# The Lights Are On; I Must Be At Work: Aspects of “Home” In the Lives Of Flight Attendants

**Drew Whitelegg**

**The Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life**
**Working Paper No. 24**

**May 2003**

**Introduction: What's So Special About Flight Attendants?**

Public fascination with flight attendants shows no signs of abating. Two recent Hollywood films, *View From the Top* and *Catch Me if You Can*, pedal the glamorous image of the profession. Coffee-table histories such as *Come Fly With Us* (Omelia and Waldock, 2003) and *Airline* (Lovegrove, 2000) proffer glossy publicity shots that belie the blatant sexism of airline advertising. *Coffee, Tea or Me?* (Baker and Jones, 1967), the ghost written memoirs of "two uninhibited stewardesses", is also to be republished by Penguin this summer. According to the *Chicago Tribune* the book captures "an image that endured well into the '80s and can still inspire nostalgia - particularly now, in the era of shoe searches and ever-shrinking snack service" (Lehoczky, 2003). The memoirs of real flight attendants continue to be marketable products, even if the tone has moved from risqué to plain wacky (Whitelegg, forthcoming). Popular magazines such as *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Vanity Fair* and *Redbook* have all featured flight attendants through the years.

Despite this high profile, flight attendants have received scant interest from academics, though issues such as sleep-loss, jet lag, radiation exposure and disruption of menstrual cycles have attracted medical inquiry (Anderson, 1997). Moles and Friedman's (1973) rejection of the popular myth of the career as a stepping stone to marriage, or – as was being suggested at the time – casual sexual encounters, was the first systematic academic study undertaken. It was not until Arlie Hochschild's groundbreaking *The Managed Heart* (1983a) that a sophisticated deconstruction of the flight attendant's job emerged. In her dissection of emotional labor and the simultaneous metamorphosis of and blurring between work and home (often based on the capacity for deep and surface acting), Hochschild catapulted the profession to the center of a burgeoning analysis of workers in the new service sector.

Subsequent work, however, has been limited in scope. Steve Taylor and Melissa Tyler, (Tyler and Taylor, 1998; Tyler and Abbott, 1998; Taylor and Tyler, 2000) have deepened the emotional labor argument, while Whitelegg (2002; 2003) and Williams (1986), have attempted to marry this with questions of worker organization. But all these studies have been situated squarely within the realm of production. Almost nothing has been published on the question of reproduction (Levy, et al, 1984; Jupp and Mayne, 1994). This lacuna in research provides the basis for the current study.

Flight attendant's jobs are unique. They generally work a long way from home, are away for up to four days at a stretch and work what are regarded as non-traditional hours. Other jobs exhibit one or two of these trends (some military or medical professions, for instance) but very few exhibit all three together. The traveling salesperson or high-ranking company executive may spring to mind as comparable, but again differ noticeably. For a start, most flight attendants (in the US about 80%) are female; salespeople and executives are generally, though of course not exclusively, male. For all its sexist imagery, no other profession has made more women so geographically mobile. Second, and perhaps more important, flight attendants' duties contain a high degree of implicit and explicit pastoral care. They spend more time as primary service providers for customers than any other employee group (Nolen, 1996). "Home", the nurturing environment where "mother" is readily on hand, is a feature of much airline advertising. But it is also a part of job training. Hochschild (1983b: 36) reports the following advice from a pilot at Delta training school:

*Now, girls, I want to tell you something else…I want you to think of the cabin as the living room in your very own home. At home, wouldn't you go out of your way to make friends feel at ease and have a good time? Well, it's the same thing in the L1011.*

Clearly one Delta flight attendant interviewed in my current study was well trained: "I treat people like they're in my house."

In a post 9/11 survey conducted by the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA), 45% of flight attendants classified themselves as having dependents. Of these, 60% had children, 20% ageing relatives or parents and 20% had both the above. Sixty-one per cent of those reporting having dependents care for them on a daily basis (Healy, 2003). In other words, many flight attendants spend most of their lives in a caring role, both at work and at home.

Of course, this is true of other professions, especially those heavily feminized, such as nurses or teachers. But again, two main differences arise. First, companies claim that it is the flight attendant's job specifically to make passengers "feel at home". This is an unlikely tactic for a nurse or teacher. Second, and more important, the "home" constructed by flight attendants is geographically dislocated by hundreds and often thousands of miles from their own actual homes. While caring for others and maintaining the outward appearance of calm required by their company, flight attendants experience stress separation from family and loved ones (including a good deal of guilt), chronic fatigue and, largely related, extreme disorientation brought on by either jet lag or too many take-offs and landings. Almost all flight attendants indicate that they have woken up and not known where they were. Leaving the bathroom light on in the hotel room not only stops flight attendants from accidentally wandering out into the corridor in the middle of the night; it also reminds them, upon waking up, that they are at work and not at home in bed.

The blurring of home and work, and the rituals and routines used by flight attendants to alleviate the inevitable disorientation involved, form part of a wider project aimed at examining how their families function.

**Methodology and Sources**

The findings below are the results of three sources. As part of an ongoing project at the MARIAL Center, Emory University, I have conducted interviews so far with about twenty current and former flight attendants from Delta Air Lines, Atlantic Southeast Airlines, Air Tran Airlines and United Airlines. I also interviewed national and local representatives of the Association of Flight Attendants. My second source is a flight attendant discussion panel, moderated by myself, and held at the MARIAL Center on October 15, 2002.[1] The third source is other written materials, both in academic and non-academic channels, including non-published work. I conducted interviews on a semi-structured basis and with an inductive approach. My intention is to code subsequent results in a more systematic manner. The purpose of this paper is to identify emerging trends in the research and not to deliver a definitive treatise. Indeed, given the climate of the industry, the latter would be almost impossible to write at this juncture.

All quotations below are taken directly from interviews with flight attendants or the discussion panel. I have not provided names – even alibis – or descriptors to protect anonymity at this stage of the research process.

**The Job Itself: Some Clarification**

A flight attendant's job specification is highly complicated and, as Volpe (1984) and Levy, et al (1984) recognize, contains numerous sub-cultural aspects, such as its own vernacular and terminology.

An airline's flight attendants are based at a particular airport, often a hub.[2] For instance, Delta Air Lines has bases at Atlanta and Dallas-Fort Worth, among others. However, a worker based in a particular city does not necessarily live in that city. For example, a number of United flight attendants are based in Chicago but live in the Atlanta area and commute to work. They do this for several reasons. First, United has no flight attendant base in Atlanta, though the carrier serves the city. Second, some flight attendants may have been forced to move due to the relocation of a partner's job. Audience members at the discussion panel asked why, if a flight attendant had to move to another city, did they not take a job with an airline based in that city. It would seem logical, if moving to Atlanta, for United workers to secure jobs with Delta. The answer touches on perhaps the most important concept in the flight attendant's job structure: seniority. Historically, they bid for the trips they want to make in the coming month according to seniority. The person who has been at the company the longest has first choice, followed by the second person, and subsequently all the way down to, in the case of Delta, number 15,000. The importance of seniority cannot be stressed enough. Seniority operates across the whole carrier, but it also operates at individual bases as well. Crucially, it is not transferable between airlines. A United flight attendant with twenty years service would be placed back at the bottom of the ladder if she or he joined Delta.[3] Also, a flight attendant might command more senior routes flying from a smaller hub than a larger one. In the case of Delta, for instance, some flight attendants who live in Atlanta are based in New York or Dallas and commute to these airports, solely because their seniority is relatively higher away from Atlanta, Delta's largest hub.

Progression up the seniority scale is vital as it allows flight attendants more control over their time. When flight attendants first begin work, they have no seniority at all, and work "reserve". This means being on call 24 hours a day, able to report for work within an hour's notice (the actual terms vary across airlines). Most flight attendants consider reserve something akin to a living hell, unable even to go to the store or the gym for fear of missing a call. One told me about mowing the lawn with one hand while continually monitoring her beeper with the other. Eventually (again the length of time varies) workers will move off reserve and be able to "hold a line". This means that they are able to bid and secure a particular series of flights for the next month. Obviously, more senior fliers will gravitate towards flights that are easier, less tiring, more interesting and so on (many choose to fly to Europe, if available). Junior fliers are often left on high maintenance routes, (for example New York to Miami where planes are full and passengers in holiday mood).

One final point needs to be made. Senior fliers will also, often, pick flights that give them the most flying hours in one go. Flight attendants generally have to fly up to

70 hours a month, with a maximum of 90. Actual flight times are calculated from the point at which the engines are turned on at one end to the point at which the doors are opened at the other. They are paid a fixed base rate equal to a certain number of flight hours, and then per flight hour (as well as per diem). Essentially, the longer the individual flight, the fewer actual days one works. A flight attendant on an Atlanta-Rome route, for instance, would only need to fly round-trip three times a month (coupled with a shorter trip) to meet the required hours. A flight attendant working Atlanta-Washington DC would need to fly a far greater number of trips to reach the requisite hours. Therefore, senior fliers tend to choose longer trips.

Flight time, however, is not the same as duty time. Until the late 1990s, there were no federal restrictions placed on the overall number of hours worked, as opposed to flown.[4] Following a campaign by the AFA, Congress introduced legislation limiting flight attendant shifts to no longer than 14 (15 as an exception) hours in any one stint. This included time sitting at the gate with no engines on, waiting for take-off clearance. Congress also stated that nine (exceptionally eight) hours had to elapse between the end of a working day and the start of a new one. However, the end of the day is calculated from the time the front door to the cabin is opened on arrival. The start of the working day is deemed to be sign-in the following morning (one hour before take-off). If it takes an hour and thirty minutes to deplane and get to the hotel on an overnight layover, a flight attendant might not be in bed much before midnight. But then he or she may need to be up at 6.00 a.m. to get to the airport in time for a 7.00 a.m. sign-in for an 8.00 a.m. flight. Technically, all this is within the rules, but it does not take a genius to see the problems caused by sleep deprivation, especially when flight attendants often need to unwind after a flight and, for a whole host or reasons, have trouble sleeping in the first place.

**Four Stages of the Flight Attendant Odyssey**

We can proceed with this discussion through recreating four distinct phases of the flight routine: leaving, in-flight, layover, and return. In each phase different aspects of home are apparent.

<u>Leaving</u>

In *The Time Bind*, Hochschild (1997) writes of the "waving window" at daycare centers, where children line up and wave to their mothers or fathers as they leave. This scene of pathos is extreme for flight attendant parents, as many of them will not be back that evening. Indeed, even those that are scheduled to return that night may not make it, due to mechanical or service delays. Flight attendant parents go through certain routines before leaving. Some talk to their children the night before to ensure that they know they will be back. This may still be a traumatic experience:

> *He used to cry and say "I want you to stay" and I would think, "I'm a bad mommy." Your heart is breaking and I would think, how can people get used to it? Your mom is getting on a plane and going to a foreign country.*
>
> *And I felt guilty. I felt guilty at leaving them and not coming back, and they have no concept of time. "I'll be home tomorrow night" means nothing to a child.*

*And then I would promise to come home that night, and the plane would be delayed and I wouldn't get home.*

Others use more symbolic tactics:

*I know a case where a single parent takes her son to the babysitter but never wears the uniform, because she didn't want the uniform to become synonymous with her leaving him.*

No matter how well prepared, the journey to the airport is often difficult:

*I would be crying all the way to the airport. I had a bad feeling when he cried for me leaving him.*

*I would not be able to see out of the car I would be crying so much driving to the airport.*

*You're talking about guilt. I'd be angry on the way to work. Any working mother will tell you this: you do feel guilty, but I was the supporter [of my family].*

At some moment the worker enters "flight-attendant mode", though the actual transition point varies:

*Once I put the uniform on, this is the persona you are talking about. I become that person until I get home again, at which point I become me.*

*I get in the car to go to the airport and put my flight attendant face on. My emotion stops at the airplane door. Put on your happy face.*

*Driving to the airport I would be in the mode, in transit mode: I'm leaving home and I'm going to fly somewhere.*

*You meet the crew. I'm not in flight attendant mode till I get on the plane. Everyone is standoffish for a while at first, 'cause no one really wants to be there.*

*When you get on that airplane you put on a different face.*

In flight-attendant mode workers are in an oxymoronic condition of flexible automation. A heavily prescribed set of routines must be adhered to, yet immediate flexibility and on-the-spot judgment is required. Both are essential to safety on board an aircraft. As one told me, "flight attendants are caring people and control freaks," and one intriguing finding from my research is that flight-attendant mode can remain dormant for workers away from the aircraft, and even for those who have left the industry altogether. Being dormant, it can be recalled and reactivated at the shortest of notice. Generally, flight attendants retain their peripheral vision, need to organize things and are unable to stay in one place for any length of time without "just checking on something". Off-duty and ex-

flight attendants initiate action, in situations from emergencies to the seating plans at a meal, when required.

It is easy to see that flight attendant mode is an integral feature of the job. But perhaps less obvious is the role that home plays within this mode. Put directly, flight-attendant mode represents an alternative home, a safe space in which, just like in their actual home, workers creates routines and rituals that make it comforting, manageable and understandable. Flight-attendant mode is therefore necessary for the functioning of both job and worker.

Two factors cement this importance. First, the general public often overlooks how lonely an occupation the career can be. As one flight attendant puts it, “There is an emptiness. It’s like being a traveling salesman. It’s a very lonely job.” The stereotype, fostered by the traditional imagery of popular fiction, is that flight attendants spend most of their time having exuberant parties. This image was one that emerged in the 1960s, when layovers were much longer, the job less stressful and most agents involved wanted to believe such stories. Today things are very different. With the growth in regional carriers and smaller airplanes, some flight attendants work alone on board. More important, the demographic make-up of flight attendants has changed. With flight attendants now working sometimes into their seventies, and with women allowed to be married, the fact is that more flight attendants have more things and people to miss when away from home than they did in the 1960s. Flight-attendant mode perhaps helps people deal with loneliness, and is a character and role that they play and, equally, know that they at some point will stop playing. The second factor is that flight-attendant mode helps cement not just the concept of an alternative home but also of a vicarious extended family. This family is best explored by moving off the ground and into the air.

<u>In-flight</u>

Many workers claim to be too busy to think about anything to do with home, though the capacity to bring home into the workplace can often depend upon the type of flight. Obviously, longer-haul flights lend themselves to greater periods of general downtime, especially outward transatlantic night flights.

Flight attendants do not necessarily know each other before a flight. Some crews may stick together for a month period and some workers “buddy-bid” (i.e. bid to fly the same line as a friend), but many flight attendants will have only met their colleagues at the pre-flight briefing. Within the space of thirty minutes they are working with complete strangers. The heavily prescribed work routines are essential to ensure that every worker knows their responsibility in an emergency.

Flight attendants therefore find themselves within a paradoxical situation whereby they feel part of an extended family in which nobody actually knows each other. Not only that, everyone within the family has the same uniform on, making individual distinction difficult.

It is important to stress the regularity with which flight attendants refer to “family” in relation to their job. Indeed, one of the major gripes in the current climate is that such bonds are becoming eroded. Equally, the endurance of the family motif is indicated by the fact that ex-flight attendants still often use the term “we”, speak in the present tense about the job, and still socialize with former colleagues. Claire Williams (1986) suggests that flight attendants represent an “occupational community” in which

most spare time is spent with workers in the same field. This leads to unusually close ties, evidence of which can be found in internet websites, chat rooms, informal support systems and solidarity across carriers during industrial action (Whitelegg, 2003). Of course, this alternative family is also nurtured by airlines themselves. Delta and Southwest Airlines, in particular, have fostered a "family spirit" atmosphere as part of their corporate culture (Whitelegg, 1991; Freiburg and Freiburg, 1996).

While talking about family, flight attendants fall back on traditional forms of individuation: pictures and storytelling. Pictures represent the most obvious form of home making. Flight attendants put up pictures of their children in the galley. Non-parents sometimes put up pictures of their cats or dogs. Some have a "brag book", a small photo album containing pictures of home and family. As one ex-worker puts it:

> *You pull out the brag book and you say, "This is who I am". Otherwise we are all the same people in the same uniform, with the same hair and the same shoes and the same flight bags and this is the only thing that's different, what we are showing you of our other life.*
>
> *You bring home to the job. You have the brag book, pictures of my son and the dog. The boyfriend I intermittently hide.*

Storytelling takes on a distinctive form in the flight attendant family. Passengers can often find flight attendants exchanging stories at the back of the aircraft during a flight. Again, this highly ritualized interchange is likely being carried on between total strangers. The broad term for this exchange is "Jump Seat Therapy", in which flight attendants pour out their life stories to people whom they have just met, on a regular basis (thus distinguishing them from the melancholic drunk in the bar).[5] Most commented upon in interviews is the explicit depth to which these conversations reach: "I don't want to hear any more gynecological problems!" one male worker exclaimed. This is information, they suggest, that you would never tell your (real) family.

There is thus a conscious distinction between an actual family and the substitute one when in flight-attendant mode. Yet family parameters still operate: flight attendants are expected to join in and participate in Jump Seat Therapy. Those who do not are regarded with suspicion or as letting the airline family down. A similar regard is held for "Slam Clickers", flight attendants who lock themselves in their rooms on layovers and refuse to participate in any socializing. The layover forms the third part of this journey.

<u>The layover</u>

Some flight attendant parents avoid layovers at all costs. If they have enough seniority, they may fly "turnarounds" (basically there and straight back). These are sometimes by day, enabling parents effectively to work "normal" hours. Alternatively, some parents fly night turnarounds, leaving from the east coast for the west in the early evening and then arriving back on the east coast early the following morning. That way, they get home in time to take over childcare from their spouses, who then go to work themselves.

For other flight attendant parents, however, layovers represent their "sanity", a breathing space where they can literally get away from it all:

*I needed the freedom. Being able to go.*

*I like my job. I need that break. I can go to the hotel, have my own time, get some sleep.*

Of course the quality of the layover varies radically. In *View From the Top* Donna Jenson (Gwyneth Paltrow) dreams of "Paris, First Class International" but ends up stuck in Cleveland. "There are only so many things you can do in Valdosta, Georgia," one regional flier told me in interview. Those flying domestic routes, especially, find themselves in a homogenous world of airports, airport shuttles, hotel rooms and other facilities that are effectively the same all over the nation. Hence the disorientation - for domestic attendants, caused more by the indistinguishable nature of their physical surroundings than by the jet lag affecting international fliers. One flight attendant reported driving to work along Route 17, unable to remember if she was in California or New York.

The layover represents a half way space. Though flight attendants regard themselves as "at work" during it (and carrier regulations banning drinking in uniform apply) they can also withdraw from flight-attendant mode. Thus, their vicarious home and family are often displaced by concerns about actual home and family.

This is exhibited in various ways. Flight attendants attempt to personalize the hotel room and to make it more individual through objects brought from home. Candles change the sight and smell of a room; personal (as opposed to hotel) bubble bath, shampoo and other toiletries provide comforting smells, as do favorite blankets, pillows or nightgowns. Some place pictures on dressing tables. In some cases, flight attendants on the same overseas route may leave a bag at the hotel, containing sweat pants, gym clothes, alternative shoes and so on. Another accoutrement one mentioned is a single wine glass, preferable to drinking wine from a hotel tumbler, and used when flight attendants have changed into sweats and are watching a video together in one of the rooms. The routines of being away also allow flight attendants to create a more peaceful home than they ever could in their permanent one, frequently washing and grooming luxuriously and leisurely. Flight attendants routinely "shed" the (habitually smelly) uniform before, if overseas, sleeping and then showering. They regularly use room service and the mini-bar, in addition to such services as manicure, pedicure and massage. Slam clickers withdraw into a hermetic world of pampering, not emerging from their hotel room from the minute they arrive until it is time to be picked up for the flight in the morning. Parents stress the importance of sleep without being woken up by their children.

The hotel, though ostensibly more relaxing, cannot replace actual home. On the mundane level, flight attendants bring domestic tasks or chores, such as correspondence, Christmas cards or bills. Others read newspapers and magazines brought from home. On a deeper level, guilt returns:

*Flight attendants are always calling home. Their kids and their husbands. I never call. My husband would never know where I was. But flight attendants with kids are always on the phone. They manage from afar, especially now with*

*cell phones. They call in the morning before the kids go to school and of course if something is wrong there is a great deal of anguish.*

*I usually called home at night, so [my daughter] didn't have the option of calling. When she did call it made me feel worse. There were so many guilt factors. What am I doing?*

People feel helpless. One interviewee claimed she said to her husband, "Don't call me unless they are bleeding." Numerous interviewees claimed to "not want to know" about problems unless they were absolute emergencies. But not for lack of interest: rather to protect themselves from the guilt of being absent when a "problem" – whatever it might be – arose.

*When I call home, I get upset. And I don't think it does them any good, either.*

*Most of the time there is nothing I can do about it where I am.*

*There is a guilt trip; flight attendants are guilty all the time. They feel guilty for the passengers and for not being there for their family. If someone dies, don't tell me. I can't do anything about it. Let me come home first.*

Unsurprisingly, concerns about family and guilt at being away appear to have increased since 9/11.

Some flight attendants wear a watch with two clock faces: one on local time and the other on "home" time. Some try to keep their body clocks on "home" time. This is partly practical, but also partly a symbol that the separation from real home is never complete.

Keeping in touch by telephone used to be very expensive. Interviewees report individual phone calls of up to $100. But, strangely, only a small minority utilizes the internet and e-mail. Cell phones are more common.

Return

Flight-attendant mode becomes dormant only on return. The transition back normally takes place in two phases. The first is on leaving the airport. Flight attendants often call home to let their partners, children, childcare workers or parents know that they have landed and are on their way. The second transition takes place upon actually entering the home. This phase is often more difficult. Flight attendants are often very tired or disoriented and always go through a ritual of adjustment. The rituals understandably vary:

*I then unpack when I get in. This is my adjustment to ground life again. Back to mommy life again. I'm asleep by 7.00 p.m.*

*There is a demarcation between work and home, once I come home and take off my uniform. Most of the time you don't bring the job home.*

*Getting in, first thing I do is take a shower. You have to wash the airplane off you. I try to leave it all in the shower.*

*I feel like every time I come home from a trip I need a little bit of space. I do need to get the uniform off and relax before I go into my mom mode.*

*When I get back I won't go to bed till about 2.00. I will have a glass of wine and talk to the kids. Read the mail. It used to be that the minute I walked in I would get bombarded with questions. They knew when to push the button and so I would say "you have to give me an hour." Then I can get on with things.*

But even with rituals, readjustment is not automatic, and the unwinding process can be prolonged:

*I stay confused with jet lag; you lose a night's sleep a week. But I don't suffer disorientation that often. I sleep well on getting back. I'm tired when getting back. Moms are tired in general.*

*You do take the job home with you. You are a vegetable for the rest of the night. My husband says I'm anti-social but I just want to be home. These are precious times – to sleep in your own bed.*

Readjustment can be especially difficult with spouses. Spouses who are naturally pleased to see their partners may be hurt if the partner seems jaded and disinterested. Or, as Jupp and Mayne (1994: 157) report, the reverse may happen:

*Many attendants who had traveled without their partners found "coming home an anticlimax". They reported anticipation of a warm reunion with their partners, but found them "indifferent" or "too busy" getting on with their own lives to be "bothered overmuch".*

Part of traveling is arriving home again, and flight attendants would be unusual if they did not expect at least some form of "homecoming" welcome. The fact that such a welcome may border on indifference is thus a further problem to returning.[6]

At worst, the job is a blueprint for creating unresolved conflict in the domestic sphere. Perhaps the biggest strain comes from the fact that flight attendants who fly "three days on, three days off" (the majority) complain that they only actually get one day to themselves. The first day off is spent recovering from the trip. The second day off is devoted to themselves. By the third day, they are preparing for the next trip, going through the routines and getting ready to enter flight-attendant mode all over again. Despite this, many interviewees claim that the career is healthy for married life: the enforced absences act as much as a safety valve as a vessel for unresolved conflict.

## Conclusion

Flight attendants move geographically and psychologically between the real home of partners, children, dogs and mortgages and the vicarious home of their alternate family of co-workers. While they are not the only group of workers to do this, I would suggest that the flight attendant's experience is unique in its extremity. "It really is like two separate lives," concluded one panel member at the MARIAL Colloquium, to universal agreement from fellow panelists.

The above discussion serves as an introduction to the relationship between these two lives. Indeed, the juxtaposition of real and vicarious family is crucial because it forms the nexus that contemporary work issues in the industry revolve around. Hochschild's (1983) conclusion that flight attendants increasingly could not distinguish between work and home, resulting in a condition of "transmutation", needs serious qualification (Wouters, 1989). In interview, flight attendants seem well aware of the fact that they lead two different lives. Even in flight-attendant mode, the connection with real home is not severed completely: "For me it's all about getting home," one concluded. Equally, they are aware that their alternative life is a temporary state and has a point of termination, say, when the uniform is removed. Though flight-attendant mode remains dormant, it is not, ultimately, the dominant modus operandi of flight attendants: real life steps in. As one parent claimed, "I never stop being a mom. I do stop being a flight attendant." Or, as another suggested, "People used to say to me, 'Do you live in the airplane?' I would say, 'No, I have a home.'"

The alternate "home at work" created by flight attendants serves as both a pleasurable escape and diversion from the real home and a coping mechanism for the demands of stress and fatigue. The key question in the current economic climate is what happens when the alternative home is no longer a welcoming place? Wharton (1993) argues that jobs requiring emotional labor have a high psychological reward and that workers (especially women) register a high level of job satisfaction. One of the clearest messages emerging from flight attendants in 2003 is that these rewards are being fundamentally eroded:

> *There is a therapeutic element to being a flight attendant. A loyal bond that comes out in things like Jump Seat Therapy…no one else can understand you. I miss that bonding with flight attendants. There is not so much of it about now.*

For many flight attendants, work no longer represents a vicarious home. The effects of this upon, first, the job and, second, the actual home, will be explored in continuing research associated with the current project.

## Notes

[1] The panel discussion was filmed by Scott Edmondson. Copies of the video are available from the MARIAL Center, Emory University.

[2] A hub is a main base of operations for an airline, through which many of their flights connect. Not all airlines have hubs: Southwest, for example, favours "point-to-point" service between individual cities.

[3] The transferability of seniority is a highly contentious point in airline mergers or acquisitions.

[4] Unlike pilots and mechanics, flight attendants have no federal certification. The Federal Aviation Authority (FAA) has oversight, but not the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

[5] The origin of the phrase is unknown.

[6] My thanks to Charles Jandreau for this perceptive observation.

## References

Anderson, Nattanya. 1997. *Broken Wings: A Flight Attendant's Journey*. Coquitlam BC: Avia Publishing.

Baker, Trudy and Jones, Rachel. 1967. *Coffee, Tea or Me? The Uninhibited Memoirs of Two Airline Stewardesses*. New York: Bartholomew House.

Freiburg, Kevin and Freiburg, Jackie. 1996. *Nuts! Southwest Airlines' Crazy Recipe for Business and Personal Success*. Austin: Bard Press.

Healy, Heather. 2003. Employee Assistance Program, Association of Flight Attendants. Interview with author, Washington DC, January 9.

Hochschild, Arlie. 1983a. *The Managed Heart*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hochschild, Arlie. 1983b. "Smile Wars." *Mother Jones* 8: 34-42.

Hochschild, Arlie. 1997. *The Time Bind*. New York: Metropolitan.

Jupp, J.J. and Mayne, P.R. 1994. "Flying Apart: Separation Stress in Female Flight Attendants." *Australian Psychologist* 27: 154-158.

Lehoczky, Etelka. 2003. "Stewardess Chic: When Air Travel Meant More Than Just Getting There." *Chicago Tribune*, April 2.

Levy, D.E, Faulkner, G.E. and Dixon, R.D. 1984. "Work and family interaction: the dual career family of the flight attendant." *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 11: 67-85.

Lovegrove, Keith. 2000. *Airline: Identity, Design and Culture*. New York: Te Neues Publishing Company.

Moles, Elizabeth and Friedman, Norman. 1973. "The Airline Hostess: Realities of an Occupation with a Popular Cultural Image." *Journal of Popular Culture* 7: 305-313.

Nolen, W. Parker. 1996. "An Exploratory Study of Stress, Depression and Burnout in Flight Attendants." Unpublished MBA dissertation, Concordia University.

Omelia, Johanna and Waldock, Michael. 2003. *Come Fly With Us: A Global History of*

*the Airline Hostess*. Portland: Collectors Press.

Taylor, Steve and Tyler, Melissa. 2000. "Emotional Labour and Sexual Difference in the Airline Industry." *Work, Employment and Society* 14: 77-95.

Tyler, Melissa and Abbott, Pamela. 1998. "Chocs Away: Weight Watching in the Contemporary Airline Industry." *Sociology* 32: 433-450.

Tyler, Melissa and Taylor, Steve. 1998. "The Exchange of Aesthetics: Women's Work and 'The Gift'". *Gender, Work and Organization* 5: 165-171.

Volpe, Joan. 1984. *Study of the Flight Attendant Subculture*. Report prepared for the Association of Flight Attendants, Employee Assistance Program, Washington DC.

Wharton, Amy. 1993. "*The Affective Consequences of Service Work: Managing Emotions on the Job*." *Work and Occupations* 20: 205-232.

Whitelegg, Drew. 1991. "Delta Air Lines, Jet Aviation and Atlanta, 1960-1980." Unpublished MA Dissertation, University of London.

Whitelegg, Drew. 2002. "Cabin Pressure: the Dialectics of Emotional Labour in the Airline Industry, 1983-2000". *Journal of Transport History* 23: 73-86.

Whitelegg, Drew. 2003. "Touching Down: Labour, Globalisation and the Airline Industry." *Antipode* 35: 244-263.

Whitelegg, Drew (forthcoming) "Coming Up For Air: Flight Attendant Narratives in the Jet Age." *Gender, Place and Culture*.

Williams, Claire. 1988. *Blue, White and Pink Collar Workers in Australia: Technicians, Bank Employees and Flight Attendants*. London: Allen and Unwin.

Wouters, Cas. 1989. "The Sociology of Emotions and Flight Attendants: Hochschild's Managed Heart." *Theory, Culture and Society* 6: 95-123.

**Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank those flight attendants and union officials who gave up their time to be interviewed. I would also like to thank the following for their feedback on and criticisms of a first draft of this paper: Lisa Dillman, Charles Jandreau, Beth Kurylo, Parker Nolen, Bradd Shore.