

# Writing in Museums: Toward a Rhetoric of Participation

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## **Abstract**

The study takes a situated and material approach to texts and writing practices and examines writing ethnographically as it transpires and displayed in museums. The ethnography highlights the richness and sociality embodied in writing practices as well as the ideological, communal, and ritualistic functions that writing and texts serve in cultural institutions. Specifically, I offer a comparative study of visitor books and similar writing platforms in two Jewish heritage museums in the United States. Extended ethnographic observations of visitors' writing activities are augmented by analysis of visitors' texts, which, following Bakhtin, are understood in terms of their addressivity structures or whom they are addressed to. The study shows how visitors' texts amount to collective contributions that are part of museums' heritage display, and that visitors become rhetors when their mode of heritage consumption is the production of texts.

## **Keywords**

ethnography, materiality, heritage, mediation, addressivity, visitors, writing, discourse

Writing is not usually thought of as an activity that takes place in museums, where visual consumption—rather than textual production—is (still) seen as the primary activity museum goers engage in. Nonetheless, I have spent the

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last decade in museums, observing visitors' writing practices, which they perform willingly and publicly as part of their roles as visitors. In this article, my ethnographic studies of museums, texts, and writing marry two bodies of scholarship. The first concerns prolific studies on texts and writing practices pursued by writing studies scholars, specifically studies that draw attention to the collaborative, highly situated, and material nature of writing (Bazerman & Prior, 2004; Haas, 1996, 1999; Prior, 2009). The second concerns rhetorical studies that examine the materialities of public texts, or the "material conditions that sustain the production, circulation, and consumption of rhetorical power" (Selzer, 1999, p. 9). This body of scholarship addresses the effects of these texts as "rhetorical performances" (Blair & Michel, 2000, p. 32), mostly around monuments and commemorative and heritage sites (Allison, 2013; Blair, 1999; Dickinson, Blair, & Ott, 2010; Selzer & Crowley, 1999).

One way of fruitfully linking these bodies of scholarship is by studying sites where everyday writing practices transpire, and where this occurs publicly and in the context of material rhetoric. This is not obvious, because most studies of written communication address disciplinary, professional, and academic contexts, while studies of public monuments and their rhetoric tend to focus on the materialities of the written more than on the materialities of writing. I propose that museum visitor books (VBs), especially those presented in heritage museums where the past is represented and issues of identity are at stake, are precisely such platforms. Offered within curated environments, VBs invite and allow visitors to become rhetors and to engage in ritualistic and public modes of writing. Upon doing so, visitors become participating/contributing members of a community, and their texts instantly join the institution's material and textual rhetoric.

My ethnographic journeys into museums are informed by an additional body of scholarship, itself loose and multidisciplinary, which includes linguistic anthropologists, sociolinguists, and discourse analysts (broadly defined)—some of whom are associated with the "new literacy studies" school—who focus on ethnographic approaches to texts and writing (Barton, 2007; Barton & Papen, 2011; Blommaert, 2013; Lillis, 2008, 2013; Noy, 2008; Rampton, 2007; Tusting & Maybin, 2007). What these scholars share with both North American writing studies and studies of material rhetoric is an appreciation of *writing practices in and of themselves*. Here is a dual remove from the dominance of oral discourse (from Aristotle through de Saussure) and from the widespread view of texts as "windows" through which meanings shine (the "transparency bias"; Haas, 1999). These studies address writing as a noun, "a record of something already existing" (Hymes, 1996, p. 35), and as a verb, denoting the social practices involved in

producing the same. They ask about the circumstances of writing as a “field of action” (Blommaert, 2004, p. 644), addressing cultural resources and consequences of the situated and interactional production of texts. I follow suit by taking the word *text* literally, meaning “a unique material inscription” (Prior, 2004, p. 169), and after Haas (1999) I see writing as embodied practices whereby a code is materialized. The situated and material approach to writing and writing practices, which treats writing as a semiotically rich set of practices (meaningful in themselves), guards from the *freezing* of writing. To recall Prior’s (2009) cautioning, “Even in some of the richest theoretical and empirical work, there remains a tendency to freeze writing (as though it entered the world from some other realm), to see writing as a noun rather than a verb, to specifically not study writing as activity” (p. 22).

In this study I examine writing activities and the public texts that they produce in two Jewish heritage museums, exploring the rich textual environments they offer and focusing on the participatory writing platforms they afford their visitors. The study of writing in these environments sheds light not only on material and public dimensions of writing but also on *participatory and collective rituals*. In light of the special issue’s focus on the rhetorical construction of social roles, objects, and spaces, and on how writing is deployed in ritual and communal environments, I stress Blair’s (1999) observation, that “memorial sites, by their very existence, *create communal spaces*” (p. 48, italics by the author hereafter). In the heritage sites I study, visitors’ texts are public contributions that are part of the museal cultural display, and writing emerges as a symbolic and leisure—rather than bureaucratic and instrumental—participatory ritual.

## Visitor Books as Situated Discursive Platforms

My focus on the activities of museum visitors and specifically on public writing practices corresponds with the notion of culture as participation, and of participation as a matter of *public performance*. The term “public” is key here because it both describes these texts’ availability (“public” versus “private”) and the fact that they are seen as written by and representing ‘the public’. I begin the study with the material rhetoric of public texts, pursued by Blair and colleagues (Blair, 1999; Blair & Michel, 2000, 2007), then move to visitors’ contributions, which I call “the material rhetoric of participation.” The writing surfaces I study are commonly labeled “visitor books,” and are laconically defined as “a book in which visitors may write their names and addresses” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Typically, VBs are public writing surfaces that museums, galleries, hotels, parks, churches, and even restaurants offer. I refer to these books broadly,

because different writing surfaces are subsumed under the this title: Comment books/logbooks, records, documents, catalogues, visitor/guest registers, genres, autograph albums, little books/booklets, journals, and signing books are a handful of terms employed in academic literature, curatorial terminology, and popular culture to refer to these on-site writing surfaces.

Perhaps because VBs are thought of as anecdotal and hence unworthy of serious study, they have received only little systematic attention. Yet existing research suggests that VBs are discursively intriguing artifacts. For instance, Stamou and Paraskevolopoulos's (2004) study of VBs in a Greek ecotourism park examined tourists' perceptions of ecological discourses. The analysis yielded discursual categories that distinguish between tourism-related themes (*The forest is fantastic. I had a very good time there;* p. 110) and environmental-related themes (*These birds are unique. Congratulations on those who contribute to the preservation of this treasure;* p. 114). Furthermore, the VBs that were studied were positioned in two different locations: One book was located in the Tourist Information Center, where visitors are given information about ecotourism, and the other was located at the observation site, where visitors view raptors eating carrion. The comparative analysis yielded significant differences: The themes in the book located in the information center were almost exclusively recreational-touristic, while the themes in the book located near the raptors' feeding spot were more environmental. The authors sensibly argue that the former spot is associated with cognitive activities (learning), while the latter spot stimulates affective responses. The point is that the physical location of the books, even within the same site, invites and elicits different themes and texts, or different rhetorical performances. These discrepancies accord with Prior's (2004) observation that "the emergence of some text as write-able in some context" (p. 168.), beseeching an up-close and attentive view of actual writing contexts.

Macdonald's (2005) and my own (Noy, 2009, 2015) semiotic and ethnographic studies of museum VBs illustrate how these place-sensitive writing surfaces are employed by visitors as stages for public expression. Akin to Blair's (above) works, these studies refrain from a traditional content analysis and focus instead on the books' rhetorical and communicative characteristics: mainly materiality, affordances, and addressivity. These studies are of particular interest because they examine VBs in heritage museums and suggest writing as a political action. Yet they are not comparative (in the sense of examining different sites and different writing interfaces), and more detail and elaboration are needed in terms of museum rhetoric and observations of actual moments of writing. In light of these studies I ask,

*Research Question 1:* What are the material and discursive means through which heritage institutions and museums rhetorically frame VBs so as to serve as situated and symbolic surfaces of and for writing?

*Research Question 2:* How, through their addressivity structures and the collaborative efforts involved in their composition, do visitors' texts perform participation?

## Writing in Museums: A Comparative Ethnography

In this section I describe two museums that narrate Jewish heritage in the United States, after which I address the methodology I used. The first museum is the Florida Holocaust Museum (FHM), located in downtown St. Petersburg, Florida. The museum is located in the touristic district of the city's downtown, in the vicinity of a number of art museums, chic restaurants, and the city's waterfront promenade. The museum portrays the roots of mediaeval European anti-Semitism, moving to the events leading to the rise of the Nazi Party, the Holocaust, and its aftermath. The second museum is the National Museum of American Jewish History (NMAJH), which is located in the historic part of Philadelphia. This museum narrates the history of Jewish immigration to, and livelihood in, the United States from a liberal perspective. It portrays the high levels of integration and accomplishments of Jewish communities in American culture, society, and politics and reserves little space for the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel.

### Method

I pursue sustained ethnographies of writing and texts in museums, where I see ethnography as a methodology that combines different methods, which address institutions (museums), practices, and texts (for helpful discussions of ethnographic writing studies see Haas, 1999; Lillis, 2008; Noy, 2011, 2015; Wickman, 2010).

*Institutions.* VBs are located in museums and are part of these institutions' public display. In order to study them, one needs to have at least some idea of why a given museum offers a VB (many museums do not), how it maintains it, and how the book corresponds with the museum's overall rhetoric of display. On a more pragmatic note, one needs the institution's consent to conduct research therein. To be able to address these issues, I conduct general observations of museums and interviews with curators, docents, and volunteers. The former help secure access to the site (the "gatekeeping" question) and illuminate how VBs are viewed; the latter, who are more "on the ground,"

shed light on daily activities and observations surrounding the VB. I also take many photos and collect “rubbish” (Blommaert & Jie, 2010, p. 58), such as flyers, advertisements, and so on.

*Practices.* I study writing activities by conducting sustained and focused ethnographic observations of “what goes on” near VBs (Noy, 2015). My ethnography at the FHM begun toward the end of 2012, with my family’s move to Florida, and since then I have been visiting the museum every week (weekdays and weekends), usually for whole days. My ethnography at the NMAJH began during a fellowship at the University of Pennsylvania (2010-2011), when I was able to visit the museum every week. Since moving from Philadelphia (2012-2014), I traveled to the museum a few times a year, each time for a few days.

Ethnography is a labor-intensive methodology, and I try to plan my museum visits so as to arrive when there are more visitors and more activity (weather is a crucial factor here: The worse it is—hot in Florida and cold in Philadelphia—the richer the ethnography!). Once in the museum, I am positioned so as to be able to physically observe the VBs and their surrounds. My role as a researcher there is marked by a visible badge, where my name and my academic affiliation are indicated, by the way I present myself to visitors, and by the field notebook I carry. I record the observations I make in the field notes. There, I describe what visitors do before, during, and after writing in VBs, and the interactions they have with the book and with other visitors. The observations aim to supply a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of situated writing practices, arguing precisely that writing is complex, collaborative and observable. They also aim to answer Haas’s (1996, p. 3) question, as to “what does it mean for language to become material?” in given context and at a particular site.

I complement the observations with interactions with visitors by asking why they chose to write and how they construe the museum and their visit more generally. I avoid the term “interviews” (though it can surely be used) because the interactions are brief, unstructured, and secondary to the observations. While in the past I based my studies on interviews (Noy, 2007a, 2007b), I prefer an ethnomethodological position that emphasizes naturally occurring interactions (between members) over questions offered by the researcher (well informed and well formulated as they might be; cf. Lillis, 2008, p. 361).

*Texts.* In order to study VB texts I first document the VB (by creating digital copies), and then transcribe the texts (a transcription procedure that is *within* written modalities and not from oral to written discourse). While in ethnographic observations the unit of analysis is visitors’ production of VB texts,

in terms of texts the unit of analysis is a written utterance (a VB text or entry). I approach utterances holistically, and following Blair's (1999) suggestion that "we must ask not just what a text means, but, more generally, what it does" (p. 23), I ask how texts function, how they stand in relation to other texts (Haas, 1999), and what they accomplish in situ. In order to do this I avoid dissecting texts or running content/text/coding analyses, and focus instead on these texts addressivity.

The notion of addressivity originates with Bakhtin (1986), whose dialogic view of utterances—the building blocks of language and communication—highlights their "being directed to someone" and that they possess a "quality of turning to someone" (pp. 95, 99). Addressivity refers to the ways texts expressively communicate who their audience(s) and who their authors(s) is/are. Barber (2009) argues more broadly that addressivity captures texts' "ways of evoking their readers and suggesting particular modes of reception and engagement" (p. 32), and Allison (2013) notes that museums "possess addressivity" and that "individuals and publics may dialogue with them and be inspired by them" (p. 149).

Addressivity is a productive analytical tool because visitors' texts can potentially address different audiences, be them museum personnel, historical figures, future visitors, and others—with none of whom they directly interact. It is the fleshing out of texts' specific addressivities, together with the material-cum-rhetorical means through which these are conveyed (where the texts is physically located, for instance), that allow a situated appreciation of the ritual work texts accomplish. And this is as true of museums' texts (who the *museums* are addressing) as it is of visitors' texts. The texts below are taken from VBs that were presented in the museums I studied during my ethnographies there: At the FHM I draw on the VB that was presented during most of 2013-2014 and on the museum's "meditation room," and at the NMAJH I draw on the book presented during the summer of 2012.

### *Discursive Ecologies and Visitor Books*

While there are considerable differences between the museums I study—from thematic orientations to size, numbers of visitors, structure, goals, and modes of operation—they show similarities in offering a *richly textual (specifically handwritten) ecology*. Both museums' exhibits are replete with handwritten documents of different sorts and origins, which amount to the salient category of items on display. At the FHM the textual artifacts include personal letters and journals that were kept by Jews before and during the Holocaust, as well as copies of German documents that describe Nazi operations. The display's basic semiotic building block is the authentic/historic text-artifact, accompanied by

its translation together with a clarifying label and accompanying visuals. At the NMAJH, too, the display is multimodal and often presents multilayered textual display. The textual artifacts include original and facsimile copies of immigration documents, completed mostly during the 18th and 19th centuries by both Jewish immigrants and immigration officers. They also include handwritten letters, personal diaries, lists of immigrants' possessions, records of births, deaths, and marriages of Jewish families, and an assortment of religious documents. The museum presents surfaces, installations, and projections that display texts, supplying a powerfully visual sense of letters, words, and sentences (even if sometimes unreadable). Visitors visually consume the multimodal display (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001), which amounts to the basic semiotic building block of the permanent exhibition.

The point is not only that these museums' spaces are textually rich environments, but that they include many handwriting artifacts *as part* of their display. With the help of textual (re)mediation (images and forms of display of texts), texts and handwriting are variably used as rich semiotic resources for display. It should not be surprising, therefore, to learn that these museums hold VBs, which are, in effect, *part and parcel of their textual display*. Moreover, each museum holds more than one VB, or more accurately more than one kind of public writing interface. At the FHM, a VB is offered as part of the museum's permanent exhibition, and smaller VBs are usually presented in the temporary exhibitions. In addition, across the hallway from the main VB is the entrance to the "meditation room," where visitors are invited to write texts on small notes, and then insert them into cracks between the stones that make up the wall (the arrangement deliberately echoes the writing ritual that takes place in the Western Wall in Jerusalem, where short prayers are inscribed on small notes called *kvitelach* in Yiddish). At the NMAJH, two small VBs are presented as part of the museum's core exhibition, in a period-room dedicated to Jewish westbound travel during the 19th century. In another location, toward the exit, a discursive interface includes Post-it notes on which visitors write replies to questions presented by the museum and stick the notes on the wall. Within the scope of this article and my focus on VBs, I turn to attend to only a few of these writing surfaces, their material location and symbolic framing, and how they are used by visitors.

### **Visitor Book and Meditation Room and at the Florida Holocaust Museum**

Both the VB and the meditation room at the FHM are located near the museum's exit, which is where VBs are typically found. It is where, Katriel (1997)





**Figure 1.** Visitor book (left) and meditation room (right and back) at the exit of the Florida Holocaust Museum.

observes, VBs are ideally suited to elicit “an audience-contributed gesture of closure” (p. 71). The VB itself is a heavy and large 150-page volume, offered in a small passageway that visitors *must* pass on their way out of the museum—visitors can avoid writing in the book (or even closely reading it), but they can hardly avoid noticing it (see Figure 1). The book consists of large blank pages (13 by 13 inches), written mostly in English, with no numbers, lines, or other organizing grids that can shape visitors’ writing. As of June 2014, it contained 2,749 texts (a considerable large corpus compared to other VBs).

The book is offered on a pedestal with a pen and a sign that reads, *Tell us about your / Museum experience!* and in smaller letters, *Thank you for your*

visit.<sup>1</sup> Writing interfaces in museums are usually accompanied by instructions that address the visitors. For instance, in a commemoration museum I studied in Jerusalem, the instructions directed visitors to write in a “respectful manner” and to “regard the visitor book in a manner appropriate to the Ammunition Hill Site” (Noy, 2008, p. 71). These signs serve to frame the books as writing-appropriate surfaces and to inform visitors how to use them (a question concerning specific, situated literacy).

Furthermore, the book’s pedestal is positioned against a special wall (Figure 1, left side), where idioms are engraved in handwriting-like form on gray square bricks: *Be the change / that you want to / see in the world. / Mahatma Gandhi*; and *History, despite its / wrenching pain, / Cannot be un-lived, / but if faced / With courage, need / not be lived again. / Maya Angelou / From On the Pulse of Morning*. The largest text here is biblical: *What we once heard / we now have witnessed. / Psalms 48*. “Rhetoric,” Blair (1999) argues, “is introduced into a space that would be different in its absence” (p. 46), and these short texts are offered as inspirations and illustrations of texts which, though brief, are meaningful and hopeful. The museum texts (on the wall) join visitors’ texts (in the book) in the process of visitors’ acquisition of literacy and developing competency in composing coherent texts. Visitors’ texts could then pass as presentable public writing and as intelligible and legitimate discursive contributions. VB literacy is unique in that it involves formulating short, even telegraphic texts, and there is no reason to presume visitors’ competency in this genre. My observations indicate that visitors read or at least scan through these idioms, and then, with *no* exception, read texts in the book before composing their own.

One afternoon in winter 2013, two young, female college students are by the VB: One is leaning over it and starting to write, while also reading what she is writing (so her friend will hear). The friend, standing close by, is reading quietly (but audibly enough for the writer to hear) the texts on the wall and in the VB. In this way, both visitors-rhetors are vocalizing (oralizing) texts synchronically, so that the latter supplies the former with formulas and ideas for composing the entry, and the former is feeding-back the text she is writing. While the former is the one who is actually doing the writing, the entry’s overall production involves both visitors. Indeed, after completing the entry and signing it, she invites her friend to sign too (which is untypical), so that the entry is eventually dually signed. It reads, *This museum / made everything / become alive I / will never forget*. In terms of Goffman’s (1981, p. 167) conceptualization of *participatory roles*, the visitor who is writing (the one actually holding the pen) is the “animator,” while both visitors are the text’s “authors.” Observations of this kind reveal what texts often veil, which is the collaborative and intertextual nature of the activity of composing texts, and

how roles are seamlessly distributed among visitors. Prior (2009) sees writing “as a face-to-face activity” (p. 24), and here we may also add face-to-sur/face(s) activity, where the authors read from the VB and the wall while—and as part of—composing their contribution. If the text is the activity’s enduring “product,” the activity itself is, as a process, interesting. The observation is also telling in terms of foregrounding practices involved in writing, including, in this case, reading and vocalizing, and in how the texts in and around the VB feed into the final outcome.

Across the hall from the VB the meditation room—also called “the prayer room”—is located. At its entrance, a text is presented in gold letters engraved on black marble:

*You are invited to use this space to reflect upon your Florida Holocaust Museum experience. / You may wish to leave your thoughts or prayers on the paper provided and place it in the wall. / In keeping with tradition, your folded messages will be collected and will remain anonymous. / The messages and prayers will then be delivered to Jerusalem and placed in the Western Wall.*

These instructions frame the space and the activities that transpire therein. While VBs are not usually afforded special spaces in museums, the space of the meditation room is designated as a place for reflection and personal, rather than public, forms of participatory writing. The juxtaposition of these writing surfaces is interesting. Located on each side of the passageway leading to the museum’s exit, they offer symbolically different elicitation and framing cues for on-site writing rituals. The VB, with the idioms inscribed nearby, frames writing as an on-site public performance: From Psalms to Angelou, the short texts are offered as authored utterances that present an expectation as to the conventions of signing the book. In comparison, the meditation room offers a discrete and personal channel, where visitors’ texts are “folded” and “remain anonymous” (note that while the texts are hidden, the multiple notes on the wall are publicly visible and *imply* texts). Unlike texts in the VB, notes in the meditation room will not remain stationary/immobile, but will travel elsewhere to a special destination—Jerusalem. Akin to letters, these documents enjoy a physical trajectory, and as prayers, they are intended to be read only by one addressee—God. Put differently, here the museum does not offer itself as the addressee of visitors’ texts (as with VBs: *Tell us about your Museum experience!*), but rather as the *conduit* for their messages.

The museum’s docents, too, play a role in framing these writing surfaces and in drawing visitors’ attention to them. Toward the end of the tour, a few of the docents specifically mention the VB and/or the meditation room. With

such propositions as, “please don’t forget to write here about your visit,” “read what it says [docent points at the wall] and write your own impressions,” and “take a quite minute to go into the meditation room,” docents allocate time during the tour to present these surfaces and to propel visitors to write. This is especially noteworthy with school-age children, who are sometimes rushed out of the museum with literally no time to read or write. With the younger school children (fifth grade is the youngest age for school trips to this museum), the docents add these words: “and don’t worry, we don’t check your writing!” The subtext of these assurances is that conventional criteria of school-related literacy give way to ‘more important’ issues, specifically expressive participation. At stake is a language ideology (Gal, 2005) that promotes participation via writing, whereby young and presumably unsure-of-themselves visitors-writers are encouraged to produce discourse not for the sake of improving grammar or spelling, but for more profound moral causes.

As participatory surfaces, the VB and the meditation room draw visitors’ attention and small gatherings often take place at these locations. It is not always easy to discern between visitors who choose to write on either platform (or on both). When I inquired with visitors about the meditation room, they typically described their texts as “prayers” and “letters to god,” in which they sought compassion, and prayed for those who perished in the Holocaust (and humanity more generally), as well as for health and peace for their families and loved ones. Other visitors said that what they wrote was “on a bigger scale” compared to the VB, and that their texts “came from the heart [while in the VB] it was toned-down because everyone can see.” Two college-age visitors from New York told me that they chose to write in the meditation room because they were intrigued by the act of inserting notes into the cracks in the wall. They said that they plan to return to the museum in a few years in order to see their notes (supposedly located exactly where they placed them). While their explanation surprised me (the engraved museum text specifically states that the notes will be removed), it shows that the material ecology of communication and the tactile rituals and meanings associated with it powerfully impact on visitors’ participatory preferences and choices.

If the meditation room channels spiritual expression “on a bigger scale,” most of the VB texts are expressions of gratitude addressed to the museum, which is viewed as an agent of documentation, preservation, and presentation of the past:

*Thank you for / guarding this / important history and / presenting it in such / a beautiful manner.*

*Very educational and it / reminds people to remember / the Holocaust so it never / happens on such a large scale / again. / Thanks for / everything [smiley].*

I argued elsewhere (Noy, 2008) that VB texts amount to *public performances*, where visitors typically reiterate the heritage narrative that the institution conveys, thus showing that they visited the site and “got” the message. In this case, the first of the two texts addresses the museum’s mandate as both an archive and a public display (*guarding* and *presenting*), and the second text explicitly denotes the museum’s educational agenda (*Very educational*) and reiterates one of its main messages, that the Holocaust should never be forgotten or repeated (*it reminds people to remember*). In terms of addressivity, both texts’ addressees are *implied*, and visitors do not need to explicitly mention the “museum” for their texts to be understood as addressing it.

Most texts in the VB address the museum (as do the texts above), yet visitors also make use of the VB for the expression of prayer and spiritual sentiment that are *not* directed at the museum (as the notes in the meditation room might be used also for expressions directed at the museum. I cannot confirm this as I did not study the notes’ contents). On one occasion, a visitor in her 50s from the Midwest signed the VB and then, teary, entered the gift shop (which is where I would usually observe and interact). She started a conversation with the museum employee and with me, and when I asked about her choice to write in the VB and who she was writing to, she answered readily: “I wrote it to our Father.” She said that she was “praying for all [people]” and that “He is the only one who can help.” She then cited the *complete text* she wrote in the VB (she took us to see it there), saying that it is her “personal prayer” and that she uses it occasionally when feeling overwhelmed: *May we love / on [sic] another as / You have loved / us. Till hate / is no more . . .* (paraphrasing John, 13:34). Perhaps because this visitor was overwhelmed or because her prayer was of a public nature (*we* and *us*), she chose to write in the VB and not in the meditation room. I am presently less interested in her motivations and more in the discursive heterogeneity and addressivity structures evinced in the VB, and that although most of the texts address the museum, a few possess different addressivity structures. In these cases, the public surface of the VB serves as an emotional outlet and ventilation channel. It is a space of articulation for visitors who are emotionally and morally awed after their visit, and who are undergoing—and communicating—a spiritual experience.

## **“Jews Are Awesome”: The Visitor Book at the National Museum of American Jewish History**

The exhibitions in both museums are arranged chronologically, moving from past to present. At the NMAJH, two small VBs are available for visitors in a small room that describes Jewish travel and immigration to the West during the 19th century. These are relatively small VBs (the size of a school



**Figure 2.** Visitor book (on left), artifacts, and museum text at the National Museum of American Jewish History.

notebook), one of which has lines, and the other—which I will discuss—clear pages. Visitors make different uses of these VBs: In the former they write their name, place of origin, and date of visit, which are the minimal traditional elements of signing a VB; in the latter, visitors write comments. This small book contains 63 texts written on 21 pages, predominantly in English. It is physically positioned inside a wooden tray, near this label:

*Think about the things you might want with you during / your long journey to the West. Some supplies are already / in your wagon. WHAT ELSE WILL YOU PACK?*

This text addresses visitors directly, playfully scripting them into action amid imaginary preparations for travel. The three artifacts that are positioned near it and near the notebook, demonstrate what travelers typically took with them when traveling westward: a handheld mirror, a Hebrew prayer book (Siddur), and a few pencils (Figure 2). The artifacts supply the immediate material and semiotic context for the notebook as a participatory writing interface:—the pencils frame writing activities as historically associated with travel *and* serve as actual writing implements (which most visitors indeed use), the Siddur frames the notebook as a *literate Jewish artifact*, and the mirror symbolically frames the notebook as a reflexive (mirroring) surface.

The texts in this notebook are heterogeneous in terms of their addressivity structures, and reveal three distinct addressivities, which are distributed more

or less evenly. About a third of the texts (20) reply to the museum's question and are composed as *responses*. These texts participate in the telling of the museum's imaginative narrative of historical Jewish travel:

*I would pack weapons just / in case something happens. / I would bring food too. / Joseph was here,*

*Feb 15, 1853 / The trip has been OK so far / except my iPad is almost dead / and 3G coverage is spotty.*

These two texts intently contribute to the rhetoric merger between heritage visitors and institutions, and to the participatory and animated cotelling of American Jewish history. The texts' addressivity structure shows that the visitors understand and accept their roles as collaborators. The second text is, in fact, is an explicitly humorous response: By way of improvisation, which implies a mastery of the genre and the ability to modifying it, the text plays with the temporal duality that is foundational to heritage museums, reconciling by-gones with immediate experience. While the text's date locates it appropriately in the 19th century (the exhibition's historic horizon, which the visitor thus conveys to have understood), the difficulties associated with travel are typical of 21st-century communication technologies. The playful response reveals that visitors are *themselves travelers*—they have traveled to the museum and are traveling within it—and reflects that the museum's invitation establishes a symbolic correspondence between journeys and travelers then and now.

Most of the texts that are addressed as responses to the museum are written by young visitors, usually together with family members. Parents sometimes use the occasion of writing as an opportunity to teach their children literacy skills in a public context, but most of the times these were the children who pointed out the notebook and who proposed to write. On a hot summer noon, a mother and her four-year-old son walk into the room. They take their time playing with the artifacts, and the mother reads the labels throughout the room out loud. They then arrive at the notebook, and the mother reads the label and then, turning to her son, repeats the question (*WHAT ELSE WILL YOU PACK?*). The boy doesn't respond, and she then asks him, "what do *you* want to write?", thus delineating the concrete activity before him. He proposes "we are in America," to which she responds "yes, but what do you want to take to the West?" The boy then says, "we got to America and we'll travel to the West." The mother now seems content and she writes the text (*We arrived at America yesterday and are traveling west*). She then signs twice, on both of their behalves, which makes the boy displeased: He frowns at her and says, "now I sign." At this point the mother hands him her pen, and

says the date, and points at where exactly on the notebook page he should write. The boy writes slowly, and the activity takes a few minutes, during which the mother instructs him exactly how to order the letters of the numerals (the date), and then, letter by letter, the long family name and city's name. The orthography is large and not well ordered, and a few of the letters appear in mirror-writing, but the signature is readable. As they conclude, the mother reads the complete entry out loud again and smiles contently and they leave the room, not before she smiles to another family, who has just entered it.

On another occasion, two orthodox Jewish brothers of grade school age are playing in the room. The mother enters a short while later with a stroller, and one of the brothers, who saw the notebook, calls to her, "this is for writing [points at notebook]. Let's write." After searching for a writing utensil the mother takes a pen out of her purse and hands it. The younger sibling joins his brother, who starts writing (with the mother standing closely behind). He repeatedly asks for spelling and for ideas, as though he wants to write but isn't sure how to write or what to write about. The mother collaborates by correcting his spelling (*howling with o*), and by suggesting ideas for the short story he wants to write. While his inquiries are directed at his mother, it is the younger brother who enthusiastically supplies ideas, and so the sibling who is writing eventually writes a long story about the fears associated with travel (*It is night. I am writing this . . .*). After a few minutes he wants to end the story with the words *The end*, but his brother tells him to conclude otherwise, with the words: *More later*. He writes these words, which offer a more open and more refined conclusion, suggesting that the genre is that of travel/diary writing where writing is pursued repeatedly (the brother shows his knowledge of the genre). On a number of other instances, children express a wish to write, but the parents are in a hurry or busy and say that there is no time for it.

These brief descriptions of in vivo writing activities (and refusals to write) illuminate the *collaborative* nature of composing adequate responses. Since most of the visitors arrive in groups, their museum activities are pursued jointly, and the "product," that is, the public text, is a joint achievement. (Co) participants in these interactions try to make sure that the text is not only an adequate reply, but also genuine and creative. They stand up to the literacy challenge by paying attention to spelling and grammar, but also to style and creativity. And they do so by occupying different Goffmanian production/participatory roles: animators, authors, and principles.

Lastly, while most of the texts that are addressed as responses in this notebook are unsigned, Joseph's text (above) illustrates signatures' performativity. The text ends conventionally, using the idiomatic token "I was here." Such assertions, whether inscribed autonomously (as stand-alone texts) or as part of a longer text (as in Joseph's text), lie at the core of the indexical semiotics of



VB texts (cf. Noy, 2015). They build on the fact that handwriting is physically tied to the body of the visitor (as accent is to the body of the speaker). In a book about the cultural history of handwriting in America, Thornton (1996) shows how, from romanticist to modernist perceptions, handwriting has been viewed as inextricably connected to writers' bodies (physiology) and minds (character and personality). The "I was here" assertion is the ultimate cultural currency handled by VBs, managing both authenticity (through indexical/physical connection), and participation in a collective ritual.

Another signed text is *Alyssa's*:

*Almost all people who / went to the west wrote / diaries. / Alyssa, Aug. 2012 / (also a Jew).*

Alyssa's signature is interesting because it explicitly references Jewish identity. The parenthesized words serve as *qualifiers* that characterize and legitimize participation in Jewish (travel-)writing: She, too, is Jewish, and hence she, too, can legitimately participate in imagining historic Jewish travel. The use of the word "also" reminds us of the notion of the collection—so essential for museum display (Stewart, 1984)—as the undersigned visitor recognizes and publically identifies herself as *fitting into* and *joining* the assembly (a collection of signatures indexing Jewish identity). In other words, Alyssa recognizes that items in museums and in VBs are sorted into collections, and in the latter case they are made of comments and autographs and amount to a collective record. Recall that the instructions indicate that "*Some supplies are already in your wagon,*" which symbolically requests visitors to *add* on to an *existing collection*. In this way, visitors are symbolically invited to first, supplement the exhibition by adding/writing their names, and to, second, supplement the past by adding a present (and a future). What visitors add to the Jewish wagon is not a material object per se, but a textual artifact that complements the contemporary "discursive wagon" that serves as a metonym of Jewish heritage and regeneration.

The addressivity structure that characterizes the second group of texts in this notebook (18, nearly a third) has the museum as its addressee. These texts are not structured as responses and their writers do not participate in the retelling of Jewish travel. Rather, they offer comments and impressions regarding the site and the exhibition in a manner that resembles typical VB texts:

*What a beautiful / and educational / museum / Amy A / Oceanside, NY,*

*This exhibition feels real. I'm not a Jew, but I'm loving the history.*

It is interesting to observe how, through these texts' addressivities, visitors-rhetors position themselves: While the first text is rather standard, the second is noteworthy in that it is offered from an "outsider's" perspective: The text is self-referenced as written by a *non-Jewish* visitor. In other words, for the writer identity is casted in terms of (non)membership in a group that is perceived as relevant for the specific occasion of writing (hence also non-membership is viewed as relevant; see Sacks, 1992, on membership categorization analysis). It might be that self-referencing serves here to enhance the positive evaluation the text is conveying, as if indicating that *despite* not having a Jewish identity, this visitor loves Jewish history. In any case, the text illustrates a group of approximately a third of the notebook's texts, which have the museum as their addressee. In this specific location, the instructions are less important than visitors' desire to make use of the available space for conveying messages regarding the exhibition and its meaning. Indeed, the last entry I discussed essentially performs a move from the site, which is immediate and tangible (*This exhibition feels real*), to Jewish history, which is abstract and intangible (*I'm loving the history*). This is a fundamental connection which heritage museums seek to establish.

While Katriel (1997, p. 71) notes that most of the VB texts she has read are repetitive and positive, Macdonald's (2005) study and my own works (Noy, 2008, 2009) show variations, which stem from texts that critique, disagree with, or bluntly oppose elements in museums' exhibitions. Though infrequent, these texts are telling in terms of the (subversive) identity claims that they make, and the features of the museums which they critically highlight (which might otherwise go unnoticed). An example of such a text, which has the museum as its addressee but in a critical way, is written in Hebrew:

*I would have been happy if there was [sic] also explanations in Hebrew. Particularly because this is a Jewish museum [smiley].<sup>2</sup>*

In addressing the museum disapprovingly, the entry raises a substantial critique, which challenges the site's very appropriateness to Jewish heritage. The entry's content has little to do with the westward travel of Jews, and assumes instead a tight correspondence between language and cultural meaning. In fact, the text's language performs its content by suggesting that at least for *this* visitor, language (Hebrew) and identity (Jewish) are correlated. "Language ideologies," Gal (2005) confirms, "are never only about language. They posit close relations between linguistic practices and other social activities and have semiotic properties that provide insights into the workings of ideologies more generally" (p. 24). Through addressing the notebook, the visitor accesses the site's Jewish character and nature. Of

course, as a Hebrew text the text itself contributes to the shaping of the site's spaces and semiotics as a bilingual (Hebrew-English) Jewish-scape. The code serves as part of the addressivity structure, excluding non-Hebrew reading visitors and museum employees.

If the first group of texts consists of responses to the museum's question, and the second group consists of texts that address the museum, the third and last group contains 20 texts that discuss Jewish identity more generally and explicitly. These texts have an "open" addressivity structure, and they make general (unspecified) use the notebook as a public platform. Consider these two short text (each inscribed on an entire page): *JEWS ARE AWESOME* [smiley], and in the following page: *I [heart] G-d*.<sup>3</sup> These texts address everyone and anyone who can read them, and they evince the visitors' recognition of and relation to the site's heritage agenda and audience. Both are multimodal and both perform "Jewishness" albeit differently: The first text claims identity explicitly, by *naming* the identity category that its author finds relevant to the act of writing in this context. The text further conveys a positive evaluation of this category (*AWESOME*), and concludes with a code change (a smiley symbol). The second text is multimodal, and shows a "chic" manner of performing identity. Its tri-modality consists of shifts between codes, linguistic and other: English (I), graphic (drawing of a heart), and Hebrew (G-d). It, too, performs Jewish identity, but it does so through referencing religious devotion and the indexical incorporation of Hebrew (similar to the critical text about the museum's language). Such texts perform Jewish identity in situ and mark the spaces of the notebook as collective Jewish spaces. The discursive surfaces of the notebook become a site for claiming identity and the public celebration of Jewishness; Jewish fandom performances.

The last illustration of the open addressivity group is an unsigned and undated text:

*God bless the Jews of / America ... and around / the entire world. / Pray for the safety & security / of Israel. / [smiley].*

This text, too, does not evoke Jewish travel westward nor does it address the museum, the exhibition, etc. If read outside its context, it would not disclose the whereabouts and whenabouts of its composition. It is an explicitly political text in that it argues for a correlation between Jews and the state of Israel. It uses the museum's public platform to promote a position, according to which American and international Jewry should unite in prayer for Israel's safety and security. This is a widespread national (Zionist) position, whereby God and the State of Israel are the defining elements of Jewish collective identity worldwide. Although I wrote that the text does not address the

museum, a contextual reading can suggest that it expresses a conservative critique of something that the museum's liberal exhibition *lacks*, namely the central evocation of Israel (the biblical land and political state) as the ultimate destiny and desire of Jews travel and prayer.

The text's political stance (perhaps critique) is noted by visitors, and a text stating *Pray for all*, was added immediately beneath it. The latter text includes a bidirectional arrow that vertically points at the earlier text (above it), establishing correspondence between them. This telegraphic, bimodal, and intertextual three-word utterance *refutes* the national position by paraphrasing it: It replaces an exclusive category (*Israel*) with an inclusive category (*all*). This dialogue is performed on the public writing surfaces that the museum offers, where contemporary Jewish identity is negotiated. It is telling in terms of addressivity because we can learn of texts' addressivity structures also from who *actually* responds to them (as Levinson, 1988, observed, following Goffman, "the addressee is that participant with the right to reply," p. 127). As the only text in the notebook to have received a reply, we might suggest that visitors see open addressivity texts, and not other addressivity structures, as summoning them and hence reply-able.

## Conclusions

This study adds to the body of ethnographic studies of texts, writing practices, and contexts by "looking *at*, rather than *through*, the literacy technologies we use every day" (Haas, 1996, pp. 22-23), and by doing so outside the settings of academic writing. Rather than assuming what VBs are, I examined them bottom-up, so as to begin from scratch and ask, how, where, and when are they employed, and to what effect. The first research question addressed the institutions—cultural heritage museums, and their texts and "rhetoric of display" (Blair & Michel, 2007, p. 605), which materially and symbolically frame on-site participatory writing interfaces. The second research question, the other side of the coin as it were, addressed visitors' texts, or the *rhetoric of participation*. I examined the relations between these two sets of texts, how visitors compose their texts as part of their roles as visitors, and how they structure their texts' addressivities so as to shape the situated rhetorical performances they seek to accomplish.

From the institutional perspective, the ethnographies at the FHM and the NMAJH evince both similarities and differences. In the two museums handwriting is used as a rich resource for authenticating and personalizing the items on display and, by implication, the overall historical narrative. The discursive and textual ecologies and writing scenes these museums offer establish correspondences between the textual (re)presentations of

historical texts, and the actual acts of producing texts in situ by visitors. Writing activities are structured by museums as a *participatory activity to be encouraged*, though in particular ways, through the use of different writing platforms or media (often operating simultaneously, such as the meditation room and the VB at the FHM). In terms of differences, these emerge when we look at the *type* of participation these museums seek through visitors' writing, which is why they position their writing platforms in different rhetorical locations, not only near the exit. Indeed, curators can and do position participatory platforms at the material and symbolic midst of the exhibition, such as at the NMAJH, where the book is located in a historic room describing Jewish travel to the West in the 19th century (cf. Noy, 2015). In this location visitors were not asked to reflect on their visit but to imaginatively participate in historic retellings.

Regardless of where they are positioned, VBs and the texts they elicit are offered publicly and they join the institutions' historical narration by augmenting the moment of the present; "the time of the visitor," as Blair and Michel (2000, p. 47) put it. Most texts in the FHM VB reflect on the visit and indicate the visitors' "takeaway" or what they leave the museum with. Other texts in the VB and in the nearby meditation room are prayers. At the NMAJH texts are equally divided between responses to the museum question, comments to/on the museum, and more general statements regarding current Jewish cultural identity. These text-performances differ in terms of their addressivity, showing what Bakhtin (1986, p. 69) called different "responsive understating" on behalf of visitors as to their roles—they can address the museum, or they can use the available platforms for writing *beyond* the museum: At the FHM these are prayers while at the NMAJH these are political statements. Indeed, addressivity emerges as a central feature of both how museums address and summon their visitors, and how the latter shape their participation as heritage agents.

In terms of writing practices, the observations refute the common view of the sole-author, and evince a highly collaborative production format (Goffman, 1981), where texts' authorship and production are pursued by a number of visitors, who occupy different roles. Prior (2009) writes that through interactions "different persons, different voices, different addresses may become embedded in the composed [written] utterance" (p. 27), and indeed, family members and friends offer corrections, comments, and thematic and stylistic suggestions for each other's texts, indicating that cognitive, social, and rhetorical processes are at work. These activities are not seen as relevant to the display of the final "product," and are not indicated in the texts. Which is why ethnographic efforts are required in order to appreciate them. Collaborative writing practices are salient in museums and other

public and cultural sites, because most visitors arrive there in groups, and the situated production of texts is pursued accordingly: a joint production by family members, students (and their teachers), or just friends who are visiting together. Writing activities are pursued leisurely—they are voluntary and noninstrumental, and are part of the social (and sometimes playful) activities available in museums. This suggests that the context and circumstances of writing can shape the very meanings that the activities of writing carry.

Finally, ethnography is a time-consuming and labor-intensive methodology, and the prolonged and sustained ethnographic study of writing in museums sheds light not only on the material and public dimensions of writing, but also, importantly, on *participatory collective rituals*. Blair and Michel (2000) argue that the memorials they study “situate the visitor as agent” (p. 41), specifically as rhetor, and I find this to be all the more true when writing functions as participatory action. In other words, visitors to heritage sites become rhetors when their *mode of heritage consumption is the production of (heritage) texts*. Studying these processes contributes to our understanding of writing as symbolic action that is deployed in ritual and communal environments.

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### Notes

1. Transcription note: Forward slash (/) indicates a line break in the original text, and words in square brackets [] were added for conveying clarifications and graphic symbols.
2. Transcription: *hayiti smekha im haya [sic] gam / hesberim be'ivrit / bifrat ki ze muzeon yehudi*.
3. The writer uses the Hebrew letter He with an apostrophe as an abbreviation for the word Ha-Shem, which is commonly used in spoken and written reference to God. Ha-Shem literally means “The Name,” but since in other VBs visitors often write “G-d,” I chose this form.

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