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Theorising comment books as historical sources: towards a performative and interpretive framework

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ABSTRACT

This article theorises historical comment books and related travel-writing sources. It offers a conceptual framework for reading disparate sources produced by travellers and tourists during and as part of travel and visitation. An interdisciplinary framework is promoted, conjoining travel and tourism studies, medium theory, communication sensibilities, and anthropology of writing. By attuning to the practices, materialities, and mobilities that comment books generate and embody, this study details six analytical hypotheses. These hypotheses address the indexical value of comment books as on-site media, their institutional nature, the heterogeneous literacies, narratives, and chronotopes performed in and through them, and the texts' addressivities. The article seeks to illuminate the richness, complexity, and significance of these sources, and of the travel practices they stimulate. More than records or capsules of historical voices and discourses, as travel-writing artefacts comment books are stimulating to "think with" about the historical, sociocultural, and political processes they index.

KEYWORDS

Travel writing; media;
writing practices;
materialities; mobilities;
indexicality

Introduction: travel, medium theory, and the anthropology of writing

Comment books are intriguing travel artefacts, the study of which sheds special light on historical and contemporary processes, practices, norms, and meanings associated with travel, destinations, and visitation. This conceptual article offers a framework for the analysis of texts in comment books by applying an interdisciplinary approach. This entails such (sub)fields as travel and tourism, medium theory (within media and communication studies), and anthropology of language – specifically of writing practices. My hope is that this conceptual framework will fruitfully promote a nuanced historical analysis of comment books and their texts. It is geared to tackle these texts' complexity, and the multiple functions they have served (and are serving) in the nexus of travel-writing, (im)mobilities, and the historical performance of identity and sociocultural meaning.

Before addressing specific hypotheses concerning the analysis of comment book texts, I briefly outline the aforementioned (sub)fields from which I borrow both sensibilities and sensitivities. As per travel and tourism, these are viewed along a performance framework, suggesting a complex set of public and observable practices, with rich historical roots,

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which are “replete with rigid conventions [...] habits and routines [...] [which are] performed via a normative array of enactions” (Edensor 2007, 199–200; also Edensor 1998; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Löfgren 1999). Indeed, a performance approach stresses the myriad roles that past and contemporary travellers present, the contexts within which they are produced, the meanings they carry, and how they transform through time and intercultural exchange. Acknowledging the normative and conventional aspects of travel throughout history, as Edensor does above, points to why the study of comment books is illuminating – it offers a window into actual literary travel practices, which transpire during and as part of travelling.

Nested within the nexus of mobility and travel, comment books illuminate the interplay between mobility and immobility, the changing values of spaces and places (“destinations”), and the relation between travel and visitation/destination. Documenting historical and cultural travel norms and rituals, comment books illuminate the interplay between the quotidian, on the one hand, and the extraordinary, faraway, and cultural Other, on the other hand. Within these sets of travel practices are included an array of forms of travel documents and acts of documentation, sometimes hidden under the arch-genre of travel writing. These forms are recognised as organic and endemic to historical and contemporary practices and roles associated with travel and tourism.

To pursue an interdisciplinary informed study, I build on several fields of knowledge, on which I briefly elaborate. Medium theory is a subfield of media and communication studies that emphasises and focuses on an actual physical artefact/technology, for example, a medium. This view stresses that communication and mediation through time and space are not pursued in abstract, and that studying such processes requires examining specific objects and related communication practices and norms, and the goals they serve. The view was initially proposed by Innis (1951), McLuhan (1964), and Meyrowitz (1985), who stressed not only the materialities and spatialities of communication and its processes, but also that “the medium is the message” (McLuhan 1964). McLuhan’s famous phrase inspires a view of *comment books as media*, which then need to be seriously considered in terms of how they are put into use and by whom – even before their contents are examined. Medium theory highlights context over content, directing us to pay close attention to these artefacts and to their affordances: what behaviour and action they elicit. A media-centered view stresses the materialities associated with comment books, rendering them as objects and artefacts that may serve as actants that operate within large systems (a matter of scale), and that are historically and institutionally agentic. Such a view opens the door to asking comparative questions about comment books and other travel artefacts and interfaces, and about how historically such media have emerged and transformed. Taking a “history of the medium” approach also directs us to inquire into the cultural and situated histories of the practices associated with comment books in terms of both the establishments that employ them, and those who are employed by them: travellers’ and visitors’ reading and writing practices.

A medium-centred view of comment books segues nicely into the study of writing practices, whereby comment books are approached as *literary artefacts*. While comments books’ materialities, (im)mobilities, and environments are surely telling, comment books are after all public documentation apparatuses that generate writing and reading. Therefore, the more familiar we are with the kind of literacies, communication resources, and

practices used to interact with and through these media, the better grasp we may gain over the larger historical and social processes that their functions, uses, and texts index. An anthropological and ethnographic orientation encourages a holistic and context-rich approach. It stresses that our objects of study are not static and finalised texts, but the historical shifting richness of myriad practices associated with producing and consuming them. As a processual and observational approach, ethnography is helpful in discerning such practices and in viewing travellers' texts as *traces of situated literary action*.

Most of my research on comment books during the last two decades took place in history museums (ethnographically speaking). This enabled me to study these sources in a way that for historians would be difficult or unattainable: I was able to observe where precisely the books are positioned, I watched how they are read and how writing in them transpires, I spoke with travellers about writing and reading comments, and I was able to compare travellers' observations with their actual uses (texts). I was also able to conduct interviews with the establishments' staff members in order to obtain a picture of how they viewed the roles of these books, and of visitors to their establishment more broadly. Lastly, as I studied extensively several comment books in different types of establishments that are located in different cultures, I could arrive at a comparative and over-arching view of institutions' approaches to comment books and their employment, as well as to how different visitors and audiences perceived and pursued writing in them.

Building on the combination of these theoretical and methodological orientations, I propose what I hope will be a valuable theoretical and conceptual framework for scholars of travel-writing, especially historical travel-writing, who rely on comment books as source material. My contribution is intended to enrich understandings of travel performance and textual production, viewing this form of travel-writing as "sited" inscriptions and evocations of presence and identity, roles and relationships, spaces and mobilities" (Noy 2021b, 230), which tend not to be highlighted by historians.

With these prefatory notes, I move to outline six hypotheses for a scholarly reading of comment books. These hypotheses offer analytical perspectives through which the complexity of the historical and contemporary objects of comment books, and the texts they hold, can be approached fruitfully. They also illustrate why these artefacts are so intriguing. The first hypothesis actually concerns the lack of sufficient research of comment books and the reasons behind it, and how is this telling; the second concerns the indexical semiotic mechanism that underlies comment books as on-site media; the third hypothesis concerns the institutional dimensions of comment books as mobilised media; the fourth hypothesis concerns comment books' heterogeneous literacies; the fifth hypothesis advances a narrative and chronotopic approach to comment books, and lastly, the sixth hypothesis sheds light on addressivity in comment books, or who is communicating with whom in and through comment books' texts.

Reading comment books and their texts: six hypotheses

The first hypothesis is really an academic reflection. Despite the endurance and pervasiveness of comment books – and arguably because of these – up until recently comment books have, except by several historians, *scarcely been studied*. Observations such as "a treasure trove of underused data"; a "virtually unknown genre" and "relatively little-

used" media; "under-analysed" books, and "uncharted territory," are characteristic of the research literature on comment books.¹ The growing interest in comment books and similar media during the last two decades amounts to an academic tide – of which this special issue is a part – which seeks to bring these historical media into focus.

It is worthwhile to reflect briefly on the reasons for the delayed study of comment books. To begin, texts in comment books are commonly viewed in academic and intellectual circles – as in popular culture – as manifesting a "low" literary genre, requiring of the authors of these texts only basic literary knowledge and literacy skills. This is because travellers' and visitors' comments are very brief and are typically authored by "ordinary" people. Instances of illiteracies, the profusion of clichés, and sometimes improper and rude expressions and visual/graphic displays, have effectively deemed messages in comment books as folklore at best (sometimes exotic curiosity), and shallow and offensive at the worst; certainly unworthy of scholarly contemplation and study. Another reason for the delayed study of comment books concerns the multi-disciplinary approaches which these media, and the institutions that hold them, have historically received. In a recent paper I listed a handful of terms that are used by academics, professionals, and cultural commentators, to reference comment books (often interchangeably): "comment books," "logbooks," "log," "records," "documents," "catalogues," "visitor/guest registers," "genres," "autograph albums," "visitors' albums," "little books/booklets," "journals," "visitor books," and "signing books" (this non-exhaustive list is limited to English terms; see Noy 2021a). The multidisciplinary polyphony is not coincidental. It results rather from the multiple functions that these media have served historically (and are presently serving), their polysemiotic nature, and the substantial differences between the various kinds of establishments that employ them. Lastly, the delayed study of comment books results also from varied *intellectual traditions and academic discourses* from which the terms themselves originate: from history and historical geography, through book history and legal history, to the fields of tourism, recreation, and museum studies. All this is telling because at stake is not a mere vernacular mishmash, but a plurality that attests to the complexity of these artefacts, which beseeches conceptualisation and theorising.

On-site media and indexicality

The second hypothesis concerning the intriguing qualities of comment books is that they typically serve as *on-site* or *on-premises media*; in other words, they are immobile. Unlike most modern epistolary media and genres of communication and writing – books, letters, postcards, personal diaries, notes, and so on (all the way to emails and messages in smartphones and apps) – comment books are sedentary. They are usually presented at a certain location within the spaces of the establishments that offer them. This is not to say that mobility is not deeply ingrained in genres of comment books' texts, it is, and in complex ways; yet essentially these are the travellers, the tourists and the visitors who are on the move, and less so the artefact or the texts therein. This sedentary quality of comment books bears far-reaching consequences on the semiotics and communicative work that they accomplish. The initial consequences of the place-boundedness of comment books are that those who engage them through the practices of reading and writing, typically do so in the place where earlier readers and writers have done so as

well. In this sense, comment books are reminiscent of graffiti (in modernity as in antiquity, see Baird and Taylor 2011; Stern 2018), where inscribed and engraved texts are tightly associated with the space, site, or establishment where they are produced and received. In a sense, texts in comment books become a textual, visual, and material part of the environment in which they are presented.

In several studies which possess a historical dimension, I was able to document the modernisation processes of travellers' and visitors' on-site writing practices. I observed how these practices shifted from organic writings on such surfaces as stones and pillars at sites of pilgrimage, to writings inside comment books therein (Cohen-Hattab and Noy 2013; Noy 2021b). In one instance, a colleague and I studied these shifts at a pilgrimage site called Rachel's Tomb, located near Bethlehem. Rachel's Tomb was an active pilgrimage destination for Jews, Muslims, and Christians since antiquity. It allegedly marks the burial site of the biblical matriarch Rachel. In tracing pilgrims' writing rituals, we were able to show that the site had transformed in modernity from an open space that was accessible to all pilgrims at all times, to a closed and exclusive structure (containing doors with locks, inside of which the comment books were offered). As part of this change, pilgrims' and visitors' writing practices were gradually limited to writing inside the structure and the comment books within it, to the point where eventually older public engraving practices of writing on the Tomb itself, and on nearby structures and surfaces including stones and trees, completely diminished. This shift captures the modernisation or "domestication" of in situ writing and engraving practices, which is a common theme that runs through the history of comment books.

This is informative in terms of histories and origins of different types of comment books, and therefore also in terms of the meanings that the comments inside them conveyed at the time of writing. What is more, the modern transformation of Rachel's Tomb was undertaken by a British–Jewish philanthropist (Sir Moses Montefiore), which would shape the kind of exclusive access that the closed structure would later allow or forbid. In other words, visiting Rachel's Tomb and signing and writing therein has not become equally exclusive to all pilgrims, and gradually the variety of spiritual traditions of pilgrims and visitors diminished as well. It alerts us to the fact that "modernisation" needs to be appreciated not only historically, but also in terms of regional, ethnic, spiritual/religious, class politics. It also alerts us to the question of the politics of accessibility, which underlies travel, visiting attractions and destination, and hence also practices of travel writing.

The fact that comment books are usually read at the same location in which writing takes place is significant. The sedentary quality of comment books centrally puts forward the *semiotics of indexicality*, where meanings are constituted through a physical association between signifier and signified. Presently, in the context of comment books and sites/destinations, the indexical relations of signification stretch between the comments visitors inscribe, and the places and establishments in which these comments may be materially expressed. Indexicality is textually manifested through spatial deictics ("here" and "there"), temporal references ("now" and "then"), and pronouns ("you" and "we").² Comment books' texts demand an indexical reading, which addresses how meanings are established when writing takes place in the *very location* where the reading does, and where both writing and reading are performed physically at the site of visitation. In this sense, comment books and similar onsite platforms differ significantly from other genres and media of travel writing. Comment books' texts are rich in indexical markers,

which can also be seen as special semiotic resources used by inscribers for stating or performing their presence in books. Through the frequent use of indexicals, visitors can perform a sense of place, and elaborate in their own words and experiences where it is that they are visiting. The use of indexicals also highlights the notion of “hereness” (often combined with a sense of time, or “nowness”).

Beyond the use of verbal indexicals, *writing itself functions indexically* in comment books (Noy 2009). The very act of writing in comment books (like graffiti), even before considering *what* is written, serves as an act that physically ties – through inscribing, engraving, marking – signs, actions, and identities with meaningful locations and institutions. Accordingly, travellers’ and visitors’ texts are material traces, supplying a public sign that the visitor physically “touched” the comment book/site, and left behind something enduring. This is sometimes all that visitors wish to express by writing. This type of writing is a performative gesture, and as such it explains the basic verbal currency that underlies all writing in comment books, as expressed in the bare cliché: “I was here!”. Obvious as this writing cliché may seem, it entails time and place, indexicality, materiality (of writing) and performativity (Noy 2008, 2009, 2015b).

The onsite location of comment books has methodological implications. I am thinking of ethnographic or historical-ethnographic sensitivities, which can highlight crucial dimensions regarding the physical and symbolic locations of comment books in the sites and establishments that offer them. In a study of two comment books located in the *same* Greek nature reserve, Stamou and Stephanos (2003) found dramatic differences in terms of not only *what* is written, but also *who* is writing. The study found that even when the books are presented on the premises of the same site, their specific location and designated symbolic framing are formative in terms of their functioning and the meanings the entries in them carry. Stamou and Paraskevolopoulos’s study is illuminating because it suggests that the specific location of comment books is a matter of *accessibility* of and by different visitors – who possess qualitatively different motivations and characteristics that are relevant to what they choose to write, and whether to do so. Findings in my studies validate Stamou and Paraskevolopoulos’s findings, albeit through comparing different locations of comment books in different sites (more on this below). The point is that when we are asked the “million-dollar question”: How many visitors or travellers actually write in comment books, the answer must be tricky. It depends much more on the specific details concerning the management of the book – including its specific positioning and subsequent issues of accessibility – than on the general number of visitors to the site, or their inclination to engage in writing while on tour.³ And qualitatively, it concerns where specifically the books are positioned.

A final point relating to the semiotics of indexical signification was highlighted by linguistic anthropologists. Silverstein (1976, 2004) suggested that the better we understand the specific indexical ties that underlie social practices and everyday rituals (“micro”), presently in situ writing practices, the better we can “climb” the “indexical order” to delineate *broader historical and sociocultural processes* (“macro”). Examining travellers’ texts, we can say that the stronger the indexical connection, the stronger is the way the travellers tap on socio-historical processes. In this sense, comment books are platforms that capture the dynamics of the places and the institutions that hold them. A hotel, an inn, a pilgrimage destination, or any other attraction may be taken by travellers and visitors to be standing *for something*; for some greater meaning. It is not just an establishment, but a location

which may embody specific values for specific visitors, having to do with recreation, spirituality, class, gender, nationality, and so on. In such cases, the performativity of comment book texts is embodied in the fact that they indexically tie the authors-visitors who wrote them not primarily to the site, but *through it* to the greater meanings that the site is endowed with in their eyes. This is particularly interesting for historical analysis because it shows the historically circumscribed – and often shifting – meaning(s) that sites and destinations possess.

In the work of anthropologist Susan Sered (1989) on the changing meanings of texts at Rachel's Tomb during the 1930-1940s, she observes how the comment book at the Matriarch's alleged gravesite was used for writing pilgrims' prayers. These were mostly prayers for health and fertility, mostly expressed by women pilgrims. This was the case due to the consoling and maternal image of the biblical Matriarch. Sered notes how the site became highly popular during the 1940s, at a time when the prayers in the comment book came to possess new meanings. This was the case because of the "societal liminality" that Pre-State (and post-Holocaust) Jewish population in Israel/Palestine was experiencing. At that time, Jews yearned for collective symbols that would offer hope and consolation. Rachel's biblical image, and the site that materialised it, were now suited for this purpose, and the texts' meanings turned from themes relating to personal health and women's fertility, to national, patriotic, and collective hopes and displays, expressed mostly by men. By inscribing prayers, pilgrims and visitors not only reflected a changing "social mood", but also performed the same at the site. What they wrote during their visit to the Tomb was as much a public reflection of their feelings as it was a re-inscribing of the Tomb's (changing) collective meaning(s).

Likewise, studying a national Israeli commemoration site in East Jerusalem, I show how different types of visitors understood spaces of commemoration, and the ritual of the visit to these, in significantly different terms. (I elaborate on the different indexical meanings below.)

Institutional media

The third hypothesis concerns the *essential institutional nature of comment books*, which may be accurately conceptualised and approached as institutional or organisational media. It is hard to overstate the implications of the institutional dimensions of comment books, which embody a nexus that highlights various (changing) organisational interests, as well as historical ideologies of presentation and display. Institutional dimensions weigh heavily on different orientations to the institution-visitor interaction, and more broadly, to such concepts as travel, recreation, leisure, visitors/tourists, and even the public. The idea is that even before we consider what travellers and visitors write in these institutional apparatuses, organisational dimensions need to be highlighted and then accounted for. This condition is an immediate result of the fact that comment books serve as vehicles for establishments in pursuit of organisational goals. It is indeed paradoxical that one of the common names they go by is "visitor books," when they are in effect institutional platforms through and through, clearly offered and closely managed by the establishments which employ them. In this sense, too, comment books stand out in relation to most modern epistolary media and genres of travel writing.

Comment books' institutional dimensions manifest themselves on multiple levels. To begin, they take the shape of the physical type of apparatus chosen to be employed by the establishment, where exactly it is offered for reading and writing, and how it is institutionally framed and managed. In my experience, much thought, and certainly some resources,⁴ are given institutionally to such issues: from the artefact itself – whether the comment book is large or small, decorated or plain, containing ruled (lined) or blank pages; to its management or how and where are comment books presented, the degree by which professionals/staff members monitor the comments (and sometimes react to them); to the “afterlife” of these media, or what is done with them once they have fulfilled their purpose.

Figures 1–3 present pages and openings from comment books in three sites. The images capture the material and design differences between these artefacts, and how they are offered, across several dimensions. Figure 1 depicts a large and plain comment book opening, with white, unruled pages, taken from the book at the Florida Holocaust Museum, St. Petersburg, Florida. The book is positioned at the very end of the tour, near the museum’s exit. A small sign located near the book addresses visitors directly with a request: “Tell us about your Museum experience!” (and in smaller letters: “Thank you for your visit”). The sign suggests to visitors to interact with the book, and frames how to do so and what types of text are expected (elaborating on “experience”). Written signs, and correspondingly oral instructions by staffers, often accompany the offering of the book for visitors to fill and sign. Moreover, behind the book, a large grey wall was erected several years ago, presenting moral idioms by known figures such as Mahatma Gandhi (“Be the change that you want to see in the world”) and

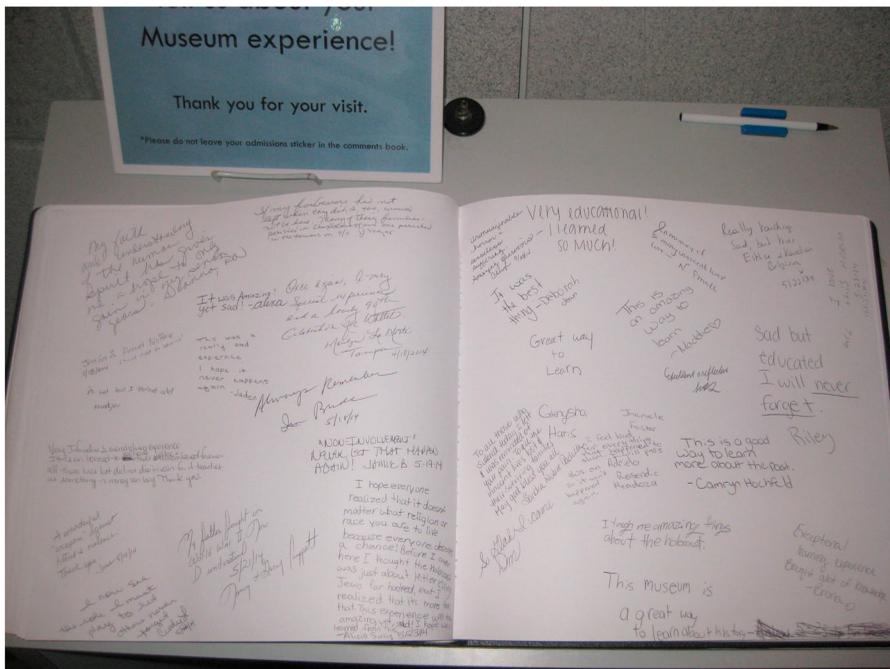


Figure 1. Plain and unruled opening: The comment book at the Florida Holocaust Museum (2014).⁸

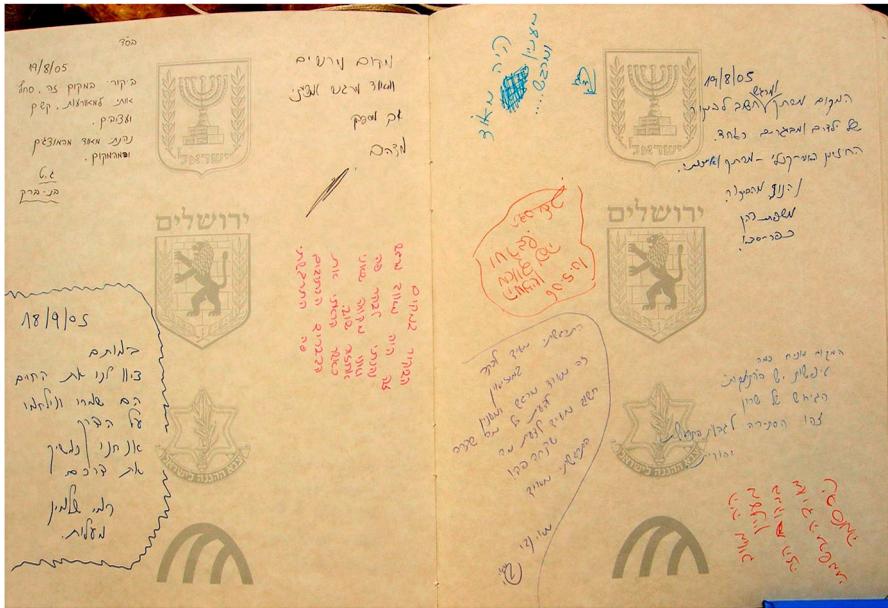


Figure 2. Ornate opening: The comment book at the Ammunition Hill National Commemoration Museum (2005).

Mother Theresa (“Kind words can be short and easy to speak, but their echoes are truly endless”). The wall, like the sign, is part of the book’s immediate material context and literary environment (installation), which aim to shape visitors’ texts.

Figure 2 presents a decorated opening, taken from the ornate comment book in a major Israeli site of national commemoration in East Jerusalem (The Ammunition Hill National Commemoration Museum). Here the book is presented on and as part of a large monument-like installation. It has a thick leather cover, and the pages are made of parchment-like material (not paper), which gives the book an old and respectable appearance. On each of the book’s pages a column of four national symbols is printed vertically in military-green hue, so that anything and everything that is written in the book is read against the printed background. Furthermore, the book is located in one of the museum’s innermost halls, near the imposing Wall of Commemoration and Eternal Memorial Flame, and is the only artefact on display in that area. Thus offered and framed, this book does not afford a literary opportunity for “audience-contributed gestures of closure” to be performed when leaving (Katriel 1997, 71), but instead a gesture of national ideology to be performed amidst the visit’s ideological crescendo.

Figure 3 presents a page from a register book that was held in Rachel’s Tomb near Bethlehem, during the 1930s. The register was carefully managed for many years by the Tomb’s beadle, who was a charismatic figure that closely managed the site, and as such saw his responsibilities in taking care of the register. The beadle’s handwritten signatures (and sometimes comments and notes), appear in each of the book’s pages, sometimes in several places on the same page. The beadle is the person who drew the lines in the book’s pages, and apparently also used it as an institutional diary for keeping notes

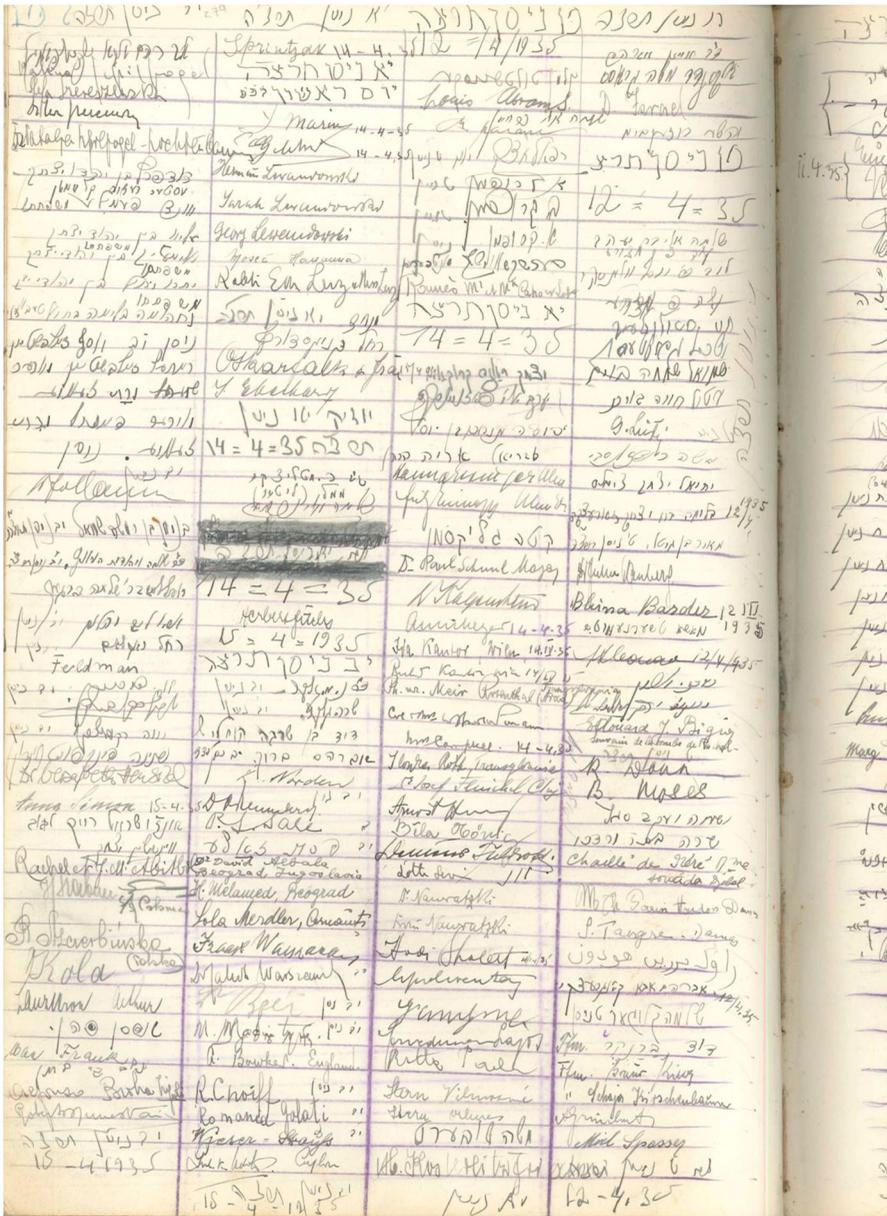


Figure 3. A page from the register at Rachel's Tomb, 1930s.

and narrating personal reflections. It is unclear however, where the book was positioned, or how it was put into use.

Viewed together, these images shed light on the heterogeneity that characterises comment books. The diverse images suggest a comparative framework by which to view such aspects as the book's/artefact's inner structure, interactional design, and appearance, and also how they are organisationally framed and where they are specifically located in the establishment. I add here that the picture is further complicated

because establishments often present more than one comment book, often possessing different designs and affordances, and serving different organisational goals.

In the capacity of serving organisational goals and promoting organisational objectives, these and other dimensions and affordances are *strategically managed* by the establishments. In contemporary museums this is part of the politics of display and of the economy of access; historically, an organisational perspective sheds needed light not only on the texts but on the emerging institutions of travel, and how they perceived travellers and travellers' roles.

Literacies and intertextualities

The fourth hypothesis accounting for the intriguing quality of comment books addresses *heterogeneous literacies* associated with reading and writing in them, and the surprising hermeneutic challenges that travellers' short texts present. The average length of texts in the comment books I studied was around 16 words.⁵ These short and condensed texts require that writers employ specific semiotic resources that allow for the expression of ideas both clearly yet succinctly. In the scope of this article, I briefly address three such resources (in addition to indexicality, which I mentioned earlier), which are designated literacies: i. intra-textuality, ii. intertextuality, and iii. multimodal resources or literacies. These literacies, especially the second and third, are specifically illuminating in terms of the intersection of texts and mobilities in travel.

By intra-textuality I refer to comments that address other comments in the same book. Intra-textual comments respond to and sometimes (in)advertently quote texts written by earlier visitors, thus creating a web of inner exchanges, dialogues, and meanings within the comment book. Through this literary strategy, texts can deliver more weighty meanings and do so more briefly. In several instances, admittedly not many, I analysed intra-textual sequences of comments, where three or more comments were written at different times by different visitors, yet were interrelated. They stood out because of their orthography and use of different writing utensils. Each text commented on the earlier text, supporting or criticising it. This created a sequence or a "chain" of intratextually interrelated comments. On another occasion, a comment was addressed to other comments written on the same page, reprimanding earlier authors for writing inappropriate "divisive comments" at a site of national commemoration and bereavement. The text calls for those visitors who "won't mature" to "pay more respect to the place that marks the unity of the People" (Noy 2010, 2015a).

Intertextuality refers to chunks or pieces of texts that originate from anywhere outside the comment book – whether this be at the site, or elsewhere beyond the premises of the site and the extent of the visit – and which travellers import and incorporate in their writing. In these cases, travellers are introducing or more accurately *entextualising* texts into the comment books, thus enriching the textual and discursive ecology of the book and of the site as a whole (Urban 1996). Sometimes it is productive to refer to the intertextual relations as instances of inter-discursivities, especially when different types of discourse are made to cohabit the same space. In such cases, discourses that travellers import may not be fully or even partially aligned with prior comments in the book, or even with the sites' institutional discourses. In the comment books at the Ammunition Hill National Commemoration Museum in East Jerusalem, only few texts can be read as

oppositional. These texts do not address the main themes of national heroism, commemoration, and sacrifice, which the museum promotes. Instead, they address ethnic dimensions and disparities relating to the dead soldiers which the museum heroises. These oppositional comments reveal that, for a few visitors, the discourse of national commemoration also entails implicitly a discourse of ethnicity and hierarchical ethnic masculinity. In this sense, these comments import an ethnic discourse that is otherwise missing, whether deliberately or not, from the site, onto the pages of the comment books and the museum's national and ethnic-blind display. They present a voice that is missing, or put differently, voice the omission. This inter-discursivity stands out because there are very few oppositional texts in the books I studied. As tourism scholar Edensor (2002) reminds us, "competing ideas about what particular sites symbolise may generate contrasting performances" (70), and these inter-discursive comments are such performances.

Other instances of transgressive interdiscursive comments in East Jerusalem, were theologically grounded. These comments critically reflect on the secular-militaristic account that the museum supplies for Israel's victory in the 1967 War. For some visitors, the neglect of mentioning divine intervention as an account of the victory (perhaps the dominant account) in the museum's narration is sorely missing, and the comments they author both critique and amend it. The historical remediation that such comments pursue, seeks to "correct" the museum's (mis)representation by adding a critical discourse that is not found in, or aligned with, the institution. This intertextuality is interdiscursive because it imports and entextualises altogether different types of discourses.

I wrote earlier that intertextuality is specifically illuminating in terms of travel and mobility, a point which I would like to develop now. From a mobility perspective, intertextuality indexes movement – the movement of anything textual (and beyond). Since comment books operate within cultures and practices of travel, multiple mobilities are involved in the production and consumption of texts, and there are at least two different types of literary mobilities to consider. The first type concerns texts that travel and circulate *with and by the travellers*. Part of the literacy capacity that travellers possess concerns the ability to remember, recall, and then entextualise texts that have travelled with them into the comment books. In this sense, intertextuality tells of the travellers as *textual bearers*, whose work is choosing and filtering the appropriate texts to inscribe at the different destinations. These inscribed and entextualised texts have moved with the travellers from their home origin/culture, or from stops along their current or previous itinerary. The point is that intertextuality in comment books indexes travellers', and travellers' texts, mobilities.

A second type of literary mobility is performed by mobilities of the artefacts of the comment books and *not* the travellers, sometimes initiated by the establishment and at other times by other agents. Here we ask questions of the mobile "afterlife" of textual materialities (textual objects and artefacts; Silverstein and Urban 1996). I stressed earlier the sedentary quality of comment books, noting its significance in terms of semiotics of indexicality: these texts are read where they are written, and both reading and writing are pursued on-site or on-premises, thus physically tied to the site and to what it stands for. However, within the nexus of travel, tourism, and recreation, comment books and/or their texts meaningfully migrate and are not necessarily sedentary. Comment books migrate physically when they are materially removed, and the texts

therein migrate hermeneutically through practices of quotation, translation, transcription, and the like. These practices build on mobilities and establish intertextualities. They suggest variations on indexical meanings, raising the defining question of hermeneutics: what meaning do texts possess once they have been removed and replaced in new environments and destinations? The related question is how, and in what ways, do these texts' original place of inscription and indexical meaning, transfer to secondary and tertiary uses, applications, and destinations? All this points to multiple mobilities and complex "scriptural economy" (de Certeau 1984, 131), when it comes to comment books' texts.

A third and last literacy resource which is often employed in travellers' texts concerns *nonverbal inscriptions*. At stake are *multimodal writing practices*, whereby visitors take the liberty of combining different communication modalities in their writing (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001). Multimodality pertains to anything written that is non-verbal. Non-verbal modalities entail drawings and illustrations, yet interestingly, even before drawings are addressed, we can consider the graphic aspects of handwriting as such, including the type of writing utensils that travellers use, orthographic aspects, positioning of texts in the space of the comment books' pages, and so on – all of which add to, tune, and tone the meaning of the entries. My ethnographic observations documented lengthy negotiations among visitors as to where to insert their comments on the space of a page or in which page in the book. For many, this was a significant aspect of adding their text to the comment book. All these non-verbal (paralinguistic or paratextual) dimensions contribute to the overall meaning of the entries travellers formulate, and serve as resources at their hands (literally).

Beyond these points, travellers' and visitors' comments often include clearly non-linguistic signs, mostly when the comment books are not ruled or where there is little monitoring on behalf of the establishment. Multimodal notes range from brief icons to quite elaborate illustrations. In the comment books I studied in East Jerusalem, almost *half* of all the book's openings contained *at least one full drawing*. These drawings appropriately depicted armoury, as well as national and military symbols, which powerfully echo the profusion of ideological icons at the site, as well as the site's national-militaristic ideology – in its powerful visual (non-verbal) mode. A few of the drawings were elaborate to the degree of conveying a narrative sequence of events, embodied in multiple images or sometimes in the relations between images and texts within the same entry. While there is a tendency to explain, or explain away, visual communication in comment books as reflecting travellers' individual preferences and skills, I see them as less about idiosyncratic skills and preferences, and more about ideologies, contexts, and notions of appropriateness of the employment of visuals. For instance, discourses of nationalism and of national history and collective memory are visually rich, while discourses in other sociocultural and institutional spheres may not be as iconic.⁶ I do note that gender differences emerge clearly in relation to travellers' multimodal entries: my observations on inscriptions' signatures establish that male visitors tend to draw weapons, and female visitors tend to draw flowers, balloons, and emotional signs (hearts, tears). The latter's drawings are more colourful and articulate, and as such are more ornamental. These clear gender differences are all the more striking, when taking into consideration the number of women who serve in the Israeli army, specifically in combat units. It might be the case, that when approaching a symbolic and collective sphere, such as writing

in commemorative visitor books, gender representations and practices regress to their more traditional and outmoded stereotypes.

Narratives and chronotopes

The fifth hypothesis accounting for the complex qualities of comment books emerges when applying a *narrative framework* to the texts. Schematically speaking, this means a view of texts as depicting causal connections between times, places, and events – and how the travellers evaluate them (Labov 1972; Labov and Waletzky 1997). Perhaps more generally and more radically, a narrative view also advances a rendering of comment books themselves in terms of narrative agency. A narrative approach to comment books can be seen as part of the communicative resources that travellers employ, where it would certainly amount to another resource in visitors' arsenal of media and writing literacies. However, such a rendering would miss the larger contribution that a narrative framework can offer to our understanding of the complexity of texts, *specifically when considering a historical approach to these media*.

To begin, a narrative approach to travellers' texts initially seems counterintuitive, as these texts are brief, improvised, and seem loosely organised, while narratives have been traditionally viewed as a structurally complex mode of literary expression and communication (Propp 1968). But to endorse a narrative framework is not to imply that all or most of the texts are well-structured, fully developed narratives (although a few are). Indeed, Labov and Waletzky's (1997) influential neoclassical narrative analysis never proposed that all the structural elements of a narrative must appear for a form to be recognised as narrative (abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda). To apply a narrative framework to comment book texts suggests instead that, *when considered contextually*, they can be productively seen as fulfilling narrative roles in larger historical, cultural, and organisational narratives.

Initially, a narrative view of travellers' comments would consider writing in comment books as *a subgenre of travel narrative and writing in itself*, as several of the studies presented in the special issue show (see also Noy 2020). Admittedly, comment book texts are not the first thing that comes to mind when the arch-genre of travel writing is mentioned. Yet several scholars have argued that this is the case. Singer (2016), for example, points out in her study of visitors' books in Wales that the comments are "microforms" of travel writing. For Singer, these "supposedly spontaneous messages" amount to "a highly complex form of travel writing, despite or because of their extreme brevity" (2016, 393).

Writing while on tour can often play a role in the larger events that comprise travellers' and tourists' travel narratives. More narrowly, I recently argued that travellers' comments can be appreciated as fulfilling various narrative roles or functions, ranging from very broad contexts to the actual physical positioning of comment books (Noy 2020, 2021c). I mentioned earlier the different locations in which establishments position their comment books, which is where the practices of writing in them are pursued. My point was that when comment books are located and signed at the site's exit, they often invite reflections on the conclusion of their visit. In narrative terms, this would suggest a resolution, and perhaps more powerfully, a coda – the closing narrative segment in which the temporalities of the events within the historical story, and the events of recounting and remediating them, are bridged. In other locations, such as the positioning

of the book in the midst of the site's ideological mediation (the case in East Jerusalem), inscribed texts do not serve in the capacity of resolutions or codas, but as events (complicating actions) within the historical narration itself. They suggest that the museum's historical narration is not a *fait accompli*, but occurs now, in the present time of the visit.

A narrative framework is especially helpful in illuminating the conjoined aspects of time and space, as elicited by and captured in comment books. It helps to flush out spatialities, temporalities, and histories that the literary artefacts of the comment books – and the texts therein – index. Bakhtin's concept of *chronotope* is useful here, referring to the "inseparability of space and time" in different modes of narration (Bakhtin 1981, 84). The narrational time–space inseparability is complex and multilayered, because it is tied with concentric temporal and spatial circles. In terms of time and temporality, we can consider such gradients as: (a) the visit's calendrical time, (b) the travellers' experiential and subjective time, "the present – the time of the visitors" (Blair and Michel 2000, 47), (c) the time of writing vis-à-vis the timeline that the comment book itself possesses (earlier comments are written on in the first pages), and (d) the time as elaborated in the travellers' comments. In terms of spatiality we can consider: (a) the space where the actual practice of writing takes place – specifically the material location of the comment book (which, as indicated, is an institutional space which bears meanings that are leisurely, touristic, religious, national, and so on), (b) the space of the site or establishment in which the comment book is located, (c) the spatial grid which emerges from travellers' evocations of their places of origin, and (d) the spaces as narrativised in the comments themselves. The complexity of the chronotopes that comment books enable emerges from the intersection of these and other spatiotemporal dimensions (Noy 2011).

Consider visitors who write in a comment book at a certain place and time, who then specify their place of origin and a temporal signature – with or without a calendrical indication. For example, "We visited here during the Holocaust Day, 2013" (at the Florida Holocaust Museum) or "Today is Independence Day, and we are visiting Jerusalem". In the second example, no calendrical date is indicated, but instead the special occasion that visitors choose to mention ("Independence Day"). This occasion – the national holiday of Independence Day – is highly relevant to the cause itself (national ideology and commemoration) and enhances the value of the visit and the symbolic capital that the travellers amassed. The travellers know the day is special, and are attesting to having made the efforts to successfully attend this specific site at this particular favoured time. Note that in terms of place, we know where they are visiting/writing, yet the place the text references is not a museum or the Ammunition Hill Site, but Israel's capital, Jerusalem. This, again, plays well into the national ideology that the site promotes, namely the centrality of "unified" Jerusalem. In other comments, different places are narrativised, including imagined places that do not exist or have ceased to physically exist (Noy 2011, 2015a).

Addressivity

The sixth and last hypothesis builds on another Bakhtinian concept: *addressivity*. Addressivity rests on Bakhtin's view of the inherently communicative nature of linguistic expression, emphasising who is communicating with whom, and how this is marked (Bakhtin 1986). Addressivity is especially fruitful for the study of historical comment

books, because often those who manage the establishments are not immediately present or accessible to the visitors. Visitors must then revert to the medium of the comment book to convey their messages and direct them at the figures whom *they* wish to engage. Contemplating the act of writing in late modernity, Derrida (1982) observes that, “a written sign is proffered in the absence of the receiver” (312) of which comment books supply, as mentioned, an intriguing instance. Bakhtin and Derrida, separately, instruct us to ask questions concerning who is addressed (and who is not), and how this address is indicated. It is a question of how travellers publicly situate and voice themselves as part of the larger historical discourses embodied in travel.

Moreover, addressivity structures serve as a fruitful key for the interpretation of texts in comment books because they centrally touch on the comments’ contents. The point here is that whom the message is directed at, and who is presented as authoring and directing it, bear formatively on what is being conveyed, and on how it needs to be appreciated. All the more so when the texts and the comment books are themselves circulating and “on the move”. Hence, addressivity is not merely a matter of communicative orientation or who travellers see themselves as communicating with, but also of what is at stake for them when they sign. Findings in studies of monuments and museums are surprising. They show significant variations in *addressivity structures*, which project a range of real (and imagined) addressees, who occupy past, present, and future realms (Allison 2013; Noy 2009). I term the main addressivity structure, which I see as a kind of comments’ “default” or normative addressivity, an *open addressivity*. An open addressivity structure concerns the most common type of addressivity, which is often non-specified. These are texts in which the person or entity who is being communicated with are implied. The short signage, “The Shaked family was here,” is an example of an open addressivity structure, as the addressee(s) is not specified and may be deduced contextually or through other texts which do explicate their addressivity. Sometimes, the establishment is addressed explicitly, such as in text that opens with the words, “To the museums!”

One of the most significant findings that emerges from my study of the national commemoration site in East Jerusalem does so as a result of examining addressivities. Most of the comments are in fact *not addressed* to the establishment (the museum) or to other travellers and visitors. In other words, an open addressivity structure is not the most popular structure. Instead, the majority of the comments are addressed to the *historical figures* who the site commemorates – namely, the fallen Israeli soldiers (“Thank You for Dying for Our Country,” Noy 2015a). As mentioned, the person or entity who is addressed bears formatively on what is communicated, which in turn discloses how we understand travellers’ and visitors’ own understanding of their historical roles as visitors and commentators. Furthermore, the large group of visitors who write the texts that address the dead soldiers are distinct in terms of socio-demographical parameters, from those whose comments possess an open addressivity structure (cf. discussion of Stamou and Paraskevopoulos’ findings above). The former type of texts are written mostly in English, by tourists in Zionist organised groups to Israel, while the latter type is written mostly in Hebrew, by Israeli/local visitors. The comments that Israelis write address the establishment (the museum), and therefore also consist of critiques of the display (its neglect, the lack of sufficient lighting, and so on), which is altogether absent from texts that correspond directly with the dead historical figures. It is as though the group of non-local (non-Israeli) visitors speaks not to, but through the comment book and the establishment,

situating the writers as agents acting directly in the midst of the museum's historical narration; not as visitors reflecting on it or evaluating it retrospectively. There is a lesson here regarding the effective ideological work that establishments pursue through the media of comment books, and how participation in historical narration is pursued.

As mentioned, structures of addressivity vary, and their study is revealing in terms of creativity of visitors' comments, and their positioning on the public pages of comment books. Addressing historical figures (above) serves merely as an example to show the kind of imaginative arsenal of figures to whom, and with whom, visitors at different sites establish communication. Other visitors at various sites address the comment books themselves. Such a reflexive act of writing is illustrated in Matthews (2021) work ("Thou, to whose sacred page the parting guest / Confides the workings of his grateful breast"), and was growingly common in the nineteenth century. In other reflexive examples, comments address other comments – creating in this way intra-textual chains (see above).

Additionally, I mentioned that addressivity concerns how visitors sign, that is how they present their identities and roles as travellers and visitors, and not only who they are communicating with. The identity of the addressors or the author, that is visitors' identities as captured in the way they sign their texts, ranges from more normative to more creative and surprising formulations. I began by noting that even a common signature, such as "The Shaked family was here" (quoted above) raises questions relating to the fact that it uses a plural pronoun: who, one can ask, within the family has actually done the writing, and who has the authority to sign (to voice) in the name of the family? How is that managed during the actual event of visiting and writing? Other signatures are institutional or professional. In such cases visitors indicate professional affiliations and identities, and not their personal name or place of residence. This reveals that for such visitors, these identities are relevant when signing at specific destinations. For instance, in several of the museum comment books I studied, nonconventional signatures where institutional affiliation and not biographical identity was used, indexed visitors who were working in other museums and were part of the establishment. It was these visitors' way of indexing entitlement and authority in relation to the specific establishment. On yet other occasions, visitors improvise on the signing formulae, manifesting such identities and roles as "a refugee" and "a survivor", rather than personal names.⁷

I take the opportunity of discussing Bakhtin's concept of addressivity to re-introduce an ethnographic benefit to the study of writing and reading practices in comment books. The ethnographic observations I conducted enabled me to discern that most texts in the comment books were actually *composed collaboratively, by several visitors*, and not by individual visitors/authors. There were usually two or more visitors or "authors" involved in composing most of the texts in the books (in all the sites I studied). This makes sense when we recall that most travellers and visitors do not arrive at these sites alone, nor engage in various other on-site practices unaccompanied. This is interesting in itself, but it is also relevant to the discussion of addressivity. It helps illuminate how common signatures, such as "The Shaked family was here" are managed, and who is actually doing the authoring and the writing of the final inscribed message. Furthermore, visitors sometimes address each other *through* the comments they author. Visitors take the opportunity of writing as a brief social event, where they "speak" with each other through the process of coauthoring the texts they eventually

inscribe. The point is not intra-textuality or comments that address other comments, but addressivity dynamics which take place during collaborative writing, and which are not always indexed in the texts, or at least not explicitly. Unless caught in ethnographic observations – directly or historically deduced from other documents – these dynamics might be missed.

Conclusion

This article theorises historical comment books and related travel writing platforms. Through comparative studies, it offers a conceptual framework for reading historical sources in the form of travellers' and tourists' texts, as inscribed during and as part of travel and visitation. I laid out several salient dimensions concerning comment books, and the texts they instigate and hold. These illuminate the complexity of comment books and of the texts therein, and why they amount to such intriguing historical artefacts that demand scholarly attention. The picture I portrayed is partial, and much is left out, both empirically and theoretically. My hope, however, is that the article convincingly illuminates these books not only as records or capsules of historical voices and discourses, but also as stimulating artefacts to "think with" about social and political historical processes.

To emphasise, comments books are intriguing historical sources not only, and even not mainly, because of the textual richness that characterises them, or what is "said" in them. What is so special about these books, these sedentary, onsite, institutional media, is the range of travel, visiting, and literary practices and rituals they have historically activated. These practices and rituals have been performed primarily by travellers and visitors, as part of the historical norms and rituals of travel and visitation, but also by the establishments and the institutions which held and offered these books (and do so today). This results in the multifunctionality of comment books, which serve as interfaces between visitors and destinations, mobility and immobility, texts, multimodal inscriptions, and the practices of inscribing them, and intricate travel materialities and imaginaries. Comment books emerge as long-lost indexical relatives of the arch-genre of travel writing, as historical attractions in and of themselves, and as enduring hubs of travel practices, which have been in use for nearly a half-millennium.

Notes

1. Shea and Roberts (1998, 72); Macdonald (2005, 131); Coffee (2013, 166); and Ross (2017, 100), respectively.
2. Indexicality originates in the semiotic work of Charles Peirce, later developed and popularised by Jakobson ([1957] 1990), ([1960] 1988); and Silverstein (1976, 2004).
3. An interesting continuum of accessibility of comment books ranges from more public and inclusive books to more private and exclusive ones. In relation to the latter, I studied what one museum manager called "our VIP visitor book". This "VIP" comment book is identical in shape to the museum's public comment book and functions alongside it. Yet the "VIP" book is selectively and proactively presented by the management only to a small and exclusive strata of visitors, whom the museum views as influential and potentially beneficial. (Noy 2015a.) I note that a third of the visitors I observed in several different sites read the comment books, and about ten percent of those also wrote in them (cf. Macdonald [2005], who reports on 20%).

4. In one of the museums I studied, the cost of the comment book was annually an issue of contention. The price of each volume was 100 USD, which for some in the management was too costly.
5. But see also Stamou and Stephanos (2003), who report an average of 13 words per text, and Macdonald (2005).
6. See Handelman and Shamgar-Handelman (1993), about visual (non-verbal) modes of nationalist discourses.
7. Addressivity structures may be examined also through the lens of rights or entitlements to communication (specifically through comment books). This means examining the role or capacity in which visitors see themselves as writing and signing comment books, which they indicate in the texts they write (Noy 2016).
8. All images were taken by the author.

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