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# Vignette: Writing in Transit

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## Writing in Transit

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Bradley Smith

I'm writing this at Boston's Logan International Airport. Starbucks is on my right, with its high-pitched whir of steam in milk slowly descending along a diachronic scale. My fellow passengers make their way to the cracked and faded seats that surround me, and outside the sun breaks the horizon, sending forth a timid glow. I have an hour until my flight to Chicago. Across from me sits a woman who is surely a graduate student. The heavy backpack sitting in front of her announces in faded chalk that it has been to England, France, Boston, and Virginia. And from this I assume that she has, too. Perched on her lap is a thick, leather-bound journal. She's hunched over it, writing quickly and prolifically. She concentrates on the task and plods along methodically, never looking up or pausing to think. I sit here, taking in the scene, composing it as it unfolds, thinking about its implications to location and writing.

But that's a lie.

I'm writing this at 36,000 feet, in the dark cabin of a Boeing 737. Sitting just behind first class, I have some leg room for once, which I seem to pay for karmically by being placed next to a man who periodically prods my arm with the edge of a binder framing his reading. All paper and electronic devices are stowed above me, in a briefcase inside a carry-on suitcase, so I compose in the margins of the book I'm reading and on the back of my boarding pass. "Silly," I write, "of a writer not to keep any paper within easy reach." I'm in the midst of one of those exigent moments. I just need to write this before it's gone forever.

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The white space of the boarding pass is almost a completed draft before I realize that, printed on the back, it reads, “This document should be retained as evidence of your journey.” Need I say more?

But that too is a lie.

I’m writing this on my couch at home. My dog is pressing her nose into my hand as I type. “It’s time for a walk,” she tells me with mild persistence. No, I’m at a restaurant, a coffee shop, reading from a printed copy and marking changes in the margins. But that too is untrue. I’m composing online; my location is virtual.

I often draft in multiple locations: in airport terminals, in coffee shops, on my living room couch, at my office desk. I commute to work via train, and I use that time to respond to student papers, write emails, take notes on readings, compose class plans, etc. Over the years, I’ve come to note the places where the train tends to sway and where there are particularly bad bumps. Lift the pen here; you’re about to shift to the left. When I look around, I notice that others on the train are also writing: composing presentations, writing emails and letters, texting. Here are the material realities of composing that Nedra Reynolds asks us to consider: an uneven lap, a binder to the elbow that sends your pen skidding across a boarding pass, the familiar clack-clunk of a particular railroad crossing, and above all, the observable moments that inspire writers—the ones that you have to take the time to unpack, even if only briefly. This is writing in transit, a state of existence where writers work on the move, locations changing in a way that drives textual production.

There is a tendency to think about writing as the act of sitting down to compose. All notions of place are swept away, and instead we concentrate on the screen. Yet, writers often head to the library or walk to the bookshelf on the other side of the room. They take a break or get a change of scenery. They observe and formulate ideas in public. They try out drafts on friends. Despite his suggestion that writers should find a consistent spot in which to write, Stephen King, for instance, wrote an early draft of *The Shining* while visiting the Stanley Hotel. And Henry David Thoreau did much of his writing in the wilderness, copying out his daily trips into his journals complete with the order and phylum of plants along the Concord, Merrimack, and Assabet Rivers. These texts were then revised and extended in different locations.

We are all “writers in transit” to one extent or another; that text forms a conglomerate of observed experiences and insights collected and organized from various locations. Writing in transit speaks to a kind of layered journey

of fits and starts, where texts are composed in many places—even if words are never set to the page in some locations—with artifacts from the past carrying through to future drafts or moldering into dust.

For this reason, I was always disappointed that Gregory Clark abandoned the metaphor of writing as travel in the face of Reynolds's critiques, despite their accuracy. Better, I think, to revise the travel metaphor, to incorporate both dwelling and movement, and to ensure that we consider the material realities of composing, as Reynolds has advised. Doing so allows us to see that dwelling and moving are two sides of the same coin, both necessary to the creative process. While it's true that I dwell as I write, it's also true that I roam.

The woman sitting across from me puts away her journal, picks up her backpack, and walks off. The terminal has grown crowded. I haven't yet begun to write. Or have I? I wonder: if I am not setting words to a literal or digital page, am I writing? Perhaps I should change my definition of what it means to write. I see the pilot punch in a door code and walk down the jetway. I check my watch. Twenty minutes until we board. But that too is probably a lie.

### **Bradley Smith**

Bradley Smith is an assistant professor of English at Governors State University, where he teaches courses in composition studies, writing pedagogy, and rhetoric. Most recently, his work has been published in the *Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*.