**Heterotopic Space, Sexuality and Cabin Crew**

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**Introduction**

This paper looks at the under-explored area of sexuality and space through the concept of heterotopia. In his conceptualization of heterotopic i.e. ‘other’ spaces, Foucault (1986) captured the disorderly nature of (disorganizing) space where several layers of meaning may juxtapose in non-compatible ways. Heterotopic space is non-hegemonic as a space of Otherness that contains sometimes hidden layers of meanings. In this paper, the concept is applied to the case of male cabin crew and the ways in which they manage a sexual, gendered and occupational identity within and through space. Here, the cabin is positioned as heterotopic space as a way of understanding these dynamics.

**Sexuality and Space**

The paper explores the literature on sexuality and space where space is seen, from Taylor and Spicer’s (2007), as ‘lived experience’ and infused with different meanings. Recent interest has focused on public, private, virtual, formal and informal spaces – how the sexualizing of space is organized as well as how it affects organization. One strand has looked at the different spatial contexts such as ‘red light’ districts and the sex industry (e.g. Tyler, 2010) while other work has explored how sexuality is formed through spatial practices and spatial ‘Othering’ that allows contestations of dominant forms of heterosexuality and the generation of new forms of sexual identity (e.g. Steyaert, 2010; Green et al, 2010). Such work foregrounds the generative dimensions of space in relation to sexual practice, identity and desire that go beyond notions of space as ‘containers’ of activities and relationships.

**Space, Identity and the Aircraft**

These spatial dynamics are implicated in the meanings attached to an aircraft as well as the practices that take place within it. In other words, the aircraft has specific spatial and temporal characteristics that frame and are framed by the relationships and embodied activities contained. These characteristics include close physical and temporal proximity of production and consumption where cultural expectations of consumers can shape the social interaction and make specific demands on the public presentation of the (employee) self. Within the context of cabin crew, expectations of passengers, mobilized through discourses of consumer sovereignty and through promotional advertising that continue to draw on creations of available heterosexual femininity, can combine with the body proximity inherent in that service work to create a sexualized atmosphere within an encounter that can last for several hours (Tyler and Abbott, 1998).

Spaces can be seen to be ‘sexed’ and gendered, shaping and framing attitudes and behaviours. The aptly named cockpit (or flight deck) and the aircraft cabin, for example, can be seen as masculine and feminine spaces respectively. As Mills (1996) has illustrated, the highly technologised space of the cockpit is underscored with meanings around rationality, danger and expertise that have core connections with discourses of heterosexual masculinity. Militaristic uniforms worn by the (mostly male) occupants are symbolic resources that further enhance the masculinity of this space. By contrast, the cabin, or main body of the aircraft, can be defined as a feminine space. It in this arena that consumption, service and the trivia of entertainment occur – culturally associated with heterosexual femininity.

It is in the context of these domestic activities and aesthetic bodily displays, saturated with gendered and sexualized meanings, that male crew accordingly manage their identity. Men often struggled against the subjectivities (based on subservience, deference and sexual Otherhood) imposed. Meanings attached to space (e.g. around gender, sexuality) can accordingly underpin an inferiorization of subjectivity where the processes of and responses to Othering are heavily influenced by the specific temporal and spatial characteristics contained. The confined space of the interaction, the inability to leave the site of the service and the duration of the service encounter may well exacerbate the effects of any ‘assault on self’ (Williams, 2003) from dominant (e.g. heteronormative) discursive regimes. Generic discourses of gender, sexuality and occupation are accordingly negotiated through daily activities and interactions that are not only spatial in their context: i.e. occur *within* space, but can be experienced (activated, constructed, resisted) *through* space.

**The Aircraft and Aisle as Heterotopic Space**

Through some of the data presented, the paper explores how the aircraft can be seen as heterotopic space as meanings within the cabin shift on sometimes contradictory ways through the embodied performances of men (and women) within it. This is demonstrated through the ways in which gender (masculinity, femininity) and sexuality (heterosexuality, homosexuality) cross cut and undermine each other in the working space of the aisle. In terms of the latter, the cabin and the aisle can be seen to be ‘feminine’ space through the association with deferential service, domesticity and an eroticized and available female heterosexuality. However, these meanings can shift towards deviancy and Otherness with the presence of men. Male crew entering this space create meanings associated with a denigrated homosexuality. Space is accordingly given meaning by the social definitions afforded to bodies of individuals who occupy its domains. At the same time, space itself confers meanings - ascribing the bodies of men with femininity and homosexuality. Space is therefore both gendered by the bodies and embodied activities within it and gendering (Halford and Leonard, 2006); by the same token it is both sexualised according to the social definition of bodies contains and ‘sexualising’ as it confers such meanings (erotic female sexuality; deviant homosexuality) onto others.

These meanings can juxtapose and intersect in ways that resonate with heterotopic space. During safety procedures, walking purposefully up and down the aisle (checking seat belts, closing overhead lockers, cross-checking security of doors and emergency exits) is integral to the work of cabin crew. Crew colonise this space – confident, visible and active as they perform their safety and security roles. While passengers are able to move within the aisle, their access is restricted and incursions more tentative and there are times when, perhaps unwillingly, they are confined to their seats. In this context, the confinement of passengers (passive, feminine) is juxtaposed against the ‘masculine’ purpose and freedom of movement of crew, reflecting and containing gendered meanings attached to safety and security and drawing, potentially, on heterosexuality to ascribe authority and order.

In terms of the latter, as Ward (2008) found in his study of gay police officers, authority and order are not normally associated with homosexuality or ascribed onto the bodies of gay men. Gay men are seen as ‘unreliable’ in a context where officers need to practise a form of hegemonic masculinity to be authentic in the role and in order to be taken seriously. In the context of the aircraft, in a similar manner, practices and procedures relating to safety and security can be seen to be informed and influenced by discourses of heterosexual masculinity that help afford the procedures with value, order and importance. In this way, during safety procedures, space can become normalised - as a ‘masculinized’ and heterosexual domain.

This more masculine, authoritative and heterosexual space, initiated partly by relations of movement and by the value afforded to safety (and heightened by recent terrorist threats), predominates during safety procedures and overlays more feminine meanings outlined above. However, authority conveyed by movement alone is not fully secure and in this context can be undermined by associations with chore driven domesticity. Therefore, while movement and walking is often associated with a (masculine) purpose and authority, movement in response to the demands of others (*‘running around after passengers’)* can be seen to be part of deferential and hence devalued ‘feminine’ service. Here, the arrival of the trolley can cause a change in meanings attached to the aisle – as consumer sovereignty and deferential service undermine an earlier authority and as pleasure and gratification (i.e. giving satisfaction as part of quality service) normatively associated with femininity and homosexuality overlay an earlier, masculine and heterosexual seriousness of intent.

The same space of the aisle therefore carries different gendered and sexualised meanings according to the embodied activities and movements of those within it and influenced by the symbolism that physical artefacts contain. These meanings can be tension-ridden and contestable and have material (e.g. dismissive behavior from passengers) and discursive (e.g. feelings of inferiority) implications. Space thus emerged as complex and unstable – its meanings shifting with the activities and practices contained – both influencing and influenced by (gendered, sexual) identity processes.

As Foucault (1986) suggests, heterotopias are capable of juxtaposing several incompatible spaces within a single real place. Further, heterotopias function in relation to all spaces that exist outside of them. They mark a culturally definable space that is unlike any other space and that reflects larger cultural patterns or social orders. Through the concept of heterotopic space, we can become alerted to the ways in which normative and ‘other’ disorderly spaces may intersect in non-compatible ways as meanings shift with the embodied activities that are contained as well as how the aircraft, while disconnected from the ground and at 30,000 feet, represents a microcosm of broader discourses that help make up a gendered and heteronormative gaze.

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