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Advancing critico-relational inquiry: is tourism studies ready for a relational turn?

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ABSTRACT

This paper advances relational thought in tourism studies as a means for facilitating greater scrutiny of the relational matrices that have rendered possible the continuity of unjust, oppressive, and discriminatory relational patterns, particularly when these become detrimental to individuals, communities, other species, and the environment. Amid the growing determination to build more ethical, just, and sustainable futures, it contemplates whether critical scholarship has arrived at a relational turning point, whereby certain manifestations of tourism are increasingly deemed undesirable and problematic, and that transformation is needed in areas such as unsustainable growth, persistent colonial domination and racial conditioning, continued disregard for the environment, ongoing gender inequality and gender violence, and enduring injustices. The paper explains how relationality is interconnected with sustainability and critical scholarship and outlines the premise of critico-relational inquiry in the field. New conceptual vocabulary is offered to emphasise the critical vitality that can be injected into the examination of relations including: relational programming, relational reprogramming, relational hacking, meta-relational concerns, and relational thriving. Critico-relational inquiry is delineated as a viable strategy for transitioning towards sustainable alternatives, and as an integral part of future sustainability cum critical studies.

Introduction: the ripening critical scholarship and relational turnings

Critical scholarship is important in the study of tourism, because it "encompasses a range of perspectives and approaches committed to social, political, and cultural critique that regard tourism analysis as an ethical and political project dedicated to creating conditions of equality" (Morgan & Pritchard, 2016, p. 202). The first two editions of the *Critical Turn in Tourism Studies* handbooks (Ateljevic et al., 2012; Ateljevic et al., 2007) and affiliated conferences and gatherings were instrumental in mobilising the academic community to promote human rights and social and environmental justice, and in addressing the inequalities in tourism, hospitality, leisure, and events. The efforts exerted in the first decade were dedicated to building critical capacities in the field. One of the considerable challenges, as noted by Morgan and Cole (2010), was to "build a substantive body of knowledge that takes on the task of highlighting issues of justice, ethics, equality and responsibility in tourism" (p. 214). Opportunely, with the momentum

maintained, the critical arm of tourism studies has advanced and yielded prolific intellectual returns, covering topics such as displacement, dispossession, and exclusion and extinction (Gibson, 2021). But perhaps the most visible marker of the success of critical thought in tourism is the rise of rise of special issues, and therefore, even more concentrated efforts to address wrongs.

Focusing on the journals *Tourism Geographies* and *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* alone, there is little doubt that critical scholarship is blossoming. Consider the current surge in the number of special issues that are dedicated to a wide range of critical matters: tourism and justice (Jamal & Higham, 2021); sustainable work and employment (Mooney et al., 2022); SGDs and partnerships (Scheyvens & Cheer, 2022); gender and sustainability (Eger et al., 2022); peace, tourism, and structural injustices in tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2022); inclusive tourism (Biddulph & Scheyvens, 2018); settler colonialism (Grimwood et al., in press); marginalisation and discrimination of LGBTQI communities (Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, in press); and racial violence and discrimination in tourism (Dillette et al., in press). Consider also that this is only a small proportion of publishing outlets, with numerous other special issues curated by other academic journals—in addition to manuscripts published in regular issues, monographs, and edited texts.

With the ripening of critical work has come the awakening of "new" urgencies and a stronger resolve for tourism academics to become the makers and shapers of better tourism worlds. Whilst such determination has always accompanied tourism criticalities, the appetite for transformation has intensified. In reflecting on the first decade of critical scholarship (since the first Critical Tourism Studies Conference held in Dubrovnik, Croatia), Morgan et al. (2018) poignantly emphasised the need "to continually examine critically the purpose of our research and ask whether our knowledge has served to enhance social justice or whether it has simply served to reify historical power and social relations" (p. 186). Similar concerns have arisen elsewhere in the field. We now see more frequent calls for tourism scholars to "do better in acknowledging the invisibility of race within historical and contemporary tourism geographies" (Dillette et al., in press), and we see also more stern critiques of pro-growth ideologies and the challenges neoliberal capitalism poses to various communities, nonhumans, and the planet (Boluk et al., 2019; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019).

The Western ideal, according to which the commodification of landscapes, peoples, cultures, natural monuments, and species has become synonymous with "progress", has, too, been contested. Unsurprisingly, there is an undeniable swell of urgency in the space of decolonising research (Aikau & Gonzalez, 2019; Carr, 2020; Carr et al., 2016; Chambers, 2022; Chambers & Buzinde, 2015; Grimwood et al., 2019; Grimwood et al., 2019; Hall & Tucker, 2004; Harbor & Hunt, 2021; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022; Phillips et al., 2021; Tucker, 2019), underpinned by the determination to destabilise and repair existing modes of being and relating one to another (and the world) and advance more inclusive substitutes. And with the pressing demands for meaningful integration of alternative, indigenous epistemologies (Scheyvens et al., 2021), the field is starting to open up to "the plural truths that apply in difficult-to-fathom globalizing/decolonizing/postcolonial settings" (Hollinshead, 2016, p. 349).

Arguably, to "do better" in tourism is to focus ever more closely on how tourism realities are constituted relationally, and how such relationalities might be reimagined and transformed in the pursuit of more just, ethical, equitable, and sustainable tourism futures. This assertion lends itself to three propositions around which relational thought and practice can be further developed. The first proposition is hardly surprising to the regular reader of this journal but is yet to be embraced wholeheartedly within mass industrial tourism. It claims that sustainable tourism is the only responsible/desirable and the inevitable pathway to ensuring that there is a future in, and for, tourism. It is evident that tourism faces significant challenges and that new architectures in support of more ethical, sustainable, and just tourism futures are needed. Not only are we at the brink of sustainable and environmental crises (Higham et al., 2022), the recent Covid-19 pandemic has underscored our interconnected vulnerabilities and reinforced the

necessity for fundamental transformations at a planetary level (Hall et al., 2020). In other words, we have reached a point at which we cannot afford for tourism not to be sustainable, with the Doomsday Clock now at 90 s to midnight (https://thebulletin.org).

The second proposition is closely interlinked with the first but makes further theoretical and philosophical claims: it asserts that a sustainable future of tourism can be advanced by understanding tourism relationally and by recognising it first and foremost as a relational phenomenon. There is no doubt that critical and sustainable scholarship has made great advances, but there is still much to be done to reach the peaks of equality and justice—whether this pertains to race and gender (Chambers, 2022), indigenous rights and decolonisation (Grimwood et al., 2019), forcibly displaced people (Burrai et al., 2022), gender violence (Eger, 2021), animal welfare (Essen et al., 2020), people with disabilities (Gillovic et al., 2021), or justice in tourism overall (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018). In such challenging transitional times, it is therefore all the more important to consider the relational nature of the world and to cogitate about the value of critico-relational inquiry. This proposition is to some extent energised by Latour's (2004) pointed ponderings about critique running out of steam. He asks: "Is it really asking too much from our collective intellectual life to devise, at least once a century, some *new* critical tools?" (p. 243).

The third proposition ensues from the first two and contends that the field of tourism studies may be ripening for a relational turn. In the words of Font et al. (2023), "sustainable tourism academics have a clear responsibility towards the wellbeing of our planet and its inhabitants, and there has never been the urgency that we face now" (p. 2). And there, too, is a growing resoluteness to be more involved in the transitions towards sustainability (Boluk et al., 2019). Such signs may be indicative of not merely new focuses and directions but a more profound shift the field may undergo. This paper suggests that critico-relational inquiry is a viable approach for navigating complex relational futures, and advocates for relational comprehensions of tourism.

Whereas the first proposition is the least contentious, the second and third demand further delineation. The aims of this paper are therefore as follows: (1) to explain how relationality is interconnected with sustainability and critical scholarship, (2) to provide a brief, rudimentary philosophical and theoretical grounding of relationality for tourism scholars, and (3) to loosely outline the premise of critico-relational inquiry and explicate the numerous ways in which relational thinking can enhance criticalities in the field. These will be treated in that order.

Relational approaches in tourism

Generally speaking, relational judgements have enjoyed considerable success and stimulated much philosophical and methodological thinking across a number of disciplines and fields. The so-called "relational turn" has been observed, for example, in sociology (Dépelteau, 2008, 2018; Emirbayer, 1997), political sciences (Selg, 2016), economic geography (Boggs & Rantisi, 2003; Murphy, 2018), human geography (Jones, 2009), ethnography (Desmond, 2014), psychology (Gergen, 2009), sustainability sciences (West et al., 2020), archaeology (Crellin et al., 2021; Grauer, 2020), and the social sciences in general (Selg & Ventsel, 2020). In the sister field of hospitality studies, anthropological and sociological interests in host–guest relationships have enjoyed a long history (e.g. Nash & Smith, 1991; Smith, 1989; Smith & Brent, 2001), and the same can be said of tourism (Cohen, 1984; Nash et al., 1981; Turner & Ash, 1975). More philosophical and conceptual investigations, however, have only relatively recently started to gain traction: actor–network theorists have been at work to reveal the ways in which tourism emerges through relational practices (Jóhannesson, 2005; Ren, 2011; van der Duim, 2007; van der Duim et al., 2012, 2017); social network analysts have similarly centred their attention on the relationships between different stakeholders (Minnaert, 2020) and delved into the patterns and structures of relationships (Casanueva et al., 2016); and posthumanist scholars have begun to challenge the anthropocentric nature of tourism (Cohen, 2019; Gren & Huijbens, 2012, 2016;

Guia, 2021; Guia & Jamal, 2020; Kumm et al., 2019), emphasising the necessity to consider nonhumans in the broader planetary relations—a sentiment endorsed by sustainability and animal ethics advocates (Fennell, 2014; Winter, 2020) as well as by colleagues drawing inspiration from new materialist and postanthropocentric thought (Matteucci et al., 2022; Valtonen et al., 2020).

Relational acumen, although not explicitly, can also be detected in the epistemological (pertaining to knowledge) and axiological (pertaining to values) foundations of sustainable tourism and ecotourism. Sustainable tourism—a specialised inquiry branch of tourism studies—is distinguished by the effort to protect the natural, cultural, and built environments and resources, and the striving for balance between the advantages and harmful impacts that tourism can bring. As such, it has become a crucial intellectual arena for advancing tourism as a force for planetary, public, and multispecies good. Similarly, the emergence of ecotourism can be understood as a relational response to mass tourism, underpinned by the conviction that there are important rules of engagement with nature that ought to be adhered to in the pursuit of tourism. With its roots in alternative tourism, it grew out of dissatisfaction with the anthropocentric and profit-driven forms of conventional tourism, which paid little attention to social and environmental problems (Fennell, 2008). It can be traced to concerns over the relationship between natural ecosystems and social-economic processes, notable, for instance, in programmes such as UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (MAB) (see Adams, 2001; Butcher, 2007). And so, from its inception, built into the dictum of ecotourism were strong relational and normative underpinnings that have remained an integral part of the architecture of ecotourism, with key themes being environmental protection and conservation, education, monitoring, community participation, and promotion of ways of being with nature vis-à-vis tourism that are beneficial to the planet and nonhumans.

Despite the available notions of relationality, there is still much to be done to advance relational thought and practice in the field. Namely, it is not clear how relational ontology—and more broadly, relational inquiry—can further critical scholarship in the context of sustainability. As noted in the renewed directions of the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, a more critical understanding of the nexus between tourism and sustainability is needed (Font et al., 2023). The continuing necessity for theoretical bridging and critico-philosophical expansion is further demonstrated by the fact that seven of the top ten journals in tourism, hospitality, and leisure—as ranked by SCImago in 2022 (https://www.scimagojr.com)—are still dedicated to advancing management and marketing insights. The exceptions are the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, *Tourism Geographies*, and *Annals of Tourism Research*. Whilst this paradigmatic grip over tourism inquiry is not unexpected, critical, conceptual, and theoretical work is indispensable in considering the future of tourism in much broader social, societal, and planetary contexts. On this note, in 2008, Airey commented that tourism as a discipline was "a long way from truly informing debate and development in its wider world", with Ateljevic et al. (2009) echoing similar concerns. And as voiced by Morgan and Pritchard (2016), "a critical approach to tourism needs to advance its study beyond questions of performance, management, and governance, to consider reclaiming the world for the whole of humanity" (p. 203).

This welcome ambition—to reclaim the world for the whole of humanity, and importantly, also for nonhumans and the planet—is of a relational variety: it is a call to consider tourism more profoundly in relational terms. It demands of scholars to probe, question, and render visible the ways in which humans relate one to another and to the world vis-à-vis tourism, and to consider what ought to be endorsed and championed, but also resisted, corrected, and built anew. Hence, the time seems opportune to advance relationality philosophically and conceptually and expound the possibilities for the field. The following section provides conceptual and theoretical guidance on viable groundings of relational research; the subsequent section discusses the implications and opportunities for critico-relational inquiry in tourism.

Possible pathways to relational thought

Relationality has been taken up by different thinkers and informed various domains of inquiry, and therefore, there are many paths that can lead to relational thought. The one paved here positions relationality in existential phenomenological and social ontological milieus. The field of philosophy called phenomenology has been attuned to broader relational problems from the outset. The interconnection between the self, world, and others was understood and pursued by Edmund Husserl, and consequently by Martin Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, and also, to greater or lesser degree, by other philosophers who can be described as existential phenomenologists. For the founder of phenomenology, Husserl, for example, the socially, culturally, and historically informed understandings of phenomena—in other words, any relationally constituted conceptions—were to be eliminated by his method of *epoché* (Husserl, 1931) to obtain pure essences. For Heidegger, there is an essential link between humans and the world we inhabit, and a conviction that human beings cannot be understood but through our relationship to, and embeddedness in, the world (Zahavi, 2019). The intellectual offspring of ideas are too many to cover here, but it pays to emphasise that for the existential phenomenologists in particular, relationality was pivotal for examining the existential fate of objects and subjects. Tiryakian (1973) elucidates this point while providing a generic definition of existential phenomenology:

> Existential phenomenology is a relational approach to social reality, asserting a fundamental nexus between social subject and social object, the nexus being the meaning-structure in terms of which the object is perceived by the subject and in terms of which the subject is disposed to act. (Tiryakian, 1973, p. 209)

Among the key concepts that became integral to phenomenology, and which are also fundamental for understanding relationality, are intentionality and intersubjectivity. Whereas the former signifies the directedness of consciousness towards things (consider here that we are never conscious of everything at once; rather, there is a sense of direction which can be ascribed to our conscious states), the latter alludes to the fact that the world is seldom experienced by subjects in isolation from other human beings. Intersubjectivity thus marks "a plurality of subjectivities making up a community sharing a common world" (Spiegelberg, 1994, p. 747). And as Crossley puts it (1996), we are "inter-subjects": "Our actions and thoughts aren't reducible to us alone. They are moves in a game which has many players, responses to a call to action which is expressed in every gesture of the other" (p. 173). In sum, the concept of intersubjectivity captures the idea that lived social realities and experienced phenomena—such as tourism—are fundamentally interpersonal and constituted socially, culturally, and historically.

Ontological grounding of relationality

The crux of relationality has been eloquently articulated by Emirbayer (1997), who observed that sociologists in the late 1990s were faced with a new dilemma: "whether to conceive of the social world as consisting primarily in substances or in processes, in static "things" or in dynamic, unfolding relations" (p. 281). Out of these ponderings grew a body of thought that emphasised the dynamic nature of social realities, and importantly, the primacy of relations over entities. In the context of tourism, the implications are such that tourism phenomena—i.e. the vast catalogue of entities taken to belong to tourism—arise from specific ways of relating, and it is the relationalities that bear more ontological weight. Thus, it is the way in which agents enter into relationships with one another and with the vast array of objects of this world that makes it possible, say, for "tourism destinations," "dark tourism," "luxury hotels," "eco-lodges," "waiters," "monuments," and "concierges" to exist. (see Pernecky 2012, 2022).

Relational ontology goes hand in hand with social ontology, as humans construct social facts through the aforementioned process of intentionality (for more details in the context of social ontology see Pernecky, 2016; Searle, 1996, 2006). Namely, it is compatible with, and complementary to, social ontology in that relationality helps to explain the processes by which constructs are possible. In plain terms, relationality is the "inbetweenness" of conscious subjects and the world, and the encodement of objects, sites, people, histories, experiences, etc. (see Figure 1). Relationality guides attitudes, actions, behaviours, practices, and customs, and more generally, our being *in* and *with* all that belongs to this world. The tourism phenomenon can thus be understood in terms of a multitude of interconnected relationalities, with a vast array of things, places, and experiences "coded" as touristic: a site of catastrophe and suffering can be encoded as "dark tourism," a guided interaction with fauna and flora as "ecotourism," a location made popular due to a film franchise as "film tourism," and a part of desert in Nevada, U.S.A., as the home to the Burning Man festival. It is worth emphasising that the physical/natural relata enjoy their own existence in the world—i.e. there are things in the world such as plants, human bodies, animal bodies, geological formations, etc.; however, it is not until these are coded and organised relationally that we can speak of "tourism destinations" or "concierges."

Another important characteristic of relational ontology is that it is closely affiliated with process philosophy—a term that "refers to all worldviews holding that process or becoming is more fundamental than unchanging being" (Griffin, 1998). And so, it is vital to reiterate that process philosophy is concerned with

> the dynamic sense of being as becoming or occurrence, the conditions of spatio-temporal existence, the kinds of dynamic entities, including mental occurrences and actions, the relationship between mind and world, and the realization of values in action. (Seibt, 2022)

The upshot of these intuitions is a loosening of rigid conceptions of tourism realities and entities as fixed, stable, and unchanging, and considering perspectives that pay more attention to the processes which render these possible. Hence, tourism researchers invested in process philosophy may examine how social phenomena are constituted, i.e. through modes of relating and relational entanglements as opposed to focusing only on the apparent, and often taken for granted, tourism phenomena "themselves." The layered and ontologically dynamic nature of tourism has been recently pointed out by Pernecky (2023), who has advocated for more relational approaches in the field. In his view, "what critico-relational scholarship can productively advance in tourism inquiry is the necessity to think cooperatively, not anthropocentrically; relationally, not individually; and diversely but connectedly". Within the promising scope of relational inquiry then is the twofold propensity to critically examine existing relationalities and bring about the kind of relationalities that ought to be championed in order to reclaim the world for the whole of humanity (to echo Morgan & Pritchard, 2016).

The rudimentary depiction of relationality in Figure 1 shows that relational ontology is concerned with the space between X and Y. As far as relational inquiry goes, what is of interest to researchers is not so much the entities represented by the letters X and Y but the ways in which these are "locked in" and constituted *via* specific modes of relating. The simplicity of Figure 1 allows for the relata X and Y to signify different things: X can be a "hotel guest" and Y a "housekeeper"; X can be a person of a certain nationality and Y a "refugee"; X can be a
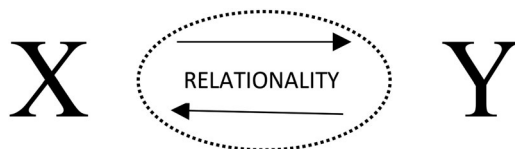

Figure 1. Relationality at its most fundamental level.

"tourist" and Y another species, and Y can also represent the planet and abstract constructs such as citizenship and race. As already established, the inbetweenness of X and Y is of primary importance because the manifested experiences of X and Y arise relationally. Accordingly, one's position in a society, how they are spoken to, how much money they earn, and whether or not they are discriminated against is determined relationally. Moreover, the lived realities of other animals in tourism worlds—be it abuse, encagement, or protection—are the consequences of different modes of relating.

From a critical stance, the examination of relations is important because it leads to exposing states of being and becoming that are troublesome, not to mention destructive and planetarily catastrophic, to humans and nonhumans. It is a philosophically and methodologically invaluable strategy for comprehending how tourism realities are enabled, maintained, and enforced, but also alterable in that relational inquiry can assist with detecting the ways in which established relations could be transformed so that new forms of relations can arise. In this regard, critico-relational inquiry is formidable in its capacity to scrutinise the relational matrices that have rendered possible the continuity of unjust/oppressive/discriminatory relational patterns. It bears much relevance to both sustainability discourse and critical theory, and has the potential to enrich critical scholarship and practice, as revealed next.

Critico-relational turnings and opportunities in the field

It has been suggested in the preceding sections that sustainable tourism can be grasped epistemologically and axiologically as a relational academic endeavour. The now widely cited 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a further indication of relational sensitivities starting to be embraced internationally. Namely, they speak to the recognition that there are significant consequences attached to humans' relationship to, and thus actions and behaviour toward, the natural world. Evidence of these concerns date back several decades to the early calls for action, such as in the *Our Common Future* report (Brundtland, 1987) and at the subsequent 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. But it was much later that we saw targeted aspirations in the likes of the United Nations resolution *The Future We Want* (see https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/66/288) in 2012, and the eventual adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, including the 17 SDGs (see https://sdgs.un.org/goals#history).

Although the SDGs can be fathomed as renewed relational foundations, we are only beginning to consider sustainable tourism as a mainstream form of tourism (Font et al., 2018). The field is still on the verge of tackling sustainable degrowth, for example, with scholars advocating for the rights of local communities over those of tourists, corporations, and the privileged with discretionary income. There is urgency to take seriously pressing problems such as overtourism, gentrification, and "tourism phobia" (Almeida-García et al., 2021)—the fruits of unchecked growth and commodification. And while work is underway to identify new relational orderings, "an entire rethinking of the [tourism] phenomenon is required", especially as we arrive "at a moment where the stark injustices are being made more apparent and impossible to ignore" (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019, p. 1927).

Furthermore, the relational complexities pointed out by The Stockholm Resilience Centre (2016) reveal that the overall success of SDGs is only attainable if the social goals are successful. That means no poverty (SDG1), no hunger (SDG2), good health and wellbeing (SGD3), quality education (SDG4), gender equality (SDG5), affordable and clean energy (SDG7), sustainable cities and communities (SDG11), and peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG16). This presents a relationally complex future for tourism, and a far greater critical engagement and level of action required around the implementation of the SDGs. Boluk et al. (2019) specifically have lamented the limited and ambition-lacking priorities in the space of gender and tourism development, and they, too, have warned about the persistent power dynamics faced by indigenous

communities. And so, for them, the *how* of relationalities would most likely lie in the academy being "intrinsically involved in ongoing iterations of multilateral accords and decrees to ensure they embody more critical and inclusive transitions toward sustainability as opposed to market-driven, neoliberal directives" (p. 848).

The burgeoning of relational concerns within sustainability and critical tourism studies—with calls for more actions and commitment as well as more "hands-on" scholarship, signal that academics may be ready to turn more decisively towards relational conceptions of tourism. In other words—and in accord with the second proposition—the time is opportune to recognise tourism first and foremost as a relational phenomenon and embrace critico-relational inquiry as a means for moving towards a greater human and interspecies planetary good. To facilitate further debate and to show the various aims that can be pursued as part of relational inquiry, a conceptual framework for critico-relational inquiry is offered consisting of the following elements: relational programming and reprogramming, relational hacking, meta-relational concerns, and relational thriving.

Relational programming

Relational programming can be articulated as a series of ideas that work as coded instructions. Understanding how human interaction, perception, actions, and behaviour and, more generally, our *being in* and *with* the world are established relationally is a fundamental aspect of critical research. The intellectual scope is wide: inquiry in this realm can be broadened to historical analyses and existential/critical phenomenological analyses, and it can also be pursued in accord with critical phenomenology—"a method that is rooted in first-person accounts of experience but also critical of classical phenomenology's claim that the first-person singular is absolutely prior to intersubjectivity and to the complex textures of social life" (Guenther, 2013, p. xiii). What critical phenomenology especially can offer is the "interrogation of the concrete conditions that structure lived experience, thinking, and the enactment of critique itself" (Rathe, 2022, p. 3). Consider that any act of discrimination and prejudice, and conversely the ability to enjoy equal rights and collective flourishing, are facilitated through the processes of relational programming. In this respect, critical phenomenological research on migrants and undocumented workers has revealed that the way these people are seen and related to is rooted in structural injustices and racism (for more details see Rathe, 2022; Sánchez, 2022). But work in the domain of relational programming can also be informed by what Hollinshead termed "Deleuzoguattarian conceptuality," whereby tourism can be fathomed as "the business of difference-declaration, difference-making, difference-concretisation par excellence as it defines places and spaces and as it declares how particular peoples, places, pasts, and presents ought to be seen, or can be seen" (Hollinshead, 2021, p. 151). Unravelling and debunking relational programmes is important, because it discloses the sometimes invisible, overlooked, and unreflexive ways of being with each other and the world. The work of Nixon (2015), for instance, reveals the ways in which colonial programming is embedded in tourism practices and how tourism has shaped cultural and sexual identity in the Caribbean.

Relational reprogramming

Relational reprogramming can be understood as the process of articulating, advancing, and activating alternative sets of coded instructions. Works of this variety are crucial elements of critico-relational inquiry because they are charged with needed action, such as the urgency to repair, disestablish, and architect new relational matrices. Considering tourism degrowth, for example, tourism can be envisioned as "the process of local communities inviting, receiving and hosting visitors in their local community, for limited time durations, with the intention of receiving benefits from such actions" (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019, p. 1936). These commitments to challenge and alter established relations are examples of the conceptual building blocks required

for alternative solutions. In practical terms, this means grounding new relational foresights and articulating principles, norms, and behaviours to advance relational change. It is important to note that relational reprogramming can also lead to ceasing certain relational patterns altogether. Critical activism (see, for example, Bertella, 2023; Hales et al., 2018; Lamond, 2021; Munar, 2017) in particular has been fuelled by the determination to put an end to relationalities of detrimental kinds and can be recognised as an extension of relational reprogramming.

Relational hacking

Relational hacking can be understood as the authorised effort to gain unauthorised access to relational patterns and structures and expose them to wider scrutiny. The authorisation is granted by virtue of critico-ethical transparency, which strives to make visible the kinds of relationalities that enable/maintain/promote exploitation, oppression, injustices, destruction, and harm concealed or not readily acknowledged by those who benefit from it. Critical tourism scholars have been known for taking a stand in support of those who have been locked in relations of injustice. Relational hacking can be pursued productively in ethically driven projects that are motivated by relational transparency. A fitting exemplar of relational hacking is the work of Ross Klein (2002, 2018) and associates (Klein & Sitter, 2016), who have striven to expose the exploitative practices in the cruise ship industry and gathered data and resources on their website http://cruisejunkie.com/. This line of work falls into the realm of relational hacking because of the commitment to render transparent the processes, practices, and events contributing to unjust and detrimental relations—be they environmental impacts, limited employee rights, corruption, or domineering business practices. Moreover, the accessibility of resources *via* their website allows for greater public scrutiny, making their critical labour more effective. It is redundant to comment on the value of such pursuits in tourism, but these tend to be overlooked in the grand scheme of criticalities, and therefore it is beneficial for providing terminology capable of marking the rich and varied endeavours of our colleagues.

Meta-relational concerns

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated that global crises require global solutions, and that tourism is contingent upon worldwide cooperation, collective action, and responsible decision making (Cheer et al., 2021). The even more deadly and catastrophic events anticipated with global warming, and increasingly felt by communities worldwide, have further made it indubitable that "the response to planetary limits and sustainable tourism requires a global approach" (Hall et al., 2020, p. 577). The Paris Agreement on climate change, adopted in 2015, and the publication of Ripple et al., 2019 article "World Scientists' Warning of a Climate Emergency", so far signed by nearly 15,000 world scientists from 158 countries (*Alliance of World Scientists*, 2019), are examples of relational steps underpinned by evidence-based research and knowledge. Importantly, they are also "corrective" relational measures stemming from the recognition that the ways humans have related to—and thereby acted towards, affected, and behaved towards—the planet has contributed to its demise. Similar important critical steps can also be noted in tourism studies, with Hall et al. (2015), for instance, weighing in on climate change denial and scepticism.

These instances can be considered as meta-relational because they seek to overarch "local" relationalities (i.e. at a regional or national level) and influence actions, behaviour, and views for the benefit of all humans, other species, and the planet. Importantly, they stem from the necessity to challenge and rectify established orthodoxies, particularly if those bear catastrophic consequences. As of tourism, and in accord with the first proposition, it is not a question of *if* but *when* sustainable tourism becomes a mainstream form of tourism, as unsustainable alternatives are likely to contribute to cataclysmic planetary repercussions. Alarmingly, nevertheless, there is

no denial of the persistent stubbornness of resistance to change and of "selfish nationalism," as Hall et al. (2020, p. 577) put it. Indeed, change on a global scale is a long-term project, often requiring fortitude and action at a much larger scale. Meta-relational concerns, then, are those at a global level, seeking to inform regional, territorial, and local relationalities.

Relational thriving

The notion of relational thriving signifies optimal relational arrangements, such as those that are respectful, mutually beneficial, and environmentally sensitive. It captures critically and pragmatically hopeful aspirations (Pernecky, 2020) and the need to exemplify, promote, and engage in finding relationally acceptable solutions. Relational thriving, too, can be considered as the end goal of critico-relational work, provided that critical work is an ongoing project and one that lends itself to continued monitoring and scrutiny. Thus, although relational thriving may be the goal towards which critical research strives, this does not imply the finitude of critical inquiry as new challenges and complexities demanding an ever-watchful critical eye.

Relational thriving is also a term worth considering in the context of education. The critical role of education in fostering transitions to sustainability has been emphasised widely (Boluk et al., 2019; McGrath et al., 2021; Moscardo & Benckendorff, 2015), highlighting that places of learning have a key role to play in developing responsible global citizens and needed changemakers capable of remaking tourism worlds for the relationally discerned "better." There is a sprouting body of work suggesting that the developmental character and function of tertiary institutions is changing. Initiatives such as the Live Baltic Campus project are indicative of the ways in which the role of universities is "expanding from one of being pure education and research facilities to increasingly becoming active partners in regional development, and incubators for innovation" (Schewenius et al., 2017, p. 16). In this regard, relational thriving can be realised as exemplary/solution-oriented learning, with students acquiring knowledge and skills needed to work out answers to lines of questioning such as, What relationally just configurations of tourism can we construct?

Figure 2 captures the sphere of possible critico-relational inquiry. Building on Figure 1, it shows that researchers can approach relational projects in a number of different ways: they
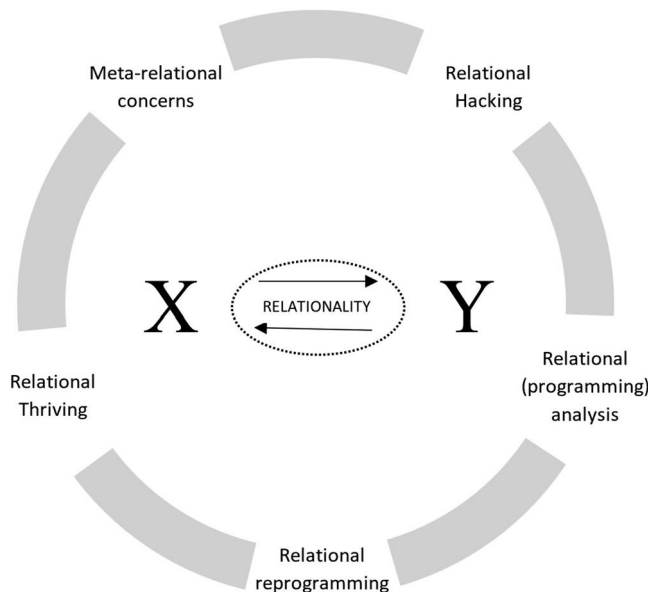

Figure 2. The sphere of critico-relational inquiry.

can examine meta-relational concerns, undertake relational (programming) analyses, advocate for and engage in relational reprogramming, pursue relational hacking, and work towards/exhibit/promote examples of relational thriving. The intended spherical design suggests that there is no necessary order in which these activities ought to be carried out; rather, they all add to the richness of critico-relational inquiry. It is indeed possible that some lines of research may be interconnected: relational thriving is likely to inform relational reprogramming, and relational hacking can be fruitfully incorporated into relational (programming) analysis. In sum, what Figure 2 seeks to underscore is the critical vitality that can be injected into the examination of relations.

To return to Latour (2004), who has energised the second proposition in this paper, Figure 2 diverges from his views in that critico-relational inquiry amounts to a more rounded approach. According to Latour's view of the critically inclined academics: "The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather" (p. 246). The critico-relational stance expounded here sees value in debunking, as well as assembling, as well as hacking, as well as architecting new alternatives. Arguably, the field of tourism studies, as shown in this paper, it is not a case of criticality running out of steam—as per Latour's title—but more a case of needed openness and explorations of how additional conceptual and philosophical tools may be fruitfully implemented. But the ideas exercised thus far resonate with Latour on the point that tourism academics ought to be continually critical—we can "generat[e] more ideas than we have received, inheriting from a prestigious critical tradition but not letting it die away, or "dropping into quiescence" like a piano no longer struck" (Latour, 2004, p. 248).

Conclusion

This paper sought to accentuate the value of relational thought in tourism and advance it as part of a bolstering critical scholarship in the field. Such efforts, it has been suggested, are not new. They are discernible in the works of colleagues across various domains of inquiry and can also be identified in the epistemological and axiological foundations of sustainable tourism and ecotourism. What has been missing, however, and what this contribution has striven to freshly facilitate, is a more nuanced philosophical and theoretical understanding of relationality. In this regard, it has been established that relational inquiry, as a broader umbrella term rooted in relational ontology, is pertinent in a number of interrelated ways: (1) it helps to explain the "how" of tourism phenomena; (2) it is a powerful means by which the relational—and not always readily obvious—underbellies of tourism phenomena can be exposed and scrutinised; (3) it is pivotal for the altering, reshaping, reimagining, and grounding of new tourism realities; and thereby (4) it contributes to building stronger foundations not only for scholars and practitioners to enact change, but also for the younger generations who will have to navigate the manifest realities of current relationalities.

The ideas put forth in this manuscript have been developed against the backdrop of three propositions. The first asserted that sustainable tourism is the only responsible/desirable/inevitable pathway to a future in, and of, tourism. The second contended that a sustainable future of tourism can be furthered by understanding tourism relationally and recognising it first and foremost as a relational phenomenon. The third contemplated that the field of tourism studies may be ripe for a relational turn. A final reflection is in order. As of the first proposition, collectively, the body of work in this manuscript is indicative of the growing comprehension, if not resoluteness, that tourism ought to be sustainable in its full spectrum (i.e. as articulated in the Sustainable Development Goals and brought to light within the flourishing body of critical scholarship). As of the second proposition, the focus on relationality corresponds with the

renewed ambitions of the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* be "transformational," to contribute to "solving the sustainability needs of society" and to advance "a more critical understanding of the relationship between tourism and sustainability" (Font et al., 2023, p. 1). To earnestly attend to the problem of how to build tourism worlds that are respectful and enabling and which take into account the varied and at times competing needs of peoples, nonhumans, and the planet requires relational astuteness. And so, as of the third proposition, the commitment to delve into relational thinking and doing is what will ultimately determine whether there is sufficient impetus for a relational turn in tourism. The threads of research presented in this paper may perhaps point to its dawn.

With regard to the conceptual contribution of this paper, critico-relational research has been depicted as an opportunity for, and a responsibility of, critical scholars to furnish new relational architectures and become agents of change—i.e. to expose, identify, and champion the kind of relations that allow communities and nonhumans to thrive. To this end, new conceptual vocabulary has been offered to highlight the rich and multilayered opportunities of relational inquiry: relational programming, relational reprogramming, relational hacking, meta-relational concerns, and relational thriving. These terms ought not to be viewed inflexibly; rather, the conceptual exercise in this paper has been fuelled by the need to spark new conversations about the near future of sustainability cum critical studies. Accordingly, the limitations to be acknowledged pertain to the philosophical underpinnings—namely, the locating of relationality in the traditions of existential phenomenology and social ontology. Other philosophical and theoretical avenues exist and can be explored in future research.

Disclosure statement

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