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Current Issues in Tourism

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcit20

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To cite this article: Tomas Pernecky (14 Nov 2023): Mobilizing relational ontology: meeting the pluriversal challenge in tourism studies, Current Issues in Tourism, DOI: 10.1080/13683500.2023.2281599

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2023.2281599

Published online: 14 Nov 2023.

CURRENT ISSUES IN TOURISM
https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2023.2281599

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Mobilizing relational ontology: meeting the pluriversal challenge in tourism studies

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ABSTRACT

Philosophical and theoretical research on tourism is ever more pertinent in an age of increased uncertainty, manifold vulnerabilities, and determination to promote justice, fairness, and equality. The pluriversal challenge facing tourism and tourism studies, that is, the necessity for polycentric, inclusive, and equitably participatory being, doing, and knowing, suggests that these transitional times require an ontology that can assist with understanding the entangled complexities of being and becoming vis-à-vis tourism. Relational ontology is thus presented as a crucial lens for comprehending the ethical, environmental, political, social, cultural, and spiritual potentialities that emerge uniquely through tourism as relationalities. This paper argues that relational ontology not only accommodates but also discloses pluriversality and the ontological multiple, and that it can facilitate not universal but relational understandings, which can coexist, enrich, and promote human flourishing through tourism.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 12 May 2023
Accepted 5 November 2023

KEYWORDS
Tourism ontology; relational ontology; pluriversal; decolonial; being; becoming

Prelude

This paper is a part of a set of three manuscripts that seek to enlarge relational comprehensions of, and approaches to, tourism. Collectively, they strive to provide a 'new' lens for enquiry into tourism knowledge, being, and doing. The first intellectual sibling, 'Advancing Critico-Relational Inquiry: Is Tourism Studies Ready for a Relational Turn?' (Pernecky, 2023a), explained how relationality is interconnected with sustainability and critical scholarship, and offered new conceptual vocabulary, such as relational programming, relational reprogramming, relational hacking, meta-relational concerns, and relational thriving. The effort therein was spent on establishing the relational nature of tourism and communicating some of the implications for future critical scholarship. The second paper, 'Kinmaking: Toward More-Than-Tourism (Studies)' (Pernecky, 2023b), focused on tourism studies' ontological, axiological, and epistemological vulnerabilities and, following Donna Haraway (2015), offered *kinmaking* as a critico-creative thoughtscape for transitioning into more-than-tourism. The cardinal task of this manuscript is to underscore the ontological significance of tourism by centring on relational ontology. The motivation and necessity for this piece stem from the pluriversal challenge facing tourism and tourism studies, suggesting that ontology should not only be cursorily subsumed as part of dominant paradigmatic schemas but ought to be elevated to a much more prominent place in tourism inquiry. Just as 'a critical ontological vision helps us in the effort to gain new understandings and insights as to who we can become' (Kincheloe, 2011, p. 334), its sibling, relational

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ontology, plays an essential role in understanding how we come to be with each other and the world.

Although the pluriversal makeup of humans and nonhumans is perhaps self-evident and has driven much of tourism mobility (e.g. the desire to experience the human, nonhuman, cultural, and natural heterogeneity available on our planet), the emergence of pluriversality in the Global South and in decolonizing scholarship (de la Cadena, 2015; de la Cadena & Blaser, 2018; Escobar, 2018, 2020; Mignolo, 2005, 2011, 2018; Santos, 1999, 2014; Santos and Meneses, 2020) has given the term a decidedly different characteristic. It has matured into a political, philosophical, and environmental concept for addressing matters of oppression, dominance, and injustice, but it has also been energized into a hopeful instrument for reimagining and constructing a future where plural existence is respected and celebrated. And although critique is still required,

> it is high time to elaborate different ways to perceive and explain the world and find solutions for the many pressing problems of the Global South, many of which, after all, were created by adhering to the development recipes sold wholesale by Western and Northern development specialists and their organizations. (Reiter, 2018, p. 1)

Broadly conceived, the pluriversal challenge can be outlined as a diversity issue, and therefore the crisis of our collective being. Against domineering and reductive systems of thought, the opportunity, in the words of Mignolo (2018), is that by viewing the world as an interconnection of diversity, we are set free to 'inhabit the pluriverse rather than the universe' (p. x). In tourism studies the pluriversal challenge then arises as the necessity to sincerely recognize and integrate diversity as part of the ontological, epistemological, and axiological reproductive systems that birth the realities in which we live and experience through tourism. Because tourism cannot be disjointed from our collective, interpersonal planetary coexistence, it is indispensable to engage in more ontological work in tourism.

Introduction: the need for a greater ontological comprehension of tourism

Tourism studies has blossomed into a field that is now producing vast volumes of knowledge. There are an estimated 300 (Law et al., 2019) to 400 (McKercher, 2021) journals dedicated to tourism, hospitality, and events, excluding thematically interconnected journals that focus on leisure, recreation, sports, and food science, and journals in other disciplines and fields in which research on tourism is published. Amid this epistemic expansion and the ever-growing variety of topics investigated, it is important not to lose sight of tourism ontology. Yet as lamented by Tribe over a decade ago (Tribe, 2009), some philosophical problems and issues in tourism have remained 'stubbornly underdeveloped' (p. 3) – ontology being one of them. Questions of being, becoming, and belonging as well as inquiries into the entities and relational structures comprising tourism phenomena ought to occupy a fundamental place in tourism scholarship, because – as advanced and argued in this paper – such ontological acumens are the bedrock for understanding the ethical, environmental, political, social, cultural, and spiritual potentialities that emerge uniquely through tourism as relationalities.

Although contributions to tourism ontology have been on the rise (e.g. Canavan, 2018; Franklin, 2004; Guia & Jamal, 2020; Hollinshead, 2021; Hollinshead et al., 2009; Pernecky, 2012, 2014, 2023a, 2023b; Platenkamp & Botterill, 2013; Pons, 2003), with advances made in specialized areas such as actor–network theory (Ren, 2011; van der Duim et al., 2012, 2017), ontological thinking about tourism is still at the intellectual margins of the field. Importantly, apart from paradigmatic summaries and methodological pointers for researchers (e.g. Ayikoru, 2009; Hollinshead, 2004; Hollinshead & Suleman, 2018; Phillimore & Goodson, 2004), and with the exception of a few thinkers who have sought to push our understandings of what tourism *is* and *does* (Franklin, 2004; Hollinshead, 2021), there has been little effort to provide a deeper synthesis of the variety of concerns that fall under the wide canopy of ontological investigations.

Inevitably, such a formidable undertaking would be too ambitious for a single article, and so the project of tourism ontology is best approached thematically. The premise of this paper is therefore limited to expounding why tourism is ontologically significant by focusing on relational ontology.

When something is posited to be relational, the existential dispositions of humans and nonhumans, for example, cannot be reduced to the individual entities alone; rather, they are informed and determined relationally. Tourism can be said to be relational in that what ensues ontically (in terms of the vast number of entities) and ontologically (i.e. tourism grasped as a *becoming*) is determined by relationships and relational arrangements – or simply, relationalities. In other words, tourism emerges out of (humans') being in, and with, the world, while also constituting an important aspect of the being of human beings and the being of other beings and things. The chief aim of this paper is to unpack these ideas further and facilitate a clearer comprehension of how the individual, society, and nonhumans are invariably connected and ontologically affirmed/reaffirmed vis-à-vis tourism, and shaped by wider social, cultural, political, and environmental matters. The parallel aim is to situate relational inquiry in the context of pluriversality, whereby tourism and tourism studies are called to deal with the necessity for polycentric, inclusive, and equitably participatory being, doing, and knowing – termed here the 'pluriversal challenge'.

The relational premise/promise of tourism

Tourism and its sister fields of events, hospitality, and leisure studies are rich ethnomethodological territories imbued with social interaction. They are windows into the constitution and reconstitution of distinct regions of social reality and, following Goodman's notion of worldmaking (Goodman, 1978), unique worlds. These worlds are complex, comprising large quantities of entities: hotels, cruises, motorhomes, airlines, eco-festivals, passports, hosts, guests, chefs, travel agents, uniforms, VIPs, beach umbrellas, national parks, etc., all of which are connected to rules, norms, privileges, and identities. The philosophical examination of the nature of such entities, and social reality in general, is carried out by social ontologists (see, e.g. Fullbrook, 2009; Lawson, 2019; Searle, 2006), who generally subscribe to the rudimentary principle that for there to be social reality, there must be subjects or selves to create it, to participate in it, and to keep it in force. It follows that the Self, too, is constituted socially and culturally; indeed, the claim that we are socially conditioned and created in and through interaction has been addressed by several intellectual predecessors (e.g. Burkitt, 1991; Cooley, 1902; Dewey & Bentley, 1950; Goffman, 1959; Harré, 1979; Mead, 1913, 1934; Sandel, 1998; Taylor, 1989; Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978), with Gergen (2009) among the most recent thinkers to remind us that our existence is dependent on relationships. These relational comprehensions, however, as fundamental as they may be, have only been very sluggishly reflected in the ontological landscape of tourism studies.

Tourism is arguably possible only as a form of relational engagement with other things, such as beaches, mountains, structures, animals, and other persons – a process through which social realities and social facts are created (see Pernecky, 2012, 2016, 2022). Indeed, it is through the distinct ways in which humans relate to other humans, entities, objects, and places that diverse ontological statuses are established. Relational ontology views tourism in terms of a 'multitude of interconnected relationalities, with a vast array of things, places, and experiences "coded" as touristic' (Pernecky, 2023a). The relational nature/connectedness of humans to others was famously expressed by Heidegger (1953/1996) who used the term being-with (*Mitsein*) and maintained that the kind of beings that we are (*Dasein*) are already in relationship with the world. This means that, with regard to ontological investigations into human being, it would be erroneous to focus solely on separate entities, because the existential disposition of Dasein is fundamentally relational. Aside from Heidegger, Indigenous philosophies and non-Western worldviews have long been developed around more holistic understandings of the world (Denzin et al., 2008; Smith, 1999; Stewart, 2020; Wilson, 2008). Māori philosophy, for example, Stewart (2020) writes, is to be found in 'Māori discourses about relationships between people, things, the environment and the world' (p. 2). Similarly, ontology through some Indigenous lenses is explained as 'a way of seeing the situated and interdependent particularities of our own worlds, of engaging the unknown in encounters with human and nonhuman others in the places we share' (Larsen & Johnson, 2017, p. 186).

In contrast to substance ontology and the primacy of independent and self-contained entities, relational ontology asks us to pay attention to the invisible bonds that exist between various entities. In this regard, the calls for plural understandings of, as well as the growing discourse on, nonhumans – including their ontological status, agency, and rights – has seen developments across a wide spectrum of disciplines and fields, ensuing from, for example, Latour's (1991/1993) notion of distributed agency, the ontological turn (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017), posthumanism (Braidotti, 2013, 2016, 2018), the material turn (Morton, 2013), new materialism (Barad, 2007), cosmopolitics (Blaser, 2016; Stengers, 1997/2010), ontological politics (Mol, 1999), pluriversal politics (Escobar, 2020), the Chthulucene (Haraway, 2015), and more.

These perspectives have 'painted' much richer ontological contours and allowed a deeper understanding and appreciation of our world. By contrast, the study of tourism has been heavily reliant on and informed by the widespread commodified tourism paradigm (see Sharpley, 2020; Wearing et al., 2005), according to which things are typically 'coded', evaluated, and absorbed into the tourism phenomenon based on the economic use-value they are perceived to have. There is no denial of tourism's economic potency; however, 'the extent to which individuals and societies may achieve well-being or become prosperous is dependent on numerous endogenous factors independent of the economic benefits accruing (or not) from tourism' (Sharpley, 2020, p. 1938). Although scholars in critical tourism studies have fought to escape the 'managerialist straitjacket' (Ateljevic et al., 2009), the field has remained largely ontologically stuck, with alternative ontological outlooks being a curiosity instead of new platforms for significant changes in thinking, doing, and being with respect to tourism.

The limited ontological grasp is particularly problematic in an epoch marked by the rise of pluriversal comprehensions (de la Cadena, 2015; Escobar, 2018, 2020; Mignolo, 2005; Santos, 1999) – an age in which environmental degradation, climate change, and social injustices around the globe intersect with different knowledge systems, cultural perspectives, and ways of being – striving for existential nondomination. And because tourism does not reside outside of these spheres, what is needed is an ontology that can assist with comprehending the entangled complexities of being and becoming vis-à-vis tourism – whereby the individual and society are invariably connected with, and shaped by, wider social, cultural, political, and environmental matters. Accordingly, the following tenets in Exhibit 1 outline what tourism amounts to through the lens of relational ontology.

Exhibit 1: Tourism through the lens of (constructionist) relational ontology:

i. Tourism emerges out of social interaction and is therefore a socially constructed relational phenomenon;
ii. To say that tourism is socially constructed does not amount to a claim that tourism does not have real implications; rather,
iii. Tourism is a spatiotemporal milieu of being and becoming, whereby becoming accentuates flows, processes, and movements that are fundamental to being;
iv. Tourism is possible only as a form of relational engagement with other things in the world; however, as these are not in themselves innately touristic,
v. What tourism is is revealed via relational ontology (i.e. the shift in focus from discrete and disconnected entities to the relation between them).

The first two tenets have been discussed in sufficient depth in tourism literature (Pernecky, 2012, 2014, 2022, 2023c), and it is therefore redundant to elaborate on the constructed nature of tourism here. Suffice to say, when pondering how tourism comes about, the most logical thesis is that tourism is a human construct and the outcome of human interaction. With regard to the ensuing statements in Exhibit 1 (iii–iv), Deleuze's (1968/1994) process philosophy, in collaboration with Guattari (Deleuze & Guattari, 1972/1984, 1980/1988), has been pivotal in turning the concept of becoming into an ontology of change and transformation. From these theorists, we learned that reality is not to be comprehended by cataloguing substances but rather understood as a flux. Of course, Deleuze and Guattari were not the only process philosophers to have argued for the dynamic nature of being; there is a long lineage of Indigenous and non-Western thought as well as

Western thinkers, including the Greek theoretician Heraclitus, Gottfried W. Leibniz, Johann G. Fichte, Friedrich W. J. Schelling, Georg W. F. Hegel, Alfred N. Whitehead, Henri Bergson, and William James and John Dewey's process-based pragmatist metaphysics (Seibt, 2022). To avoid potential misconceptions and charges by the proponents of substance realism, it is worth pointing out that

> While process philosophers insist that all within and about reality is continuously going on and coming about, they do not deny that there are temporally stable and reliably recurrent aspects of reality. But they take such aspects of persistence to be the regular behavior of dynamic organizations that arise due to the continuously ongoing interaction of processes. (Seibt, 2022, para. 2)

The notion of tourism as a spatiotemporal milieu of being and becoming in Exhibit 1 speaks to the fact that tourism is constitutive of how *we are* in this world and the ways in which we *become* by taking part in – both willingly and unwillingly – the tourism phenomenon. Furthermore, tourism is constitutive of the objects and entities that are generated, made, and remade through worldmaking processes. As observed by Hollinshead (2021), we must be attuned to the worldmaking agency and authority of tourism, as well as the dynamic ontological relations between people, objects, places, ideas, and the past and the present. By seizing the totality of the relational powers of tourism, and by recognizing that being does not occur in a social vacuum – rather, it sprouts from within the constructed, relational worlds we inhabit, of which tourism is one – we begin to fathom the ontologically constitutive vitalities of tourism. To make the point with more nuance: being is always being in context; tourism is that in which distinct manifestations of being and becoming are produced.

The tenets in Exhibit 1 underpin the essential role of ontology in tourism, allowing for a shift from dualistic, disconnected, and commodified approaches to the study of tourism to conceptions and thinking that champion interdependence and interconnectedness. When tourism is grasped relationally, there are opportunities to embrace critico-relational inquiry and examine the relational dynamics in given contexts (Pernecky, 2023a), such as probing the conventions, dominant rhetoric, and worldmaking machineries of tourism. And since the world consists of a web of dynamic relations that give rise to pluriversality, the question is whether pluriversality is duly reflected in tourism as a phenomenon and in tourism studies as a field of inquiry. To take up this task is no longer a matter for a handful of critical tourism studies scholars; the responsibility falls upon the entire field.

In this regard, relational ontology not only accommodates but also discloses pluriversality and the ontological multiple. It facilitates and promotes not universal but relational understandings, which can coexist, enrich, and promote human flourishing. In contrast to other alternatives, such as critical realism, which pursue Western notions of objectivity as mind independence and have opposed social constructionism (e.g. Botterill, 2014), relational ontology – underpinned by constructionist theory – embraces multiple realities that emerge from interaction in/with the world. Therefore, it can serve as a valuable strategy for unveiling historically invisible and marginalized views, values, and modes of being without imposing universalism. The five tenets in Exhibit 1 synthesize what relational ontology amounts in terms of the philosophical assumptions that can guide pluriversal inquiry in tourism.

Meeting the pluriversal challenge

Human-nature relationships

When thinking pluriversally, it is imperative to acknowledge that the phenomenon of modern tourism emerged as a Western-centric construct (Zuelow, 2016). It was built on ontological anthropocentrism, which prioritized the needs and desires of humans above those of other entities. In contrast, pluriversality is rooted in recognizing the dangers of human exceptionalism and the collective failure to understand the necessity for conjoint existence, transformation, and belonging. For example, Escobar's (2020) 'radical relationality' is a thesis according to which 'all entities that make up the world are so deeply interrelated that they have no intrinsic, separate existence by

themselves' (p. xiii). Braidotti (2018) has similarly posited that the Anthropocene is a 'multi-layered posthuman predicament that includes the environmental, socio-economic, and affective and psychic dimensions of our ecologies of belonging' (p. 32). And Hollinshead, alongside Deleuze and Guattari (1972/1984, 1980/1988), has used the phrase 'posthuman connectivity' to further allude to the relational nature of existence, explaining it as 'the need for (and benefits of!) humans relating to not just the broad human world of people, societies, and nations, but to the wider non-human world' (Hollinshead, 2021, p. 165). And so, the Anthropocene is undoubtedly a significant thematic area holding much relational promise for tourism studies, inviting, in particular, politically and ecologically themed relationalities (Moore, 2019). Under the premise of critico-relational inquiry (Pernecky, 2023a, 2023b), the urgency is then to challenge/dislodge/replace the relational matrices that have propelled the varieties of tourism that have become problematic not only for humans but also for the environment. The tenacious scholarship on posthumanism (Cohen, 2019; Grimwood, 2013; Guia & Jamal, 2020; Kumm et al., 2019), for example, not only has galvanized the needed discourse on ethics and political responsibility, it has also been a 'catalyst for justice in tourism' (Guia, 2021, p. 503). It is in this space of relational research that important questions about human-nature relationships in tourism are being tackled (Grimwood et al., 2018) and ought to be elevated to mainstream thinking in and about tourism.

Critico-relational critique and deep decolonizing

Escobar's (2020) ontological/pluralistic politics serves as a potent reminder that environmental conflicts are ontological conflicts stemming from human-nonhuman relations. Mass tourism, the offspring of universalist thinking, was propelled by the ideals of progress in industrializing countries (see Butcher, 2020) and arguably altered the relational dynamics between humans and the world – newly perceived through the lens of touristic potential. However, critical scholarship from nations and populations to whom progress was 'sold' as the solution to pressing problems remains wary of its new forms. That is, Escobar is much more vigilant and critical in his analysis and unconvinced by the Western promise of 'sustainability'. In his view, the green economy, the idea of carbon markets, and the rhetoric of 'development' are likely to 'reproduce the sustainability of the capitalist model of world construction' (2020, p. 129) and perpetuate structural unsustainability. And so, it is pertinent to ask: Is Escobar's vigilance and scepticism misplaced, or is there a need for much deeper decolonization so that the same mistakes are not repeated?

The potential and vigor of relational ontology and critico-relational inquiry as a type of Escobarian-inspired radical relationality lies in questioning the taken-for-granted assumptions while considering that sustainability amounts to 'the long-term survival not of the conventional economic model or the modern liberal society but rather of the plurality of worlds that inhabit it' (p. 128). The pluriversal challenge must then focus on amending the deeply ingrained Western-centric attitude to know, solve, and implement 'better' and consider that 'if worlds are multiple, then the possible must also be multiple' (p. ix).

Epistemological decolonization and the rise of non-western scholarship in tourism studies

The project of epistemological decolonization of tourism studies entails dismantling the persistent, oppressive, colonial relational structures embedded in research, knowledge-making processes, education, and academic institutions. The problem with Western epistemology, as Chambers and Buzinde (2015) put it, is that 'ethnocentric knowledges became universalized through a complex web of exploitative power relationships and systems which were necessary to sustain colonialism' (p. 3). In this regard, Hollinshead (1993) issued warnings about the prejudices attached to ethnocentrism and sociocentrism 30 years ago, observing that 'ethnocentric outlooks are prominent sources of pain and error in the practice of tourism' (p. 653). He has not been alone in delineating

the problems of postcolonialism (see, e.g. d'Hauteserre, 2004; Hall & Tucker, 2004; Wearing & Wearing, 2006), which can be traced to thinkers outside the field (e.g. Haraway, 1988) who have emphasized the importance of incorporating multiple perspectives into knowledge production. Despite such warnings, change has been slow, as demonstrated by Carr et al.'s (2016) recent call for Indigenous authors and editors to become the norm in academia.

Although it is important not to overlook the efforts of colleagues who have worked to combat the epistemological decolonization of tourism knowledge production (e.g. Aquino, 2019; Boukhris, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2022; Ooi, 2019; Whitford et al., 2017; Wijesinghe et al., 2019), as evidenced further in special issues dedicated to non-Western and local methodological and epistemologies, such as 'Redefining Asian tourism' (Yang & Ong, 2020), the thematic sessions dedicated to decolonizing Asian tourism at the XX ISA World Congress of Sociology in 2023 (see https://www.isa-sociology.org/en), and African-inspired conversations on sustainability (Gona & Atieno, 2022), the diverse and multiple in tourism studies are still marginal, and so is a deeper critical inventory of the 'epistemological givens', the models, concepts, and tools taken for granted that continue to be used unpluriversally. To truly embrace pluriversality in the field, do we not need new dictionaries and new ways of thinking about tourism, as seen in other disciplines and fields (e.g. Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018; Kothari et al., 2019; Kumm et al., 2019; Tascón & Ife, 2020)? Do we not need to think in terms of more-than-tourism with people who may not speak the same 'language' of tourism? This type of academic 'doing', exemplified by the aforementioned scholars, seems foundational to meeting the pluriversal challenge.

Recognizing the enormity of the pluriversal challenge

Hunt's (2014) observations in the field of cultural geography are instructive in understanding the scale and breadth of the project. In examining how Indigenous ways of being and knowing can be legitimized within Western theorizations of ontology, she pertinently reminds us that just as feminism would amount to something ontologically different if women were not an essential part of the movement and its foundations, it is equally fundamental to consider what it means for Indigeneity to receive due recognition. In Hunt's words: '[W]hat does it mean for Indigeneity to be theorized, accounted for, and constructed as a category, within hegemonic systems of knowledge production where only a small number of Indigenous people situate their work?' (2014, p. 31). In the field of tourism studies, a similar question arises: Do Indigenous and non-Western scholars have meaningful opportunities to share alternative visions for tourism, and can these visions, along with their ways of knowing and being, be integrated into pluriversal curricula and research agendas?

Thus, the pluriversal challenge in academia pertains to creating and sharing spaces and platforms for alternative voices and worldviews. It also extends to the ongoing processes of challenging the status quo, which demands that academics become partners to students in resisting systemic hegemonies, such as when universities are perceived as maquilas (assembly-line process of education) (Ferreras et al., 2019). As Santos and Meneses (2020) point out, there have always been many alternative ways of thinking and doing, but these have been discredited, disregarded, and rendered invisible by the dominant powers. The relational challenge for tourism epistemology is to create an equitable and intellectually diverse space that fosters a culture of *learning with* others.

In a critical vein, it is equally important to pay attention to the concerns of thinkers such as Táíwò (2022), who caution against the use of decolonization as a 'catch-all idea to tackle anything with any, even minor, association with the "West"', and who argue instead 'for the openness of humanity and against racialisation of modernity' (p. xvi). Or, indeed, thinkers like Malik (2023), who distinguish between identity and the politics of identity and who emphasize the possibility of finding solidarity and commonality with those whose ethnicity or culture may be different. Malik especially underscores the role of agency by pointing out that one's ethical and racial background does not necessarily determine their values. While crucial in tackling systemic inequalities, the danger of identity politics – both voluntary and imposed externally by others – is blunt reductionism, stereotyping,

and, ultimately, the diminishment of pluriversality on a personal level. Therefore, the project of pluriversality appears to hold its highest promise when it serves as a means to embrace diversity. Accordingly, conjoint pluriversal becomings vis-à-vis tourism should extend to critical and dialogical opportunities as well as enriching and emancipatory lived experiences.

To champion pluriversality in tourism and tourism studies then is to genuinely embrace thinking, as well as other ways of being and doing, from beyond its conventional borders, allowing all to flourish more inclusively. In Escobar's (2018) words, the challenge and opportunity are to embrace 'a world where many worlds fit' (p. xvi). This requires a willingness to envision a future of tourism/more-than-tourism in which we cultivate planetary kinships and global citizenship – 'a process in which tourism becomes a relational force for the global and planetary good' (Pernecky, 2023b).

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to stimulate more ontological thinking in the field by centring on relational ontology. By and large, the scope and breadth of relational approaches is not bound by the short and focused concerns rehearsed in this contribution; it expands with the resolve of scholars to continue challenging, advocating for, and actively building more just, caring, sustainable, and equitable tourism worlds. However, such hopeful prospects must come with philosophically grounded criticalities. The disconnect from recognizing tourism relationally and the failure to do so is arguably at the root of manifold crises. For example, the absence of relational ontology in commodified approaches that have dominated the tourism industry (including stakeholders such as governments, associations, lobby groups, and marketing agencies) has continued to exacerbate problems such as overtourism, social gentrification, and displacement of local populations (see Cocola-Gant & Gago, 2019).

To combat some of these challenges, and to meaningfully address the pluriversal challenge facing tourism, this paper has put forth how tourism can be studied through the lens of relational ontology, summarized into five tenets. The first point established that there is value in adopting social constructionist and interactionist perspectives, which recognize that tourism arises from social processes and interactions. The second point clarified that the actions and practices manifested vis-à-vis tourism have real-world implications and consequences, thus underpinning our ethical challenge: the need to claim responsibility over our ways of being and becoming in and through tourism. The third point introduced the idea that tourism is a spatiotemporal milieu of being and becoming – further elaborated upon in the fourth point, which highlighted that tourism is only possible through relational engagement with other things in the world. The ensuing discussion accentuated that tourism readily – and at times autocratically and inequitably – absorbs humans and nonhumans via its worldmaking powers, and that the challenge for tourism scholars is to continue shaping more just realities of tourism.

With regard to wider methodological contributions, given that much of the concurrent discourse in the field is about transformation and change (e.g. Higgins-Desbiolles & Monga, 2021; Higham & Miller, 2018; Kirillova et al., 2016; Walker & Moscardo, 2016), it is vital to be able to account for and discuss transformation philosophically and methodologically. Namely, is transformation to be understood ontologically as the end of the 'old' and the materialization of something new (i.e. ontically different types of entities with unique attributes, properties, and characteristics), or is transformation to be fathomed relationally and as a process? While there has been growing momentum in the domain of transformative epistemologies in tourism (Bellato et al., 2023), the ontological explanation of transformation vis-à-vis critical theory has been largely overlooked. In accord with Renault (2016), critical theory needs processual social ontology[1]; relational process ontologies offer a way to probe beneath the surface to address the underlying mechanisms that make change, transitions, and renewal possible.

In closing, thinking in terms of relationships is not solely an academic exercise. In recognizing the elemental role of relationship, the opportunity to ponder the kinds of relations that are produced

and reproduced in tourism is available to students, tourists, NGOs, marketers, and policymakers, all of whom play their own role in recreating tourism realities. The pluriversal challenge is a call for global responsibility and the inevitability to rethink tourism according to the needs of local populations and nonhumans, and fundamentally, it comes as the necessity to recognize and champion diversity.

Epilogue

It is the final month of Ever Present: First Peoples Arts of Australia, an art exhibition held at Auckland Art Gallery in New Zealand. Although the gallery buildings are conveniently located across the road from my office, I only just managed to navigate an escape route between the tightly packed blocks in my Outlook calendar. With only a few days left, it is time to act. The exhibition features more than 150 works by First Nations Australian artists from 1890 to today; it is described as follows:

> Drawn from the collections of the National Gallery of Australia and The Wesfarmers Collection of Australian Art, *Ever Present* highlights the diverse peoples and artistic practices across Australia. It is a celebration of First Peoples of Australia art exploring the interlinking themes of Ancestors, Community, Culture, Colonisation, and Identity. Knowledge systems are passed down through oral histories, dancing, stories and songlines or songspirals that traverse diverse lands, coming together to evoke Ancestral creation stories known by some Communities as the Dreaming or Tjukurrpa. Art is also used as a tool of resistance. Artists utilise wit and juxtaposition to encourage conversation about critical issues of the past and present. The artworks included in *Ever Present* address Australia's complex histories and challenge stereotypes about First Peoples of Australia. (Auckland Art Gallery, 2023, para 2)

As I walk through the exhibition space, I find myself enveloped in pluriversality. I am surrounded by incredible art. I read the description cards placed next to each piece, and I learn about what the featured artists sought to visually depict and the stories the artworks tell around the themes of community and family, culture and ceremony, trade and influence, and resistance and colonization. On the walls around me, ontology, cosmology, knowledge, and values are amalgamated via artistic expression.

Back in my office, I cannot help but wonder: If tourism were considered an artwork, what would it look like from Aboriginal and other non-Western perspectives? Would it be painted on canvas, bark, or wood, perhaps? What would be the choice of colours and techniques? What imagery and shapes would it evoke? Could it be captured through song, dance, and performance? And what might it be called?

Note

1. Keen readers will observe that Emmanuel Renault (2016) sees a fundamental difference between processual and relational ontology; however, this distinction is resisted here. The stance adopted in this manuscript is that relations/ways of relating are not easily separated from processes. It would be 'empty' to discuss processes or becoming without relationality – that is, it would be fruitless for tourism scholars to speak of becoming in a relational vacuum and only as a process, because there would be nothing meaningful to be said. Being as becoming is always relational and situated.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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