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Bessie Coleman: Race and Gender Realities Behind Aviation Dreams

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Bessie Coleman: Race and Gender Realities Behind Aviation Dreams

Abstract

OVER THE FIRST THREE DECADES FOLLOWING THE WRIGHT BROTHERS' TRIUMPH AT KITTY HAWK, AMERICANS ACROSS RACIAL AND GENDER LINES BECAME FASCINATED by the rich possibilities of flight. Especially after World War I (WWI), ordinary men and women were enraptured by what historian Joseph Corn has called "the gospel of aviation," popular fascination with the marvelous, even magical, implications of flying. Many thrilled to the sense of leaving behind Earthbound limits, exploring suggestions that aviation had the power to cure disease, avert wars, and literally bring human beings closer to heaven.

Disciplines

African History | History of Gender | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine

Comments

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*Bessie
Coleman*

Race and Gender Realities
Behind Aviation Dreams

AMY SUE BIX

OVER THE FIRST THREE DECADES FOLLOWING THE WRIGHT BROTHERS' TRIUMPH AT KITTY HAWK, AMERICANS ACROSS RACIAL AND GENDER LINES BECAME FASCINATED by the rich possibilities of flight. Especially after World War I (WWI), ordinary men and women were enraptured by what historian Joseph Corn has called "the gospel of aviation," popular fascination with the marvelous, even magical, implications of flying. Many thrilled to the sense of leaving behind Earthbound limits, exploring suggestions that aviation had the power to cure disease, avert wars, and literally bring human beings closer to heaven.¹

Underneath this adoration of airplanes, aviation from 1903 through the 1920s poses a more complex, less rosy picture. Early pilots spoke and wrote about the sheer joy of overcoming gravity, joining the birds in gazing down at towns and the land from a supe-

¹ Joseph J. Corn, *The Winged Gospel: America's Romance with Aviation, 1900–1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

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rior height. Yet while the feeling of flying itself might embody freedom, the process of getting into the sky was by no means free or fair. For many women and minorities, simply gaining access to airplanes and flying lessons posed particular challenges. Along with practical problems of finding the necessary financial resources, these marginalized groups faced the barrier of social assumptions that ruled it inappropriate for them to fly.

Ironically, while soaring into the sky might carry a sense of empowerment, the early equipment was undependable; in some cases, wings literally fell off airplanes. The evolution of aviation in this era often intensified life-threatening risks. Aside from the military applications made evident during the war, the practical value of airplanes had not yet matured by the start of the 1920s. In the absence of consistently viable commercial business or thriving passenger traffic, one of the few civilian functions of aviation was entertainment. In the prewar era, the sheer novelty of flying had been amusement enough; in seeing “birdmen” lift off the ground, first-time viewers could satisfy their curiosity and verify reports that flying machines had indeed been invented. Yet soon, flyers began expanding their repertoire, not only to attract spectators, but also as a result of their own competitiveness and desire to push the boundaries of aeronautics. By 1910, the Wright brothers and Glenn Curtiss set up companies to give aerial exhibitions and schools to train new pilots for these traveling teams. Public demonstrations of “fancy flying,” as it was called, proved profitable monetarily, but with a high personal toll. Only one of the four men who signed a two-year contract with the Wright Exhibition Company actually lived to complete it.²

The postwar years continued the era of flying as a business of entertainment. The phenomenon of aviation as a spectator sport was indirectly given a boost by the recent conflict. With arrival of peacetime, the federal government put hundreds of surplus military aircraft on the market at relatively affordable prices. One of the most common, a Curtiss JN-4 “Jenny” biplane, could be obtained for just \$300 to \$500. Pilots, many who had acquired flying experience in WWI, purchased surplus planes to begin careers showing off their flying skills to ordinary Americans. Barnstorming provided an avenue for new enthusiasts to enter the field, including Charles Lindbergh, who performed stunts such as parachute jumping and wing walking to earn money to buy his own plane. Barnstormers toured the country, flying out of county fairs, carnivals, local airstrips, or even farmers’ fields. The “flying gypsies” incorporated dogfighting tactics of loops, rolls, and dives into their acts, giving “air circuses” a dramatic intensity highlighted in advertisements. The flirtation with danger became part of the attraction for audience members

² Roger E. Bilstein, *Flight in America: From the Wrights to the Astronauts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 25; and Dominick A. Pisano, “The Greatest Show Not on Earth: The Confrontation Between Utility and Entertainment in Aviation,” in *The Airplane in American Culture*, ed. Dominick A. Pisano (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), p. 49. See also Curtis Prendergast, *The First Aviators* (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1980); and Corn, *The Winged Gospel*, p. 24.

who relished seeing others testing the edge or anticipated witnessing a spectacularly horrific accident.³

Barnstorming demanded physical skill, mental sharpness, and the utmost daring, but was otherwise a relatively open occupation, shunning formal qualifications and rules. Where women and minorities were barred from entering the U.S. Air Mail Service (formed in 1918) and military flight units, a few found opportunities in barnstorming during the early 1920s. While white male flyers were no longer a novelty in themselves, female and minority pilots or stunt performers commanded attention by their mere existence. Yet while their rarity value could be commercialized, it also raised pointed questions about their abilities. Because they defied traditional gender and racial expectations, female and minority aviators faced skepticism, ridicule, or outright hostility, sometimes even from members of their own communities. Under this intensified pressure, women and minorities felt compelled to prove their skills over and over. Beyond being forced to justify their right to fly, early women and minority aviators faced other serious frustrations. To the extent that marginalization denied them access to the best training, newest planes, and other resources, inherent risks of their flying rose.

The question of how and on what terms women and minorities could find a place in aviation reflected broader debates in American culture during the 1920s on the subjects of race and gender. While suffragists had finally secured voting rights for women in 1920, the women's movement suffered in the Red Scare conservative backlash and split down the middle over whether to pursue an Equal Rights Amendment. The Jazz Age brought individual women new visibility, transforming actress Mary Pickford, athlete Gertrude Ederle, and writer Dorothy Parker, among others, into celebrities. Female aviators faced a similar situation of entering the spotlight for their individual talent, yet also being evaluated and defining themselves in relation to their entire gender. The first generations of female pilots displayed this ambivalence and awareness. Some, including Amelia Earhart, refrained from calling themselves feminists, wary of the radical connotations of that label. Yet in public statements they repeatedly insisted that women could be excellent aviators and worked to enhance support for female pilots.

Similarly, for African Americans, the 1920s represented a time of racial violence, lynch mobs, and a revival of the Ku Klux Klan. Black artists and writers, such as Langston Hughes, found vital expression for their creativity in the Harlem Renaissance but had to depend on white patrons who romanticized African sensuality while ignoring hardships and discrimination facing blacks. For blacks interested in aviation, it would prove impossible to separate their individual aspirations and achievements from their community's broader political, economic, and social conflicts.

³ Paul O'Neil, *Barnstormers and Speed Kings* (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1981).

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THE FIRST GENERATION

In the years after 1903, as aviation entered public awareness, a few women joined men in expressing interest in the art of flying. Although promoters such as the Wrights and Curtiss hoped to encourage the rapid spread of aviation, there were deep reservations about female involvement. Critics worried that women were inherently unsuited to become pilots due to their feminine temperament. They characterized women as too scatterbrained to master complex technology and so emotional that any crisis would send them into catastrophic panic. Curtiss was extremely reluctant to include women in his pilot training, fearing among other things the repercussions if a female aviator should be killed in a crash.⁴

It would be in Europe in the spring of 1910 that the first woman would qualify to fly. After instruction from the great French aviator Charles Voisin, Raymonde de Laroche received her license in March 1910 from the Aero Club of France and went on to compete in races and other contests against male pilots. Soon other women, such as Hélène Boucher, made solo flights in France. By 1913, there were enough female pilots that France could create a special cup to honor woman aviators. Hélène Dutrieu became Belgium's first licensed female pilot, and, in 1913, France awarded this "Girl Hawk" the Legion of Honor.⁵

In the United States, Blanche Scott, who had already gained fame by completing a strenuous cross-country automobile drive, used this record to overcome Curtiss's opposition to female pilots and began studying aviation at his school in the autumn of 1910. Billed as the "Tomboy of the Air," Scott later worked in exhibition flying, specializing in stunts such as a hair-raising "Death Dive." Bessie Raiche studied aviation in France, inspired by de Laroche, and married a Frenchman; she flew her first solo in the fall of 1910.⁶

In 1911, Harriet Quimby became the first woman in the United States to earn her pilot's license. As a journalist, Quimby saw firsthand the media rush to cover the aviation craze. Reportedly, after noticing that no female pilots had appeared at a big 1910 New York air meet and being caught up in racing excitement, Quimby determined to take lessons herself. After joining an exhibition team, Quimby suggested that female pilots also could join men in commercial aviation, running flying schools, carrying passengers, and delivering packages. In April 1912, Quimby won international renown by becoming the first woman to fly across the English Channel, overcoming bitterly cold weather in her open-cockpit monoplane. Almost three months later, back in the United States, Quimby fell to her death before thousands of spectators when equipment problems caused her plane to flip midflight.⁷

4 Valerie Moolman, *Women Aloft* (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1981). See also Kathleen Brooks-Pazmany, *United States Women in Aviation, 1919–1929* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1983).

5 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 22–28.

Other women proceeded to earn pilot's licenses during the remainder of the 1910s, and, like men, some sought to make a living and a name for themselves through flying. Ruth Law and Katherine Stinson joined the ranks of exhibition teams performing dramatic acrobatic stunts. Beyond that, Law and Stinson competed to win acclaim through altitude, endurance, and distance flight, setting new women's records and sometimes breaking men's records.⁸

THE CASE OF BESSIE COLEMAN

The first generation of American female pilots such as Scott, Quimby, Law, and Stinson faced numerous doubters who considered flying inappropriate for women. Nevertheless, each managed to gain entry, finding some supporter willing to offer training and encouragement. The obstacles would be multiplied for Bessie Coleman, with race joining gender in conditioning the reception of her announced ambition of flying.

At first glance, Coleman would not appear a likely candidate to succeed in becoming the world's first black female aviator and the first of her race, male or female, to secure an international pilot's license. Coleman was born in a one-room cabin in Atlanta, Texas, apparently on 26 January 1892. For African Americans of that era, racial tension, public lynchings, community segregation, and assertions of white supremacy shadowed life in the South. Jim Crow laws barred blacks from sharing public facilities such as railroad cars, restrooms, and drinking fountains with whites. Literacy tests, poll taxes, and institutionalized discrimination denied voting rights to many black men. Allegedly frustrated by race-related economic marginalization, Bessie's part-black, part-Native American father, George Coleman, left the family to move to Oklahoma Indian territory when Bessie was nine.⁹

In what became a single-parent household, Bessie assumed the responsibilities of running the home in Waxahachie and tending to her younger sisters while her mother Susan went out to perform domestic services. Such obligations occasionally interfered with Bessie's attendance at the black one-room schoolhouse 4 miles away. Moreover, in cotton country, black youngsters' education was interrupted every year for them to help their families gather extra income through cotton picking. Though Bessie resisted this draining labor by slowing her pace, family members recall that she also protected Coleman interests by making sure the foreman credited them with full weight for each sack. Although financial constraint burdened the Coleman family, Susan strove to improve her

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 29–32.

⁹ Doris L. Rich, *Queen Bess: Daredevil Aviator* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), pp. 3–8. The year of Coleman's birth has been the subject of prolonged confusion; newspaper articles and other popular accounts often reported her age erroneously, and Coleman herself contributed to cloud the date.

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children's prospects by emphasizing the importance of cultivated manners, self-respect, and racial pride. According to family memory, Susan ensured that, through reading and oral tradition, Bessie and other children would become familiar with black figures such as Harriet Tubman and Booker T. Washington.¹⁰

After finishing eighth grade, Bessie used money she earned through laundry work to enter Oklahoma's Colored Agricultural and Normal University in 1910. When lack of funds compelled Coleman to depart after a single term, she returned to Waxahachie and continued working as a laundress.

According to accounts, Coleman's ambition drove her to leave Texas in 1915, joining the flood of African Americans making the Great Migration, heading for Chicago to join older brothers Walter and John. After mastering the beautician's trade, Coleman found employment in black community barbershops as a manicurist. When the United States entered WWI, Walter and John served in France with the segregated Eighth Army National Guard unit. Upon returning, John allegedly taunted his sister by comparing black women unfavorably to the strong Frenchwomen he had encountered overseas, particularly citing the example of female pilots.¹¹

Engrossed with the challenge of emulating these daring female flyers, Coleman soon encountered difficulty. While a number of white women had gained aviation training since Scott and Raiche in 1910, Coleman's gender and race counted for two strikes against her. All the white pilots and flying schools she approached apparently rejected her requests. There were no African American aviation institutions or even individuals in position to accept Coleman as a flying student. When Coleman related her plight to Robert Abbott, influential editor and publisher of the black newsweekly *Chicago Defender*, he encouraged her to sidestep that barrier by attending flying school in France. With his assistance and encouragement, Coleman acquired a passport, visas, and basic French language, then sailed out of New York in November 1920.¹²

The first flying school Coleman approached in France refused her, since two of its female students had recently died in accidents. Ultimately Coleman gained admission to the École d'Aviation des Frères Caudron in Le Crotoy, France's most renowned training center. Caudron already had accepted female students, including Frenchwoman Adrienne Bolland, who became the first woman to fly over the Andes Mountains.¹³ Coleman undertook a seven-month course of ground lessons and trial-and-error practice flights in the wood-framed, fabric-covered Nieuport biplane. Walking 9 miles daily from lodgings to class, Coleman persisted despite seeing a fellow student suffer a fatal crash, a risk well known to every aviator. On 15 June 1921, Coleman demonstrated her takeoff, land-

10 Ibid., p. 11.

11 Ibid., p. 26.

12 Ibid., pp. 30–32.

13 Moolman, *Woman Aloft*, p. 44.



Barred from flight school in the United States because of her race, Bessie Coleman earned a French pilot's license on 15 June 1921. (Photo number 93-7758, National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution)

ing, and flying skills to earn a license from the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale, the distinguished world aviation organization.¹⁴

After continuing flying lessons in Paris over the summer, Coleman sailed home in the autumn of 1921. Upon arrival in New York, reporters received her as a curiosity; her accomplishment was interpreted in both the black and white communities as significant primarily due to her race and gender. Aviation magazines duly recorded her acquisition of flying credentials, without analyzing or condemning the discrimination that had forced Coleman to gain her license overseas. For aviation enthusiasts, Coleman's story seemed to verify the inevitable success of human flight, measured in terms of its spread. However, to them, the existence of one African American female pilot did not necessarily signify an equal distribution of flying ability between whites and blacks or provide

¹⁴ Rich, *Queen Bess*, p. 34.

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reason to anticipate a massive influx of black pilots, male or female. Coverage of Coleman in specialized aviation publications and in mass-market media reflected the press's general fascination with aviation. Newspapers and magazines of this era ran regular columns and special features on aviation, both catering to and feeding readers' fascination with flight. This coverage particularly highlighted aviation "firsts," such as the first air commuter and first scheduled passenger flight; Coleman represented one among this series of "firsts."¹⁵

For black-oriented newspapers and for the African American public, Coleman's identification signaled something different, not just another aviation "first," but a political and social landmark. Moreover, her arrival coincided with intense debate within the black community over the relationship between race and adoption of modern air technology. Coleman herself would contribute to that discussion, making tangible the concept of black flight.

As Jill Snider has pointed out in her research on African Americans and aviation history, Coleman's return to the United States as an internationally qualified pilot in the fall of 1921 occurred less than four months following the infamous Tulsa race riot of June. While African Americans fled from homes going up in flames, airplanes soared over the chaos. White authorities apparently used planes to conduct aerial surveillance of areas under siege and to ensure that blacks from nearby were not moving toward the trouble. Blacks later reported having observed white aviators dropping gasoline or bombs and shooting at escaping black men, women, and children. Given the climate of Klan-fueled violence against blacks in this era, African Americans began considering with alarm the potential of airplanes as weapons racists might employ to decimate or even exterminate the black race.¹⁶

Coleman's presentation of herself as an aviator, then, occurred at precisely the time when members of the black community were heatedly denouncing use of the airplane in Tulsa as a tool for murder and debating how African Americans should react. Marcus Garvey, leader of a growing black nationalist movement, incorporated this discussion of the airplane into his campaign to glorify blackness and strengthen the race for a forthcoming struggle. As part of his campaign for blacks to return en masse to their motherland, Garvey declared that control of military technology would dictate the future of Africa. Just as Tulsa's black community had been helpless against the airplane, he declared, it was futile for Africans to use stones and spears against white colonial masters

¹⁵ Corn, *The Winged Gospel*. For examples of Coleman's press coverage, see "Chicago Colored Girl Learns to Fly Abroad," *Aerial Age Weekly* (17 October 1921): 125; and "Negro Aviatrix to Tour the Country," *Air Service Newsletter* (1 November 1921): 11.

¹⁶ Jill D. Snider, "'Great Shadow in the Sky': The Airplane in the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 and the Development of African American Dreams of Aviation, 1921–1926," in *The Airplane in American Culture*, ed. Dominick A. Pisano (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), pp. 105–146.

who possessed planes and machine guns. By learning to build, fly, and maintain airplanes themselves, Garvey suggested, American blacks could protect the race and lift Africa triumphantly toward freedom.¹⁷

Within this rhetorical context, black nationalists hailed any African American involvement with aviation as a step toward racial victory. Those who remained dubious about Garvey's approach could still rejoice in Coleman's achievement. Black newspapers featured the first African American woman flyer as a front-page celebrity, quoting Coleman herself touting her uniqueness as a nonwhite, nonmale pilot. At a time when numerous white critics openly branded black people with charges of laziness, stupidity, criminality, and other vices, Coleman appeared to disprove stereotypical assumptions that blacks did not have the intelligence or bravery necessary to fly. At a time when women were still second-class citizens in terms of legal status, political position, and economic opportunity, Coleman had shown what a "Negro girl" could do. In interviews with the *Chicago Defender*, Coleman projected her success as a beacon for all African Americans, an opinion perfectly suited to the *Defender's* racial-uplift agenda. In the era of the Harlem Renaissance, when black artists and authors such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston displayed their talents as an expression of the race, African Americans were ready to embrace Coleman. The cast of New York's hit black musical *Shuffle Along* presented her with a trophy, and the Metropolitan Baptist Church invited her to address its large congregation. In interviews and speeches, Coleman promoted her ambitions, announcing plans to special-order a plane for herself and promising to help other African Americans learn to fly.¹⁸

In February 1922, Coleman again left for Europe, where she pursued an advanced aviation course in Paris, visited airplane designer Anthony Fokker in Holland, and made numerous flights in Germany. Returning to America in August, Coleman began capitalizing on media attention, dramatizing (and, it seems, occasionally embellishing) her exploits. Even the *New York Times* noted the arrival of this "Negro aviatrix," whom the reporter said had been hailed by "leading French and Dutch aviators as one of the best flyers they had seen."¹⁹

Fortunately for her, Coleman by nature was not afraid of the spotlight, since, as a curiosity to blacks and whites alike, she had little chance of avoiding attention. More to the point, Coleman consciously cultivated publicity as a tool to advance her aviation

17 Snider, "Great Shadow in the Sky," pp. 120–121.

18 "Shuffle Along Company Gives Fair Flyer Cup," and "Aviatrix Must Sign Away Life to Learn Trade," *Chicago Defender* (8 October 1921): 2. For more coverage of Coleman by the *Chicago Defender*, see "Chicago Girl is a Full-fledged Aviatrix Now," *Chicago Defender* (1 October 1921): 1. See also "Chicago Colored Girl is Made Aviatrix by French," *Chicago Tribune* (28 September 1921).

19 "Negro Aviatrix Arrives: Bessie Coleman Flew Planes of Many Types in Europe," *New York Times* (14 August 1922): 4.

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career. She visited newspaper offices to distribute her own press releases and testimonials, wrote on stationery illustrated with pictures of her stunt flying, and screened newsreel footage of her flights in Germany. Coleman fashioned her public identity as a black woman of special beauty and daring, and the press collaborated equally eagerly in creating her glamorous image.

The *Chicago Defender* gave Coleman a particularly enormous buildup in anticipation of her first American flying show in late summer. Coleman made a personal appearance at the 1922 United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) New York convention to promote her appearance and was greeted as the attractive personification of the Garveyites' hopes for black pilots. Though her debut exhibition was delayed by inclement weather, the rescheduled appearance on 3 September 1922 was understood to be the first public flight of a black female pilot in the United States. The theatricality of that production was undeniable and deliberate; donning a striking military-style uniform, Coleman lifted off in an on-loan Curtiss airplane to the accompaniment of the national anthem. Her flight itself seems to have been able but unspectacular; organizers did not permit her to perform any stunt flying.²⁰

To the white public, Coleman's claim on attention lay in the simple fact that a "Negress Pilots Airplane," as the *New York Times* put it. The dramatic ceremony served to underscore Coleman's link to history, the sheer novelty of a black female flyer. But to black observers, details of the program sent deeper messages about race and technological progress—a politicized promise of black incursions into the white-controlled territory of



A smiling Bessie Coleman shows off one of her military-style flying costumes. She hoped her exhibitions would encourage other African Americans to take up flying.

(Undated photo number 84-14782, National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution)

²⁰ "Bessie to Fly Over Gotham: Queen Bess to Ride Air Next Sunday," *Chicago Defender* (26 August 1922): 1; "Rain Halts the Initial Flight of Miss Bessie," *Chicago Defender* (2 September 1922): 9; "Negress in Flying Show: Bessie Coleman to Give Exhibition for Fifteenth Regiment," *New York Times* (27 August 1922): 2; "Negress Pilots Airplane: Bessie Coleman Makes Three Flights for Fifteenth Infantry," *New York Times* (4 September 1922): 9; and "Bessie Gets Away; Does Her Stuff," *Chicago Defender* (9 September 1922): 3. See also Snider, "Great Shadow in the Sky"; and Rich, *Queen Bess*.

aviation. While Coleman remained the star of the program, UNIA member Herbert Julian performed a parachute jump as an additional feature. African American pilot Edison McVey made a cameo appearance, presenting Coleman with a beautiful bouquet upon completion of her demonstration, a ceremony of welcome for a fellow African American flight pioneer. The theme of black pride in past, present, and future accomplishment was further underscored by the fact that Coleman's appearance honored the all-black Fifteenth New York Infantry, which had seen service in WWI.²¹

The *Defender* expended even more extravagant rhetoric promoting Coleman's first flight in her adopted hometown of Chicago several weeks later. Articles billed her as "the Race's only aviatrix" and a pilot who had "amazed continental Europe." Advertisements promised a chance to "see this daredevil aviatrix in her hair-raising stunts."²² Coleman performed a display of takeoffs, glides, turns, and figure eights for a crowd of about two thousand, including her mother, sisters, and other relatives. The *Defender* praised Coleman as part of the newspaper's campaign to win respect for blacks, making Coleman into the personification of progress through self-help, education, and persistence. Equally important, editors hoped that Coleman's attractiveness and colorful adventures could draw readers. The black press gave Coleman nicknames of "Queen Bess" and the "Bird Woman." While American observers labeled white female flyers with cute labels such as "angels," "sweethearts of the air," and "powder puff pilots," press references to Coleman consistently stressed her racial identity. White newspapers headlined her uniqueness as a "Negro aviatrix," while black media emphasized her representation of the race.²³

With such publicity, Coleman was positioned to establish a career as an exhibition flyer performing at airshows and fairs around the country. While white barnstormers made a reputation through ever-more-daring stunts, for Coleman racial identity became a highly visible component of her reputation. Plans for her flying appearances, however, were complicated by racial politics. Some problems would have been virtually inescapable for a black woman trying to compete in a field controlled by white men. On the other hand, Coleman herself contributed to foil some potential prospects. Black entertainers had a separate traveling circuit, and Bessie unfortunately alienated key organizers by confusion over bookings and by breaking a contract to star in a film whose script she considered to be patronizing.

To maintain her access to flying and raise money to open the African American flight school she envisioned, Coleman sought commercial employment. She positioned herself as an entrepreneur, proposing to drop tire-company leaflets from her plane and appear

21 Snider, "Great Shadow in the Sky," pp. 134–135; and Rich, *Queen Bess*, pp. 49–51.

22 Rich, *Queen Bess*, p. 54.

23 "Bessie Coleman, the Race's Only Aviatrix, Will Make Her Initial Local Flight at Checkerboard Airdrome Sunday, Oct. 15," *Chicago Defender* (9 September 1922): 3; "Bird Woman Arrives," *Afro-American* (18 August 1922): 10; and Blaine Poindexter, "Bessie Coleman Makes Initial Aerial Flight," *Chicago Defender* (21 October 1922): 3.

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in their promotions. Yet while white female pilots such as Amelia Earhart would succeed in parlaying their attractiveness and ability into endorsement contracts, Coleman's racial marginality limited her sponsorship possibilities. Moreover, Earhart and other white pilots had connections within the flying community—mentors who recommended them for sales jobs or other aviation-related work. Due to her marginalization and training abroad, Coleman had no comparably wide base of support among established aviators. While exploring financial options in California in February 1923, Coleman arranged to present a flying demonstration as the star draw at a Los Angeles fair. Upon taking off from Santa Monica, the engine of Coleman's newly purchased but old surplus Curtiss Jenny stalled. The crash left Coleman with fractured ribs, a broken leg, and useless airplane wreckage. The African American press played up her fortitude in bearing the physical pain and praised her unshaken determination not only to continue flying herself, but to help other blacks become pilots. Coleman reportedly sent a telegram announcing, "Tell them [my fans] all that as soon as I can walk I'm going to fly."²⁴

Determination could not work miracles, however, and Coleman experienced continued setbacks both in her personal flying career and in her efforts to secure capital for an African American flight school. Newspaper articles repeatedly announced that Coleman's training center was about to open or indeed was ready to receive students; Coleman apparently declared on several occasions that she had ordered or purchased one, two, or an entire fleet of airplanes for herself and students. Those aircraft never materialized, and Coleman had to keep borrowing planes for her own flights. After lengthy recuperation from her injuries, Coleman resumed appearances in air shows in Illinois and Ohio in late 1923. But beyond those regional shows, Coleman was unable to expand her bookings. Her headstrong independence had antagonized managers and agents, who branded her as overly temperamental. Without capital, Coleman could not purchase her own plane or finance her flying plans; without performance prospects, she could not count on income. After a year and a half of career stagnation, Coleman finally secured a schedule of lectures and public flying demonstrations for mid-1925 in her birth state of Texas.

For Coleman, as for almost any African American of this era who achieved public stature, racial politics inevitably complicated her daily routine. Coleman had to plan her travels knowing there were public spaces and accommodations in Jim Crow regions where blacks were unwelcome. As a celebrity, she gained a small influence over racial conditions at her own appearances. Coleman's performances around Houston and elsewhere in Texas attracted thousands of spectators, both white and black—a situation that generated difficulties in the era of segregation. In Waxahachie, Coleman threatened to boycott the show if arrangers insisted that whites and blacks enter the grounds through separate gates, and organizers capitulated (though seating remained segregated). In

²⁴ Rich, *Queen Bess*, p. 70.

Florida, Coleman similarly warned that she would cancel her scheduled parachute jump if the Orlando Chamber of Commerce refused to let blacks attend.

Beyond her gender and race, Coleman resembled other barnstorming pilots, who were mainly white men, in her drive to maximize the entertainment value of her flying through flair and apparent personal risk. Coleman regularly posed for photographers as part of her appearances, standing in front of her plane in her specially designed costumes and playing to the waving crowds. She aimed to amaze onlookers with attention-getting acrobatic stunts, including parachute jumps, barrel rolls, loops, and steep dives taking her plane extremely close to the ground. While male pilots usually cultivated a macho image to accompany their daring showmanship, Coleman's popularity rested on a more feminine brand of personal charisma. Her uniforms carried an air of military distinction, yet also fashionably accentuated her graceful petiteness and light-skinned femininity, making her control of a powerful machine all the more impressive. Advertisements described her as "the little girl who has the nerve to fly," highlighting her petite status and youthful appearance in contrast to more mature men whom society usually credited with extra courage.²⁵

Even when she followed the same standard barnstorming act as white male pilots, Coleman's routine conveyed a unique set of racial messages. In connection with their exhibitions, performers at air circuses regularly sold adventurous spectators a chance to climb aboard planes for short hops. Coleman joined other barnstormers in selling rides for \$3 or \$5 apiece, yet, for her African American audiences, the offer carried additional racial significance. Coleman was particularly interested in sharing the experience of flying with black passengers—a dimension of her public performances that justified their superficial theatricality in terms of a larger race mission. African Americans who watched a Coleman show or stepped into her plane to venture up themselves had been guided by the black press and black leaders to think about the racial politics of flight.

During the same years that Coleman was striving to advance her career, Herbert Julian also was working to connect his personal interest in flying to the Garvey movement's black-nationalist aviation agenda. The African American stunt team of parachutist Julian and pilot Edison McVey gave exhibitions during the summer of 1923, primarily in black venues. McVey was temporarily forced into retirement by a crash when his aircraft stalled, but later resumed flying and delivered UNIA lectures promoting aviation. Meanwhile, however, Julian had come under criticism for personal scandals, for having misrepresented his background, and for ostentatious behavior. Snider explains, "By late 1923, Julian's panache had become an embarrassment for some, especially as it increasingly caught the eye of white journalists. The *New York Times* and other white papers frequently made Julian a target of their humor, publishing numerous articles parodying him as a Negro buffoon attempting to master a white man's technology."²⁶

25 Elizabeth Amelia Hadley Freyberg, *Bessie Coleman: The Brownskin Lady Bird* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994).

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Coleman could in no way be characterized as a buffoon; her public character, though dramatized to suit requirements of the entertainment business, was untarnished by scandal or clownishness. At the same time, her remarks about the importance of increasing black involvement in aviation often seemed to suit the Garvey orientation. Coleman frequently stressed the importance of bringing African American men into flying, saying, "We must have aviators if we are to keep up with the times. I shall never be satisfied until we have men of the race who can fly." It would be men, of course, who in Garvey's world would lead the battle of black liberationists against white colonialists.²⁷

Yet as a petite female, Coleman herself never matched Garvey's plan for an army of black pilots prepared to wage race war. Her personal image fell more into line with the integrationists' vision of black pilots as a nonthreatening (at least physically) statement to whites of African American capabilities and as an equally significant message to blacks about the possibilities of individual uplift.

Moreover, within just a few years, the Garvey movement headed toward implosion. For all the attention he received, Garvey had never won full endorsement from the African American middle-to-upper-class establishment. The black press generally remained wary of Garvey's radical nationalism, and *Chicago Defender* editors and writers in particular backed an alternative vision of black individual progress within a white American world capable of social reform. Garvey's pretentiousness alienated other observers, and, not entirely to the dismay of his black critics, the federal government pursued and ultimately imprisoned Garvey on counts of mail fraud. Garvey's fall turned the spotlight toward more mainstream leaders' assessment of aviation as a route toward integration rather than race conflict. Integrationists suggested that by learning to fly, African Americans could counter racist stereotypes of blacks as ignorant, cowardly, or backwards, proving the race's claim to join whites in the skies and in a democratically reformed society on equal status. These commentators also stressed that given the promising future for aviation expansion in the United States, blacks should pursue it as a potential source of employment and economic opportunity.²⁸

For this set of optimistic observers, Coleman's success in becoming a pilot reflected credit on all African Americans, particularly those who overcame any qualms and paid a few dollars to join her on a ride. This race-uplift aim in her individual gospel of aviation remained a constant theme in Coleman's public career. She spoke publicly about the importance of improving the national perceptions of African Americans and promoted

26 Snider, "Great Shadow in the Sky," pp. 128–131. Julian would come to further grief in 1924, when the African American press greeted his plans for making an ambitious transatlantic crossing with skepticism. Julian remained popular among many black citizens, in large part due to his direct racial appeal. Julian decorated his airplane, christened *Ethiopia I*, with the saying, "This plane is the property of the Negro race, donated by them for their future advancement in aviation." Julian's scheme met an ignominious end on Independence Day in 1924, when his long-awaited takeoff ended almost immediately in a clumsy crash.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 135.

28 *Ibid.*

aviation as a modern means to that end. According to the *Houston Post-Dispatch*, Coleman declared, "I want to interest the Negro in flying and thus help the best way I'm equipped in to uplift the colored race."²⁹

Coleman's example as an aviation entrepreneur also encouraged those who believed that blacks could find a place in this new enterprise. Citing the fact that popularity of automobiles had created jobs for blacks as chauffeurs, Coleman (like a number of other African American observers) predicted that the spread of airplanes could bring a natural progression to black employment as hired pilots. In lectures at black churches, halls, and theaters, Coleman spoke about turning "Uncle Tom's cabin into a hanger" with her dream of setting up a black flying school. The day before what would be her final flight, Coleman paid a visit to each black public school in Jacksonville, Florida, impressing the children with her sharply tailored uniform.³⁰

Behind her smart personal appearance, Coleman's career was hampered by continued financial tentativeness and lack of decent equipment. On occasion, Coleman apparently had to cancel scheduled appearances when she was unable to rent or borrow a plane from local owners. Coleman had begun making payments on a used Curtiss Jenny; when she was due to give an exhibition in Jacksonville in April 1926, to benefit the Negro Welfare League, she arranged to have white mechanic William Wills fly the Jenny to Florida from Texas. During the trip, Wills had to make two unplanned landings when the worn-out engine malfunctioned.

On 30 April 1926, the day before the air show, Coleman wanted a preliminary run to get an overview of the area and determine the best location for making her parachute jump. Wills handled the controls while Coleman sat in back, leaving her seatbelt unfastened, perhaps so she could crane her neck over the side to survey the field. After taking off without incident and a short period of climbing and circling, the plane abruptly sped up, nose-dived, and flipped over, throwing Coleman to her death. Wills fought vainly to restore control of the plane before crashing. Police and aviation officials soon arrived at the scene. While nervously surveying the catastrophe, John Betsch, Coleman's sponsor from the Negro Welfare League, lit a cigarette, igniting spilled gasoline and reducing the plane to a burnt mess. Through subsequent investigation, authorities determined that a wrench left inside the Jenny had fallen into the engine, jamming it and sending the plane plummeting. The black community of Jacksonville, which had scheduled a post-exhibition "aerial frolic" to honor Coleman, now canceled the dance and held her memorial service instead. Thousands of men, women, and children waited in line to walk past her casket and filled churches first in Florida and then in Chicago.³¹

29 "Texas Negro Girl Becomes Able Aviatrix," *Houston Post Dispatch* (7 May 1925): 4.

30 Snider, "Great Shadow in the Sky," p. 135.

31 Rich, *Queen Bess*, p. 111. See also E. B. Jourdain, Jr., "Bessie Coleman, Aviatrix Killed," *Chicago Defender* (8 May 1926): 1; and Evangeline Roberts, "Chicago Pays Parting Tribute to Brave Bessie," *Chicago Defender* (15 May 1926): 2.

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COLEMAN REMEMBERED

Other African Americans, male and female, followed Coleman into the skies in the years after her death. Many discovered almost immediately, as had Coleman, that race narrowed access to training. Around 1927, William Powell was turned away from Chicago-area flight schools that refused to consider blacks. After finally gaining entry to Los Angeles's Warren College of Aeronautics, Powell earned his license in 1928. The next year, he set up a Bessie Coleman Aero Club and School, offering African Americans a location for flight training and aviation development. The Coleman Aero Club became a magnet for African Americans interested in flying such as James Banning, whose curiosity had been sparked by taking a \$5 airplane ride at a circus. After failing to locate a flight school willing to accept him, Banning took lessons from a WWI veteran and became the first African American to earn a pilot's license from the U.S. Department of Commerce in 1926. Citing Coleman as his inspiration, Banning proceeded to become a barnstormer, mail pilot, and chief flight instructor at the Coleman Aero Club. In the fall of 1932, Banning became the first black pilot to complete a transcontinental journey, flying from Los Angeles to New York with mechanic Thomas Allen. This diversified face of aviation appeared most publicly with the creation of a "Colored Air Circus," whose attractions included a performance by an all-black troupe named "The Five Blackbirds."

Of course, no one knew more intimately than African Americans how many obstacles remained. While Willa Brown succeeded in setting up an African American flight school in Chicago in the 1930s, black pilots had to build their own airfield outside city borders due to racial restrictions barring them from regular Chicago airports. The black press periodically complained about policies excluding blacks from military aviation service and government-backed flight training. When that barrier was finally broken during WWII with the creation of the Tuskegee Airmen, numerous observers credited Coleman as a pathbreaker for those black pilots.³²

Over the decades, the African American community periodically remembered and celebrated Coleman as a pioneer. By the 1930s, black pilots in Chicago had instituted a tradition of holding an annual flyover to drop flowers on Coleman's grave, and, after a lapse, that tribute was reinstated in the 1980s and 1990s. Dr. Mae Jemison, the first African American female astronaut, commented on Coleman's inspiration by noting, "[E]very day we see people making small strides in overcoming obstacles of gender,

³² For background, see Walter T. Dixon, Jr., *The Negro in Aviation* (Baltimore: Clarke Press, 1950); and Von Hardesty and Dominick Pisano, *Black Wings: The American Black in Aviation* (Washington, DC: National Air and Space Museum, 1983). On the Tuskegee Airmen, see Stanley Sandler, *Segregated Skies: All-Black Combat Squadrons of World War II* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1992); and Robert J. Jakeman, *The Divided Skies: Establishing Flight Training at Tuskegee, Alabama, 1934-1942* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992).

birthright, race, ethnicity, economics, illness, poor technology, education, societal condemnation, and fear . . . [H]ere is a woman . . . who exemplifies and serves as a model to all humanity: the very definition of strength, dignity, courage, integrity, and beauty.” In 1995, the U.S. Postal Service created a stamp honoring Coleman as part of their “Black Heritage” postage series.³³

Coleman’s most visible public legacy today is as a role model meant to inspire, particularly for children. Coleman’s life has been the subject of at least five picture books and at least four juvenile biographies for a slightly older market. This new attention to Coleman has emerged over the last decade, following publication of Doris Rich’s 1993 adult biography, which called attention to Coleman and clarified many details. It is telling that there are so many juvenile biographies of Coleman, while the Rich biography and Elizabeth Freyberg’s analysis of Coleman as an entertainer are the only book-length scholarly accounts. The school-age books on Coleman seem particularly oriented for use as part of the appreciation of Black History Month and Women’s History Month; they add another woman of color to the list of “great Americans” about whom students can learn.

As a group, these juvenile biographies interpret Coleman’s history as a moral lesson in the power of overcoming obstacles and pursuing a personal vision. While not quite depicting her as a rags-to-riches story, these books present Coleman as a real-life black female version of Horatio Alger’s *Strive and Succeed*, someone making her way against great odds to achieve success—measured not in financial worth, but in individual fulfillment.

These biographies usually open with Coleman’s rise from poverty, portraying it as the result of inherent determination. Four picture books give vivid visual depth to Coleman’s early hardships, offering illustrations of a young black girl picking cotton, scrubbing or ironing clothes, hanging washing, or carrying a full laundry hamper. Sally Walker’s *Bessie Coleman: Daring to Fly*; Lynn Joseph’s *Fly, Bessie, Fly*; and Nikki Grimes’s *Talkin’ About Bessie* all use the story that Coleman challenged field foremen who tried to shortchange her family (or even slid her foot onto the scale to add weight to their sacks), praising her willingness to use initiative to fight an unfair situation. Both the Walker and Joseph books contain illustrations showing a defiant Bessie arguing with a stern or smug-looking man over a scale and account book. Walker writes, “If the white man who paid them tried to cheat, Bessie wasn’t afraid to set him straight. She was *that* daring.”³⁴

These books also highlight illustrations of Coleman studying in school or reading at home, stressing her dedication to education as a measure of her personal values and

33 Mae Jemison, “Afterword,” in Rich, *Queen Bess*, pp. 143, 145.

34 Sally M. Walker, *Bessie Coleman: Daring to Fly*, illustrated by Janice Lee Porter (Minneapolis: Carolrhoda Books, 2003), pp. 6–7; Lynn Joseph, *Fly, Bessie, Fly*, illustrated by Yvonne Buchanan (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998); and Nikki Grimes, *Talkin’ About Bessie: The Story of Aviator Elizabeth Coleman*, illustrated by E. B. Lewis (New York: Orchard Books, 2002). As another example from children’s literature, see Philip S. Hart, *Up in the Air: The Story of Bessie Coleman* (Minneapolis: Carolrhoda Books, 1996).

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strength of mind. Walker explains, “In 1902 . . . [m]ost schools for black children had little money. Bessie’s school had few books . . . Still, Bessie worked hard. She planned to do more with her life than pick cotton. The more she learned, the better her chances would be.”³⁵

These authors usually convey, with varying explicitness, some sense of the racial discrimination pervading early 20th-century society. Joseph’s book contains an illustration of Coleman at a circus getting turned away from a “whites only” ticket booth. Joseph tells readers that even as she returned to the black people’s line, Coleman held her head high and comforted a crying sister by reminding her of their mother’s assurance that all skin colors were the same before God. Some accounts suggest how Coleman’s racial pride defied southern expectations of black deference. The picture book *Talkin’ About Bessie*, which builds historical evidence into the form of fictionalized narratives from Coleman’s family and acquaintances, contains a supposed comment from a white woman who hired Coleman to do laundry. “She’d come to the back door, like they were supposed to in those days. But when I opened it, there this Colored girl would be standin’, lookin’ me straight in the eye, like we were just any two people meetin’ on a street in town. You know, like we were *equals*. It was odd, I don’t mind tellin’ you.”³⁶

In rebellion against this discrimination, out of her mother’s encouragement, and from her own interest, these books suggest, Coleman developed an early racial awareness. Walker describes a quest for African American role models, writing that Coleman “loved the story of Harriet Tubman. Now there was a daring black woman! She had led hundreds of slaves to freedom . . . As she read, Bessie made up her mind. Someday *she* would do something important, too.” Grimes portrays Coleman’s sister Elois saying, “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was among Bessie’s favorite books . . . [but] she had no respect whatever for the slave girl, Topsy, who seemed incapable of self-improvement, or for Tom, who had too little race pride for Bessie’s taste . . . Bessie’s habit of probing others’ words came . . . of studying those written by Booker T. Washington and Paul Lawrence Dunbar. Sometimes, I wondered how far their words would take her.” This self-instruction in African American promise combined with personal ambition, these accounts indicate, to make Coleman committed to bettering her personal prospects and accomplishing something racially meaningful.³⁷

35 Walker, *Bessie Coleman*, p. 8.

36 Joseph, *Fly, Bessie, Fly*; and Grimes, *Talkin’ About Bessie*.

37 Walker, *Bessie Coleman*, p. 10–11; and Grimes, *Talkin’ About Bessie*.

In their eagerness to convey the importance of determination, several children's books stretch beyond solid historical evidence to maintain that Coleman was set on aviation from the beginning. The cover of *Fly, Bessie, Fly* shows a black girl running through a field with her arms spread, imitating the plane soaring above. Joseph shows Coleman staring skyward, singing, "Far away, far away, up past the clouds. High away, fly away, and never come down," engrossed in daydreams about being able to fly like a bird. Reeve Lindbergh's *Nobody Owns the Sky* uses a similar picture of a black girl gazing longingly at geese and bluebirds overhead, with the following rhyme:

Bessie wished she could rise up and fly, high and low,
Over Texas, a long time ago . . .
Bessie worked hard at school, and she dreamed about flight.
People said she was crazy; it wouldn't be right.
"You're a girl, not a man, and you're not even white!"
But did she stop dreaming? Not quite!

Another illustration shows a young Coleman having colored a blue cloud-filled sky and with a model airplane resting on her desk (inaccurate, given that Coleman was already approaching teenage years when the Wrights first developed their plane). Lillian Fisher's *Brave Bessie: Flying Free* goes further, suggesting that throughout elementary school and college, Coleman found the sound of airplane engines "music to her ears" and particularly requested books on aviation. "For as long as she could remember, she knew in her heart that someday she would become a pilot. She thought about flying constantly, knowing the only way to reach that goal was through more education." Fisher further asserts that Coleman closely analyzed aircraft technology during WWI. "It amazed Bessie that in four short years the plane changed from a flimsy aircraft, one that looked like a crate with linen wings, into a sturdy-looking plane."³⁸

Both Joseph and Fisher imply that for Coleman, from the start, flying represented freedom—an African American dream of escaping cotton picking and discrimination. Fisher creates the following poem meant to represent "Bessie's Song":

38 Joseph, *Fly, Bessie, Fly*; Reeve Lindbergh, *Nobody Owns the Sky: The Story of "Brave Bessie" Coleman*, illustrated by Pamela Paparone (Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 1996); and Lillian M. Fisher, *Brave Bessie: Flying Free* (Dallas: Hendrick Long Publishing Company, 1995), pp. 21, 26–27, 31.

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I climb, I soar,
Higher, high
Above the cotton
Fields I fly.
Unleashed,
Unbound,
My spirit free
Beyond the clouds
On wings I flee
Alone with wind,
Sweet air, and sun
I sing the song
Of battles won.³⁹

By and large, these authors succeed in conveying the race and gender-located difficulties Coleman faced in gaining access to aviation. Lindbergh writes:

There was a young woman who wanted to fly.
But the people said, “Kiss *that* wish goodbye!
The sky’s too big, and the sky’s too high,
And you never will fly, so you’d better not try.”
But this woman laughed, and she just said, “Why?
Nobody owns the sky!”
“White men can fly. Why can’t I?” she would say.
But the flying schools turned her away.
Bessie manicured nails while the barber cut hair.
And she dreamed about flying, but didn’t know where.
Then one day someone said, “Fly in France! They won’t care
That you’re black and a woman.” So Bessie went there.
She was young, tough, and smart; she had courage to spare,
And she took like a hawk to the air.

Both the Walker and Joseph biographies use illustrations of a dejected or angry-looking Coleman at an airfield, speaking with a white man who blocks her entry.⁴⁰

These accounts build Coleman’s persistence in securing flight instruction in France into lessons about the value of commitment. Several illustrations take liberties in attach-

³⁹ Fisher, *Brave Bessie*.

⁴⁰ Lindbergh, *Nobody Owns the Sky*; Walker, *Bessie Coleman*; and Joseph, *Fly, Bessie, Fly*.

ing an over-glamorized French romanticism to Coleman's training, showing (inaccurately) the Eiffel Tower looming over her school airport. These books assure children that hard work brings rewards; Joseph writes that upon returning home, "Instantly, she is a star. Everyone wants to take the picture of the only black woman aviator in the world." A couple books note that Coleman applied her new celebrity to encourage fellow African Americans to pursue aviation. Lindbergh writes:

On the ground Bessie lectured to crowds big and small.
People gathered in church or inside the town hall.
"Come and fly, boys and girls! Black or white, short or tall,
Come and fly, everybody! Come, answer my call.
The air has no barrier, boundary, or wall.
The blue sky has room for us all."⁴¹

Understandably, some books for younger readers are circumspect about Coleman's death. Walker and Joseph both relegate it to an afterword, giving the details of Coleman's crash while tying it to a reassurance that "Bessie's spirit lives on today" in the way she inspired others to become pilots. Louise Borden and Mary Kay Kroeger convey the same message in *Fly High*, which contains an illustration of a flag-draped casket being carried past a crowd of mourners. In a startling contrast, Lindbergh actually emphasizes Coleman's crash with an illustration of smoke rising over the horizon as both black and white spectators gasp in dismay. Lindbergh writes:

Bessie's life was not long, but she flew far and wide . . .
But in Jacksonville, Florida, everyone cried,
Because Bessie's plane failed, and she fell, and she died.
"Farewell to Brave Bessie!" they sighed . . .
Other young men and women soon wanted to fly
And the people said, "Why don't you give it a try?
The sky's still big, and the sky's still high,
But you're bound to get there, by and by.
Just remember her words 'til the day you die—
Nobody owns the sky!

Universally, these books draw on Coleman's life to instruct young readers to believe in themselves. Dolores Johnson writes in *She Dared to Fly*, "Bessie learned to fly when others

41 Joseph, *Fly, Bessie, Fly*; and Lindbergh, *Nobody Owns the Sky*.

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said it was impossible for a woman, never mind a black woman . . . She set a goal and decided to work very hard until she achieved it. She chose a dream she dared to live, and she made it happen.” Walker phrases the moral of Coleman’s story as “aim high,” while Fisher declares, “The sky is the limit!” Borden and Kroeger tell readers to “keep trying! Fly high!” while a biography by Connie Plantz advises children, “Don’t be afraid to take risks. Fly!”⁴²

Of course, even among adults, not everyone was prepared to accept that injunction to take Coleman’s life as inspiration. In 1994, after *Air and Space* magazine ran an article by Doris Rich on Coleman, one irate reader denounced the article as “a waste of space.” He continued, “It is clear to me that Coleman made no contribution to the field and in fact was an unskilled and/or very careless pilot. The only rationale for the story was that she was black and an activist to boot. Spare us! Keep the politically correct agenda for the fourth estate; they cover it exhaustively enough.”⁴³

This belittling of Coleman’s skills belies the clear evidence that Coleman was not even piloting the plane during the fatal flight. Such readiness to attribute fault to a female pilot provides a recent example of a phenomenon appearing repeatedly through the decades—critics’ rush to condemn female aviators as incompetent. In the early years of aviation, crashes were quite common occurrences; some stemmed from human error, others from equipment failure, and others from cases where flyers deliberately attempted to stretch the limits. Some of the era’s best pilots were involved in crashes, often on multiple occasions; to take just one instance, Wiley Post, who had flown around the world twice, was killed in a 1935 accident. Yet crashes involving female pilots were deconstructed to signify personal weakness in ways that men’s accidents were not and became an excuse to repeat that women had no place in aviation. Corn comments, “[E]ven death did not free them from the barbs of prejudice. The lady flier stereotype often surfaced in discussions of fatal accidents, such as the one that killed Muriel Crosson in 1929.” Journalists and officials suggested that Crosson lost control of her plane after fainting or “neglected” to open her parachute upon bailing out. In truth, evidence suggests that Crosson indeed attempted to use her parachute and that she had commented before flying that her airplane’s engine was operating poorly. “She took off anyway . . . Had she not taken off . . . she would have opened herself to the criticism of being timid and overly cautious, thereby encouraging yet another invocation of the lady flier stereotype.”⁴⁴ Other women were indeed criticized as being too cowardly to be true pilots when safety concerns led them to cancel flights.

42 Dolores Johnson, *She Dared To Fly: Bessie Coleman* (New York: Benchmark Books, 1997), p. 6; Walker, *Bessie Coleman*, p. 47; Louise Borden and Mary Kay Kroeger, *Fly High! The Story of Bessie Coleman*, illustrated by Teresa Flavin (New York: Margaret K. McElderry Books, 2001); Fisher, *Brave Bessie*, p. 71; and Connie Plantz, *Bessie Coleman: First Black Woman Pilot* (Berkeley Heights, NJ: Enslow Publishing, 2001), p. 111.

43 Letter to editor, J. Don Marion, *Air and Space* (December 1994/January 1995): 8.

44 Corn, *Winged Gospel*, pp. 79–80.

CONCLUSION

Coleman clearly belongs to a specific point in the history of aviation, the barnstorming era. As Corn, Dominick Pisano, and Roger Bilstein have made clear, barnstormers fulfilled a purpose for aviation promoters in literally bringing flying to the masses, yet ultimately the aviation establishment became uncomfortable with barnstorming culture. By the early 1920s, the National Aeronautic Association and the Aeronautics Branch of the U.S. Department of Commerce worried that the very daring which gave barnstorming its entertainment value threatened to undermine aviation's serious future. Some among the crowds came to exhibitions hoping to witness an exciting crash, but businessmen wanted people to associate aviation with safety and reliability, rather than danger. Authorities began to impose restrictions on air circuses, pushing demonstrations back from spectators and limiting specific stunts such as wing walking.⁴⁵ At the time of Coleman's death, the peak of barnstorming fever had started receding.



Coleman amazed onlookers with attention-getting acrobatic stunts, including parachute jumps, barrel rolls, loops, and steep dives taking her plane extremely close to the ground. She died in the crash of her secondhand Curtiss Jenny in 1926 before one of her air shows. Ironically, that day she was not at the controls. (Undated photo number 93-16054, National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution)

⁴⁵ Pisano, "The Greatest Show Not on Earth," pp. 39–74.

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As a barnstormer, Coleman had a certain freedom to design her own show, yet at the same time faced continual pressure to top the spectacle content of other entertainers. Furthermore, that nominal freedom was constrained by her persistent problems in gaining access to aircraft. By definition, there were tensions in what Coleman was trying to accomplish. As an African American pilot attempting to convince other African Americans to ride into the sky with her, she had to convince them that flying was reasonably safe; yet the old planes she managed to obtain were often inherently unsafe, and stunts such as parachuting and dives that she used to attract those spectators also courted risk. As a black pilot encouraging other blacks to enter aviation, she had to make flying appear straightforward, something others could master given the opportunity. But as a black pilot trying to convince whites that her accomplishment disproved stereotypes of racial inadequacy, she had to emphasize the difficulty behind her flying, the skill and intelligence it demonstrated. Moreover, if Coleman made aviation appear too safe and simple, her celebrity would be tarnished as less impressive.

Politically and socially, Coleman clearly placed herself and was categorized by others in racial terms. While Coleman deliberately cultivated an unmistakably feminine appearance as her public image, her identity as a female pilot was more problematic. White female pilots proved useful to the aviation establishment precisely because women were assumed to be less courageous, less strong, and less rational than men. Seeing pilots of “the weaker sex” was supposed to convince reluctant men, potential pilots and passengers, that flying was so safe even a woman could handle it. “[W]omen pilots domesticated the sky, purging it of associations with death and terror,” Corn writes, and “paradoxically, prejudice begat opportunity.” A number found jobs demonstrating and selling private airplanes, with female pilots tacitly guaranteeing reliability. The curiosity factor also increased the attention factor for female sales personnel, as did perceptions of feminine pleasantness and attractiveness.⁴⁶ Yet, due to her race, even if Coleman’s career had extended over a longer period, it is unlikely she would have secured the same types of aviation business employment that white flyers such as Ruth Nichols, Louise Thaden, Blanche Noyes, and Amelia Earhart did.⁴⁷

Despite stereotypes restricting them to this “woman’s sphere” of aviation, white female pilots associated flying with feelings of independence and enjoyed a certain sense of power in appropriating male-linked technology. In addition, in 1929, female pilots

⁴⁶ Corn, *The Winged Gospel*, pp. 78–79, 88. As Corn emphasizes, negative stereotypes of female pilots ironically opened some doors, but meant that others remained closed. Women pilots would find few opportunities with commercial passenger airlines. In another key case, during the 1920s, Helen Richey was effectively pushed out of work as an airmail pilot after male union members protested that women were too weak to handle planes in rough weather, and the government issued guidelines limiting women to fair-weather flying.

⁴⁷ It is worth noting that for Earhart in particular, employment opportunity preceded celebrity; thanks to connections in the aviation community and perceptions of her appropriately proper femininity, she began sales work long before setting her most famous records.

formed an organization named the Ninety-Nines (the number of charter members) that campaigned to open more aviation opportunities to women and defeat discriminatory measures such as a proposal to bar women from flying while menstruating. By the end of the 1920s, a number of women secured employment in aerial photography, as flight instructors, and on commercial airline staff (though not generally as pilots). Coleman, of course, passed away before the creation of the Ninety-Nines, but, during her lifetime, she never really entered the aviation community of her white sisters. She too sought personal and group liberation through flying, but, for her, that quest was equally if not more racial than gender related.

For insight, it is worthwhile comparing Coleman's situation with that of Amelia Earhart, her famous white counterpart. Earhart earned her American pilot's license from the National Aeronautic Association on 15 December 1921, roughly half a year after Coleman completed initial training. Earhart received her FAI license on 15 May 1923, two years after Coleman. Having been licensed, Earhart struggled to afford the expense of flying by juggling numerous part-time jobs, including secretarial work, settlement house work, photography, and even gravel hauling for a construction firm. Yet unlike Coleman, Earhart ultimately enjoyed two major advantages. Her mother, though in a precarious financial state, still helped Amelia purchase her first plane, and Earhart was able to secure work as an airplane demonstrator and sales representative from a friend in the business.⁴⁸

Earhart's biggest break came thanks to her appearance as "representative" of the liberated yet still feminine "new woman" in America, an image tacitly coded as white, for which Coleman never could have qualified.⁴⁹ Organizers of a new transatlantic venture sought "the right sort of girl" to join them; Earhart, as an educated, socially gracious, attractive yet respectable single woman, seemed perfect. Her pilot's license was useful, given that it showed her comfort with being airborne, yet was not directly necessary; although the successful 1928 "Friendship" flight made Earhart the first woman to cross the Atlantic by airplane, she was given no role in the piloting. Considering that cross-Atlantic flight remained supremely risky, Earhart did deserve credit for her courage and became an international celebrity overnight. Publisher George Palmer "G. P." Putnam expertly packaged Earhart as the exemplary "all-American girl," steering the press and observers to remark upon how similar her strong facial lines, light coloring, and tall slenderness were to the appearance of world aviation hero Charles Lindbergh.⁵⁰

Earhart's schedule became packed with almost nonstop public appearances, charity events, press conferences, interviews, and radio broadcasts. Though soon exhausted by

48 Doris L. Rich, *Amelia Earhart: An Autobiography* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989).

49 For background, see Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2000).

50 Rich, *Amelia Earhart*, pp. 46–47.

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dealing with a relentless press and throngs of curiosity seekers, she knew publicity was essential to raising the money she wanted to underwrite advanced flying lessons, buy and maintain new planes, and support her family. She wrote aviation columns for *Cosmopolitan*, gained endorsement offers for automobiles and (controversially) cigarettes, became a consultant for coeds at Purdue University, and assumed an airline executive job promoting travel to female passengers. While never relaxed in the spotlight, Earhart began traveling the remunerative national lecture circuit giving talks for audiences of five thousand or more. These speeches, sometimes two per day, commanding fees up to \$300 apiece, became her biggest source of income. Putnam kept inventing new ventures for Earhart, including designing and modeling her own lines of women's clothing and luggage. Earhart had a master of public relations promoting her (and the books she wrote for his firm), where Coleman struggled with self-promotion. Earhart and Putnam would later marry, placing her within the ranks of female pilots such as Florence "Pancho" Barnes, Lady Mary Heath, Ruth Nichols, and Jacqueline Cochran who were either born into privileged circumstances or married into wealth. Coleman, of course, did neither.⁵¹

For Coleman, financial difficulties limited flying opportunities and blocked her aim of opening a black flight school. Earhart enjoyed substantial income, yet her personal and professional expenses simultaneously skyrocketed. Earhart became trapped in a vicious cycle; she poured capital into acquiring the faster, more powerful new planes that she needed to meet new aviation goals, which became the subject for new articles, books, and lectures, bringing her money she needed to repeat the process. Each publicity campaign drained Earhart's energy and took valuable time away from flying practice, yet she still compiled an imposing list of accomplishments, including new FAI women's world speed records in 1930, the first women's solo transatlantic flight in 1932, and the first solo flight from Hawaii to California in 1935. Her disappearance on 2 July 1937, as her airplane was lost trying to land on tiny Howland Island in the Pacific Ocean, came in her attempt to set a spectacular new record, a flight circumnavigating the globe near the equator.⁵²

Despite all the differences in their circumstances, one similarity linked the paths of Coleman and Earhart. Each found flying fun in itself, but also applied the attention it brought them to promoting a heart-felt cause. In her public appearances, Earhart frequently spoke in favor of women's rights, pacifism, and the expansion of aviation. Coleman, of course, championed the case for African American equality.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

Like white fans of aviation, America's black community commonly envisioned flying as a centerpiece of the future, defined by the technological progress already apparent through advances in radio, automobiles, movies, and electrical machinery.⁵³ Yet while white citizens took for granted their possession of the power of airplanes, African Americans were largely looking at that power from outside. Blacks were not naïve, passive observers of aviation's development; for them, airplanes were not innocent objects of wonder, but rather a potent symbol of contested economic, social, and political control. Coleman concurred that aviation encapsulated the promise of the future and therefore wanted to see blacks share its potential for employment and rewarding accomplishment. This aim was frustrated by her awareness that for all the passion aviation technology attracted, its human institutions were not equally welcoming to all. As the first African American female to venture into this field, Coleman had to devise strategies for simply gaining access to airplanes and training. At the same time, she actively pursued even deeper challenges of raising money and communicating her ideas about aviation. In children's literature, her success is linked to character as an inspirational lesson in the power of dreaming and determination. For historians, her biography can serve as the pathway toward richer interpretations in the social and political history of aviation, showing how Americans' enthusiasm for flight was complicated by racial and gender realities.

53 See Dominick A. Pisano, "New Directions in the History of Aviation," in *The Airplane in American Culture*, pp. 1–15; and Roger Bilstein, "The Airplane and the American Experience," *The Airplane in American Culture*, pp. 16–35.