

Solo Doesn't Mean Alone: Travels with Lonely Planet

Hannah Kroonblawd

In this article, Hannah Kroonblawd considers how a specific kind of text, the *Lonely Planet* guidebook, influences action, and how both text and action can be changed by context. Central to Kroonblawd's project are ideas of intertextuality, CHAT-based theories of activity and socialization, and recognition of antecedent knowledge.

If you've ever walked through the travel section of a bookstore, you've probably seen them, all lined up in a long row of white titles and blue spines: *Lonely Planet* travel guidebooks. Maybe you're not a big traveler, but these books awaken a monster in me—the kind of monster that forgets about student loans and groceries and rent payments and decides to book the next flight to the Faroe Islands. “Read me,” *Lonely Planet* whispers, “and you will soar like a sky lantern over the city of Taipei.” My traveling experiences are so closely intertwined with *Lonely Planet* that I can't separate myself from them. It's a problem, I know.

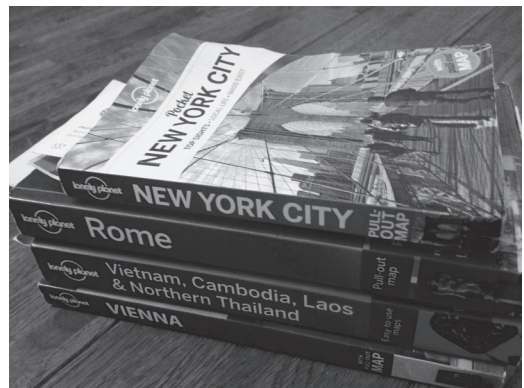


Figure 1: My stack of *Lonely Planet* guidebooks.

For this *Grassroots* article, I decided to take a closer look at my own use of contemporary guidebooks, specifically those published by *Lonely Planet*. It's a

funny genre—part encyclopedia, part food critic, part history book, part map. I've used *Lonely Planet* guides on five different trips, both inside and outside of the United States. My first trip using a *Lonely Planet* book was in February 2013, and my most recent trip was March 2016. I've used their multi-country guides, city guides, and pocket guides. I lent one regional guide to a friend, and it was never returned. I'm still bitter about that one. I tell people that I trust *Lonely Planet* with my life because, after fried tarantula in Cambodia and the Museum of Communism in Prague ("you couldn't do laundry, but you could get your brainwashed"), I do.

In considering my use of (and strong attachment to) these guidebooks, I decided to focus on two main questions:

1. How does the intertextual nature of a *Lonely Planet* guidebook affect the actual traveling experience of its audience (and vice versa)?
2. What reader-text interactions occur between the day of purchase and the end of the trip?

To analyze the intertextual and interactional nature of a *Lonely Planet* book, I looked at two different city guides—the *Rome* city guide and the *New York City* pocket guide—and thought about how I worked with the text as I traveled and how the text worked with me. Travel is not static. The action of traveling is something that changes day by day, moment by moment. We can consider travel the same way that we think about texts. People, place, and language all come together at a specific moment with the intention of experiencing something new or different, much in the same way we approach a new or different kind of text.

When it comes to traveling, whether close to home or far away, we have websites like Yelp and TripAdvisor that help do a lot of the "guiding" legwork for us. These sites have compilations of traveler-recommended restaurants and hotels and attractions, with any amount of personal anecdote on the side. We can get a pretty good idea of what our travel experience will be like before we even step out the door (or go online to buy plane tickets). There isn't a whole lot of mystery left when it comes to traveling, unless you decide to go internet-free and scrap the guidebook altogether.

It sounds like fun, going off-grid while travelling, but I'm the kind of person who likes to have a plan—a flexible plan that can change whenever I'd like, but a plan nonetheless. And, while the internet is great in terms of having anything and everything about a city or a country just a click away, I like having a book in my hands.

Enter the *Lonely Planet* guidebook.

Intertextuality, or What's Between the Pages

The moment I open my *Rome* guidebook, things start to fall out of it. Literally.

Here's what I have to catch, two-and-a-half years after returning from Italy:

1. A “100-minute integrated ticket” for the Rome bus system.
2. An Italian/English map of the Roman Forum, Colosseum, and Palatine Hill.
3. An Italian/English map of the Vatican Museum.
 - Another bus ticket falls out of that map.
4. An English map of the “Case Romane Del Celio” (underground houses).

Apparently, I shoved these between the cover and the first page of the book. Later on, a receipt from La Casa del Caffé is being used as a bookmark between pages 196 and 197. On it I'd written, “the time I finally ordered the right way (pay first, give receipt back to barista) lol.” The date on the receipt is 04-04-14.

There is something comfortable about this guidebook. Perhaps it is the font and color choices: bright blue headings, red numbers and icons, serif fonts for descriptions, sans-serif for time/location/directional information and inset textboxes. Paragraphs are generally short, there are lots of pictures, and there are maps every 15 pages or so. This is a young-adult-friendly book, with its **representation** (how the idea behind the text is put into practice) geared specifically towards readers who are used to *Google Maps*, emojis, and hipster coffee shops. Take, for example, this description of a bar near the Piazza Navona: “It's laid-back and good-looking, with occasional jam sessions and original French country décor—think wrought-iron fittings, comfy armchairs and a crackling fireplace” (*Rome* 103). Only a certain readership is going to be concerned about “comfy armchairs.”

The *Rome* guidebook is about 400 pages long. Despite the length, its comfy-ness (no escaping it now) led me to treat it as a scrapbook of sorts. I annotated the text itself with my own code:

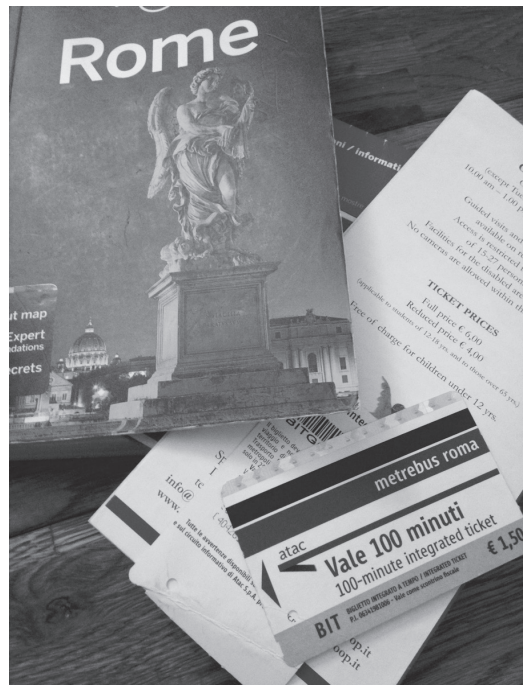


Figure 2: Items within the pages of my *Rome* guidebook.

- Green highlighter indicates places I wanted to visit (highlighted during planning time).
- Checkmarks next to headings indicate places I actually visited (checked after visiting). (See Figure 3)
- Circles on maps indicate places I needed to be able to reference quickly (so that I wouldn't look *too* much like a tourist).
- Two stars indicate my favorite gelato shop (there is only one, and it is Fior di Luna in Trastevere). (See Figure 3)

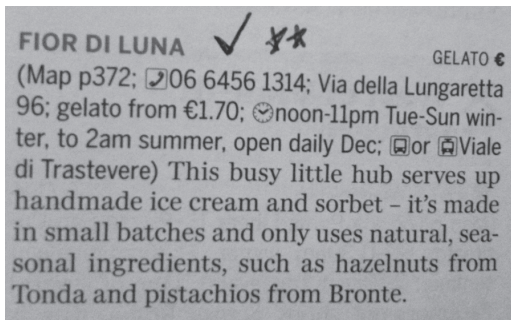


Figure 3: Annotation example.

I must have read the book nearly cover to cover in the months leading up to the trip given the amount of green highlighter. And, in retrospect, there is no way I would have been able to do it all in seven days. Tracking my highlights, I notice that I highlighted nearly everything one would expect to see in Rome: the Colosseum, the Spanish Steps, the Trevi Fountain. I highlighted lots of churches, especially those with well-known artwork inside,

and lots of gelato shops. Comparing highlights to checkmarks, I'd estimate that I visited less than a quarter of the places I hoped to see. There are also checkmarks floating outside of highlights—I didn't always stick to what I had planned. What I did while traveling (eating lunch or drinking espresso or

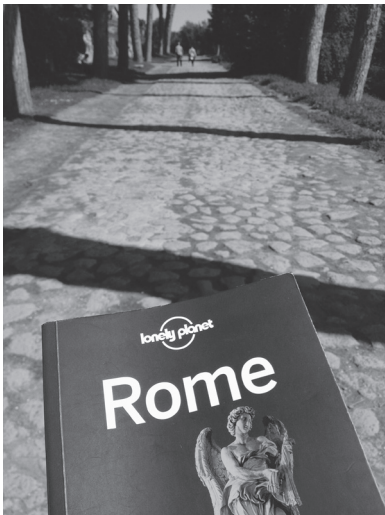


Figure 4: Walking the Palatino with my guidebook.

viewing paintings) changed due to the context of each day. But these aspects of **socialization** (my interactions with the wider world as I use a text) were also very much guided by the book I carried. Keats-Shelley House? Check. Figuring out how to order pizza by the kilo instead of the slice? Check. Using the train station kiosks to buy a ticket to Assisi? Check.

And this is where intertextuality comes into play. **Intertextuality** is the action of texts working within or alongside or against one another. In CHAT terms, we use the word **activity** to describe action, whether text-action or people-action. In my travels, intertextuality takes the shape of my annotations within the guidebook, my own thoughts and experiences on top of published, “objective”

recommendations. It is also the texts that I've chosen to keep within the pages of the guidebook—the tickets and maps that fall out when I open its

pages. Intertextuality allows me to exert my own authority, gained both as I plan and as I visit the places I read about. In the act of annotation, even annotations as small as a check or a star, I become both writer and reader of a single, integrated, intertextual guidebook. My activity as a reader, as a writer, changes the way I use the guidebook itself.

Rome vs. NYC

One of the most interesting things about the *Rome* guidebook is that buying the book was the impetus for buying my ticket to Italy. I remember standing in an English bookstore in Hong Kong (I was living in China at the time) and holding three *Lonely Planets* in my hand: *Rome*, *Paris*, and *London*. You already know which one I ended up buying. But here's the thing, holding this book in my hand solidified the trip for me. It made it real; it made it possible. The idea that someone (or, in this case, multiple someones, as *Lonely Planet* guides are written collaboratively by multiple authors) had been to a place and taken pictures and gained enough knowledge to tell me I could do the same was enough to convince me to *actually* do the same. I bought *Rome* in November of 2013 and visited the city five months later. Here, again, is where activity is in full force. The actions of someone else visiting and then writing about Rome helped me to do the same.

The opposite happened when buying *Pocket New York City*. I didn't buy the guidebook for NYC until the week before departure. The pocket guide is a half-size version of the larger *Lonely Planet New York City* guidebook. It has many of the same features as the full-size text; it still includes top sights, neighborhood descriptions, and "best of" lists. It also includes a pull-out map, which I did actually pull out of the book. But nothing falls out of this guidebook as I open it. There are three bookmarks, all firmly wedged in place: a business card from the AT&T store in Times Square, a movie ticket for *Deadpool*, and an Ellis Island + Statue of Liberty ticket. There are no highlights, no check marks, no stars. I didn't write in this book at all, not before, during, or after the trip.

I was in New York the exact same amount of time that I was in Rome, even during the same time of year, but the NYC trip was different. I was traveling with two friends. Because I wasn't alone, because there were two other people with two opinions other than my own of what to do and where

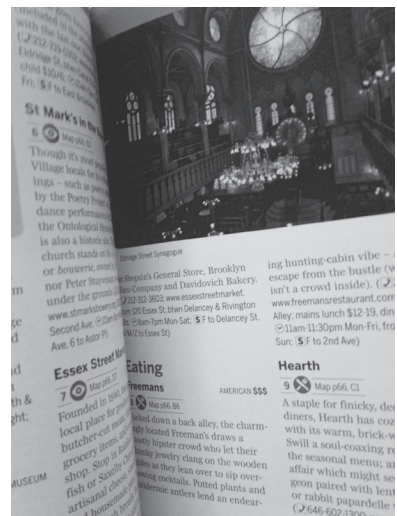


Figure 5: The very clean pages of my NYC guidebook.

to go and what to eat, the text itself lessened in importance. I wasn't as tied to this book as my go-to authority because I was traveling with one person who had visited NYC multiple times before, because I was surrounded by people I knew (or at least assumed) were English speakers, because I knew that NYC's streets went up in numbers the farther north you walked, etc. Socialization was integral to this part of my travel experience. My interactions with others took priority over writing in the guidebook.

Not What I Expected

This project surprised me. I thought I was going to be comparing how these texts affected context, how they changed the way I traveled. And maybe the *Rome* guidebook did. But I'm realizing, as I write this article, that it was in fact the opposite, that context changed how I used the texts, and that I changed the *Rome* text as I traveled. My trip to New York City was very different from my Rome trip, so I used my guidebook differently. I was in an environment that was more familiar to me—the country where I was born, my native language as the primary one spoken, a city with a history and culture that I've grown up learning about and reading about and watching unfold.

Here. Maybe a chart will help clarify my thoughts.

New York City	Rome
Traveling with 2 friends	Traveling alone
Local language = native language	Local language = unfamiliar language
General understanding of city layout	No knowledge of city layout
Driver's License necessary for identification - identifies me as domestic tourist	Passport necessary for identification - identifies me as foreign tourist
Emergency protocol is natural (i.e., call 911)	Emergency protocol???
Family/friends within an hour's drive	Family/friends on the other side of the ocean

This isn't a perfect experiment. Perhaps it would be more effective if I had actually gotten the full-text copy of the New York City guidebook instead of the pocket one, if I could use one city as a "control" (probably New York City) and attempt to mirror my exact activity in the other city. But that's not true to life or true to travel. And maybe the "perfect experiment" doesn't matter so much as the conclusions I can draw from an imperfect one: that

unfamiliar contexts bring me into closer relationships with texts, especially texts created with the intention of allowing me to navigate unfamiliar locations. I felt more comfortable in NYC, not because of my guidebook, but because I had stronger **antecedent knowledge** (prior understanding, both conscious and unconscious) of the city, which meant I didn't have to rely on the guidebook with the same intensity as I did in Rome. And, on the flipside, making physical alterations to the *Rome* text was, perhaps, helping to ground me, giving me a sort of control over the unknown both before I set foot in Italy (through highlighting places I wanted to visit) and while I was there (by checking places off once I'd visited them).

What does this—looking at my use of guidebooks prior to, during, and after two very different trips—teach me about literate activity? It means I can't expect that texts will always have control over a given situation or context. But it also means I can't assume the opposite. Textual use varies according to context, according to the situations I find myself approaching, or in the middle of, or already leaving behind. Textual use changes depending on whether I am alone or alongside others, whether I have a lot of antecedent knowledge of my situation or very little or none at all. Much of the activity that happens as I travel stems from the amount of socialization I'm engaging in—maybe a lot, as in New York, or maybe a little, as in Rome.

The other question is why I wrote in *Rome* in the first place, especially as I was also keeping a separate journal of the trip. Sometimes it was to help me find my physical location or destination, like those circles on the map. But more often it was with the understanding that this text can help connect me to the future, when maybe, *hopefully*, I'd get to visit Rome again. Then I wouldn't only have the guidebook to help me. I'd also have the writing I did on top of the guidebook text, the intertextual writing, to influence my choices. The reader becomes writer, taking an active role beyond that of passive reading. Writing on top of writing is not just a present act, but also an act that carries both the reader/writer and the text itself forward. Intertextuality works as a time capsule and a time-travel machine at once.

Lately I've been reading a lot of articles that talk about how a text is never just a text in isolation. A book is always in conversation with its author and reader and context and genre and history and other books. And the same is true of me, even if I'm traveling alone. I'm in conversation with the texts that are around me—the signs I read, the menus I peruse, the guidebooks I carry—which in turn help me to be in conversation with the unfamiliar and uncertain contexts I find myself in. Sometimes, like with the NYC pocket guide, the conversations are short, almost non-existent. At other times, like with *Rome*, the conversations begin and never really end. Even now, pieces still fall from between the pages.

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Hannah Kroonblawd is a PhD student in the English Studies program at Illinois State, focusing on creative writing and poetry. She used to teach middle schoolers in southern China, where she lived for two years without a guidebook. And those were two of the best years ever. Go figure.



