Nyqvist, †Anette. "Loss of words and end of worlds: Transitions and troubles of travel writing." *Literature and the Making of the World: Cosmopolitan Texts, Vernacular Practices*. Ed. Stefan Helgesson. Ed. Helena Bodin. Ed. Annika Mörté Alling. New York,: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. 279–307. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501374180.ch-9>>.

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Loss of words and end of worlds: Transitions and troubles of travel writing

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With a heart-warming smile and arms flung wide open, the keynote speaker kicks off the four-day travel writers' conference with 'Welcome!'; followed by the words: 'We are here to celebrate a shared passion. Most people don't understand the impulse to travel and write about it. But we do. This is a tribe. You are all now officially members of this tribe.'¹

I am attending the twenty-sixth annual travel writers' conference in a small town in the San Francisco Bay area on America's West Coast. It is a gathering of colleagues and competitors; a mix of seasoned professionals and hopeful newcomers. A hundred-plus travel writers, mainly American and most of them based on the West Coast, in various stages of their careers have come here to exchange knowledge and share experiences; to learn from others and develop their writing skills in workshops and consultations; to network and pitch their work to publishers and editors; to meet old and new friends of 'the tribe', as it were. The sense of community is displayed throughout the conference. The keynote speaker, for example, continues the opening address by declaring: 'People among

¹ For the research project as a whole, I have conducted a study of semi-structured qualitative interviews with professional travel writers in both the United States and, to a lesser extent so far, Sweden. The interviews, eighteen in total, were conducted in New York, California and Stockholm between February 2017 and November 2019; ten of these interviews explicitly inform and illustrate this chapter. The research also includes archival studies at the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg carried out in March 2017. I conducted participant observation at one trade conference, the twenty-sixth annual Book Passage Travel Writers' and Photographers' Conference in Corte Madera, CA, 10–13 August 2017, which was used explicitly as an illustrative example in this chapter. I have also conducted participant observation at travel-writing workshops in New York, Gotham Writers July–August 2017, and California, a four-day extracurricular activity in conjunction with the above-mentioned trade conference in August 2017, as well as an online writing workshop with nine American travel writers in monthly meetings between December 2017 and June 2019. Insights from these workshops inform the discussion in this chapter, but the material from the participant observations at the workshops is not used explicitly here.

the very best in the field are here. We have assembled people who like to share and to teach. People that are iconic in their fields: they are all here.' Over the coming days other invited speakers and professional travel writers reaffirm the sense of community, and even tribe, to the participating peers gathered for the conference. One senior professional travel writer says during a panel: 'There is a community of people here. A community of travel writers. Travel writing is a craft that you keep working on and keep on developing. And we are all here now to learn from each other.' Another day, at another panel, another well-known travel writer smiles at the attentive audience and says: 'This is one great big tribe, a travel writers' tribe.'

As at most trade conferences, the programme for this one is filled with knowledge-sharing activities such as talks, seminars, panels, workshops, meetings and consultations; events, large and small, scheduled back-to-back, in parallel or as break-out sessions, non-stop from early morning to late at night. The so-called 'informal', yet scheduled, karaoke evening that is – as tradition here dictates, I am told – the last item of the third day on the conference programme highlights the ongoing community-building purpose of the gathering. At 9 pm sharp the small café by the entrance to the venue turns into a bar serving local wines by the glass. Steps away, the large 'event room' has been cleared of all chairs and now quickly fills up with conference participants gathered in small groups. Next, lights are dimmed, microphones put in place up on the small stage and music turned up. One after another, well-known, seasoned and established travel writers, as well as those new to the trade and yet unpublished, step up to the microphones and sing their hearts out as the audience jubilantly cheers on. Soon the conference podium is crowded with travel writers locked together with arms around each other, bawling out the lyrics to Lynyrd Skynyrd's 'Sweet Home Alabama' and other requests. As far as community-building activities go, the traditional and scheduled 'informal' karaoke evening of this conference seems to be quite effective.

This chapter is about the experiences of a profession and literary practice in transition. Travel writing is, scholars agree, an elusive and ever-changing literary form but recent, ongoing and significant changes concerning both travel and writing have the community of professional travel writers (the writers interviewed here are all based in the United States) currently worried about the very future of their profession and craft. In this chapter I account for how both travel writers themselves and scholars of travel writing emphasize that at the core of such writing sits a set of principal and defining elements: curiosity-driven

stories of travels, narratives based on first-hand experiences and observations from distant places, and texts intended to reach a broad audience with the aims of both informing and entertaining the readership. Furthermore, both scholars of travel writing and professional travel writers stress that these fundamental features of contemporary travel writing had already been established in medieval travel literature. This leads me, finally, to the voices of contemporary professional travel writers, who express concern that recent and ongoing developments in the business of professional travel writing might, in fact, signal its end, at least in the form we know it.

Travel writers see themselves as a 'global tribe' in much the same way that foreign correspondents do (Hannerz 2004). What unites the professional community and self-proclaimed 'tribe' of travel writers is – apart from a 'cosmopolitan habitus' similar to the foreign correspondents in Ulf Hannerz's (*ibid.*) research – a passionate interest in not only travelling to far-away places but also, by writing, mediating their experiences and observations of those places to a readership back home. For this chapter, I draw from interviews with ten American professional travel writers who, with two exceptions, are based in the states of New York or California. They all have long careers behind them and have published extensively in, mainly, American print media. Insights from participant observations at a trade conference and participating in writing workshops for travel writers have, less explicitly, informed this text. From attending the conference and workshops, I have gained an understanding of how the professional identities of travel writers take shape and what aspects of their professional practices they see as essential. Industry conferences are opportunities for knowledge production and networking among peers, and are therefore good sites for ethnographic inquiry into various aspects of specific industries. Such large-scale gatherings are events where professional identities are shaped (Nyqvist 2017: 23–42, Nyqvist, Høyer Leivestad and Tunestad 2017: 1–22). The methodological approach of the study behind this chapter is also inspired by the interview-based ethnographic studies of textual production, practices of different kinds of writers, and writing as a profession that scholars such as social anthropologists Hannerz (2004) and Helena Wulff (2017) have conducted and written about. To maintain focus on what different travel writers have to say about some fundamental elements and current changes of travel writing, rather than igniting curiosity about who says what, I have opted to anonymize the interviewees, give them all new names and treat the interview material as a 'collection of voices' (Gudeman and Rivera 1990, Nyqvist 2016, Rothenberg 1998).

The general premise here is that travel writing is a literary form, and practice, in which writers produce texts in an ongoing negotiation between cosmopolitanism and vernacularism. Literary products are key elements in the configuration of the world itself (Archetti 1994), and cosmopolitan writers – such as foreign correspondents and travel writers – translate and mediate the world to their readership at home (Clifford 1997, Hannerz 2003, 2004, Nünning and Nünning 2010, Wulff 2016, 2017). This leads to the postulation of the world-making ability of literature which Nelson Goodman (1978: 6) proposed: ‘Worldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking.’ Goodman (ibid.: 94) includes a wide range of modes of expression, other than words, in his approach to world-making, claiming that: ‘Worlds are made by making such versions with words, numerals, pictures, sounds, or other symbols of any kind in any medium.’ A main point here is that, until recently, the world-making capabilities of travel writing have been inherent and fundamental, and constitute its very core.

Mediating the soul of a place

Curiosity and a sense of wonder are seen as important drivers for a good travel writer, and personal experience of a place is key. In the interviews and writing workshops, travel writers talk of their efforts to portray the actual place as the main character in their travel stories, and emphasize the importance of conveying ‘a sense of place’ in their writing. As ways to accomplish this, they mention the significance of being well prepared, yet open to change travel and writing plans according to surprises and mishaps along the way. They stress the importance of being able to mediate ‘the soul of a place’ in a simultaneously informed and entertaining way to a broad readership at home.

One renowned travel writer, here called Andrew, is an author and editor with numerous published articles and books on travel and travel writing. Andrew claims he has been ‘wandering and writing’ for more than forty years, and in the interview he sweeps through the history of travel writing and concludes that the personal experience of a journey has become increasingly conspicuous for this literary form, and especially its ability to ‘make worlds’:

What the Marco Polos of the world did was that they wrote about places that no one had ever been to and would never get to. So they had this incredible

artistic licence to really make a world. That continued for a long time but now, whenever I go somewhere, the chances are huge that someone has already posted something about that place on Instagram and Facebook. So as a travel writer, I cannot say: 'Reader, you've never seen this but here's what it looks like.' Instead, it's about my interaction with the place. As a travel writer, I think I bring value by saying to people: 'This is how this place affected me and therefore, this might be how it would affect you too as a traveller, as a human being.' I don't think Marco Polo was saying very much about what he felt about the different places but it was totally his take. He was the filter. Not that the story today is all about you but you're the vehicle that illuminates the story about a particular place. That is, I think, what travel writing has been evolving towards. That uniqueness. What I, as a travel writer, am creating is an emotional world. My world. Which is what travel writers have always done really but it's much more explicit now.

To keep alive one's curiosity as well as a sense of discovery and wonder – all important features of travel writing introduced by medieval travel writers – is something that is often communicated as crucial for any travel writer (see for example Shapiro 2004). But Brian, a self-proclaimed 'old-school travel journalist' based on the American East Coast, does not like the word 'wonder': 'There are people that talk about "the wonder", even "the magic". I just think of it as "the cool stuff". My goal is always to go somewhere that I've never been to before. Somewhere that excites me. Somewhere that gives me a sense of: "Oh, wow! This is going to be cool!"'

But a sense of wonder and an 'insatiable curiosity' were not enough for the early travel writers in medieval times (Asfour 2003: 578), and do not seem to suffice for the contemporary travel writer either; an element of adventure and 'a willingness to brave difficulties' are needed as well (ibid.). The travel writers I interviewed talk about mishaps and mistakes, unexpectedness and serendipity. Charles, a non-fiction author, travel writer and documentary filmmaker based in San Francisco, California, argues that 'real travel' and great storytelling is all about misadventure and serendipity, it is about taking the wrong turn. To make his point and demonstrate what he sees as the difference between tourism and travel, Charles tells the story of how Thomas Cook, the seventeenth-century British businessman, first began to arrange group travel:

He [Cook] said: 'Hop on the train with me in Birmingham. We are going to London and then back again. I'm taking you on a tour.' And that's the start of tourism. But, what's key is that at the bottom of Cook's travel posters it said: 'No surprises guaranteed.' Because that's what people going on organized group

tours wanted. And still, to this day, tourism means no surprises. But surprises are the thrills for any real traveller. It is about taking the wrong turn and getting lost. And that's where the story for one's travel writing is. You want that element of surprise in your travel story; otherwise you'll just be feeding the beast: the beast of stereotypes.

David, a travel writer and magazine editor with more than ten published travel books, also emphasizes the unplanned as an essential element of good storytelling, especially when writing about travel. 'The bad experience *is* the story', David exclaims when talking about telling stories based on his travels. He continues:

Nobody wants to hear stories about everything that went as expected. You're lucky when bad shit happens. I'm interested in telling stories, not in writing an encyclopaedia article, or describing something for the would-be traveller. I want to tell a story, and misfortune is often part of that. So, what might be a terrible trip for someone else would be an absolute wonder for me because I get to write about it. It makes a good story.

'I often accidentally find my way into other stories while I'm on an assignment. You have to be open to serendipity and accidents', says Elizabeth, a travel writer formerly based in New York but now living in California, who has built her career writing about travel for American magazines. Frank, a travel and art writer based on the West Coast, says: 'Of course you have to do your homework beforehand, but if you do exactly your pitch then you're doing something wrong. You'd better get surprised out there.' Brian puts it this way: 'The opening yourself up to the unexpected is very important. Observing is obviously important but if you're just walking there, observing, you risk only seeing and experiencing that which you already know. You have to allow for the unexpected. Leave room for the whimsy, for happenstance and for chance.' Andrew, in his interview, expresses his concern about the fact that information about everything and every place today can be found on the internet, and social media may ruin the necessary element of surprise in travel and travel writing. He says: 'Nowadays the surprise element has been diminished. It gets diluted by social media and when you can find out everything before going somewhere. People need to go out and get lost. I always say: "Lose yourself in the place. Rely on a stranger. Engage with the place."' A personal engagement with the particular place that the writer visits is yet another long-lasting element of travel writing. Charles simply states: 'Attention and intention. Ask yourself: "Why am I going? Why am

I here?” And remember: you’re looking for the soul of a place.’ A poet, novelist and travel writer, here called Grace, talks passionately about engaging with the places she writes about:

It is all about place. Place has a personality in good travel writing. You create a feeling for the place. First, you have to know your facts and the history, but what happens then is that the place leaves the shadows. It leaves an imprint and you can capture the colour and the light, the people and the language, how that particular place is used, what it does and what it can reveal. You capture the mood of the place, the feelings of the place. The place is the character in the story.

These ‘collections of voices’ and experience-based insights from contemporary long-term professional travel writers convey what they see as the principal and fundamental elements of their craft. Sincere curiosity and an open mind combined with a well-informed knowledge of, and engagement with, the place are held up as necessary prerequisites for a travel writer to write personal, experience-based, well-researched text that conveys the soul of a distant place to a broad readership back home. I return to contemporary travel writers, but first I take a closer look at what scholars of travel writing see as the very roots of the practice and craft of travel writing, and some of the more salient shifts within the evolution of travel writing as a literary form.

An elusive literary form

As a literary form, travel writing is inherently elusive and has constantly proved difficult for practitioners and scholars alike to define and classify. A set of commonly, albeit not universally, agreed-upon tenets of travel writing are that such writings are experienced-based, first-person descriptions of far-away places aimed at a readership at home. The main feature is that the text is a narrative of an actual journey personally conducted by the author (Borm 2017: 17, Pettinger and Youngs 2019: 4, Sherman 2002: 31, Youngs 2013: 5, 2017: 180). Beyond that, scholars struggle to establish what, in fact, travel writing is, and some argue that it should even be considered as a literary genre (see for example Borm 2017: 13). Travel writing is not readily determined or contained (Youngs 2013: 1, 15), but remains instead ‘a loosely defined body of literature’ (Hooper and Youngs 2017: 2) and ‘a relatively open-ended and versatile form’ (ibid.: 3). Travel writing is always fluid and flexible, adaptable and versatile (ibid.: 11,

Korte 2000: 9, Littlewood 2001: 20, Youngs 2013: 1). Over time, travel writing has ‘taken a bewildering multiplicity of forms and functions’ (Speake 2003: vii), which is something that is seen by some as being increasingly divisive (Youngs 2013: 188). Because of its mixed and cross-over character, travel writing has been dubbed by some scholars as ‘the most hybrid and unassimilable of literary genres’ (Holland and Huggan 1998: 8). Pointing to the fact that travel writing often encompasses, and makes use of, a number of other types of texts and forms of literature, such as newspaper articles, official documents, letters, diary entries and much else, it has been suggested that ‘travel writing is the art of the collage’ (Bishop 1985: 203). Travel writing is, in short, a ‘stubbornly indefinable form’ (Youngs 2013: 2), characterized by its ‘generic range and mixture’ (Pettinger and Youngs 2019: 6). Travel writing scholar Tim Youngs (2013: 6) states that: ‘A near-consensus has developed that travel writing is a mixed form that feeds off other genres’ and talks about ‘the hybridity of travel writing’ (ibid.: 173). Travel writing, Youngs (ibid.: 6) asserts, is ‘a genre whose intergeneric features constitute its identity’. The broad range of this fluid and flexible hybrid literary form include guidebooks, itineraries, reports and other such factual accounts, but also less restricted narratives of journeys written as prose or poetry, in the form of a private diary, an essay, a short story, a novel or a poem, often with elements of several of these or other literary forms mixed in single pieces of travel writing (Bishop 1985: 203, Borm 2017: 14–16, Youngs 2013: 6).

Travel writing, then, is a broad, ever-shifting hybrid literary form – one that feeds off other genres, constantly reinvents itself and adapts to its time and place. Travel writing has ‘travelled’ (Youngs 2017: 167) and has ‘altered, reflecting the shifting aesthetic and cultural fashions of the day’ (Hooper and Youngs 2017: 3). In a broad sense, travel writing reflects ‘the society in which it is produced and consumed, multifarious elements of culture are contained within it’ (Youngs 2017: 175). It is therefore argued that travel writing ‘is the most socially important of all literary genres. It records our temporal and special progress. It throws light on how we define ourselves and on how we define others’ (Youngs 2013: 1).

Curiosity and storytelling at the core

‘Do you want to hear my theory about stories?’ David asks rhetorically during the interview, and proceeds: ‘Alright. We as homo sapiens told stories around the camp fire. Homer did his stories in poems. Gutenberg let us disseminate

our stories through the printed word. We read stories on the internet. Stories are baked into our DNA. We're storytelling creatures.' If telling stories to each other is a fundamental human trait, then perhaps a tale of travel might very well be one of the first stories to be told. Scholars and writers have over the years discussed and reflected upon how the act of returning from a journey to share the experiences with those who stayed behind may, in fact, be the origin of all storytelling (Benjamin 1969: 85, Goody 2010: 134, Legassie 2017: 16, Youngs 2013: 1, 19). It has also been suggested that the travel story may be seen as the very basis for any good plot, whether oral or written. Leo Tolstoy is often credited with having said 'All great literature is one of two stories: a man goes on a journey or a stranger comes to town.' Whether it was Tolstoy or someone else who first said this matters little; what is interesting to note is that these two basic storylines are different perspectives of travelling, one focusing on the onset of a journey, the other on the arrival at a destination; both equally intriguing and enticing, open-ended and with infinite exploration possibilities. If people can be said to be both travelling and storytelling creatures that have always ventured out on journeys, and those who come back told stories about their adventures – the travel story, then, has been around for thousands of years and contemporary travel writing can be seen to have its roots in diverse ancient texts which, in various ways, describe journeys (Howard 1980: 29, Humble 2011, Legassie 2017, Pretzler 2013, Rubiés 2002: 248, Sherman 2002: 21, Youngs 2013: 21–4).

It was, however, with the widely circulated experienced-based and curiosity-driven written narratives of medieval travellers that the travel story found its literary form as we now know it. The stories of the journeys of Marco Polo, one of the most famous travellers of the medieval period, are seen by scholars of travel writing as the starting point of a new impulse in such writing, one specifically 'attentive to observed experience and curiosity towards other lifeways' (Hulme and Youngs 2002: 3).² With the medieval overland routes between Europe and the vast Mongol Empire secured by the Pax Mongolica, more and new kinds of travellers journeyed east: merchants, of course, but also adventurers and explorers, philosophers and other individuals driven by curiosity and wanderlust. Marco Polo, born into a Venetian merchant family circa 1254, was by no means the first European to travel east during the Middle Ages, but the written account

² Outside the Christian tradition, the Arabic literary form *rihla* – referring to both a journey and the written account of that journey – flourished during medieval and early-modern periods and lasted up to the seventeenth century (Euben 2008, Youngs 2013, Zumthor and Peebles 1994).

of his experiences in the Mongol Empire captured the imagination of an unprecedentedly large readership, setting new and lasting standards for travel writing (Elsner and Rubiés 1999: 35, Frankopan 2003: 971, Youngs 2013: 25). As a teenager, Marco Polo accompanied his merchant father and uncle on a journey east. When they returned to Venice twenty-four years later, arriving in 1295, they had lived in East Asia for seventeen years and travelled extensively in Central, East, Far East and Southeast Asia (Frankopan 2003: 972–3, Legassie 2017: 39). Soon after their return, Marco Polo was captured and imprisoned in Genoa, where he happened to share a cell with the then well-known writer Rustichello da Pisa, to whom Polo dictated his experiences and observations from his journeys (Frankopan 2003: 971, Legassie 2017: 39).

The Travels of Marco Polo, or *Le Divisament dou Monde*, was originally written in 1298 in a version of French known as Franco-Italian. The opening paragraph reads: ‘Lord emperors and kings, dukes and marquises, counts, knights, and burgesses, and all people who want to know about the diverse races of men and the diverse wonders of diverse regions of the world, take this book and have it read’ (translation from *Divisament* as quoted in Legassie 2017: 40, see also Polo ([1845] 2018). Based on the fact that *Divisament* was first written in a popular vernacular language instead of Latin, and is filled with captivating and detailed descriptions and composed in a rather regular and inclusive narrative tone, the book is considered to be a pioneering attempt at reaching out to a different and broader readership (Elsner and Rubiés 1999: 36, Frankopan 2003: 972, Legassie 2017: 39–47, 93, Youngs 2013: 27). *The Travels of Marco Polo* was, at the time, a new kind of literary work: new not only because of its extensive descriptions of the life and reign of the Mogul emperor and the accounts of many lands, peoples and cultures previously unknown to Europeans, but also innovative as a literary work in that it ‘sought a socially mixed, geographically wide-ranging reading public, which it addressed in the vernacular’ (Legassie 2017: 39–40). It quickly became one of the most widely read travel books of its time and within a few decades had been translated into several other languages, including Latin and French (ibid.: 39). It is argued that Marco Polo’s influence on not only his contemporary fellow travellers and writers but also ‘the broader medieval mind’ is ‘almost second to none’ (Frankopan 2003: 973). Scholars have argued that Polo’s palpable curiosity and desire for knowledge, his detailed first-hand observations, his lay empiricism and his immersion in the life of the places he visited successfully introduced these new and lasting features to travel writing (Elsner and Rubiés 1999: 30–6). Jennifer Speake (2003: vii) phrases the lasting

influence of *The Travels of Marco Polo* succinctly: 'Curiosity, information, pleasure – not much has changed in the underlying compact between travel writers and their audience since Marco Polo's visit to the court of the Mogul Great Khan, Kublai, in the thirteenth century.' In an earlier account, British poet John Masefield alludes to the world-making capacity of *The Travels of Marco Polo* in his introduction to a 1908 edition of the book: 'The wonder of Marco Polo is ... that he created Asia for the European mind' (quoted in Youngs 2013: 25).

After this look at the roots and essential features of travel writing, in what follows I provide a brief historicization to point out some of the more salient shifts of this literary form.

The year 1492, with Columbus's first voyage, is typically viewed as a 'new beginning' for travel writing: rather than meaning a novel type of travel writing *per se*, this seems to allude to the fact that Columbus's 'discovery' of a new continent demarks the beginning of a new epistemological turn, with shifts in the perception of the world (Hulme and Youngs 2002: 3, Legassie 2017: 59, Quadflieg 2017: 28, Ramachandran 2015, Youngs 2013: 13). The early-modern period, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, did see a continuous increase in both production and popularity of travel writing. The form and style of writing varied greatly, and by the end of the period illustrations of the places, people, nature and culture described in the texts had become a new, even expected, supplement to the published works (Sherman 2002: 19–20, 30–1). The travel writing of the early-modern period, accompanied by detailed maps as well as drawings of landscapes, coastlines, harbours and settlements, was not only in popular demand but also played significant roles in political debates and raising funds for new journeys (Hulme and Youngs 2002: 3, Youngs 2013: 30). Youngs (*ibid.*: 31) sums up this key notion of travel writing in early-modern times: 'It manifests the connection between travel, nation, commerce and colonial expansion that has been evident in so much travel writing, and that would appear strongly again in the mid to late nineteenth century.'

As the so-called 'age of discovery' continued into the eighteenth century, an ever-growing plethora of travel writing followed in its path, some with an obvious intent to entertain, others with more scientific purposes, many a mix of these two aims and most with an underlying agenda of a political, economic or religious character (Bridges 2002: 53, Youngs 2013: 41). Two new types of travellers gained notoriety during this era, those in groups and the individualistic romantic traveller – each producing different kinds of texts.

The new phenomenon of the Grand Tour gained traction during the eighteenth century, and the well-travelled routes gave rise to standardized guidebooks which, in turn, paved the way for later mass tourism and the tourist as a new type of traveller (Chard 1999, Littlewood 2001). An assortment of new types of subgenres of travel literature saw the light of day during the eighteenth century, and the popularity of this heterogeneous literary form was unparalleled (Youngs 2013: 38–41). The eighteenth-century press, of course, enabled broad dissemination of travel writing and, due to public demand, extracts from travel books were often published in periodicals (Steward 2003: 659).

The Romanticist approach to travel writing began towards the end of the eighteenth century and came into full bloom during the nineteenth. Salient novel characteristics here were individual reflection and introspection, where travel accounts often included descriptions of the author's inner journey and personal change alongside descriptions of the actual trip. Just as the tourist's guidebook continues to be part of the broad spectrum of contemporary travel writing, so does this new introspective and transitional travel literature (Littlewood 2001: 56, Youngs 2013: 46–7, 55).

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, colonialism followed by criticism of the colonial era, new modes of transportation, innovations in printing and the steady increase in literacy rates all affected the travel writing of the era. Throughout the nineteenth century the continuous advancements of the steam engine, with transcontinental railways and trans-Atlantic passenger ships as a result, enabled more people to travel longer distances at greater speeds. And in the twentieth century cars revolutionized the possibilities for individual travel and airplanes pushed the limits of distance and speed in travelling even further. All these advancements and innovations led not only to new ways of travelling but also new ways of viewing the world and oneself in it, as well as new ways of writing about travel (Bassnett 2003: xii, Korte 2000: 18, Legassie 2017: 229, Steward 2003: 660, Youngs 2013: 38–67). Innovations in book printing and the expansion of daily and periodical media, as well as a general increase in literacy rates, led to a growth in both production and reading of, among much else, travel writing (Steward 2003: 659, Youngs 2013: 53–6).

Altogether a more subjective, individualistic, self-conscious and reflective, even parodic, type of travel writing emerged as modernism became established and novelists venturing into travel writing spurred a more literary kind of account (Hulme and Youngs 2002: 7, Youngs 2013: 68–83). With seemingly no blank spots left on the map of the world to travel to and write home about,

a general tendency among travel writers became to, in various ways, turn the focus on to – and into – themselves. A strong emphasis on individuality was developed, sometimes manifested in stories of the lone traveller, often by the creation of a narrating persona invented to carry the story of the travel forward as well as to distinguish one's writing from that of others (Youngs 2013: 68–83). Youngs (*ibid.*: 152) writes: 'A common strategy employed by travel writers who are visiting areas that have already been written about is to distinguish their accounts from previous ones. This is often managed through humour and irony, qualities that help construct their narrative personae and that create a warm relationship between author-narrator and reader.' The renewed interest in the journey into the self in the twentieth century originated with the introduction of psychoanalysis and the work of Sigmund Freud in the late nineteenth century (*ibid.*: 102–14). The late-nineteenth and twentieth-century travel writing with themes of inner journeys is often written as introspective responses to contemporary political and cultural developments (*ibid.*: 103). During the post-war era, however, politics of decolonization brought a new awareness that began to challenge and rebut assumptions and stereotypes in earlier travel writing. The post-colonial criticism grew stronger and became even more widespread towards the end of the twentieth century (*ibid.*: 68–83).

Much as travel changed with the introduction of new modes of travel, and travel writing subsequently changed with the new ways of thinking about and being in the world that the new ways of travelling enabled, so too is travel writing currently changing with the introduction of new media technologies. In the twenty-first century, due to globalization, innovations in information technology and the introduction of low-cost airlines, long-distance travel has become more accessible to a great many more people. Some claim that the value of and interest in travel writing is in decline. Youngs (*ibid.*: 177), however, argued differently when in 2013 he wrote that 'the proliferation of blogs and the increasing ease of self-publishing means that the production of travellers' accounts will not be halted by any decline in readership'. Instead, he expected: 'Travel writing, like all literature, responds to new technologies. The means and speed of motion affect the way people experience their travel as well as how they write about it' (*ibid.*: 178). Youngs (*ibid.*: 180) further anticipated increased self-publishing and greater empowerment, given that social media allows 'anyone who can get online to publish their thoughts and experiences'. With examples of the new media technologies such as Tumblr, Flickr and Twitter, Youngs broods over the brevity of these novel ways of recording and sharing one's travel experiences, and

asks whether travel writing in these formats can be considered to be much more than electronic postcards. 'One might question whether tweets, emails, blogs and texts count as travel writing at all' (ibid.: 187).

In sum, scholars of travel writing have shown that at different moments in time such writing both reflects and influences the way people view the world and themselves in it. Travel writing is shaped by the political, economic, social, religious and cultural conditions of the time and place in which it was produced. The hyper-marketization and pressure for profitability in the media and publishing industries, continued dominance of internet-based publishing and the constant introduction of new information technologies are a few, albeit broad and dominant, conditions that impact contemporary travel writing and have some travel writers worried about the future of travel writing. Considering these issues, I now account for some of the salient dynamics at play within travel writing as it has developed over time, and then give a reminder of some of the more lasting features of this literary form.

Tensions and tenacities

The experience-based and curiosity-driven texts conveying information based on observations from far-away places to a broad audience at home make up the very core of travel writing. Besides such pervasive characteristics, there are a few sets of intrinsic tensions or dynamics that have proved to be formative and long-lasting within the genre. The inherent dynamics of travel writing are the tension between cosmopolitan and vernacular, and between distance and proximity, as well as the tension created by mixing facts with fiction. These dynamics all work to shape the worlds presented in travel writing, so first I give a reminder of the world-making capacities of travel writing.

Scholars have, over the years, pointed to the world-making capabilities of literature in general and travel writing in particular. Peter Bishop (1985: 204), discussing travel writer Peter Matthiessen's book *The Snow Leopard*, asserts that: 'Travel writing creates worlds; it does not simply discover them.' It has been argued that travel writing can be seen as one of the most socially important of literary forms in that it both reflects and influences the way the world is viewed (Hooper and Youngs 2017, Hulme and Youngs 2002, Pettinger and Youngs 2019, Pratt 1992, Youngs 2013). As Youngs (ibid.: 12) states: 'Travel writing reflects and influences the way we view the world and ourselves in relation to it.' I have

already accounted for how Goodman (1978), in his discussion of world-making, includes a wide range of modes of expression other than words; building on Goodman's work, other scholars have shown that the intricate relationship among various forms of communication – textual, visual and oral – is at the core of processes of world-making. The role of media, medialization and the dynamics of premediation and remediation are seen as important factors that have shaped, and continue to shape, existing ways of world-making (Nünning and Nünning 2010). The narrative form in general is seen to have an especially powerful potential regarding the making of worlds. The main reason for this is that the narrative and storytelling – that is, the procedures and processes through which happenings, occurrences or incidents become meaningful events, stories and story-worlds – not only generate possible worlds but also exert performative power (Neumann and Zierold 2010, Nünning 2010, Nyqvist 2018). As Birgit Neumann and Martin Zierold hold:

In other words, the production and circulation of cultural as well as individual knowledge, i.e. the making of worlds in the broadest sense, is to a large extent dependent on media use and medial externalisation. Cultural world-making is constituted by a host of different media, all of which operate within specific symbolic systems: literary texts, TV documentaries, historical painting, newspaper articles, and monuments, for example. World-making cannot do without media that represent or embody cultural knowledge and are capable of circulating in a social group.

(Neumann and Zierold 2010: 103)

Considering travel writing specifically, these notions of the role that medialization plays in processes of world-making place the travel writer at the centre of such processes. The figure of the cultural broker is significant here, in that travel writers are situated in the intermediary position of a broker and mediate the world from one local setting to another. The role of the broker has been described by anthropologists as one that serves as a connection to mediate and disseminate knowledge between the local and global (Geertz 1960, James 2011, Wolf 1956). In writing specifically about the profession of foreign correspondents, Hannerz (2004: 2) states that they 'seemed to be key players in today's globalization of consciousness. Their reporting ... makes up a major part of that flow of information from and about other parts of the world.' Without mentioning the position of the broker specifically, Hannerz (*ibid.*: 15), in his discussion about foreign correspondents, alludes to such a mediating function: 'That argument, about bringing a perspective from one

place and applying it to another place, then reporting it back to where it came from, is central.' Scholars of travel writing also focus on the mediating role of travel writing and the travel writer as a kind of broker who mediates, transmits and translates first-hand experiences and observations from far-away places to readers back home. Benjamin Colbert (2019: 175) suggests that, by way of detailed descriptions, the figure of the traveller in narratives may be viewed as a representation of the imagined reader, while Susan Bassnett (2003: xi) likens the travel writer to a translator in her discussion of travel writing in relation to its readers. She writes: 'travel writers write for a designated audience, whose expectations are similarly shaped by their own context. Travel writing is here viewed as a particular form of writing, closely akin to translation. Like the translator, the travel writer shapes material in such a way that readers may have access to whatever situations and places, known or unknown, are being described.' Youngs (2013: 10) points to the similarities between travellers and translators, highlighting their in-between position: 'Translators and travellers may be seen as liminal figures moving between cultures, not quite or wholly belonging to any one exclusively.' Youngs (*ibid.*: 166) further discusses the particular position and function that travel writing holds: 'Of all literary genres, travel writing, which deals with encounter and observation, is best placed to transmit cultural values under the guise of straight-forward report or individual impression.'

With these world-making capacities and the mediating role of travel writing in mind, we now turn to look at the inherent tensions and dynamics significant to travel writing. It seems that the cosmopolitan–vernacular dynamic is especially salient here. Travel writing can be seen as a literary form and practice in which writers produce texts in an ongoing translation of and negotiation between cosmopolitanism and vernacularism (Hannerz 2003, 2004, Pollock et al. 2002). The cosmopolitan notion of travel writing is, scholars suggest, linked to a structure of colonialism and imperialism from which it is seemingly impossible to depart (Lisle 2006: 70, Pratt 1992, Youngs 2013: 182). On that note, Youngs (*ibid.*: 159) holds that: 'Authors who suggest they learn from, rather than have superior knowledge to, indigenous peoples, or who portray the results of their journeys as indecisive, are still using the Other – at least in textual terms – in order to make a point for their own purposes.'

Connected to the tensions between the cosmopolitan and the vernacular are the dynamics of distance and proximity. As Swedish travel writer Tomas Löfström (1984: 185, my translation) formulated it: 'It is in the tension between

the traveller and the surroundings that the possibilities of the travel story lie.' The very essence of travel writing is that the writer goes on journeys to distant places and writes about his or her experiences and first-hand observations for a readership at home. Travel writing, then, translates and mediates accounts from and of the world, and it does so from one local setting to another. The dynamic between distance and proximity is, and has been so from the beginning, formative for the travel story. On this very point, Bassnett (2003: xi) writes: 'Travel writing has built into its very existence a notion of otherness. It is premised on a binary opposition between home and elsewhere ... Hence all travel writing exists in a dialectical relationship between two distinct places – that designated by the writer and perhaps also by readers as "home", and that designated by the cultural other.'

In his work on the interpretation of cultural forms, and specifically on the role of the author within anthropology, Clifford Geertz (1988: 129–30) points to the two positions of 'Being There' and 'Being Here' of the anthropologist. The former represents the position of the anthropologist while in the field, as it were, something which more often than not – and especially so in the earlier days of the discipline – involved travelling to distant places to conduct fieldwork. 'In itself, Being There is a postcard experience ("I've been to Katmandu – have you?"). It is Being Here, a scholar among scholars, that gets your anthropology read, published, viewed, cited, taught.' The 'Here' that Geertz refers to is, of course, the academic world back home, and it is in the tension between the distant Being There and the nearby Being Here that the anthropological analysis is created. With regard to travel writing and the dynamics of distance and proximity, it has been argued that the positions of 'here' and 'there' are of importance. In her account of early Scottish women's travel writing, Dorothy McMillan (1997: 119) argues: 'All literature of travel operates between notions of "here" and "there" and the audience for such writing may sometimes be in both places at the same time, just as the writer too may shift positions in significant ways.' And with Michael Kowalewski (1992: 9) arguing along similar lines, we circle back to the role of the travel writer as the readers' representative or surrogate: 'No matter how much "inside" description a traveller employs in evoking another culture and its people, a crucial element of all travel writing remains the author's "visitor" status. He or she remains, as the reader's surrogate, a cultural outsider who moves into, through and finally beyond the places and events encountered.' It has been argued that inherent in one of the core features of travel writing, namely the detailed first-hand description, lies

the tension between distance and proximity. Benjamin Colbert (2019: 167) bases his discussion on the workings of descriptions on the Latin root of the word 'describe' where *de* means off, away, aside and *scriber* means to write. He argues that this 'involves distance, memory, a remove from experience; hence description is fundamental to the crafting of on-the-spot travels into narrative'. This brings us to the tensions generated by the frequent trespassing, in many other literary genres, over the distinct line between fact and fiction displayed in travel writing from the very onset.

Marco Polo was, for example, accused of both exaggerating and fabricating his travel experiences, and as Nicholas Frankopan (2003: 972) states: 'It is now generally acknowledged that Marco Polo tended to exaggerate his role.' The fluid, versatile and hybrid character of travel writing feeds off the tension between fact and fiction, in that travel writers often cross over to, borrow from and make use of other genres and literary forms to create their travel stories. The width of the literary form of travel writing accommodates more literary, creative and fictitious texts – albeit based on first-hand experiences of journeys – such as poems, short stories and novels on the one hand, and, on the other, predominantly informational texts such as guidebooks and travel writing from the pens of trained journalists who do not steer away from their fact-based material. But as Bassnett (2003: xi) reminds us: 'travellers who write about actual journeys they have undertaken are often in some way influenced by that fictitious writing, and indeed the boundaries between fact and fiction in what we shall call the genre of travel writing are often hard to discern.' Also at play here is the tension between distance and proximity, and, as discussed above, the dynamic created in the interplay of 'Being There' and 'Being Here'. As Barbara Korte (2000: 11) asserts: 'The actual experience of a journey is reconstructed, and therefore fictionalized, in the moment of being told' (see also Hooper and Youngs 2017: 9, Youngs 2013: 3). In his introduction to the seminal volume *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, James Clifford (1986: 6) reminds us of the Latin root of the word 'fiction' to argue that 'ethnographic writings can properly be called fictions'. The word's Latin root, *fingere*, refers to something that is made, shaped or fashioned, not necessarily invented. Finally Youngs, building on the arguments of Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan, touches upon both the mediating position of travel writing and other dynamics of fact and fiction inherent to the literary form: 'Holland and Huggan state that "travel writing enjoys an intermediary status between subjective inquiry and objective documentation" ... This immediately entails two things: the construction of the

self and the other and the relationship between fact and fiction' (Youngs 2013: 173, referring to Holland and Huggan 1998).

Based on the historic overview above, we see that a few fundamental characteristics were already in place during medieval times and have since remained at the very basic core of travel writing. To venture out on a journey and with a curious mind seek new, first-hand experienced-based information about far-away places and peoples, to observe carefully and take actual or mental notes of the findings, and upon one's return to transform the information, observations and experiences into texts that are both informative and entertaining, with the purpose of disseminating the travel stories to a wide audience – these are all defining elements of the otherwise constantly changing and evolving literary form of travel writing, and have existed since medieval times. There is, however, now a growing concern that this foundation may be deteriorating, which is endangering the very essence of travel writing.

Voices of concern

I now return to the interviews with professional travel writers, and what they have to say about their experiences and the current state of their craft and profession. In recent years these seasoned travel writers have been witnessing changes that they consider fundamental, and which they fear might lead to the demise of the literary form as such.

Several of the travel writers I interviewed half-jokingly identified themselves as 'old-school' writers, implying that a new generation of travel writers that they have met on assignments in recent years practise their craft differently. When delving into this topic a little, reflections saturated with both nostalgia and concern emerged. There was clearly a longing for a vanishing cosmopolitan essence of travel writing. More explicitly, these professional travel writers expressed deep concern about the effects that escalating marketization and digitalization might entail, and worried about what a new type of competition, the so-called travel influencers, might bring about for their profession and for travel writing as a literary form. Let us begin with what the interviewed travel writers said about the increased pressures and expectations of efficiency and output they experienced from editors and others on the publishing side of the travel-writing business. They expressed a real concern about authenticity, and grievances about expectations in the pursuit of 'clicks'.

‘A lot of travel writers, especially these days, are not able to focus on the kinds of stories that they, at heart, would prefer to,’ said Brian, continuing with an observation that:

Most people who are doing this for a living today have to take as many assignments as they can get and they have to write stories that they may not personally like to write. I can see that most of their work comes from websites and not even from actual travels or personal experiences. The reason, of course, is that most of the work is so poorly paid that in order to make anything approaching a realistic living, you have to write story after story after story after story. So you’re churning it out. And the quality ... Well, it’s reflected in the quality of the writing. Boy, am I glad that I’m not coming up in journalism and travel writing now.

During my interview with Grace, her friend and colleague, here called Harold, joined mid-interview and at one point the two dived into a dialogue about authenticity, or rather the difficulty they as travel writers increasingly had in finding what they perceived as authentic travel experiences to write about when tourist bureaus so heavily attempt to steer and shape what travel writers see and do during their travels. ‘Everybody is trying to get beyond the industry, the tourism industry, in some way, and have an authentic experience,’ says Grace. ‘Yes, people are looking for authentic experiences. You know, experiential things like home-stays or immersive experiences,’ Harold chimed in.

Brian, in particular, had a lot to say about a rather new phenomenon generated by online publishing which pressures travel writers, instead of looking for authentic and personal experiences to write about, merely to compile lists of things aimed to lure impatient online readers to click on the list rather than be tempted to read a longer travel story. Here is what Brian said about the phenomenon of lists:

I know that many travel writers trying to make a living have to do these round-ups, these listicals, you know, writing about things that they have not personally experienced. Lists of the ten greatest whatever. It started in the 90s on the covers of magazines when somebody came up with this rule that numbers on covers sell magazines. So, then you had to have ‘The Five This’ and ‘The 69 Most Wonderful That.’ And if you have that number on the cover – ‘The 17 Best Whatever,’ then that has got to be in the title of the story. And if that, then, is your headline, well, it affects the story you can write. And that’s when things began to go to hell, in my opinion.

Isabella is a travel writer and travel magazine editor based in New York who has worked as a print and digital travel editor for twenty-five years. From her long-

time experience, Isabella provided insight into the world of keywords and ‘clicks.’ She talked about how travel writers nowadays, often with the help of editors, have to think in new ways about the exact words they use. The job now has less to do with how best to describe something interesting from a journey, and is more about generating online traffic. Isabella said:

There’s the issue of Google analytics and keywords now. In order to, you know, get the clicks, writers nowadays have to know how to incorporate those words into their stories and headlines. I’m sure that if you’re a really good writer, you can develop an artistry of doing that so that you’re not repeating yourself. But I think that’s something that the new generation do not think the same about. It’s not easy to reconcile having a bunch of searchable words with trying to keep it fresh and having strong writing. It’s really difficult to be creative *and* accommodate the need for clicks. I’m sorry to say it but I think that writers of the new generation go for the clicks every time and let the writing be damned.

So who are they, then, the ‘new generation’ of travel writers that the more seasoned professionals keep mentioning? They are so-called travel influencers and travel bloggers, young women and men who travel and post texts, films and photos from their trips. Some have a blog or a vlog, others their own podcast, YouTube channel or Instagram account. Many of these travel influencers have hundreds of thousands of followers, some several million (see for example Johnston 2019, Mediakix 2019, Rachel 2019, Street 2017). Looking through the content and feeds of some of the more successful travel influencers, several things are apparent: most of them look like models, they have all cleared the sites to take a photograph, and the information they convey has little or no resemblance to any kind of travel writing. Mostly because there is so little actual text, some would not even qualify as what Youngs (2013: 187) calls ‘electronic postcards.’ It is obviously the case that, in the world of travel influencers, the image – the photograph or video clip – is the more important form of communication. The accompanying texts contain information about the name of the place the influencer has travelled to, perhaps something about the mood or emotion that the place evokes and a question to followers to entice them into direct communication in the comments section. The brief texts often also include information about products that the influencers wear, carry or use.

The travel posts of the new-generation travel influencers have little in common with the published travel stories of the professional, ‘old-school’ travel writers I interviewed. Given the lack of actual words, the output of the

travel influencers should arguably not be regarded as a new subgenre within, or evolution of, the ever-shifting form of travel writing. The fundamental and long-lasting features of travel writing, such as well-informed, curiosity-driven and experienced-based detailed descriptions of far-away places, are far from prominent, if present at all, in the brief notes of travel influencers. It can easily be argued that the work of this 'new generation' of travellers promoting their travels to a wide audience should not even be considered as contributing to the literary form of travel writing. What, then, are the 'old-school' travel writers worried about? Their concern is that bloggers, vloggers, YouTubers and Instagrammers are increasingly overshadowing the work of the 'old-school', some say 'real', travel writers. They wonder if the younger generation and their use of new media technology will make so-called actual travel writing obsolete. They also worry whether the young travel influencers' scant and superficial information about far-away places will dilute or even corrupt and damage the view of the world for the millions of people who follow their 'feeds'. Their concern, in short, is that travel influencers will, in fact, have real influence and impact, that they will influence not only the profession and craft of travel writing but also the travel industry *per se*, as well as the view of the world of readers-cum-followers and potential travellers.

Jennifer, based in New York, has worked as a travel writer and editor for more than fifteen years, and in recent years she keeps running into travel influencers on her trips:

Once I was on a wonderful trip to an amazingly beautiful island with a complex history. On my last day there a PR person arrived with about nine or ten influencers. All they did was take pictures of themselves. It was ridiculous. But that's what they do. They get paid to go to places and post things. They're required to post a minimum of pictures on social media. I mean, travel writers do convey a sense of place and there are still writers out there that care about that and try to do that but what I see is more of a very inauthentic kind of reporting. Influencers and bloggers contribute to a superficial mainstreaming because all they want is 'the money shot'.

Karen, another travel writer based in New York, has a long career in both print and online travel media, and was more direct in her criticism of the new generation that she meets on press trips:

I don't really like going on press trips any longer. There's nothing more depressing than seeing a 20-something twirling around saying: 'I'm an influencer.' This next

generation is all self-appointed. 'I'm an influencer. I'm a blogger.' But where did you learn? Did you go to school? Did you take a master's? Did you train anywhere? 'No. I take pictures.' All that kind of killed it for real travel writers. I mean, take Instagram or Twitter ... It's too quick. It's all just surface.

Back to Andrew on the West Coast. He recognizes that the new generation with their new media outlets are here to stay, but like others from his generation of travel writers, he is also genuinely concerned about the recent developments. 'Travel bloggers are the future, the cutting edge of the industry,' he said, and shared his experience of attending travel-writing conferences lately, conveying insight into a shift in motivation for travel writers: 'You'll find that, I would say, seventy-five per cent of the panels and discussions are about making money. I am usually the only person there talking about quality.' Andrew also spoke of the perils of the direct uploading of texts and images in travel influencers' posts:

There is all this unfiltered material. There are no curators. No editors. Just readers that immediately come into contact with bloggers who identify themselves as travel writers. So the popular sense of what a travel writer is and what a travel writer does has become somewhat diffused and corrupt, I think. Younger people who are just coming into the world of reading don't understand the distinction well. They pretty much have an unfiltered, uncurated embrace of everything they read. And that makes me wonder about the future of the whole genre and where it's going. When the travel bloggers become the predominant source of travel information, what does that do?

End of the road?

What, indeed, will increased and potentially dominant click-bait and sponsor-driven unfiltered postcard-like online postings or best-of lists from far-away places do to travel writing? What will happen to travel writing as a craft and profession?

For thousands of years people have ventured out on journeys, returned back home and told stories of distant places to those who did not travel. Since medieval times such storytelling has evolved into the diverse literary form of travel writing; a form that at its core is defined by curiosity-driven narratives of travel, first-hand experiences and observations from distant places, and texts with the dual purpose of informing and entertaining, intended to reach a

broad audience. Travel writing has, throughout its history, shifted and changed according to political, economic, social, religious and cultural conditions, and over the centuries innovations in transportation, printing, media and communication have altered the way people travel and affected how writers tell their stories of the journeys they take. But if, as Youngs (2017: 175) argued, travel writing ‘reflects the society in which it is produced and consumed, multifarious elements of culture are contained within it’, the current changes that are worrying the community of professional travel writers make perfect sense, in that they reflect the contemporary condition. Much as merchants, missionaries, explorers and colonialists were driven by the conditions of their respective times to venture out into the world and write home about it for the purpose of trade, evangelism, discovering or colonializing, the drivers for a new generation of travel storytellers – bloggers, influencers and Instagram personalities – are to achieve a growing number of followers, increased online traffic, more individual clicks and other measures that, in one way or another, are seen to generate profit in online publishing and social media industries. If, in fact, there is waning interest in and demand for longer, informative yet personal narratives based on experiences, observations and reflections from distant places which the author has actually visited, then the world-making capabilities of travel writing are diminished and travel writing as a literary form and profession may very well have reached the end of a long and winding road.

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Interview material

Full transcripts of all interviews in author's possession at Stockholm University.

Interview with 'Andrew' conducted in California, August 2017.

Interview with 'Brian' conducted in New York, October 2019.

Interview with 'Charles' conducted in California, August 2017.

Interview with 'David' conducted in California, August 2017.

Interview with 'Elizabeth' conducted in California, August 2017.

Interview with 'Frank' conducted in California, August 2017.

Interview with 'Grace' conducted in California, August 2017.

Interview with 'Harold' conducted in California, August 2017.

Interview with 'Isabella' conducted in New York, October 2019.

Interview with 'Jennifer' conducted in New York, October 2019.

Interview with 'Karen' conducted in New York, October 2019.