

Transit Visa: An Essay on Code

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[I]n the twenty-first century, the border is not just a line on the earth anymore. It's so much more than that. It's about status. It's about opportunity... the border is everywhere. The border... is in your mind.¹

This is an essay about a minor calamity that sometimes confronts passengers/travellers undertaking global journeys. This is an essay about getting caught in loopholes. This is an essay about rule and exception, about text, narrative and error, and reading the signs.

The words of this essay's epigraph are spoken by Guy Swift, a PR whizkid in Hari Kunzru's novel *Transmission* (2004) and the genius behind the European Border Authority's idea of Europe as an "exclusive", "upscale continent", "the world's VIP room". In a delicious twist of irony at the very end of the novel, after Swift finds himself stranded, thanks to a marauding virus, outside "Club Europa", excluded by the very walls he helped erect,² *Transmission* dissolves into a chaos of fragmented accounts, the textual deluge that follows in the wake of global disaster. In Kunzru's novel, then, disaster is rendered concrete at the end of a global narrative.

This essay reverses that fictive strategy, seeking to meld a coherent narrative from a multiplicity of accounts, from the proliferation of code.



Attempting Narrative in the Airport

*We are no longer citizens with civic obligations, but passengers for whom all destinations are theoretically open... An easy camaraderie rules the departure lounges, along with the virtual abolition of nationality – whether we are Scots or Japanese is far less important than where we are going. I've long suspected that people are only truly happy and aware of a real purpose to their lives when they hand over their tickets at the check-in.*³

The narrative begins in the imagined. Start with a passenger. Perhaps an exile, a refugee, a merchant, an artist, a student, a worker who calls home someplace half a world away, called to return urgently by a sickness, a festivity, a birth, a death, a wedding, an engagement, an interview, or two short weeks of annual vacation. Imagine the journey that has been braved many times – travelling miles/kilometres to an airport, waiting in multiple lines and lounges in order to be strapped into a pressurised cabin and delivered home. Consider the primary and secondary documentation that must be carried to prove eligibility to travel. Imagine the banality of waiting, imagine the handing over of tickets, imagine becoming aware, perhaps, in Ballard's words, of a "real purpose".

Finally, imagine the passenger being told that he or she cannot fly.

Leached of local colour and detail, emptied of nationality, race, sex, ethnicity, this fictive catastrophe still suggests the outline of a familiar story. The imagined passenger evokes a migrant, perhaps an immigrant, infected with third world origins. One preliminary lesson seems to be that the carefree cosmopolitan of Ballard's version and the tired travelling national of the third world do not co-exist in the same person. No matter how deep the third world traveller goes into the first, the passport can still incriminate.

To understand the nature of the transgression that closes off the passenger's possible destination, however, it becomes necessary to venture into the anti-narrative arena of code/space.

Code/Space

At its most fundamental, we define code to be an instruction or rule that has a single outcome determined by binary logic (yes/no).⁴

Geographers Martin Dodge and Rob Kitchin model aviation space, from the online purchase of a ticket, through the airport, and into the airplane, as 'code/space', i.e., space whose use and production is determined by code:

[C]ode and space are mutually constituted, wherein how the space is used and produced is predominantly mediated by code, and code and its data exist in order to produce the space and its attendant spatiality... [I]n code/space, code dominates the production of space.⁵

How precisely does narrative figure in code/space?

Consider the check-in line.

The Ceremony of Code

The check-in line is the first ceremony in code. To the passenger is assigned the work of waiting – in the airplane, at the gate, in the security line and at check-in. Wait here, the bold sign says, till your turn comes. Have your passport and travel documents ready for the desk agent.

Equally compelling is the subtext: Do not speak till you are spoken to. Be present, simultaneously alert and passive.

A game of trust-building, this waiting in airport and airspace, like the trust fall of corporate team-building exercises. Surrender one's agency, be caught and delivered. Wait for the call for your designation: "Next!"

Just as the airport has been called a non-place,⁶ the check-in desk agent may be counted as a non-person. In either case, function is definition. Eye contact is moot. Words are strictly optional. In rare cases, a nod may be offered, solely at the discretion of the desk agent.

At the counter, the passenger hands over for inspection the matrix of personhood, the proofs of identity and intent. The desk agent reads the code. The passenger's face is checked against the passport photo.

Believing this reading to be a confirmatory ceremony, with the outcome almost certain, not knowing the binary logic of code, the passenger waits to load the baggage of her journey onto the carousel.

The desk agent says, "Sorry, we cannot let you travel today".

The desk agent emerges from facelessness. This is when she becomes visible – the colour of her eyes gray, the color of her hair brown.

This is also when the passenger becomes *you*.

Mr Smith enters the airport and makes his way to the Swift Travel terminal. Along the way, he passes through standard terminals where long lines of travellers are queued at security checkpoints. To enter the Swift Travel terminal, Mr Smith walks down a long corridor. As he does, he undergoes multiple security checks – biological, biometric, radiological – conducted unobtrusively by systems imbedded in the corridor... His identity confirmed and his person deemed free of threat, Mr Smith reaches his gate... From the parking garage to his airplane seat, Mr Smith barely broke stride in his passage through the airport. Taking his complimentary drink from the flight attendant, Mr Smith raises a gratified toast to Swift Travel.⁷

Failing the Swift Travel of the future, perhaps you have a travelling companion to counsel you. Perhaps you are travelling alone to a family emergency. In either case, your use of British airport space requires a transit visa.

If you protest that your layover is no more than an hour, and that you have no plans to leave the airport, the desk agent will leaf through your passport to the US visa page and tap on the date. *Expired.*

If you argue that you are not trying to enter the United States, that you are trying to leave, she will say that she could have allowed you to pass through London's Heathrow airport even six months earlier when your US visa expiry was still within the six-month grace

period. As evidence, she will refer to a document on “Visa and Direct Airside Transit Visa (DATV) Nationals” and the exceptions contained therein.

If you try to read the fine print, try to find the loophole that proves her error, she will wait, purse-lipped, faceless, as if to say: emotion has no place in the pure ceremony of code.

There is only one way to defile the ceremony of which you, passenger, have already broken the rules. Only one way to disturb both the person and the function. Allege racial discrimination.

She will fetch her ethnically ambiguous check-in supervisor.

He will display the list of DATV countries – 48 in all, and 25% of all countries in the United Nations:

Afghanistan, Liberia, Albania, Macedonia, Algeria, Malawi, Angola, Moldova, Bangladesh, Mongolia, Belarus, Montenegro, Burma, Nepal, Burundi, Nigeria, Cameroon, Palestinian Authority, People's Republic of China, Pakistan, Colombia, Rwanda, Congo, Senegal, Democratic Republic of Serbia, Ecuador, the United Nations Mission in Kosovo, Ethiopia (including documents issued by Eritrea), Sierra Leone, Gambia, Sudan, Ghana, Somalia, Guinea, Sri Lanka, Guinea-Bissau, Tanzania, India, Turkey, Iran, 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus', Iraq, Uganda, Ivory Coast, Vietnam, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Lebanon⁸

For your pains, he will book you on code/space, a flight two days later from an airport 330 kilometres and a ten-hour drive away. On your itinerary, hastily, he will scribble this URL: www.BritainUSA.com

You, passenger, embarrassed and undone by your errors, stranded in code/space, will need the following: an internet connection, access to a phone that does not need to be fed change, a ready usable credit card, a place to rest, and many hours to spare.

Read the rules in hypertext. Consider exemptions, and costs. Call travel agent, airline, and embassy. Anyone you know. Try not to get lost.



Terms and Conditions: We want you to know the details before purchasing your airline ticket...

6. The passenger is responsible for all travel documents and information, including but not limited to: Passports, Visas, Transit Visas, Immunizations required and/or recommended, Baggage limitations, State Department Warnings.⁹

Passports and Visas

It is your responsibility to ensure that you have the correct travel documents for your journey. Entry and transit requirements are subject to change and you are advised to check the requirements with the Consulate or Embassy of all countries on your itinerary.¹⁰

Q. I need to travel quickly, but there are no appointments available. How can I get an expedited service?

A. The Consulate does not offer an expedited service. However you can apply through an independent courier service that does not require an appointment to submit an application on your behalf:¹¹

An outsourced telephone enquiry service now handles all passport and visa enquiries made to British Government Offices (BGOs) in the US. This premium rate service (\$2.49 per minute) will be operated by our partners, ABTRAN, who aim to provide a professional and seamless service to our customers. This service complements the comprehensive information on visas for the UK and Overseas Territories already made available through this website.¹²

In the crudely compressed space of acronym, ATV is code both for Action Television and Airside Transit Visa.



The Joker Flies to London

Earlier this week, Robert Coleman, 35, flew to London using his Joker ID card. Pictures of Coleman, standing in front of the Big Ben and 10 Downing Street, were posted in the forum of the popular Dutch blog Fok. However, on his way back he was forced to surrender his card to the authorities at Schiphol Airport. Coleman says he pulled the stunt to show that the regulations for passport photos are not watertight. He got his card by claiming he had to dress this way because of religious principles. He also managed to apply for a driver's licence picturing him with The Joker's white skin and dark hat.¹³

Coded Facts

A Federal District Court judge questioned the legality of State Department manuals that, apart from encouraging "special handling" of blacks, Arabs and others, provide a list of abbreviations to help sort applicants: "RK = rich kid, LP = looks poor, TP = talks poor, LR = looks rough, TC = take care". In the case in which the judge had provided his ruling, among the evidence submitted were rejected applications with notations like "Slimy-looking", "Wears jacket on shoulder w/earring", and "No way... poor, poor, poor"¹⁴.

The following is a non-comprehensive list of states requiring airside transit visas: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Luxemburg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom, United States.

Travellers from the following countries are subjected to the airport transit visa requirement by all the above states: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Congo (DRC), Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Sri Lanka.¹⁵

The IATA (International Air Transport Association)/Control Authorities Working Group (CAWG), members of which include the national carriers and immigration departments (sometimes supported by the civil aviation and border police) of Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States, provides these definitions in guidelines on streamlining ATV regimes:



Airside Transit Visa (ATV) means a document issued prior to arrival by a State that authorises citizens of certain nationalities to transit through the issuing State's territory en route to an international destination without leaving the Direct Transit Area.

Direct Transit Area means the special area established in connection with an international airport, approved by the public authorities concerned and under their direct supervision, for accommodation of traffic that is pausing briefly in its passage through the State's territory.¹⁶

Significantly, the IATA/CAWG issued these guidelines in August 2001, barely a month before the defining international disaster of this century. Also in August 2001, at the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, held in Durban, the International Labour Organization (ILO), International Organization for Migration (IOM), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) along with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), noted with concern the dramatic spread of international visa and direct airside transit visa (DATV) regimes, cutting across traditional bilateral and sub-regional routes.¹⁷

Earlier, British Airways, in a memorandum on physical controls in UK ports of entry tabled before the House of Commons in April 2000, voiced dissatisfaction with the effect of the DATV regime, then restricted to 17 countries, on passengers transiting through London.¹⁸ Even earlier, in February 1999, Mike O'Brien, then junior minister in the British Home Office, summed up the total number of DATVs granted during 1996 and 1997 as 23,200 and 29,000 respectively.¹⁹

Viewed from the post-9/11 vantage point, after the debate was taken off the table, these discussions seem curiously prescient.²⁰ Like the coding of applicants on class and appearance in the State Department manual cited above, at stake is the control of the immigration flow, a matter of weeding out the undesirable, as Kunzru's Guy Swift might say. The DATV regime preceded Al Qaeda. By all indications, it will outlive Bin Laden and his progeny.



Accounts from Code/Space

Whose jurisdiction am I under when making a connection at a foreign airport?²¹

In code/space, meanwhile, the ripples multiply. Concealed in virtual space, dealing privately with the massive opacity of the system, each passenger confronts the possibility of expensive error. In the months and years following the implementation of newer, more comprehensive DATV regimes, before the exceptions are clearly defined and publicly disseminated, and before they are widely understood, informational chaos reigns. Bewilderment and contradictory accounts are defining symptoms.

Does an Indian passport holder need a 'Schengen' ATV to transit through Frankfurt en route from India to the US? No, not if s/he has a multiple-point entry visa to the US.

Does an Indian passport holder with an expired US entry visa need a 'Schengen' ATV to transit through Frankfurt en route from India to the US? Yes, but it is hardly ever checked.

In the multiplying accounts, and regurgitated jargon, each passenger must somehow find the rules applicable to his/her unique case. On online immigration discussion forums, strikingly most densely populated by Indian passport holders, the scenarios are rehashed, the same questions answered again and again, the answers often contradicting each other. On the website Rupnet.net, for instance, which offers "phone cards, fragrances, classifieds, astrology and \$5 web domains" in addition to immigration discussion forums, someone asks about travelling from Newark, New Jersey to Delhi via Paris on Air India without a visa but with visa authorisation. Multiple replies follow, often containing anecdotal advice.²²

Every so often, meanwhile, someone is travelling off the well-trodden path. Recognising the limitations of *desi* (indigenous) forums, this genus of traveller poses its questions on yahoo!answers.

Travelling Delhi-London-Lisbon or Islamabad-Paris-Oslo, there are fewer answers.

The set of rules that determine the code are thus an emergent category, inferred as much as understood through the unsettling chiaroscuro of passenger/migrant discourse. The fewest consolations, however, accrue to the realised catastrophe, the made mistake.



Yet these ghosts of frustrated journeys define the limits of conjecture. These are defining cases, where the code is rendered crystalline and visible, verifiable.

Someone's brother-in-law, for instance, an Indian citizen and American green card holder, lacking a transit visa, was denied passage from New York to India. Someone's aunt, American resident for 35 years, deprived of the right to fly without reference to visa guidelines, muddies the picture.²³

The errant would-be passenger, meanwhile, punished by the system, draws such personal conclusions as his/her case and temperament warrant. After the lodged complaint, after the damage control, after the re-booked itinerary, the personal rule often takes the form of private resolve to avoid such-and-such airline, such-and-such travel agent, and in extreme cases, such-and-such route.²⁴

While in many ways the most responsive to the forces of political economy that shape the code, the individual's boycott is also essentially a quixotic act, a symbolic tilting at the signifier of an ever-receding windmill. Minus a narrative, the account suffers for lack of generalising, communicative power. At best, it is the worst-case scenario, a cautionary tale for would-be passengers. At worst, it is hostage to the teller's idiosyncratic spelling, or punctuation, or delivery style, a moral/conclusion dangling in code/space.²⁵

Minus narrative, each question, each complaint, is locked into its own flight path. What might happen if the narrative was actually rendered, and not paradoxically present as an absence/lack?

Plane Passenger Tells Security Penis Pump Is Bomb

A passenger who rather ill-advisedly told security at Chicago's O'Hare Airport that part of his penis pump was a bomb faces possibly three years' jail on a felony/disorderly conduct rap, *The Chicago Sun-Times* reports.

Mardin Amin, 29, was en route to Turkey on 16 August with his dear old ma and two small children when a female security operative extracted a "small, black, squeezable



rubber object” from his backpack. Since he was standing next to his mum, Amin decided to whisper out of the corner of his mouth that it was a “pump”. The guard misheard it as “bomb”, with inevitable consequences.²⁶

Bold and Fine Print

The airport as text functions in bold visible print, a mapped and marked space of flows, built to facilitate directed mobility.

In the hyperlinked world,²⁷ on the other hand, getting lost is a legitimate option.

Code operates in fine print. In code/space, narrative dissolves into text, bits of information. It becomes the task of the reader, then, to rescue the narrative by decoding the text.

Simultaneously resistant to causality and hospitable to conclusion, the code offers the comfort of embedded rule. Do not fly airline X, avoid route Y. Ask the embassy. Obtain the transit visa in advance. For each individual case, from each account of error, a single, customised conclusion.

Narrative resists conclusion, offers no morals for easy scanning. Seeking to travel, it searches for points of connection, the synapses of the system where many lives touch. The most instructive narratives, like the most instructive accounts, end in disaster. Indeed, as Canadian writer Margaret Atwood shows in her story *Happy Endings*, to be at all interesting or instructive, the narrative must embrace disaster.²⁸

How then may the reader/rescuer construct an empowering narrative from the jetsam, the wreckage of a failed flight?

The touchstone is a theme, the strand that unites disparate accounts.

Consider the following newspaper report:

On a Monarch Airlines flight from Malaga to Manchester in August 2006, two men were removed, according to passenger accounts, for “acting a bit strange”, for



moving from the front of the queue to the back, and most of all, for speaking Arabic. In the aftermath of the “Chinese Whispers”, as one passenger described the floating accounts that followed this “strange behaviour”, some passengers refused to board the flight, and others “deplaned”. Spanish police subsequently boarded the plane, took the men’s passports and removed them from the aircraft. They were questioned for several hours but later released.²⁹

Another report, this time closer to home, uncannily dating to the same month:

Ten Indian nationals, all men, all Muslim, were removed from Northwest Airline’s Amsterdam-Mumbai NW-0042 flight, held for interrogation for several days by Dutch authorities, and finally released. Some passengers described the men as speaking Urdu; some with beards, and some in *salwar-kameez*... Nitin Patel of Boston, who sat behind the men, said... “I don’t know how close we were, but my gut tells me these people wanted to hijack the airplane”³⁰.

What connects the travellers in these reports with the ones stranded without a DATV, the ones that failed to pass through a security checkpoint? In this substratum, lies the seed of the narrative.

The difference between the passenger and the traveller is that acquiescence is not a requirement for the traveller. The traveller reads the fine print and knows where to plumb it for significance. The traveller is well informed on what questions to ask. The traveller can ask who wrote the code, and why. Perhaps even construct an anti-code, a counter-narrative.

Terminal Point

If flight paths are solitary, there is a clearing space for conversation in the train. The train narrative is a well-established tradition, from the stories of Tolstoy to Shama Futehally to Rohinton Mistry.

In second-class, third-class or first-class, body space is adjustable, a space of autonomy, self-defined, infinitely flexible. Adjustments are made, for a second, a third and



a fourth body. In code/space, on the other hand, personal room is a precisely calibrated thing, defined by armrests. You can come only so close, and go only so far.

In a departure lounge at Amsterdam's Schipol airport, a mother waits for her delayed flight. On the gray day, brightly orange-robed this mother, and very, very lost. Passengers come and go – girls of non-specific ethnicity wearing pink slacks; a *desi* family or two; blond-spiked young men – but the mother sits, with her arms crossed, sombre, and waiting, barely contained in her seat. This is her first time flying, all the way from Abuja, Nigeria, to Atlanta, Georgia, USA.

"Do you know it?" she asks, enunciating the foreign syllables with care; and it is difficult to say whether she refers to origin or destination. Her son is an engineer, a recent post-graduate from university. She is a mother travelling alone. Like yours might someday travel, in a new *salwaar-kameez*, seasoned, yet vulnerable, and ripe with motherly innocence.

All around the terminal there are clocks showing international time. But there is none that is close enough to indicate flight times. The mother asks you the local hour, and in turn, she offers an orange – juicy, and non-coded.

Notes

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2. *Ibid.*, p. 239.
3. J.G. Ballard. "Going Somewhere?" In *The Observer*, 14 September 1997.
4. Martin Dodge and R. Kitchin. "Flying through Code/Space: The Real Virtuality of Air Travel". In *Environment and Planning A* 36, No. 2, p. 197 (2004).
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 195-211.
6. M. Augé. *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (Verso, 1995, London).
7. A vision for the future for airport security systems inaugurated by MITRE, a not-for-profit organisation working in the area of US Federal Aviation Administration. See Chris Lockheart, "Swift Travel: A Glimpse into the Future of Airport Information Management", in *The MITRE Digest*, February 2006. http://www.mitre.org/news/digest/aviation/02_06/swift_travel.html.



8. UK Visas. "Visa and Direct Airside Transit Visa (DATV) Nationals". <http://www.ukvisas.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1020786334922>. (20/12/06)
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16. IATA/Control Authorities Working Group. See "Guidelines on Airside-Restricted Transit Visas", IATA, http://www1.iata.org/WHIP/_Files/Wgld_0009/transit_visas.pdf
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18. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199899/cmhansrd/vo990216/text/90216w16.htm>
19. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200001/cmselect/cmhaff/163/163ap44.htm>
20. Tom Bunyan of Statewatch reports on a secret October 2001 US-EU meeting, thus: "We may be witnessing the creation of a new northern 'Fortress Europe-USA'". See <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2002/feb/03useuim.htm>
21. <http://ask.metafilter.com/42479/Whose-jurisdiction-am-i-under-when-making-a-connection-at-a-foreign-airport>
22. <http://www.rupnet.net/immigration/posts/reply.asp?id=2609>
23. <http://ask.metafilter.com/42479/Whose-jurisdiction-am-i-under-when-making-a-connection-at-a-foreign-airport>
24. <http://backtalk.com/articles/why-we-wont-fly-british-airways-any-more/>
25. *Ibid.*
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28. Margaret Atwood. "Happy Endings". In *Murder in the Dark: Short Fictions and Prose Poems* (Jonathan Cape, 1983, London).
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