THE GENDERED NATURES OF POLAR BEAR TOURISM

OLGA YUDINA,* BRYAN S. R. GRIMWOOD,† LISBETH A. BERBARY,† AND HEATHER MAIR†

*Department of Geography and Environmental Management, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, ON, Canada
†Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, ON, Canada

This article offers a critique of nature-based Arctic tourism through a gender-aware analysis of representations associated with polar bear tourism in Churchill, Manitoba, Canada. The guiding purpose of our study was to analyze how “nature” is gendered in its construction and presentation through tourism, and to what effect. Our study focused on revealing dominant gendered expectations and understandings (re)produced in the Churchill polar bear tourism promotional landscape. Drawing on a critical discourse analysis of qualitative and visual promotional texts, we show how various representations of polar bear tourism impose hegemonic gender roles onto polar bear bodies, which are emplaced within a conventionally gendered landscape. As the “Polar Bear Capital of the World,” Churchill’s wildlife viewing industry relies on the (re)creation, dissemination, and maintenance of particular meanings and natures attributed to polar bears, as well as human–polar bear relationships, for economic benefit. This gives rise to questions about how power circulates with respect to Churchill’s tourism production practices, gender being one of many axes of identity through which power operates and is interpolated. Ultimately, the article advances literature on gender-aware analyses of tourism and environment, and argues the promotion of gendered natures must be consistently questioned to create space for more equitable tourism practices.

Key words: Gendered bodies; Gendered landscapes; Discourse analysis; Representation; Nature-based tourism

Introduction

Relationships between gender and tourism have become increasingly significant in the study of tourism since the 1990s. Despite observations that tourism is relatively gender blind in comparison to cognate disciplines and fields (Figueroa-Domecq, Pritchard, Segovia-Pérez, Morgan, & Villacé-Molinero, 2015), a critical mass of tourism scholarship has infused gender-aware frameworks and analyses into the intellectual terrains of our field. Indeed, tourism studies has been enriched by the recognition that “leisured travel, and the industry that supports it, is built of human relations, and...
thus impacts and is impacted by global and local
gender relations” (Swain, 1995, p. 247), and that
since “tourism itself is a product of gendered soci-
eties it follows that tourism processes are gendered
in their construction, presentation and consump-
tion” (Pritchard & Morgan, 2000a, p. 116). Gender
in this regard refers to “a system of culturally con-
structed identities, expressed in ideologies of mas-
culinity and femininity, interacting with socially
structured relationships in divisions of labor and
leisure, sexuality, and power between women and
men” (Swain, 1995, pp. 258–259). Constituted in
various ways that are specific to temporal and spa-
tial contexts (Edensor & Kothari, 1994; Pritchard
& Morgan, 2000a), gender represents a system of
beliefs, practices, and shared understandings that
(re)produce social differentiation between women
and men. These gendered “realities” are configured
not only in relation to tourist motivations, hosts’
actions, or tourism marketing—all of which help
inscribe sets of social stereotypes and power hier-
archies upon tourism places—but also in relation to
the discursive space of tourism academia (Edensor
& Kothari, 1994; Munar et al., 2015; Swain, 1995).

In the 20+ years of tourism gender research,
studies have focused on diverse topics and issues.
Figueroa-Domecq et al.’s (2015) bibliometric anal-
ysis distinguished four thematic categories driving
tourism gender research. Gendered consumption,
the first theme, includes research on the ways
female and male travel expectations, desires, and
experiences qualitatively differ. The second theme
focuses on the gendered impact of tourism in host
communities. Studies within this group are con-
cerned with how tourism modifies cultural prac-
tices of destination communities in ways that affect
men and women differently. The third theme exam-
ines gendered labor and sexist work practices, with
attention paid to relationships between tourism and
wage discrimination, occupational segregation, and
the global sex trade. The fourth theme is focused on
theory-building and knowledge structures in gen-
der tourism research. Of particular note within this
grouping are early conceptual works that advanced
the application of gender-aware analyses in our
field (Hall, Swain, & Kinnaird, 2003; Kinnaird &
Hall, 1996, 2000; Swain, 1995).

To varying degrees, each thematic category has
helped introduce the field to new social theoretical
perspectives, particularly those aligned with or
extending the various waves of feminism. Two
examples of how feminist cultural geography has
been taken up are useful to highlight here as they
inform aspects of our analysis below. First, gender-
aware scholarship has opened pathways for putting
“the body” back into tourism and tourism research
(Veijola & Jokinen, 1994). As Hall et al. (2003)
summarized, “the body” represents a cultural arte-
fact constructed by social systems and is therefore
inscribed with particular values, morality, social
laws, and norms. Bodies in tourism are thus under-
stood to be constructed by various sex/gender sys-
tems including patriarchal and heterosexist institu-
tional regimes, while an embodied appreciation of
gender has allowed for a more fluid, contextualized
definition of gender in tourism (Butler, 1990; Hall
et al., 2003). More than ever, tourism scholars rec-
ognize the significance of the body as a geographi-
cally situated site for tracing, mapping, and enact-
ing a politics of space and place (d’Hauteserre,
2014; Kinnaird & Hall, 2000).

Second, and related to the first in part by the
resistance to thinking of space and place as simply
physical locations, tourism gender researchers have
demonstrated how tourism landscapes are socio-
culturally constructed. Aitchison (1999) and Pritchard
and Morgan (2000a, 2000b) pioneered work in this
area. Recognizing the complexity of “landscape”
meanings, these authors critically diagnosed how
tourism landscapes are shaped by discourses of
patriarchy, (hetero)sexuality, and racism. Language
and imagery used in promoting destinations is espe-
cially revealing. Northern landscapes, for instance,
tend to be represented in tourism promotional
materials as hostile, pristine environments ripe for
the exploration or gaze of a predominately white,
male Western audience. As Pritchard and Morgan
(2000a) argue, such production of:

masculinized landscapes like the Yukon [territory
in Canada] offer an environment in which man can
rediscover and reacquaint himself with the “real,”
“natural” world. It offers the romance of man with
man’s best friend, a return to the natural elemental
world and a reliving of (a masculinized) history.
(p. 131)

Cohen (1995) exposed similar power geometries
at play in marketing materials for the British Virgin
Islands, finding that the imagery used represents a gendered (female), natural, pristine destination that is made available for possession by the (male) tourist. These studies illustrate how the tourism industry uses gendered—but also racialized and sexualized—images to construct destination landscapes in ways that reinforce stereotypical roles and social inequalities (Kinnaird & Hall, 2000).

Studies informed by such geographical perspectives of the body and landscape illustrate the potential for tourism gender research to critique and enhance our understanding of environmental issues in tourism development. Swain (1995) identified the tourism–environment nexus as a distinctly important area for gender-aware tourism analysis. In addition to studies noted above, contributions include Hughes and Kinnaird’s (1997) analysis of a dolphin watching experience in Scotland, which illustrated how masculine identity can be articulated and normalized through the scientifically controlled and objectifying “nature” experiences of wildlife tourism. More recently, Tran and Walter (2014) used a gender analysis framework to study women’s participation in community-based ecotourism in northern Vietnam. Their study builds on Walter’s (2011) suggestion that without analysis of gendered labor divisions, gender relations, and differential access to and control over environmental, livelihood, and cultural resources, community-based ecotourism may unwittingly exacerbate gender inequalities in local communities. Others have adopted ecofeminism to analyze the gendered constructions of environment and nature in tourism promotions involving animals, tourism experiences involving meat consumption, and animal use in tourism experiences (Bertella, 2013; Fennell & Sheppard, 2011; Yudina & Fennell, 2013; Yudina & Grimwood, 2016).

Despite these examples, the promise of gender-aware analyses of tourism and environmental issues is often overlooked or underappreciated. Gender research does not register within a 40-year retrospective of tourism’s interaction with nature (Holden, 2015), nor is it presented as consequential in a synthesis of contemporary research on nature-based tourism experiences (Vespestad & Lindberg, 2011) or in an expansive handbook on tourism and environment (Holden & Fennell, 2012). Such gender blindness may reflect the tendency in tourism research to accept the object of and desire for nature in uncritical and rather simplistic terms (Franklin & Crang, 2001), or perhaps how review articles and texts tend to focus on powerful conceptions and therefore cannot portray the multitude of constructions produced by society (Reis & Shelton, 2011). Whatever the case, our assessment of the literature echoes Figueroa-Domecq et al.’s (2015) observation that tourism gender research on environment barely registers within the knowledge canons of our field.

This article contributes to the application of gender-aware analyses of tourism and environment. In particular, we offer a critique of nature-based Arctic tourism through an analysis of representations associated with polar bear tourism in Churchill, Manitoba, Canada. The guiding purpose of our study was to analyze how “nature” is gendered in its construction and presentation through tourism, and to what effect. Recognizing that “nature” has multiple meanings that discipline how we understand and talk about human and more-than-human worlds, we engage it here as an idea represented to audiences in taken-for-granted ways and with particular intentions in mind (Castree, 2014). Our study was especially focused on revealing dominant gendered expectations and understandings (re)produced in the Churchill polar bear tourism promotional landscape. The empirical substance underpinning this analysis included qualitative and visual texts derived from: a) websites of 17 operators offering polar bear-related tourism activities in the Churchill vicinity; b) online marketing campaigns of two publically funded corporations, Travel Manitoba and the Canadian Tourism Commission; and c) promotional materials (e.g., postcards, souvenirs, brochures, signage) encountered over 4 weeks of field observations in Churchill during the peak polar bear viewing season. Drawing on critical discourse analysis, we show how various representations of polar bear tourism impose hegemonic gender roles onto polar bear bodies, which are emplaced within a conventionally gendered landscape. As the “Polar Bear Capital of the World,” Churchill’s wildlife viewing industry relies on the (re)creation, dissemination, and maintenance of particular meanings and natures attributed to polar bears, as well as human–polar bear relationships, for economic benefit. We question how power
circulates with respect to these tourism production practices, gender being one of many axes of identity through which power operates and is interpolated (Pritchard & Morgan, 2000a).

**Critical Discourse Analysis**

There are multiple forms in which methodologists engage with the practices of discourse analysis (Hannam & Knox, 2005). Epistemological attachments direct the form that such discourse analysis will take, differentiating between more interpretivist/critical analyses of discourse as dialogic linguistic exchanges of spoken word or text and more poststructural analyses of discourse as power-laden ways of making sense of and engaging within the world. The epistemological positioning of this article takes direction from poststructuralist orientations, or what some refer to as Foucauldian discourse analysis, where, again, discourse is no longer simply interpreted as a text or language, but rather as “historically, socially, and institutionally specific structures of statements, terms, categories, and beliefs” that organize “a way of thinking into a way of acting in the world” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 485), and where power articulates which speech acts can be enacted and which must remain unsaid. Further, we relied on Jaworski and Pritchard (2005), who identified opportunities to interrogate tourism discourse as semiotic practices, but also to critically attend to the ways discourses are vehicles through which certain ideological orientations are made manifest (van Dijk, 2015) and power inequalities are maintained, particularly through social practices (Fairclough, 2013).

For our purposes herein, and building on Foucault’s (1972) theorizations, discourse describes a sequence of shared assumptions and rules that circulate through various texts (e.g., media, policy, travel blogs, souvenirs, academic literature, bodies, and so forth) to govern knowledge claims and discipline social and spatial relationships. Through discourse, particular ways of communicating, understanding, and behaving become “normalized” and “naturalized”; they privilege and accept only certain versions of truth, knowledge, or subjectivity (Rose, 2007). While several discourses operate around us at any one time, our social realities manifest in relation to dominant discourses associated with institutions of power and persuasion (from nation-states to patriarchy to visitor codes of conduct). Indeed, it is through discourse that power is imposed and circulated. Yet as Foucault (1980) instructed, power is relational and productive, meaning that it operates through discourse to not only impose or coerce, but also to actively resist or negotiate dominant meanings and practices. In other words, contending discourses may become empowered to compete with and contradict privileged discourses and their effects of truth (Waite, 2005). This applies within terrains of tourism just as much as it does within realms of academia—tourism can be done and researched to enable resistance. Attending to power relations thus engenders awareness of how discourses dominate and subjugate, while at the same time bringing to the forefront possibilities for thinking and doing things differently (Cheong & Miller, 2000; Fairclough, 2013).

Linked to these conceptual underpinnings, we engage critical discourse analysis as a strategy for investigating how various texts (from written to performed to visual) construct, and are constitutive of, particular versions of reality and the mechanisms that maintain normalized and naturalized assumptions that work to constitute linguistic structures into material realities (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). This approach has proven especially useful to exposing social injustices given that “social inequity is discursively constituted, reproduced and legitimated” (Toolan, 1997, p. 87). Jaworski and Pritchard (2005) provided several illustrations of how thorough critical investigations of dominant discourses, and the social institutions in which discourses are embedded, can marshal awareness and scrutiny of patriarchy, colonialism, ethnocentrism, and other modes of oppression. Importantly, such analyses attend to the possibility of intentional exclusions or silences within texts, thus ensuring that dominant discourses and their effects become noticed and that subverted discourses, counternarratives, and alternative social meanings and practices are revealed (Hannam & Knox, 2005). In the context of this study, critical discourse analysis generated insights into the gendered nature of polar bear tourism and broader power relations and effects nature-based (wildlife) tourism helps to sustain. We turn now to the context of this investigation.
Polar Bear Viewing in Churchill, Manitoba

Churchill, Manitoba (population 813) is located on the western coast of Hudson Bay at the mouth of the Churchill River (Fig. 1). The town is situated within three distinct ecozones—arctic marine, arctic tundra, and boreal forest—making Churchill home to a diversity of animal and plant life including beluga whales, arctic foxes, caribou, snowy owls, polar bears, and hundreds of species of wildflowers and boreal plants (Lemelin, 2008). Hudson Bay’s seasonal ice cover typically forms in November and breaks up in June, with the last ice disappearing from the Bay around August. From late September to November, polar bears migrate from summer resting areas toward the Hudson Bay coast, anticipating the formation of sea ice. Most bears reside on the ice from mid-November to mid-July (presumably to hunt ringed seals) and return to adjacent coastal lands during the ice-free period.

Although human-polar bear encounters occur throughout the year in Churchill, they are most frequent in October and November during the bears’ congregation along the coast. National, provincial, and local tourism-related actors have capitalized on this proximity by investing in polar bear viewing infrastructures and opportunities (Table 1). Rapid growth in both supply and demand has transpired since the 1980s, an evolution advanced by development of tundra vehicles and mobile lodges (Lemelin & Wiersma, 2007). A typical tourist experience onboard tundra vehicles involves traveling east of Churchill into the Churchill Wildlife Management Area (CWMA). Managed by Manitoba Conservation, a government agency, the CWMA was established to “[protect] the polar bear’s summer resting areas and maternity denning grounds” (CWMA, n.d.). Two Churchill tourism companies have permits to operate tundra vehicles within this protected area: Tundra Buggy Adventure (owned by Frontiers North Adventures) and Great White Bear Tours. Both also operate mobile lodges in the CWMA. Frontiers North Adventures (FNA) also holds a permit to operate a temporary mobile lodge at Cape Churchill in Wapusk National Park, a protected area established with similar intentions.
as the CWMA and managed by Parks Canada. A company called Wat’chee Expeditions also operates polar bear viewing tours in Wapusk. Only one company, Hudson Bay Helicopters, is permitted to fly in both protected areas for tourism purposes.

Method

Empirical substance for our study consisted of three types of text collected by the first author between October 2013 and January 2014. Each type was determined to help (re)create, disseminate, and maintain representations of polar bears in the Churchill tourism context. First, visual and written content was examined on websites for 17 tourism companies offering polar bear-related activities in Churchill (Table 2). Operator websites were identified through a general Internet search and, more importantly, by searching Churchill’s official “Town of Churchill” website and Travel Manitoba’s “Everything Churchill” website. Although not all companies included in this study host tours or are physically present in Churchill, they each facilitate polar bear viewing experiences in some capacity. Second, the online polar bear tourism marketing campaigns of two crown corporations were examined: Travel Manitoba and the Canadian Tourism Commission (also Table 2). These are the main provincial and federal agencies involved in tourism promotion, respectively. Third, promotional materials and memorabilia were examined and documented during 4 weeks of observational field research in Churchill. Included were postcards, souvenirs, brochures, and signage at local gift shops, hotels, restaurants, and the Churchill airport, among other locations. If available, websites for these establishments were also analyzed (Table 3).

Discursive analysis aligned with Waitt’s (2005) recommendations. It is important to emphasize that, much like other qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), the premise of our analysis was to interpret specific cultural texts and not unearth their “truth” (Waitt, 2005). As such, the analysis is not intended to be absolute; rather it seeks to unpack constructions of truth, their effects, and the structures that maintain their validity and worth (Waitt, 2005) and to generate understandings from situated and partial perspectives and negotiated meanings (see, e.g., Pritchard, Morgan, & Ateljevic, 2011). Additionally, our work is grounded in a

Table 1
Overview of Actors Involved in Churchill’s Polar Bear Tourism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category/Primary Roles</th>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crown Agency</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Canadian Tourism Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provincial/regional</td>
<td>Travel Manitoba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Frontiers North Adventures&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provincial/Regional</td>
<td>Churchill Wild, Wat’chee Expeditions&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>Churchill Northern Studies Centre, Great White Bear Tours, Hudson Bay Helicopters&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;, Lazy Bear Lodge, Nature 1st Tours and Transportation, Sea North Tours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides escorted package tours, products, and services to support polar bear tourism (e.g., air/ground transportation, accommodation, food, tours, itinerary development)</td>
<td>International</td>
<td>Natural Habitat Adventures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides packages of existing tourism products/services but does not escort tourists</td>
<td>Provincial/regional</td>
<td>Churchill Nature Tours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>International</td>
<td>Cregor Adventures, Great Canadian Travel Company, Kensington Tours, Responsible Travel, Tours of Exploration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provincial/regional</td>
<td>Heartland International Travel and Tours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Company has a permit to operate in the Churchill Wildlife Management Area. <sup>b</sup>Company has a permit to operate in Wapusk National Park.
### Table 2
Operator and Organization Websites Analyzed in This Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Operator/Organization</th>
<th>Web Address</th>
<th>Date(s) Accessed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Churchill Northern Studies Centre</td>
<td><a href="http://www.churchillscience.ca">www.churchillscience.ca</a></td>
<td>December 8–10, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kensington Tours</td>
<td><a href="http://www.kensingtontours.com">www.kensingtontours.com</a></td>
<td>December 20–22, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Habitat Adventures</td>
<td><a href="http://www.nathab.com">www.nathab.com</a></td>
<td>December 3–7, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature 1st Tours and Transportation</td>
<td><a href="http://www.nature1sttours.ca">www.nature1sttours.ca</a></td>
<td>December 10, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsible Travel</td>
<td><a href="http://www.responsibletravel.ca">www.responsibletravel.ca</a></td>
<td>December 21, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sea North Tours</td>
<td><a href="http://www.seanorthtours.com">www.seanorthtours.com</a></td>
<td>December 20, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel Manitoba</td>
<td><a href="http://www.travelmanitoba.com">www.travelmanitoba.com</a></td>
<td>January 9–11, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel Manitoba—Everything Churchill</td>
<td><a href="http://www.everythingchurchill.com">www.everythingchurchill.com</a></td>
<td>January 11, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tours of Exploration</td>
<td><a href="http://www.toursexplore.com">www.toursexplore.com</a></td>
<td>December 20–22, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wat’chee Expeditions</td>
<td><a href="http://www.watchee.com">www.watchee.com</a></td>
<td>December 17, 2013</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The study relied on several webpages of content accessed from the home web addresses listed.

### Table 3
Churchill Establishments at Which Promotional Memorabilia Was Documented

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type/Name</th>
<th>Web Address</th>
<th>Date Accessed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Churchill Motel Restaurant and Dining Room</td>
<td>No website</td>
<td>January 12, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gypsy’s Bakery and Restaurant</td>
<td><a href="http://www.gypsymbakery.ca">www.gypsymbakery.ca</a></td>
<td>January 16, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lazy Bear Café</td>
<td><a href="http://www.lazybearlodge.com">www.lazybearlodge.com</a></td>
<td>January 6, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reef Restaurant and Dining Room</td>
<td><a href="http://www.seaporthotel.ca">www.seaporthotel.ca</a></td>
<td>January 16, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Souvenir shop</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eskimo Museum Gift Shop</td>
<td>No website</td>
<td>January 20, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Here Be Bears!</td>
<td><a href="http://www.her%D0%B5%D0%B1ebears.com">www.herебebears.com</a></td>
<td>January 16, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Images</td>
<td><a href="http://www.northernimages.ca">www.northernimages.ca</a></td>
<td>January 6, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tundra Buggy Gift Shop</td>
<td>No website</td>
<td>January 4, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wapusk General Store</td>
<td>wapuskadventures.com/merchandise</td>
<td>January 6, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aurora Inn</td>
<td><a href="http://www.auroramb.ca">www.auroramb.ca</a></td>
<td>January 6, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bear Country Inn</td>
<td>No website</td>
<td>January 16, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Churchill Motel</td>
<td>No website</td>
<td>January 16, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceberg Inn</td>
<td><a href="http://www.iceberginn.ca">www.iceberginn.ca</a></td>
<td>January 16, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lazy Bear Lodge</td>
<td>lazybearlodge.com</td>
<td>December 16, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polar Inn &amp; Suites</td>
<td><a href="http://www.polarinn.com">www.polarinn.com</a></td>
<td>January 6, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seaport Hotel</td>
<td><a href="http://www.seaporthotel.ca">www.seaporthotel.ca</a></td>
<td>January 16, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Tundra Inn</td>
<td><a href="http://www.tundrainn.com">www.tundrainn.com</a></td>
<td>January 16, 2014</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* On-site documentation occurred in October 2013.
constructionist epistemology that tends to reject postpositivist notions of limitations (e.g., small samples, bias, lack of reliable data). We therefore aim to encourage trustworthiness through crystallization (showing multiple perspectives), and being upfront that all research is partial, local, and positioned within particular and contingent historical and cultural discourses. Accordingly, our methods are reported not for the purposes of replication, but to foster trustworthiness and transparency.

Curious about the relationship between gender and tourism natures, we immersed ourselves in the texts, reading for signs of various constructions of truth and knowledge about polar bears, along with the discourses of which these constructions are a part. This process involved transfer of relevant content from websites and field notes into word processing documents, followed by interrogation of these texts for both manifest and latent meanings and themes. To avoid fixating on dominant constructions and discourses, we remained alert to possibilities of alternative interpretations, understandings, and productions of polar bears, along with identifying mechanisms that marshalled perspectives and representations to marginalized positions. In other words, while we focused on specifics within the textual representations, we also read them for how broader social forces and institutions might give them (or be given) shape. This approach afforded a situated perspective of the power relationships associated with gendering nature in this particular setting, a contextualized understanding of mechanisms that produce and maintain these dynamics, and their social effects.

Analysis

Polar Bears as Gendered Bodies

Our analysis shows how representations of polar bear bodies within Churchill tourism promotions depend on and help propagate gender stereotypes. In particular, polar bear tourism invests in the construction of norms that distinguish powerful, majestic masculine bears from domestic, motherly feminine bears.

With respect to masculinity, tourism promotions invoke the physical strength and size of male bears as traits underpinning their supremacy within the tundra environment. The Great Canadian Travel Company, for instance, entices tourists with “close-up encounters with powerful polar bears,” while Churchill Nature Tours tells tourists through brochures that they should expect interactions with “the mighty Polar Bear.” Travel Manitoba further inscribes a trait of fearlessness onto polar bears, stating that polar bears “have no natural enemies and consequently no fear.” This sense of might and power is attached exclusively to male bears—“young males play-fight” and “solitary giant males patrol the shores” according to a promotional video for Natural Habitat Adventures. Such language rendering male bears as powerful spectacles is often coupled with complimentary imagery. Photographs, such as the one shown in Figure 2, communicate the brawn and physicality of polar bears, and appear frequently in Churchill promotions. Filming of bears sparring is also common. A Travel Manitoba video entitled “Explore Canada like a local—Face to face with polar bears” actually presents footage in slow motion, which has the effect of accentuating the power of a bear’s movements and the deep impact of striking an opponent.

Constructions of polar bear masculinity are also revealed in the status they are granted as tundra inhabitants. Bears are persistently depicted as the masculine royalty of the Canadian Arctic. They are the “majestic,” “regal,” and “proud” “Lords of the North.” Natural Habitat Adventures indicates that their operation “is widely recognized as the most thrilling way to immerse yourself in the wild habitat of the King of the Arctic.” Similarly, the Great Canadian Travel Company asserts that “witnessing the migration of the ‘King of the Arctic’ is truly a-once-in-a-lifetime experience.” Correspondingly, the tundra environment in which the polar bears are viewed is depicted as the bears’ rightful territory. This is implied not only in the proud titles of King and Lord given to the bears, but also explicitly reinforced by the use of words such as “domain” (e.g., “As evening falls, remain in the domain of the polar bear to experience sunset across the snow and ice”; Gregor Adventures) and “realm” (e.g., “There’s no more thorough immersion in the King of the Arctic’s realm than on this most unique of northern adventures”; Natural Habitat Adventures). Through these depictions, the tourism industry elevates polar bears above other animals living in the same
environment, creating and imposing a hierarchy of importance on arctic wildlife. This hierarchy seems to have little or nothing to do with polar bears as apex predators and instead reflects the centrality of polar bears in the production and consumption of a particular Churchill experience.

Alongside the powerful and majestic masculine representations of polar bears are promotional materials that attach domestic and affectionate qualities to female polar bears. The central feature in these constructions of femininity is the supposed intimacy and bond between mother and her cubs. Imagery is especially effective at communicating this sense of the caring maternal bear (e.g., Fig. 3). Written references to affectionate mother–cub relationships are also common. To this point, an image of a mother and cub used on the Churchill Wild website is simply captioned “Cuddles,” while the Great Canadian Travel Company declares that their expeditions offer tourists the opportunity to “watch momma bears nuzzle their cubs.” Representations of cubs following their mothers across stretches of land, mimicking their movements, or learning from their patient teachings help further reinforce constructions of an affectionate maternal bear. Idealized bonds between mother and child are further inscribed in the postcards and souvenirs found within Churchill gift shops.

The tourism representations we analyzed show clear juxtaposition of mother bears and cubs against lone male polar bears, or male polar bears engaged in a spar. The differentiation of female and male bears is not based on biological sex, but rather on representations of bear bodies interpolated by conventional human sex/gender roles and norms. As the following examples show, domestic and nurturing
qualities are exclusive to female bears while power and strength are typically reserved for male bears:

We may see mothers protecting and teaching their cubs, young males play-fighting, or massive adults patrolling the shore as they wait for the bay to freeze. (Natural Habitat Adventures)

During the daytime, young males play-fight, mother bears cautiously explore with their cubs at their sides, and solitary adults lumber across the tundra. (Cregor Adventures)

While the giant males gather on the western shores of the bay, mothers and cubs tend to congregate in areas where they are protected from the dominant adult males. (Cregor Adventures)

It is interesting to note that power and strength are only attributed to female polar bear mothers when in it is presumably derived from the protective nature instilled in them through motherhood. In an ABC News video featured on the Wat’chee Expeditions website, a newscaster joining an expedition notes “the mother bear’s hulking size seems to unravel as she suddenly climbs out, and with three little ones in tow, pushes on.” The physical size and intimidating presence of a female polar bear are diminished when her intuited responsibilities as a mother become apparent.

Polar Bears Within a Gendered Landscape

In addition to inscribing traditional gender roles on polar bear bodies, promotion materials associated with polar bear tourism in Churchill invest heavily in the gendered portrayal of the tundra landscape. In particular, promotions represent polar bears’ tundra habitat as an authentically harsh and pristine wilderness; one that has somehow evaded the destructive environmental influences of human society and yet is coded primarily as a “masculine playground” where “masculine desires” can be fulfilled.

Time and again, tourism promotions inform tourists that Churchill and the surrounding area is an “undiscovered” oasis, a “last frontier” with unparalleled “natural beauty.” Indeed, just as Kensing-ton Tours promises to “reveal the majesty of one of the last great untouched wilderness areas in the world from every angle,” Churchill Wild asserts that “Northern Manitoba is one of the most pristine wilderness areas left in the world” and that the coastline of Hudson Bay is “an area so remote that it hasn’t changed in thousands of years.” To script
the Canadian Arctic as “one of the world’s last great frontiers,” promotions also elevate specific imagery and meanings of the tundra landscape as a hostile, unforgiving, and unpeopled environment. Tours allow visitors to “pass through the wilderness” and spend time “traveling through soaring boreal forests and across vast icy plains in pursuit of the frozen north’s most majestic creature—the polar bear.” Images of individual bears or of a mother and cub walking across ice or snow (Fig. 4) visually communicate notions of bitterness and severity, capturing the scene from a distance to accentuate the frozen vastness of the bears’ authentic abode. Situated as figures in and of Arctic wilderness, polar bears are projected to have inherent purity and superiority relative to their captive cousins. We see this most plainly in a testimonial featured on the Great White Bear Tours website. The narrator explains:

You can see polar bears on the Discovery Channel, or you can go to the zoo. But until you’ve seen the unflinching wildness in a polar bear’s eyes, knowing that it is sizing you up for a meal, you haven’t really seen a polar bear.

In this selection of representational moments, we see how the purity of wilderness is entwined with the barren, bleak, and inhospitable. Here, the conflation of wilderness and nature with virginity and femininity is one that readers might well expect. It mirrors the feminization of nature spaces pointed to by several authors within tourism and beyond (e.g., Aitchison, 1996; Plumwood, 1998; Pritchard & Morgan, 2000a; Vannini, 2016). With respect to northern wilderness specifically, polar bear tourism promotions reinforce constructions of an exotic, seductive, and passive landscape; “an objectifiable feminine Other in the physical terrain” to borrow phrasing from Grace (2001, p. 48). Tourists are enticed to gaze upon polar bears in the breathtaking beauty of their natural environment. At the same time, promotional materials script the tundra landscape as a hypermasculine opponent that is wild, rugged, untamed, and unpredictable. The tundra, in this sense, is scripted as a testing ground for male virtue. It is a destination—“harsh and penetrative” to borrow from Pritchard and Morgan (2000b, p. 897)—designed for exploration, conquest, and matching or “out-muscling” a formidable adversary. Within such “narratives of rugged individualism” (Hulan, 2002, p. 186), it seems only normal that the comforts of packaged polar bear tours are advertised as “expeditions,” “journeys of exploration and discovery,” or “the adventure of a lifetime.”

The gender dynamics at play in polar bear tourism promotions reflect discursive structures of
patriarchy and (hetero)sexuality. By constructing northern wilderness as a place of escape, a landscape to pass through in order to reinvigorate or reconfirm attachments to something seemingly untamed, polar bear tourism speaks the language of a heteronormative male audience. As Plumwood (1998) observed, “if feminine immanence is expressed in limitation to the domestic, masculine transcendence is expressed in escape to a superior realm of true spiritual or adventurous experience in a nature defined against an inferiorized, familiar sphere of dullness and dailiness” (cited in Vannini, 2016, p. 59). The gendered nature of polar bear tourism is anchored to a dichotomy between rural or wild spaces on the one hand, and urban, domesticated, civilized spaces on the other (Saul, 1999). According to Saul (1999), in the North-as-wilderness construction, the male escapes “from the constraints of domestic responsibilities” into the “unconquerable wilderness”—the “antithesis of ‘home base’ and the domain of women and families” (p. 96). Wilderness is a proving ground for masculinity. Warren (1996) described this wilderness adventure as a “heroic quest” in which the individual “hears a call to adventure, leaves home, encounters dragons on the way and slays them, reflects on his conquest, and returns home as a hero with a clearer understanding of himself” (p. 16).

Power and the Gendered Natures of Polar Bear Tourism

Promotional texts analyzed in our study are emblematic of how power relations are configured in and through tourism representations. The preceding sections draw particular attention to how prevailing discourses of polar bear tourism invite sensory experiences and consumptive practices that reinforce social hierarchies based on conventional gender binaries. Promotional texts instruct tourists to make sense of polar bears and their habitats using normative (and certainly problematic!) ideas about females and males, femininity and masculinity. In their attempts to sell encounters with wild nature—embodied both by polar bears and the tundra landscape in which they live—promotional texts fortify constructions that enclose femininity within domestic spheres and responsibilities and masculinity within realms of uninhibited adventure and territorial command.

The effects of such power-laden practices are numerous and recurrent. Masculine competition and heroic quests against nature are maintained and in turn buttress instrumental human–nature relationships that define and value the material “natural” world in terms of how it serves human use and human ends (Yudina & Grimwood, 2016). Such orientations have, for some time and across multiple fields of study, been charged as the root cause of the environmental calamities and social-ecological system collapse. They are also rampant in the majority of tourism enterprises that rely on nonhuman animals to achieve economic objectives and eschew any sense of moral responsibility (Fennell, 2011). Other modes of relating to nature-based destinations and pursuits, including involvement of women and people with other sex/gender identities, are trivialized or rendered invisible. Relational discourses of care and species interdependence that ecofeminists might advocate are likewise concealed.

These gender and nature dynamics intersect with other discursive regimes that order social and spatial relations and produce various consequences. Perhaps the clearest illustration is found in the unrestrained nationalism that runs through polar bear tourism promotions—a nationalism that often relies on metaphors of gendered and sexualized power even as nationalist narratives are reconfigured within current global-political frameworks (Ranchod-Nilsson & Tetreault, 2000). Definitions, metaphors, and material effects of such nationalisms work to elide the gendered or sexualized power at play within the images, performances, and productions of “nation” and national boundaries, forcing a privileging of dominant masculinist narratives and a silencing of potential counter narratives. Appealing to nationalist narratives that equate Canada with The North, promotional texts often work to reinforce such dominant narratives by marking polar bears and Arctic wilderness as the powerful masculine “soul or psyche of Canada” (Shields, 1991, p. 61). In a Frontiers North Adventures promotional video, for example, a company representative explains that, “there’s a fascination [with the polar bear] particularly in Canada because
it's a cultural icon, it's a very important symbol for the North.” Similarly, in a video created by the Canadian Tourism Commission and featured on the Everything Churchill website, a spokesperson from Polar Bear International states:

Polar bears are a very special animal to the Canadian people. It is their heritage. Right now, some 66 percent of the polar bears that exist in the world exist here in Canada. Even on their two-dollar coin, they have the polar bear. Polar bear is Canada as the Arctic is Canada as well.

As an audience, we are disciplined by these texts to believe that gazing upon polar bears in the tundra habitat will enable us to “discover the secrets of Canada’s north” and ultimately what it means to be Canadian. Arguably, the promotion of polar bear tourism in Churchill helps to enshrine as a rule in Canadian living a gendered opposition between nature and civilization (Shields, 1991).

While the Canadian North may represent “prototypical wilderness,” the suggestion that Canadian identity, let alone its northern identity, is anything but multiple, dynamic, and complex suggests a project of homogenization. Indeed, Grace (2001) wrote that “to ask where North is and what North means is to open a veritable Pandora’s box on identity” (p. 48). Meanings of “Canada” and “the North” are far from static or universal. The implication of polar bear tourism in a nationalistic discourse mirrors other tactics of producing a Canadian identity and imagination that serves the interests, and reinforces relative privileges, of white settler colonialism (Baldwin, 2009; Erickson, 2013; Shields, 1991). Settler colonialism in Canada (though not exclusively) has been characterized by the systematic erasure of Indigenous Peoples from their ancestral lands, which renders landscapes unoccupied and therefore well suited for ownership and development (Cooke, 2017). Following Saul (2008), the movement of tourists passing through wilderness resonates with a colonial discourse that perceives the Canadian North as a place to be crossed and not lived in. This perception is tied to northern economic development and security, for example, in the case of early Canadian fur trade or in present-day military initiatives devised to protect Canadian northern sovereignty. The livelihoods of Indigenous and other northern residents are often left inconsequential (Saul, 2008). These exclusions have been explained in terms of how wilderness becomes a fetishized and anachronistic space; that is, an uncivilized but endangered space located outside of history, mourned for and desired by the leisure class, and which systematically denies Indigenous Peoples, for example, opportunities to participate fairly in contemporary society (see, e.g., Braun, 2002; Erickson, 2013). In effect, the colonial silences and social hierarchies implicated in the wilderness–nationalism discourses of polar bear tourism disguise a reality of northern exploitation by southerners (typically men) for profit (Shields, 1991).

Conclusion

This article has presented a critique of nature-based Arctic tourism through an analysis of representations associated with polar bear tourism in Churchill, Manitoba. Our study’s guiding purpose was to analyze how “nature” is gendered in its construction and presentation through tourism, and to what effect. We were especially focused on revealing dominant gendered expectations and understandings (re)produced in the Churchill polar bear tourism promotional landscape. Our critical discourse analysis revealed how representations of polar bear tourism impose hegemonic gender roles onto polar bear bodies, which are emplaced within a conventionally gendered landscape and underwritten by nationalistic and colonial readings of Canada’s North. Echoing conclusions made by Pritchard and Morgan (2000a), among others, these insights help lay bare the recurrent character of social inequities and struggles that structure the tourism experience and that demand consistent attention within our field and beyond. By unpacking and revealing such baggage in relation to the gendering of nature, our reading creates space for the kind of critical questioning, dialogue, and understanding that may lead to creative responses and new touristic practices. Opportunities remain for tourism scholars to challenge and rethink what has typically been accepted with regard to the power dynamics underscoring nature-based and wildlife tourism.
Unfortunately, many of the representations of gender reinforced through tourism in relation to animals and landscapes rely on and mutually reinforce more traditional, limited, and socially problematic binary distinctions between males and females. Since the 1990s, theorizations of gender have pointed out the limitations of gender binaries and highlighted the violence of disciplining individuals and/or national narratives around such stringent, highly stereotyped, essentializing expectations (Butler, 1990; Halberstam, 2011). When traditional notions of gender are projected onto those objects/beings that we mark as nonhuman (both animal and material), the perceived innateness and naturalness of those norms are often reified and strengthened, weakening the reality of their socially constructed “origin” and therefore their contestability (Foucault, 2000). Projecting human constructed notions of gender onto animals and landscapes therefore has implications for the ways that we define our gendered selves, how we interact with landscapes, and what we expect from our engagements with animals.

In particular, because of the distinctions made between culture and nature—where culture is understood as humanly constructed, malleable, and subjective and nature is privileged as predetermined, unchanging, and objective—the projection of socially constructed notions of gender (culture) onto polar bears and wilderness landscapes (nature) works to make elusive the “origin” of gender, begging the question: Is the gender we perceive in nature through tourism, natural or cultural or both? Traditional readings will see the origins of gender represented in tourism materials as discovered within nature and will privilege nature as something that falls outside of human construction/culture; will assume that nature is above the realm of human activity (St. Pierre, 2000); and will reinforce that humans are apart from matter rather than a part of matter (Barad, 2007) and therefore unable to act upon that which is natural—in this case gender. More social and critical constructionist readings of gender in tourism materials will see the “origins” of gender as constructed between humans (culture) and nonhuman beings/objects (nature), where gender is not innate, but rather is interactional, mutually constructed, and therefore contestable and malleable through human action (Crotty, 1998). The different potentials for action/nonaction among these readings of gender show the relevance of the perceived origin of gender norms—either as innate and unchallengeable or as constructed and contestable. If traditional gender as natural and discovered from within animals/landscapes prevails in tourism spaces and national narratives, we erase the ability to challenge, contest, adapt, deconstruct, or dismantle oppressive norms. And once transferred to human engagements as gendered “truths” originating from “nature,” the influences of power, social conflicts, and material conditions that constitute and maintain limited norms for female and male beings are hidden and remain dominant. Because humans and animals and landscapes are inexorably linked in such politics, how we gender polar bears and landscapes matters for us all.

References


