceed as one because Collins did not live to complete it. The bulk of the book is a compilation of Collins's columns, which were collected by the publisher and printed posthumously. The most startling part of the book is the epilogue entitled "I Am Dead," a chapter in which Collins describes his death as the airplane he is flying breaks into pieces midair. Written just before his last test dive, the chapter was included in a letter Collins wrote to his sister in the event that he got "bumped off" (174). Although the chapter begins with Collins joking that the chapter, if

needed, will be “ghost-written,” it is a sobering reminder of the potentially grim consequences of working in a new and unforgiving industry.

Collins’s work differs from Lindbergh’s and Byrd’s autobiographies in that it does not depend on “spectacular flights”—ocean crossings, exploration, record breaking—to organize the narrative. Instead, Collins highlights a variety of flying experiences and describes other people with whom he works and flies. As such, it is more a mosaic than a unified whole, and it’s hard to say whether Collins considered the work “finished” or not, since he died before its publication. It is clear throughout, however, that Collins’s emphasis is not on competition, but on a sense of fair play. If anything, Collins reverses the image of the aviator as a transcendent hero. He pokes fun at his own limitations and shows other aviators with whom he flies to be a colorful, eclectic and sometimes erratic mix of people. Neither he nor his companions escape the material world; rather, they work a variety of jobs within it. Aviation for Collins is not a transcendent calling, but an industry that is filled with humor and fraught with physical and financial challenges.

Like other pilot autobiographers, Collins begins by documenting his ancestry. But he is unable to claim a pedigree of pioneering relatives as Lindbergh does. Instead, he describes a family, and a life of poverty, that firmly establishes his identity as a working class subject. Collins explains that his grandfather, an Irish immigrant, was a basket weaver and that his father, a bricklayer, died when Collins was five years old. His mother, who worked a combination of unskilled domestic jobs to support Collins and his sister, died eleven years later, leaving the children to fend for themselves. Collins notes that the only way he was able to finish high school was by working night shifts at the

Goodrich Rubber Factory in Akron, Ohio. As in most pilot autobiographies, an opportunity to fly shows up early on—just in time to help the young protagonist decide on a career path—and this moment happens for Collins when he is accepted to the United States Army Air Service flying school. Rather than resolve concerns about class, however, his training complicates them, since he graduates from the flight school—along with classmate Charles Lindbergh—to enter a world of unemployment.

Collins shows himself returning to the military on several occasions in order to secure work. And here, Collins makes another significant departure from the autobiographical pattern established in *“WE.”* Collins does not claim to have an individuating moment in which he feels called to participate in a particular aerial feat. Instead, he begins reading George Bernard Shaw, develops a correspondence with the author, and has an identity crisis. He realizes that what he loves most—flying and instructing—can only be done with any kind of job security within the military, and that the military is the one thing that stands between him and the factory jobs that make him feel demoralized. From reading Shaw, however, Collins feels the need to face that his life is at odds with his ideals: “To find one’s self a convinced Socialist and a pacifist and at the same time a professional soldier, at the age of twenty-four, places one, if one is conscientious, as I was, in a considerable dilemma” (7). Collins’s convictions force him to leave the military, and he learns very quickly that his background makes him an anomaly in aviation. “I began inquiring,” he writes, “and I learned that I was the only pilot of my training and experience that I knew who had a working-class background” (13).

The ideological struggle in which Collins finds himself is compounded by the fact that he is married with two young children, and his attention to his family marks another departure from flight autobiographies in which material demands, domestic spaces, and familial subjects disappear. Collins's concern for his family becomes a powerfully motivating force that intersects with, and is sometimes at odds with, his political ideals. For Collins, flight is not a way of freeing himself from the confines of home and family, but of taking responsibility for them. After Collins loses a piloting job because of his involvement in local Socialist groups, his wife and children move to Oklahoma to live with in-laws while Collins looks for work. In the meantime, Collins takes the next job that comes his way: diving airplanes for the Navy.

The job Collins takes, commonly referred to at the time as "death diving," is a supremely dangerous one that requires him to dive an airplane straight at the ground from an altitude of 18,000 to 20,000 feet in order to determine the airplane's terminal velocity—the speed at which a falling object ceases to accelerate. The most dangerous part of the flight is not the dive, however, but the pullout, which has to be done at a minimum of 9 gs in order for Navy officials to count the test as a viable measure of structural strength. Collins notes that the terminal velocity of the Grumman fighter is 395 miles per hour, and he calculates that a force of nine gs (nine times his own body weight) will put a stress on his body of 1,350 pounds. After Collins nearly passes out on his first dive, which reads at a mere 5 ½ gs, a Navy commander tells him to yell on the pullout in order to "preserve sight and consciousness longer" (35). The physical strain, which was

known to cause intestinal ruptures and broken blood vessels in the brain³⁴ leads Collins to question why the Navy is more intent on determining structural factors than human ones. In spite of the apparent lack of interest in his physical safety, Collins continues to dive until he earns his first paycheck: \$1,500 for 12 9-g dives.

Collins hardly fits the requirements of the universal subject. While he is a solitary figure aloft in the space of the cockpit, he is not independent or able to pursue a unique destiny free from material or biological encumbrances. Flight, for Collins, is entirely dependent on a paycheck, and so he doesn't escape the toil of earth, but takes it with him. The choices he makes in the cockpit are determined by others, and they have direct, physical consequences, which make his body a conspicuous, and vulnerable, presence in the autobiography. Following his first 9-g dive, for example, he writes: "I felt like I had been beaten. My eyes felt like somebody had taken them out and played with them and put them back in again. I was droopy tired and had sharp shooting pains in my chest. My back ached, and that night I blew my nose and it bled" (34). The job Collins describes does not allow him to rise above the common man as much as it enables other "transcendent" individuals like Byrd and Magee to fly well-tested aircraft. And, whether he likes it or not, Collins's work reduces him to an aerial source of material production.

The presence of Collins's family as a motivating factor restricts Collins's ability to appear autonomous and free. Though his wife and children figure into the introduction and final chapter, they also show up in a few of the flying stories as well. By including them, Collins purposely contrasts himself to Lindbergh. Flying over Lindbergh's "sad, white house" in the Sourland Mountains, for instance, Collins thinks about the murder of

³⁴ "Damn Fool's Job," *Time*, April 1935.

Lindbergh's baby, and, upon returning home kisses his own chubby-cheeked son and pities Lindbergh his fame "somewhat" (98-99). Later, Collins describes giving his wife, Dee, flying lessons; and, after a particularly frustrating lesson in which she seems incapable of stabilizing the aircraft, Collins berates her for not taking to the airplane as well as Anne Morrow Lindbergh. Dee, however, gets the last word. She looks at Collins long and hard and then says, "Well, look who taught her" (166). The exchange allows Dee to have personality of her own within the text, and it allows Collins to critique his own presumed superiority.

The vignettes are sometimes humorous, sometimes tragic, but all of them are distinctly down to earth. There is no "spirit" of mankind that takes Collins aloft into a realm reserved for a special few. Pilots play pranks on each other, goof up, crack up their ships and themselves, fly drunk, wire skeletons into cockpits, and parachute from burning aircraft holding the fire extinguisher. There are, in fact, many more stories in which people fly together or work together than isolated ones in which the pilot develops anything like a special identity.

The sky in *Test Pilot* is not a sociocultural space in which Collins differentiates or self-defines, but a place where he flies and works with a community of others. But the longer Collins stays in aviation, the less able he is to fly for reasons that are fulfilling to him. Collins's frustration at the end of the book is due to the fact that his dream of flight is contingent on material forces over which he has no control. In the final "ghost-written" chapter, it is obvious that Collins regrets his inability to transcend earthly cares. Collins writes of the "formless, unbreathed word of mood and dream and passion" that was his dream of flight (175), but he also writes how the dream was dimmed by material

reality: “The glow died down, and the colors of the earth showed up. Ambition, money. Love and cares and worry. Curious how strong the strength of weakness is, in women and their children, when you can see your own deep dreams, unworded, shining in their eyes” (176). Here, for the first time, Collins seems to resent the terrestrial forces—namely his family and their needs—that bind him to earth. His inability to free himself from material and physical entanglements interferes with his ability to concoct a selfhood that rises above earthly cares—and it interferes with his ability to fly in the first place. “Finally,” he writes, “there came a time when I would rather eat than fly, and money was a precious thing” (177). His disappointment permeates the last chapter, as domestic responsibilities and economic instability interfere with his ability to participate in the “dream of flight.”

Socioeconomic factors that inhibit Collins’s ability to make a living as a pilot are the same ones that interfere with his ability to be the transcendent, aerial subject, who engages in dangerous and willful acts of self-realization. Michael Nerlich traces adventure ideology, which “demands and celebrates voluntary daring” (5) to the end of the twelfth century, when it emerged as a “distinctive hallmark of class” (6). This was a major shift from Bakhtin’s classical hero of antiquity who merely endures ordeals, since the protagonist actively chooses danger and in so doing he realizes “his true ‘essence’” (6). Nerlich claims that “the systematic glorification of the (knightly, then bourgeois) adventurer” (xx) demanded a subject that was decidedly not poor or “common.” By the eighteenth century, Nerlich argues adventure was firmly out of reach for most people, particularly the poor, who could only experience adventure in the negative sense, that is “as a fate one suffers, as trouble, punishment, injustice” (208). Collins—because he

lacks the resources for “voluntary daring”: that is, he lacks the means to engage in flight as an act of self-realization—falls into the second class of people who endure adventure as a form of (social) injustice.

Collins not only struggles with an ideology that limits his access to adventure, he struggles with a genre that presumes bourgeois subjectivity as well. Laura Marcus notes that auto/biographical discourses engage in a “doctrine of pursuits,” which privileges the “unified progress of life and text.” The successful autobiographical subject is synonymous with the subject who is successful in a career. The preoccupation with “purpose, progress and attainment,” which finds its ideal in the statesman, plots the life course as “inseparable from the life-structures specific to bourgeois masculinity” (26). Elizabeth Bidinger concurs, arguing that a strong component of working class autobiography is its focus on transformation in which the protagonist follows an upward progression that “dramatizes a journey from a hard life to a better one.” This progression, according to Bidinger, is motivated by a desire to appeal to the “biases, tastes, and expectations of his upper-middle-class readers” (5). Sidonie Smith argues that the development of self in autobiography is a fundamentally bourgeois formulation as well—one either moves vertically downward to discover the “pure being or essence” or horizontally outward, “expanding the horizons of self and the boundaries of experience through accretion” (18).

In all of these formulations, autobiographical practices consolidate a bourgeois subject defined in contrast to working class subjects or working class origins. The very qualities needed for autobiographical success, then, are ones that Moreau shows to be the prerogative of the “hidden referent.” Problematically, these are the same qualities that

“dominated” subjects (working class, people of color and women) are accused of as lacking: the ability to move freely from “enclosure” to “open space” and the ability to communicate in articulate, abstract or conceptual terms (51). At the margins, the working class subject can only speak for himself or for a community of marginalized others; he cannot generalize or universalize or extrapolate his experience for others *unless he makes the transformation* from a replaceable working class subject to a progressive, highly individuated and successful bourgeois subject.

The preconditions for autobiography are attuned to a subject that Collins is not suited to embody well. He does not experience a transformation in which he moves from a hard life to a better one; he does not move vertically toward his pure “essence,” nor does he move outward, expanding his own horizons. He is unable to move ahead in his career, but is trapped in a job in which he is shockingly expendable. Should he die, there are plenty of other pilots to take his place. His death would not be a national loss, but what would amount to a kind of collateral damage, and this is evidenced in the fact that the military officials are more interested in the physical effects on the airplane than the effects on the diver. The practical realities of his job, of his flying, overshadow self-reflection required for ideal autobiographical selfhood. He does not self-define in symbolic space; he barely manages to survive occupational space.

Collins’s physicality limits his ability to seem “universal.” Unlike Magee, who seems to fly in spite of the machine, and Lindbergh, whose spirit allows him to fly in spite physical limitations, Collins is confined to a body that is utterly vulnerable. In addition, Collins’s relationship to materiality limits his ability to seem transcendent. Unlike Byrd, who flies *in spite of* material expenses, Collins must fly *because of* material

expenses. The intrusion of material concerns—providing for wife and children—shows him to be aligned with feminine, domestic spaces, which are essentially non transcendent. Moreau’s argument that marginalized subjects are typically seen as being more practical or as having a “relationship with nature” (51) is applicable to Collins, who does not rise above the material world but is enmeshed or trapped within it. He does not rise above or exist outside of nature, but is utterly dependent on its laws. The physical injuries he sustains from pushing the laws of aerodynamics show him to be a subject who does not conquer nature, but is bludgeoned by nature. His final inability to control the machine or metaphorical markers of transcendence marks him in terms of his distance from an ideal that is extraordinarily masculine and fundamentally exclusive.

Test Pilot earned mixed reviews upon its publication. In one *New York Times* review, John Chamberlain admires its “artless charm,” but notes that it “fails to become the large critique of the anomalous position of the expert technician in a competitively overcrowded field” (19). In another *Times* review, however, the reviewer claims that “no one else has written about flying with the knowledge, the poetic feeling, the ability to translate the song in the heart into glowing, impressive language as Jimmy Collins has done in this little book” (“The Book of Jimmy Collins” BR3). The reviews consider Collins’s book in terms of its creative merits and arrive at mixed conclusions, but it is less important to referee the reviews than to point out that the conclusions matter less than the merits by which the book was judged. As a textual artifact, *Test Pilot* is evaluated on literary achievement alone. Texts like “*WE*” and *Skyward*, on the other hand, are evaluated by the cultural significance of the *actions* performed by the authors, which places the texts beyond “mere” literary critique. While I would argue that

Collins's book is much more introspective than Lindbergh's and far more engaging than Byrd's, the fact that Collins is not a cultural icon makes his autobiography less recognizable as a literary and cultural contribution.

Collins's autobiography radically challenges the accessibility of transcendence and universal selfhood, and it begins to reveal the biases at work within aerial and autobiographical discourses. Even though flight is supremely dangerous for Collins, it is not an act of self-realization, but a series of tasks that allow him to make a living. The fact that his flying is repetitious and directly linked to home and family moves it from being a supremely masculine endeavor to one that is feminized—complicated with domestic cares. Collins's inability to establish his own identity within cherished, cultural fictions such as the "doctrine of pursuits" or the American Dream, limited the mass appeal and critical acclaim of his work. Collins may not have been an example of the iconic, unencumbered aerial hero, but his struggle to balance his passion for flight with his responsibilities at home allows him to represent a much larger cross section of the early, flying public: those who did not transcend physical and material limitations, but simply meant to eke out a living in a new and unforgiving industry.

Aerial Dreams and Physical Realities: William J. Powell's *Black Wings*

Lindbergh's life was supposed to serve as a model to young men who were considered to be the inheritors of his heroic legacy.³⁵ But his legacy was a selective one, available to a very few able to embody the best of human nature while radically setting

³⁵ Putnam produced a special boxed edition of "WE" for boys, and the afterward makes it clear that the flight is a "tribute to the young men of the world," 262.

themselves apart from other human beings. Collins's autobiography shows how material demands mark the subject in contrast to the "universal" ideal defined by Lindbergh, while the autobiography I introduce next, William J. Powell's *Black Wings*,³⁶ shows how the intrusion of the body marks the subject in contrast to the ideal as well. Both of the texts show how subjects more closely aligned with immediate, material concerns had more trouble escaping earthly cares and writing themselves as heroic. Both texts also show how imaginative geographies trap writers within terrestrial or domestic spaces that limit their ability to enact transcendent plots. Neither of the pilots exists entirely outside of the demands of the physical world, and because of this, both of them are connected to "nature" in ways that their iconic contemporaries were not. Collins betrays his proximity to nature when his "dream" of flight is shattered by the "colors of the earth" (176). Powell, however, is even more closely linked to nature by sheer physicality, and this connection feminizes his efforts and makes him seem an unlikely subject in the hypermasculine space of the sky. The two texts show the difficulties of self-actualizing within the new aerial frontier, but Powell's is especially valuable in addressing the extraordinary biases that black pilots faced during the golden age of flight.

Lindbergh shaped, and was shaped by, existing notions of what the modern, aerial hero should be: brave, modest, virtuous, hardworking, resourceful, visionary. And, even though his story was not rags to riches, it was his persistence, not privilege, that people wanted to see, since it allowed for continued faith in the American dream and the transformative power of flight. If Lindbergh could make a name for himself through the

³⁶ I will refer to Powell's autobiography by its original title, *Black Wings*, even though my references are from *Black Aviator*, the 1994 reprint of the original, published in 1934.

conquest of the skies, then it seemed that others could do so as well. The enthusiasm for Lindbergh was also an enthusiasm for the idea that anyone with enough raw nerve and determination could leave the ordinary world behind. The excitement with which people took lessons and began to compete in speed, distance, and endurance events after Lindbergh's flight is testament to a legacy in which "common men" could potentially change themselves—and the world—through aviation. In the United States, people saw the airplane as an instrument for social reform (Corn 60) and aviation as a way of transcending cultural restrictions imposed by sexual and racial discrimination (35).

But even as the skies seemed to be literally up for grabs, notions about what *kind* of person belonged aloft revealed entrenched biases. While Bessie Coleman, the first African American pilot, claimed "the air is the only place free from prejudices," her faith in the equality of the air was betrayed by the fact that no American flight school would admit her.³⁷ Were it not for aeronautical schools in France that accepted black students, she could not have become the first licensed black American aviator. Coleman's optimism was echoed by African American pilot and "prophet of aviation" (xv) William Powell who urged the black community to take up the cause of aviation as a way of "ride[ing] below the Mason and Dixon line as a free man should ride" (xxxiv). And yet, entering the world of the "birdmen" would prove as difficult for Powell as it was for Coleman. It took almost a year of steady rejections before Powell was able to locate a flight school in the U.S. that consented to take on a "colored" student in 1928.

³⁷ She earned her private license in France on June 15, 1921, and earned her international aviation license from the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale later that year, becoming the first American woman to hold one. The quote is widely attributed to Coleman and recorded in David English's *The Air up There* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2003), 47.

Prejudices that kept people of color firmly tethered to the earth were due in part to imaginative geographies that presumed a “natural” vertical progression, from lower to higher life forms. The Great Chain of Being, which assigned value to all life based on perceived corruptibility, subjugated matter to spirit; animal to human; human to god. Anyone who could be conflated with nature, that is, anyone associated with corporality, femininity or animality—or who illustrated “natural,” chaotic or irrational impulses—seemed incongruous within the air, a space that symbolized “higher” thought, intellect, spirit, freedom and independence. The metaphor, by ordering life in terms of its godlike potential, readily accommodated and rationalized prejudices that situated people of color as “lower” than their white counterparts.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. attributes the subjugation and enslavement of black people to an Enlightenment fixation on reason that became integral to the Great Chain in the eighteenth century. Gates points out that the perceived absence or presence of reason—as a measurement of perfection—was used to “delimit and circumscribe the very humanity of the cultures and people of color which Europeans had been ‘discovering’ since the Renaissance.” The presumed absence of reason relegated blacks to “a lower rung” on the Great Chain of Being, which located “‘the lowliest Hottentot’ (black South Africans)” well below “‘glorious Milton and Newton’” (130). Gates explains that the rise of reason as the prime personality trait made writing a necessary part of racial emancipation. As a visible sign of reason, writing had to be employed by black people in order to establish themselves as speaking, reasoning subjects.

Writing posed particular problems for people from oral traditions. The dissonance between written and oral discourses created specific problems for black

writers, and I will address these in a moment as they relate to Powell's work. For the moment, however, I want to point out that the assumptions in the metaphor necessarily exclude people of color from "higher" spaces. Spirit, as I mentioned in the last chapter, is perfect, infallible, and constituted by its opposite, the body, which is essentially fallible. Being *defined* by one's physical body, then, becomes a marker of fallibility, of temporality, of the *inability* to transcend earthly encumbrances. Cultural assumptions that reduced black people to physicality thus anchored black Americans to material and domestic spaces, and this feminizing gesture helps account for the extraordinary biases that kept black people from participating in aviation in the United States. Flight may have been prohibitive for men like Collins, who lacked the financial means to stay aloft, but it was virtually inaccessible for people who were presumed to be inextricably bound to imperfect, physical bodies.

It's impossible to know if Powell read Lindbergh's "*WE*" before writing *Black Wings*, but it is clear that Lindbergh was a touchstone for Powell. Inspired by Lindbergh's flight, and by what he took to be the perfect opportunity to get in on the "ground floor" of what was about to be the "most gigantic of all industries" (xxxiii), Powell takes as his point of departure the field at Le Bourget in order to lend immediate, symbolic importance to the narrative. The life events selected by Powell do not show him to be radically unique or independent, but solidly representative and down to earth. There are no fabulous landscapes, no metaphorical geographies. Rather, each flight is designed to teach the reader something useful about aviation. The narrative is not introspective, but instructive; not poetic, but intensely practical—and political. From the introduction, Powell makes it clear that the black American community must seize the

opportunities within the new field of aviation. The life narrative that follows is less a way of rising above his fellow black citizens than of leading by example. Each incident he describes, from his training and solo to his cross country adventures, anticipates a reader who will be motivated by—and learn from—his experience.

Although there are startling differences between Powell's life narrative and autobiography proper, Powell's book includes most of the elements typical to flight autobiography. Powell does not mention his family background, but he does describe a specific, individuating moment when he feels called to aviation. Following this is an initiation that includes his first solo, after which he faces further tests of skill and endurance. Powell's primary struggle, however, is not against the forces of nature, but against social and political forces that frustrate his dream of "black wings": a sky and an industry filled with black professionals. The refusal of the American flight schools to accept him as a student is only the first hurdle. Securing public awareness, governmental approval, and financial support proves to be an ongoing battle that motivates all of the action in the book. Powell's actions are also motivated by the desire to prove his friend, Reverend Braddan, wrong. Braddan, who believes that his fellow blacks "do not take to new things readily" (8, 9), cautions Powell against giving up his successful automotive businesses³⁸ in order to drum up interest in black aviation. Braddan's caution turns into a bet in which he promises to fly with Powell in the event that he can "get a group of ten Negroes together to pioneer a new field...complete their training and get them all to Chicago" (28). The book ends with a letter to Braddan explaining that the Black Wings

³⁸ Von Hardesty notes that Powell was a successful businessman in an area of South Chicago known as the "Black Belt," and that his first gas station, which opened in 1926, grew to an enterprise that may have included as many as five garages by 1926. From the introduction xv.

Aviation Association, composed of twelve men and women, are preparing to fly to Chicago to see him “*pay-off*” (130).

Powell’s individuating moment occurs at Le Bourget, a few months after Lindbergh’s historical landing. In Paris for an American Legion Convention, Powell and a friend, Burrell Neely, take their first airplane ride. The flight sparks Powell’s interest in aviation, and allows him to think about the meaning of the flight. It is significant that Powell does not consider what the flight means to him personally, but what it means to black people as a whole—and this move is typical of how he frames experience throughout the text. Powell observes that the biggest American industries, such as transportation and motion pictures, have “passed the Negro by” (4), and he becomes determined to reverse this trend, resolving to return to the United States and promote aviation. Back in the States, however, Powell finds that he is refused airplane rides as well as lessons. Although he is a successful and educated American citizen—having graduated from the University of Illinois in electrical engineering—no private or commercial schools will accept him as a student. And, even though he is a decorated veteran, the military flight schools flatly deny his admittance based on the fact that he is “colored” (18). Before his aerial initiation can even begin, Powell spends a year “in despair” applying to flight schools before being accepted to the Warren College of Aeronautics in Los Angeles.

By expressing his goals and concerns in terms of what is at stake for all black Americans, Powell shows his own identity to be bound to that of a larger group. In his first official meeting with Neely, who becomes his business manager, the two agree that the “day of rampant individualism has passed,” and that in order for the black man to

profit, “he must lay aside personalities and submerge them in collective effort” (55-56). Stephen Butterfield points out that the formation of individual identity in black autobiography is linked to “ties and responsibilities” to the community (3), but Laura Marcus explains that the formation of collective identity in African American life-writing emerges as a major issue (289), since auto/ biographical discourses privilege a selfhood defined by independence. The tension between individual and collective identity pervades *Black Wings*, but it is most evident in “Ethiopia Spreads Her Wings,” a chapter that begins with Powell’s work in aviation and then segues into the achievements by a host of black citizens. By combining his efforts and those of others, Powell creates a text that is both personal and political. But he also creates a text that is less recognizable as autobiography.

Powell both participates in, and subverts, the generic demands of autobiography, which presume a unique and independent subject. His attention to a larger community of black Americans shows his commitment to community, but the erasure of his own family shows his ambivalence about defining himself in collective terms if those are private or feminine. At the time he wrote *Black Wings*, Powell had been married to his wife, Lucille, for twelve years, and his daughter Bernardine would have been eleven,³⁹ and yet these women are fully erased in the narrative. The disappearance of Powell’s family suggests that he was responding to discourses that privileged an independent and autonomous subject firmly anchored in the public sphere. Powell’s decision to craft a public identity makes sense, given the problems of legitimacy he already faced; but the disappearance of the family—particularly in an autobiography that foregrounds

³⁹ From Von Hardesty’s introduction, xv.

community—is a reminder that the sky was sociocultural space that presumed a subject able to escape the drag of the body.

Even more unusual than Powell's attention to collective identity is the fact that he adopts a range of narrative styles and subject positions within the text. Powell begins with a Preface that outlines his intentions, which are strictly motivational. In lieu of introducing himself, he begins by describing "Joe," a friend who loses a chauffeuring job because he is afraid to take the flight lessons offered by his employer, who wants a pilot as well as a driver. The story seems more allegorical than factual, given the profound resistance to black fliers at the time, but it makes sense given Powell's favorite image: the black American liberated by flight. Von Hardesty points out in the introduction that, for Powell, "moving from chauffeur to corporate pilot was a metaphor for racial emancipation" (xxiii). By shifting attention from his story to Joe's, Powell bursts into a political and polemical present tense narrative, in which he firmly chastises his fellow black citizens for their former lack of initiative in other industries. Powell's belief that the airplane was uniquely suited for "transcending all earthbound race restrictions"⁴⁰ fuels his insistence that black Americans need to take active roles in aviation as soon as possible.

Since Powell's autobiography is set against a backdrop of political and social struggle, it is less concerned with the formation of a unique identity than with issues of access. The urgency with which Powell addresses his fellow black Americans in the Preface is more manifesto than life-writing, but it is not too much of a digression from life narratives such as Byrd's that begin by addressing aviation as an industry. The most

⁴⁰ Ibid, xii.

significant departure Powell makes from autobiographical discourses is that he adopts what seems to be a fictitious identity after the Preface. The pressing, motivational speech that characterizes the beginning of the book is replaced in chapter one by simple, reflective, third-person narrative that introduces “Bill Brown,” a World War I veteran who finds himself at Le Bourget a few months after Lindbergh’s arrival. Although it is clear that Bill is in fact a thinly-veiled version of Powell, the narrative progresses as if Powell has no relationship to the protagonist. The rest of the autobiography is written from Bill’s perspective, with the exception of a short section at the end entitled “‘OPPORTUNITIES’ A Personal Word with the Author,” in which Powell returns to first person in order to define a plan of action and urge black Americans to take an active interest in aviation.

The double consciousness in which Powell is both the subject and object of his own autobiography calls attention to the fact that all autobiographical narrators are plural, and that the unity of the subject is a linguistic illusion. Sidonie Smith points out that there are typically four “I”s at work in any autobiography: the “real” or historical “I,” the narrating “I,” the narrated “I,” and the ideological “I” (*Reading* 59-63). The “real” or historical “I” refers to an actual individual living in a particular place and time; but this “I” exists outside of autobiography. The narrating “I” is the one who remembers and creates the story; and this “I” is also the “agent of discourse” (60). The narrated “I” is the object, the protagonist of the autobiography as constituted by the narrator. The ideological “I” is the personhood culturally available to the narrator at the time of the telling; and this “I” (re)produces, and sometimes subverts, prevalent beliefs about personhood. By splitting the subject, Powell makes the multiple identities obvious.

“Bill,” as the narrated “I,” is controlled by Powell, who is the narrating “I”—the agent making choices about how Bill should conduct himself as a representative black aviator. The ideological “I” is the personhood that Bill assumes within the historical and social contexts in which he lives. And this “I” is the one that struggles against the limitations imposed by the dominant culture.

Like Smith, Marcus points out that “pronouns of identity (“I,” “you,” “he/ she”) frequently appear in autobiographical texts as strategies for articulating or engaging the tension between unity and division” (194). The fact that Powell chose to represent himself in both first and third-person points to a tension between the self as a stable, past-tense object and a current self which observes and evaluates the self as an ongoing process. By locating “Bill’s” experience firmly in the past and at a narrative distance, Powell may have been trying to present his experience both allegorically and objectively. The approach allows Bill to become a model for other black Americans who want to fly, but he also becomes an object of discourse that Powell can mold and critique from a distance.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. explains that narrative shifts between third and first person often “oscillate freely” within black texts, and that they are the result of tensions between written and oral traditions. Gates contends that the confluence of literary and vernacular traditions creates a “double-voiced discourse” in black autobiography that combines literal and figurative forms. This doubling is central to Gates’s concept of signifyin(g), which he describes as a “formal revision that is at all points double voiced” (22). For Gates, the vernacular is a subversive force, undercutting the penchant for the literal in rational discourse. Powell’s doubling seems less an act of subversion than a move

toward acceptance. He studiously avoids figurative and vernacular language, presumably in order to make his experience recognizable—and acceptable—within discourses of power. Powell fully appropriates Standard English, even as he takes on multiple subject positions. The way that he splits the subject comes at a narrative cost, however. In a genre that presupposes subjective unity, Powell comes across more like an imposter than an ideal subject—which is precisely how many people viewed his work in aviation at the time.

Powell's book sometimes reads like fiction, sometimes like manifesto, and sometimes like an instruction manual, but rarely like traditional autobiography. Throughout the text, Powell constructs Bill as a model student: he is rational, teachable, methodical and fully committed to his lessons, even when they become difficult and demoralizing. All of Bill's flights are cast as learning experiences with direct, material consequences. There is no conflation of the air with "heaven," no touching the face of god, no spiritual transformation of the pilot. Although Powell adopts a variety of voices, his goals remain practical. In the chapter "Bill Learns to Fly," for instance, the text reads more like a manual in aerodynamics and safety than life-writing. Five full pages are written from the point of view of Mr. Monteith, Bill's flight instructor, who dutifully lectures Bill on the dangers of imprudence. The lesson is directed at Bill, but it reads as if Powell is making the information available to other potential students. By including it, Powell does a kind of double duty, one in which he tells his own story and educates others. The result of Powell's attention to community and his use of multiple subjectivities is a text that starkly challenges the generic boundaries of autobiography.

One of the most important parts of *Black Wings* is Bill's first solo flight, and I include part of it here in order to demonstrate Powell's approach and address the kinds of pressures Powell faced as one of the first black flight students in the United States. A high-profile moment, the solo reveals the character and personality of the flier, but it also foreshadows how the flier will handle future adventures alone. Powell's solo also illustrates the profound stakes of his aerial and autobiographical performances. In the passage, Powell positions himself both inside and outside of the cockpit, making Bill the subject and object of critique. The excerpt shows Powell's deep enthusiasm for flight, but it also shows his self-consciousness, since he seems to side with the crowd, which regards his flight with doubt and suspicion:

Without another word Bill opened the throttle and soon was in the air. What a thrill! Up in the air alone! ... Around the field at 1,000 feet and then land, Bill thought. The first time around he made himself quite at home looking over the side of the ship at those on the ground watching him. He even waved. Yes, he's getting too smart right at the start. He's coming in now for a landing. Everybody is out of the hangars and shops watching Bill solo—he's way too high—he'll land 'way out in the weeds on the rough ground—probably he'll nose over, break a propeller, probably the ship will catch fire. He is side-slipping, but he's 'way too high, even at that. The instructor is watching him very calmly. But Bill, too, has noticed that he cannot make the field from that height, and so he gives her the gun and goes around again, and Monteith heaves a sigh of relief. (49)

Powell's double consciousness permeates the text, which allows him to critique Bill from a distance. Powell projects cockiness onto Bill, using it as a way of cautioning others who may follow his example. From his detached perspective, Powell becomes one of the people below who expect any number of disasters. Monteith, his instructor, watches in apparent calm, but he heaves a sigh of relief, betraying his concern over Bill's high approach. Although Bill eventually exhibits competence—he comes in on the third attempt for a perfect landing—he also exhibits fallibility. Unlike Byrd, who shows himself gaining competence quickly and flying much longer than instructed, Bill shows himself to be submissive and respectful of “the wise instructor” who suggests that he quit after his first landing.

Even though the passage shows Bill making intelligent decisions about flight, it shows a lack of complete control over the machine, over the elements, and over language that might allow him to rise above “nature.” In the passage, he is a model student, doing precisely what he is told, but he is unable to separate himself from imaginative geographies in which he is trapped. Even as he splits the subject and watches his performance from the ground, Powell depicts Bill as erratic, uninitiated, and potentially dangerous, and this feminizes him and undermines his ability to write himself into transcendent plots. Though the passage shows Bill to be a conscientious and careful flyer, his effort is hardly as masculine as piercing the heavens or self-actualizing on the aerial frontier. Marked in contrast to transcendence, Bill is more a force of nature than a conscious and rational entity that exists apart from it. Unpredictable and only marginally in control, Powell proves that he can temporarily go up *into* the world, but he lacks the physical and metaphorical mastery to go beyond the world. Hampered by attitudes that

relegate him to earthly spaces, Powell glimpses himself from the gaze of the crowd, which does not trust the black aviator to fly, but expects him to fail.

The first solo is a significant moment common to all aviators, but Powell's account shows, more dramatically than any other, how outside pressures impinge on autobiographical subjectivity. For Powell, risks are not merely personal or physical but political. If he fails at the solo flight, he could obviously harm himself, but his failure could also compromise opportunities in aviation for other black Americans. Powell's aerial performance is complicated by the demands of self-portraiture and by motives that are clearly political. In order for the book to do the kind of work he wanted it to, Powell would have to seem respectable to a white audience and appeal to a black audience. Powell's strict attention to Standard English suggests attention to written discourses of power, while his various narrative voices—reflective, instructive, and prophetic—suggest an awareness of a diverse, black audience.

Black Wings was originally printed by Ivan Deach Jr., a small publisher out of Los Angeles that printed a handful of books in the United States in the 1930s. It's hard to say how large Powell's readership would have been, or if it would have ever reached a white audience. One of the surviving ads for the book clearly positions it for black readers: "One Million Jobs for Negroes: OPPORTUNITIES IN AVIATION...READ BLACK WINGS" (xiii). Floyd C. Covington, the executive secretary of the Los Angeles Urban League, argues in the foreword that the book will appeal to multiple audiences: "to the vast host of surging black feet," to "all races who are moved by courage and skill," to "negro youth," and to "all those interested in the techniques and science of aviation" (xxix-xxx). And yet its ability to inspire is aimed at black readers who should see the

book as “a compass pointing toward those places where men of will *will* win,” in spite of the “proverbial American ‘color line’” (xxix-xxx).

Covington is right: Powell’s attention to the work of black aviators, such as C. Al Anderson and Albert E. Forsythe, who completed the first round trip transcontinental flight from Atlantic City to Los Angeles (without parachutes, radios or instruments due to a lack of funding) is certainly inspirational. But even as the book celebrates the determination and achievements of a community of black Americans working together in aviation, it also subtly critiques the community as well. Black aviators and enthusiasts fail to make scheduled appearances, bicker among themselves, engage in fistfights, undermine each other’s efforts and sometimes seem petty. Powell spends more time organizing events, raising money, dealing with administrative crises and resolving feuds than actually flying—all of which make him a very unlikely “ideal” aerial subject. He hardly has time to self-define in the air, since he is continually resolving problems on the ground. And this inhibits his ability to seem free of earthly cares or self-realize in a space that is more fabulous than real.

The flying community Powell describes is enthusiastic, determined, but hardly unified. And, while the white flying community certainly had its share of squabbles,⁴¹ the stakes of discord were high for a group struggling with issues of equity and credibility. Ironically, when Powell becomes most frustrated, he does not direct his anger

⁴¹ Clarence D. Chamberlin, for instance, who piloted a transatlantic “hop” shortly after Lindbergh, probably would have won the Orteig Prize were it not for the fact that the flight was delayed by a lawsuit and by internal squabbles about who would pilot the aircraft. The aircraft owner, Charles A. Levine, worried that Chamberlin was not a “‘movie type,’” and would not “film well after the big adventure.” Levine finally agreed to accompany Chamberlin across the Atlantic, but because Lindbergh had already reached Paris, the two had to proceed to Berlin to break the transatlantic record. From Chamberlin’s autobiography *Record Flights* (1928). Quotes are from the book’s 1942 pairing with *Give ‘em Hell!* (New York: Beechwood) 15.

at various kinds of institutionalized prejudice that interfere with the dream of “black wings,” but at the black community itself. When, for example, transcontinental pilot James Herman and mechanic Thomas C. Allen (the “flying hobos”) call off their cross country promotional tour on account of engine repairs that will cost \$500, Powell’s anger is not directed at cultural forces that systematically deny the rights of black Americans, but on the “gross negligence” of the black community that does not come up with the money (117). Powell even goes so far as to say that the selfishness of “a race of people so ungrateful, so unmindful of good deeds performed” angers God, and that the people will “pay dearly” (117). When pilot James Banning—one of the most skilled black pilots of the time—is killed in an air show, Powell doesn’t blame the impetuous, white Navy pilot who insists on flying the airplane and spins it into the ground, but a people who don’t support their own.

The feeling that there will be unfortunate consequences if black people do not approach aviation *in the right spirit* permeates the book—a sense that, like the waving in Bill’s solo, any imprudence, selfishness, showing off, excess pride, will bring one down. Unlike pilots such as Magee, Lindbergh, and Byrd who unabashedly and proudly transgress boundaries, Powell is extremely self conscious of anything that might seem like arrogance. The “high untrespassed sanctity of space” is not a particularly comfortable metaphor for an aviator who believes that his instructor’s verbal abuse⁴² is a method of keeping “Bill” from “developing overconfidence” (48). Powell’s own language betrays his concern about getting “too smart” or “too high” (49). When he and

⁴² After a lesson in which he doesn’t perform particularly well, Powell quotes Monteith as saying “I guess you’re a hopeless case; I don’t see how in the world you got such good grades in your aeronautical studies. You are the dumbest flier I ever met. You’ll never learn to fly” (47). Fictitious or not, the dialogue is certainly cautionary.

Banning get lost on a long cross country flight, for instance, he blames the fact that they go too high “for no other reason than to see how far up [the ship] would go” (76). While many pilots take great pride in pushing the limitations of their aircraft, Powell worries about it, blaming their disorientation on something that seems more like pride rather than a lack of clear landmarks.

Figuratively speaking, the narrative pattern speaks to the dangers of rising too high, even as it encourages black Americans to take to the skies. This ambivalence may have been due to Powell’s desire to prove black Americans to be sensible, skillful and professional pilots as opposed to a bunch of dangerous, high-flying mavericks. But part of Powell’s self consciousness may have been due to the fact that vertically driven narratives and metaphors were simply not available to black writers in the 1930s. Access to physical space was difficult enough; but access to metaphorical space was out of the question at a time when publishers simply did not print books that featured successful, intelligent, black protagonists.

W.E.B. Du Bois observes that in 1926 the white public only paid for art that reinscribed a one-sided “propaganda” that elevated or redeemed white protagonists while leaving black subjects who are “stripped and silent” to participate in plots in which they “[go] down further and further” (22). Du Bois contends that black art must compel recognition if black people are to be “rated as human” (23), but he also admits that the demands of a white readership—which only pays to see “pitiful human degradation” if it applies to colored people—sabotage the process. Twenty years later, Zora Neale Hurston made a similar observation: that white publishers do not print books about educated or upper class black Americans because there is no demand. White readers, she argues,

refuse to read books that feature “romantic,” successful, intellectual or upper class black subjects—unless the book participates in a narrative of descent, that is, one in which the hero or heroine (or both) “appear frustrated or go down in defeat somehow” (56).

Related to this problem is what Hurston calls “reversion to type” (56), an assumed relationship with nature that denies vertical progression. “No matter how high we may *seem* to climb,” she writes, “put us under strain and we revert to type, that is, to the bush. Under a layer of western culture, the jungle drums throb in our veins” (56).

Given these kinds of biases, transcendent plots would have been unavailable to Powell, and by extension, to the black flying community. The observations by Du Bois and Hurston show upwardly vertical narratives to be the prerogative of white characters. Narratives of success that featured introspective or resourceful or intellectual black protagonists were not recognizable to an American public more comfortable with stereotypes than complex, black characters. The anchoring of the black subject to primitivism and nature—to the “bush”—makes the possibility of a black subject able to transcend earthly cares exceedingly slim. The ability to exist outside of nature, to move freely about in space and in metaphor, would have been unavailable to any black pilots at the time, even if they were comfortable with the poetics of space.

Since his identity as a “god” was already established, Lindbergh could craft his experience in *The Spirit of St. Louis* as mystical and still be taken seriously as a pilot. Descending to meet the ocean, for instance, Lindbergh begins by “asking its favor—the right to pass for thousands of miles across its realm” (198). This gesture, which acknowledges the sky as a fabulous and powerful space, establishes Lindbergh’s vulnerability in the face of timeless elements. But this kind of gesture is unavailable to

Powell, whose principal interest is to be taken seriously—as someone *with* power. In order to gain respect, Powell must show himself to be capable at all times, especially since he represents others who must prove themselves to be thoroughly competent and rational. Were Powell to ask permission of the elements or suggest that spirits infused his fuselage, he would be dismissed as being backward or superstitious. What exist as available poetics for Lindbergh pose various problems for Powell. Establishing a mythic identity was impossible for a man still grappling with the problems of establishing a respectable one.

Discourses that Lindbergh draws upon in *Spirit* are wily and slippery, and hardly available to other white pilots, let alone a black man struggling for respect in an exclusive, aerial world. Although Powell proves himself to be a talented aviator and an articulate promoter, he struggles with a genre that presupposes an independent and unified subject able to escape all forms of embodiment. The limited access Powell has to “universal” selfhood is illustrated by his relationship to the machine: Lindbergh’s airplane flies as an extension of spirit, while Powell’s airplane flies as result of physical manipulation. What Lindbergh does effortlessly, Powell achieves through trial and error. In the former, the pilot’s spirit keeps the airplane aloft; in the latter, the airplane keeps the pilot aloft. No matter how proficient “Bill” becomes, he remains aligned with the material world and relegated to his physical body. The same is true, in varying degrees, for Collins, who has less access to “spirit,” since his body is unmistakably physical and vulnerable. For Powell, however, the drag of the body is *the* most significant hurdle. As a person reduced to his physical body, Powell is equated with fallibility and femininity.

Because of this, Powell remains on the margins of aerial discourses that demand an ability to rise above the limits of corporeality.

In the life narratives mentioned so far, the sky is an imaginative space from which all of the men emerge transformed. But while Lindbergh and Byrd make the transition from men to modern American heroes, Collins and Powell merely transition from people to pilots. Taking their physicality with them even as they rise into the sky, Powell and Collins become part of the air most closely aligned with the earth, the feminine, fluid, changing “teeming air” in which elements combine and creatures of the earth and sky contend. By metaphorical contrast, Lindbergh and Byrd rise to the empyrean, immobile sphere of the blessed elect. Relegated to feminized space and unstable identity Powell is analogous to Ralph Ellison’s buzzard, the aviator who remains untransformed by the airplane, even as he places his faith in it.⁴³ The imaginative space reserved for eagles would remain stubbornly inaccessible for “lesser” birds, even if the birds flew in tandem.

Eight years after the publication of *Black Wings*, Powell died from complications resulting from injuries he had received in World War I; but he lived long enough to see the admission of blacks to the U.S. Army Air Corps in 1941 at Tuskegee.⁴⁴ Powell’s aerial vision was sorely needed at a time when mechanized ascension was equated with white transcendence. Powell’s importance as a writer has little to do with how his work fits within the parameters of genre, but with how his work exposes the biases inherent within autobiographical discourses. Similarly, his importance as a pilot has little to do with how he embodied the image of the ideal aerial subject, but with how his presence

⁴³ An allusion to Ellison’s short story “Flying Home” (1944) in *Flying Home and Other Stories* (New York: Random House, 1996).

⁴⁴ From Von Hardesty’s introduction to *Black Aviator* (xxiii).

exposes its prejudices. As a black aviator, Powell felt that his fellow black citizens needed initiative, competence and intelligence in order to succeed in aviation. What he didn't realize was that black Americans needed more than access to physical space; they needed access to discursive space. And this went well beyond the capacity of the airplane to deliver. The pristine, fiery realm where the "common air ends" could accommodate few gods; and these would be the ones most able to leave physicality, and the material world, behind.

Chapter Four

Female Subjects and Masculine Spaces: Flight Autobiographies by American Women

Oh, why did the Creator wise,
that people'd highest Heaven with spirits masculine,
create at last this Noveltie on Earth,
this fair defect of Nature,
and not fill the World at once with man as Angels without Feminine,
or find some other way to generate mankind?

John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (571)

Every aircraft is the personification of femininity.

Ronald E. Pedro, "A Platform and a Passion" (53)

Autobiographies by Lindbergh and Byrd show how mastery of the aircraft and mastery of geographic metaphors was essential to the ideal pilot. Fully able to employ cherished cultural metaphors and embody valued subject positions within them, these men did not just fly around; they self-defined on the aerial frontier, as pioneers and explorers in a vast and unfamiliar new element. Located wholly outside of "nature," these men were able to define themselves in extraordinarily masculine terms: transcending earthbound restrictions, braving the elements, breaching the heavens, participating in the classic struggle of man against nature.

Autobiographies by Collins and Powell, on the other hand, show the ability to control machine and metaphor to be contingent upon financial and sociocultural factors. These men flew the way others wanted them to in order to make a living (in Collins's case) or to gain respect (in Powell's case). These men lacked access to cultural

metaphors because they did not fully exist apart from imaginative geographies that located them closer to matter, to physicality, and to a “nature” that is simultaneously fallible, chaotic and feminine. The last chapter showed how the ability to extract oneself from earthbound geographies and abstract from experience was (and is) a marker of ethnic and class privilege that is ultimately tied to issues of gender. This chapter looks at how the ideals of transcendence and “universality” impinged on flying and life writing by women pilots, who were blatantly marked in terms of feminine, physical bodies. In order to introduce some of the ideological problems women faced during the golden age of flight, I begin with Louise Thaden’s account of the flight that secured for her, and co-pilot Frances Marsalis, the world endurance and refueling record in 1932.⁴⁵

Five days into what would be a grueling eight-day-long flight over Long Island, Thaden and Marsalis found themselves numb from the endless circling and midair refueling. Exhausted from taking turns at the wheel, and from sleeping on the hard metal floor in the baggage compartment, the women dropped a weighted note begging to be passed milkshakes at the next refueling. The reply was not to be the “tea party” the women had joked about, but a letter asking them to feign a crisis. While they were doing a “wonderful job,” things were simply not exciting enough on the ground. Would it be possible, reporters wondered, if Frances—the smaller of the two—could develop appendicitis? One of the cloth wings of the small airplane had already been torn by the refueling hose, forcing the women to land and restart the event; still, the near-disaster had not been enough to sustain public interest. Their work in an airplane nicknamed “The Flying Boudoir” was losing its appeal (Thaden 82).

⁴⁵ Details of this endurance event are from Thaden’s autobiography, *High, Wide, and Frightened* 75-82.

The press wanted more than just aerial sensationalism; it wanted a story the public was prepared to hear: that women were physically and psychologically ill-suited to flight, complicated machinery and rigorous endurance events. The airplane's nickname, also imposed by the press, feminized what otherwise would be the masculine space of the cockpit. The place of action became one of passivity, relaxation, and implied sexuality. The image of a ladies' sitting room made it hard for the public to take the women seriously, since it conjured Thaden and Marsalis as ladies of leisure, reclining in dressing gowns, preparing for bed. It could not accommodate the reality of endless, careful adjustments to stick and rudder, wary instrument and weather appraisal, chronic avgas fumes, or engine noise. Nor could it capture the oil-can pillows or flat air mattress. Effort became effortless; the airplane seemed to fly itself. The women were situated within the confines of home, even as they moved into the sky.

Women pilots like Thaden and Marsalis made headlines, set records and won races, but their efforts were met with a degree of ambivalence their male counterparts did not share. Even though the sky seemed to welcome all comers equally, ideas about transcendence anchored most people to the ground, particularly women who, conflated with domestic spaces, seemed antithetical to the masculine domains of competition, exploration and mechanical mastery. Even so, there was a great deal of optimism attached to the airplane. Joseph Corn notes that "Americans widely expected the airplane to foster democracy, equality, and freedom" (34), and this, for people like Margery Brown, meant an end to sexual discrimination, since flying would make women into

“confident, aggressive, and independent individuals who would soon demand and receive equal treatment” (Corn 35).⁴⁶

The hope that literal transcendence would allow people to rise above cultural biases was enacted in autobiography, since powered flight seemed to offer the ideal selfhood: a radically individuated, independent, and autonomous identity able to rise above others. Thaden’s description of the midair refueling flight, however, shows that while women proved themselves equally capable of controlling the aircraft as men, they still struggled with imaginative geographies that located them closer to domestic spaces, to nature, to materiality and to their physical bodies. Trapped within metaphors that situated them as part of the “earthbound,” women were encumbered by biology, by attachments to home and family and other women in ways that their male contemporaries were not. Linda Anderson points out that autobiography has had a long tradition of maintaining a “particular view of the individual as transcending both social and historical difference” (4),⁴⁷ but autobiographies by aviators, and women aviators in particular, show how transcending *geographical* difference is crucial to the success of autobiography as well. The ability to see the self as existing outside of nature, to situate the self in dramatic contrast as a warrior or pilgrim or explorer, to take an active role in subduing, braving, discovering nature—these are extremely masculine gestures that seemed inconsistent with people who had a long history of being equated with nature.⁴⁸ Even so,

⁴⁶ I quote Joseph Corn’s paraphrase here. The original reference is from Margery Brown, “Flying Is Changing Women,” *Pictorial Review* June 1930: 30.

⁴⁷ In this passage, Anderson is presenting James Olney’s discussion of the “isolate uniqueness” that is for him the “primary quality and condition of the individual and his experience.”

⁴⁸ There is a rich body of scholarship on the imaginative links between women and nature, including Carolyn Merchant’s *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (New York: Routledge, 1995), Susan Griffin’s *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1978), and

the success of women's life narratives was contingent on the control of highly masculine geographic constructs, which were not readily available.

In order to address both the cultural and textual problems that women faced, I have separated this chapter into two parts. Part one considers the discourses that made women seem out of place in the air, while part two looks at why women sometimes seemed like impostors within their own autobiographies. These theoretical speculations are followed by attention to life narratives by Amelia Earhart, Louise Thaden, and Jackie Cochran. The autobiographies show strikingly different allegiances to transcendence and universal selfhood, but all of them illustrate the difficulties of participating in aerial and textual spaces that never meant to include female subjects.

Like Collins and Powell, pilots in this chapter do not employ geographic metaphors as much as they struggle against geographic formations that situate them closer to nature than the transcendent ends of culture. The hypermasculine spaces of flight and flight autobiography discussed in the last chapter will come into sharper relief here as I break down some of the constructions that worked against women's aerial and textual efforts. As the last chapter has shown, even male pilots had trouble measuring up to the extreme masculine scripts and identities offered by powered flight. Similarly—as this chapter and the next will show—women could be quite adept at appropriating masculine scripts and identities, which allowed them (temporary) access to the pantheon of aerial figures. In terms of autobiographical popularity, the liabilities of constructing a

replaceable feminine identity were more costly in than constructing a unique masculine identity, but both constructions posed distinct problems for women.

Gendered Spaces, Scripts, and Subjectivities I: Metaphors, Myth Heroes, and the Machine

David Courtwright notes that the world of “the early birds” was “first of all, a masculine world, walled off by gender assumptions” (30). The Wrights, who regarded women fliers as “unsuitable, nervous students” (30), were not alone in holding the belief that women had no business in the sky. Robert Wohl explains that women were thought of as “temperamentally unfitted to fly because they were prone to panic and lacked the physical strength to deal with emergencies” (*Passion* 279-80). More to the point, however, was that flying was hazardous, and was, therefore, a man’s game: “flying was dangerous and women had no right to risk their lives. This was a male prerogative like fighting wars and killing” (*Passion* 279-80).

Participating in the advent of powered flight earned women pilots accolades and fierce criticism, since their presence aloft seemed incongruous with the myth history of the air and with notions about mechanics, motion, and transcendence, which were linked to masculine ideals. The myth-history of ascension in the West had shown flight to be a male prerogative, a male progression. It was a male who enacted the quintessential, redeeming movement upward, recasting Plato’s movement toward the good as the upward movement toward God. Women who were able to move vertically were sometimes saints—the ability to fly based on sexual purity and religious zeal (Singer

34)—but they were more likely to be witches, associated with domesticity (brooms) and relegated to the lower “teeming” air, their power to fly the antithesis of spiritual ascent.

While the earliest human fliers were mythological, they were also male:

Daedalus, skillful artificer of wings and first successful flier; his son Icarus, intrepid (and unfortunate) high-flier; Perseus, wearer of winged sandals and slayer of Medusa (from whose blood the winged horse Pegasus sprang forth); Bellerophon, prince of Corinth, who attempted to ride Pegasus to Olympus. While these (mostly) mortal men met the skies with more or less success, it is significant that no ancient Western stories linked mortal women to flight. While the goddess Athena could turn into a bird and transport herself effortlessly from earth to Olympus, she too was a masculine manifestation.

Sprung fully formed from the head of Zeus, Athena escapes the weaknesses inherent in being born of woman and instead becomes the ideological manifestation of patriarchy.

The adoption of the masculine frames of reference such as the “warrior” allowed women pilots to craft themselves within familiar, masculine scripts, but these scripts were not easy for women to appropriate or sustain.

The world aloft was not only occupied by a host of male myth heroes, it was spatially gendered as well. The sky, with its associations of purity, freedom, power, and spirit was a masculine space, while “mother earth”—insentient, passive and resistant to culture—was traditionally thought of as feminine. Organized on a hierarchical continuum that characterized the “lower” air as feminine, altitude itself harbored gendered connotations. Although modern audiences would probably not have been aware of the ancient Greek and Roman cosmologies that associated masculinity with the “brighter, fiery upper air” and the “darker, moist air near the ground” (with its

“fickleness, variability of mood, and liability to sudden storms”) with femininity, the general sense that women belonged on the ground was widespread. The lower air might be “made up of the same seeds as the sky,” but it was also subordinate to the sky (Hart 1-4).

Even the *way* in which a body moved through the air was gendered. In his navigational history, Guy Murchie points out that air balloons operate on the “feminine principle of passive, rotund, floating flight” while powered flight operates on the “bird-inspired masculine concept of active flight” (281). The popular, winged penises used as pendants and wind chimes in Rome in the first two centuries C.E. suggest that the idea of penetrating the skies, as a distinctly male effort, is hardly new (Singer 16, Hart 5). Thus, transcending the earth as an active, willful, penetrative act was conceived as a masculine gesture well before human beings discovered the physical components of lift.

Given the sexual connotations of powered vertical movement, it hardly comes as a surprise that the airplane itself emerged as a thoroughly gendered machine. From the beginning, the airplane was sexualized and its component parts were gendered according to whether they were associated with active or passive movement. The propeller, for instance, was commonly known as the airscrew, and it was this part of the plane that provided the “thrust” necessary to overcome “drag” and produce “lift.” The most obvious masculine space, of course, was the cockpit itself, the opening that invited male presence, and from which the pilot controlled the craft with a stick or a yoke.⁴⁹ The curved body of the airplane, on the other hand, was feminized, and airplanes were almost

⁴⁹ Bayla Singer’s musings on the sexualization of American warplanes and their payloads are also relevant here. *Like Sex with Gods* 92.

invariably referred to as “she.” Given the labels, it’s not hard to see the larger metaphor: the masculine presence of the pilot as the spirit and mind of the otherwise immobile and feminized vessel that itself has no agency. If the airplane does show agency in flight narrative, it is likely to be perverse and fickle. Beryl Markham, for instance, upon sighting her friend, Woody’s, downed aircraft from the air, describes the airplane (“she”) as “frail and feminine” and “frivolous and inconstant” (48-49). Once she locates Woody, he calls the Klemm a “bitch” and goes on to complain that the airplane is “like a woman with nerves...or no conscience, or even an imbecile!” (54). The machine that is described in affectionate terms earlier (16) is loveable only as long as “she” responds without question to the touch of the aviator. If Freud’s suspicion that the “wish to fly” is a “longing to be capable of sexual performance” then it is clear that the sexual performance is in fact a masculine one.⁵⁰

Self-propelled ascent was a masculine gesture, but transcendence, as Simone de Beauvoir points out, has historically been a masculine prerogative as well. Tracing the origins of sexual bias, Beauvoir argues that the “bondage of reproduction” relegated women to “functions” (i.e. birthing and nursing) rather than “activities,” and that these uncreative or repetitious functions were essentially non-transcendent (57). By contrast, Beauvoir notes that men were able to participate in transcendent acts that included the freedom to engage in projects of an ever widening scope. Denied acts of “self-realization, women were relegated to roles of “mere repetition” rather than those of “transcendence” (59). Men’s activities, furthermore, were granted “supreme dignity”

⁵⁰ From Sigmund Freud’s “Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood” in *The Freud Reader* (New York: Norton, 1995) 443. I am indebted to Bayla Singer’s *Like Sex with Gods* (27) for this reference.

because they were dangerous; and danger, according to Beauvoir, is one of the markers of transcendence: “For it is not in giving life but in risking life that man is raised above the animal” (58). Thus transcendence was constituted by what it was (a progressive and creative outward movement into the world that leads to self-realization) and by what it was not (reproductive or repetitive functions). The former was not restricted to “mere” life, but responded to “the reasons for living above mere life” (57, 60).

Beauvoir contends that transcendence is manifested through the tools that extend one’s reach into the world. And the development and implementation of these tools, according to David Noble, has also been a masculine enterprise. Noble notes that the “masculinization” of the useful arts (technology) coincided with the “elevation” of the useful arts as having spiritual significance. Rather than trace technology as a means of transcendence to primitive human societies as Beauvoir does, however, Noble traces the development and deification of technology to the “monotheistic Judeo-Christian male creation myth, whereby men consciously sought to imitate their male god, master craftsman of the universe” (212-13). Like Beauvoir, Noble notes that women were denied participation in technology, but his reasons are mythological rather than biological. According to the Noble, woman as Eve emerges as *the* reason for the loss of power over nature. As the cause of the fall, woman becomes more like nature, a force against which man must contend. Fallible and feminine, woman remains a “perpetual impediment” to the recovery of the Garden through technology and “antithetical to the entire project” (214). The figure of woman as Eve, then, becomes representative of the “earthy, the material, the sensual, whereas man...is credited with transcendence: while

the one merely eats the apple, the other derives from it the fundamental laws of nature” (225-26).⁵¹

Seen as “lower on the scale of transcendence than man” (Ortner 76), women came to be characterized by what Sidonie Smith describes as “sessility,” a botanical (and physical) position of being “permanently planted, tenaciously fixed, utterly immobile” (*Moving Lives* x). The female body, conflated with earth, shelter and closure, relegated women to the functional demands of childbirth and childcare, while symbolic ties to home and family kept women on a shorter “geographic tether” than their male counterparts. For women, geographical “looseness” would be a marker for sexual wantonness, whereas for men “footlooseness” would be seen as a signifier of manhood (Domosh and Seager 118). The relative ease with which a person could move through space has always been, as Domosh and Seager point out, a result of gender and class privilege.

As *the* most dramatically transcendent mobile technology, flight did not accommodate female protagonists well, in the air, in print, or in film. Robert Wohl notes that of the hundreds of aviation films “ground out” by Hollywood before 1940, women typically played the “good girl who stands passively by, supporting her man in the sky through thick and thin” or the “non-comprehending complainer who threatens to pull him down to earth” (*Spectacle* 148-49). If women played the part of the aviatrix⁵² in American film, their characters typically did so to their peril. More often than not, as Robert Wohl notes, Hollywood cast women as flying in order to “get closer to the men

⁵¹ Here, Noble is quoting from Andrew Martin’s *The Knowledge of Ignorance: From Genesis to Jules Verne* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge UP, 1985) 189.

⁵² The exoticized name for women fliers in the 1920s and ‘30s.

they love” rather than furthering any kind of transcendent ideals of their own. The “story that Americans wanted to tell themselves about aviation,” writes Wohl, was that “flying was essentially a form of masculine escape from the bonds of earth, humdrum existence, and the constraining responsibilities of everyday life, especially the demands of nagging women” (152).

Aerial, technological, and transcendent discourses that presumed a masculine subject intersected in ways that made women highly unlikely aerial subjects. Trapped within earthy metaphors, women were natural forces that, like gravity, brought men down. The fact that women pilots *were* unlikely subjects made them unquestionably unique, but because they were marked in contrast to masculine ideals, it was very difficult for them to seem representative. Feminine “particulars” made women unusual rather than exemplary, and because of this, the notoriety they gained exacted a price. Louise Thaden explains that women pilots were more newsworthy than men, but that they were also seen by the public as “oddities” or “tramps” (xii-xiii). The films merely played out the prevailing biases and attitudes. Thus, the access women pilots had to self-representation was already compromised well before they began to write life narratives.

Gendered Spaces, Scripts, and Subjectivities II: Masculine Spaces and Autobiography

Discourses that aligned women with earthly metaphors and domestic spaces undermined the ability of women to enact transcendent plots. Literal transcendence, which seemed to promise the ability to transcend social difference, became a way of “moving up” in the world in an expressly symbolic way. By competing with men—and winning—women pilots hoped to show themselves to be more than capable; they wanted

recognition as serious contenders in the conquest of the air. Autobiographies by Cochran, Earhart, and Thaden show proving themselves in a man's world to be a high priority, but winning races did not necessarily gain the kind of respect they hoped for. Men, it seemed, competed with the elements themselves. Women merely competed with men, and this made their efforts seem less noble—less transcendent (and more self-serving)—than the efforts of their male counterparts. The women's life narratives were of course no more self-serving than flight autobiographies by men; but men were sometimes able to mask it more effectively, since their goals could be cast in terms of serving "humanity" and not merely the cause of "women."

In order to participate in the textual world of flight, which was driven by masculine plots, women either took on masculine roles or tried to reverse them. But women, who seemed incongruous within narratives of celestial exploration, adventure and conquest, also seemed incongruous within the generic demands of autobiography, which presumed a radically individuated and independent masculine subject as well. The indirect pressure to take on a selfhood that escapes domestic cares and spaces is evident in many flight autobiographies; but this identity was difficult to access for women, who were defined in terms of their physical bodies, and whose identities were not solitary but bound up in the lives of others—namely, husbands and children. Wohl's autobiographical pattern that included moments of high drama, autobiographical flashbacks, reflection, and return was fully compatible with Joseph Campbell's heroic cycle of departure, initiation, and return, but both of these were thoroughly masculine.

Universal selfhood as a solitary, differentiated, and autonomous ideal was not a product of literature, but a powerful discursive formation with a long cultural history.

And this formation, as Carol Gilligan notes, has been the normative standard by which personality has traditionally been measured in psychology and literature. Gilligan points out that the markers of maturity and moral development as defined by Freud, Piaget, and Kohlberg were in fact measuring a masculinized personality that looks suspiciously like the universal subject. According to psychosocial rubrics, “feminine” characteristics such as interdependence were seen as weakness, while “masculine” independence was shown to be the *sine qua non* of human development (18). Formed by separating the self from the primary caregiver (typically female), masculine identity is defined by differentiation, which in turn becomes a marker of maturity. Feminine identity, by contrast, is formed in relationship to the primary caregiver and it is characterized by attention to “reconciliation and connection” (7). Gilligan contends that the problem is not that different “voices” arise in the creation of identity, but that the one is constituted by its difference from, and its inferiority to, the other. Culturally speaking, the “voice” of justice and autonomy, with its emphasis on rights, rules, and universals, is much more highly regarded than the contextualized voice of relationships and responsibility. In literary terms, the “voice” of the lone, autonomous hero would be privileged over the tale of the person deeply enmeshed in a world of relationships, namely, the mother and wife.

Translated into life writing, the self that is *not* unified or solitary or unique—that struggles with autonomy or that doesn’t move handily and linearly against great odds toward a clear and culturally valuable goal—is subject to suspicion, while the radically individuated, brave and determined self is more likely to be socially acceptable. The “hero legend” of “radical separation and violence” (Gilligan xiv) continues to be prevalent in Western literature, but it is problematic for people who do not have access to

this model. As psychotherapist Susan Baur notes, Joseph Campbell's "monomyth," in which the hero "single-handedly overcomes adversity and achieves his goal" is not a viable template for everyone. "The mentally ill, for example, not to mention women, blacks, gays, the handicapped, and other minorities, have had a hard time fitting their lives into the kind of plot that has been fashioned by free white males" (xvii).

Sidonie Smith extends the consideration of available subjectivities by acknowledging historical and cultural forces that complicate the writing of autobiography for women. "Scripts" available to women from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance included the nun, queen (the least accessible), wife, or witch, all of which prescribed specific roles. Available scripts for men, on the other hand, included the Homeric hero, the knight, the Roman *pater familias*, the ideal gentleman, the ideal scholar, monk, and so on (*Poetics* 9, 32-37). A genre that presupposed a whole or continuous male identity, autobiography readily accommodated subjects able to exhibit bravery or who were intensely goal-directed or who developed identity and "genius" through sustained self study—none of which were imagined to be coterminous with women (Marcus 64-66). Because of inscribed gender roles, women were more likely to play the role of antagonist within male autobiographies than protagonist within their own autobiographies—enacting the same roles that emerged in the flight films. As a cultural discourse that "secures and textualizes patriarchal definitions of Woman as Other through which Man discovers and enhances his own shape" (Smith, *Poetics* 39), autobiography implied a masculine subject that self-evolved in contrast to the feminine. Problems of self-representation would have been intensified for women not only because the feminine, "relational" voice is presumed

to be one of weakness, but because feminine constructs *assumed to be inferior* are necessary to constitute masculine models as ideal.

In order to be heard within the genre, then, the female subject must negotiate a compromise between a radically unique masculine identity and an indistinguishable and replaceable feminine identity; and this tension is apparent in all of the women's autobiographies I address in this project. Negotiations like these tend to make the women pilots seem unstable, since their textual identities, like their flying selves, are necessarily hybrid. The women may take on masculine scripts of competition and achievement, but their work is always identified by a body that is marked as female. The dissonance between feminine and masculine constructs creates competing "fictions" in life narrative by women, and these, according to Smith, create ruptures within the narrative self, since a woman doubly representing herself as subject and narrator contends with "male identified" fiction that commands the repression of the mother, and the "good woman" fiction that commands the suppression of female eroticism (*Poetics* 55).

In order to compete in the air, women had to prove themselves in the same ways men did. Their speed, altitude, and endurance records—and sometimes their untimely deaths—testify to a resolute desire to show themselves capable of competing in an industry dominated by men. To compete in print, women wrote a range of autobiographical texts. Sometimes, the subject of a given flight autobiography appears to be feminine, but is a highly masculine one that sheds attachments to home and family in order to take part in transcendent narratives such as exploration. In *Listen! The Wind*, for instance, Anne Morrow Lindbergh adopts a Homeric framework that casts her as Odysseus rather than Penelope. The descent into Praia (Hades) and daring escape

radically sets her apart from other women whom she meets on the island. Similarly, Beryl Markham's identity in *West with the Night* is presumably feminine, but is a masculine construction that dramatically sets her apart from other women. I will address the work of these two women in detail in the next chapter, but for now I want to mention them in order to show that "masculine" gestures of self representation were not limited to male subjects any more than "masculine" narratives and subjectivities were essential (or readily available) to men. As Beauvoir points out, "it is regardless of sex that the existent seeks self-justification through transcendence" (59). Adopting masculine subjectivities and narratives came at a narrative cost for the women, however, and the next two chapters address this specifically.

To one extent or another, all of the women writers in this chapter follow the pattern of American flight autobiography established by Lindbergh in "*WE*." The life narratives begin by briefly establishing the flier's family background before detailing the flier's public "ascent." Each of the autobiographies includes a moment in which the protagonist feels "called" to flight, and it is important to note here that none of these women is called by destiny (as Lindbergh seems to be), or by their own remarkable drive for self-realization (as Byrd is), but by men who encourage them—and in some ways finance—their aerial efforts: namely, Floyd Odlum (Cochran), George Putnam (Earhart) and J.H. Turner (Thaden). Although all of these women were intensely driven and in fact surpassed their male contemporaries in some ways, their achievements seem more an extension of male foresight rather than evidence of a "higher" calling—and this alone situates the women as less "transcendent" than their male contemporaries. The truth is that no one competed in the new aerial frontier without financial support, although some

pilots were better at concealing this—or casting it as a result of extraordinary initiative—than others. Even if it weren't for the Depression, the expenses of training alone would have been prohibitive for most people. In order to compete in races and endurance events, a flier had to have the best training and the latest and most technologically advanced aircraft. In feminine scripts, the subject attributes success to other people (or to a community of others), while in masculine scripts the subject attributes success to personal determination or inspiration. The pressure to cast flight as a result of a unique selfhood is evidenced by the ways in which the fliers reveal and conceal various kinds of support.

The life narratives addressed in this chapter show attention to the usual components of flight autobiography, which include the flier's first solo and various tests of skill and endurance. Although these tests of skill imply a masculine subject, the women address them in remarkably different ways that show a range of adherence to “universal” subjectivity and transcendent ideals. Contemporaries, competitors and friends, Earhart, Thaden and Cochran participated in many of the same events, faced similar dangers, and acted as models and advocates for other women who wanted to fly. Like their male contemporaries, these women donned flight suits, goggles, and boots in order to compete within the conquest of the sky. But their life narratives were subverted by imaginative geographies that made them seem less heroic and transcendent than iconic pilots like Lindbergh and Byrd. Even though their achievements have been dutifully recorded in the annals of flight, their own words remain largely unheard, sabotaged by discourses that make them seem like interlopers within aerial and autobiographical spaces.

Amelia Earhart and the Domestication of American Flight Autobiography

It is only fitting that a study of women's flight autobiography begin with Amelia Earhart. A tireless advocate for women and aviation, Earhart was the first woman pilot to write about her adventures for a mass audience. Earhart also completed more of what Byrd calls "spectacular flights"—pioneering flights and ocean crossings—than any other pilot during the interwar years. She was the first woman to fly across the Atlantic as a passenger and the first woman (and second person) to fly solo across the Atlantic. In addition to her Atlantic flights, Earhart flew solo to Mexico and was first person to fly across the Pacific Ocean alone. Along with her navigator, Fred Noonan, Earhart had flown most of her round-the-world flight before the ship and its crew disappeared en route from Lae, New Guinea, to Howland Island on July 2, 1937. Earhart continues to be remembered for her oceanic flights and for her mysterious disappearance, but she is not typically remembered for her words, which are recorded in three autobiographical works: *20 Hrs.40 Min.: Our Flight in the Friendship* (1928), *The Fun of It* (1932), and *Last Flight* (1937). This section introduces Earhart's work and shows how imaginative geographies complicated the work of life narrative for women pilots.

Behind all of Earhart's autobiographies is the figure of George Palmer Putnam, publisher, promoter, and "master of the machinery of ballyhoo" (Rich 46). Putnam had become known for what he liked to call "fabricated books," a process in which he thought up an idea for a book and found an author to write it (Lovell 76). Putnam had just published the first autobiographies by Lindbergh and Byrd when he made it is business to find the "right sort of girl" for an Atlantic crossing. When Putnam became

aware of Earhart, she was working as a social worker in Boston teaching English to immigrant children and flying when she could afford it. Earhart was selected for the Atlantic crossing partly because she was a capable pilot, but she was also selected based on an image Putnam and public relations man Capt. Hilton H. Railey, had in mind: she looked like Lindbergh (Rich 46-47). Earhart, then, began as an idea, a publishable aerial sensation. Putnam's gift to her for the transatlantic crossing—a leather-bound diary—was not without intention. A place in which Earhart could record her experiences and impressions, the material in the diary would be immediately publishable. With Putnam's help, all of Earhart's flights would be properly funded, publicized and published. In 1931, Earhart's promoter became her husband, on Earhart's condition that they would separate in a year if they found no happiness together (Rich 117).

Thanks to Putnam's assistance, Earhart was able to reach a mass readership, but Putnam's endless promoting took a toll. Earhart had trouble balancing her public life with her writing demands while maintaining proficiency as a flier. In spite of her notoriety, Earhart's life narratives were never wildly popular. All of her autobiographies share material, which is sometimes verbatim, and none of them share the critical acclaim or popularity of her male contemporaries. When Earhart began writing about flight in 1928, she was the only woman pilot to do so. The only pilots to have published firsthand accounts of flight at the time were iconic, men: Lindbergh, Byrd, and Chamberlin.⁵³

Anne Morrow Lindbergh published her first autobiography in 1935, and Louise Thaden

⁵³ Clarence D. Chamberlin's *Record Flights* (1928) came out the same year as Byrd's and Earhart's, which were just a year behind Lindbergh's "WE". Chamberlin's describes the first transatlantic crossing from New York to Berlin.

published hers in 1938, but aside from the work of these women, flight autobiography during the “golden years” was strictly a male domain.

Earhart’s first two autobiographies follow the familiar autobiographical pattern established by Lindbergh: each begins with a different version of the moment Earhart feels drawn to flight (an air show in Long Beach in which Earhart asks her father to inquire about lessons), each provides similar versions of her solo, and each includes a remarkable flight that marks her as exceptional. But while Earhart’s overall structure is predictable and similar to Lindbergh’s, her self-portrayal is not. Her reluctance to write herself as a solitary, romantic subject who self-defines in imaginative space is particularly striking, given the other accounts of flight that were popular at the time. Earhart’s awareness of her own limitations, her self-depreciating humor, her attention to women and aviation—all of these conspire to create an autobiographical subject that is personable and approachable, but one that is not “universal” or particularly “heroic.” One of the markers of Earhart’s style is that she employs domestic metaphors rather than masculine ones. The metaphors demystify the mystical realm of the air, making it more accessible to the average reader, but they also limit her ability to perform transcendence—the ability to exist apart from the surly and mundane spaces of the material world.

Earhart’s first autobiography, *20 Hrs. 40 Min.*, traces her journey across the Atlantic with Wilmer “Bill” Stultz and Louis “Slim” Edward Gordon. Although Earhart is a perfectly capable pilot, the two men exchange all of the flying duties, while Earhart, for the most part, huddles on the floor of the *Friendship* between the gas tanks. Because of her role as a passenger, Earhart lacks control of the airplane and therefore lacks access

to a masculine narrative of conquest. She may don a man's flight suit, but she is unable to make significant decisions about the flight. Her role as a passive participant makes Earhart seem less heroic than the men, even though a transatlantic flight in 1928 was extremely risky. Since Lindbergh's voyage a year earlier, fourteen people—three of whom were women passengers—had been lost at sea attempting to make the crossing (Rich 48).

In spite of the danger, Earhart does not seem particularly heroic in *20 Hrs. 40 Min.*, partly because she does not actively choose the adventure; it chooses her. In lieu of a narrative in which she feels fated to fly the Atlantic—or explore the earth's poles—she is approached by men who hope to profit from a publicity stunt. Earhart doesn't attempt to conceal her backers or the conditions of her passage; rather, she playfully accepts her position as a passenger and passes it off as no big deal. In order to debunk misinformation spread by the press following the successful landing in Wales,⁵⁴ Earhart claims that her presence on the flight was not at all unusual. Of the request to make the flight, she writes, "The opportunity came as casually as an invitation to a matinee, and it came by telephone" (39).

The tendency to bring flight "down to earth" is typical of Earhart's approach to life narrative. The extraordinary opportunity offered by Putnam and Railey is passed off as a daily occurrence—one that could happen to anyone. Her tendency to minimize life events is obvious from her solo, in which one of the airplane's shock absorbers breaks on takeoff, causing one of the wings to "sag" (16). Earhart lands safely without mentioning

⁵⁴ Earhart writes that following the flight the press had simultaneously invented her as a "demi-orphan," a woman of wealth, and a person who was flying to "lift the mortgage from the old homestead," 39.

the danger of her “brief ‘penguin’ flight” and goes on to trivialize her official solo: “When the damage had been repaired, I took courage to try again, this time climbing about 5,000 feet, playing around a little, and returning to make a thoroughly rotten landing. At once I had my picture taken by a gentleman from Iowa who happened to be touring California and wanted a few rare sights for the album back home” (17). The passage characterizes how Earhart portrays herself in both transatlantic autobiographies: as someone who is just having a little fun, who is by no means uncommonly skilled, and who is somewhat of a curiosity.

Despite Earhart’s tendency to play down dangerous events, the details of the transatlantic “hop” are harrowing: the engines take on water and threaten to quit; the crew plows through endless clouds and fog; the radio goes dead; fuel reserves drop to one hour just as the crew suspects they are off course. Earhart doesn’t capitalize on the drama, but for the most part allows her short diary entries speak for themselves. A sampling from the diary reveals her to be writing under enormous pressure: “We are running between the clouds still. Many clouds all about...shouldn’t bother. Port motor coughing a bit. Sounds like water.... Try to get bearing. Radio won’t. One hr’s gas. Mess.” (106-7). The urgency is certainly there, but it is undeveloped, and Earhart’s commentary on the log entry is more humorous than dramatic. Reflecting on the moment of crisis, Earhart writes that “Slim” hauls out a sandwich and begins to eat breakfast (110).

Details about the flight are followed by three chapters that discuss aviation in general, women in aviation and the public response to her flight—which Earhart does by transcribing a series of magazine and newspaper clippings and commenting on them. Rather than show her to be a revered, public figure (as the afterward material in “*WE*”

does), the clippings show a general ambivalence about Earhart's participation in the flight. One imaginatively recreates Earhart as a woman back-seat-driver complaining all the way to Wales (173-75). Another angrily claims that Earhart's presence aboard the craft must have "vastly increased" the anxiety of the pilot. In this article, the angry columnist goes on to complain that Earhart's presence "*added no more to the achievement than if the passenger had been a sheep*" (171-72).⁵⁵ The clippings are hardly flattering. The first reduces Earhart to an unfortunate female stereotype, and second equates her with a dim animal that can only be a liability. Both ignore Earhart's specialized pilot training and refuse to allow her to be a heroic or representative figure. Rather than refute the derogatory portrayals, however, Earhart jokes about them,⁵⁶ proclaiming that she is "happy to have popped into existence at a period so interesting" (180).

With her first transatlantic flight well publicized and orchestrated by Putnam, Earhart became a well-known, national figure, but *20 Hrs. 40 Min.* did not allow Earhart to seem like an iconic pilot. Although the book traces Earhart's transition from obscurity to recognition, Earhart remains trapped within imaginative geographies that align her with the nature and animality rather than the transcendent ends of culture. Her narrative choices reinforce her position as a conventionally feminine subject, and her metaphors—which are consistently domestic—construe her experience in decidedly non-masculine terms: going "upstairs" is "fun;" the clouds look like "mashed potatoes" (15, 133).

⁵⁵ The article was mailed to Earhart by an anonymous source while she was still in London. Italics are Earhart's, indicating where the sender had underlined sentences.

⁵⁶ After the line about the sheep, Earhart interjects "This is the zoological last straw! After two weeks of mutton at Trepassey I'm sure the boys could not have endured the proximity of a sheep on the *Friendship*" (172).

Earhart's sky is filled with "dragons," "sea serpents" and "monstrosities," but it is also filled with "teddy bears" (*20 Hours* 104-05). The sky in which her predecessors define themselves is a sky in which Earhart encounters what seem to be a host of nursery images. It's impossible to say whether Earhart lacks control over powerful geographic metaphors or if she makes conscious decisions about the metaphors in order to relate to a largely non-flying public; but her inability or refusal to show herself escaping from the mundane and material realities of the earth hampers her ability to appear transcendent or even relevant to the flight.

By the time Earhart finished her second autobiography, *The Fun of It*, she had earned her place in history beside the celebrated male pilots of her time. Her successful solo transatlantic crossing made her the only person since Lindbergh to cross the Atlantic alone. The book, however, published to commemorate the crossing, has little to say about it. Earhart does not use the opportunity to write about herself as much as she uses it to address gender biases in aviation. Like *20 Hrs. 40 Min.*, *The Fun of It* shows Earhart to be playful and practical. But it also shows her to be more political—more attuned to (and more frustrated by) prejudices that consign women to secretarial or manufacturing positions within aviation. Earhart complains that women are unfairly socialized within an educational system that "goes on dividing people according to their sex, and putting them in little feminine or masculine pigeonholes" (144). Weaving a critique of "tradition" throughout the book, Earhart points out unfair social practices that keep women on the ground: women pay the same for flying lessons as men even though they earn less; the best flight instruction in the country—offered by the Army and Navy—is closed to women; the commercial schools discourage women candidates; the cockpit

itself is a physically challenging space for women, since airplanes are designed for larger, and presumably male, bodies (140-45).

Though Earhart shows herself to be a “tomboy” who prefers footballs and pop-guns to dolls, she does this as a way of critiquing tradition rather than separating herself from other women. While she and her sister insist on wearing “gymnasium suits” instead of dresses so they can play more energetically, she is distinctly uncomfortable with the decision: “though we felt terribly ‘free and athletic,’ we also felt somewhat as outcasts among the little girls who fluttered about us in their skirts” (11). The tension she feels about being a woman in a politically charged, male occupation plays out in the fact that early on in her career she insists on flying in dresses, a choice that consciously marks her as a woman flyer.

In *The Fun of It*, Earhart continues to show a reluctance to take on masculine plots or character traits. Her use of understatement and wry humor enables her to craft an identity that subverts the ideals of transcendence and universal selfhood. By removing the masculine hero from the cockpit and replacing it with “the girl next door” (Smith *Moving Lives* 89), Earhart reduces the distance between the flyer and the “average” person. The reversal is intended to make flight and its narratives available to women, whom she invites to participate throughout. In the section entitled “When You Learn to Fly,” for instance—a title that directly invites her readers in—Earhart compares the startling maneuvers⁵⁷ that students must master in order to earn a pilot’s license to “driving in traffic” (35). She also adds that “[t]he most remarkable thing about flying is

⁵⁷ Stalls, spins, and barrel rolls to name a few. The latter two maneuvers were subsequently removed from practical flight examinations because of the dangers of practicing them.

that it isn't remarkable" (40). For Earhart, the power of flight is not in its exclusivity, but in its potential for inclusion.

But even though Earhart's modest, self-conscious approach is intended to make her readers less wary of flight, it also belittles her own skill and experience. Her own solo flight across the Atlantic is attached at the end of the book like an afterthought. The ten-page postscript provides a quick rationale for the flight, but it hardly addresses the dangers involved. The fact that her altimeter fails just as she enters a storm in which she will have to rely entirely on instruments seems almost routine. When she does mention the problem, she reduces it to a domestic metaphor: "just plowing through the 'soup'" (215). There are other dire circumstances as well: ice collects on the wings and Earhart must descend without knowing how close the ocean is; fire breaks out from a broken weld on the manifold; the fuel gauge fails. In spite of these harrowing events, when she finally executes a forced landing on the northern shore of Ireland, she claims that she merely "succeeded in frightening all the cattle in the country" (218). Earhart's wry, unassuming style downplays her heroicism, but it also tends to diminish her achievements.

Earhart's own extraordinary flights are clearly not the focus of the book. She nods briefly to both of her transatlantic crossings, but the bulk of the book is devoted to others who made it possible for her to fly. Earhart's emphasis is on social rather than solitary flight. The flyer does not succeed without the help of family and friends; nor does she ignore the larger community to which she belongs. The achievements of other women fliers—to whom she devotes four chapters—are as important as her own. If she is remarkable, it is because she is in the company of other remarkable women. Other

women pilots appear as brave and competent allies, and her mother appears as central to her success: “Mother was a good sport enough to help me buy a small second hand plane.... If mother was worried during this period, she did not show it.... I didn’t realize it at the time, but the cooperation of one’s family and close friends is one of the greatest safety factors a fledging flyer can have” (27). Flight, for Earhart, is not a solitary hero’s journey, but one that succeeds or fails within a larger community and a network of relationships.

Although Earhart’s first two autobiographies were witty and subversive, neither enjoyed critical acclaim or enjoyed any time on national bestseller lists. A *New York Times* review of *20 Hrs. 40 Min.* notes Earhart’s “sly humor,” but offers little overt praise (“Miss Earhart” 33). Similarly, reviews of *The Fun of It* were tepid. The book’s “chief value” according to the *New York Times* reviewer, is its “extensive accounts and discussions of the science, the art, and the business of flying” (“Amelia” BR8). Earhart’s achievements are not held up as a standard to which other people should aspire. Her adventures are not representative but merely unique: the experiences of an “unusual woman” (“Miss Earhart” 33) who offers her readers “entertainment and information” (“Amelia” BR8).

The most favorably reviewed of Earhart’s life narratives was *Last Flight*, a book that was tentatively entitled *World Flight* before Earhart was lost at sea. Putnam made it his goal to complete the book himself after it was evident that his wife had probably not survived the flight. The autobiography is a compilation of Earhart’s earlier writing, previously published magazine articles and reports of the early stages of the flight. But it also draws material from Earhart’s personal papers and letters. The account of the flight,

which reads as a unified and intimate portrayal of the flier's journeys across the globe, is a carefully orchestrated auto/biography that produces the illusion of unity from what amounted to very little firsthand en route material.⁵⁸

It's not clear how much Putnam manipulated Earhart's material, but biographer Mary S. Lovell claims that the book owes much to its editor. Earhart's characteristic understated prose and self-deprecating asides are all but gone. The "rotten landing" of the first solo is gone, as are all references to other women in aviation. In addition to omissions, Lovell notes that sections from Earhart's original notes are embellished. Earhart's "little clouds" that look like "white scrambled eggs," for example, become with Putnam's help "mystic caves and roaring fortresses" upon which the sun illuminates "giant cloud creatures mocking with lumpy paws the tiny man made birds" (301-2).

The changes, which replace Earhart's domestic metaphors with decidedly masculine ones, illustrate Putnam's control of geographic metaphors, not Earhart's. Through Putnam's use of imagery, and his mastery of autobiographical discourses, Earhart goes from being the "sly" protagonist of *20 Hrs. 40 Min.* to one who is "gay, debonair [and] courageous" (Owen 100). The book, which *New York Times* reviewer Russell Owen claims to be "the most interesting flying book yet written by a woman," (100) was more popular than her earlier books.⁵⁹ The tragic circumstances of the book's publication no doubt increased public interest, but its popularity was probably also due to the masculinization of its protagonist and narrative. For the first time, Earhart describes flight in terms of something approaching transcendence: "But how many of the

⁵⁸ Biographer Mary Lovell notes that the actual trip details amounted to "jottings on less than fifty pages torn from a stenographer's note pad." *Sound of Wings* 301

⁵⁹ The book enjoyed three months on bestselling book lists: *New York Times* 9 Jan. 1938, BR12; 6 Feb. 1938, 111; 6 Mar. 1938, 96.

earthbound realize the relative nearness of sunlight above the cloud-covering? How many know that perhaps only three thousand feet above the gray dank world my plane, if I will it, may emerge into sunlight over a billowy sea of clouds stretching away into blue infinity” (108).

It’s impossible to say whether these words are Earhart’s or Putnam’s. But, for the purposes of this inquiry it matters less who wrote them than how the imagery changes Earhart’s subjectivity and the perceived value of her narrative. In this passage, Earhart contrasts herself to earthbound others who lack the perspective of altitude. While Earhart doesn’t claim to interact with the spirits of the ages or touch the face of God or transcend the struggle for mere existence, she comes closer to self-actualization through Putnam’s synthesis than through her own self-portrayals. The book ends with Earhart’s poem, “Courage,” written while she was still a nameless social worker in Boston. In it, “courage” is the price the soul pays for the “release from little things” (229). Positioned at the end of the narrative, the poem provides a transcendent ending to the life of a woman who had made it a point to avoid such gestures.

The “failure” of Earhart’s first two autobiographies is due in part to the fact that she resisted geographical metaphors that would have granted her a kind of cultural capital. But she also had little time to spend writing autobiography. Earhart found it enormously hard to keep up with the grueling schedule of press conferences, social events and writing deadlines arranged for her by Putnam after her first Atlantic flight. Complicating her life as a celebrity after her first Atlantic crossing was a contract with *Cosmopolitan* in which she was to fly twelve cities in twelve months writing an article and lecturing to women’s clubs in each city (Rich 78). Her inability to keep up with both

flying and writing led to at least one attempt on her part to hire a ghostwriter (78). In order to capitalize on the “homecoming hoopla” (73), Earhart was expected to turn out autobiographies with amazing speed. Hoping that Earhart’s story would be as profitable as Lindbergh and Byrd’s had been, Putnam gave Earhart three weeks to write her first autobiography.

By the time Earhart was ready to make her solo attempt at crossing the Atlantic, she had already completed *The Fun of It* with the exception of the last nine pages, which describe the crossing itself (144). And this accounts for the fact that the journey seems like an afterthought than a life-defining voyage. Without the time to craft the book as a unified, retrospective whole, the book seems a bit scattered and inconsistent—as does its protagonist. Allowing her time to produce more literary texts was unthinkable, however, since the passing of time might dull the public interest in the flight. While the goal was never to produce “literature,” Earhart sensed that her rushed work might not measure up to expectations. In her preface to *20 Hrs. 40 Min.* she writes, “I myself am disappointed not to have been able to write a ‘work’—(you know, Dickens’ Works, Thackeray’s Works), but my dignity wouldn’t stand the strain. I can only hope, therefore, that some of the fun of flying the Atlantic has sifted onto my pages....” (xviii).

Earhart suffered by comparison throughout her career in aviation. As “Lady Lindy,” she could not escape the constant comparisons to Lindbergh: “Lucky Lindy.” While Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic to show that it could be done, Earhart crossed it to show that women were equally capable. “It was, in a measure, a self-justification” she wrote, “a proving to me, and to anyone else interested, that a woman with adequate experience could do it” (*Fun of It* 210). In a culture obsessed with “firsts,” however,

Earhart's crossing would always be regarded as a secondary effort. That she took off for her transatlantic flight five years after Lindbergh—to the day—allowed her to participate in Lindbergh's legacy, but it also relegated her to the unfortunate position of seeming like a cheap imitation of the original.

Lindbergh's solo transatlantic flight would be upheld as a triumph of the American spirit, while Earhart's solo transatlantic flight would be interesting and entertaining. Situated as a "hop" rather than epic, Earhart's flight becomes a second-rate feminization of the heroic journey. No outpouring of poetry marked the completion of Earhart's flight, nor did testimonials of foreign diplomats grace the final pages of her book. When her "happy adventure" ends in a field in Londonderry, her narrative (and presumably her legacy) ends as well. Lindbergh becomes an exemplar, a pioneer, a god, while Earhart merely succeeds in crossing the ocean alive.

Much of the resistance Earhart met was cultural. In spite of her work in aviation, there were those who saw her flying and writing as irrelevant. After her death, Charles Grey founder and editor of the journal *The Aeroplane*, argued that Earhart had "never done anything to advance the cause of aviation." Furthermore, he accused her of writing for "vanity and self advertisement" (Horwill 88).⁶⁰ Although Earhart spent most of her life making aviation more accessible to everyone her efforts seemed, to people like Grey, completely unnecessary. That Earhart's work was disparaged at a time when her pioneering flights were not all that different from her male contemporaries points to powerful discourses that insist on masculine subject positions and plots—neither of which Earhart was well suited, or inclined, to fulfill.

⁶⁰ Grey's accusations are intended to explain his refusal to read and review *Last Flight* for the journal.

Earhart's autobiographies may have been irrelevant to people like Grey in part because she did not draw on familiar, masculine, geographical constructs. By replacing masculine metaphors with feminine ones, it's possible that Earhart was attempting to demystify the sky in order to make it accessible to more people. The problem this creates for her is that she never seems transcendent. The sky for Earhart is not a frontier (or paradise or sacred garden), and so she does not perform an identity consistent with the cherished metaphorical geographies. By not marking her territory on the aerial frontier, she is unable to show herself to be an aerial pioneer—*even though she is one*.

Earhart intended her spectacular flights to be her legacy to women and to aviation. Louise Thaden, a fellow pilot and friend observes that Earhart had an “insatiable desire to get women into the air, and once in the air to have the recognition she felt they deserved” (148). In a letter to Putnam, which Earhart asked to be opened in the event that she did not survive her world flight, Earhart acknowledges the danger and expresses her hope that the flight will serve to inspire other women: “Please know that I am quite aware of the hazards. I want to do it because I want to do it. Women must try to do things as men have tried. When they fail, their failure must be but a challenge to others” (228).

Earhart's tragic death, however, confirmed what many people had secretly believed about women and aviation all along: that the “accidents” of women fliers were evidence of the fact that “a woman's place was not in the air but at home” (Wohl *Passion* 280). Earhart's attention to community and her wry subversion of masculine scripts is one of her great contributions to flight and autobiography. The fact that her efforts were not particularly recognizable in a genre (and industry) that prized only the most masculine ideals is hardly surprising. Earhart's last flight was meant to be a matchless

example of what women could accomplish, given the right equipment and nerve. The failure of her world flight resulted in the premature loss of one of the most devoted advocates for women and aviation. But part of the tragedy was that the unfinished flight packed an ambivalent message. It spoke to women of what they could do, but it also spoke of what they shouldn't.

At Odds between Heaven and Earth: Louise Thaden's *High, Wide, and Frightened*

When Louise McPhedridge Thaden announced that she would be leaving home to become a pilot, her parents' reaction was one of stunned silence. Famous for "crack-ups," caused by bad weather, unreliable engines and structural weaknesses, aviation in the twenties was more likely to offer an untimely death than a means of making a living. One in six pilots died in 1920, and by 1927—the year Thaden received her pilot's license—all but nine of the original forty US mail pilots were dead (Courtwright 59). A self-proclaimed "hot" pilot, Thaden would ignore the bleak statistics and take the early world of aviation by storm, coming to hold the world records for endurance, altitude, and speed simultaneously. Successfully maneuvering her way through engine failures, thunderstorms, oxygen deprivation, and fatigue, she secured a name for herself within an enormously competitive industry, winning the Women's National Air Derby in 1929, the Bendix Transcontinental Air Race in 1936 (the first year women were allowed to compete), and the prestigious, international Harmon Trophy in 1936. Still, she would complain of an "inherent inferiority complex" throughout her career from "trying to do a man's job with the men looking on" (38).

The masculine gaze under which Thaden felt uncomfortable, however, was the same one that allowed her to move from a job selling coal to a career in aviation. After seeing her enthusiasm at a monoplane test flight, J.H. Turner—her boss and major stockholder in Travel Air—made it his business to secure her an opportunity to fly. Through his connections, Thaden was sent from Wichita to San Francisco where she began to build a reputation as a flier. The career she began in California became the impetus for her life narrative, *High, Wide, and Frightened* (1938).

Thaden begins her autobiography as fledgling flier competing for the world endurance record. From there, the narrative flashes back to her early interest in aviation and subsequent initiation. The rest of the book proceeds chronologically, documenting further tests of skill and endurance. Each chapter describes a major aerial event or a significant change in her life. The book ends as Thaden retires from aviation, ten years after she began her career. She also includes a postscript to her friend and racing rival, Amelia Earhart, who died a year before Thaden published her own autobiography.

Thaden's life narrative follows several of the predictable narrative elements of flight autobiography. She describes what amounts to a "call" to aviation—a moment in which she claims she cannot keep her car from driving to the airport, even though she's supposed to be at work "dispensing fuel oil" (12). When Turner calls her into his office after seeing her at the test flight, it isn't to give her the lecture she expected, but to line her up with Walter Beech who offers her a job working for Travel Air. The job comes with what she wants most: flying lessons. Thaden doesn't bother to describe her first solo, but she does describe taking the exam to get her transport license—the most coveted and difficult pilot rating. Before the flight test, the examiner explains that he is going to

be particularly hard on her because she is a woman. Shrugging, he explains “A man can get into difficulty and I won’t be blamed. But if you do...!” (36). Thaden claims that her indignation at the remark enables her to fly the required maneuvers even better than usual. By the end of the flight, Thaden earns the examiner’s congratulations, becoming the fourth woman in the United States to hold the rating.

The flight test shows Thaden to be in full command of the airplane, and of conventionally masculine characteristics. She is confident, competitive and spirited. But the way Thaden represents herself in the test is not indicative of how she represents herself throughout the book. Prior to the test, she shows herself in more conventionally feminine terms, terrified and trembling after making a forced landing. What begins as a routine test flight turns into an ordeal in which Thaden barely makes it back onto the runway after the engine quits. Although she goes on to make two more “deadstick” landings in the same airplane that afternoon, Thaden describes herself sitting in the cockpit after the first one, “shaking uncontrollably,” and trying not to cry, telling herself that a man would never behave so emotionally (17).

The two incidents are representative of how Thaden portrays herself throughout the book—as someone who is brash and daring, but someone who is also anxiously aware of the hazards of flight. Her willingness to show herself to be flustered and frightened as well as driven and determined is a change from other flight autobiographies in which the pilots who show themselves to be wholly unflappable. The word “frightened” in the title of the book signals the departure from the usual narrative. Thaden claims that flying allows her to feel exaltation, mastery, freedom, and vitality (34), but she also admits that flying causes fear. Thaden makes the case from the first sentence of

the preface that “[a] pilot who says he has never been frightened in an airplane is ... lying” (xv). The “heady feeling of supremacy” (17) she enjoys at altitude is checked at regular intervals by boredom, disorientation, terror, and frustration.

Thaden’s self-portrayal sets her apart from pilots who show themselves to be consistently unemotional and cool under pressure, but her honesty marks her in contrast to a cool and rational “universal” ideal. Thaden consistently shows herself to be in conflict, not with the elements or with her fellow aerial competitors, but with herself. The conflicting emotions she describes in response to flight are symptomatic of the conflicting feelings she has in response to cultural demands and expectations. Married shortly after earning her license, Thaden becomes a wife and mother well before she is ready to stop flying. Once she realizes that her public and private lives are bound to be incompatible, she begins a series of oscillations between family and career that ultimately ends her flying. Torn between societal traditions that anchor her firmly to the ground, and a passion for flight that takes her to the skies, the most passionate passages in her autobiography are not about the “glory” of flight, but her ambivalent relationship to the ground. Once pregnant, she realizes that her former, extraordinary mobility is gone. At home, she finds herself going through housework with the “futile pacing” of a caged animal. Looking at the birds, she longs not for the quiet solitude of home but for the freedom and power offered by the aircraft:

As much as anything, I missed the soothing splendor of flight—the ability to go up into God’s heaven, to look out toward distant horizons, to gaze at the struggling creatures far below...to hear the rush of air past the cabin window, to squint into the sun, toying with the controls, to feel the

exhilaration of power under taut leash, responsive to whim or fancy, to feel, if only for a brief moment, that I could be master of my fate—that is what I missed! (65)

Pregnancy confines Thaden to home and reduces her to the functions of her physical body. By becoming a mother, Thaden becomes one of the “struggling creatures” once transcended by the aircraft. The longing she feels comes less from a loss of notoriety than from diminished freedom and volition. Though she misses the view from “God’s heaven,” it is the ability to move, to make choices, and to participate in a larger world that she misses most. Metaphors of home and heaven create dissonance for Thaden, since they are powerfully gendered and inherently incompatible. In the passage, Thaden senses—and uses—imagery that anchors her firmly to the ground. A “caged animal,” she is unable to extricate herself from imaginative geographies that link her to nature and animality. Thaden becomes encumbered by a maternal body that is fundamentally antithetical to transcendence.

Thaden’s decision to include her husband and children in her life narrative is an extraordinary one. At the time she was writing, no flight autobiographies included an extended discussion of spouses or children—if they mentioned them at all. The realm of the air did not tolerate encumbrances well. Highly accomplished women pilots like Earhart and Jackie Cochran realized that attachments to home and family would seriously hamper a career in aviation, and neither had children. The illusion of independence was crucial to a career in flight and to autobiographical discourses that privileged a lone, autonomous protagonist.

In contrast to autobiographies by her peers, Thaden simultaneously reveals and conceals her husband and children. Her husband, Herb, makes fleeting appearances throughout the text and so it's not always clear which life events he would have shared with her. Similarly, one has to infer from the dates how old Thaden's children would have been during various life events. Bill would have been two years old during the midair refueling flight, and he would have been six (with a three-year-old younger sister) when she won the Bendix. Thaden mentions the children when she is either longing for flight, or safely back home after an unsettling adventure. Like her ambivalence between the joy and terror of flight, and the comforts of home and the challenges of the air, Thaden's sense of what constitutes the right kind of subject leads her to produce a life narrative that simultaneously calls attention to, and ignores, her family. Torn between heaven and earth, Thaden does her best to accommodate both, and she does it by separating chapters between personal responsibilities and public events.

Thaden shows herself to be unmistakably transcendent only once in the book, and that is on its first page, when she describes circling the Oakland airport all night in order to break the world endurance record. Watching the lights of San Francisco Bay, Thaden imagines herself to be more a part of the starry skies than the mechanized and material world beneath the airplane: "The warm gleam of stars seemed closer and more friendly than the man-made glitter below. I felt alone in a dim void, detached completely from the earth and earthly things. The moon cast an ethereal light through which the plane cut sharply, a foreign speck buzzing through the solitude of the night" (1). Unfettered and alone, Thaden self-defines apart from "earthly things," including human attachments. The night flight allows her to perform a unique and romantic identity that is compatible

with ideal or “universal” characteristics. Once she marries and has children, however, her access to transcendence is gone. In the hospital after her daughter’s birth, Thaden imagines that she has “remained behind on the earth” (95) while her husband continues to fly.

Thaden cannot sustain the illusion of transcendence because she is embedded in imaginative geographies that reduce her to biology and equate her with nature. Her sense of being a “caged animal” betrays the tension between her desire for transcendence and her feelings of entrapment. Thaden’s lack of access to powerful, geographical metaphors is due in part to the fact that as *part* of nature she can no longer transcend it or define herself in contrast to it. Her inability to fully access or control geographic metaphors is a sign that she is essentially non-transcendent—that she is trapped within imaginative geographies rather than empowered by them.

As much as Thaden struggles against the geographies that confine her to a life of enclosure, she talks herself into the virtues of domesticity. “Ashamed” of her resentment, Thaden reminds herself of the fundamental discourse of woman and home: “[b]earing children is the one real accomplishment of woman,” she writes. “In comparison all things else pale. Fame is unstable, fleeting. Our children, and their children, shall be my monument forever” (65). But even as she tries to convince herself that she’s made the right decision, it continues to create dissonance for her. Turning from the sky to watch her son play in the sandbox—an image that brings her “back to earth”—prompts her to wonder how she can give up the only “real freedom” available to her. “To a psychoanalyst,” she muses, “a woman pilot, particularly a married one with children, must prove an interesting as well as an inexhaustible subject. Torn between two loves,

emotionally confused, the desire to fly an incurable disease eating out your life in the slow torture of frustration—she cannot be a simple, natural personality” (92).

She is right: her personality is not “natural” according to traditional definitions of femininity, nor is her desire to fly. In a culture in which women are associated with nature, tethered to embodiment, reproduction and home, her longing can only be seen as an aberration of nature, as something for which she should seek professional help. After a few more years of professional flying, Thaden considers the dangers flight holds for her family and quits, firmly convinced that “no woman can have two careers simultaneously” (153). Thaden’s conflict between home and heaven is a metaphorical one that has real world consequences. Home is presumably “natural” for her, while heaven—a masculine construct—is inappropriate and out of reach. Thaden is unable to reconcile the metaphors because they are mutually exclusive. Conflated with earth and tethered to embodiment, Thaden realizes that her forays into the heavens are temporary. Her infant son’s steady sleep reminds her that her heart is at home, while the birds remind her of a life she misses.

On a few occasions, Thaden attempts to combine the roles of pilot and mother, and these occasions show the dissonance that comes from trying to merge the metaphors. In a chapter entitled “The Whole Family Flies,” Thaden describes a cross-country flight with Bill who is either an infant or a toddler at the time. Thaden does not explain why she is travelling with Bill and his nurse, but she does describe feeling more wary than usual. Even though the weather is perfectly clear, she finds that she is jumpy, more attuned to suspicious noises and potentially unusual instrument readings. A veteran of faulty engines, fuel problems, and forced landings, Thaden knows that problems can crop

up at any time. Her heightened anxiety leads her to overreact when she hears a loud, metallic clatter during the flight: “My heart swelled up into my throat. Breath came in short sobs as I dissolved into a limply weak heap. The engine continued its even song. Oil pressure, oil temperature, rpm’s, head temperatures—all were normal. Looking back, I saw that Bill had dropped a tin cup, which lay on the floor glinting innocently” (70).

This passage illustrates the incompatibility of home and “heaven.” Although Thaden is an extremely competent pilot, the presence of her son makes it impossible to think of the air in metaphorical or paradisiacal terms. The air is a place in which she must be utterly practical and proficient; it is not a place where she self-reflects or receives “messages of importance unattainable in ordinary life.”⁶¹ Bravely executing a forced landing by herself is one thing; executing one with her child is another. All bravado, all references to the serenity of space, disappear as she obsesses about the safety of her most vulnerable passenger. While it is arguable that a scene like this suggests an inappropriate geography for mother and son—she wouldn’t be nervous if she were safely on the ground with Bill where they presumably belong—its value is in *why* the space seems inappropriate to mother and son as opposed to, say, a father and son. Most importantly, the passage points out how geographic metaphors—which are markers of transcendence—become progressively unavailable the closer one is to vulnerability, to emotion, to maternity and to nature.

Thaden’s autobiography is a celebration of the achievements of a person who was unique and intensely driven, fairly autonomous, and fiercely competitive. The “fraternity” she joins (xi) allows her access to transcendence in the new, mechanized

⁶¹ Allusion to Lindbergh’s *Spirit*, 389.

“heaven,” but her participation there is short-lived, sabotaged by discourses that link her firmly to the earth. Her life as a solitary, free, and daring flier is usurped by a patriarchal narrative in which the role of mother cannot be coterminous with that of pilot. That she eventually accepts the narrative, believing she has no other choice, shows its power. Her disappointment is directed at herself rather than at normative definitions of femininity, which makes the loves of her life irreconcilable. While she is joins the pantheon of fliers for a time, she finally succumbs to what Sidonie Smith describes as the “narrative of the doomed aviatrix,” a plot in which “there must be either flight without normative femininity or normative femininity without flight” (*Moving Lives* 116). Still, her own struggle with imposed roles highlights the inequitable allocation of the roles, even though she chooses to participate in the socially acceptable one.

High, Wide and Frightened was by no means a bestseller, but it did earn a little praise. A *New York Times* reviewer applauded its “happy candor and modesty” as well as its “pleasant glimpses of domesticity” (“Miscellaneous” 110). Unlike the reviews of Earhart’s work, which improve as Earhart’s writing takes on progressively masculine metaphors, the review of Thaden’s work commends the author insofar as she engages conventionally feminine characteristics and domestic imagery. Thaden wins races and breaks records, but she does not transcend the problems of home and family. By including her concerns as a mother within the text, Thaden limits her ability to participate in transcendent ideals or “universal” subjectivity. But her willingness to show herself as a mother helps illuminate the biases of a space in which the subject typically defines the self in contrast to the earthbound. Perceived incongruities do not point to a flawed, female protagonist, but to hierarchical metaphors that presume a radically individuated,

masculine subject. That Thaden broke records and won races shows how she pushed the boundaries of physical space; that she wrote herself as a wife and mother shows how she pushed the boundaries of autobiographical spaces. Her life narrative may not have been as popular as those by her pioneering colleagues, but it poignantly illustrates the exclusivities and limitations of heaven and earth.

Upward Mobility and Rejection of the Mother: Jackie Cochran's *The Stars at Noon*

If women's flight autobiography were put on a continuum with one end being a conventionally masculine narrative in which the subject individuates through adversity and conquest, and the other being a conventionally feminine narrative in which a relational identity forms within a community of others, Jackie Cochran's *Stars at Noon* would be at the former extreme. A woman born into profound poverty in the sawmill towns of northern Florida, Cochran rose to become one of the most accomplished aviators of the twentieth century. At the time of her death in 1980 she held more speed, altitude, and endurance records than any other pilot in aviation history. In her autobiography, Cochran admits that her story is extraordinary, but she also insists that she didn't do anything anyone else couldn't do. Her autobiography, which traces her transformation "from sawdust to stardust" (273), follows a progression of competition and achievement unparalleled by virtually any other pilot—male or female.

From the first pages of the text, Cochran defines herself in opposition to other women, beginning with her primary caregiver, who she finds out is not her real mother. Believing her "mama" to be mean, slovenly, and lazy, Cochran secretly celebrates when she overhears whispered gossip explaining that she is "not part of the family." The

knowledge that she does not “belong” to this woman gives her a sense of “happiness and exhilaration” (3), since she can build an identity in contrast to a person who embodies normative femininity and the lowest of class distinctions. Living hand to mouth, the family migrates from job to job, sometimes working, sometimes starving. Hearing the gossip brings her pleasure, since it suggests that she doesn’t have to suffer the same fate as the woman with whom she shares her formative years.

In contrast to her “Mama,” Cochran begins to fashion a radically individuated and autonomous selfhood. She explains that she “conquered fear” as a child, and that she did not hesitate to leave her family and childhood behind to work in a cotton mill: “At eight years of life, I became self-supporting and was on my way to independence” (22). From a very young age, she shows herself capable of earning money and standing up for herself. She threatens a female school teacher who is preparing to whip her for misbehaving, she punches the foreman on the nose, and she confronts “Mama” when she feels like the woman keeps too much of her earnings. But it isn’t until she meets Floyd Odlum, a self-made millionaire, that she begins to fly. Cochran, who by then has worked her way up from curling hair to promoting her own cosmetic line, takes Odlum’s advice and gets her pilot’s license as a way of distributing her products more effectively.

The book progresses as Cochran effortlessly chalks up one success after another. Experienced pilots warn her that it will take her two or three months to earn a license, but she insists that they teach her in three weeks. Her first solo—which in flight autobiography is always a marker of identity, competence, and future success—shows her to be remarkably composed and resourceful. After only three lessons, the instructor

gets out of the plane and lets her take it alone. Once aloft, the engine dies and she makes her first landing alone, unaided by an instructor or an engine (42-43).

Cochran's solo foreshadows an aviation career in which she takes part in extraordinary tests of skill and endurance. She flies solo from New York to Montreal on her first long flight without ever having had navigational instruction (43). She insists on taking off in a nighttime fog as a contestant in the Bendix race even though race officials ask her not to—and even after she is shown the decapitated remains of the last pilot who attempted to take off (62).⁶² Her autobiography is chronological, beginning with her childhood and moving through a dizzying array of achievements that are often marked by perilous circumstances: treacherous weather, engine failures, fuel leaks, electrical malfunctions. It's hard to keep track of all the records she breaks, the forced landings she makes, or the cracked up airplanes from which she walks away. In addition to test-flying aircraft and racing them, she organizes and directs the WASP program with the support of General Henry H. Arnold,⁶³ ferries a bomber to England during WWII, travels the world on a regular basis, socializes with world leaders including the Pope, and becomes the first woman to break the sound barrier—all while keeping her cosmetics company intact. The book ends with Cochran describing a dinner party at the Waldorf-Astoria in which she, sitting near the soon-to-be President Eisenhower, muses about her diamond

⁶² Cochran describes the airplane "wreckage" in *Stars at Noon*, but the grizzly details of the pilot don't show up until the version in her posthumous autobiography, *Jackie Cochran: An Autobiography* (New York: Bantam, 1987) 2.

⁶³ WASP stands for Women Airforce Service Pilots, an Air Force auxiliary entirely staffed of women pilots or pilot trainees, who tested new aircraft, ferried airplanes, towed targets for gunnery practice, transported military personnel, trained male pilots and piloted bombers in order to train navigators, gunners and bombardiers. In spite of their service, the WASPs were disbanded eight months prior to the end of WWII because of growing resentment that the women were taking jobs that should be available to men. Molly Merryman, *Clipped Wings: The Rise and Fall of the Woman Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) of World War II* (New York: New York UP, 1998) 4-6.

jewelry and the “sense of infinity and divinity” (270) she has felt in her life, both as a pilot and as a member of the prestigious group at the hotel.

Cochran fully engages a masculine persona, differentiating herself from the “earthbound souls” who miss the wonders of altitude, and who “know only the underside of the atmosphere in which they live” (45, 59). Cochran makes sure to point out that she has flown alone on all of her racing and record-setting flights,⁶⁴ of which there are nearly eighty (58), and explains that in order to compete, she trains “just like a prize fighter” (79). Her flying epitomizes de Beauvoir’s definition transcendence, which is predicated on the ability to participate in dangerous “activities” or projects of an ever widening scope that allow for self-realization (59). Cochran does not fly for a living, nor does she fly for “pleasure”: she flies as a way of “exploring the atmosphere”—of going “faster or farther...or higher into it than anyone else” (58). Flying, for Cochran, is a way of evolving in contrast to the poverty of her childhood, of taking on one “great test” after another, and proving herself successful (65). By describing her life as she does, Cochran’s autobiography illustrates the classic masculine sequence described by Smith: “progressive stages by which the subject achieves distinction and comes to reflect on that achievement in later years” (*Subjectivity* 52).

Cochran’s ability to differentiate from the “earthbound” gestures toward an ideal or “universal” selfhood that sheds attachments to material demands and physical limitations. But even though Cochran is unquestionably unique, she is hardly representative. Cochran attributes her ability to participate in the “conquest of the atmosphere” to not having “converted herself into a wife and a mother” (58). Cochran

⁶⁴ She makes one concession: the London-Melbourne race in which she had a crew member.

marries Odlum, but they do not have children, and this frees her to develop extraordinary independence unencumbered by domestic duties or family obligations. In spite of her independence, however, she fails to seem universal. Marked “as a woman,” she does not represent “man”; but as a highly competitive and career oriented woman, she does not represent most women, either. Cochran’s problems of self-representation are intensified by the fact that she would have been particularly unrecognizable to an American postwar public. Cochran was close personal friends with Earhart and earned her wings at the same time as Earhart and Thaden, but she did not finish her autobiography until 1954. The later date allowed her to more time to accumulate more awards and achievements than her contemporaries, but the time period put her life story at odds with prevailing cultural values.

Joseph Corn notes that women in America had more opportunities in aviation during the interwar years than during the postwar years, partly because they were novelties in the new industry, but also because they were instrumental in the “selling” of aviation. That is, if women, who were thought of as “frail, timid, unathletic, and unmechanical” (76) could fly, then a reluctant public would be persuaded to see that anyone could do it safely. The disproportionate number of women pilots who demonstrated and sold aircraft (including Earhart and Thaden) during this time period shows a demand for what Corn calls “a kind of aerial domesticity” (81). By the 1940s, however, Corn explains that the public’s fear of aviation had been mostly allayed, and so “the males who built the planes and ran the industry had no further business need to recruit women pilots” (89). The responsibility for the domestication of the skies would pass from women pilots to “professional nurturers”: stewardesses (89).

The bubble of opportunity for women fliers in the '30s had all but collapsed by the time Cochran released her book. Women pilots had come to be seen as antithetical to the war effort, and extraneous to the airlines. Cochran's lifetime of masculine achievement seemed especially incongruous at a time when the trappings of home, husband and children measured a woman's worth, not the demands of time, rate and distance. To complicate matters, Cochran's autobiography came out a year after Lindbergh's *Spirit of St. Louis*, which had reestablished public adoration of the boy aviator and recast the dream of flight as a romantic and thoroughly masculine one. Cochran's list of extraordinary achievements paled in comparison to a text in which the "Prince of the Air" (Hertog 26-27) recast himself as the quintessential American hero within *all* of the most cherished, national geographic metaphors.

In spite of the fact that Cochran is an unlikely representative figure, she attempts to identify with other people. In the epilogue, she explains that her "reminiscences" are intended to "motivate" others, who may be uneasy about the future. Her message is one of hope: "What I have done without special advantages, others can do also" (273). Combining aerial and mechanical metaphors, Cochran addresses her audience (which she identifies as America's "youth") directly for the first time, claiming that the outcome of a person's life is the result of the difference between "power and drag" (273). All "you" need to do, she writes, is "open up your power plants of vitality and energy, clean up your spark plugs of ambition and desires, and pour in the fuel of work and still more work." This "formula for success" is one that will enable her readers to "go places and do things." Oddly, the metaphors are reframed as a "recipe for success" in the next paragraph, a passage in which determination and tenacity (along with some honesty) are

the “main ingredients” (274). The combination of masculine and feminine metaphors creates only the slightest dissonance within the narrative, since her attention hardly deviates from the master narrative of the American Dream. Anyone can make something from nothing by pulling themselves up by the bootstraps. Anyone can be a hero; anyone can leave behind a life of poverty and misery and “fly.”

Cochran insists that the super-human feats she achieves⁶⁵ are accomplished without privilege, and by doing so, she gestures toward being a representative figure. But because she severs herself so completely from the poverty of her youth, she has trouble seeing that she participates in a culture that is antithetical to various kinds of transcendence. As the leader of the Women’s Airforce Service Pilots during World War II, she is particularly insensitive to the flying desires of African American women, who as part of “the so-called Negro question” (127) may pose a threat to the government sponsorship of the program. Her own difficult past doesn’t create empathy for other marginalized people as much as it allows her to condemn those who remain on the “Sawdust and Tobacco roads.” Of people who do not become upwardly mobile in the United States, she writes: “This land of ours...will always have these places because some people prefer to live that way rather than work” (274). This statement, in which marginalized spaces and itinerant labor emerge as a lack of initiative, reduces human beings to forces of material production, and lazy ones at that.

⁶⁵ By 1938 Cochran was considered the best woman pilot in the United States, having won the first of what would become fifteen Harmon Trophies. She would eventually go on to become the first woman to break the sound barrier and the first woman to fly a bomber and jet across the Atlantic. Setting national and international records, she is widely acknowledged as one of the most outstanding pilots in the world, and was the first living woman pilot to be enshrined in the Aviation Hall of Fame. Cochran and Brinley, 352-54.

In addition to criticizing people who do not seem to “progress,” her omissions—which obscure her “advantages”—are particularly troubling. Cochran only occasionally admits to being afraid, even in extraordinarily dangerous or difficult circumstances. She never loses faith in her own efforts, never deviates from her upward trajectory. Her remarkable transformation seems a product of ingenuity, since she fails to mention that Floyd Odlum financially backs her efforts. Cochran met Odlum in 1932 and they were married in 1936, but the two kept the details of their relationship a secret since Odlum was still married to Hortense McQuarrie until 1935 and he didn’t want to “hurt his sons,” Stanley and Bruce (Cochran and Brinley 61). The four-year gap in which Odlum remains invisible allows Cochran to seem both unattached and radically resourceful, since her job in cosmetic sales (during the Depression) allows her to pay for flight lessons, buy an airplane, attend air shows, and enroll in one of the top American flying schools—Ryan Flying School in San Diego—for advanced training. The makeup sales also seem to account for the fact that Cochran finds the time and resources to compete in national and international air races, including the MacRobertson Race from London to Australia.

By erasing Odlum’s support, Cochran attempts to perform an identity that overcomes all obstacles and “naturally” succeeds through hard work and determination. This identity is “universal” in that Cochran is able to participate in scripts of independence, autonomy, bravery and resourcefulness. Untethered to domestic spaces or familial obligations, Cochran erases virtually all evidence of feminine spaces and transcends the limitations of her body through iron will. Claiming that she takes part in the “conquest of the atmosphere” (18) “without special advantages,” however, belies the fact that being married to “one of the ten richest men in the world” (67) is in fact an

advantage. Unimpeded by material concerns, Cochran is able to cast her ability to take to the skies as the result of remarkable character rather than financial backing.

My intention is not to villainize Cochran, who spent much of her time trying to help other women succeed in aviation, but to show how her narrative choices were informed by an awareness of cultural values and discourses that favored a brave, unfettered and masculine subject. By using the model of life narrative available to her, however, Cochran may have undermined her ability to influence the people she hoped to help. That she contextualized her own experience within masculinist plots was not, I think, to show other women what they couldn't do, but what they could. But Cochran is so far removed from the average woman that she runs the risk of completely overwhelming her readers. Privileged people hardly have access to her narrative, let alone marginalized ones. Cochran's life story is so far out of reach as to be virtually impossible, and yet it is positioned as something that everyone can (and should) do.

In spite of Cochran's adherence to familiar, masculine scripts, her autobiography was not well received. Upon its publication, Thyra Samter Winslow called the book "hard-hitting" but "weak in character" (BR5). Presumably, the weakness is due to the one-dimensionality of other characters in the book, since Cochran's own character is quite well established. Calling Cochran's philosophy "earthy and practical," Winslow projects feminine traits onto a protagonist who is anything but feminine. Winslow admits that her unhappiness with the book stems from a wish for Cochran to have "told more about some of the people and places she has known" (BR5). In other words, Winslow wanted a social plot, not one of risk or competition in which Cochran makes history, but one which Cochran describes meeting important people. Cochran's own remarkable

achievements seem less important to Winslow than the fact that Cochran's social circle consisted of powerful and influential men.⁶⁶

To call anything about Cochran "earthy and practical" is to project a feminized imaginative geography onto a woman who did her best to rise above earthly constraints. That Cochran's life work is reduced to what amounts to a nature metaphor suggests that the reviewer was trying to fit Cochran's narrative within the familiar parameters of normative, femininity; but it also suggests that Cochran—who is relegated to nature even as she conquers the atmosphere—is consigned to geographies that she does not control.

Although Cochran shows herself to be fully in control of every aircraft she flies—even when fire bursts from the cowlings or fuel leaks into the cockpit—she is not always in control of textual discourses that might grant her autobiography the respect of the American public. By controlling highly dangerous and complex machinery, Cochran extricates herself somewhat from imaginative geographies that connect her to "nature." Even so, she struggles with an "earthy" identity. Cochran may briefly claim access to the "heavens" above the "murky dust-laden air that hugs the earth" (80), but her inability to master powerful geographic metaphors is an indication that she is to some extent still trapped within them. Her failure to fully transcend geography impinges on her ability to transcend social and historical difference, which is a marker of the ideal selfhood of autobiography proper.

Cochran's inability to master geographic metaphors is probably due to her limitations as a writer. In an auto/biographical account published posthumously, Cochran admits that she dropped out of nursing school just before the written exams because she

⁶⁶ Chuck Yeager, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, to name a few.

couldn't bear to fail them (Cochran and Brinley 44-5). A friend, Mike Rosen, who helped Cochran prepare to take her pilot exams orally, explains that she "couldn't write at all" and that he had to read material to her so that she could memorize it (59).

Throughout *The Stars at Noon*, Cochran insists that she is a fast learner, but the fact that she wrote a life narrative with what amounted to a second-grade education is itself extraordinary. Odlum admits in the preface that as "wingman," his job was to "help Jackie dress her thoughts in language that approached grammatical correctness and to suggest elements of continuity" (x). It's hard to know if Odlum helped more with the autobiography than he let on, but Cochran was definitely not fluent nor comfortable with written language, no matter what the strong persona on the page suggests. Like the surname she picked out of a phonebook in Pensacola in order to start her new life away from the poverty she had known as a child (49), the fictions driving her narrative are probably a combination of her own creations and those of others.

Never widely popular, the book is difficult to find today. Although Cochran shows herself to be easily as resourceful as Lindbergh, her autobiography speaks to the problems women face in constructing an autobiographical selfhood that appropriates masculine ideals such as transcendence. Cochran, by passing off her achievements as something anyone can do, distances herself from a female audience and makes herself unrecognizable to a male audience. For the former, her narrative is too far out of reach, a story of an extraordinarily successful woman with whom they have little in common. For the latter, the narrative suffers by comparison. If one wants to read an adventurous, masculine flight autobiography, why not read Chuck Yeager? Sidonie Smith points out that women, no matter how fiercely they compete in the real world, often fail in the

textual world of autobiography: “No matter how conscientiously [the life story] pays tribute to the life of a man, no matter how fiercely it affirms its narrative paternity, the testimony of life and text is vulnerable to erasure from history because it is, one hand, an ‘unfeminine’ story and, on the other, merely the ‘inferior’ word of woman” (53). Though Cochran flies as high and fast and far as the men with whom she competes, her life narrative flounders in a postwar culture obsessed with peace, comfort, and normative femininity. Cochran’s contributions to women and to aviation are impossible to ignore; but her own account of flight, which was contradicted by prevailing cultural trends, did less to startle or impress than simply seem irrelevant.

All of the women discussed in this chapter defied traditional gender roles by participating in discourses that were fundamentally antithetical to women. By participating in acts of ascension, by mastering navigation and weather and an enormously complicated machine, these women risked their lives to show that women were fully qualified and as competent in the air as men. As advocates for women, they spoke out against cultural biases that limited women’s ability to secure flying jobs; and, as women who would represent their own experience, they wrote their own stories of flight, which would both reenact and resist transcendent narratives. Given the conventions of autobiography, which situated them as both subject and narrator, the women wrestled to situate female selves within masculine discourses of flight and of the lone, autonomous self which springs forth from conflict.

In order to succeed in the air, all three needed the good fortune to be helped by men in power. While Earhart was the only pilot to buy an airplane and earn a license on

her own, none of the women could sustain careers in aviation without help from influential men. Problematically, however, attitudes that fostered the women's achievements (as curiosities), also undermined their efforts. Similarly, autobiographical discourses that presumed a masculine subject might have seemed neutral, but in fact sabotaged participation by the women. Whether it was Earhart's reversal of the masculine narrative, Thaden's departure from it or Cochran's appropriation of it, none of the women could fully locate their complex lives within a genre that insisted on adherence to "universal" and transcendent ideals.

The pilot identities of these women show attention to different audiences and expectations: Cochran builds an identity as manifestation of the American Dream that "anyone" can access. Earhart becomes the modest "girl next door" who does nothing special; Thaden becomes the respectable wife and mother. Each presents an identity more or less appropriate to the time period that stands against the aviatrix-as-threat/tramp/seductress (Thaden xiii; Smith *Moving Lives* 83-85; Courtwright 54). Even as these women challenged traditional gender roles and took to the skies, their lives seemed irrelevant within an industry and a genre that favored hypermasculine subjects.

Rather than escape embodiment and participate in the skies as gods, women fliers seemed to take their corporeal selves upward, take a look around, set some records, and come back to earth, utterly human. Mythologically speaking, Athena is further out of reach for women fliers like Thaden, Cochran, and Earhart than Hermes (or Christ or Prometheus or Ulysses) is for Lindbergh. Even as the women attempted to access power through aerial exploration and competition, cultural and textual forces conspired to keep them in place, making their narratives seem supplementary to the transcendent, masculine

narratives of their male contemporaries. That these women participated within twin discourses meant to exclude them speaks ultimately to their importance as subversive figures. By creating identities that both accepted and rejected normative femininity, they created a niche in which other women would come to find their footing.

Chapter Five

Transcendence Abroad: Imaginative Geographies and Imperial Discourses

We cannot escape the fact that our civilization was built, and still depends, upon the quality rather than the equality of men.... It was the quality of our American forebears that subdued a wilderness and won independence from a stronger power. For Americans, the doctrine of universal equality is a doctrine of death.

Charles A. Lindbergh, *Of Flight and Life* (35)

Is there not an unquestioned assumption on our part that our destiny is to rule and lead the world, a destiny that we have assigned ourselves as part of our errand into the wilderness?

Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (55)

A Global Ascent: American and European Flight Autobiography in the United States

The advent of powered flight was extraordinary partly because it allowed people to rethink physical and cultural boundaries. The air above seemed “free” and resistant to ownership, and from it the lines dividing one country from another seemed arbitrary or even nonexistent. There was optimism (tempered in Western Europe by fear of aggression) that the airplane could bring people together in a spirit of brotherhood, and that new air routes would unite the diverse peoples of the world. Richard Rumbold and Margaret Stewart observe that “it was believed that the aeroplane, by linking the world more closely together, would break down the spiritual barriers between man and man,

nation and nation; it would also bring the benefits of civilisation to remote peoples” (46-7).⁶⁷

The “benefits of civilization” for the worlds’ remote peoples were, of course, debatable.⁶⁸ More often than not, western technologies of motion highlighted the differences between Euro-American powers and other world peoples. The airplane, which offered unprecedented movement through space, dramatically underscored differences in mobility, technological power, and scientific knowledge, and as such it was more a marker of cultural superiority than equity. This chapter looks at how flight autobiographies participated in narratives of global unity and harmony, but it also considers how transcendence, which is marked by the ability to control powerful geographical metaphors, was deeply divisive and antithetical to humanitarian ends.

So far I have argued that geographic metaphors and generic constraints produced physical and textual spaces that were enormously exclusive and accessible only insofar as the writer could claim an ideal or “universal” selfhood; and I have shown transcendence and universal subjectivity to be masculine constructs that were not available to all pilots equally. This chapter furthers these claims, but adds another layer of argument: constituting the ideal aerial subject depended upon differentiating the subject from non-transcendent others, and this textured the autobiographies in inequitable terms. Though I have alluded to the mutually constitutive aspects of identity creation in other chapters, this relationship will come into much sharper focus here. There is no question that each

⁶⁷ In this reference Rumbold and Stewart are introducing Didier Daurat, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry and the rationale for the Line in North Africa in *The Winged Life*.

⁶⁸ There is a rich body of postcolonial scholarship addressing the effects of imperial control. Robert J.C. Young’s *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), a major contribution to postcolonial scholarship, addresses how anti-colonial movements reshaped power and knowledge.

of the writers in this chapter invoked a uniquely unencumbered subjectivity able to rise above the limitations of the “common man.” All of the autobiographies I address in this chapter were extremely popular, even though the work by Anne Morrow Lindbergh and Beryl Markham did not enjoy the same long-term appeal as that of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. For each of the texts, I look at the how universal subjectivity is assumed within predictable narrative patterns and powerful geographic metaphors, but I also show how this subjectivity is formed in contrast to people trapped within imaginative geographies

From the air, geographical boundaries were fluid, and the boundaries separating pilot writers were fluid as well. Pilots read each other’s work, flew and met in far-flung locations, exchanged letters, endorsed each other’s books, applauded each other’s themes and were compared to each other in book reviews. It’s hard to say how directly the writers influenced each other, but it is clear that writers were aware of each other and their work. Beryl Markham’s *West with the Night*, for instance, which describes her flight from England to America against the prevailing winds, was likely a collaboration between herself and American scriptwriter Raoul Schumacher—even though Markham insisted that her inspiration and style were a result of her correspondence with Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.⁶⁹ Impressed with Anne Morrow Lindbergh’s *Listen! the Wind*, Saint-Exupéry wrote a nine-page essay for the preface to the French edition instead of the one-page introduction requested by the publisher (Hertog 356). Anne Morrow Lindbergh in

⁶⁹ In *Straight on Till Morning*, Markham biographer Mary S. Lovell contends that Markham not only met Saint-Exupéry, but that he encouraged her work as a writer and was integral to her success with *West with the Night*, which shows stylistic similarities to *Wind, Sand and Stars* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1987). 218-20. Biographer Errol Trzebinski, on the other hand, in *The Lives of Beryl Markham*, contends that Saint-Exupéry’s work merely provided stylistic moves for Raoul Schumacher, who wrote Markham’s autobiography (London: Heinemann, 1993) 238-40. Either way, the texts show Antoine de Saint-Exupéry to be an influential presence for other writers.

turn, smitten with the French aviator and his autobiography *Wind, Sand and Stars*, used Saint-Exupéry's work to critique her husband's *Spirit of St. Louis* (Berg 491).⁷⁰

American pilots who had the means to travel abroad did not do so in isolation but within an international community of pilots who were also living and working abroad, sometimes in contested or colonized regions. The new air routes, mail routes, and recreational opportunities afforded by the airplane allowed pilots to define themselves in terms of progress and “universal” ideals—as people able to transcend the physical earth and their own human limitations. But contemplating nature—or rising above or taming or battling nature—was particularly unkind to people who tended to be conflated with nature, namely, the indigenous people surveyed from the skies.

Before pursuing this line of argument, I want to point out that I am less interested in criticizing the pilots and their work than I am in examining the kinds of discursive formations at work in their writing. For, if autobiographical identity is a result of complex negotiations between personal experience and public expectations and desires, then the identities crafted by the aviators are societal values writ large. Because these writers were able to embody cherished cultural and national ideals, their work was—and in some cases continues to be—tremendously popular. But it also bears the tell-tale marks of empire.

The autobiographies I introduce in this chapter were not the work of novices. Unlike work by Jimmy Collins, William Powell, Louise Thaden, and Jackie Cochran, these texts were produced by practiced writers with prior publications. A well-educated

⁷⁰ Anne Morrow Lindbergh was never entirely comfortable with the comparisons between her husband's work and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's. In her diary, she wrote that Saint-Exupéry's motivation for writing was “love, understanding, insight, compassion for human beings,” while her husband's was “conquest—success—achievement.” Berg, 491.

and gifted writer, Anne Morrow Lindbergh had already published *North to the Orient* (1935), an award winning and bestselling account of her flight to China with her husband, Charles Lindbergh, before she began writing *Listen! the Wind* (1938) a year later. Before publishing his autobiographical *Terre des Hommes* in 1939, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry already had several titles to his name, including *Vol de Nuit* (1931), a novel that earned him the Prix Femina and established him as a notable French writer. Beryl Markham's biographer, Errol Trzebinski, claims that although Markham had little or no writing inclination or experience, and that her American lover, Raoul Schumacher, "an experienced ghostwriter," either wrote *West with the Night* (238-40) or at the very least co-wrote it. Whether it was Saint-Exupéry's ties to the French literati,⁷¹ Anne Morrow Lindbergh's literary background, or Markham's access to professional writers, each of these pilots had access to literary conventions, familiar metaphors and idealized masculine constructs—Lindbergh via the legacy of her husband and Markham via a partner who seamlessly appropriated them—in ways that other pilots did not.

Each of these pilots follows the autobiographical "formula" described by Robert Wohl, which includes life-threatening perils, flashbacks, reflections about the land and people overflown, the spectrum of emotions while in the air, and the reception upon returning to earth (*Passion* 271). In addition, these pilots enlist many of the narrative elements common to American flight autobiography: a call to a specific aerial feat, an initiation, tests of endurance and skill, and a supreme self-defining ordeal that tests the limits and character of the aviator. I include work by Markham and Saint-Exupéry in this

⁷¹ Robert Wohl notes that Saint-Exupéry benefitted from excellent literary connections through his mother's second cousin Yvonne de Lestrangé, Duchess of Trévisé. Through her, he met the "rising stars of Gaston Gallimard's publishing house" and secured a secured a guarantee that his work, beginning with *Courrier-Sud*, would be published. *Spectacle*, 172

chapter not only because of the ways that their lives and work intersected with American writers, but also because of the reason Laurence Goldstein gives for drawing upon English and non-English works in his survey of American flight literature, which is that it is important to draw on prominent non-American authors when their texts significantly contribute the study of “aviation *as myth*” (11). As two of the most popular pilot writers in the United States, Markham and Saint-Exupéry produced work that resonated with an American public and with an American myth history of ascension. Although their words come from very different places, they are products of a similar time. Lindbergh’s and Saint-Exupéry’s autobiographies appeared together as two of the top-ten bestsellers in 1939, and Markham’s appeared on bestseller lists three years later.⁷²

The writers in this section show attention to a binary opposition to earth and sky, body and spirit. Flight is not a way to travel, but a way to forge or display character within powerfully symbolic space. The popularity of the texts is directly related to the writers’ ability to access a uniquely unencumbered selfhood able to detach from the petty cares of earth and ruminate about flight in universal terms. But it was (and is) harder to see that the radically individuated and romanticized aviator with “that vision, that seeing eye, which peers down to the still world below” (Lindbergh *North to the Orient* 244) as problematic. Discourses that thrived on a transcendent subject able to exist outside of the material world depended on a host of others who were unable to extricate themselves from imaginative geographies that relegated them to corporeality, temporality, and mass, undifferentiated identity. The geographic metaphors used by aviators were no doubt intended to be poetic, but they typically constituted indigenous Others as similar to

⁷² Publishing information on Lindbergh and Saint-Exupéry in Tebbel 701.

nature—or as incarnations of nature—and this allowed the aviators to apply the language of struggle, cultivation and improvement to human beings. The next section introduces Beryl Markham’s autobiography, but it also establishes some of the powerful geographic constructs that were at work in when the pilots in this chapter were writing their life narratives.

Eden from the Air: Discourses of Transcendence and Markham’s Africa

When Beryl Markham was four years old, her father moved the family from England to Nairobi, Kenya, which was then part of British East Africa. The year was 1905. A sickly child, Markham’s older brother, Richard, was sent home to England with friends after a series of illnesses, which his parents attributed to climate and altitude. Unhappy with the isolation, Markham’s mother returned to England as well, leaving Markham to grow up in the care of her father (Lovell 14-15). Markham’s autobiography, *West with the Night*, documents the extraordinary childhood of a girl who grew upon a farm in Njoro, Kenya, on the edge of the Mau Forest, playing with Nandi children and hunting wild boar with Nandi Murani men. The book is organized in four parts, beginning *in media res* as Markham reviews her logbook, imagining the untold stories it holds. The second part details her childhood on the farm; the third marks her life after the farm fails and she strikes out on her own as a horse trainer. The final section describes her initiation and career in aviation, which ends with her solo crossing of the Atlantic from east to west in 1936.

In her autobiography Beryl Markham describes something like a “call” to aviation. Attributing her desire to fly to a chance meeting with Destiny, Markham

recounts her introduction to Tom Black, a man who would become her flight instructor and the managing director of Wilson Airways in Nairobi. Riding her horse, Pegasus, along a quiet, dusty road from Molo, Uganda, Markham notices Black struggling to coax life back into a stalled automobile and stops to help. As he tinkers with the engine, Black reminisces about flying during the war and claims that had he the means, he would buy an aeroplane (151-52).

Unsure why he would want such a thing, Markham dismisses the idea of powered flight, imagining it to be “a far step away from the warmth and the flow of life” (152). Still, she is drawn to the stranger’s romantic portrayal: “‘When you fly’ he tells her, ‘you get a feeling of possession that you couldn’t have if you owned all of Africa. You feel that everything belongs to you—all the pieces are put together, and the whole is yours.... It makes you feel bigger than you are—closer to being something you’ve sensed you might be capable of, but never had the courage to seriously imagine’” (152-53). Because of the chance encounter, Markham learns to fly, invests in an airplane, and opens a small, commercial service out of Nairobi in the 1930’s beginning an extraordinary career that allows her to make sweeping observations of landscape and of the diverse peoples of Africa.

Black’s description of flight shows that the view from the cockpit allows for two things: a sense of entitlement and ownership that enacts Mary Louise Pratt’s “monarch-of-all-I-survey” on a grand scale (201-05), and a sense of empowerment that comes as a result of altitude. Black’s claim that “you feel bigger than you are” suggests that the elation of flight is not merely a result of a new perspective, but of a perspective that is transformative. Things on the ground become small or insignificant as the aviator rises to

a place where he or she feels larger than life. What Markham cannot yet “seriously imagine” is the joy that comes from transcending the limits of the physical body and the tethers of the material world.

Passages that describe flight in transcendent terms are common in Markham’s autobiography, and I will return to these moment. For now, however, I want to point out some of the problems specific to colonial narratives in order to situate the aerial gaze within a larger context of colonial discourses. The proprietary view from the cockpit was, of course, enabled by assumed rights of technological achievement. But powered flight was symbolically textured in ways that seemed to “redeem” it, making it seem superior to other technologies of motion.⁷³ “Unlike earlier transportation innovations, such as the railroad,” writes Joseph Corn, “the airplane elicited virtually no negative comment” (42). Its ability to lift human beings from the materiality of the earth set it apart not merely as a form of transport but as a tool of transcendence. Laurence Goldstein notes that no area of technics would embody salvation as intensely and as long as aviation: “The airplane was perceived immediately as a material counterpart of the aspiring spirit, with the enviable ability to fly clear of a creaturely realm characterized by confinement and decay” (5-6).

But the “creaturely realm” of the earth—associated with animality, femininity, and materiality—was a construct that relegated the vast majority of people to decidedly non transcendent roles within vertical metaphors, and these people became the objects against which transcendent others construed universal subjectivity. In *Orientalism*,

⁷³ Markham herself is won over by the airplane after considering how unreliable and “filthy” the automobile and locomotive are. *West with the Night*, 151-52.

Edward Said points out that the Orient was produced in such a way that it allowed Europeans to derive identity through perceived difference. Assumed to be “rational, virtuous, mature, [and] ‘normal,’” the European was constituted by the Oriental, who was cast as “irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, [and] ‘different,’” (40). The terms of the dishonest equation⁷⁴ meant that non-European subjects were always marked in distinctly non-universal terms, as capable only of deviating from—rather than embodying—transcendent ideals. Said makes the case that the “transcendent” subject must be constituted by an object that is essentially passive, non-evolutive, non-autonomous, and historically specific by quoting Anwar Abdel Malek: “Thus one ends with a typology—based on a real specificity, but detached from history, and, consequently, conceived as being intangible, essential—which makes of the studied ‘object’ another being with regard to whom the studying subject is transcendent” (96-97). In other words, it is impossible to conceive of a subject as “transcendent” without an object to transcend.

Discourses that relegated orientalized others to passive, non-evolutive, and non-transcendent roles also feminized non-European others. Said contends that the discursive constructs that produced the Oriental as passive and irrational were equally capable of producing a feminized subject. “Orientalism,” he writes, “was an exclusively male province” that linked elements in Western society such as poverty, delinquency, insanity, and femininity (as “lamentably alien” characteristics) to non-European peoples. And these were the same discursive constructs that allowed for the Orient itself to be cast in terms of “feminine penetrability” and “supine malleability” (206-07). Thus, the terms

⁷⁴ Here, I am alluding to Aimé Césaire’s “dishonest equations” that rationalize colonization: “Christianity= civilization, paganism=savagery.” *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review P, 1972) 11.

that cast the Orient in terms of difference sometimes cast it in feminine terms of exoticism, barrenness, fertility—terms that, as Jeanne Garane points out in *Discursive Geographies*, featured “exoticized, feminized, and sensual images linking the peoples of the ‘Orient’ to static images of landscape” (164). Drawing on Said’s work, Patrick Colm Hogan furthers the discussion of feminization of nature and indigene by noting that

the colonial denigration of indigenous culture consistently involved an assimilation of cultural hierarchies to sex hierarchies ... the indigenous cultures were seen as feminine or effeminate and the metropolitan culture as masculine. Colonists who promulgated this view stressed or fabricated elements of indigenous culture putatively indicative of effeminacy (passivity, weakness, irrationality, wiliness, etc.) and elements of metropolitan culture putatively indicative of masculinity (aggressiveness, strength, rationality, honesty, etc.).... In this way, colonial ideology tended to “feminize” indigenous men and “hyper-feminize” indigenous women. (17-18)

The view from the cockpit participated in and reinscribed normative, masculine constructs such as these. Within discourses of transcendence that positioned the bonds holding man to earth as “surlly” and the sky above as sacred, the “heavens” provided a unique vantage point from which human beings could judge the earth and its inhabitants from a loftier—and presumably neutral—perspective. The “glass of culture” through which Antoine de Saint-Exupéry would claim the ability to “judge man in cosmic terms, scrutinize him through our portholes as through instruments in a laboratory” (*Wind, Sand and Stars* 14, 99) would be the same glass from which Beryl Markham and Anne Morrow

Lindbergh would consider Africa's landscapes and indigenous peoples. All of these writers, to one degree or another, adopt masculinist plots and tropes that otherize and feminize colonized people and places. The literal transcendence offered by the airplane magnified perceived differences between Western subjects and colonized others and further justified cultural superiority and colonial control. As long as indigenous peoples could be cast in essentially non-transcendent terms—limited to immediate historical and regional contexts, defined by their physicality and conflated with imaginative geographies—the promise of uniting the worlds' peoples by air would remain a selective one that served the interests of imperialism.

Aerial discourses were formed by a range of ideas about human beings and their relationship to the world, and I want to tease out some of the implications of the geographic constructs, since they are markers of transcendence. Tom Black's romantic portrayal of flight in Markham's autobiography is typical in its penchant for assigning value to verticality. Flight, as upward movement, allowed one to move away from temporal, corruptible, and physical spaces to a space more "alive" with meaning and wonder—and this endowed the aviator with special identity. Crucial to the autobiographies in this chapter are the assumptions lurking in the Great Chain of Being, which located people of color "lower" than their white counterparts (Gates 130). The notion that people of color were located closer to the earth—defined as it was by a lack of sentience or spirit—meant that they ended up in static, chaotic, or domesticated roles within life narratives, not as transcendent subjects, but as objects to transcend. Powerful, hierarchical strains of this metaphor were at work during the years pilots began writing,

and these intersected with another powerfully motivating geographic Western construct: pristine nature as the Garden of Eden.

Embedded within the Edenic framework are the twin figures of fallen man and fallen nature, both of which are defined vertically, and both of which have the potential to be redeemed: the Garden restored to its former glory and man to his rightful dominion. Inherent within the “recovery plot” described by Carolyn Merchant is a movement from “savagery” to “civilization” that is embedded in Greco-Roman and Christian traditions (33). Within the Edenic script, Merchant argues that nature plays one of three roles: as original, fallen, or Mother Eve. As original Eve, nature is cast as pristine or virginal, with potential for development. As fallen Eve, nature becomes chaotic or disorderly: a wilderness. As Mother Eve, nature returns to the Garden, fertile, cultivated, bounteous, improved (32). By extension, native Others conflated with nature take on similar roles: as original or pristine (noble savage), as fallen or wild (unpredictable, hostile or disorderly Other), or as the garden restored (cultivated citizen / domesticated servant). Within flight autobiographies, the conflation of nature and indigene is particularly troubling. For, if both can be conflated as “every living thing”⁷⁵ from the all-seeing eye of the aviator, then the narrative progression that moves from chaos to recovered dominion can be reenacted on an epic scale.

Recovery plots work on the assumption that dominion over nature, which was lost as a result of the Fall, could be restored through human labor. Lost innocence could be recovered by faith, and the Garden could be recovered through cultivation (31). Within these plots, technology provided the means for recovery as it allowed for increased power

⁷⁵ Gen. 1:28.

over nature. Defining transcendence as “the recovery of lost perfection,” David Noble traces the emerging role of technology within the recovery narrative to the ninth century, when the “practical arts” would begin to be seen as “vehicles of redemption” (12, 45). The Christianization of technology that appeared within the monastic tradition would emerge fully formed within the grand, master narrative of the Enlightenment: that scientific discovery and technological advancement would secure the ascendancy of man over nature. The belief was self-confirming, since increased mastery over nature seemed to provide material evidence that man was doing the work of God. Discourses of transcendence relied on a hierarchical divide between culture and nature, confident that the former would restore power over the latter.

No technology was as obviously and explicitly transcendent as the airplane. By literally reversing the fall, powered flight redeemed Icarus as Christ redeemed Adam, placing the power to save squarely on the shoulders of man and/as machine—and this enabled new versions of heroic narrative that constituted aviators as subjects uniquely able to “[break] the steel shackles binding their feet of clay to the breast of Mother Earth.”⁷⁶ The belief that the machine and its pilot were foreordained—that “the Creator had completed His Universal Plans for the airplane and carefully selected His truest leaders to carry out that mission”⁷⁷—was not peculiar but common, particularly in America (Corn 26). The unprecedented enthusiasm that greeted both flyer and machine was evidence of Freud's suspicion that the technological appurtenances of modern civilization had replaced the gods of the ancients with the contemporary figure of Man as

⁷⁶ Here, Joseph Corn (26) is referencing Roger Q. Williams's self-published history of flight *To the Moon and Halfway Back* (Oakland, CA: 1949) 233.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

a “prosthetic God,”⁷⁸ since man, by physically rising above the earth, seemed to enact his own salvation. “Flight,” writes historian Michael Sherry, “resonated with the deepest impulses and symbols of religious and particularly Christian mythology—nothing less than Christ’s ascension. Its realization then served as a powerful metaphor for heavenly aspirations” (209-10).

The view from the cockpit was not unproblematic, however, despite what people wanted to believe about the persona of the aviator, who by association with transcendent machine seemed to rise above human limitations. Pilots would in fact be human, attuned to seeing the world in terms of its potential for development in the same way that early European seafarers were conditioned to see Eden in the New World. Whether it was the lofty mountains and wondrous pinegroves of La Española or the wild expanses of the East African plains, the eye of the explorer would be trained toward paradise: on what new territories boasted and what they lacked. Through a sense of divine entitlement, non-European Others could be simultaneously removed *from* place and conflated *with* place as manifestations of “nature” in order to perpetuate narratives of recovery.

From altitude it was easy to perceive new lands as lacking, not only in evidence of civilization but also in the ultimate act of creation: man created in God’s image. And no one seemed better able to point out this lack than the aviators, who seemed more-than-human themselves. Endowed with the ability to “know” the landscape in ways that their earthbound counterparts could not, fliers like Markham were able to describe for readers what seemed to be an empty garden—an assessment that invoked the biblical imperative

⁷⁸ Freud uses this term and theorizes the neuroticism that accompanies prosthetic godhood in *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961) 42-44.

to “dress” and “keep” the garden properly.⁷⁹ Thus the distant view, which implied superior knowledge, led to control: dressing the garden demanded attention to aesthetics and cultivation, while keeping the garden implied ownership. If, as Edward Said points out, “[k]nowledge means rising above immediacy, beyond self, into the foreign and distant” (32), then flight technology would literalize this movement, providing new and specialized knowledge about foreign lands even as the Edenic imperative justified possession.

Markham’s autobiography illustrates the tendency to cast new territories in Edenic terms, devoid of civilization and ripe for development, from a position of superior knowledge. Taking off for Nungwe, for example, Markham reflects: “Ahead of me lies a land that is unknown to the rest of the world and only vaguely known to the African—a strange mixture of grasslands, scrub, desert.... Swamps. Badlands. Land without life. Land teeming with life” (15). From her vantage point aloft, the myth of empty lands is confirmed; evidence of human habitation vanishes, and in its place zebra, wildebeest and lion roam as pristine nature flourishes. Markham’s view is enhanced by a machine that allows her to see distantly and panoramically. The perspective is particularly well suited to perpetuate forms of power-knowledge, since it allows the colonizer to assume an understanding of place that the African cannot know.

The “strange mixture” of landscape that, like Eden, is simultaneously full and empty, thriving and desolate, is characteristic of how Markham describes Africa throughout the text. The Serengeti Plains are both “endless and empty” and “as warm with life as the waters of a tropic sea.” Images of life are animal rather than human,

⁷⁹ Gen. 2:15.

while images of absence are defined by a lack of civilization: “There are no roads. There are no villages, no towns, no telegraph. There is nothing, as far as you can see ... except grass and rocks and a few trees and the animals that live there” (33). The lack described in this passage is not a shortage of animate life, but of human life, evidence of culture and the signs of empire. Apparently unknown and uninhabited, the wilderness of Africa seems to invite colonizing presence.

The interplay between what Africa boasts and what it lacks are extended to life on the ground as Markham considers various African peoples, particularly the Kavirondo, whom she essentializes as a source of material production: “the porter of Africa,” “the happy-go-lucky buffoon,” “the most tractable and dependable source of labour in East Africa” (20). As a people full of life, the Kavirondo resist White infiltration by “eating heartily and breeding profusely.” But, as people who lack knowledge, they are also ‘empty’: “I couldn’t help wondering what Africa would have been like if such physique as these Kavirondo had were coupled with equal intelligence—or perhaps I should say with cunning equal to that of their white brethren.” Because of the lack, Markham imagines that Africa remains unfulfilled. Were the Kavirondo more like the English, she muses, the “‘undeveloped’ and ‘savage’ country would be transformed from a wasteland to a paradise of suburban homes and quaint bathing cabanas and popular beaches, all redolent, on hot days, of the subtle aroma of European culture” (21).

Certainly, there is some irony in the observation, since Markham clearly values the vast and unsettled African landscapes, but it is important to note that the indigene in this example is relegated to essentialized and feminized collective identity. What the Kavirondo cannot do with his mind (resist) he can attempt with his body (breed). The

verbiage both animalizes and feminizes, reducing the indigenous male to a source of material and biological reproduction. As a form of nature—and as a commodity—the non-European is cast in contrast to the European, who improves and redeems the empty lands, transforming “wasteland” to “paradise.”

The opposing images of emptiness and fullness, savage and citizen, wasteland and paradise pivot upon twin datum points of utility and pleasure, qualities which seem to redeem both people and place. Through the “glass of culture” the plains of Africa become Garden and indigene becomes its domesticated equal: cultivated, productive, submissive. Even though Markham seems to question assumed Western superiority by asking, “What upstart race, sprung from some recent, callow century to arm itself with steel and boastfulness, can match in purity the blood of a single Masai Murani whose heritage may have stemmed not far from Eden?” (7), she calls upon a mythology that casts nature, and native, as pristine or “fallen”—and one that attributes the “fallen” state to female imperfection and folly. Markham’s question seems sincere, and by asking it she holds two contradictory points of view that are never resolved. It is clear, however that the “purity” in which she cloaks the Masai Murani is not entirely complimentary or neutral.

The redemptive threads within the narrative may seem innocuous, if not naïve, modern tributes to progress and invention, but the invocation of the Edenic framework is particularly effective at serving the imperial project. Cast in the language of purity, the Murani warrior is inserted into a narrative that defines him atavistically, before the fall, before civilization, lacking in fundamental knowledge and powerful technologies. The

“upstart race” may be “boastful,” but it is doing precisely what the narrative calls for: recovering lost dominion.

It is important to note that Markham’s view of Africa is a byproduct of her ability to situate herself as a universal and transcendent figure. Markham is able to make sweeping judgments about Africa and its peoples precisely because she imagines herself existing apart from them. Like Charles Lindbergh, Markham finds the sky to be a space in which she can individuate and define herself, detached from matter, corporeality, and temporality. “The air takes me into its realm,” she writes. “Night envelops me entirely, leaving me out of touch with the earth, leaving me within this small moving world of my own, living in space with the stars” (15). Markham’s “dream” of the flight is contrasted to the static reality of the world upon landing: “The whole scheme of things with which you have lived acutely, during hours of roaring sound in an element altogether detached from the world, ceases abruptly.... The dream of flight is suddenly gone before the mundane realities of growing grass and swirling dust, the slow plodding of men and the enduring patience of rooted trees” (17).

The intensity enjoyed by Markham during flight ends upon contact with the ground, which is “heavy, with the life gone out of it” (18). The air that allows her to feel vitally alive is defined by earthly space that is dull and lifeless in comparison. But there is more than a qualitative assessment at work here: there is contact with symbolic space that grants Markham transcendence and profound individuality—and this is the space that is categorically denied to the non-European. As a foil against which the aviator constructs identity, the indigene can only watch from afar as an undifferentiated presence,

synonymous with the static landscape below the airplane, silently awaiting the return of the aviator.

Markham's ability to exist beyond terrestrial and domestic spaces is constituted by indigenous others who are part of the earthly nature transcended by the aircraft. Nandi men, she writes, are "like unto stone" and Nandi women are "like unto leaves of grass" (77). These metaphors, which conflate non-European peoples with nature, appear to be complimentary but are deeply problematic. While a stone connotes strength and stability, it also connotes a lack of sentiment or sentience. Similarly, the grass that connotes growth, flexibility, and fertility also suggests collectivity, fragility, earthy dependence, and transience. Neither metaphor is one of transcendence, and both play into a larger metaphor in which the "cultured plant" struggles against the "weed" (7).

In order to maintain the illusion of universality in her autobiography, Markham severs all links to domestic spaces and familial attachments. Her identity as a wife and mother is entirely missing from the narrative, as are other feminine markers. Biographer Trzebinski notes that Markham was never particularly fond of women (19, 25) and that she chose to fly in male flying clothes, making "no concession to gender" (206). Markham was on her second marriage when she made her famous "waterjump,"⁸⁰ a feat that made her the first woman to cross the Atlantic east to west across the prevailing winds; and her son, Gervase, would have been seven years old at the time (205). In spite of the fact that she is a wife and mother, the only people who figure prominently into the autobiography are men aligned with the masculine, public domains of horse racing, hunting, and flight—and these are cast as professional acquaintances, even when they

⁸⁰ The term European fliers used during the '30s to refer to Atlantic crossings (Trzebinski 199).

were in fact friends and lovers. When Markham mentions Denys Finch Hatton, for instance, she mentions his reputation as “one of the ablest of White Hunters” (192) and describes the tragic takeoff at Voi that claims his life. What she does not mention is that Denys was her lover, that he took her flying as part of their affair, and that he was the reason she began taking flying lessons from Tom Black in the first place (Lovell 104-07).

Throughout the text, Markham consistently places herself within exclusive, masculine plots and spaces. The one community with which she aligns herself is the “guild” of professional pilots that she describes as “a camaraderie *sans* sentiment of the kind that men who once sailed uncharted seas in wooden ships” (12). By establishing her own identity within a tradition of (white, male) explorers, Markham draws on powerful metaphors that ennoble exploration and allow her to figuratively detach from familiar or domestic spaces. Markham’s irritation at the gendered terminology used by the press to refer to her piloting achievements is manifested in a letter she handed to a *Daily Express* reporter shortly before taking off on her transatlantic voyage. In the letter, which she asks to be printed as a “courtesy extended to the condemned,” she states, “‘Society-mother,’ ‘Flying-mother,’ ‘Bird-woman’ et cetera, are repugnant to me.... I fail to see that an accident of birth has to do with flying the ocean” (Trzebinski 209). Markham understood that competing in the air meant competing on equal ground with men and rejecting the tethers of female sexuality that confine her to the earth.

Few women are mentioned in *West with the Night*, and when they do appear, it is as a way for Markham to differentiate from them. Sidonie Smith observes that Markham defines herself in opposition to other women throughout the book, including childhood friend and Nandi playmate, Jebbta, who performs the role of the normative, embodied

woman limited to “the script of the sexed body” (“The Other Woman” 414). Markham dedicates the book to her father, expresses her thanks to Raoul Schumacher, invokes Shakespeare, but fully erases any signs of female companionship or nurturing.⁸¹ The erasure of her own family, and of other women who were friends, positions Markham firmly within spaces where she can perform a fully independent, unattached and autonomous identity. Smith asserts that by erasing all references to femininity, Markham becomes Athena of the *Oresteia*—the “powerful, fleet goddess who emerges full blown from the head of her father, Zeus” (415)—a female manifestation of patriarchy.

Smith contends that Markham’s autobiography shows a narrative allegiance to masculine scripts of adventure, travel and contest, but I would add that her *ability* to access these scripts is the result of her command of geographic metaphors, which allow her to exist beyond mundane, earthly spaces. Markham is not confined to or conflated with nature, but rises above it, pushing beyond the limits of the known world. Detached from the earth, from femininity and physicality, Markham self-defines in an imaginative space that allows her to take on the masculine identities of adventurer and explorer.

Given the fact that Markham’s autobiography was probably written by a man—or at the very least informed by male models and mentors—her “allegiance to patrimony” (415) is hardly surprising. Robert Viking O’Brien, who considers questions of authorship in *West with the Night*, concludes that it hardly matters whether Markham or Schumacher or both wrote the book, since the auto/biographical self is always constituted through the eyes of an outsider. Drawing on the Bakhtinian conclusion that “it is impossible to

⁸¹ Markham’s unwillingness to depict any signs of mothering may have been due in part to the fact that her own mother abandoned her when she was four years old. Though other women tried to fill this role—most notably Emma Orchardson, whom Markham thought was her mother until she was eight—Markham had a mistrust (if not contempt) for women much of her life. Trzebinski, 1-2).

conceive of any being outside of the relations that link it to the other” (22), O’Brien argues that the biographer constructs the subject through his or her own values and desires while the autobiographer constructs the self through the values and desires of external others. While I am not making the case that there are *no* differences between biography and autobiography, I am using O’Brien’s analysis to suggest that self and other are mutually constitutive in both discourses. What this means for a discussion of *West with the Night* is that identity is fashioned in response to perceived ideals. Markham (or Schumacher) would not have cast the flyer in terms of transcendence, autonomy, detachment, and independence if these were not cherished, “universal” characteristics—nor would Markham have engaged in mythic plotting in which men of courage test themselves against “the elemental forces” (Markham 7), if this were not an extremely valuable cultural narrative.

When *West with the Night* was published, reviewers enthusiastically applauded Markham’s unconventional life and artful writing. *New York Times* reviewer John Chamberlain characterized the writing in the book as “lucid, shapely prose.” His review praises Markham’s “jewel of taut writing” for offering (almost) as much “adventure and beauty” (if not the “final poetic awareness”) as work by Saint-Exupéry (19). Similarly, Jane Spence Southron praised the book for its “vivid, evocative writing,” “simple beauty,” and “objectivity” (BR4). What appears to be “objectivity,” however, is a discursive illusion that performs neutrality and intimacy as a form of specialized knowledge. The following passage, for instance, seems objective, but it naturalizes Markham’s presence in Africa as it claims an understanding of the essential nature of Africa:

But the soul of Africa, its integrity, the slow inexorable pulse of its life, is its own and of such singular rhythm that no outsider, unless steeped from childhood in its endless, even beat, can ever hope to experience it, except only as a bystander might experience a Masai was dance knowing nothing of its music nor the meaning of its steps. (13)

In this passage, Markham establishes herself as an expert on people and place by virtue of her personal history. Familiar with the “soul of Africa” since childhood, Markham professes to understand the vastness of a continent, not just Njoro, Kenya, where she grew up. Her intimacy is not just with the physical landscapes, but with something like a universal essence or spirit of the place, which is sketched in mystical language. Positioned as an insider, Markham shows herself to be “natural” or native to Africa, familiar with its rhythms and aware of its fundamental nature. Markham’s specialized knowledge extends to people, since she can presumably watch the Masai dance with complete understanding. Outsiders may observe the place, its peoples and its rituals, but they cannot grasp the essence of the place or understand its true significance as she can.

Edward Said writes that “positive knowledge” about the Orient is suffused with “imaginative geography,” a topography of “suppositions, associations and fictions” that are projected onto unfamiliar or distant spaces in order to produce meaning (*Orientalism* 54). These imaginative geographies endow space (and time) with a “quasi-fictional” and “figurative value” that infuses both history and geography (55). The geographic metaphors at work in Markham’s autobiography—and in the autobiographies by Anne Morrow Lindbergh and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry that I consider next—do not convey

actual people and places as much as they point to familiar Western constructs that made sense to the writers at the time. Imaginative geographies such as the Great Chain that located colonized others closer to nature than their white counterparts reenforced Edenic metaphors that rationalized occupation and control. And these “natural” metaphors are integral to the autobiographies in this chapter.

The goal of “imaginative geographies,” according to Said, is to “help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away” (55). At altitude, the aviator was already distanced from life on the ground, from other people and from the nuances of the specific regions overflowed—which often looked vast and undifferentiated. If the orientalist view is an essentializing gesture in which “ancient societies and myriad peoples can be shaken up like so many peanuts in a jar” (Said xviii), then this was magnified for aviators by the physically distancing characteristics of the machine and the textually distancing gestures of transcendence and universal subjectivity.

Cultivating the Garden: Antoine de Saint-Exupéry and the Noble Struggle

If there were a European counterpart to Charles Lindbergh, it would be Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. While Saint-Exupéry’s ability to poeticize flight preceded (and arguably exceeded) Lindbergh’s, both men were able to access transcendence and universal selfhood in ways that would be unequalled by anyone else. Contemporaries, the men earned their pilot licenses within a year of each other,⁸² received military flight instruction, made a living delivering mail under extraordinarily dangerous conditions, and

⁸² Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in 1921 and Lindbergh in 1922.

volunteered pilot services in World War II. Both men flew to and from far-flung locations, and became notable writers and national heroes. Lindbergh, however, did not write about his later exploratory flights, of which there were two.⁸³ These were recorded by his wife, Anne Morrow Lindbergh.

Even though there are similarities between Lindbergh and Saint-Exupéry, Saint-Exupéry's writing is markedly different from Lindbergh's. Saint-Exupéry was known for his fiction, which was loosely based on his flying for Aéropostale,⁸⁴ before he became known for anything like autobiography. His life narrative, *Terre des Hommes*, published in English as *Wind, Sand and Stars* (1939), is a compilation of ten thematically consistent essays set in a wide variety of places: France, Spain, Paraguay, Libya, and the Western Sahara. The work was less a methodical attempt at self-representation than an attempt to appease French publishers to whom Saint-Exupéry was in debt. Finding himself in financial trouble and suffering from serious injuries incurred from a failed takeoff in Guatemala during a "goodwill mission,"⁸⁵ Saint-Exupéry met with editor Hervé Mille, who instructed the pilot to collect all of his writings and selectively compile them. With Mille's help, Saint-Exupéry chose three articles, added six more on his desert adventures (most of which were reworked versions of essays he had published separately in 1932) and added—for the American version—a chapter about his encounter with a Patagonian cyclone (Schiff 301-02). The result was, as biographer Stacy Schiff points out, "not a

⁸³ The first flight was in 1931, from Washington D.C. through Canada and the Arctic to Russia, Japan and China. The second flight was in 1933, from New York back to Florida crossing the Atlantic twice. The route went through Greenland, Russia, much of Western Europe, West Africa, South America, and Puerto Rico.

⁸⁴ *Courrier Sud* (translated in English as *Southern Mail*, 1929), and *Vol de Nuit* (*Night Flight*, 1931).

⁸⁵ The 1937 flight was intended to span 9,000 miles, running the length of North and South America. Saint-Exupéry and his navigator, Prévot, were 3,500 miles into the journey when their overloaded aircraft crashed into a gravel pit at the end of the runway nearly killing both of the men.

book written over the course of eight years, but a book into which eight years of writing were hurriedly stitched” (305). The result, however, was a critical achievement that established Saint-Exupéry as the unequalled voice of poet-pilot.

It is probably not an exaggeration to say that *Terre des Hommes* has been the most beloved and enduring flight narrative of all time. Upon its publication, the book enjoyed enormous success, earning the French Academy’s distinguished award for fiction—the Grand Prix du Roman de l’Académie Française—even though the book was not a novel. Meanwhile, the English version was voted by the American Booksellers Association to be the year’s best work of nonfiction. In the United States, *Wind, Sand and Stars* remained on best seller lists for nine months and sold more than 150,000 copies in less than six months (Schiff 310-12). Its glowing reviews earned Saint-Exupéry a reputation as a “humanist,” a poet, and “champion of the nobility of mankind.”⁸⁶ Decades later, it continues to enjoy a broad readership and enthusiastic praise. Topping the list of *Outside* magazine’s “25 Essential Books for the Well-Read Explorer” in 2003, *Wind, Sand and Stars* was declared to be “so humane, so poetic, you underline sentences” (1). Even Halia Koo’s postcolonial critique of *Terre des Hommes*, which questions the presumed supremacy of the aviator “up in the air,” concludes that his vulnerability “down on the ground” allows for “humanity and true communication” (47).

The popularity of the book has been extraordinary, and I will argue that the book owes its popularity to Saint-Exupéry’s command of powerful geographic metaphors,

⁸⁶ Curtis Cate synthesizes more favorable reviews of *Terre des Hommes* in his biography *Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: His Life and Times* (New York: Paragon, 1990) 372-73. Other reviews include Eliot G. Fay’s “The Philosophy of Saint-Exupéry,” *Modern Language Journal* 31.2 (1947): 90-97, and Richard Rumbold and Lady Margaret Stewart’s *The Winged Life: A Portrait of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry Poet and Airman* (New York: David McKay, 1953). The quoted reference is from Philip A. Wadsworth’s “Saint-Exupéry, Artist and Humanist,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 12.1 (1951): 96-107.

which allow him (and his companions) to enact transcendence. As a whole, the book is confusing. It skips from Saint-Exupéry's apprenticeship as a pilot to his friend, Guillaumet's, disappearance and rescue in the Andes. These chapters are followed by others in which Saint-Exupéry finds himself musing on the airplane in general, flying through a Patagonian cyclone, meditating on the beauty of the Sahara, flirting in Paraguay, working the Line in West Africa, wrecking in the Libyan desert, and travelling through Barcelona and Madrid during the Spanish civil war. The book concludes as Saint-Exupéry sits on a train, studying the faces of the poor, Polish workmen. Were it not for its powerful themes—which are driven by imaginative geographies—the book would be a disjointed and bewildering assortment of travel narratives. The metaphors that lend the book its power are troubling, however, because they depend upon non-transcendent and feminized others who are rooted to the earth and conflated with nature. By looking at Saint-Exupéry's work as part of the myth history of aviation, I show how transcendence is not merely a masculine gesture, but one that is inherently compatible with imperial projects.

*Wind, Sand and Stars*⁸⁷ begins predictably, with Saint-Exupéry's initiation into aviation, which for him is the moment he begins flying the mail. He spends the "vigil" before his first flight with Guillaumet, a veteran pilot who mentors his young, untested friend on the mountains of Spain—which becomes a "fairyland" under the tutelage of his wizened mentor. After the "strange lesson in geography," Saint-Exupéry wastes no time in showing himself to be a radically individuated and transcendent subject, and he does

⁸⁷ References to *Terre des Hommes* will be from Lewis Galantière's translation, *Wind, Sand and Stars* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1939), unless otherwise noted.

this with a combination of symbols and fairy tale imagery. Riding the old omnibus to the airport to report for his first mail flight, for example, Saint-Exupéry imagines himself becoming transformed by his role as a pilot—one that sets him apart from other people on the bus who are consumed with decidedly non-transcendent concerns: “illness, money, shabby, domestic cares” (23). For the petty bourgeoisie of Toulouse, the bus is merely a mechanical vehicle that takes them to “their dreary diurnal tasks, their red tape, their monotonous lives.” For Saint-Exupéry, on the other hand, the bus is a “grey chrysalis” from which he will emerge “transfigured” (20).

Saint-Exupéry’s ability to perform transcendence is unparalleled. Of the anticipation of his first flight, for instance, he writes, “The magic of the craft has opened for me a world in which I shall confront, within two hours, the black dragons and the crowned crests of a coma of blue lightnings, and when night has fallen I, delivered, shall read my course in the stars” (24). Saint-Exupéry uses chivalric metaphors throughout, but he also reinvents himself through a variety of other metaphors. He is the implied butterfly of the chrysalis as well as a “shepherd,” “warrior” and “sovereign,” (18, 21). The tripartite image underscores his difference from the others and aligns the aviator with redemptive, chivalric, masculine roles that are decidedly transcendent. Uniquely unencumbered and individuated, Saint-Exupéry becomes redeemer and defender of mankind, able to exist outside of embodied reality and historic context; and this perceived transcendence is what allows him to “judge man in cosmic terms” (99).

Imaginative geographies that situate the world of the pilot as a “fairyland” (17) enable Saint-Exupéry to establish an identity that transcends material reality. Clouds that mark the “frontier between the real and the unreal, between the known and the

unknowable” (15) are only part of a universe in which the pilot suddenly realizes “that he has slipped beyond the confines of this world” (26). The “fabulous world filled with snares and pitfalls” brings forth encounters with “dragons” (12), but it also brings forth princesses (121). The significance of the fairy tale motifs are, as M.M. Bakhtin points out, that they are ultimately linked to chivalric identity, “enchantments of every sort, which temporarily take a man out of the ordinary course of events and transport him into a strange world” (151). By leaving the “profane world” behind, the pilot enters the “domain of legend” (183).

Saint-Exupéry combines chivalric and geographic metaphors to distinguish himself from the petty bourgeoisie on the bus in Toulouse, and these metaphors become even more dramatic when he uses them to differentiate between himself and the indigenous peoples of Africa, who are typically defined as chaotic forces of nature. Nature and indigene play similar roles in the book, as forces worthy of respect, but also as unruly, unpredictable and potentially hostile forces in need of domestication and cultivation. Domestication becomes the job of the pilot who braves new air routes and “tames” the Moors, while cultivation becomes the job of the gardener, who struggles against the “fallow field.”⁸⁸ For Saint-Exupéry, the ideal is personified by Guillaumet, who is not merely a pilot, but a gardener of men (61). In the metaphors, “nature” is engaged and improved through struggle, and the struggle becomes a redemptive one that “releases the prince asleep” (241).

⁸⁸ Piero Boitani provides an extended analysis of Saint-Exupéry’s pilot-as-gardener metaphor in *Winged Worlds: Flight in Poetry and History* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2007) 182-84.

Saint-Exupéry compares aviation and cultivation from the first paragraph of the text, and this is one of the powerful themes he invokes throughout the book. In the Foreword—a section that is unaccountably missing in the English translation—the airplane is likened to a plow. As a “tool” the airplane becomes a means of uncovering the secrets of nature and discovering universal truth. The earth, as a force which resists man, performs an adversarial role that allows man to measure his worth in relationship to it:

La terre nous en apprend plus long sur nous que tous les livres. Parce qu'elle nous résiste. L'homme se découvre quand il se mesure avec l'obstacle. Mais pour l'atteindre, il lui faut un outil. Il lui faut un rabot, ou une charrue. Le paysan, dans son labour, arrache peu à peu quelques secrets á la nature, et la vérité qu'il dégage est universelle. De même l'avion, l'outil des lignes aériennes, mêle l'homme à tous les vieux problèmes. (*Terre des Hommes* 11)

The earth teaches us more about ourselves than all the books. Because it resists us. Man discovers himself when he measures himself against the obstacle. But to meet challenge, it is necessary for man to have a tool, a planer, or a plough. The peasant, in his plowing, pulls out little by little the secrets of nature, and the truth that it releases is universal. In the same way, the airplane, the tool of the aerial lines, engages man in all of the great problems.

The foreword articulates two fundamental ideas that Saint-Exupéry holds throughout: that character is formed by measuring the self against a formidable Other,

and that the tool with which one observes, engages, domesticates or cultivates becomes a tool for discovering Truth. Within these ideas are powerful metaphors, a hint of a Garden and a transformation of wilderness. The heroic struggle against nature that ennoble man is clearly Baconian in theme, even though Saint-Exupéry resists allusions to Christianity.⁸⁹ While he doesn't necessarily define man's relationship to nature in terms of penetration,⁹⁰ Saint-Exupéry is intent on deciphering nature's "secret language" (33, 138); and, like Bacon, he consistently uses language that connotes struggle. He "wrestles" with nature (83, 84) and engages it in "hand to hand combat" (40). Nature is both "adversary" (80) and "prison" (98), "empty" and "profane," (183) something that must be confronted and outwitted—or at the very least, cultivated.

Nature-as-adversary is so conspicuous within the text that it is easy to get caught up in Saint-Exupéry's adventures and miss the fact that he applies similar oppositional terms to non-Europeans. Transferred to Cape Juby in the Spanish Rio de Oro in 1927, Saint-Exupéry is charged with managing the refueling station for Latécoère, a fledgling French airline. During his stay in West Africa, he claims to admire the Moors, even as he represents them as a kind of wilderness, one that if "tamed" will ennoble humanity as a whole. Rumbold and Stewart characterize the "essence" of Saint-Exupéry's worldview as one in which man "gives worth and significance to his existence" as he struggles to bring order "[o]ut of the chaos of nature" (48), and this plays out in conflicts with non-European others who are trapped within imaginative geographies as manifestations of nature.

⁸⁹ Francis Bacon's reasons for admonishing experimentation were, of course, explicitly Christian.

⁹⁰ Peter Pesic provides an extended analysis of Baconian nature metaphors, including the "penetrating investigation" and the "heroic struggle [against nature] that will ennoble humanity" in "Wrestling with Proteus: Francis Bacon and the 'Torture' of Nature," *Isis* 90.1 (1999): 81-94.

From his first day in Africa, on which the airplane in which he is flying throws a connecting rod and crash lands in the desert, Saint-Exupéry constructs both people and place in terms of ennobling struggle. Surveying the horizon like a “captain on his bridge” he imagines himself falling in love with the Sahara (130-31) not *in spite of* the danger but *because of it*, since it allows him to feel noble. The “vast and sandy void” (128) that harbors invisible “plotting” and “imminent surprise” becomes a proving ground in which he feels “immense pride” (130). This moment anticipates a later one where, forced down in the Rio de Oro, Saint-Exupéry describes the thrill of being (presumably) the first person to set foot on the “virginity of a soil which no step of man or beast had sullied” (104).

As Saint-Exupéry awaits his rescue plane, he notes that memories emerge like “waters of a spring” to fill the emptiness: the firs and linden trees of France, his childhood home, the sound of frogs, the old housekeeper bustling about, keeping the house in order. All become the “thousand landmarks” with which he must identify in order to reorient himself (107). The substitutions are telling. Images of barrenness are replaced with those of life, wasteland with water, chaos with order. Projected images are those of European civilization: the housekeeper at her spinning wheel, snow-white sheets and stately cupboards. And, lest the reader miss the significance of the substitutions, Saint-Exupéry explains: “My dreams are more real than these dunes, than that moon, than these presences. My civilization is an empire more imperious than this empire” (110). The “feeling of eternity” that comes over him in the “wilderness” (108) is not a sense of belonging to the Sahara, but belonging to culture that would improve it.

Like the desert, the native people West Africa are also shown to be lacking. As chaotic forms of nature, they are lacking elements central to Saint-Exupéry's worldview, namely, the moral powers, imagination, and creative ability that set man apart from the other animals (Rumbold and Stewart 48). As a way of "taming" the Moors, Saint-Exupéry and other pilots offer airplane rides, hoping to "soften their pride ... born of the illusion of their power" (139). At one point, three tribal leaders are flown to France, presumably in friendship, but more likely as a demonstration of European power. Upon their return, Saint-Exupéry is surprised to learn that the men are less impressed by technology than by the abundance of water, which they see as a manifestation of divinity.

While Saint-Exupéry suspects that the men missed the point of the flight, their response, one of baffled submission, is precisely what he expects. It seems to delight him (since he repeats it a page later) that the Moorish chiefs admit a kind of inferiority: "the God of the French ... He is more generous to the French than the God of the Moors is to the Moors'" (142, 144). Here, it doesn't matter much whether the leaders appreciate the display of technology or not. The lack that the leaders admit is not merely a deficiency of resources, but a lack of divine favor that seems to justify (if not demand) the assistance of empire. Saint-Exupéry's reflection confirms the imperial logic when he writes: "I knew them well, my barbarians. There they sat, perplexed in their faith, disconcerted, and henceforth quite ready to acknowledge French overlordship.... There was no question but that they would, by their submission, be materially better off" (144).

The lesson the tribal leaders learn—the one that Saint-Exupéry seems to want them to learn—is that they have been proud only because of their ignorance. As primitive or "fallen" men, they cannot recover the Garden alone; nor can they discover

the “universal” truths that come as a result of wielding the tools of empire (the plow, the airplane, the planer). Although Saint-Exupéry proclaims a desire to celebrate and release the hidden nobility present in all men, the redemption he describes is a selective one that comes as a result of pitting the self against a resistant and potentially hostile force that is essentially non-transcendent.

The act of taming is, of course, an act of domestication, but it is also an act of feminization. The display of power (natural or technological) results in submission and passivity on the part of the Moorish chiefs, who willingly accept their fate as subjects in the custody of empire. But even when the Moorish tribes emerge as a threat, the result is that the European men become increasingly masculinized, while the opposite is true for the tribesmen.

The resistance to the French and Spanish occupation in the Western Sahara posed immediate danger for the pilots of La Ligne. Airplanes were regularly fired upon, and pilots who had to make emergency landings in the desert were particularly vulnerable. Before Saint-Exupéry took charge of the French refueling station at Cape Juby, several pilots had been taken hostage and others had been killed.⁹¹ Even so, the ways in which Saint-Exupéry renders the threat is at times oddly feminized. On visiting Port Etienne, for example, he writes that the surrounding desert makes the threat of a razzia (a band of armed tribesman) slim. What makes the moment important for Saint-Exupéry, however, is not whether there *is* immediate danger, but that there *was* immediate danger at some

⁹¹ Before Saint-Exupéry arrived in 1927, several incidents had already attracted worldwide publicity. In 1925, French pilots Rozes and Ville were attacked after a forced landing and pilot Marcel Reine was taken prisoner. The following year, pilot Jean Memroz was taken prisoner and Erable (pilot) and Pintado (Spanish mechanic) were killed after trying to rescue Gourp, a pilot who had made an emergency landing. Gourp later died from a bullet wound after his ransom was paid. Rumbold and Stewart 65-6.

point in time. The captain at the fort describes an earlier attack, and for Saint-Exupéry, the “memory” of the razzia lends enchantment to the place. Imagining the armed conflict fills the captain with a feeling that is not fear or patriotism, but love: “Each time that the army captain who served as commandant of the fort came to drink a cup of tea with us, he would show us its route [that the attack] on the map the way a man might tell the legend of a beautiful princess” (135). The strangely tender way in which the commanding officer describes the attack is telling, for without it, he has no “obstacle” against which to measure nobility and masculinity. That he remembers the conflict in the same way a man might look forward to an exotic love affair shows how the threat becomes sexualized. The Moorish tribesmen collectively take on the role of princess, which according to metaphor is to be courted, wedded, and seduced.

There are virtually no women in the text aside from two “princesses,” who live in “a forbidden kingdom” (sisters Saint-Exupéry meets in Argentina after a forced landing [114, 121]). As in Markham’s autobiography, the action revolves around exclusively male worlds: the airfield, the battlefield, and the colonial outpost. Saint-Exupéry’s chivalric metaphors situate him as a lone, questing male who communes only with fellow knights of the air. By devoting himself to duty, he rises above the need for female companionship. Although Saint-Exupéry had been married to Consuelo Gómez Carrillo eight years by the time he compiled the chapters that would become *Wind, Sand and Stars*, his character is crafted exclusively through comradeship with a brotherhood of men. The one place in the text where his wife makes an appearance is both fleeting and jarring. Jean Lucas, an Aéropostale colleague who has just plotted the navigational course for Saint-Exupéry’s Paris to Saigon flight, wakes his friend early, explaining,

“here: here are your maps, with your course all marked out. And here—” Lucas does not finish his thought, which is completed by a faceless and nameless wife, “is your bag packed for Saïgon.” (175).

There is no image, no introduction, no affiliation, no affection, and no further mention of the person who packs the bag. Any feelings for her that might be inferred are, on the next page, upstaged by his feelings for the airplane. As he walks around the *Simoon* in preparation for the trip that will leave him stranded in the Libyan desert, he touches the aircraft tenderly and adoringly: “I walked round my ship, stroking her winds with the back of my hand in a caress that I believe was love” (176). The book is certainly not devoid of love—it is in fact brimming with love for one’s companions—but that love is reserved for man, for the machine, and for the stark, “virgin” landscapes filled with danger and eroticism. Like Didier Daurat, the leader of La Ligne who forbade women to cross the boundaries of the airfields, Saint-Exupéry all but banishes female presence from the book. It almost goes without saying that, according to *Wind, Sand and Stars*, African women simply do not exist.

It seems suitable that *Terre des Hommes* received the French Academy’s most prestigious award for fiction, since it allows Saint-Exupéry to participate in a variety of fictions that allow him access to chivalric identity. Saint-Exupéry eventually expresses something like his love for his wife—the “rose” that stays at home under glass (complaining)—but that would not happen until 1943, when his Little Prince would

wander into the desert alone to learn that “L’essentiel est invisible pour les yeux” (*Le Petit Prince* 71).⁹²

In *The Right Stuff*, Tom Wolfe writes that Saint-Exupéry was “[a] saint in short, true to his name, flying up here at the right hand of God. The good Saint-Ex! And he was not the only one. He was merely the one who put it into words most beautifully and anointed himself before the altar of the right stuff” (40). If *Wind, Sand and Stars* is indication of what is worshipped at the “altar of the right stuff,” then it is safe to assume that the gods of the sky are extraordinarily masculine, independent, noble, brave, and true. Forged in contrast to all things feminine and embodied.

Escaping the Wilderness: Anne Morrow Lindbergh and the Epic Journey

It’s hard to miss the woodcut on the title page of Anne Morrow Lindbergh’s *Listen! the Wind*: a huge star in the shape of a cross showering light upon a small, twin-engine floatplane. The star invokes the Star of Bethlehem, the anticipation of God’s arrival, the end of a faithful journey, the promise of salvation, while the aircraft suggests a vehicle with which to locate god’s presence. But this is not a story about virgin birth, nor is it the story of God incarnate. It is the story of a married couple flying across the north and south Atlantic in an attempt to establish air routes between the United States, Western Europe, Africa, and South America.

The image, one that illustrates faith in the airplane as a redemptive tool, depicts the couple’s mission as a divine one even as it provides ironic substitutions: the star’s rays fall in the shape of a cross suggesting death and resurrection, not birth; the implied,

⁹² What is essential is invisible to the eyes.

white couple takes the place of Magi; and a single machine takes the place of ancient group transport, typically depicted as camels. It is also interesting to note that the light of the star doesn't shine in the distance, illuminating the way to God, but fills the space allotted, shining its light directly upon the small airplane. The image suggests that God's presence will fill the whole world and that the airplane and its occupants are entrusted with the sacred duty of emissaries.

The illustration, one of several in the book by Charles Lindbergh, provides subtle commentary on the intention of the flight, even though the book's author, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, makes no specific references to Christianity. Instead, the Christianizing mission is implied as the central metaphor becomes Odyssean journey—a comparison that lends epic significance to the flight. The narrative begins mid-voyage, after the couple has crossed the Atlantic, completed a tour of Western Europe, and made a stop in Spanish West Africa. Upon leaving Villa Cisneros, the two fly to Praia, an island intended as a short fuel stop en route to the coast of Brazil. Jubilant that the wind has been their ally for the journey so far, Lindbergh invokes the Odyssean framework by referring to Aeolus's gift of wind, anticipating that the wind will speed their return homeward. “[L]ike the old story of Odysseus,” she writes, “some god had imprisoned in a bag of ox's skin all opposing winds, leaving free only that one which was to take us home” (4).

From the moment they are “pinned” to Praia, however, it becomes clear that the wind is to be opponent rather than ally: “perverse, uncontrollable and fickle” (4). The wind that is supposed to bring them home instead stirs the ocean into high, choppy waves, making it impossible for their seaplane to take off with enough fuel to reach South

America. The stay at the island—one in which they determine to fly back to Africa rather than wait for the wind to die down—becomes a trial in which they, like Odysseus, struggle with less-than-human characters and natural forces in order to secure passage home. Within the Odyssean framework nature and non-European others are unpredictable and potentially dangerous forces that sometimes help—but sometimes seem to conspire against—the couple. Metaphorically, nature and indigene are conflated as fallen Eve or wilderness within the recovery plot: chaotic, unpredictable and unproductive. Whether the plot is a Greek or Judeo-Christian one, indigenous peoples are trapped within imaginative geographies that relegate them to subject positions that are fundamentally non-transcendent. Fully able to control the metaphors, on the other hand, Lindbergh becomes the transcendent subject of adventure, the explorer who “discovers” strange new places and peoples.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh is able to invoke the supremely masculine plot of Odysseus and still be taken seriously, since she is speaking as the companion to the hero’s modern equivalent. The metaphorical conflation allows Lindbergh access to universal selfhood, since the figure of Odysseus is profoundly individuated, solitary, autonomous, free from the encumbrances of home and family. Defined by his clever mind, Odysseus escapes the limitations of his physical body, and the grotesque or feminine bodies that seek to confine him. Geographically speaking, the metaphor allows Lindbergh to invoke the powerful trope of the explorer, who self-defines in unknown and distant lands, far from the familiar comforts of home. By drawing on the cunning voyager and timeless hero, Lindbergh masculinizes her narrative and avoids being marked by her own female body. Discourses of adventure that allow her to erase her

identity as a woman also allow her to erase attachments to home and family. Unlike Odysseus, however, Lindbergh does not show herself longing for home. Although her journey takes her away from her infant son, Jon, for almost six months, she does not mention him at any point in the text. Lindbergh's frustration at being unable to leave Praia is not linked to home and family, but to the inability to progress—to escape from a place that for her is the very antithesis of civilization.

Lindbergh performs transcendence by stressing the physical and metaphorical distance between herself and the earthbound. By virtue of the tools of transcendence (maps and various kinds of calculations), Lindbergh shows how she and her husband transcend the inhabitants of Praia even before they reach the island. Of planning the flight and sighting the island, Lindbergh asks, “Hadn't we picked [the island] out of the clear outlines of a chart, putting a finger on the very harbor now below us, looking down at the contours like gods surveying the world?” (9). From their “Olympian heights” (9) husband and wife are situated literally and figuratively well above the inhabitants of the island within the first few pages of the text.

Once they become “anchored” to Praia, however, Lindbergh mourns the lack of Olympian powers. As “fallen” figures, she and her husband are no longer gods controlling their own fates, but (merely) Odyssean heroes who must grapple with inhuman forces to secure safe passage home. Lindbergh's unhappiness with the place stems from the fact that she is stuck on the ground in a geography that she imagines to be hostile to her, and so she consoles herself by attempting to fill the landscape with what it is not. Like Markham and Saint-Exupéry, Lindbergh describes the place in terms of what

it lacks, and she projects images on to the landscape that are consistent with her own desires:

There must be lovely parts to this island I thought; cool valleys with the lush green of tropical forests; eucalyptus trees, with their long fingers rustling in the wind; bamboo, pushing up, high and stiff and cool as sheets of water falling; slopes covered with the dense dark green of coffee bushes; gullies with streams running all year round. (36)

The image is blatantly paradisiacal, featuring a lush, fertile Garden with plenty of resources, which both comfort and sustain. Her imagined sanctuary participates in what Lawrence Buell calls the “aesthetics of the not-there” (68). Noting the frequency with which American writers such as Thoreau describe one place (a remote and romantic elsewhere) in place of the actual landscape, Buell attributes the practice to a need for self-protection. Tracing the trend to New England’s early settlers, Buell explains that “old world frames of reference—the Exodus narrative, pastoral convention, a basketful of English place names—became defenses against the heart of darkness” (70).

The inclination to fill a place with images of another has obvious problems, not the least of which is that the substitutions work on a presumed emptiness that stems from the inability to value what is there. The new world wouldn’t need to be filled with “pastoral accoutrements” if it were not already “willed to be empty” (71). By replacing the stark environment with lush imagery, Lindbergh judges the island from a mythology that holds the garden as landscape supreme. The desert has not been made to blossom like the rose, and this fact makes it not merely uninviting but unwholesome. Overwhelmed by what she can only see as barren, Lindbergh substitutes images of

comfort and pleasure—an Eden recovered—even as she gives up on the possibility of its recovery: “For us there were only these bare brown hills, those gray trees on the slopes, bent in the wind, dusty roads back to a harbor open to the sea, and waiting, waiting” (36). The only response she can muster for such a place is an intense hope for leaving it. Seen through her disappointment, the island is wholly unredeemable.

The sense that the place has no redeeming qualities is transferred onto Lindbergh’s assessments of indigenous people who, though touched by Western civilization, don’t seem to be improved by it. The Portuguese governor’s wife and daughter are “pretty and cool in thin clothes and lipstick” (32), while the native women, surrounded as they are by “swollen-bellied little boys” (31) are described in terms of poverty and reproduction. Noting the ragged calico skirts and cloth belts to support pregnancy, Lindbergh assumes that most of the women are pregnant: “It seemed to me a strange place for a belt, until I realized that the band was in exactly the right position to support the weight of a child if the woman were pregnant. And most of them were” (31). While pregnancy might suggest an analogy to “mother Eve,” the connection to poverty suggests a fallen Eve, one who indiscriminately reproduces. “The women,” who have “limp babies, like wilting poppy buds, drooping on their backs” (37) seem more animal than human, more nature than culture, an extension of the desolate landscape of which they are a part.

The hyper-feminized women—to use Patrick Colm Hogan’s terminology (164)—are defined as a collective and undistinguishable Other, and as such they are utterly non-transcendent, reduced to being objects of reproductive biology. Defined by physicality, poverty and lethargy, the women are evidence of fallen nature from which Lindbergh

differentiates. Indigenous men, however, fare only slightly better in terms of feminization. The one indigenous man to surface as an individual among the other “negroes” is “Chef,” a man who offers his home to the couple, since they want to stay as close to the tiny, vulnerable seaplane as possible and his is the closest residence. “Chef,” is defined by his body, which is tall, bony and sickly—a “scarecrow” (19). “Chef’s” professional role as the island’s radio operator is obscured by that fact that he is allied with his home, which is plain, rundown, filthy, and ridden with bedbugs and presumably disease. His wife, a quiet, listless and impassive young girl with a “sweet sallow little face” (19), attends “Chef” at all times, and the two become symbolic of the wilderness Lindbergh longs to escape.

“Chef” and his wife are continually described in terms of what they lack: good-fitting clothes, adequate food, clean beds. The barrenness of the island is superimposed onto this couple, who, despite their efforts to take care of the Lindberghs, are seen as a threat. The couple—and later the island—becomes a kind of Odyssean monster once the Lindberghs realize that “Chef” is sick, whether from rheumatism (as he claims) or from tuberculosis (as the French mechanic claims). Once they find out about the illness, the Lindbergh enter the couple’s home—where they have already agreed to stay—like “spies entering the enemy’s camp.” Trying to avoid prolonged contact with the native couple, the Lindberghs finally flee the home and sleep in the baggage compartment of the airplane (55-67). Later, suffering from a headache, Lindbergh will attribute her discomfort to a malicious force of the island that holds her captive: “Was it *me* that had the headache? ... Wasn’t it in the burnt grass and in the wind? Not in me. ‘It’ had the

headache—the island, perhaps, or something that brooded over the island, and I was just caught in it, a little part of it, a single throb” (88).

Seen through the Odyssean framework, native and nature—each personified by illness—become threatening forces that must be escaped. Lindbergh fears that the longer she stays, the more she will become part of the sickness of the island, if only a “single throb.” Lindbergh seems to worry that she and her husband, like Odysseus’s men who eat the fruit of the lotus offered by the natives and cease to be mindful of civilization, are likely to lose qualities—such as motivation—that differentiate them from their less-than-human counterparts.

But while wild forces, like the island, the wind, and disease, are positioned as unpredictable or even hostile forces from which Anne Morrow Lindbergh and her husband must escape, her overwhelming appraisal of the place and its people is one of stagnancy, of the inability to progress. And this is clearly her biggest fear of all: that she will be unable to move forward. Feeling trapped, Lindbergh sees her time at Praia as purgatorial, and her frustration at not being able to leave is projected onto the island and its inhabitants as the very antithesis of growth and development. Lindbergh distinguishes between the wind on the island, (which traps its inhabitants like prey), and the winds aloft (which deliver the travelers into the arms of civilization):

Time didn’t count here at all. It had stopped. Listening to that wind roaring above us distantly, I had a sudden feeling of panic; a sense that it was life up there hurrying by, a great stream, tumbling, turning, sparkling, a rich swift life like the packed months just behind us... we were in the stream once, but now we had been tossed out of it. We here, on this

island, were caught in an eddy, a backwater, out of the stream; a pool, where bits of sodden leaves and crooked twigs and stray maple seeds went round and round, and never made any progress, never won their way out again into the whirling current. (49)

The trade winds, which represent progress, are clearly *going somewhere*, while the wind at the surface merely stirs up the sea, creating an eddy against which the fully-loaded seaplane can't contend. The upper air is alive with potential, excitement, and momentum, while the people who have no access to it are depicted as passive, organic, and even "vacuous." Walking to the radio station from which the couple will try to communicate a change of plans, Lindbergh notices the radio towers rising from the crest of a hill and imagines what the towers mean to her. Ironically, the lifeless antennas, which "reach up to [the] Olympian world of power, speed, vision" are for her the "organic tie" that connects her to the "living world" (90-91). The island, by contrast, presents a lifeless alternative—a place from which heroes don't return victoriously, but degenerate as nature does, decaying like bits of twigs and leaves.

Lindbergh's salvation comes when she receives word that English officials at Bathurst, a British settlement off the coast of Africa, enthusiastically await the arrival of the couple. By travelling back to the African coast, the Lindberghs won't be weighed down by the fuel required for an Atlantic crossing, and so they will be able to take off in spite of the choppy water. The thought of leaving prompts Lindbergh to revisit the Odyssean metaphor as nature and native converge in images of degeneration: "The sound of the wind, the heat, the rust on machinery, the talk of fever, the tubercular cough. They need not, then, have dominion over us; they need not hold us down. They could be

blown away. The forces against us could be tied up like the opposing winds of Odysseus and that one friendly force left out to sweep us home” (78).

The conflation between native people and nature signals that they are trapped within imaginative geographies that are controlled by Lindbergh, who transcends earthly entrapment. The conflation is most blatant when Lindbergh informs “Chef” and his wife of their plans to leave. Elated to inform the native couple that they will be leaving soon, Lindbergh contrasts her happiness to what she reads as despondency in the faces of “Chef” and his wife as they hear the news. Lindbergh attributes the “appalling stillness” of the couple to unhappiness, and compares the expression on their faces to a landscape of desolation. Their silence and immobility reminds her of “a waiting train, standing in a country station.” As a way of explaining the comparison, she goes on to say that once the train leaves, everything becomes bleak: “You are suddenly faced again with the same stark landscape; the still roadbed covered with oil and cinders, the still tracks, the still water tank, the telegraph poles, the ditch, the fence. It was the same landscape I saw now in the faces opposite me” (112–13).

In this passage, the native couple becomes synonymous with a fallen kind of nature, a quasi-technological wasteland. And, while the first comparison is with technology, not nature—as in the image of the waiting train—the tool is a servant with no volition of its own. Like the train, husband and wife are merely empty vessels waiting on others who are going somewhere. After the train leaves, however, it becomes clear that the native couple is not conflated with technology, but what is left in its wake: a landscape of desolation, cheerless, powerless, and unsightly. The lasting image of the

couple who offers their home to the Lindberghs is as a barren landscape that is not redeemed, by technology.

When the Lindberghs finally take off, the event is marked only by the exultation Lindbergh feels at leaving. Watching the people waving below, she thinks of them as “a dim and dreamlike memory, an old nightmare,” one that she will forget as they “ceased to be important” (118). From Praia, the couple arrives at Bathurst, which she describes in contrast to Praia. The natives under English rule are civilized, well-trained servants who fit their clothes nicely; English officials provide elaborate meals and pleasant living accommodations. And, although the lack of wind forestalls the takeoff from the coast for a few days, not providing *enough* lift for the heavy takeoff, Lindbergh will still describe a “lump in her chest” at the thought of leaving—a stark departure from her feelings at Praia (148). Still, her description of takeoff is much the same as before: a triumphal departure from earth, marked by the conquering of the forces that hold the couple to the ground:

Yes—we are off—we are rising ... like a long sigh, like a person breathing easily, freely. Like someone seeing ecstatically, climbing, soaring—sustained note of power and joy. We turn from the lights of the city; we pivot on a dark wing; we roar over the earth. The plane seems exultant now, even arrogant. We did it, we did it! We are up, above you. We were dependent on you just now, River, prisoners fawning on you for favors, for wind and light. But now, we are free. We are up; we are off. We can toss you aside, you there, way below us, a few lights in the great dark silent world that is ours—for we are above it. (217)

While it's clear that Lindbergh is addressing nature in this paragraph, it is arguable that she is addressing people like "Chef" and his wife whom she has "tossed aside" as well. Her elation depends on becoming radically independent from "nature," and from those whom she has conflated with nature—which conveniently ignores the rather obvious fact that she and her husband have been dependent upon "nature" all along. Being "up above you" is figurative as well as literal, and it applies to her feelings about non-European peoples as well as rivers, eddies and decaying leaves. Freeing oneself from the clutches of the ground and the indolence of the people becomes the same thing. Given the Odyssean framework, flight is the only option, since attachment to less-than-human creatures will only hold the hero back, inhibiting the triumphal return to civilization. Islands, monsters, and enchantments are to be escaped, not understood. Transcendent vertical movement—as victorious separation—becomes the supreme display of difference.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh did not always cast herself in transcendent or "universal" terms. Like her husband, who wrote himself differently the two versions of his Atlantic crossing, Anne Morrow Lindbergh portrays herself differently in her own life narratives. Lindbergh wrote her first autobiography, *North to the Orient* (1935), early in her marriage to Charles. This book, which chronicles the flight she and her husband made from New York to China via Canada, Alaska, Russia, and Japan, frankly addresses her insecurities, which are directly related to being the female companion of the famous aviator. Although she is a fully capable licensed pilot and radio operator, she second-guesses her ability to operate the radios or speak intelligently about the technical demands of aviation. Like the press who interviews her, she regards her own presence on

the flight with suspicion. She notes that reporters ask her “housekeeping” questions (“Where do you put the lunchboxes?”), while her husband is asked “vital masculine questions” (39). Although she is irritated to be asked about clothes and sandwiches, she admits to herself that maybe it’s for the best. “If I were asked about steely technicalities or broad abstractions,” she writes, “I would not be able to answer, so perhaps I do not deserve anything better” (39). In spite of the fact that she shares piloting duties with her husband and takes care of all of the radio communications, she writes herself as an insecure “good wife” who worries that she is an unnecessary appendage, a disappointing presence for people bent on glimpsing her husband. As the couple nears a port in Petropavlovsk, Russia, Lindbergh asks herself a question that is a perpetual concern throughout the text: “How do you justify your own existence?” (141).

In *North to the Orient*, Anne Morrow Lindbergh finds herself caught between public and private identities, and between normative and nontraditional gender roles. For the most part, she plays the part of a public figure in her first autobiography: she establishes the flight within the larger context of the exploring tradition, and she performs the twin roles of radio technician and copilot competently in spite of her insecurities. But she is also a wife and a mother. Although Lindbergh does not say very much about her infant son, Charlie—who was just over a year old when the couple took off (and who had been murdered by the time she wrote the bulk of the book)—he appears briefly in the book as a way for Lindbergh to relate to other women. Unable to share a common language, she shared pictures of Charlie with two Russian women, one of whom has a son of her own, and notes that she feels closer to her son because they had talked of him.

After a tea ceremony, Lindbergh considers the gift of metaphor she receives from the Japanese and thinks of her son as “[m]y hunter of the dragon fly” (193).

Lindbergh’s full erasure of home and family in *Listen! the Wind* demonstrates the Victorian penchant for separating public and private spaces, but it may also indicate a protective desire to shield Jon from a public that had become obsessed with the famous family to the point of violence.⁹³ The reasons for Lindbergh’s narrative choices are unclear, but it is obvious that by the time she wrote *Listen! the Wind* Lindbergh was able to perform an identity in which her insecurities seem to disappear along with her feminine identity. In her second autobiography, Lindbergh emerges as a universal subject able to transcend terrestrial spaces and the limitations of the sexed body. Her appropriation of masculine tropes allows her access to discourses of adventure, but it also allows her to participate in Simone de Beauvoir’s definition of transcendence, which is characterized by the ability to engage in dangerous projects of an ever-widening scope.

Both of Lindbergh’s books were extremely popular when they were first published. Each was among the top ten bestselling nonfiction books in the United States for two years in a row, and *North to the Orient* was *the* number one bestselling book in 1935 (Tebbel 699-701). Before her books, only one flight autobiography had the distinction of a two-year run on top ten bestselling lists—and that book was Charles Lindbergh’s “*WE*.” Upon the publication of *Listen! The Wind*, *New York Times* reviewer Katherine Woods beamed that the book had a “cosmic quality”—an “epic quality”

⁹³ After receiving multiple threats on the life of their three-year-old son, Jon (and after the press ran the Lindbergh’s car off the road to get a picture of the boy), the Lindberghs resolved to move to England in December 1935. Hertog 278. Anne Morrow Lindbergh’s *Listen! The Wind!* was written, according to biographer Susan Hertog, between taking Jon to school and “feeding Land his milk and porridge” (309), but there are no references to mothering in the narrative.

wrought with “exquisiteness and intensity” as well as “awareness” and “lyric beauty” (93). Ralph Thompson raved that the book was the most “superbly reported” of all oceanic voyages (27). Unlike her husband’s or Saint-Exupéry’s autobiographies, however, which continued to enjoy new printings into the twenty-first century, Anne Morrow Lindbergh’s books were reprinted only once in the 1960s and have since become relatively unknown. None of her work appears in popular flight anthologies, presumably because people thought of her as Charles Lindbergh’s wife and not a pilot in her own right.

Like Anne Morrow Lindbergh’s autobiographies, Beryl Markham’s *West with the Night* earned critical praise and enjoyed a few months on bestselling book lists before it disappeared. Markham’s autobiography probably would have remained unknown if it were not for a letter written by Hemingway in 1942 that praised the pilot’s ability to “write rings around” him. The letter, which was discovered in 1981 led to the book’s reprinting in 1982 (O’Brien 14-15). The fact that the two women’s critically acclaimed and bestselling autobiographies had trouble standing the test of time speaks to the historically specific context of their appeal—and to the non-“universal” nature of their identities.

Tom Wolfe explains that “the right stuff” is not just about bravery, but about having a “righteous quality” that is a combination of fortitude and fortune. Having “the right stuff” means having the determination to contend in an endless series of tests; it means being part of a “cause” that “means something to thousands, to a people, a nation, to humanity, to god” (24). But it also means having the right scripts, the right opportunities and the right anatomical parts. Joining “the elite” is to be part of an “all-

enclosing fraternity,” which means that the “right stuff,” by definition, is decidedly male. Given Wolfe’s qualities, it is no surprise that the reigning champion of flight autobiography in the United States continues to be Saint-Exupéry, who embodied the “right stuff”—chivalric ideals, righteousness, transcendence—absolutely. Pilots such as Beryl Markham and Anne Morrow Lindbergh could adopt the right scripts and have the right opportunities, but the ultimately could not join the “special few at the very top” which is “the very Brotherhood of the Right Stuff itself” (24).

Sidonie Smith’s reminder that women who participate in masculine plots do so at a narrative expense is salient here: that the adoption of masculine tropes only serve to make the women seem like “interlopers” within accepted “fictions” (*Poetics* 51). But I would add that the women’s bodies don’t just interfere with the women’s ability to participate in masculine narratives; they interfere with the women’s ability to embody and sustain roles within powerful geographic metaphors—and this makes them seem less transcendent than their male counterparts. Lindbergh can invoke the Odyssean journey; Markham can beat men across the Atlantic; both can erase their sons, but in spite of this, neither of them seems entirely consistent with the explorer, voyager, or adventuring hero who, unfettered by the demands of earthly cares, self-defines in symbolic space.

Although the women attempt to erase the tell-tale marks of their own femininity, their bodies, like the markers of empire, appear in the writing nonetheless. In the end, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, knight and prince of the air, reigns supreme in the aerial “mythic lineage of heroes,”⁹⁴ and for that, he continues to be forgiven colonial excess.

⁹⁴ Reference from Paul Carter’s *The Road to Botany Bay: An Essay in Spatial History* (London: Faber, 1987) xvii, in which he argues that imperial histories fail to admit intentionality, making it seem as if the

Chapter 6: Summary and Conclusions

15. Aircraft operating in the high untrespassed sanctity of space must remain in IFR⁹⁵ flight regardless of meteorological conditions and visibility.

16. Pilots and passengers are reminded that opening doors or windows in order to touch the face of God may result in loss of cabin pressure.

From an anonymously posted “FAA Supplement” to “High Flight” (Braden Files)

There are also celestial bodies, and bodies terrestrial: but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another.

1 Corinthians 15:40

At ten-thirty on the morning of July 2, 1982, Larry Walters took to the skies from the backyard of his girlfriend’s home in San Pedro, California, in a craft called *Inspiration I*, a lawn chair attached to 42 weather balloons, each measuring seven feet in diameter.⁹⁶ Inspired by a “dream of flight” that sustained him through the Army and a tour of duty in Vietnam, Walters had thought about helium-powered flight since a childhood visit to Disneyland in which he had seen a woman holding “what seemed like a zillion Mickey Mouse balloons” (Plimpton 62, 64). By high school Larry was experimenting with helium gas generators, inflating small balloons, and seriously considering the possibility of going aloft with the aid of a weather balloon he had seen in an Army-Navy surplus store.

myth-heroes are merely “fulfilling a higher destiny” rather than purposefully naming and appropriating space.

⁹⁵ Instrument Flight Rules, which include being on an authorized flight plan and in constant radio contact with Air Traffic Control agencies.

⁹⁶ The number is disputed. *LA Times* staff writers put the number at 42, while UPI and AP articles simultaneously report 42 and 45. Interviewers George Plimpton and Mark Barry list 42 and National Air and Space Museum chronologers claim there were 45. “Out of the Past” *Aerospace America* July 2007.

Walters's flight could have been a success. A careful planner, Walters had everything he needed: lift from the helium, ballast (milk jugs filled with water tied to the chair legs), altimeter, parachute, life vest, CB radio, roadmap, some beef jerky, and a BB gun to pop the balloons. He even had a spare pair of glasses, which came in handy when the balloons burst from the restraints prematurely, pitching him forward and knocking his original pair off. Upon reaching 15,000 feet, Walters sensed the shortage of oxygen and began shooting balloons to stop his ascent. After popping several of them, a gust of wind knocked the gun from his hand and he continued to ascend to 16,500, where the temperature neared zero. He had just started wondering if he'd need the parachute when the balloons began to leak and his ship descended, leaving him dangling from power lines over the backyard of an off duty airline pilot (62). Citing Walters for four violations of the Federal Aviation Act, the FAA fined him \$4,000 (Jones B1).⁹⁷

Walters would not write his own account of the flight, but the largely derisive public viewed Walters as ridiculous. "Lawnchair Larry"⁹⁸ would be alternatively mocked and marginally admired, receiving an honorable mention in the 1982 Darwin Awards, top prize from the Bonehead Club of Dallas, and invitations to appear on *The Tonight Show* and *Late Night with David Letterman*. His presence would be inferred in an image of a lawn-chair-flying Ronald Reagan—"another nut from California"—in a political cartoon by Paul Conrad (Plimpton 62). Once the initial hype settled down, Walters would comment, "I didn't think that by fulfilling my goal in life—my dream—that it would create such a stir ... and make people laugh" (Oliver A16).

⁹⁷ Walters finally settled with the FAA for \$1,500.

⁹⁸ Who would become "Danny Deckchair" in a 2004 film by the same name. Larry Walter's story would also be the impetus for a Broadway play in August 2001: *The Ballad of Larry the Flier*.

Humor thrives on incongruity, which is precisely why Walters's flight was laughable. Even though he had merely invoked the time-honored tenets of the scientific method for himself, he seemed glaringly out of place in the air. His flight was no more outrageous than the first manned balloon ascent, which featured courtiers French Jean-François Pilâtre de Rozier and François Laurent Marquis d'Arlandes (in lieu of condemned criminals suggested by the Montgolfiers) in a wicker basket waving and rising gallantly just before embers from the fire burned through two of the lines, forcing a landing in a Paris suburb (Land 13). Nor was it as comical as the first crossing of the English Channel, an ascension in which Jean-Pierre Blanchard and John Jefferies would jettison everything⁹⁹ just before hitting an unexpected updraft that hoisted them high into space, chilling them to the bone, and leaving them 12 miles beyond the coast of France in a grove of trees (Murchie 285). Even the beef jerky Walters brought was part of a long tradition of dining aloft. Pioneering flights in France typically featured a bottle of brandy; and the first helium powered flight piloted by Vincent Lunardi featured "several glasses of wine and a chicken leg" (Land 14).

In a quirky history of daring ascents, Walters should have seemed right at home: an intrepid man with a dream of flight that could not be suppressed. What, then, was wrong with his attempt? Obviously, the newness was gone from the narrative. Next to original engineering pioneers like Joseph Michel Montgolfier, whose observations and experiments led to the first lighter-than-air ascents, Walters could only come up short, two hundred years too late to participate in the wonder and enthusiasm (and sometimes

⁹⁹ A gesture which included jettisoning their coats, Blanchard's trousers and "relieving themselves." Murchie 285.

the violent, superstitious reactions) that attended the first ascensions. Even so, not all jet-age balloon flights were laughable. Steve Fossett's round-the-world balloon flight in 2002, for instance, was regarded as a triumph. Easily compatible with notions of the frontier and with narratives of progress and courage, it was the very essence of transcendence.

Throughout this project I have shown control of the aircraft and control of geographic metaphors to be crucial to the ideal, aerial subject. Anything feminine, chaotic, weak, irrational, unstable, or earthy—that is, anything that could be equated with “nature”—was antithetical to the pilot who epitomized conventionally masculine ideals. Masterfully controlling a feminized machine, the ideal pilot did not fly as a result of physical manipulation, but character. Spirit, reason, purity, determination—these qualities were more important to the construction of ideal, aerial selfhood than attention to the physical laws of aerodynamics. Within pilot narratives, control of geographic metaphors was as important as controlling the aircraft, since these proved that the pilot mastered more than mechanics: he had mastered qualities consistent with a space of power, agency, and poetry.

In this brief chapter, I draw on Larry Walters's flight to sum up my major arguments and to sketch the broad implications of this project, which speak to problems in literary scholarship and aviation. Environmental literary scholarship has studied the kinds of metaphors that texture our landscapes and inform our thinking about the natural world, but so far it has not paid attention to how geographic metaphors influence identity, agency, and experience. This project shows that imaginative geographies are directly related to subjectivity and that they have real-life consequences. The sky, for instance—

like the frontier, wilderness, or “virgin land”—is not a neutral construct, but one that invites a specific kind of subject and rejects others. Mastery of the metaphors is not “natural,” but is *always* an indication of transcendence and privilege. In order to convincingly invoke powerful, metaphorical geographies, one cannot be trapped within geographical constructs as part of nature, which helps explain why conventionally feminine subjects have always seemed out of place in powerfully symbolic geographical spaces. These insights are not just important to environmental literary scholarship, but to autobiographical scholarship, which has so far done little to explore how geographical discourses impinge on the construction of subjectivity. The flight autobiographies addressed in this project show how the literal earthly transcendence offered by the airplane did not allow for figurative transcendence, which is a masculine prerogative and a matter of privilege. The advent of powered flight, with its unprecedented enthusiasm and transformative narratives, makes the biases of transcendence explicit.

It is clear that “universal” selfhood depends on the ability to exist apart from the encumbrances of the physical body, but it also depends upon transcendence—the ability to remain outside of earthly geographies. The ability to fly is contingent on a host of privileges, as is the ability to write about it in poetic terms. What emerges in the most popular flight autobiographies is a thoroughly transcendent, masculine subject radically differentiated from the earthbound, teeming masses—but one that pretends to represent all “men.” A hypermasculine construct, this ideal, aerial selfhood self-defines in opposition to all that can be construed as feminine, material, encumbered, or relational. To fly was one thing; to transcend the known world was another; and the vast majority of people merely flew. I include Walters’s story here to show the difference between going

up into the world and going beyond the world—and to return to John Gillespie Magee Jr.'s poem "High Flight" where this project began.

The public reaction to Walters's flight signaled that ascension and transcendence were not the same thing and in fact never were. The "dubious premise" of Walters's flight (Hardy 11) wasn't any more dubious than the premises of other pioneering flights, yet, given the high-tech context of the late twentieth century, his low-tech enactment could only seem foolish. Aristotle's cosmos had long been superseded by new constructs, but these were no less hierarchical or gendered. Ancient and Medieval skies that presumed a transcendent, masculine presence had become terraced in new ways, but the air—as airspace—still presumed a conspicuously masculine subject.

Unlike Magee, Walters does not rise from the mundane to the miraculous, but from the mundane to the ridiculous—and this movement highlights the exclusivities that I have been addressing all along. The combination of aerial discourses, written discourses and transcendent discourses that lend Magee legendary status conspire against Walters to make him look like an absurd, bumbling parody of self-actualization within the "sanctity of space." Although most autobiographical subjects don't contend with the sky as a sociocultural site, *all* autobiographical subjects contend with spaces that are not neutral. The ideal aerial subject is just one example of how imaginative geographies demand a particular kind of subject and narrative—and in the storied tradition of the air, this subject is decidedly masculine.

Walters seemed incongruous within aerial discourses partly because his aircraft was far too ordinary—too aligned with domesticity to be taken seriously as a viable flying machine. The winged sandals of Perseus are, in Walters's case, a wholly prosaic

object of home and garden: a piece of lawn furniture. By trying to access transcendent space by using something terrestrial, Walters committed the cardinal sin of taking the domestic, everyday world into the sky. The lawn chair, along with its *déclassé* accoutrements—milk jugs—was defined by feminine, class markers that were hardly appropriate in a high-tech, exclusive space associated with progress and power. Furthermore, Walters's lighter-than-air ascent was dependent on the "feminine principle of passive, rotund, floating flight" (Murchie 281). To further feminize his ascent, Walters took off from the backyard of his girlfriend's home with a cluster of these, making him analogous to the woman of his youth, holding the bouquet of Mickey Mouse balloons. Unlike Magee, who in "High Flight" pierces the heavens with a Spitfire—one of the most notorious fighters of WWII—Walters can only wend his way aloft, passively and erratically, at the mercy of the elements, in a craft that is extremely vulnerable and hard to control. The one masculine prop that is left to him, the BB gun air pistol, is more child's toy than manly tool, and even this is lost to him as he is tossed about by the wind.

Walters's feminized ascent is highlighted by the fact that the space he enters is thoroughly masculine. Had Walters set off from the Mojave Desert, where he intended to land, it is doubtful the flight would have excited as much publicity. Untethering the aircraft within the extended control zones of Los Angeles International Airport, however, made the ascent particularly conspicuous and risky. It's hard to know how much Walters knew about the invisible airspace design, which situated the launch directly within LAX departure and approach paths, but there's no doubt that the airspace he entered was supremely hierarchical, exclusive and gendered. The pilot nickname for busy U.S. hubs like Los Angeles betrays its biases: "the rich man's wedding cake."

Designed in an upside-down three-tier shape, the top of the “cake” would have been directly over the airport, with other, higher layers directly over the Van Deusen home. In order to be granted access to the space, Walters would not only need to have a suitably equipped aircraft, he would also have to be fluent with the codes of communication recognized by controlling agencies. But Walters’s working class background positioned him as terrestrial and feminine, more likely to live beneath the busy approach paths than take part in the transcendent activities above. Given the space, and the exclusive rites of passage within it, Larry could only be seen as dangerous and ridiculous. In a system where the sky itself had become partitioned and commodified, its “conquest” could only be perpetuated by insider elite who knew the codes of environment, machine and regulation. He could not “slip the surly bonds of earth” merely because he had discovered a way to do so.

Walters’s low tech, feminized aircraft was extremely incompatible with the highly compartmentalized and hierarchical airspaces of the late twentieth century. But his inability to be taken seriously was not merely due to the fact that he lacked the right kind of machine or that he was a stark manifestation of the encumbered, domestic subject or that he untethered his aircraft in a space that made him a spectacle. His ascent is marked by *a lack of control*, and this undermines his ability to tell his own story. Unlike Magee’s ascent, in which the aircraft responds to every whim of the pilot—and in which the aircraft becomes progressively invisible leaving Magee to self-define in divine presence—Walters’s ascent is marked by his body and the balloons, both of which are conspicuous and vulnerable. He can hardly control the craft, let alone a poetics of space that accesses the divine. He does not control imaginative geographies that relegate him

to terrestrial or domestic space; nor does he control geographic metaphors that might mark him as transcendent. He also cannot control the wild and diverse reactions to his flight, or the appropriation of his story.

Walters's story quickly goes beyond his ability to control it. As part of popular culture, the story becomes part of a collective narrative, told and retold and interpreted by others. Because of this, the flight does not pass into literary culture, but into oral culture. Magee fully controls the poetics of his own experience in ways that Walters cannot because his flight occurs somewhere beyond the chaos of the known world, beyond the public eye, in a space that is fully compatible with a vertical narrative of redemption and with the familiar and respected strains of the sonnet. Walters, on the other hand, performs *within* the chaos of the known world and in full view of anyone within reach of a *Los Angeles Times*. It's hard to say what kind of written discourses Walters was familiar with or if his high school education prepared him adequately to participate in the demands of formal writing. Even if he were adept at forms of life-narrative, his ascension is hardly poetic or transcendent. Control of the aircraft, of geographic metaphors, of poetic space and form, allows Magee to become a legend, while a lack of control of these marks Walters an urban legend.

While Walters certainly took a risk, his effort is not a transcendent one. He does not rise above the "common man," but exposes himself as hopelessly common; he does not exist beyond historical or regional contexts, but is condemned by them; he does not escape physical or domestic encumbrances, but highlights them; he does exist outside of nature, but is helplessly buffeted by nature. He does not control his own story, but is controlled by it. All of which undermine his ability to embody "universal" ideals.

Walters is not the new Adam enacting transcendence as “the recovery of lost perfection,” but the new Eve, transgressing the boundaries of accepted knowledge, falling from grace.

Walters’s flight, as the ideological opposite of Magee’s, sums up *the* most persistent bias in aerial and autobiographical discourses, which is that both depend on transcendence—an ability to exist apart from the earth and its encumbrances. Any signs of “nature”—chaos, passivity, resistance to culture—mark the subject as feminine and these dramatically reduce the ability to self-define through flying or writing. The problems of transcendence aren’t merely poetic, but political. This project may be about the poetics of flight, but it also serves to critique an industry that continues to be radically gendered. As late as 2007, women held fewer than 4% of active Airline Transport certificates, but made up over 80% of the total number of flight attendants.¹⁰⁰ Although this project cannot fully account for the discrepancies, it does offer insights into the ethnic and gender biases that have always been part of aviation.

No one knows why Walters took his own life in a remote area in the Angeles National Forest eleven years after his historic flight. In interviews with friends and family after the funeral, George Plimpton discovered that Walters had developed an obsession with the past—a time when the air seemed open to all takers. Exciting, new, immediate, and sensory, aerial adventure seemed open to anyone who wished to challenge the law of gravity. Walters may have survived the icy reaches of the thin upper

¹⁰⁰ This information is available on the official FAA website, which began posting statistics in 1998. In 2007, the FAA estimated that 143,953 airmen held active Airline Transport certificates of which 5,349 (3.72%) were women. The total number of flight attendants in 2007 was 147, 013, of which 118, 426 (80.6%) were women. The FAA does not post numbers according to ethnicity. FAA, “2007 U.S. Civil Airmen Statistics,” Estimated Active Airmen Certificates Held Table 1, and Estimated Active Women Airmen Certificates Held Table 2, http://www.faa.gov/data_statistics/aviation_data_statistics/civil_airmen_statistics/2007/

air; but he may not have survived the rough reception on landing—the ridicule of a public that regarded his effort as laughable. The promise of transcending geographical and social differences through rising from the ground was, and is, as misleading as autobiographical discourses that pretend neutrality.

The autobiographies in this project show that transcendence was not available to all fliers, no matter how skilled or daring. Even if one did “slip the surly bonds of earth” in a flying machine, he or she did not necessarily slip the bonds of corporeality, of domesticity, and this invariably limited the appeal of their texts. The literal movement upward, no matter how dramatic, while allowing the flier to become unique, could not guarantee that the flier would become “universal” or representative. If going up were enough to become exemplary or transcendent subject, then Larry Walters might have reaped praise instead of derision. Walters’s story, like many of the life narratives mentioned in this project, fails only because he is marked in conventionally feminine terms, as chaotic and earthly and unstable—all of which make him an unlikely subject in the myth history of the air.

Larry Walters’s story confirms that “universal” and transcendent ideals have never been accessible to everyone, and that the pretended neutrality of these constructs allows for exclusions that are compatible with a range of prejudices that not only exclude feminine subjects, but rationalize racial biases and imperial discourses as well. The pilot life narratives I have included here are uniquely suited to illustrating the biases and excesses of extraordinarily exclusive ideals. This project is about flight autobiographies, but it also about the inherent biases within all imaginative geographies and autobiographical discourses. That these discourses favor and enable a masculine subject

is not all that surprising. But the fact that the transcendent discourses require detachment and expansion is troubling. Transcendence in this regard becomes complicit with colonizing gestures that invite a narrative of supremacy, not diplomacy; of individuality, not community—and this may be the most problematic, and counterproductive, gesture of all.

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