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Writing's Rooms

Building on interest in writing's situatedness and materiality, this article stretches conceptions of writing processes with accounts of writers' unintentional, embodied, and emergent interactions within writing environments, as rendered through reflective multimodal methods combining talk, drawing, photographs, and video.

Where did Janet Emig observe the composing processes of twelfth-grade student Lynn? What did Lucille McCarthy's desk look like, the desk where undergraduate student Dave, with his "pre-writing notes and his books spread out" (240), composed a first draft while she observed? How did the "unskilled writers" in Sondra Perl's composing process study move as they wrote? In those moments in their protocols when they fell silent, did they gaze out a window? Or up at the ceiling? Were there even any windows in the "soundproof room in the college library" (Perl, "Composing" 318) in which they were writing?

These are the questions that distract me when I read composing process research. I often think, "I wonder what that *looked like*?" Of course, these researchers were focused on other details, especially on what the writers were able to say aloud about their thoughts and writing plans. The

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things arranged on a desk, the feeling of writing in a professor's office chair, a look out a window are simply inconsequential details falling outside of these researchers' purviews.

But acknowledging this matter of focus doesn't make me any less interested in trying to imagine the material location and physical actions of the writers in composing process studies like these. What this comes down to, I suppose, is my interest in writing's rooms, in the environmental minutiae of where writing takes place—the walls, desk, objects, and tools; the bodily movements, interruptions, and sounds of keys clacking. I don't think I'm the only one who cares about this. People continue to flock to Shakespeare's house. J. D. McClatchy and Erica Lennard filled a beautiful coffee table book with photographs of the writing rooms of Dickinson, Hawthorne, Twain, and other famous minds. Feminist literary scholar Diana Fuss suggests that there is a "great deal of something" to learn from the "theatre of composition . . . a place animated by the artifacts, mementos, machines, books, and furniture that frame any intellectual labor" (1). But it is not just aesthetics or prying fascination that draws us to consider these rooms. As Virginia Woolf showed us long ago, writing's rooms are also critical social and political spaces. And while Woolf's room was more a symbol embodying the cultural permission and authority to write, it is nevertheless a metaphor with sharp material contours: the financial capital to spare a room and the social capital—and a lock—to literally block it from domesticity.

Composition studies has declared some interest in the "theater of composition," in the "wheres" and "with whats" of writing. Recently, some compositionists have drawn influence from new materialist, distributed agency, object-oriented, and actor-network theories, frameworks that call into question the primacy of human agency in writing and rhetoric while amplifying the participatory roles of things, bodies, affects, environments, and others (e.g., Barnett; Barnett and Boyle; Gries; Lynch and Rivers; Rickert). Focus on the "where" also materialized recently in the pages of *College Composition and Communication*, in two 2014 issues dedicated to location. Compositionists responded vociferously to then-editor Kathleen Blake Yancey's call to consider the questions "Where do we write? And what difference, if any, does the location of our writing make?" (5). With the journal receiving "over two hundred submissions" (Yancey 6), the sheer volume of these journal submissions shows that material location remains a capacious frame for composition studies inquiry. But in invoking location

and materiality, has the field focused on writers in specific and concrete places, moving and making? Have we seen—up close—how material objects and bodily movement matter to composing processes? Have we studied writing's rooms?

In some ways, surely. But in this extended post-moment, writing's situatedness is most often theorized on expansive networked, social, and ecological scales (e.g., Cooper; Dobrin, *Postcomposition*; Foster; Trimbur). The persistence of zoomed-out perspectives is, in part and in oversimplified terms, owed to the drive for comprehensiveness in writing theories in combination with postmodern impulses that question the autonomy and unity of—and consequently, focus on—individuals as agents. In turn, seeing the material situatedness of writing on a radically local or composing process scale has gone mostly unexplored. As Jody Shipka has observed, composition research has been challenged by “the discipline's fading interest in composing process studies coupled with its tendency to ‘freeze’ writing, to treat it as a noun rather than a verb, and to privilege the analyses of static texts” (13). Said another way, as the materiality of writing has emerged in our theories, less space has been made for studies of materially emplaced writers and writing practices. Richard Fulkerson echoes this point in absolute and perhaps overstated terms, claiming, “we no longer do research into writing processes” (670). Current interests in location and materiality, however, represent an opportunity to pursue the field's as-yet marginal focus on writing processes situated in specific material environments. Aligning with recent work that reengages process as a focus of research and teaching (e.g., Jensen; Shipka; Pigg; Takayoshi), I argue for the study of situated material-embodied processes through the figure of writing's rooms.

Though it risks implying otherwise, I choose “writing's rooms” as a figure not to privilege any one kind of writing space—indeed, to focus on rooms might mean to examine writing practices staged at an intentionally designed writing space, an office desk, a library carrel, a bench on a bus or a train, a kitchen table strewn also with children's art projects and household bills. The figure of the room is foremost meant to emphasize that writing activity is *never not emplaced*: composing processes *only* happen through things, spaces, time, action, and bodily movement. This point may feel obvious, but it has been concealed by long-standing incorporeal constructions of processes that, for example, see writing first as abstract thinking or as located first in social space or discourse communities. These social and

cognitive dimensions of process theories remain critical but nevertheless imply that processes are at the same time disembodied and placeless. The room adjusts focus, zooming out from what happens “inside the writer’s head” (Bizzell 185) to instead see a writer’s activity as always *in relation* to his or her immediate material environment but at the same time never isolated from “the socially situated knowledge without which no writing project gets under way” (Bizzell 93). Focus on writing’s rooms means focus on what at first may seem *peripheral*, accounting for what’s on the desk, repetitive actions, periods of silent or motionless inactivity, pauses, or other seemingly nonwriting activities. Focusing upon embodied interaction with immediate material environments, the study of writing’s rooms is a significant pursuit, for one, because it helps budge the clingy assumption that composing processes are ultimately only rational, linear, goal-directed mental action—a steady (if recursive) march of only *intentional* activity that reliably results in a textual product. The room illustrates instead how processes are susceptible to environmental forces and never in writers’ full and autonomous control.

In pursuing writing’s rooms, at least two concerns emerge: matters of scale and method. I begin by considering how the scale of composition’s social and material theories have both invited and curbed focus on writing’s rooms. I then build precedence for their study by exploring the methods and implications of three studies of composing environments (McNely et al.; Prior and Shipka; Wyche). Through two case examples from my own study of graduate student writers’ rooms, I expand on the capacities of multimodal methods, emphasizing how video recordings help writers consider compositional activity that exceeds conscious awareness. Multimodally documenting writing’s myriad rooms stretches conceptions of writing processes, decentering writers’ assumed control and emphasizing the formative roles of writers’ bodily actions emplaced in dynamic material environments.

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Einstein's Office: The Material Turn and Matters of Scale

Recently, a photo of Albert Einstein's office—with his disheveled bookshelves, papers and books piled haphazardly on his desk, and leather desk chair askew—circulated on social media. The photograph, said to have been taken on the day of Einstein's death, is acutely evocative: the uninhabited material chaos of the office is suggestive of both Einstein's transcendent intellect and the movements and habits that grounded his work in the everyday. The image invites us to picture how he might have sat and shuffled through the papers on his desk, or how he perhaps gazed out the window just before putting chalk to the chalkboard hanging between two bookshelves. For many of my academic, teacher-type friends, those encouraged perhaps by the many Internet articles proclaiming a sure link between messiness and genius, this image was validating. Like Einstein, their own cluttered writing spaces must at least signal creativity and accomplishment if not genius. As a writer with particular need for order and general sparseness, I retorted in my mind with the image of Jane Austen's writing room—in pictures, just a small round side table, placed in front of a window, only a quill atop it. Whether it is mess or order that supposedly signals genius, shared here is the assumption that *writing's rooms have something to say*. But though the rooms of famous minds continue to captivate the popular imagination, composition hasn't much grappled with them. We certainly haven't asked much about the places where our students write, how they move within those spaces, and what things collect around them.

The field's amassing focus on materiality and objects—what might be loosely named a *material turn* in rhetoric and composition—could encourage the study of writing's everyday rooms. Some compositionists, for example, have called into question rhetoric's ontologies, repositioning the rhetor as but one force in a complex material web of interactions among immediate and distant human and nonhuman agents. Accounting for material contingencies in this way shifts the focus from an isolated and autonomous rhetor to a wider, distributed view of what and who coproduces rhetorical action. As Thomas Rickert writes, "Intent and self-consciousness" of the rhetor "no doubt matter enormously, but they no longer suffice" (36) because, for one, this rhetoric as intention model cannot account for the oftentimes unruly, accidental, failed, or detoured nature of rhetorical action. Rickert argues that rhetoric is ambient, rather than controlled, and "must diffuse outward to include the material environment" (3) including

things, technologies, affects, and embodiment. Jenny Edbauer, too, broadens rhetorical action in her shift from situation to rhetorical ecology, observing that “writing is distributed across a range of processes and encounters” (13). These and other materially oriented theories reshape core rhetorical concepts like intention, ethos, and agency and could hold similar implications for conceptions of writing processes. Everyday notions of process, as in rhetorical theory, continue to prioritize the writer’s self-conscious intentions—the plans or inner monologue that guide textual decision making. But as collective interests in Einstein’s office or Shakespeare’s house would suggest, those intentions hardly paint a full picture of composing, missing the formative roles of bodily movement, objects, rhythms, and distractions. And, as Shipka and others have observed, thinking in terms of writing processes at all has lost cachet in light of social, postprocess, ecological and postmodern impulses in the field, which tend to construct writing phenomena on expansive scales and overlook the ways writing also situates in immediate material environments.

Counter to these tendencies, though, some compositionists have over time argued for examining the physicality and materiality of processes. Shipka, for example, has called for focus on the “dynamic, emergent, distributed, historical and technologically mediated dimensions of composing processes” (14). Christina Haas, in her study of computer word processing, demonstrated “how the material tools of writing significantly and consistently alter the mental processes of text production” (73). More recently, Laura R. Micciche, writing of what she observes as a new materialist trend, proposes that writing be considered “a practice of coexistence . . . an activity not solely dependent on one’s control but made possible by elements that codetermine writing’s possibility” (498). Margaret Syverson, too, has emphasized the immediate material situatedness of writing—“the material, physical processes and structures involved in text production” (74)—in relation to expansive sociomaterial ecological systems.

Syverson’s 1999 book, *The Wealth of Reality: An Ecology of Composition*, shows how the massive scale of writing theories, especially materially oriented ones, have both invited and occluded focus on writing’s rooms. Drawing upon work in complex systems and distributed cognition, Syverson aims for a “richer, more comprehensive theory of composing” (2) that casts writing as “an ecological system of interrelated structures and processes that are at once physically or materially, socially, psychologically, tempo-

rally, and spatially emerging in codependent activities” (25). Exploring vast trajectories of, for example, social structures or reader-writer interactions, Syverson does consider along the way writing at the scale of the room: in the case of “someone writing a book to explain a set of theories” (6), her theory would consider “the writer’s interaction with the environment, including the technologies for writing, the memory aids, the tools and instruments that help shape and support the writing” (6). But because Syverson constructs writing’s materiality through the figure of ecology, the boundaries of that writing scene unceasingly *stretch*. Rather than lingering to examine the immediate material environment’s tools and “memory aids,” her focus continues to zoom out in an attempt to account for bigger systems that exceed and precede any particular scene of writing: broad channels of circulation and reception, as well as the roles of “historically situated technologies, social relations, cultural influences, and disciplinary practices” (6–7). The scale of Syverson’s ecology in this way both encourages and delimits attention to the small-scale dynamics of writing’s rooms. Moreover, this tendency to observe writing “at every level of scale” (23) is not just characteristic of Syverson’s ecology, but also more generally of networked, postprocess, and

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social theories. As Pamela Takayoshi notes: “Since the social turn took hold in composition studies . . . researchers [have] expanded their lenses from looking at writing as a process, labor, or practice to look more broadly at literacy as it functions in social contexts” (3).

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The challenge of accounting for both the micro- and macro-scales of writing’s material emplacement is further exemplified by Nedra Reynolds. Drawing on discourses of cultural geography, postmodernity, and spatiality, Reynolds proposes that writing be understood as a set of practices “more spatial than temporal” (5), a move that grounds writing’s sociality in its connections to both imagined constructions and bodily experiences of place. Along the way, she muses about how to grapple with writing’s immediate

situatedness—a matter, she points out, that compositionists agree we don't know enough about (176)—and what insights those considerations may garner. She observes:

Writing's materiality begins with where the work of writing gets done, the tools and conditions and surroundings—not to determine a cause and effect relationship between the writing's quality or success and the site of its production, but to trace the threads or remnants of literacy practices. Along with knowing more about where writers write, though, geography contributes to a richer understanding of the habits and memories and “moves” that characterize our own acts of writing, particularly those moves that become habitual but are not “taught.” (167)

Composing processes unfold only among and through things—the tools, conditions, surroundings, technologies, texts, chairs, and so on that populate writing's rooms. And, as Reynolds underlines, attending to tools and writing spaces draws attention to embodied action—the look out the window or repetitive punch on the backspace bar. Indeed, Reynolds points directly toward writing's inhabited rooms, the interrelated roles of materiality and embodied movement, the geographies of the radically local.

More than Syverson, who ultimately seeks a “comprehensive theory of composing” (2) and thus spends more time in the expanse than in rooms, Reynolds grapples with scale. She calls for “new maps of writing” (176) that would capture the materiality of writing practices, maps that would not only detail “the places where writing occurs, but [also] the sense of place and space that readers and writers bring with them to intellectual work of writing, to navigating, arranging, remembering and composing” (176). However, this zoomed-in focus on the geographies of practice remains peripheral to her overall project, an omission that Reynolds herself worries about: “I haven't done much in these pages to unlock those physical movements that we call writing, uses of a mouse or keyboard, pencil, stylus, screen, or page” (168). In a note, she follows up on this admission, explaining, “more studies are needed that depend upon empirical research to trace writers' *moves* in composing” (188). The scale of Reynolds's new geography pushes the micro-scale of rooms to the periphery, even in spite of her own expressed interests. Similarly, composition theory has well acknowledged that writing is materially situated and distributed at the macro-level of ecologies or hyper-circulatory networks but, as Reynolds notes, much less

so at the micro-level of the practitioner immersed in his or her immediate environment.

There is no doubt that complex ecologies or networks are fitting figures for writing theory. Arguing for focus on writing's rooms does not deny the expansive contexts beyond any room's "walls." At the same time, focus on either individual writing scenes or sweeping writing systems does not have to be an absolute choice, as the process/postprocess divide sometimes suggests (e.g., Dobrin, "Paralogic"). If we could *temporarily* halt the urge to see the big picture of writing's situatedness in its larger, infinite contexts, we could uncover the small, embodied and material actions also participatory in the production and practice of writing. The room is far from the whole story, but zooming in to focus upon its dynamics can grant a view not much seen in our literature, adjust how we imagine writing processes, and unite the physical action of writing with its social action. To access this micro-view, Reynolds and others suggest process-scaled research, single-writer studies that might "trace writers' moves in composing" (188). What might process-scaled studies of writing rooms look like?

More than Words: Matters of Method and Multimodality

In her 1979 study of "unskilled writers," Sondra Perl recognized both the promise and the limitations of existing process research methods. "[N]arrative descriptions of composing processes," Perl asserted, did not provide enough detail "for the perception of underlying regularities and patterns" ("Composing" 317). So Perl invented modified methods—her composing style sheets—which recorded the "movements that occur during composing" (318) as captured through participants' talk-aloud protocols. With this method, Perl identified sixteen distinct behaviors with several sub-actions, but of particular interest is the sixteenth action—"periods of silence" (321). Since Perl expected to "hear" the movement of composing only through participants' talk, the recording of silence is noteworthy as, under the scheme, it indicates a seeming *lack* of activity and thus should not be recorded. But Perl remains open to this silence. As she wrote in 2004, "what turned out to be more fascinating was what my coding scheme could not elucidate": the ways writers would fall into still silence followed by a "burst of composing energy" (*Felt* 7), or what she comes to name and theorize as felt sense. Significant composing activity, Perl discovered, was not exclusively found in participants' verbalized thoughts, but also in their *physical movement*.

Perl's shift to the body, her zoom out from strict focus upon "activities taking place inside the writer's head" (Bizzell 185), captures some of what writing's rooms can reveal about what constitutes composing. What Perl discovers is that even the rich records of talk-aloud—a method that essentially equates writing activity with verbalized intentions—misses much meaningful composing activity, especially that which exceeds the writer's own awareness. Rendered mostly through discourse-driven research methods, long-standing cognition-dominant and acontextual conceptions of writing processes have left the physical movement, objects, and the ambient environs that also frame and shape writing activity largely invisible. Modified methods capable of seeing writers always in relation to their immediate environments are necessary. To consider this question of methods, I explore three studies focused on writing's rooms in different ways—those of Susan Wyche, Paul Prior and Jody Shipka, and Brian McNely, Paul Gestwicki, Bridget Gelms, and Ann Burke. Together, these studies suggest the limits of alphabetical, written data and the efficacies of multimodal methods to "trace writers' moves in composing" (Reynolds 188).

In her essay "Time, Tools, and Talismans," Susan Wyche connects our fascination with the ritual, material behaviors of famous authors (like Schiller sniffing his stash of rotten apples stored in his desk drawer, or Charles Dickens's ceramic frogs) to those of the average academic writer "eating, drinking, pacing, rocking, sailing, driving a car or riding in a bus or train" (52–53). After her own painful bout of writer's block and subsequent quest for a "protected place" to work (53), Wyche wonders how her *students* consider and construct their own writing rooms and rituals. So she asks two of her writing classes to complete detailed questionnaires about where, how, and with what they write, following up with a few students in interviews.

One featured student is Adriana, who says of her writing environment and actions, "I can't stay in one place, like for five hours and write a paper. I have to stand up, walk around, watch a little bit of TV and then start again. If my favorite program comes on I just have to watch it. Sometimes it's hard to do both—writing and TV" (55). Wyche concludes that Adriana is often "unable to concentrate for extended periods of time; instead, she

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takes numerous breaks, including watching television” (55). While Wyche understands Adriana’s interactions with the TV as fully disadvantageous, she later identifies as “beneficial” another kind of looking: “star[ing] out the window to gather her thoughts” (56). Looking at the TV is understood as a distraction, but looking out the window is seen as a positive, focusing movement. Wyche’s read is probably generally true: no writing teacher would *encourage* writers to make TV a part of their writing practice (but, at the same time, haven’t most of us practiced at some point “writing while watching”?). But it is ultimately impossible to discern meaningful differences between the look to the TV and the look to the window without seeing those actions happen; and even in observing those behaviors, the formative roles of “looking away” may remain uncertain. Adriana’s looking at the TV, for example, might even be *worse*—more extended and consuming—than she reports it and Wyche understands it. Staring out the window—though poetically heralded as an inspiration-inducing move—might for Adriana become an equal barrier to her writing. This example suggests the limits of what writers’ written and verbal recollection can reveal about their rooms.

Wyche’s aim in the study, though, is not to interpret with finality any of her students’ behaviors. Instead, she wants her students to develop, just as she did, deep awareness of their constantly changing writing environments in order to more mindfully shape and respond to them. Wyche’s study estab-

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lishes the importance of understanding what happens *around* composing processes—the peripheral actions, material objects, supportive and inhibiting habits. Her study, too, suggests the value in writers reflecting on their rooms. While it will not lead to sure assertions about optimal environments, studying writing’s rooms helps writers become increasingly (but never fully) aware of the tiny and substantial ways writing spaces and objects shape the activity and embodied experience of writing. Wyche also points out a limit: recollection and reporting only provides so much in-situ detail about how writers inhabit their spaces in real-time. Not only does recollected narrative miss details, but it also presumes that the writer is always aware of everything he or she is doing,

A study that draws out more thick detail on the wheres of writing is Paul Prior and Jody Shipka's "Chronotopic Lamination: Tracing the Contours of Literate Activity." In this study, the researchers ask participants to draw and discuss their writing processes and spaces in order to demonstrate from a cultural-historical activity theory perspective "the chronotopic lamination . . . of the writers' literate activity, the dispersed and fluid chains of places, times, people, and artifacts that come to be tied together in trajectories of literate action" (181). Of Melissa, for instance, an associate professor working on a book manuscript, the researchers write:

[H]er discussion of her writing ranged widely over practices of writing, feedback from close and distant audiences, the material contexts of her writing, and the various kinds of struggles that writing encompasses. It also ranged widely over time, reaching back to classes, professors, and thinking she engaged in as an undergraduate. (201)

The study creates first a rich sense of the "not just hereness" of every action associated with writing, the way that writing processes spread out to others, memories, experiences, texts, ideas, spaces, and behaviors that have come before.

At the same time, participants emphasize their immediate material emplacement through what Prior and Shipka name "ESSPs," or "environment selecting and structuring practices" (219). This kind of attuning to the immediate writing space involves, as the researchers observe with one participant, "the furnishing of the space (desks, chairs, an air conditioner, books, a computer, a Buddha, plants), but also . . . ambiences (a candle lit, incense burning) and bodily practices (a stimulating cup of black tea to drink)" (222). Far from irrelevant background, the researchers find these writing room practices integral, functioning as "the intentional deployment of external aids and actors . . . [that] shape, stabilize, and direct consciousness in service of the task at hand" (219).

Prior and Shipka excel in creating zoomed-in, detailed pictures of writers' practices and writing spaces while maintaining a sense of the expanse of any given writing situation. This view is achieved in part through responsive, visual methods. The drawings participants create help explain experiences of space, time, and activity that aren't contained, aiding writers in representing not just the material "facts" but also the perceived realities of their writing rooms. One participant, for example, draws her own apartment

and her boyfriend's apartment side-by-side, emphasizing the proximity of (and often tension between) those spaces in her writing psyche, but defying the realities of their actual physical distance (197). Retrospective drawing

Retrospective drawing also explodes conventional senses of writing time: while more process-oriented research might focus only on writers as they are seated and writing, the drawings reveal longer, wandering timelines, as writing activity melds with everyday activities like laundry, walking, showering, or listening to a class discussion.

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Prior and Shipka offer a compelling vision of writing processes as cultural, dispersed, and emplaced material action by virtue of this visual method. And

while these drawings do much, the researchers also see their limitations: "These retrospective accounts do not provide the kind of grounded detail available through close observation of in situ practices. We cannot, for example, know how well or how fully these accounts of writing would match up with a videotaped record of the process" (186). Drawings help uncover dimensions of situated writing processes not limited to observable behaviors, while video can provide grounded detail of environmental minutiae as well as what might exceed a writer's conscious awareness. Shipka has elsewhere indicated the virtues of video recording for process research (146), especially methods where writers are given the "means of recording themselves throughout the process of producing a text, artifact, or event" (147). Prior and Shipka's study shows how non-alphabetic modes capture the constructedness and lived experiences of writing's rooms and suggests the potential of video recording methods to further uncover layers of in situ detail.

A third study, an ethnography of undergraduates developing a web-based learning game for a children's museum coauthored by Brian McNely, Paul Gestwicki, Bridget Gelms, and Ann Burke, renders through photographs the ambient, atmospheric detail of writing's rooms. Making the case to bring visual ethnography methods to composition and rhetoric, McNely et al. fill their *Enculturation* webtext with large photographs depicting the environmental surround of participants' rhetorical processes. The

photographs, McNely et al. write, are “particularly useful for documenting, understanding, and representing the complexities of writing and rhetorical invention encountered in situ.” The complexities captured by the photographs serve the researchers, moreover, “as the primary ground of analysis,” while “fieldnotes, analytic memos, and interview transcripts [are used] for triangulation and additional context.” The photographs in this way lead the analysis, as the researchers use the images to engage participants in “reflexive meaning-making” processes that understand “photography as a situated and contextual practice rather than an objective record of experience.”

In positioning images at the fore of the research narrative, McNely and his coauthors show the rich possibilities of non-alphabetic representations as evidence and ethnographic detail. It is not that photographs tell more “truth” than words—photographs are, like language, a construct and selection. Photographs, though, as ethnographic evidence subject to triangulation, are more economical than words. The photographs in this text retain the periphery of writing’s rooms—the “extra stuff” around and involved in the inventional, compositional action on which the researchers focus. The research write-up—a bit of a misnomer given the vibrant visuality of the web text—retains evocative, unfinished details that reveal the material dimensions of immersive learning that words are challenged to capture. Seven photographs across the webtext set in the parlor room exemplify this effect. This room appears repeatedly, but the researchers *say* almost nothing about it. Readers nonetheless garner a very keen sense of how this room frames and sustains participants’ collaborative composing efforts.

As its name evokes, the parlor is shown to be a stuffy, stately, old collegiate-feeling room—with a lavish rug, overstuffed leather couches, and ornately carved furniture. It is the kind of room one might expect given the building in which this fifteen-week experience is staged: a mansion “[s]ituated on a 2.65 acre wooded lot slightly more than one mile from the major university” (McNely et al.) The parlor room is the setting of the students’ regular reading group meetings as well as participant Lauren’s storyboarding processes, a scene of composing that the authors document extensively. Tiny environmental details accrue about this room across the photographs: Lauren composes her storyboard as a fire burns in the grand fireplace; she lies on her stomach across the ornate rug, her notecards spread before her. In another shot, Lauren sits cross-legged with her work arranged on a cushy red ottoman, a cup of coffee by her side. That same ottoman is captured in

the first shot of the parlor room, during a reading group meeting, where a student props his elbows and midsection across it, a relaxed comportment echoed by a student shown in the background, sitting cross-legged on a leather couch, with no shoes on. The vibe of this room, as staged by these photographs, is one of simultaneous comfort and importance—a fancy

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formal room is inhabited by these students with a sense of comfortable ownership.

The photographs' accrual delivers a sense of these students' "theatre of composition" (Fuss 1). As a representational mode, photographs deliver something that words alone would struggle to create: the sense of comportment, inhabitation, the

social and material *atmospheres* of this extended collaborative project. The photographs take on the status of evidence to reveal the complex "interactive role to what we typically see as setting or context, foregrounding what is customarily background to rhetorical work" (Rickert xv). The environs captured through the photographs are perhaps only suggestive, but the parlor becomes significant through its structured *repetition*—readers garner a sense of the room by seeing it inhabited in myriad ways across the text. By carefully structuring the readers' experience through the photographs' selection and arrangement, McNely and his coauthors make a compelling case for visual media to foreground qualitative process studies of writing's rooms.

But again, in spite of this strong case, visual methods remain less common in composition and rhetoric. One reason for this scarcity simply may be that our journals remain largely text based. Another narrower reason might be found in the process research tradition that has prioritized word data, epitomized by talk-aloud protocol methods: Perl chose to capture the "movement" of composing in writer's conscious, spoken descriptions of their actions. Carol Berkenkotter collected an astounding 120 hours of Donald Murray's talking-aloud about his processes. Recent studies of digital composing processes, though, increasingly make use of visual methods. Takayoshi, for example, employs a "30-minute screencast think aloud video" (5) in her study of social media writing, and Stacey Pigg employs video as an observational method (257) in her study of mobile composing practices (though neither shape their research narratives with visuals). In

their recent study of elementary school students' mobile-digital composing processes, Christian Ehret and Ty Hollett use head-mounted cameras to capture participants' "interactions with their mobile devices and peers" (435) and subject the footage to "multimodal interaction analysis methods" that focus not on participants' speech but on "gesture, gaze, and proxemics" (438). Ehret and Hollett's visual and multimodal analytical methods observe processes from the vantage of the writing body in relation to the "physical environment" (439), affect, movement, and feeling, recasting composing as processes of inhabiting and moving through specific material spaces. As I emphasize in this and the next section, video represents an accessible and apt medium for exposing and reflecting upon the improvisational rhythms and environmental contingencies of writing processes.

McNely has argued not only for visual methods but also for the study of writing's rooms. As he puts it, "the things near us and with us matter to the work we do, to how we perceive that work, and to who we are. . . . We need methodologies that account for how users actually interact with their ambient environs" ("Taking" 49–50). Stacey Pigg echoes this call: "we need more research that analyzes how student writers simultaneously and actively navigate—and become influenced by—physical and virtual environments" (254). Visual methods are most suited to meet these needs. I show in the next section the value of combining modes—interview, photographs, drawings, and video recordings—into what I call multimodal case study methods enacted by writers. Layering visual modes uncovers meaningful dissonance in seemingly peripheral, inadvertent actions that wrap into writing's rooms.

Capturing the Periphery: Multimodal Methods in Graduate Students' Writing Rooms

Inspired by visual methods and the studies I've just discussed, I partnered with several graduate student writers to enact multimodal and reflective methods in their writing rooms. The orienting questions of this study were intentionally broad: How do writers inhabit their writing spaces? How do writers conceive of their writing rooms and the things that populate them? These questions guided the study's focus upon objects, writers' relationships with and affective responses to the rooms, and their physical movements and behaviors.

Nine graduate student writers began the first stage of the study by making two drawings: one represented the “writing process” they were undergoing for a particular piece of writing and the second depicted their writing spaces. Following Prior and Shipka’s concern for how prompts influence participants’ responses, instructions for these drawings emphasized flexibility and openness, making clear that there was no single way to understand what is meant by “writing process” or “writing space.” Next, participants photographed their rooms, taking pictures from a variety of angles and emphases: capturing whole living rooms, home or work offices, dining rooms, specific chairs, an improvised kitchen desk, resonant aesthetic objects, and official-looking writing desks (that, in the case of more than one participant, were never actually used for writing). Participants also wrote about what was depicted in each image, writing that helped later guide semi-structured interviews.

Seven remaining participants then video-recorded at least three sessions of writing. I emphasized flexibility in camera angle, recording duration, and device to make sure that recording was minimally disruptive. As a result, participants recorded themselves from a variety of angles: from their webcam, positioned to see their screens only, from the side, and so on. The focus of the video camera, in other words, captured the physicality of composing differently—facial expressions and eye movement, hands to the keyboard, full body movements on the chair, or peripheral interactions with things in the room. And this variety yielded interesting insights. For example, two writers had much to say in the interview about the emotion they perceived on their faces in their webcam recordings, a dimension of their writing life beyond their conscious awareness.

I concluded with semi-structured interviews with seven participants, leading the interview by asking them to examine and reflect on the range of representations they created and prioritizing “participant meanings” (Creswell 175). Overall, my study design was informed by case study and situational analysis methods (Clarke; Stake). Like McNely et al., the participants and I understood the “visual data as the primary grounds for analysis.” For data reduction, Clarke formulates the essential interpretive question that guided analysis: How do the conditions of the situation “appear—make themselves felt as consequential—inside the empirical situation under examination?” (71–72). Steered by this question, participants and I engaged in processes of triangulation (see comments on reduction in McNely et

al.) to identify objects, movements, or environmental dynamics appearing more than once across their multiple visual texts. Participants featured in the case examples below were also invited to review this manuscript for accuracy in my representation of their words and images.

Several broad trends emerged across these rooms: writers discovered bodily comfort practices (e.g., food, blankets, drinks, aesthetic objects thought to sustain engagement), the revealing nature of physical rhythms (e.g., leaning forward in the chair, then pushing away), and the need to feel connected in their space to the outside world (e.g., through television or an open window). For my purposes, however, I zoom in on just two small examples from this study that demonstrate the virtue of multimodal methods. To expose these methods' reflective capacities, I necessarily leave out in these examples many important details about these writers' identities, their projects, and other rich details of their rooms. The small examples are significant, though, in that they emerged from productive dissonance in repetition across representational modes, especially between the grounded detail available in the video recordings and the writers' own self-consciousness about their habits and spaces.

That is, documenting writing's rooms shows not only composers' "*intentional* deployment of external aids and actors to shape, stabilize, and direct consciousness in service of the task at hand" (Prior and Shipka 219, emphasis mine), but also their seemingly inconsequential or unintentional activity—the rhythms of reaching for a ritually prepared drink, for example, or interactions with a passing dog.

Case example: The drink. Participant Erin's photos, drawings, and video staged her writing mostly in the living room of her apartment. She wrote mostly in an overstuffed loveseat, propping her feet up on an ottoman with her laptop on her lap. In writing about her photographs, Erin emphasized her ritual of preparing a drink before settling down into the loveseat to write. She never began a session, she made clear, without first carefully preparing something and placing it within easy reach on a side table behind her. In the drawing of her space, she represents the drink as

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a main feature (see Figure 1); in her writing about the drawing she says, “I also show a quilt on the ottoman (as the space is often chilly) and a drink and lamp on the end table” (see Figure 2). This repetition suggests, simply, this writer *knows* that the drink is a sustaining ritual that aids her in getting started. If Wyche were interviewing her, both might conclude the drink was assuredly an enabling, positive ritual, like taking a walk.

However, though it seemed like Erin was thoroughly tuned into what Prior and Shipka might call a prominent ESSP, Erin came to view the drink differently by reviewing her video recordings. In the recording of one writing session, Erin noticed a repeating process: she would stop typing, wait for a moment, reach for the drink, take a sip, put it back, wait a beat, then start writing again. In another recording, she doesn’t see herself go for the drink at all.

I began each interview by asking the participants to reflect across all their representations to notice what repeats or seems important or surprising. Erin first commented on the experience of seeing her facial expressions (indeed, wondering if she was seeing concentration, pain, or frustration on her face, she laughed and said, “I think I was going to have, I must have had lasers coming out of my eyes at the screen at one point!”). She then talked about the drink:

I think in describing it, I realized . . . I don’t know, it just it seemed to me as I was thinking about and describing it, and then watching back over the videos, one of the things that really stuck out to me was the importance of having a drink there. Like that just, it’s not something I ever would have thought of before I started describing it to you, and then watching, as I watched the videos how I interacted with—drinks. Um, and being aware of then, the other day, I had something sitting there, and I was so focused on my writing, I realized like two hours later I hadn’t taken a single sip of it, and so wondering what that meant . . . in terms of the times I find myself relying on it more and the times when I . . . don’t even notice it there.

I was surprised that Erin was surprised by the drink. As her photographs, writing, and drawing made clear, she knew that the drink was a central writing ritual. But nonetheless, in making available the “grounded detail” (Prior and Shipka 186) of several writing sessions through video recording, Erin came to see the drink no longer as just a purposeful ritual, but as an important site of nonwriting activity of which she was not consciously aware. Erin herself wondered about what the varying frequency of reach-

ing for the drink reveals about her writing. We can posit interpretations: it might be that the reach for the drink comes in a moment when the writing has halted, when the writer doesn't know what to do or say next. And pulling the drink into the process might fill in that silence, a mindless method to perform to while waiting for writing to commence. But we—including Erin herself—cannot know finally how to interpret the choreography of the drink. The ritual with the drink seems to be conscious and sustained through time, but the ways at any moment the drink might become meaningful or participatory is not. Video recording layered with other media representations—this multimodal approach—collects the multiple ways that seemingly peripheral actants coalesce, often beyond the conscious awareness of the writer. Seeing writing practices staged in myriad and ever-changing rooms helps dislodge the sense of writing processes as enduring, static procedures. Rather, this view shows processes as continually made and remade, as writers collide differently with things.

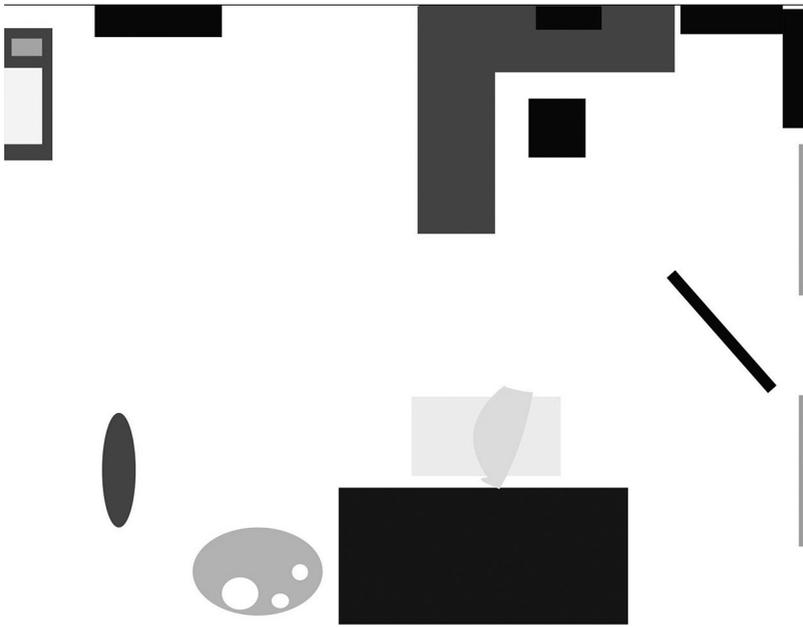


Fig. 1. Erin's drawing of her writing room.

d) Tell me about your writing space drawing. What have you shown and why?

The blue rectangle is my love seat, where I sit to write. I have discovered that I can do administrative work sitting at a table or desk, but if I'm doing creative work like writing, I concentrate better if I have my feet up—so the ottoman is very important!

☺ I also show a quilt on the ottoman (as the space is often chilly) and a drink and lamp on the end table (there's also a jar of dog treats for when the pup gets noisy—he's wandering around the room and can be a bit distracting). I included the tv, between the windows, which can be a distraction, but I can't think when there's noise, so it's usually off when I'm writing. On the opposite side of the room is my desk with printer and scanner and three bookshelves (black). Catty-corner to the loveseat is a cabinet with snacks and teas, a microwave, and a water jug.

Fig. 2. Erin's description of her writing room drawing.



Fig. 3. One of Erin's photographs of her writing room with a drink on the side table.



Fig. 4. A still from Erin's video recording that shows her reaching for the drink.

Case example: The dogs. Another participant, Andrea, depicted her writing room at the center of her home—a dining room table positioned between the living room and kitchen. In her written commentary (see Figure 5), Andrea described the relationship of the writing space to the rest of the domestic space. The dining room table, Andrea wrote,

has both my and my husband's laptops and is strewn with materials for work and from other aspects of our lives, like gloves, for when we walk/run the dog. I also included the kitchen because when I'm writing and need a break, I'll often bake or cook. Or, if I'm not cooking, my husband may be making dinner while I continue to write.

Andrea demonstrates how her room, just as Prior and Shipka would suggest, leaks out into other spaces. Domestic and writing objects and activities overlap in various relations. Indeed, sometimes this overlap is so absolute as to blur together completely, affirming writing as an expanding, life-sweeping activity, an “extended, being-in-the-world practice” (Prior and Shipka 220). And, of course, this point doesn’t escape the historical trajectories of gender politics: as Reynolds notes, for example, “homes are not immune from the politics of space in the everyday” (152). Home activities clearly wrap into Andrea’s writing rhythms. As she said in her interview, “if I’m frustrated and starting to procrastinate, I’ll find other activities to do like clean the kitchen or sometimes sweep the living room because the dogs make a mess with their toys and stuff. And if it’s really bad, then I start to do laundry or something like that.”

Andrea’s dogs emerged as recurring figures in her writing room and domestic space. For example, Andrea’s description of her writing desk/dining table notably includes “gloves, for when we walk/run the dog.” When I asked Andrea what she noticed in looking over her media representations, she said she foremost discovered “how often I get distracted . . . by my dogs.” Indeed, like Erin’s drink, the dogs were everywhere in her representations of her space. Her video recordings capture Andrea quickly talking to the dogs, correcting them (see Figure 8), reaching down to pat them. The dogs are seen also moving around the periphery of Andrea’s writing space (see Figure 9). Andrea revealed in her interview that they got a second dog since the first was an insistent distraction for her; the first dog would regularly “come stand on me and stand on the chair like he did in one of the videos.” In spite of feeling the need to control the dogs’ behavior and her initial assertion in the interview that they are a distraction, Andrea also notes how she finds comfort in their company: “But it’s company. It’s definitely company,” she said in the interview. She also depicts in her drawing one of the dogs snoozing in a chair, suggesting the dogs are a strong background presence in her writing environment. The dogs further wrap into the room, as she describes conscious ritual. Walking the dogs becomes a central part of Andrea’s intentional invention processes. As she revealed in her interview, “I find that I think about it a lot also or just any writing project when I’m walking and will walk the dogs and especially if we’re on a three-mile walk or something. Then I can really think about it and not be distracted.”

By virtue of repetition across Andrea's representations of her writing room, it is clear that the dogs matter. But how they matter is always changing. The dogs serve in all sorts of ways—peaceful background, companion, comfort, ritual, forceful interruption. Andrea, though, repeatedly rationalizes the dogs as distractions. But her videos show that interacting with the dogs is never more than a few seconds of interruption—she deals with the dog, she turns back. She moreover practices the ritual of walking the dogs to “not be distracted.” It is curious then that distraction is Andrea's most recurring interpretation of the dogs, especially as she represents them across her visual modes as a central part of her space and that she reported that caring for the dogs keeps her at home (instead of working at her school office or a coffee shop), putting her in a more “distracted” but “happy” state.

Ultimately the rhythms and needs of the dogs are not separable from Andrea's other composing activities. The dogs, like Erin's drink, are part of both conscious ritual (taking a walk) *and* automatic, unthinking physical movement (reaching a hand to pet the passing dog). And, like Erin, Andrea was not aware of all the ways that the dogs took on these roles in her composing environs. The layered representations of the dogs suggest, though, that environmental forces aren't static or steady, but emergent, shifting in and out of the room variously. And by engaging in the multimodal protocol, Andrea had the opportunity to encounter these forces (not just the dogs, of course) and see her writing room and her actions within it differently. And this—the playback of scenes of writing for the writer *herself*—is perhaps the clearest benefit of engaging the study of writing's everyday rooms. As Wyche argued, it is transformative for writers to see that the “where and with what” they write matters. Multimodal methods illuminate the texture and detail of interactive moments that retrospective accounts cannot access and that exceed writers' conscious awareness, giving writers a way to see their environmental processes strangely.

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 Drawing 2: Writing Place

- c) I typically write at our dining room table. The leaves have been extended so it is a huge space in which I can have my laptop, my mug of tea/coffee, and I can spread out books and papers as well. Where I sit at the table looks out at the living room, the front door, all the windows in the dining/living space, and where my dog naps in the arm chair.
-

Fig.5.Andrea's description of her writing room.

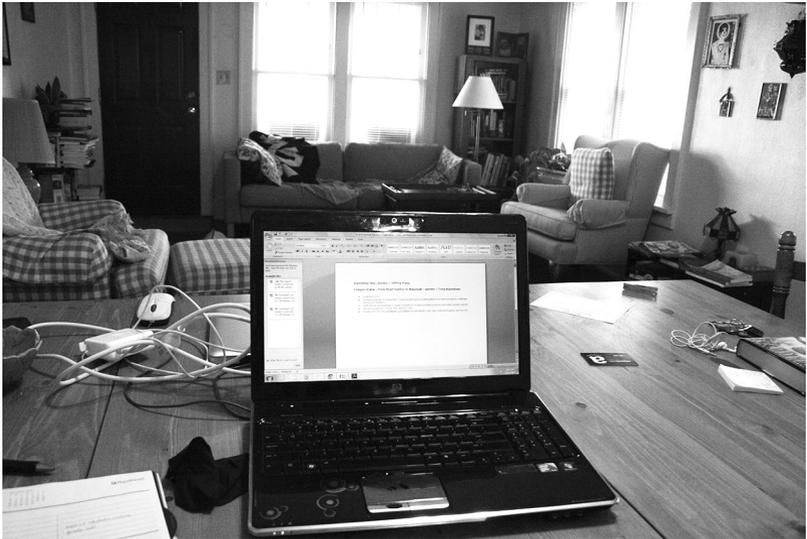


Fig.6. One of Andrea's photographs of her writing room.

These examples uncover the unpredictable potentiality of writing's rooms and how writers move amid environmental actants that are constantly in flux. TVs, a prepared drink, dogs, talismanic or aesthetic objects, laptops, a fireplace, or an ottoman in a stately parlor room literally shape writing practice, but in a determinism that is "soft" at best. In any given snapshot, the participatory forces of a drink or a dog and the movements around and through them *differ*. Multimodal methods provide means to see this texture and retain a sense of potentiality—the always-changing environmental forces of composing unfolding through and around things. Rather than consolidate the activities of writing or overlook them altogether,



Fig. 7. Andrea's drawing of her writing room, depicting one of the dogs.



Fig. 8. A still from Andrea's video of one dog interrupting her.



Fig. 9. A still from Andrea's video showing dogs on the periphery: one dog lies in the chair, the other's blurry head comes into frame on the right.

these layered methods—photos, drawings, writing, video, and talk—allow writers to see writing processes as distinct emplaced movements and as “an activity not solely dependent on one’s control” (Micciche 498).

Conclusion—The Rooms of Everyday Writers

I see writing’s rooms and these multimodal methods as especially useful for writers in our classrooms. And I raise them to argue for something ultimately quite simple: it is good for writers to *see writing* happen in its infinite

But in my experience, student writers are challenged to consider any of the deep ways their writing processes are situated and contingent, often defaulting instead to seeing “process” merely as a matter of abstract mental routines or general textual habits (like “outlining” or “first drafting”) to haul along with them to each scene of writing. Compositionists and writers can, through multimodal methods, upend this image of disembodied writing processes, reflect upon the infinite particularities of everyday writing rooms, and see how writing processes iterate differently through material staging and physical moves.

variety, modes, and locations. As Linda Brodkey has established, how we picture writing matters. The writer is indeed no longer cloistered in the garret; compositionists continue to demonstrate how writers are radically implicated in social, cultural, and political spheres and identities. But in my experience, student writers are challenged to consider any of the deep ways their writing processes are situated and contingent, often defaulting instead to seeing “process” merely as a matter of abstract mental routines or general textual habits (like “outlining” or “first drafting”) to

haul along with them to each scene of writing. Compositionists and writers can, through multimodal methods, upend this image of disembodied writing processes, reflect upon the infinite particularities of everyday writing rooms, and see how writing processes iterate differently through material staging and physical moves.

It is an apt time to engage reflective multimodal methods in this way, and a critical time to do so, given ongoing technological and cultural change in writing practices. Technologies of various kinds are now more ubiquitous—putting cameras right in our pockets and, simultaneously, making writing much more a part of everyday life. There are calls, especially from digital writing studies, for a return to process-scaled studies focused on digital-material writing environments and attendant to “the agentive role

physical environments play” (Pigg 255). As Takayoshi observes, “Writing spaces are dramatically different than they were 25 years ago, and the field of writing studies has not yet in any sustained way paid close attention to how this difference impacts processes and products of writing” (4). Writers themselves can help our field see writing in practice and catalog these massive writing changes through a focus on discrete emplaced writing practices.

Of course, I, or any compositionist or writer, can only deliver small snapshots of the particularities of writing’s rooms. The examples I set forth from my study focused on perhaps the *smallest* of material-embodied interactions. Dogs and drinks in themselves aren’t important to all writers—nor to these particular writers every day—but these tiny forces emerged as significant in the rooms of these specific writers

Writing’s rooms suggest that composing’s recursivity be understood not only textually but also *environmentally*, as composing activity romps all over (and beyond) its rooms.

at these moments in time. The drink or dogs are not the whole story of these writers’ rooms. But these examples are powerful for what they encourage us to *question*: the examples, along with the interventions of Wyche, Prior and Shipka, and McNely et al., poke holes in clingy assumptions associated with “the process paradigm”: that processes are just intentional, goal-oriented mind work achieved via an unbroken temporal, *and spatial*, telos. Writing’s rooms suggest that composing’s recursivity be understood not only textually but also *environmentally*, as composing activity romps all over (and beyond) its rooms.

I emphasize again that I am not suggesting that writing is *only* enmeshed in rooms: writing remains crucially situated in community discourses, in structures of financial and social capital and inequities, in matters of long- and short-term memory and executive functioning, in histories of technologies, in larger systems of production and circulation, and so on. But staying in the room, lingering near writers’ embodied activity, wondering about incidental movements and rhythms and objects and tools, is also an important and lesser-seen view and a critical complement to our theory’s tendency to stretch writing always into its massive systematicities. Writing is social, expressive, cultural, political, affective, historical, cognitive, *and* it is also fundamentally physical and material, the orchestrated and improvisational activity of bodies and of things. As a figure for process-scaled study and theory, writing’s rooms emphasize the experience and *life*

of writing. I call to examine writing's rooms "not to determine a cause and effect relationship between the writing's quality or success and the site of its production" (Reynolds 167) but rather to understand the spaces in themselves as "systemic contexts of our everyday work environments" (McNely, "Taking Things" 50). To pursue writing's rooms is to continually uncover the inhabited "theaters" of composing processes: the emplaced embodied movements, the unintentional and accidental interactions that exceed awareness, the ineluctable and myriad ways that writing always (and all ways) takes place.

As a figure for process-scaled study and theory, writing's rooms emphasize the experience and *life* of writing.

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