Memorandum

To: Christine Skolnik
From: Jill A. White
Date: 8/4/2003
Re: Project #1: Travel Writing as a discourse community

The Discourse Community

Using research conducted on the internet and in several periodicals, I have constructed an analysis of the discourse community of travel writers. Through this research, I found that all travel writing fulfills one basic purpose: making the travel experience easier and more memorable for the traveler. However, since no two travelers have exactly the same idea of what constitutes a “memorable” travel experience, travel writing necessarily addresses many different audiences and discusses a variety of issues. Despite such diversity, many common threads run through all travel writing, rendering it a distinct discourse community (albeit with several “sub”-communities). Such threads include:

- the need for expert writing skills among its practitioners
- a similar general subject matter
- writers who are avid and passionate travelers
- the common goal of imparting what travel writer Martin Li calls “meaty, practical and accurate information that is useful to the reader.”
- An ability to adapt that goal for many different audiences

The Writer

An Expert: To join the ranks of the travel writing discourse community requires a high level of skill as a writer. Martin Li’s on-line piece, “How To Write the Perfect..."
Travel Article” lists as vital characteristics “clear writing style, without affectation; vivid reporting; high literary quality; and the accurate use of grammar and syntax.” The online source Travel Info Exchange echoes this notion, exhorting writers with the headline, “Please Your Editor!” to submit pieces that are well-written: “…think of how happy an editor would be if your work can be printed without any additional intervention.”

A personality: The editors at Marco Polo Publications, who maintain the web site Travelwriters.com, also appreciate travel writers who “take the personal approach.” It is very common, in fact, to see travel pieces written in the first person. In a recent item in the magazine Saveur, for instance, writer Shane Mitchell lends a highly personal focus to what might have been an ordinary review piece about a Canadian bakery:

For the past 12 years I’ve crossed the Canadian border to provision my cottage in northern New York. Pan Chancho is my stop for crunchy baguettes, chocolate-studded brioches, artisanal Quebec cheeses, and Niagara freestone peaches.

Travelwriters.com also extols the value of writers “who know what their point is and get to it.” Finding this point is key, since—as all of these online sources point out—most places a writer visits have been written about before. Travel writers therefore share the ability to approach a destination with a fresh perspective and “find something new and original to say,” as Li writes. When writing these “new and original” pieces, travel writers are able to do so vividly, reaching beyond what Travelwriters.com calls “those golly-gee-it-was-fun stories.” Travel writers, the site contends, should infuse their stories with a personal touch, allowing readers to sense “the magic and wonder—or even squalor—of a place, to know what it means to go there.” The lead story in the April 6 issue of the Chicago Tribune travel section, written by Arline and Sam Bleecker, provides an excellent example of this particular skill:

Hamilton, Bermuda—We couldn’t believe it was the Atlantic Ocean. Along Bermuda’s pink-sane shoreline, we waded in water the color of blue Popsicles. Jutting from the cerulean sea, black sandstone outcroppings forged a hidden cove near Horseshoe Bay, where we swam in lagoon-like pools and idled under the buttery sun.

A traveler and researcher: Above all, travel writers are avid travelers who have a knack for gathering accurate information. Li points out in his on-line article, “How to Travel the World for Free as a Published Travel Writer,” that travel editors most often insist that their writers submit pieces only about locations they have visited
firsthand. “You can find out an awful lot about a destination through desk research, and you should certainly undertake such research before going on a trip,” he writes. “However, you will never truly understand the essence and soul of a place…until you’ve visited it…” Travel writers thus share a certain bravery, a sense of adventure, that compels them to visit new places and embrace new experiences. In addition, they lack the diffidence that often keeps mere tourists on the beaten path, and are not shy about gathering and verifying information from natives, fellow travelers, tourist bureaus, or any other source.

The Audience

Diverse needs: The discourse of the travel writer addresses travelers; the community is tied together, after all, by its focus on places to go, things to see, places to stay, and places to eat. However, as the Travel Info Exchange points out, “Usual readerships are fairly broad, and include a spectrum of likes and dislikes.” In other words, since the nature of voyages varies widely from traveler to traveler and trip to trip, travel writers find themselves addressing a number of different groups within the traveling community. The business traveler, for instance, is an ideal audience for quick-reference travel guides that simply list hotels, restaurants, and perhaps a stores where necessities can be found. Saveur, on the other hand, addresses an audience of traveling “foodies,” whose main reason for traveling is to sample and prepare unique and regional cuisine.

Diverse means: Travel writer Adam Lechmere makes note of another audience for travel writers: those he calls the “time rich and cash poor.” In an article on travel guides posted on the BBC Arts web page, Lechmere points out that “Michelin, Fodor—and before them, Baedeker—catered exclusively for the upmarket traveller. The [Lonely Planet editors] wrote for a market more interested in getting around on a couple of dollars a day than in where they could get their shirts starched.”

Diverse interests: Other audiences include outdoor adventure travelers, cruise travelers, retirees, travelers with children, and nature travelers, based on a perfunctory scan of the articles in National Geographic Traveler and the Chicago Tribune. Each of these audience groups in turn contains many sub-groups that might be interested in anything from architecture, archaeology and history to discotheques, fashion, and shopping. Travel writers must therefore be adept at writing for different audiences. Indeed, the Travel Info Exchange web page admonishes, “When you write a travel story or guidebook, you’re not writing for yourself, you’re writing for others. You must be careful to write what THEY want to read.”

The Subjects

In addressing this wide variety of audiences, travel writers necessarily deal with a number of divergent issues; all of these issues, however, are linked in some manner
to the overriding topic of travel, that “meaty and accurate” information that travel writers must supply above all else. Within that topic, everything from the expected hotel and restaurant information to local foods, customs, and etiquette; festivals and other activities; cultural history and archaeology; shopping and entertainment; and tips on handling mundane tasks like obtaining passports and exchanging money can be fodder for a travel writer. Consequently, a typically broad-based magazine like National Geographic Traveler is likely to cover many divergent subjects within a single issue. This month, for instance, the magazine includes such items as a visit by Darwin’s great-great-grandson to the Galápagos Islands; a broad treatment of the historical and cultural delights of Malta; an “insider’s” look at Toronto; and an outdoor adventure in Maine’s Acadia National Park. A more narrow focus is common as well in travel writing texts. In its April 6 issue, the Chicago Tribune chose to devote its travel section almost entirely to the topic of cruising. The individual articles in the section addressed such specifics as the advantages of cruising to Bermuda; the experiences of a first-time cruiser; cruising with kids; and reviews of four cruise lines that sail to Bermuda. Similarly narrow is the foodie-focused Saveur, which covered such topics as feijoada, the Brazilian national dish; the production of Japanese green tea; London’s Borough Market; Myanmar’s Water Festival; and Lebanon’s wine makers in its most recent issue. The possibilities for subject matter in this particular discourse community are nearly endless; indeed, one mark of a true travel writer is an ability to find fresh subject matter within the basic “where can I go and what can I see” topic that marks the community.

The Texts

The texts of the travel writing discourse community, once limited to guide books such as Baedeker and Fodor’s, now encompass a growing variety of genres. In addition to newspaper and magazine articles, typical (and atypical) texts include

- tourism brochures
- press releases and publicity packets for resorts and airlines
- memos and queries to travel editors
- screenwriting for the ever-burgeoning number of travel shows and documentaries on television. Examples include Michael Palin’s highly touted Pole to Pole series; Food Network’s The Best Of, Food Finds, and A Cook’s Tour; the dubiously named series Travel Sick; and the entire line-up of the Travel Channel Network.
- on-line resources, such as tourism web sites, restaurant reviews, and hotel reservation services, to name only a few. In addition, many guidebooks publish updated information on the web.
The Contexts

Political: Several political factors may influence what travel writers choose to write, the particular information they choose to impart, and even the subjects editors choose to publish. Recent world events, for instance, prompted the publishing of an article addressing concerns about cruising during wartime in the April 6 Tribune. Additionally, political conflict can determine whether a particular country will appear at all in travel articles. It is unlikely, for example, that any U.S. travel publication will be running pieces on Libya, Iraq, Iran, or Afghanistan any time soon. Similarly, there has been a dearth of travel articles about Cuba for the last several decades, although that void is shrinking somewhat as political tensions ease.

Social: Social concerns, such as illness or crime, can also influence the discourse of travel writers. The SARS outbreak, for instance, has curtailed travel to Asia; it is likely that numerous articles meant to entice travelers back to Asia will soon appear as airlines and tourist bureaus scramble to shore up their sagging revenue. Of similar concern currently among travel writers is security. It is this concern that prompted the publishing of an article in this month’s National Geographic Traveler that profiles several travel-intelligence agencies that can provide pre-trip information on crime and security for any given destination.

Economic: Economy has always had an impact on travel writing, as the plethora of travel-on-the-cheap guides and articles attest. As the Lechmere article mentions, the socio-economic level of the potential traveler is of course always a consideration. However, sharp dips in the economy or the value of the home currency can create an increase in these types of articles, as readers generally find themselves with less money to spend on travel. Whatever the economy, most travel writers mention economics at some point. Writer Nelson Mui, for instance, offers a moderately priced alternative to the swank Metropole Hotel in his piece on Hanoi in National Geographic Traveler. In their Tribune article, the Bleeckers tout the economy of cruising to Bermuda, saying it “offers terrific value compared to springing for international air fare and staying at costly island hotels.”

Despite the broad nature of their subject matter, travel writers form a distinct discourse community. Common to all travel subjects is a need for compelling, substantial, useful, and accurate information written in skillful, clear, unaffected—yet vivid—prose. To become a part of this community, then, I must develop strong and diverse writing abilities. I am already an avid traveler and a very good researcher, but to succeed in this discourse community, I must cultivate the moxie to talk to new people, the tenacity to dig up and verify information, and the creativity to find a fresh angle on a destination.