

The background features abstract geometric shapes in shades of blue and grey. A dark blue triangle points downwards from the top left. A light blue triangle points upwards from the bottom left. A grey triangle points downwards from the top right. The central area is white.

# Conference Reports



## Everyday Histories of Airports

Conference at the International Research Center for Cultural Studies (IFK) of the University of Art and Design Linz in Vienna, March 29–31, 2023. Co-sponsored by the IFK, the German Historical Institute Washington, the Research Platform “Mobile Cultures and Societies” at the University of Vienna, and the City of Vienna. Conveners: Nils Gütler (University of Vienna), Carolin Liebisch-Gümüş (GHI Washington), Britta-Marie Schenk (University of Lucerne), in cooperation with Alexandra Ganser (University of Vienna). Participants: Susanne Bauer (University of Oslo), Sonja Dümpelmann (University of Pennsylvania), Ole Frahm (LIGNA Artist Collective), Markus Grossbach (Fraport AG Archiv), Karin Harrasser (International Research Center for Cultural Studies Vienna), Thomas Macho (International Research Center for Cultural Studies Vienna), Carole Martin (University of Munich), Torsten Michaelsen (LIGNA Artist Collective), Anke Ortlepp (University of Cologne), Annegret Pelz (University of Vienna), Martina Schlünder (Max Planck Institute for the History of Science), Lauren Stokes (Northwestern University), Annette Vowinckel (Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History [ZZF] Potsdam).

Airports are not a typical object of study for historians. For a long time, only sub-disciplines such as transport history and the history of technology were devoted to the study of airports. It is only in recent years – and inspired by Alastair Gordon’s seminal 2004 book *Naked Airport* – that more works have appeared that examine airports from the perspectives of political history, social history, the history of knowledge, or environmental history, thus placing them more deeply in the history of the regions and societies surrounding them. The conference tied in with this trend while at the same time testing a new approach: it looked at airports from the angle

of *Alltagsgeschichte*. The participants explored how everyday life in the airport cosmos was connected to social, political, and transnational processes, and they investigated how social developments, crises, and continuities affected a place that for many people was and is not a space of exception, but rather an everyday place. By focusing on specific groups of actors – including homeless people, social workers, baggage handlers, migrants, and animal caretakers – the presenters challenged the notion that airports are spaces of exception and emergency. Focusing instead on daily routines, they demonstrated that airports are places that on the one hand (re)produce larger social structures, but at the same time also create their own everyday life shaped by the highly technical setting. The interdisciplinary nature of the conference, which featured not only historians but also literary and cultural scholars, an artist collective, and the archivist of the Fraport AG (Frankfurt Airport's operating company), made this new view of airports possible.

Three presenters at the conference illuminated airports as everyday sites of migration. Carolin Liebisch-Gümüş argued in her talk that airports became places of social conflict against the backdrop of West Germany's history of migration and asylum in the 1980s. Focusing on the church-affiliated airport social service and its welfare work at Frankfurt Airport, she showed how the social workers criticized the government's asylum policies and managed to intervene on behalf of asylum seekers at the airport, even while they held an ambivalent position as mediators between the German Federal Border Guard and refugees. Liebisch-Gümüş thus put the airport in the context of the heated "asylum debate" in the Federal Republic, showing how over the course of this debate airports turned into contested sites of migration control. Lauren Stokes focused her presentation on "cracks in the Iron Curtain" – loopholes of escape to the West during the Cold War, one of which was the airport in Gander, New-

foundland. Because planes flying between Cuba and the Eastern Bloc depended on the stopover for refueling, Gander evolved into a location of opportunity for refugees to ask Canadian immigration officers for asylum. Not only citizens from Cuba, the GDR, and other Eastern Bloc countries but also asylum seekers from the Middle East made use of this loophole. Stokes argued that the dictatorial border regime of the GDR, aimed at preventing *Republikflucht*, and the liberal democracy of Canada, seeking to stop asylum immigration from the Middle East rather than from the Eastern bloc, met in their shared efforts to prevent unwanted forms of airborne refugee migration. Carole Martin extended the focus on migration policies with a literary perspective on the context of the Vietnam War, when temporary marriages between U.S. military personnel and Vietnamese refugees at airports provided a means of entry into the United States, as recounted in the short story "Bound" from Aimee Phan's collection *We Should Never Meet* (2004). Martin explained how, on the one hand, such fictional pieces reflect the emancipation of migrants and their perspectives from dominant historiography. On the other hand, she pointed to the limitations of such literary works as historical sources. While the practice of "visa marriages" at airports at the time of the Vietnam War did indeed take place, it did not necessarily lead to successful immigration.

During a panel on mobility and traffic management – the functional core of the airport – Markus Grossbach, chief archivist at the Fraport AG, presented on the labor history of air travel. He highlighted the challenges faced by baggage handlers who felt threatened by the introduction of baggage carts in the 1970s, even resorting to hiding them to protect their jobs. He also examined the perspectives of luggage cart developers and marketers, who aimed to cater to the needs of travelers. However, their efforts were influenced by gendered perceptions, as they used images of young

women in their advertisements and anticipated potential issues that female travelers might face with the new technology. Annette Vowinckel explored how travelers from East and West Germany reacted to service disruptions and flight cancellations at Berlin's GDR-controlled Schönefeld Airport in the 1970s. Vowinckel argued that the complaints lodged by these individuals reflect a demand for seamless mobility. Disruptions and travelers' responses to them thus highlight what was considered the expected norm. GDR citizens, in particular, were careful to frame their demands in the language and the political framework preferred by the state. This might be seen, Vowinckel suggested, as a distinctively socialist approach to filing complaints. During the ensuing discussion, Vowinckel observed that historians tend to focus more on moments of disturbance than on the smooth flow of traffic, possibly due to the nature of the source material. However, when assessing the impact of airports and air travel on modern societies, it is crucial not to overlook their inclusive effects, especially the democratization of mobility that occurred during the era of mass flight, Vowinckel stressed.

How are airports and flying imagined and narrated? With this question in mind, one panel of the conference took a literary look at the everyday location of the airport: Annet Pelz took the audience on a journey through European literature, spanning from antiquity to the recent past with Daniel F. Galouye's novel *Simulacron-3* (1964). Her talk began by highlighting the lack of literary discourse on airports: while airports are often featured briefly in literature as places of departure and transit, the focus tends to be on flying itself and the aerial perspective. According to Pelz, the distant view of the world from above provides a chance for literary meta-reflection and self-exploration, which could be applied by researchers studying airports as well. Alexandra Ganzer examined a different type of air-

port: the space station, as portrayed in contemporary U.S. television series. While drama and emotion drive the stories set in space stations, social and environmental issues such as resource consumption and labor often remain invisible. Ganser argued that the “everyday space life” depicted in these shows is dominated by the hero myth, where the female astronaut who sacrifices her personal life for space exploration becomes a recurring trope. The astronauts themselves shape the meaning of the confined space they live in. Invoking Michel de Certeau’s theory of everyday life, Ganser highlighted the importance of considering how everyday practices shape the meaning of spaces like the space station and airports.

Air travel today is often associated with concerns about environmental impact and the climate crisis. One panel at the conference demonstrated that the airport environment is in fact complex, destructive, and ecologically rich at the same time. In their joint paper, Susanne Bauer, Nils Güttler, and Martina Schlünder focused on the treatment of animals on airport grounds, highlighting the challenges and conflicts that arise when living beings move within the complex interplay of cargo and passenger transport. The presenters contrasted the processing of these “animal passengers” with the rescue of injured wild animals and an animal shelter at the edge of the airport grounds. Not all animals in the airport environment fit into the logics of transit and global trade, as the airport becomes a border space where global animal mobility and regional fauna meet. In her contribution to the panel, Sonja Dümpelmann further expanded on human-environment relationships at airports, using sheep as her subject. She illustrated how sheep grazing alongside the runways have historically been used as “mowers,” while also providing images of pastoral idyll, rootedness, and home that contrasted with the airport. Dümpelmann spoke of “bio-techniques of naturalization” to describe the use of sheep for

image campaigning and for painting the picture of a harmonic airport environment – a form of greenwashing.

The presentations of the last panel dealt with the airport experiences of marginalized groups in Germany and the USA, examining how structures of inequality and discrimination manifested at airports and to what extent they also became sites of resistance and subversion. Anke Ortlepp used several case studies to illustrate the struggles for desegregation at U.S. airports in the South during Jim Crow. It was only through the increasing protests of activists and numerous lawsuits that the pressure on airports grew until, in 1963, Shreveport airport became the last U.S. airport to desegregate by court order. Airports, Ortlepp argued, represented an important arena of the civil rights movement because they symbolized civic ideals of mobility and freedom as parts of citizenship, as well as access to the commercial boom of the postwar era. In the last talk of the conference, Britta-Marie Schenk shed light on the everyday experiences of homeless people at Frankfurt Airport. Tracing the phenomenon of homeless people flocking to the airport in the year 1991 back to preceding social and urban policy developments in the Main metropolis, she emphasized the need to view airports as integral parts of urban space. Schenk then highlighted the opposition between the homeless and the airport security service, which set up a “homeless people” unit aimed at expelling and banning them from the airport. Schenk’s analysis thus revealed the airport as an exclusionary institution, shaped by social and political factors that extend beyond the airport itself. But she also showed how homeless people strategically adapted to this place by blending in with crowds of travelers and waiting passengers, often carrying suitcases to avoid unwanted attention.

Focusing on specific groups and local contexts, all the presentations underlined that historiographical perspectives



contradict the notion that airports are “non spaces” (Marc Augé) presumably characterized by uniformity, anonymity, and detachment from society. Rather, the speakers demonstrated, the meaning and spatial character of airports depend on the group of actors one takes into focus. This was also underlined by the video walk “The Passenger” presented by Ole Frahm and Torsten Michaelsen from the artists collective LIGNA. Using smartphone technology to take viewers on a global tour of airports, their project highlights the ecological and social problems that arise from their expansion. From the eviction of residents in Porto Alegre, Brazil, to make way for airport expansion to the destruction of rainforests in Yaoundé, Cameroon, to produce rubber for aircraft tires, the video emphasized that airports are both globally connected and locally impactful places.

The conference provided an experimental intellectual platform to explore how airport history and *Alltagsgeschichte* can be productively integrated. While the concept of everyday life was at times unclear and ambiguous, one participant emphasized that it should not be mistaken for the accretion of anecdotes but rather as a lens to reveal the routines and systems which have shaped airports. If one takes the core idea of *Alltagsgeschichte* seriously – to uncover the relationship between actors and larger structures – studying airports from this perspective reveals no less than the crises, challenges, and moments of exclusion as well as the promises and opportunities of mass mobility for modern societies. Even the temporary stays of less mobile groups at the airport, like homeless people, is indirectly shaped by the primacy of mobility there. Moreover, the everyday lives of those who work at the airport demonstrate the urban, regional, and social structures that underlie the management of mass mobility. These insights offer answers to the central question of what makes everyday life at the airport unique and distinguishes it from other transit places. One participant suggested that the airport is special in that it is a confined,

highly structured, and technical space where global mobility gets tightly curated, processed, and controlled. The organizers also noted that perhaps everyday life at the airport is not the opposite of crisis and exception; rather, it seems that at airports, the extraordinary is *alltäglich*.

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