Identity and Difference Research Group

Ikhtilaf, Journal of Critical Humanities and Social Studies Issue 1- Fall 2017
ISSN 2509-1743 ISSN (Print) 2509-1751
Issue#1, Fall 2017. The environment is us: humanities and the ecological crisis

Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *North to the Orient*: An Account of an Aviator's Emerging Environmental Consciousness

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Abstract

This paper investigates the role of aviation in increasing environmental consciousness in the early twentieth century with particular focus on Anne Morrow Lindbergh's flight account, *North to the Orient* (1935). It asks how Lindbergh's aerial view of the changing natural landscape contributed to her awareness of environmental issues (along with her husband, she later became an environmental activist, speaking out for organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund) and man's role in exacerbating – if not, creating – them. I also question why her environmentalist interpretation of the aerial view has been critically overlooked. Besides the current tendency to associate aeroplanes with pollution and overconsumption of natural energy sources, I illustrate how military, national, and commercial appropriation of the aeroplane obscured its environmental potential. More significantly, media coverage and critical studies have placed greater emphasis on Lindbergh's position as a woman in a male-dominated profession, thereby obscuring the importance and potential of her unique perspective on the relationship between the aeroplane and nature. Lindbergh, I argue, did not just highlight and value nature in her text, but she also exhibited equal appreciation for the aeroplane (and technology in general) and its capacity to bring about awareness of environmental issues.

Keywords

Anne Morrow Lindbergh; *North to the Orient*; aviation; environmentalism; ecocriticism; history of technology

Flying in the 1930s

In 1931, Anne Morrow Lindbergh embarked on a survey flight to Japan and China from the United States with her husband Charles. The purpose of the journey was to uncover the fastest route from New York to Tokyo, which required flying over vast, uncharted territories and wide bodies of water, and several stops in remote areas. What resulted from the journey was a practicable flight route and the publication of*North to the Orient* (1935) – a deeply personal account of the discovery of the route as well as a portrayal of Lindbergh's emerging awareness of environmental changes.

In the 1930s, much of the enthusiasm for aviation in America was directed at the heroic, predominantly masculine, figure of the aviator – a status attributed mostly to Lindbergh's husband, Charles. Whether he was willing to accept it or not, he could not have avoided the fame that came with his momentous flight across the Atlantic in May 1927. A headline in the *New York Times*in 1927 declaring, 'LINDBERGH CROWD SHATTERS RECORD', demonstrates just how enthusiastic the American public was about his feat, when "sweltering thousands"

(Speers1) came to Potomac Park in Washington, DC., to witness the President congratulating their national hero. So intense was the public's fascination with Lindbergh that he spent much of his years campaigning against tabloid journalism that often breached his privacy.[1]

The passionate show of support for him is also illustrative of the patriotic sentiment bound up in the American zeal towards the aeroplane and the heroic aviator.As Joseph J. Corn states in his significant study on aviation in America, the relationship that Americans had with the aeroplane was essentially, "a love affair [… an] extraordinary affection millions of American men, women, and children felt for the flying machine" (xiii). In America, the expectations and enthusiasm for aviation were often "idealistic" and reached "utopian" heights (Corn 29), which is telling of the nation's deep belief in technological advances. Corn states, "So central was the airplane in the American imagination, in fact, that many people expected that they would soon take to the sky, flying their own family plane or helicopter" (xiii). The *New York Times*, for instance, in1923 published a report on a possible new invention called a "flivver"—"a cross between a glider and a regular airplane"—that "aeronautic experts believe […] soon will become as plentiful, relatively, as their namesakes" ("Flying Flivver for Every Family" xx4). It was predicted that "every family" would want to own one as it was "befitting in respect of weight, size, fuel requirements, relative speed, and probable construction cost" (xx4). The aeroplane can thus be seen to have brought closer this vision of a technologically-advanced, utopian America, which clearly many Americans embraced.

Ann Douglas designates the "airminded" mentality as a largely and uniquely "American phenomenon" (456). She explains:

> America's size and isolation, its exemption from the Great War, its ongoing freedom from fears of invasion and attack, and its long tradition of tying utopian hopes to technological advancement kept its enthusiasm for aviation white-hot. Only in America could you get mass-produced piggy banks, purses, fans, clocks, lamps, and (a rarer item) coffins shaped like airplanes (Douglas 456).

Oftentimes the airmindedness in America did reach bizarre levels, illustrating the great extent of U.S. citizens' support for, and belief in, the aeroplane. At one point, in an attempt to fuel public interest in aviation, "A Guernsey cow of famous lineage was carried aloft in a tri-motored Ford [and] submitted to being milked in the air" ("Small Plane Gets Air Show Interest"27).[1] The *New York Times* article went so far as to refer to the animal as an "air-minded cow" (27), as if to highlight unprecedented levels of technological progressiveness in the nation.

This nationwide passion for aviation can also be seen in Italy with the rise of the Futurist movement. Proponents of this movement, such as F.T. Marinetti, sought to aestheticize technological violence in the name of human progress and total liberation from the past, resulting in aero-poems and aero-paintings that reflect their belief in the aeroplane's capacity for destruction. To a larger extent, as Philip K. Lawrence points out, this aestheticization can be detected within the context of aerial warfare and discourses of air power, "where the symmetry and physical power of planes and missiles attracts adulation" (37). Such adulation was also

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exhibited by Fascist leader, Benito Mussolini, whose propaganda biography, titled*Mussolini Aviator* (which came out in the same year as *North to the Orient*) captures just how significant aviation was to his fascist vision. For Mussolini, the position of the flyer is a superior one because "no machine requires so much human concentration of soul and will power as a flying machine to make it work properly," thus leading Mussolini to conclude that, "Every airman is a born Fascist" (Mattioli 4). His romanticized and patriarchal belief in the heroic status of the aviator was replicated by pro-Fascists in England who sought to appropriate the aviation industry to further their imperialistic goals. Oswald Mosley, who founded the British Union of Fascists in 1932 also formed Fascist flying clubs in 1934.

Considering the close association between aviation and patriarchal ideas of heroism, nationalism, and indomitable technological progress during this period, how did Lindbergh as a female aviator navigate the field?In *North to the Orient*, she reveals the struggles inherent in the outsider role she was to play: on being interviewed before their journey, Lindbergh states, "Over in the corner my husband is being asked vital masculine questions, clean-cut steely technicalities or broad abstraction. But I am asked about clothes and lunch boxes" (18). Lindbergh's frustration at the irrelevant questions—"What could I say that would have any significance? All the important questions about the trip will be answered by my husband" (*North* 18)—reveals both the silencing of her identity as an aviator in her own right by the exclusive, male-dominated field of aviation. Lindbergh also reveals the media's complicity when she recounts the inaccurate description of her clothes by a radio announcer: "'Why!' I thought blankly, looking down at a costume which did not correspond at all to his description. What nonsense! It was much too hot to wear leather" (*North* 18). Such occurrences may well have instigated her desire to insert her own distinctly female and affective narrative into skewed mainstream discourse on aviation that focused on, and even aestheticized, technological violence.

Despite her frustration at not being asked aviation-related questions, Lindbergh also admits to feeling uncomfortable when, on their stop at Ottawa, she was sat next to "one of the foremost experts on radio in the country" (*North* 31) and was expected to converse fluently with him on account of her experience—limited as it was—as an operator on their flight. Conversations about flight, then, were limited to questions concerning technicality, thus excluding Lindbergh's unique perspective which goes beyond such a subject. This exclusivity also suggests that any topic beyond technicality is not worth pursuing, and such an assumption can be detected in the majority of accounts of flight at the time. A prime example can be found in Lindbergh's own husband's account, *WE* (1927). Writing about his early barnstorming adventures, for instance, he chooses to explain how to land in bad weather rather than relate his encounters with the people interested in flying.[2]

The majority of flight accounts, like *WE*, rarely deliberate over the impact their journeys may have on society, culture, the environment, or international relations, all of which *North to the Orient* addresses. Lindbergh, for instance, writes of their short stop in Russia during their journey: "Certainly I have no modern answer to give when I am asked […], 'I hear you've been to Russia—what did you think of it?' / I can only protest childly, 'It isn't *It*; it's *Them*, and I like them" (*North* 91). To Lindbergh, Russia is much more than its location and politics—it is a different culture inhabited by different people from which one can learn, and this refreshing

perspective of travel serves as an example of what Lindbergh as an "outsider" can bring to the field of aviation.

Just as she was marginalized by the same field that she contributed to, environmental historians and historians of aviation have also seemed to leave Lindbergh's environmentalist perspective out of critical discussions, preferring instead to focus on her husband or situating her among other female aviators in the same period. Leonard S. Reich, for example, only briefly mentions Lindbergh in an article detailing her husband's growing concern for the environment despite the significant amount of writings she produced on the subject. Scholarly work on aviation also tends to portray the relationship between aviation and the natural environment negatively, especially since aeroplanes have been a major contributor to climate change since the sharp increase in air travel in the mid-1980s.[3]The overemphasis of this negative association leads to a neglect of the role that aviation can also perform in support of environmental efforts, which Lindbergh in *North to the Orient* illustrates.[4]

A Unique Voice

It seemed only natural that Lindbergh herself became an accomplished writer. Her passion for writing emerges in her letters as well as in the pages of her diaries, which she had kept since she was little. In June 1933, for instance, she worries about not having the time to write due to her busy schedule (Lindbergh, *Locked Rooms* 44). Yet, despite the numerous events she needed to attend, she nevertheless managed to complete writing her first book, *North to the Orient*—"not […] a technical account," but rather, "an attempt to capture some of the magic," of the "unrepeatable" history of travel (Lindbergh, *North* xiii) in the first few years of aviation when flying still retained a sense of novelty. Upon publication by Harcourt Brace, *North to the Orient* sold "extremely well" and won the National Booksellers Award for non-fiction (Gherman 89). The Anne Morrow Lindbergh archive at Yale University contains numerous letters that she received from various readers, praising her writing and expressing their enjoyment of her book. One such letter from a reader named Adele Burden states how "tremendously impressed I am with the story and by the way it is told." Harold Nicolson, who had written Lindbergh's father's biography, *Dwight Morrow* (1935), added to the pile of letters by writing how "it is years since I read a book which I have enjoyed so much." Notably, he remarks upon "the panoramic focus—the feeling of two people being up above the world, the contrast between the closed intimacy of the cockpit and the wide-spread unknowable below," that made the book all the more fascinating, which is telling of Lindbergh's distinct literary style and (aerial) perspective. He heightens his praise by stating how "valuable [it is] from a literary point of view," and not just because it is simply "readable." Nicolson also sent a copy of the text to Virginia Woolf, whose works were often read by Lindbergh. Woolf had apparently told Nicolson that she read *North to the Orient* "with great pleasure" and praised Lindbergh's writing for being "too good."

It is easy to see why the text garnered as much high praise as it did as *North to the Orient* brings a meditative and affective approach to the view of the world from above. For instance, as Lindbergh contemplates the "fundamental magic of flying," which for her emerges the most when she is flying above, looking down, "Life [is] put in new patterns from the air," as if a "glaze is put over life" (Lindbergh, *North* 163). She captures a serene vision of the world below, "like slow-motion pictures which catch the moment of outstretched beauty [that] one cannot see in life itself, so swiftly does it move" (Lindbergh, *North* 164). For Lindbergh, the aerial view is

valuable especially because of its ability to revitalize one's view of the world below. Interestingly, her words echo Gertrude Stein's comments on Pablo Picasso's Cubist paintings: "One must not forget that the earth seen from an airplane is more splendid than the earth seen from an automobile" (49). Stein differentiates between the two vehicles, contending that the automobile is "the end of progress on the earth" because the landscape seen from it is the same one as seen while walking, whereas the "earth seen from an airplane is something else" (49). For Lindbergh, that "something else" appears to be the affective dimension to the journey: "As we neared our geographical destination," she writes of landing in Maine, "we were also nearing our emotional one" (*North* 24). This link between the geographical and the emotional is, as is evident throughout her text, the essential component that draws readers into her descriptions of their encounters with nature.

At one point in the air, Lindbergh contemplates the "the rippling skin of the river, and birds drifting like petals down the air" (*North* 163). She captures the subtle movements in her writing, which consequently ask the reader to take note and observe the fragility of the world below that instigated her and her husband's environmental conservationist efforts (Cevasco and Harmond 253). Charles, too, notes in his account that the bird's-eye view enabled by the aeroplane "let me know my country as no man had ever known it before" (*An Autobiography* 81). Their preoccupation with the natural American landscape is also clear in the photographs taken on their aerial explorations, many of which can be found in the Lindbergh Papers at the Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University. Commenting on the changing American landscape, Charles observes that, "In the decades that I spent flying civil and military aircraft, I saw tremendous changes taking place on the earth's surface […] Trees disappeared from mountains and valleys. Erosions turned clear rivers yellow. Power lines and highways stretched out beyond horizons" (*An Autobiography* 32). As Tom D. Crouch asserts, these views observed by Lindbergh during his flights had a significant impact on his environmental awareness and instigated his active involvement in causes devoted to the preservation of the environment such as the World Wildlife Fund, and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. Demonstrating their increasing commitment to environmentalist concerns, in 1933, both husband and wife notably joined botanical experts on an aerial exploration near the Arctic Circle in order to, "make collections of micro-organisms from the atmosphere," in a collaborative study with the United States Department of Agriculture in their research concerning the epidemiology of rusts and other plant diseases.[5] The Lindberghs' involvement in this study and several others indicates their shared vision of aviation as a tool to contribute to environmental awareness and knowledge. Their vision is echoed by aviator and writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, who states in *Wind, Sand and Stars* (1939), "A plane may just be a machine, but what an analytical instrument it is! It has revealed to us the true face of the earth" (33).

In an article Lindbergh wrote for *LIFE* magazine in 1966 reflecting on her journey to Africa, she states: "Below [their plane were] great expanses of wild land stretching out in all directions: rolling plains, wooded hills, an occasional lake, a rim of distant mountains and, very far away, one peak with a plume of snow. No concrete roads, no towns, no section lines" (90). Along with the vastness of the natural land below, she also observes the wild animals that they encounter, remarking that "One is reduced to silence before rhinoceros, hippopotamus and buffalo—not only dwarfed by their size, but speechless before their unfamiliar shape, stunned by their unmistakable power" (Lindbergh, "Immersion" 95). This vastness and power of nature

around her provides her with "tremendous renewal of energy," which she states comes from "being put back in one's place in the universe, as an animal alongside other animals—one of many miracles of life on earth, not the only miracle" (Lindbergh, "Immersion" 97). She adamantly places humans on a level equivalent to other species, thus undermining the long-held idea of human superiority. Lindbergh then laments the scarcity of such an experience in Western civilization because "the impact of science on our civilization had created the illusion that we are all-powerful and control the universe" ("Immersion" 97).

Problems arise, however, with Lindbergh's criticism of the Western reverence for science and technology and her admiration for the natural African landscape. Lindbergh is inescapably a Western-educated, white, middle-class woman whose position as an aviator must be informed by her privileged upbringing. Her representations of the natural landscapes – including those outside of Africa – are notably romanticized and exoticized, which betrays the same Orientalist mindset that pervades the Western civilization that she criticizes. At one point, she herself hints at the temptation to see the objects and the people below as "limp, shining, detached, for me to pick up and arrange in what patterns I might choose" (*North* 163). This problematizes the environmentalist outlook she tries to adopt, as the world below is thus subjugated and forced to "perform" for her. (Her admiration of the African landscape, for instance, is encouraged by the "renewal of energy" she gains). From this point of view, Lindbergh's aerial perspective bears troubling similarities with that of the bomber's.

Yet, *North to the Orient* remains undeniably distinct from the dominant discourses of aviation in America as well as from the majority of flight accounts at the time. On the subject of rivers, Lindbergh reflects their powerful presence, stating that "man's gleaming cement roads which he has built with such care look fragile" in comparison to rivers that "have carved their way over the earth's face for centuries" (130). The focus in Lindbergh's account of their journey, then, is not on them and their ability and skill to fly, but on the natural world and what flying has taught them about it.For Lindbergh, the resultant human neglect of the environment is a threat to man himself as he "faces the loss of a breathing space for all that is wild and free in his spirit [...] his physical welfare also, perhaps even his survival, according to conservationists, is imperiled by the extermination of other life on this planet" (*North* 130). The aerial view, which helped precipitate this realization of the necessity of nature to human survival, can thus be seen as a powerful medium. In contrast to the patriarchal, military and nationalist view of aviation, then, Lindbergh's environmentalist interpretation of the aerial views help to emphasize the constructive potential of the aeroplane.

An Environmentalist Narrative Emerges

It is not only the nature-focused content of *North to the Orient* that differentiates it from many other flight accounts at the time. Her unique aerial view can also be seen to affect her style of writing, producing what appears to be a hybrid narrative suited to an environmentalist outlook. She resists conventional narrative form and style perhaps in an attempt to capture her idiosyncratic opinions, ideas, and feelings about their journey. Rather than writing in straightforward traditional prose, she mixes in poetry and images of maps, forming a hybrid narrative not unlike the fragmented, modernist writings being produced at the time. For instance, Lindbergh includes a Japanese hokku—the opening verse of a poem—which she came upon on their stop in Japan:

ISSN 2509-1743 ISSN (Print) 2509-1751

How far in chase today
  I wonder
Has gone my Hunter
  Of the dragon fly! (*North* 119)

While Lindbergh does not elaborate on the significance of the poem for her, readers may have recognized that this hokku, which their Japanese hostess explains is "about the mother whose little boy has died," (*North* 119) must have resonated with Lindbergh due to the kidnapping and death of her own one-year-old son a few years earlier. Even though Lindbergh only includes a brief section of this poem, it nevertheless speaks volumes about her position as a grieving mother as well as the universality of the experience of motherhood, given that the poem is Japanese. The inclusion of the Japanese hokku thus adds not only a different cultural perspective to *North to the Orient* but also a more personal and emotional dimension to the travel narrative. On that note, Lindbergh's account of flight is markedly illustrative of Wendy Parkins's statement that "women's writing often reflected the diverse affective experience of modernity," (15) thus distinguishing their depictions from those of their male counterparts. While the poem may have nothing to do with flight itself and may detract the text from being seen as asubstantial flight account, it is precisely such inclusions that make *North to the Orient* invaluable. It is her uniquely inclusive point-of-view that is able to accommodate and articulate the interconnections between the seemingly disparate subjects of aviation, motherhood, and nature. Such an all-encompassing perspective is what is needed in order to highlight the environmental concerns that should be paid attention to by all – men and women, mothers, aviators, writers, and readers of all racial and cultural backgrounds. And in order to portray such an inclusive perspective, one needs to adopt an inclusive narrative style.

In addition to lines of verse, Lindbergh includes a small map on the first page of each chapter to show which section of the journey the chapter is referring to. She thus restructures the standard form of a narrative to include other viewpoints of their journey. The maps are provided by her husband as indicated in the title page, "With Maps by Charles A. Lindbergh," and this neatly references his leading role in the journey, which is to navigate their plane using such maps. These maps also effectively juxtapose the technical aspect of the journey with Lindbergh's more intimate perspective and highlights the simplified, perhaps reductive, view of the world as contained in maps. Maps are also arguably indicative of the illusion of human mastery over land and symbolic of the exertion of colonial power over others. As Graham Huggan points out, the production of maps, "such as the reinscription, enclosure, and hierarchization of space [provide] an analogue for the acquisition, management, and reinforcement of colonial power" (21). Even so, it seems unlikely that Lindbergh included the maps specifically to undermine or criticize their use. Rather, it would be more plausible to suggest that Lindbergh included the maps to add another, more visual viewpoint to her story for her readers' interest.

Lindbergh thus resists the conventional narrative form not only in order to reflect the events and occurrences of their journey more accurately, but also to reflect her idiosyncratic views as an aviator. For instance, when she practices communicating in Morse code on the aeroplane's radio equipment to a distant radio operator and asks him how her messages are, she describes the operator's reply as follows:

> "'Pretty - - - good - - -' the letters ran slowly into words as I copied, 'but - - - a - - - little - - - heavy - - - on - - - the - - - dashes—' (It seemed intensely funny to me, this slow deliberate conversation with a strange person somewhere on Long Island.) '—just - - - like - - - my - - - wife's - - - sending'" (Lindbergh, *North* 14).

Lindbergh faithfully records the sound pattern of their conversation in Morse code by including the multiple dashes, which fragment the flow of the prose and effectively reflects the fragmentation and slowness of their actual conversation. She further breaks the flow by inserting her own thoughts in parentheses, which gives readers further insight into her view of the conversation. The fragmentation of the narrative of the past in order to depict the present can be seen as a way of widening the narrative perspective, notably emulating the all-encompassing aerial view. Technology in this case is shown to aid communication between remote persons, rather than facilitate a hierarchical relationship between the two.

It is important to note this distinction, as it is what sets *North to the Orient* apart from other accounts of flight. Not only does Lindbergh allow space for her own voice within the text, but she also lends her voice to the physical environment which she effectively acknowledges is an essential collaborator, and not just a component, in realizing human flight successfully. Looking at their plane against the backdrop of the Nanking wall in China, she imagines a conversation between the two:

> "I am a wall. Generations have passed under my gates; wars and destruction have broken over me like waves. I am still here – a wall."
>
> "I am a plane. Power and speed. I traverse space and race with time. You are bound; but I can fly – I am a plane."
>
> "I am a wall. You are a plane; you will be gone tomorrow. But I – I will be here forever – a wall."
>
> > " a plane…"
> >
> > "… a wall…" (Lindbergh, *North* 135)

Although the plane and the wall have reached an impasse in their argument, it is nevertheless an on-going dialogue, highlighted by the ellipses. Both the plane and the wall acknowledge each other's presence and this imagined conversation appears to signal the need for a similar conversation between humans and the environment. While Lindbergh may have been writing from a limited and privileged point-of-view, she nevertheless takes the first necessary steps in loosening her narrative and incorporating into her text the multiple voices of her collaborators, i.e. technology and nature, thus significantly distinguishing her environmentalist point-of-view from the mainly nationalist and militarist narratives of aviation at the time.

Notes

1. On 25th March 1928, the *New York Times* also came out with an article headlined, 'Lindbergh Weary of the Limelight', detailing the frequent "crowd perils he faces" (Owen 1) when he is out in public.

2. "I could have carried many more passengers but it rained nearly every day and each flight rutted the field badly. When I landed, it was necessary to pass over a soft spot between two hillsides, and before taking off I had to taxi back over this soft place on the way to the far corner of the field" (C. Lindbergh 60). Much of *WE* is written in this descriptive, technical manner.

3. Recent critical studies tend to focus on sustainability policies aiming to curb the aviation industry's detrimental impact on climate change. See Bretton Weir, 'Soaring to Green Heights: The Current Sustainable Initiative in the Commercial Airline Industry', *Earth Common Journal*, 3.1 (2013), 1-3; Peter John McManners, 'Developing Policy Integrating Sustainability: A Case Study into Aviation', *Environmental Science and Policy*, 57 (2016), 86-92; Weiqiang Lin's 'Aviation and Climate Change: Practicing Green Governmentality across the North-South Divide', *Geopolitics*, 21 (2016), 1-22.

4. This tendency to focus on the aeroplane's destructive potential may be influenced by studies emphasizing the national and military power of the aeroplane that have dominated the field of aviation history from Joseph Corn's *Winged Gospel* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983) to Brett Holman's *The Next War in the Air* (London: Routledge, 2014).

5. See Fred C. Meier, 'Collecting Micro-Organisms from the Arctic Atmosphere', *Scientific Monthly* (January, 1935), Manuscript and Archives, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University, New Haven, Ct, Charles Lindbergh Papers, Writings, Speeches, Statements, and Diaries: Articles, "Collecting Micro-Organisms from the Arctic Atmosphere," by Fred C. Meier, Field Notes and Material by CAL, Jan 1935, MS 325 Box 196 Folder 293.

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