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Prospectus Meeting: Nov. 8, 2004

Manhood Up in the Air: A Study of Male Flight Attendants, Queerness, and Corporate Capitalism during the Cold War Era

“Coffee, tea, or me?”¹ Thanks to the “uninhibited memoirs” of flight attendants Trudy Baker and Rachel Jones, many Americans by the late 1960s were in on the joke. Air stewardesses by that time had the reputation of providing more than just beverage service; they had also become highly coveted—and allegedly available—beauty queens. Their youth, thinness, and feminine charm, not to mention their jet-setting lifestyle that suggested opulence and exoticism, all accentuated their sex appeal. Further encouraged by racy ad campaigns showcasing female bodies and slogans such as “Fly Me,” many male customers boarding planes naturally expected to be greeted with a rousing display of feminine bravado.²

What customers got was often quite a bit different: a gentlemanly greeting from a man, professionally dressed in a suit, yet just as willing as his female colleagues to pour coffee and pass out pillows. By 1972 the female flight attendant had new male companions, who had just won the right to enter (or, better said, re-enter)³ this heavily female workforce. A Supreme Court

¹ This commonly-heard joke about flight attendants also is the title of the sexually risqué memoirs of two flight attendants written in 1967: Trudy Baker and Rachel Jones, *Coffee, Tea or Me? The Uninhibited Memoirs of Two Airline Stewardesses* (New York: Bartholomew House, 1967).

² The “Fly Me” slogan was used by National Airlines starting in September of 1971. It is quite similar in form and content to various ad campaigns from numerous airlines which marketed the glamour of female flight attendant. Kathleen Barry, “Femininity in Flight: Flight Attendants, Glamour, and Pink-Collar Activism in the Twentieth-Century United States.” (Dissertation, New York University, 2002), 508.

³ Men were hired by almost all airlines from the start of commercial airlines in the late 1920s until the 1950s. By World War II, men were in the distinct minority among flight attendants, but certain airlines such as Pan Am,

order from November of 1971, inspired by Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act which prohibited workplace discrimination based on sex, was the impetus for this integration of the flight attendant corps. Some straight men's sexual frustration with this decision was evident not only from numerous passengers' reactions of dismay, but also from the media's reporting on the Court's decision. Even the otherwise strictly-business Wall Street Journal churlishly mused, "To the extent male stewards replace glamorous stewardesses, the case...may prove to be one of the more controversial interpretations of the 1964 law among members of the male-dominated Congress."⁴

Given the sexual expectations in male society surrounding one's encounters with flight attendants, it hardly comes as a great surprise that suspicions of queerness immediately erupted around this new corps of men in the air. This bait-and-switch at the hands of the Supreme Court—replacing the proper object of the straight male's passion with an at times equally young, attractive male—was surely enough to elicit in some men the "homosexual panic" that literary critic Eve Sedgwick has identified.⁵ Gazing on another man who has taken on the feminized role of sex object (i.e., flight attendant) disrupts the otherwise non-threatening social interaction between men, converting the safely "homosocial" encounter into a potentially alarming "homoerotic" one. In other words, when read psychosexually, the interaction in the 1970s between male customers and flight attendants had the strong potential to be erotically unsettling, now that the implied overture "Coffee, tea, or me?" was coming from another man.

Eastern, and TWA continued to hire men. This hiring of men effectively stopped, with rare exceptions, in 1959, as I shall discuss later.

⁴ Wall Street Journal, Nov. 10, 1971.

⁵ With homophobia rife in a culture, the man is never beyond risk of, and must constantly fear, being labeled homosexual, even in regular day-to-day interactions with men. After all, "For a man to be a man's man is separated only by an invisible, carefully blurred, always-already-crossed line from being 'interested in men.'" Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1992 (originally 1985)), 89.

Going beyond such a psychosexual analysis to a more historical investigation, one finds even more grounds that suspicions of queerness erupted—regardless of one’s sexual orientation—whenever men served as flight attendants during the Cold War era. Indeed, even back in the 1950s, the suspicions that these men were homosexual came to be so strong that nearly all airlines had stopped hiring men altogether.⁶ After all, male flight attendants found themselves simultaneously straddling two crucial and explosive fault lines in postwar American society generally, and in the corporate workplace more particularly. The first of these fault lines was gender-based, as these men disrupted what were considered to be quite natural and clean—but were in fact increasingly arbitrary and contested—boundaries between *men’s work* and *women’s work* in corporate America. The second of these fault lines involved the attempts to impose yet another supposedly natural division—this time between the *heterosexual* and *homosexual*—onto an American population whose sexuality was in fact far more multifaceted and ambiguous. Even as sexologist Alfred Kinsey opened the postwar era with the admonition that, “[m]ales do not represent two discrete populations, heterosexual and homosexual. The world is not to be divided into sheep and goats,” his words were in fact ignored.⁷ Instead, the Cold War consensus that took shape by the early 1950s included vigorous efforts to expel homosexuals from the workplace and all other realms of positive social contribution, marking them as criminals and perverts and forcing them to survive on the margins of US society.⁸ Male flight attendants were, thus, enmeshed in two somewhat separate, but clearly overlapping accusations of queerness—a “double queerness,” if you will: the first that they were “sissified

⁶ As I note in my discussion of Chapter One, several former male flight attendants tell the story, which I have yet to substantiate with a written source, that a homophobic scandal in 1959 involving two male flight attendants at Eastern Airlines led almost all airlines to stop hiring men for these jobs.

⁷ Alfred Kinsey et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders, 1948), p. 639.

⁸ Robert Corber provides an excellent analysis of the homophobic notions even of the liberal postwar intellectual establishment in the Introduction to his book, *In the Name of National Security: Hitchcock, Homophobia, and the Political Construction of Gender in Postwar America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

men” playing a woman’s role in society; the second (flowing almost as a natural corollary of the first) that they were sexually interested in men and therefore a genuine threat to society.⁹

Yet, at the same time that these men suffered society’s ostracism for their queerness, they arguably also foreshadowed what all Americans could potentially become due to the dictates of capitalism. In other words, their queerness arose not from some pathology, but rather from their embrace of new social configurations (a gender-oblivious workforce) and, for some, a new personal identity (homosexuality)¹⁰ that capitalism was gradually making possible for anyone. Along these lines, the attempts of men to enter women’s work, like the even greater rush of women into men’s work that has gotten far more attention from historians,¹¹ simply conformed to the dictates of the economic laws governing a capitalist labor market: technological innovation in an industrial system of production would strive to make laborers as interchangeable as possible, and as minimally skilled as possible, in an effort to contain wages. This sort of labor standardization had by World War II rendered even most jobs in heavy industry as easily accomplishable by women as they could be by men. Thus, as the imagery of Rosie the Riveter attests, industrial labor had become just as decidedly “androgynous” as service labor had always

⁹ The fear of the “sissified man” and a corresponding homophobia penetrated much of male social critique in 1950s America. Note the intense paranoia surrounding the flight from masculinity and “Momism” tied to Philip Wylie, Abram Kardiner, C. Wright Mills, Erik Erikson, William Whyte, and the like.

¹⁰ The following portion of the paragraph concerns the rise of a gender-oblivious workforce, rather than this point about the way that capitalism has fostered, even created, a homosexual identity. The major way in which capitalism has fostered a gay identity is by introducing wage labor into the economic system. Once individuals are paid for labor themselves, without depending on the family unit for their sustenance, they are free to pursue their homosexual desire not only to the point of seeking out homosexual *acts*, but also to the point of pursuing a homosexual lifestyle and even developing a sense of the self as possessing a homosexual *identity*. For a full consideration of this argument, see John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Abelove, Barale, and Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 467-478.

¹¹ A whole corpus of work discusses the ways that women entering the workplace met ingrained opposition from those defending the patriarchal vision of society that kept the public sphere overwhelmingly male. Indeed, according to Lisa Duggan, accusations of queerness were directed toward these women as far back as the late 1800s, when the New Woman staked her claim in the public sphere. See Lisa Duggan, *Sapphic Slashes: Sex, Violence and American Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000). The bibliography section entitled “On Gender/Homosexuality and Corporate Culture” attached to this prospectus also covers numerous such titles, nearly all of which tell the story of growing labor androgyny as the story of women entering traditionally male spheres.

been.¹² Indeed, most forms of service sector labor also defied *ipso facto* definitions as men's work or women's work: being a barber was a man's job, while the same work as a hairdresser was a woman's job; being a chef or a waiter could be a man's job, while cooking at home or setting the table was a woman's job; if you took the train to New York in the 1950s, a (black) man would serve you, but if you flew there, a (white) woman more than likely would.

Fears of a major job shortage with the demobilization of the US military at the close of World War II fostered a retrenchment of the division between men's work and women's work. By the early 1950s, female factory workers were once again practically nonexistent, and middle class women as a whole were encouraged to withdraw from the workforce in favor of remaining at home as housewives.¹³ Similarly, an attempt to purge homosexuals from the workplace, which began with the US military's first-ever blanket policy against the conscription of homosexuals in World War II, gradually expanded throughout the 1950s to include all federal government jobs and many private-sector jobs as well. Indeed, the nearly unanimous exclusion by the airlines of almost all men (gay or straight) from work as flight attendants in 1959 might well be the high-water mark for this anti-homosexual exclusion from the workplace. Thus, in a vast series of exclusionary hiring decisions that had nothing to do with qualifications and everything to do with gender and sexual orientation, 1950s America had forcibly instilled a *status quo ante* in which men's work and women's work were (allegedly) once again easily distinguishable. And any man or woman who transgressed these boundaries evoked a visceral recoil in onlookers, who could not help but read such brazen androgyny as queer.

¹² Of the 6 million women who entered the labor force for the first time during the World War II, about 2 million of these took jobs normally available only to men, in war-related heavy industries. John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1983), p. 29.

¹³ See Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), for an analysis of this forced retrenchment back into traditional gender roles that occurred in the 1950s.

The Cold War era thereby illustrates how deeply ambivalent the relationship is between queerness and corporate capitalism. Especially when studying the history of male flight attendants, one finds that queerness in the workplace—both in the sense of gender androgyny and homosexual identity—is encouraged by the invisible hand of capitalism working in labor markets. Indeed, this queerness is cutting edge, a forerunner of an androgyny that all jobs would in time conform to. Likewise, the case of homosexuality is also cutting edge, as it embodies the freedom ultimately offered to all individual wage laborers to create their own social networks independent of marriage, parenthood, and the biological family (if so desired). And yet, even as queerness represents the cutting edge of capitalist dictates, the Cold War era is riddled with examples where corporations just as easily coalesces with the forces promoting the retrenchment of patriarchal norms, forcing women and men back to their respective spheres and relegating the homosexual to the very margins of social existence.

In the pages that follow, I tell the history of male flight attendants in an effort to track the various twists and turns in this ambivalent relationship between queerness and corporate capitalism. I do so first and foremost because male flight attendants' "double queerness" offers a more insightful lens for assessing the attempts to create a workplace free of discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation, overcoming the tendency of most authors to cover only gender or only sexuality. I also intend with this project to address an additional perceived shortcoming in the histories of workplace integration: namely, a tendency to write such histories from a female perspective that not only (perhaps quite legitimately) prioritizes the attempts of women to enter male professions, but also ignores similar strivings of men to enter women's work.

Not surprisingly, then, the literature available to date about flight attendants—both popular literature and academic writing—almost completely ignores the experience of the male

flight attendant. The most authoritative history of flight attendants, Kathleen Barry's dissertation "Femininity in Flight," certainly acknowledges the steady presence of male flight attendants throughout the Cold War period, but it fails to examine the unique struggles of these men to maintain their position in the workplace.¹⁴ Indeed, there is no consideration of the homophobic impetus for their exclusion from employment starting in 1959 and no coverage of later battles to fight for their jobs, their benefits, and even a decorum of dignity, during the AIDS crisis. Additionally, crucial male-oriented events like the *Diaz v. Pan Am* case are treated mainly as precursors to other victories for female flight attendants, such as the end of weight standards, marriage prohibitions, and age restrictions on their employment. Thus, while the existing literature has impressively chronicled a female-oriented struggle for greater dignity in the workplace, there is as yet no significant scholarly work that considers the unique issues of "double queerness" in the workplace that male flight attendants embody.

Chapter Divisions

To tell this unique history of workplace integration, I have chosen to divide my work into five chapters, each of which covers a different aspect of the ambivalent relationship between queerness and corporate capitalism. These chapters tend to flow in historical order, starting with the 1950s and ending in the early 1990s, thereby covering the whole scope of the Cold War era. The **first chapter**, entitled **Odd Man Out: Airlines End Almost All Hiring of Male Attendants**, treats the decision in 1959 to end the hiring of almost all men wishing to work as flight attendants as a key moment of both gender-based exclusion and sexual orientation-based discrimination in the workplace. The presence of male flight attendants radically challenged

¹⁴ Kathleen Barry, "Femininity in Flight: Flight Attendants, Glamour, and Pink-Collar Activism in the Twentieth-Century United States." (Dissertation, New York University, 2002).

what had become by the 1950s an otherwise clean gender division aboard airplanes, where pilots embodied a macho masculinity and stewardesses a reassuring feminine charm and tenderness. Historian David Courtwright, in his upcoming book *Sky as Frontier*, stresses just how preponderant this gendered division was, noting that the nearly exclusively male pilot corps in the early Cold War era was weaned in their youth on the daredevilery of barnstormers and inspired to bravery by the heroic adventurism of Charles Lindbergh. In their adulthood, a vast majority of these men honed their flying skills as members of the US military, flying sorties over Europe or in the Pacific, or later in Korea and Vietnam. The machismo tied to piloting made these men, as a group, prototypical of the John Wayne masculinity venerated by much of mainstream US society during the Cold War. Courtwright finds that women on commercial airliners, on the other hand, were prized particularly for their gentleness and domestic qualities. Indeed, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, as airlines sought to expand their customer base beyond just the very wealthy and the busy corporate traveler, they relied heavily on their stewardesses to reassure an uneasy public that it was safe and even comfortable to fly. These women, then, not only provided safety and comfort to passengers through their work, but their very femininity—read: fragility—also testified that the skies were now open to all sorts of customers, not just adventurous and virile men.¹⁵

With time, the feminine appeal of stewardesses came to be exploited in yet another way: through physical objectification of the young, unmarried, slim women hired by the airlines. Advertising departments for many of the major airlines started marketing female bodies as a way to appeal to their core market of middle-aged businessmen, who paid more per mile flown and traveled far more frequently than did the average tourist. While the most egregious campaigns

¹⁵ David Courtwright, *Sky as Frontier: Adventure, Aviation and Empire* (College Station: TAMU Press, forthcoming Nov. 2004)

of selling stewardesses' bodies came in the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was already much of it about by the late 1950s.

Where did such developments leave the male steward? With the advent of commercial flight back in the late 1920s, men were the first to undertake these service jobs, which were considered quite dangerous, unpleasant, and labor-intensive. Even as more and more women were hired as flight attendants through the 1930s, certain companies such as Pan Am and Eastern Airlines stubbornly maintained their all-male corps, at least until the labor shortages of World War II—and even later, in the case of Eastern. Yet the more the work turned towards personal service and emotional comforting by the 1950s, the more the male flight attendants seemed out of place. Pilots increasingly scorned these men, and frequent-flying businessmen strongly preferred their pampering to come from attractive women. Thus, derisive suspicions of queerness increasingly circulated around the airline steward by the close of the decade.

Oddly, just as black women were finally allowed to enter the workforce as flight attendants, the entranceway to such employment for men (of any color) was being slammed shut. By 1957, black women were successfully using anti-discrimination laws on the books in states like New York to force airlines to hire them. Meanwhile, the final straw leading every airline to stop hiring men for these positions came in 1959 at Eastern Airlines, the only remaining major airline whose flight attendant core was predominantly male. According to the stories of former flight attendants—a story as yet unsubstantiated by any written source I have been able to locate—two male flight attendants at Eastern were involved in a homosexual scandal that centered around a love relationship gone bad and ended in one man murdering the other. If this account is indeed true, then the decisive act of establishing flight attendants' work as "women's work" depended upon a homophobic reaction to an isolated event of violence between gay men.

As such, it marks a moment where the double suspicion of queerness raised against these men consolidated into a singular moment of exclusion, which further stabilized gender norms in the workplace and further isolated gay men from mainstream society.

The very fact that this moment of homophobia may not exist in the written historical record demonstrates the degree to which homosexuality and its persecution is wrongfully marginalized from our understanding of Cold War history. By retrieving this silenced history, I seek to do the same sort of work that historian Robert Dean does for the history of McCarthyism and US foreign policy in his book *Imperial Brotherhood*.¹⁶ Dean finds that the “lavender scare” incited by McCarthy and his followers was in fact more effective politically for those who orchestrated the hearings—and far more debilitating in terms of people victimized—than the “red scare” that garners the attention of most historians. In a somewhat similar fashion, most histories of flight attendants focus on the abuses against women, especially in terms of marriage restrictions, forced retirement for older stewardesses, and a harshly imposed standard of beauty. Such histories might, however, look quite different once male victims are recognized and their complete exclusion from these jobs are taken into consideration.

Furthermore, by focusing on one moment of homophobic panic, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of other such moments during the 1950s when accusations of homosexuality were used as a powerful tool to rouse the public. Instead of seeing such attacks as isolated events, much could be gained from viewing them together and seeking patterns among them, especially if there are similarities in the types of people who stood to gain economically and politically from igniting them.

¹⁶ Robert Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (Amherst: U. Mass. Press, 2001).

I expect to use a combination of written and oral sources for this chapter. My hope is that the rumors shared amongst ex-flight attendants will ultimately lead me to written sources in the press, in corporate documents, or in union documents, each of which might include further reactions to these scandals and an analysis of their potential fallout. One possible hypothesis that might arise from such research is that airline companies were in fact well served by these homosexual scandals, as it provided them a cover of moral rectitude for making their flight attendant corps as female as possible. After all, establishing this domain as women's work meant cheaper and less unionized labor, while women's physical attractiveness could provide an additional unpaid benefit to the airline of luring high-paying male customers. In theory, though, labor unions should have fought this demonizing of their male members, since their absence would weaken the union and thereby lead to possible further declines in wages and benefits for all flight attendants. More research will clarify the interests each of these groups possessed in the homophobic scandals of the time.

After considering this moment of homophobic exclusion in the 1950s, I move in **Chapter Two**, entitled **Turbulence in the Air: *Diaz v. Pan Am* Reintegrates the Workforce**, to the moment in the early 1970s when men were forcibly reinstated into the flight attendant corps. When the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, almost all attention was focused on the righting of injustices against African Americans and other racial minorities. Even women, whose protection was included in the Act as a last-minute addendum, were rather marginalized from the bill's focus, so much so that initial grievances filed by women with the newly created Equal Employment Opportunity Commission were greeted rather quizzically.¹⁷ In time, however, Title

¹⁷ Barry, "Femininity in Flight", 433ff.

VII of the Civil Rights Act did indeed become a readily recognized instrument that allowed women to gain a foothold in jobs that were otherwise regarded as men's work.

And yet, women were not the only ones who invoked Title VII as a means to address their grievances. In fact, it was an aspiring male flight attendant whose legal proceedings under the auspices of Title VII decisively altered the battle for equal access to employment along gender lines. Celio Diaz had filed suit against Pan Am Airways in 1967 when his request for employment was denied on the grounds of gender. Pan Am initially won the case in a federal district court in Florida, with the court accepting the airline's rather tenuous claim that femininity was a "bona fide occupational qualification" (meaning that it was essential to the performance of the worker's duties) and thereby subject to exemption from Title VII's reach. Of course, the airlines were making such claims in contradiction to the fact that men had served as flight attendants quite capably all the way through the 1950s and that there was a small percentage of male flight attendants (perhaps 10 percent) who were still flying.

When Diaz appealed the verdict, however, the US Court of Appeals in New Orleans reversed the decision, which prompted Pan Am—in cooperation with the US's other major airlines—to appeal the case to the US Supreme Court. The Court, however, in November of 1971 decided not to take the case, allowing the Appeals Court's interpretation of Title VII to stand. As a result, each major US airline thereafter opened their flight attendant training programs to men, and male flight attendants again become a highly visible (though still numerically smaller) presence in the skies.¹⁸

¹⁸ The first co-ed graduating class from Pan Am's Flight Service Training and Development Center included 16 men and 18 women, a virtually even ratio which would last for the first few years after *Diaz v. Pan Am*. Pan American World Airways, Inc., "Boys and Girls Together at Pan Am School," Press Release, March 30, 1972 (Pan Am Archives, University of Miami, Box 292, folder 9).

The men who entered this by-now solidly feminine profession occupied a very tenuous space in the realm of identity politics that arose during the 1970s. While the feminist movement of the 1970s ultimately sought to dismantle the rigidly enforced gender segregation of the public sphere, there was also a growing embrace and mobilization of all-female institutions. Along these lines, the various flight attendants' unions of the early 1970s were increasingly finding their voice as a strong advocate for certain feminist concerns, now that they had largely shed their male-dominated leadership structures and dissolved their affiliations with the heavily male pilots' union, the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA). The new female leadership of these flight attendants' unions helped turn organizations such as the ALSSA (Airline Stewards and Stewardesses Association) into voices of feminist resistance on certain issues, even as much of the union's rank and file was socially conservative and on the whole ambivalent about a strongly feminist agenda. Crucially, such unions became very influential in raising concerns against public norms of feminine beauty (given stewardesses' status in the public imagination as beauty queens), and they developed a series of strategies to attack the most discriminatory consequences of such beauty norms among female flight attendants: enforced weight restrictions, age restrictions, and restrictions against employment upon marrying.

Thus, for many in the flight attendants unions, the reintroduction of men into the workplace may have been greeted with ambivalence. Initial union statements I have seen treat the *Diaz* decision as progressive only in the sense that it made victories against anti-female discrimination in the workplace more attainable. I suspect as well that the most avowedly feminist of flight attendants at the time might have regretted the potential loss of their unions as a woman-identified space whose political power could be used to press for a woman-identified agenda.

Overall, then, when men returned to the skies as flight attendants in the 1970s, they risked being seen by all sides as *personae non gratae*. A society so beholden to the male-female binary in the workplace seemed to hold special contempt for these men who surrendered their male privilege to work alongside women as equals. While clearly the highest degree of contempt came from the macho pilot corps, the male business-class customers and the airline companies themselves who feared the loss of their core customers, there are also likely to be documented cases of neglect from the female-guided flight attendants' unions as well. As such, these men's turbulent status testifies to the inherent hardships of those whose very existence can't help but queer the boundaries between male and female in US society.

With **Chapter Three, entitled Corporate Gay Genesis: Flight Attendants Forge a Community and Increase Gay Visibility**, I intend to focus my investigation of queerness and capitalism less on issues of gender divisions and more on issues of homosexuality. In particular, I argue in this chapter that gay-tolerant and gay-friendly workplaces are actually crucial places in US society that foster a stronger sense of shared identity among gay men and help to give the gay community a more public face than they might otherwise achieve. In this sense, corporate careers like that of flight attendant, which attract large numbers of gay men and are so openly associated with homosexuality in the public consciousness, can be considered a place of "genesis," where the gay community is created, nurtured, and allowed to become visible. This sort of gay community-building was particularly crucial in the immediate post-Stonewall era of the early 1970s, when activist groups on the coasts had asserted the existence of a strong and vibrant gay community, but a vast majority of gay men in most parts of the country remained invisible and silent.

The most influential GLBT historians attribute the rise of gay and lesbian communities to a variety of factors in US society. Many historians choose to follow the path most associated with Michel Foucault, linking the rise of a homosexual identity to the work of sexologists, psychologists, and other medical professionals in the late 19th century.¹⁹ The genesis of homosexuality, according to these historians, occurs in asylums, doctor's offices, and scientific tomes. Other historians, following the work of Alan Bray, locate the genesis of a gay identity in the underworld of taverns, whorehouses, and cruising venues.²⁰ Bray's concentration on London's "molly houses" in the 17th century gets echoed by George Chauncey's emphasis in *Gay New York* on New York City pubs, YMCAs, cruising locales, drag balls, and racy cabaret performances as key places where a modern gay identity began to take shape.²¹ Finally, rather than emphasizing the gay "nightlife" as the key place of gay genesis, other historians concentrate on the creation of homophile activist groups as the critical catalyst for the consolidation of gay identity. Foremost in this line of work stands John D'Emilio, whose work *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* stresses the key role that activist groups dating back to the early 1950s played in creating a gay consciousness in postwar US society. D'Emilio even credits these groups, as his book's subtitle states, with *The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States*.²²

Of all the accounts of the genesis of a gay and lesbian community in the United States, few credit corporations and other employers within the capitalist system as having a major role in gay identity formation. This strikes me as a major omission on the part of GLBT historians up

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction* (New York, Vintage Books, 1990 (originally 1976)).

²⁰ Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (London: Gay Men's Press, 1982).

²¹ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay World 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

²² John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1983).

to the present. Of course, the historical narratives that emphasize the importance of the nightlife on gay identity clearly account for a certain degree of imbrication of gay identity into a capitalist system, as gays were both key consumers of this nightlife and (at times) key owners and employees of its venues. On the whole, however, leisure-related industries—whether bars, prostitution rings, or theater productions—could not begin to account for the full number of gays and lesbians who make up the “homosexual minority” in the United States.

Indeed, just like their straight counterparts, gays and lesbians have always relied on having access to a full panoply of careers in order to sustain their livelihoods, whether blue-collar, white-collar, or pink-collar. Inasmuch as corporate culture demanded that homosexuality remain invisible in order to be tolerated, gays and lesbians necessarily stayed closeted in the workplace in order to provide for themselves and their loved ones. Yet, through the Cold War period, more and more gays and lesbians found careers which, at least tacitly, tolerated their homosexuality and even became places where homosexuality was quite visible. Some of this tolerance is owed to the work of certain labor unions, some to benevolent managers and owners. Whatever way these safe workspaces were created, they quickly became essential to the creation and further growth of gay and lesbian communities. Gay-tolerant workplaces allowed gays a venue to earn money without enduring the indignity and paranoia of closeting themselves. They also allowed certain men and women their first opportunities to meet other gays, even to “turn” gay for the first time. And finally, these gay-tolerant workplaces introduced Americans not in-the-know to the existence of gays, providing a first glimpse, however superficial, of this minority group.

I want to look at the specific workings of how the job of flight attendant became a crucial safe space for gay men during the 1970s. My initial hypothesis is that this tolerance had several

sources. Certainly, *Diaz v. Pan Am* illustrated that there were now stricter legal constraints on employers who discriminated for multiple reasons. Even though sexual orientation was not a criterion that was legally protected against discrimination (until certain municipalities like Los Angeles and San Francisco instituted such statutes beginning in the late 1970s), it is likely that the prospect of protracted court battles could have deterred some employers from purging homosexuals from their ranks. It is also likely that flight attendants' unions were also invested in preventing firings of gays. The unions had been in a constant struggle throughout the postwar era to prove their labor to be very demanding and highly technical. Whether the unions specifically committed themselves to being pro-gay or not (a point which I do not yet know), they presumably would have fought any sort of layoffs inspired by criteria other than a failure to perform one's on-the-job duties. Any indiscriminate purge of employees based solely on sexual orientation would, by extension, have demeaned the entire flight attendant corps as less professionalized.

Equally important as the causes of this tolerance for gay men in the flight attendants' corps is whether gay men actually felt tolerated and free enough to be more at ease with their sexual identity, more open than they might otherwise be, and more able to access networks of other gay men. After all, these are the types of behaviors which would promote the growth of a gay "community" and allow it to become more visible, to other gays and to non-gays alike. Accounts from oral histories of flight attendants could provide the strongest indication that such community-building was happening among flight attendants. In addition, a small study conducted under Dr. Andrew Boxer at the University of Chicago in the early 1990s contributes a more quantifiable, analytical basis for addressing this issue. Boxer's study (subsequently summarized in the dissertation of Kay Adams) established that male flight attendants felt they

were able to be more out as their careers went along and were able to forge various sorts of networks with other gay men by virtue of their work. The study concludes that gay men overwhelmingly found their profession facilitated the coming out process, and that they were building extensive social networks amongst each other, including love relationships, sexual partnerships, and lasting friendships.²³

The discussion in **Chapter Four** continues to treat issues of queerness in the sense of homosexuality, but this time covers a more international perspective than in Chapter Three. Entitled **Illicit Export: Flight Attendants Transport US Gay Identity Around the Globe**, this chapter considers the interaction of queerness and capitalism as both of them spread beyond the borders of the United States in the Cold War era. Whereas the era prior to World War II saw the US virtually alone in advocating free trade and open capital markets, the postwar era saw the rapid disintegration of autarkic systems of trade designed to protect a colonial power's spheres of influence. The colonialist land grabs lasting through the early 20th century finally gave way to an international economic system built around institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade—all protected by a US military presence deployed more globally than it ever had been before. While in theory serving to democratize capital markets and equalize trading opportunities for all nations, historians such as Gabriel Kolko point out that the postwar ground rules in fact gave US corporations a distinct advantage over their non-American competitors. Thus, at least in non-communist countries, the Cold War “Pax Americana” was a time when US products became staples around the globe, when US businessmen became a highly influential elite in the world's capital cities, and when

²³ Kay V. Adams, “The Impact of Work on Gay Male Identity Among Male Flight Attendants,” Dissertation, Loyola University of Chicago, Dept. of Counseling Psychology, 1997. See especially pp 54 & 68 for the conclusions noted above.

US investment became crucial components of state economies in Western Europe, Japan, and throughout the developing world.

In many countries, including even parts of Europe's communist East, US culture was also in high demand. Various writers have documented a global fascination with jazz, Hollywood films and television, American fashion, an outspoken and fun-loving youth culture, and—perhaps most especially—an acquisitiveness for consumer goods.²⁴ Indeed, the US worker's ability to own a cornucopia of consumer durable goods—an individual home and yard, a car (or two!), a television, and a washing machine—became the envy of the world's working classes. The American lifestyle was largely something admired and worthy of emulation in the eyes of the common people of the industrializing nations.

Surreptitiously, another US cultural export was making its way around the globe as well: a US gay identity at times considerably unlike the manifestations of homosexuality found in the local cultures. By the 1990s, this profound incidence of cultural borrowing had become quite palpable, with the celebration of "Gay Pride Days" in dozens of capitals on each continent, the opening of gay bars in these same cities that typically boast English-language names and a Top 40 play list, and the conscious usage of the American term "gay" for one's identity rather than a local term. In part, these developments reflect the same process that historian John D'Emilio describes in the example of the United States: the advance of industrial capitalism frees individuals from family-based living structures once wage labor takes hold in an economy, allowing more men and women to live a gay lifestyle.²⁵ Moreover, thanks to globalization, the

²⁴ A good example of this sort of literature is E. Tyler May & R. Wagnleitner (eds.), *"Here, There and Everywhere": The Foreign Politics of American Popular Culture* (Hanover, NH: Univ. Press of New England, 2000).

²⁵ As I note in footnote 10, John D'Emilio makes the claim that capitalism, especially the institution of wage labor, allows people the economic freedom to pursue their homosexual desires to the point of actually living a homosexual

burgeoning middle classes in places as far flung as Indonesia, Guatemala, and Korea arguably share as much or more in common with middle class Americans as they do with the laboring classes in their own countries' agricultural regions.

Yet, the gay subcultures of the developing world surely would not have developed to be quite so uniform across the globe (at least in their external manifestations) without intense intermingling with the hegemonic prototype of American gay culture. And it is doubtful as well that the massive cultural changes needed to foster the creation of a homosexual minority—a process that took about 100 years in the US²⁶—would have congealed so quickly across the developing world without borrowing considerably from the already-established gay cultural paradigms of the United States. Thus, while there may be only modest documentation of such, it is clear that influences from American gay culture hit these local cultures significantly earlier than the period of visibility beginning in the 1990s and played a crucial role in encouraging gay life in these countries to manifest itself as markedly American as it grew towards visibility.

Interactions between male flight attendants and local men may have been one of these first bridges by which American gay culture reached other parts of the world and began to influence gay identity formation in these recipient cultures. If so, these gay male flight attendants shared their pioneering role with other men, including gay US businessmen and diplomats in the expatriate communities of the developing world's capital cities, gay tourists, and gay émigrés living in the West who returned to their original homeland from time to time. These flight attendants had extensive access to various parts of the globe throughout the Cold War era, as US carriers such as Pan Am had well-established routes linking the disparate capitals of the

lifestyle and creating a gay identity. John D'Emilio "Capitalism and Gay Identity" in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Abelove, Barale, and Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 467-478.

²⁶ I generated this figure by tracing the rise of wage labor and industrialization in the US (a process that took hold in Northeastern cities roughly between 1820 and 1840) in combination with claims by D'Emilio that the homosexual minority in the US congealed in the immediate postwar era. See D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity."

developing world with the United States. Especially in the 1950s and 1960s, Pan Am's network stretched far more broadly than any US carrier in history, flying even to Africa, Eastern Europe, the Indian subcontinent, and the Arab Middle East (places where no US carrier currently serves). Additionally, Pan Am's hiring policy towards men was rather more lax than its domestic competitors, as the airline started hiring women only in World War II and maintained at least one male flight attendant on almost all of its flights throughout the 1960s, most often to serve in the more senior positions of bursar or crew chief.

We can assume, then, that oral histories of such male flight attendants might well yield recollections of primary encounters with men in these more remote ports of call, at a time when a cross-cultural gay parlance was only slowly consolidating into a decidedly American form. As such, these oral histories could begin to fill in the underwritten aspects of this tremendous example of cultural borrowing that accelerated in the jet age of globalization. Indeed, the globalization of US gay identity may indeed have depended on the jet—and especially the flight attendants aboard—for its ultimate success in circumventing the globe.

In **Chapter Five**, entitled **Gay Plague and Patient Zero: AIDS and flight attendants**, I turn my attention to a more dour aspect of globalization. Sociologist Dennis Altman in his book *Global Sex* points out that diseases such as AIDS cannot be forgotten when listing the various things that easily transgress national boundaries in the jet age.²⁷ And yet, sexually transmitted diseases actually require a human carrier to physically transport it from place to place, unlike the capital flows, the information flows, or the consumer products, whose global circulation typifies the current age. Working literally in the galleys where this mass circulation of humanity takes places, it only stands to reason that flight attendants are at high risk of contracting numerous

²⁷ Dennis Altman, *Global Sex* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2001).

diseases. And those gay men who embraced their job's sexually racy reputation—like the notorious Patient Zero—found themselves particularly at risk of acquiring and passing on STDs such as AIDS.²⁸ This was especially true in the epidemic's early years, when “safe sex” did not yet exist, and when the disease was undetectable and virtually invisible, due to the lack of testing methods for the virus and its extended incubation time before symptoms became noticeable. Ex-flight attendants report that colleagues started to die of AIDS as early as 1982, at a time when the disease was only beginning to be diagnosed.

I cannot hope to capture the tragedy that AIDS brought to the flight attendant corps during the 1980s and 1990s. By all accounts, the losses were staggering, as a group of workers formerly popularized for their young, fun-loving, mobile lifestyle instead confronted the ordeals of sickness and death on a daily basis. I intend to leave this valuable historical work of retrieving the stories of personal losses and small personal triumphs to those who actually experienced the crisis firsthand.

Instead, my own coverage of the AIDS crisis as it affected flight attendants will look at how this illness altered the workplace. First and foremost, I want to examine the response of corporate executives and the labor unions to the prospect that their male employees were falling ill to HIV/AIDS. On a very practical level, these two groups were confronted with a highly unexpected health crisis: the debilitation of several of their youngest, healthiest employees. For any company, the cost of lost work hours and coverage of catastrophic health problems stand as a major financial drain which most employers are loath to incur. The AIDS crisis thus became a crucial moment in which employers' loyalty to their gay male workers was severely tested. To

²⁸ Randy Shits' characterization of “Patient Zero” (i.e., Gaetan Dugas, an Air Canada flight attendant linked to the first AIDS outbreaks in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco) illustrates the far extreme of the sexually racy life that was available to certain male flight attendants. See Randy Shits, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987).

what extent did employers seek to dismiss those who were sick, or at risk of falling sick? To what extent did the labor unions protect their members suffering from HIV/AIDS from the loss of work privileges and health benefits? And to what extent did legal challenges, as in *Diaz v. Pan Am* or interpretations of the Americans with Disabilities Act, compel the airlines not to discriminate against their employees with HIV/AIDS, even as their profit margins might have suffered as a result?

And yet, AIDS was not just any catastrophic disease, in that it seemed to target especially gay men, predominantly so in the early years of the epidemic. The tie between the disease and the gay community was in fact so strong that AIDS was initially known as GRID (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency), or simply the “Gay Plague”. So, even as other high-risk groups for the disease began to be identified—IV drug users, hemophiliacs, Haitians—the disease still maintained an insoluble association with homosexuality in the eyes of the general public. Thus, when people like Rock Hudson announced their illness to the world, it came as a double confession: not only do I have AIDS, but I’m also gay. Homosexuality and AIDS became virtually equivalent.

As such, the AIDS crisis represented another moment when homophobic panic resurfaced in the workplace with a vengeance. Former airline employees claim that airlines sought to forbid employment to gay men during the peak of the AIDS scare, a reversion to the same sort of discrimination as from the 1950s—though this time isolating gay men specifically, rather than all men (more research will confirm or refute such claims). Likewise, many passengers became downright fearful of being served by male flight attendants, for fear of contracting AIDS simply by casual contact. A perusal of union records and media accounts will thus illuminate this dark moment in gay corporate visibility, when the notion that “homosexuality=AIDS” jeopardized

gay men's standing at work and turned this hard-won locus of gay visibility within corporate America into a potential nightmare of discrimination.

In response to governmental neglect, as well as corporate and even union reticence, flight attendants responded to the AIDS crisis the way so many other groups did in order to survive: they organized themselves, began to raise money, and volunteered their time. While I still am not aware of the full extent of these self-help groups, I hope to be able to document the variety of ways that the AIDS crisis brought about a new level of commitment to making the workplace dignified for gays and those with HIV/AIDS. Clearly, the intervention of the courts were instrumental in keeping such jobs open to all men during the AIDS crisis; yet, the refusal of these men and their allies to accept discrimination also represents a marked change since their quiet departure from the workforce in the late 1950s when confronted with a similar episode of homophobia. By the 1990s, gay men were seemingly too entrenched in their jobs, too self-aware and assertive as a community, and too powerful—especially when backed by the courts and their labor unions—to accept second-tier status in the capitalist economy. In the face of this crisis, it was clear that the relationship between gays and capitalism had shifted once again, this time decidedly, albeit slowly, in favor of dignity and justice.

Conclusion

The variety of ways that queerness, or better said “double queerness,” interacts with corporate capitalism illustrates a fundamental crisis at the heart of American identity. Indeed, just as much as America as a whole tends to embrace the innovations of capitalism, staking its aspirations for prosperity on the dictates of the free market, many Americans are profoundly uneasy with some of the social innovations that capitalism renders. In particular, the history of

male flight attendants during the Cold War has illustrated America's misgivings with the loss of strongly defined gender roles in the workplace as well as the increase of homosexual lifestyles made possible under a wage labor system. From time to time, this battle against labor androgyny and homosexuality has manifested itself in heinous, extra-legal intimidation such as homophobic scandals. At other times, these manifestations of a deeper "culture war" have been fought through the laws, with social conservatives at times succeeding in legislating discrimination (as in Eisenhower's Executive Order in 1953), while social progressives aided by the courts have likewise secured victories that have kept the workplace more inclusive of gender and sexuality diversity. As a dissertation arising out of the discipline of American Studies, "Manhood Up in the Air" seeks to emphasize these contested aspects of American identity that get played out in the history of male flight attendants.

The dissertation also, like other works of American Studies, employs an interdisciplinary methodology and seeks to intervene in constructive ways in many fields of US history. Clearly, this work is first and foremost a blending of the fields of gender history and business history, as it seeks to chronicle the various configurations that arose in the complex interplay between queerness and corporate America. Indeed, the fact that male flight attendants often embody a "double queerness" allows my work to go beyond customary works on the integration of the workforce that too often consider gender integration only—and do so almost exclusively from a female perspective. Following the related strands of both male gender discrimination and sexual orientation discrimination will provide much more depth and a broader focus to the works of gender history and business history that already exist.

Yet, in addition to making significant contributions to gender and business history, this project intervenes in major discussions of GLBT history as well. As I noted above, gay male

histories have traditionally underemphasized the importance of the workplace in creating a sense of gay community and in establishing places in US society where this often-invisible minority became more visible. The greatest impression one gains from reading accounts of the genesis of the gay community is that the demimonde of leisure—the theater, the bar scene, cruising venues—is where gay identity most decisively took shape. I would argue, however, that certain careers outside of the leisure industries, including that of flight attendant, also helped to create a stronger sense of gay identity. Ultimately, these gay-identified workplaces also did as much as gay activist movements to bring about a more just society that affords greater equality for homosexuals in US society overall.

An additional intervention into GLBT history serves as an important expansion of the scope of US foreign relations history as well. Too often, GLBT histories treat the gay community as a US-only entity, even as the earliest activist movements in the major gay metropolises proudly—but perhaps ingenuously—chanted, “We are everywhere!” Likewise, an overwhelming sentiment in the national consciousness, not to mention in history departments, treats homosexuality as a “domestic issue.” In reality, however, gay identity has always had an international component, one that fits an often-viewed dynamic of cultural borrowing: a social development like homosexuality developed more intensely first in Europe and came to American shores as an import of sorts, but eventually would be spread throughout the world in the post-World War II era as a distinctly “American” export.²⁹ While historians of American foreign relations have recently expanded their view to consider issues of globalization, few have considered gay identity as one of America’s more prolific exports since World War II. When

²⁹ A few titles that trace aspects of this dynamic include Richard Pells, *Not Like Us: How Europeans Loves, Hated and Transformed American Culture Since World War II* (New York, Basic Books, 1997); Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986); and Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1999).

one notes the adoption throughout the globe of American gay lingo, an Americanesque gay bar culture, and even an American-style gay civil rights agenda centered around the rainbow flag and “Gay Pride Days,” it becomes important for historians to ask how this immense cultural borrowing has come about. My consideration of how male flight attendants may have served as some of the first “cultural ambassadors” of a US-style homosexuality during the jet age will contribute significantly to recouping this otherwise neglected aspect of foreign relations history.

For all of the potential contributions this project offers to American Studies and to the various disciplines of US history, I look forward to the opportunity over the next few semesters to visit the relevant archives, record oral histories, and compose these chapters that speak to the history of male flight attendants while profiling the interconnectedness between queerness and capitalism in the United States and beyond.

Archival Materials

Airline Periodicals, various, Transportation Library, Northwestern University.

*These periodicals and others such as **Aviation Weekly**, which have covered the aviation industry throughout the postwar era may also be available at other locations in the US.*

Association of Flight Attendants Collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University

The AFA union is an independent affiliate of the Air Line Pilots Association, founded in 1974. It currently represents flight attendants at USAir, United, and various other airlines, and it may have represented even more airlines from its inception.

Diaz v. Pan Am: 311 F. Supp. 559, 16 (S.D Fla.1970)

Diaz v Pan Am, 442 F.2nd 385,8 (5th Cir. 1971)

The above court cases involve the first case and then the appeal of Diaz v Pan Am, the court case which forced the return of male flight attendants to the industry.

ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California.

The ONE archives is an international clearinghouse on media archives and other materials of interest to scholars studying homosexuality. The archive may be particularly helpful in tracking down media stories and court cases involving expulsions of flight attendants from the workplace due to scandal or fear of HIV/AIDS.

Pan Am Archives, University of Miami.

The Pan Am archives contain extensive files seized after the airline declared bankruptcy. Most of the materials seem to be from the Public Relations Department, and they therefore include press releases and the like. Because most sensitive material from the corporate perspective is not in the archives, this collection may not be of significant value.

Records of Stewards and Stewardess Division, Air Line Pilots Association Collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

Almost all flight attendants, save for those at Pan Am and Delta, were served by this branch of the ALPA until the flight attendants broke off to create their own union(s) in the 1960s.

Transport Workers Union of America Collection, Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

The TWU Local 500 served Pan Am's flight attendants throughout the postwar era until 1977 (when the IUFA began to serve Pan Am attendants). Locals 550, 551, 552, 553, 554 served flight attendants of other airlines.

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