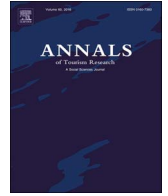


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Travel writers and the nature of self: Essentialism, transformation and (online) construction

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ABSTRACT

A lacuna of academic research exists that explores contemporary travel writers' lived experience, particularly how they perceive their sense of self through their work as a forum for self-discovery and self-transformation. Using the essentialist self and socially constructed selves as theoretical frameworks, this research extends the concept of multiple selves to these writers and new forms of online media. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 47 travel writers and data were analysed using an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. Findings suggest that many travel writers (co)construct an online self and use their writing to transform themselves. The cathartic process of writing, interaction with their readership and the importance of establishing a social identity online emerged as influences on the nature of self.

Introduction

Contemporary travel writers are increasingly focused on their inner journey (Hulme, 2002), although in this they might arguably be following a long tradition. According to MacCannell (1976: 5), self-actualisation appears to be a core motif of modern civilisation and he points to the “giants” of literature, from Odysseus to Jules Verne, who he feels wrote to discover themselves. What is new, perhaps, is the honesty with which modern writers acknowledge this. Paul Theroux (2011: 47–48) proclaims that “in a fit of candour or self-consciousness, many travel writers have felt the need to explain how or why they wrote their books, and in doing so they reveal a great deal about themselves”. This suggests that there is an “essentialist self” (Cohen, 2010: 118) behind a text, which can be discovered. Yet Pico Iyer, when presenting at the Melbourne Writer's Festival in 2012, spoke openly about the impossibility of complete veracity regarding the self in writing, arguing that a reader will never know the writer alone in his study. This debate regarding a true self versus constructed selves is prominent in the academic literature, including the extent to which a text contributes to or reveals the self of its author.

Various voices argue that texts *are* telling of their authors, which assumes that these authors have a true sense of self that can be revealed. For instance, Elsrud (2001: 600) reasons that travel narratives symbolise more than the events being described because they are also “expressing a story about who he or she [the author] is or wants to be”. Expanding on this argument, Johnson (2010: 508) states that travel narratives have the “potential to tell more about the author and their point of view than the place visited”. Indeed, various travel writers have claimed to be searching for themselves when describing their experiences in their books. Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love* (2006) is an example, in which the American author travels to Italy, India and Indonesia, where she finds a stronger sense of self. The idea that the travel writing self can be changed and even constructed is also well developed. For instance, in *Marco Polo Didn't Go There*, Rolf Potts concludes each chapter with a commentary track containing endnotes that provide annotated

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peeks into each story's creation as he acknowledges "the gap between story and experience, traveler and writer, truth and presentation" (2008: xvii). These endnotes reveal more about his underlying motivations than is disclosed in the published stories, suggesting that the self can be constructed to suit the narrative.

The socially constructed self can be traced back to Goffman (1959), who uses a theatrical metaphor to explain the phenomenon, where people perform different roles for different audiences. Individuals will strategically stage their activities when in the presence of others. Referred to as self-presentation, it involves impression management via the purposeful editing and packaging of the self to deliver positive impressions to others. There is a spectrum of views in the academic literature regarding the concept of the self, ranging from it being discoverable and static to something that is more fluid and mutable. These theories have yet to be applied to a study of travel writers' experiences and perceptions of their sense of self in their work.

This research is timely because travel writers now have to cope with the rapidly changing digital sphere. This environment is characterised by interactivity, new media platforms and an increase in people who are publishing online. This study can therefore help us to gain a deeper understanding of the process of presenting the self online. Using the aforementioned conceptualisations of the self, travel writers might be viewed as the playwrights of their own story, carefully considering how they present themselves in their texts. Interviewing travel writers about the way in which they conceptualise their sense of self in their texts could perhaps validate or extend some of these theories. Acknowledging the work of Cohen (2010), who criticises tourism researchers for focusing on the search for the self, as opposed to the creation or construction of self, as well as Belk's (2013) concept of the extended self in a digital world, the purpose of the research is to explore the notion of the self in the context of contemporary travel writers. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research question: how do contemporary travel writers conceptualise their sense of self in their writing?

Scholars' understandings of both travel texts and their writers vary widely (e.g. guidebooks, travel journalism, creative non-fiction and travel novels) and the digital age has added complexity. Briggs and Burke (2009) commented that while print media continues to occupy an important space, globalisation of the media and the growth of social and participatory media, has led to many new media platforms. For the purpose of this research and to reflect and explore the nuances of the profession, contemporary travel writers have been defined broadly as authors of texts about travel, in a professional or amateur sense, writing for a range of different purposes, including travel promotion, entertainment, inspiration and personal development, as well as a diverse audience, ranging from the self to friends and family and larger more commercial or amorphous readers. These travel writers can work as freelancers, be contracted as employees, or, receive no remuneration. For some, travel writing is their main source of income, while for others it is treated more like a hobby. Their work is primarily non-fiction writings about travel, although fictive elements can also be used, in a variety of forms, ranging from highly subjective narratives to much more objective and fact-based reports. Their work is published on a range of platforms, from print media, such as books, guides and magazines, to digital media, such as e-books, blogs and social media.

Conceptualising the self

There are various understandings of the self and it is acknowledged to be a slippery concept. Jenkins (1996: 29, original emphasis) defines the self as "each individual's reflexive sense of her or his own particular identity" which is constituted in terms of similarity and difference with other people and cultures. Hogg and Abrams' (1988) analysis of social identity theory explains the role of identity in creating self whereby one's self-concept (i.e. 'I') constructs a personal identity (i.e. 'me'). While the self can be distinguished from identity in this way, Cohen (2010) acknowledges that there is a tendency for the two terms to be used interchangeably. Searching for an essentialist self, where a *true self* can purportedly be discovered and/or transformed (Neumann, 1992) or self-actualisation attained (MacCannell, 1976), underpins many tourism theories regarding travel (Cohen, 2010). The literature review that follows will explore the self in essentialist terms, before moving on to studies that highlight multiple selves.

Essentialist (and transformable) self

Studies in tourism and broader social sciences have postulated the essentialist concept of the self as singular and hence discoverable or searchable. Neumann (1992) explores lived experience and the concept of finding self through the recollection of travel. He argues that travel "brings people into a world of unpredictable possibilities [such as confrontation with others and different worlds] that can reveal new ways of knowing the self", where they seek to link themselves to a "larger meaning of society as well as the cosmos" (Neumann, 1992: 200) and thus achieve a sense of belonging. Going beyond this, Cutler, Carmichael, and Doherty (2013) explore perceptions of identity and a corporeal self through travel journeys. Using experiences of hiking the Peruvian Inca Trail, they find that the experience had an impact on tourists' understandings of self, many of whom reported a sense of personal growth. These studies are reflective of existential authenticity, which is defined by Wang (1999: 352) as "a potential existential state of Being that is to be activated by tourist activities" whereby people can find their authentic (true) self. Laing and Crouch (2011: 1528) refer to existential authenticity in the context of frontier tourists who seek "a space in which they can construct self-identity and be their true selves". By pitting themselves against a perilous environment, to see "how one will cope with the dangers and rigours", these extreme travellers attain self-discovery.

The transformative nature of travel is well documented throughout history (e.g. the Grand Tour) as well as more recently in the context of having a gap year, adventure travel and backpacking. Some of these individuals write about their travel, which can also constitute a transformative experience (Laing & Crouch, 2011). While a detailed discussion of the literature on transformative travel is outside the scope of this article, some examples illustrate the potential effect on the sense of self. Celsi, Rose and Leigh (1993: 11) suggest that "sustained participation in a high-risk subculture offers the opportunity to construct a 'new' personal identity" as "high-risk activities provide a well-defined context for personal change". Later work supports their proposal, where an analysis of

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