

Airspace Matters: Wheel-wells and the Political Geography of Air at London Heathrow

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The wheel-wells of long-haul aircraft speak to us about the global transfer of materials. They are a form of vessel containing air partitioned from other air and in which the air is transported through the air, by air. They are cavities in which material – spores, aphids and invasive species become trapped and are transported from one country to another. In the case of planes travelling from developing countries to the global south, they are enclaves in which stowaways hide and, as landing gear is opened in preparation for arrival, frozen bodies fall into the airport peripheries.

Informed by resurgent materialist philosophies, scholarship in sociology, spatial theory and primary research conducted in the Heathrow neighbourhood, this paper explores the wheel well as a non-human element in an ecology of contestation in Heathrow airspace. I examine the wheel well's agency as a vessel that determines, conditions, and organises matter that is in the air, and hence, the matter of air in both senses of the phrase. I examine how it performs, through allegory and metonymy, a politics of airspace. Hence, too I look at its role as expository instrument, as far as it makes available for inspection the politics inscribed into its formal, spatial, and temporal configuration. I conclude by contextualising these contributions in relation to existing socio-geographical discourses of partition, apportionment and use of the air in the Heathrow neighbourhood.

Keywords: Heathrow; political geography of air; materiality; wheel-well