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Surrendering to the Tropics: *Tristes Tropiques* as Antidote to Tourism's Bland Place Narratives

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Abstract

The central idea in this article is that tropical landscapes are not uniform and that reducing such physical worlds to a set of generic material signifiers—as is the case in tropical tourism discourses—impoverishes place narratives. I base my attempt at increasing the multiplicity of tropical landscapes on the discussion of such landscapes in Lévi-Strauss's famed *Tristes Tropiques*. The latter combines approaches not often associated with the anthropologist: namely, an autobiographical/confessional mode of writing and a materialist-cum-phenomenological approach to the physical landscapes encountered. I examine how *Tristes Tropiques* narrates the sensorial qualities of the contrasting "wet" and "dry" tropics of Brazil; and how the book disrupts the wet/dry binary in fascinating ways. The notion of "surrendering to the tropics" advanced here combines Lévi-Strauss's account with the phenomenology of lesser-known sociologist of knowledge Kurt H. Wolff. In *Surrender and Catch*, *Tristes Tropiques* is cited as a forerunner to surrender as "total involvement"; and both books highlight the fusing of time, space, and felt experience in seeing the world afresh. In the last section, I document my own surrender processes to the dry tropics of North Queensland, Australia; and discuss the place narratives of regional organizations that either acknowledge or elide (through a tourist gaze) the "brownness" of the local landscape. The article concludes by highlighting how, what Denis Cosgrove terms the tropics as physical "encounter", gives the narrating of wet and dry tropical landscapes an ontological and existential edge.

Keywords: Wet and dry tropics, tristes tropiques, material-phenomenology, tropical landscapes, tropical place narratives, tropical tourism discourses

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Tropical place narratives have been shaped by numerous colonial, post-colonial, and transnational processes. Central to such processes has been the idea of the tropical landscape as a site of adventure, exoticism, territorial expansion, economic exploitation and consumption (Sheller, 2002). The framing of tropical place materialities—the climate, the vegetation, the exotic geomorphology and the colours of the seascapes and landscapes—is therefore the result of historical and other processes involving the *imperial gaze* (McClintock, 1995) and the *tourist gaze* (Urry, 1990). The sociologist who coined the latter, John Urry (2002, p. 152), details in the second edition of his influential book, *The Tourist* Gaze, how "in the case of tropical travel", the development of such a gaze, required "visitors…able to taste new fruits, to smell the flowers, to feel the heat of the sun, to immerse one's body in the moist greenery of the forest, as well as to see new sights". There has always been an underlying materiality to the tropics. However, the imperial and tourist "gazes" have tended to push the appreciation of tropical materialities towards some generic ideal of "tropicality". As such, we need a conception of tropical landscapes that resists, what cultural geographer Denis Cosgrove (2005, p. 214), labels the place-less image of the tropics: "Like any other geography, the tropics is a place, made up of places that are tropical in the myriad ways that humans inhabit them".

In this article, I canvas the topic of how to "challenge the overbearing banalities of neoliberalism's tourism discourses".[1] I propose using differences in the material and aesthetic associations of wet and dry tropical landscapes as a basis for exploring the multiplicity of tropical places. I consider approaches and modes of writing that aim to capture the "texture" of tropical landscapes and how such textures are experienced. The notion of landscape textures suggests that landscapes are never reducible to their symbolic encoding or textuality (Ingold, 2011; de la Fuente, 2019, 2020). To evoke Cosgrove (2005, pp. 215-216) again: what is needed in the socio-cultural analysis of tropical landscapes is a greater sense of balance between the tropics as places that have been mapped, classified, and represented (what he terms the tropics as "epistemologies") with the tropics as sensed, physically encountered, and experienced existentially (what he terms the tropics as "ontologies"). My attempt at finding such a balance hinges on a text that has been described as too "neat" and too "Eurocentric" (Clifford, 1988, p.14); and as exemplar of a "disappointed Romanticism" (Geertz, 1973, p. 351). I am referring to Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1974) *Tristes Tropiques*. Contra readings that see the book as a mere steppingstone to the author's more cerebral structuralist texts and their reliance on "linguistics, communication theory, cybernetics, and mathematical logic" (Geertz, 1973, p. 351), I will be emphasizing the ways in which *Tristes Tropiques* registers how the "material presence of the tropical earth impresses itself bodily" (Cosgrove, 2005, p. 213).

[1] This is one of the topics suggested on the CFP for the Special Issue on *Tourisms' Tristes Tropiques* as announced on the *eTropic* online journal system, 2025.

As will be evident in my discussion of *Tristes Tropiques* in the next two sections, I am especially interested in how Lévi-Strauss frames the wet and dry tropics. For me, *Tristes Tropiques* entails a narrative in which the traveller-cum-ethnographer sweats and feels out-of-place, but also delights in new sensory experiences and the challenges new physical worlds pose. Interestingly, Lévi-Strauss suggested in an interview, that despite its autobiographical and first-person framing, *Tristes Tropiques* perhaps achieved "a certain scientific truth…greater than in [his] objective works" (cited in Wilcken, 2010, p. 202). He attributed this to the manner in which *Tristes Tropiques* includes the "observer into the object of his observation"; a text one could describe as "written with a lens that's called a fish eye" and which "shows what is not only in front of the camera but also what is behind [it]" (Lévi-Strauss cited in Wilcken, 2010, p. 202). Furthermore, as Lévi-Strauss's (1974, p. 413) famous book is about what the author terms an "interruption" to the natural attitude to the world, my reading of *Tristes Tropiques* seeks to emphasize what phenomenological sociology has termed the "surrender experience" (Wolff, 1976). The basis of such a phenomenology is that "meaning…is reached through a radically experiential, *existential absorption* in the surrenderer's unique concrete situation" (Backhaus, 2003, p. 312). My fusing of insights from *Tristes Tropiques* and *Surrender and Catch* arguably accords with readings of the former which emphasize the less formalist dimensions of Lévi-Strauss's oeuvre (Boon, 1972).

In the last part of the article, I use the frameworks unearthed in Lévi-Strauss's book and in Wolffian sociology to document my own process of surrendering to North Queensland's dry tropics—a region which, like the author of *Tristes Tropiques*, I came to know through academic employment. I also highlight the asymmetries between how tourism and non-tourism place narratives frame the dry tropics of the region in question; and use this comparison to restate my case for understandings based on giving oneself over to tropical materialities and their sensory associations. I use my discussion of the specificities of the dry tropical landscape to suggest implications for more applied fields. We are living through the proliferation of a range of professions and specialist knowledges such as "place marketing", "destination branding", "placemaking", etc, (Warnaby & Medway, 2013; Campelo et al., 2014). Often these fields are based on disembodied understandings of place and rely on what might be called "thin-data" (Madsbjerg, 2017). It has also been claimed that tourism and place-related strategies often succumb to cookie-cutter approaches and what has been termed "fast policy" (Peck, 2005). To such a backdrop, emphasizing the radical alterity of tropical landscapes and how best to experience such alterity, is not a purely theoretical exercise. Opening the "black-box" of tropical landscape meanings implies rethinking how we engage with, attend to, and seek to create value from, the landscape qualities embedded in different tropical places.

Fecund Tropicality: Lévi-Strauss on "Lushness"

Before beginning the exegesis of *Tristes Tropiques* we might ask: what are the dominant images of tropicality and the materialities of tropical places in the modern or contemporary "tourist gaze"? Mimi Sheller (2002, p. 36) proposes it revolves around the "familiar sun-sea-and-sand imagery used…to promote everything from package holidays and cruises to time-shares and villa purchases all over the world". She adds that the imagery in question relies "on longstanding visual and literary themes in Western culture" (Sheller, 2002, p. 36). Images of tropicality tend to involve some variation on the idea of tropical places "as microcosms of earthly Paradise" (Sheller, 2002, p. 36). What might be called the Edenic framing of the tropics involves an underlying theme of "the profusion (even promiscuity), variety, and colour of all life forms" in tropical zones (Cosgrove, 2005, p. 209). At the heart of tropicality is what two cultural historians have described as plants, nature, and landscape exhibiting signs of tropical "luxuriance" (Martins & Driver, 2005). Indeed, the adjective "lush", which is so often used to describe wet tropical forests and vegetation, denotes a phenomenon that is "succulent", "luxurious", "characterised by luxury and comfort", or which is perceived as "sexually attractive" (Macquarie University, 1982, p. 743).

The fecund or lush version of the Brazilian tropics first appears in *Tristes Tropiques* in the chapter entitled "Crossing the Tropic". The latter begins: "The coast between Rio and Santos offers…tropical landscapes of dream-like beauty" (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 89). Some passages read like a (albeit very poetic) brochure for tropical oceanic tourism. One passage speaks of "[b]eaches of fine sand, bordered by coconut palms or by dark forests…inaccessible except from the sea"; and of the "boat slowly mak[ing] its way between the islands" (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, pp. 89-90). It was then that Lévi-Strauss (1974, p. 90) claims he "first…experienced the impact of the tropics"; a sensation he equates with sailing through a coastal passage "encompassed by a channel of greenery" where the passengers felt as if they "had only to stretch out our hands to grasp the plants". It was also from the deck of the same ship that the anthropologist remembers experiencing the tropics as a distinct smellscape. The smellscape was different to anything suggested by the word Brazil before leaving Paris. It also contrasted with the scents and air flows of the oceanic trip:

> [T]he sea smells of the preceding weeks had ceased to circulate so freely; they had come up against an invisible wall; thus immobilized, they no longer claimed the traveller's attention, which was now drawn towards smell that were of quite a different nature and that nothing in his [or her] experience enabled him [or her] to define: they were like a forest breeze alternating with hot-house scents, the quintessence of

> the vegetable kingdom…a peculiar freshness so concentrated as to be transmuted into a kind of olfactory intoxication, the last note of a powerful chord. (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 78)

Once on land, the overpowering and Eden-like qualities of the tropics continue to be experienced. There is mention of a coastal hinterland "variegated by lagoons and marshes and crisscrossed by innumerable rivers, straits and canals"; and these, in turn, seem "perpetually blurred by a pearly vapour, [that] seems like the earth itself, emerging on the first day of creation" (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, pp. 90-91). Next, after an ascent into the hills and mountains close to the coastline by car, the anthropologist witnesses "banana plantations…of the freshest and tenderest green imaginable"; as well as a "mist reminiscent of mountain highlands under other climes" (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 91). On this drive, Lévi-Strauss (1974, p. 91) evokes the botanical colonial gaze, claiming he felt "free to examine the trees and plants arranged in tiers like specimens in a museum". But soon the comparisons and contrasts with the familiar begins. The difference between European and tropical forests is that, in the case of the latter, the "foliage is darker, its shades of green" more intense (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 91). The visual gaze required to appreciate tropical forests is also different. In the case of the tropics, foreground and background are too hard to decipher unless one is "near the edge to contemplate the forest as a whole"; in fact, on the whole, the tropical forest invites a focus "on the details" (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 91). The "stems and leaves" of the lush rainforest seemed to "have been cut out of metal" and exhibit "a higher degree of presence and permanence" than most other forests (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 91). Lévi-Strauss (1974, p. 91) compares tropical rainforests to "Rousseau's paintings of exotic landscapes" with their well-defined, sculptural vegetal forms.

It isn't until after Lévi-Strauss had crossed the Mato Grosso and entered Amazonia that lushness resurfaces. The re-entry into lushness occurs after a protracted period in the dry interior (the subject of the next section of this article). The luxuriance of the physical world is highlighted at this point of re-entry: "Trees were growing in all directions, and flowers bloomed across waterfalls; it was impossible to say whether the river served to irrigate this fantastic garden or whether it was about to be choked by a proliferation of plants and creepers" (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 330). While there is a certain pulsating energy, if not violent force, to the "dripping creepers and overgrown torrents" of the wet tropics, Lévi-Strauss (1974, p. 330) also mentions instances when the wet tropics resembled the Garden of Eden before the Fall: "The birds did not flee at our approach…they were part of the living reconstitution, before my astonished eyes…[of a] Paradise…marked by a tender intimacy between plants, beasts and men".

Lévi-Strauss claims the wet tropics helped him to see all landscapes through fresh eyes. He suggests had he not witnessed "the forest…in its most virulent form", he might not have grasped the "universal features" of all forests or discovered the "words to describe" the specific qualities of forests (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 341). One lesson drawn from the wet tropics is that looking at a forest requires immersion: "Seen from the outside, the Amazonian forest seems like a mass of congealed bubbles, a vertical accumulation of green swellings…. But once you break through the surface-skin and go inside, everything changes…the chaotic mass becomes a monumental universe" (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 341). Lévi-Strauss gropes for a fecund form of writing to match the fecundity of the landscape. He writes, for example, of the need to recognise "the forest's various closely adjacent planes"; something that is possible once the "mind has overcome its first impression of being overwhelmed" (Lévi-Strauss, 1974: 341). The following thick-description ensues:

> [F]irst, the tops of plants and grasses which are no taller than a man; above these, the pale trunks of trees and stems of creepers…a little higher up, these trunks and stems disappear into the foliage of large shrubs or the scarlet blossoms of the *pacova*, the wild banana trees; they re-emerge momentarily from this vegetable foam, only to vanish once more among the palm-fronds; they then reappear at a still higher point, where their first horizontal branches become visible, leafless, but laden with parasitic plants such as orchids and Bromeliaceae, like a ship's masts with the rigging; and, almost beyond human vision, this plant universe is completed by vast domes. (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 341)

This is poetic ethnographic writing meant to capture how the wet tropics challenged and extended the anthropologist's social science gaze. Lévi-Strauss (1974, p. 342) said of the lush tropical forests of Brazil that they require an observer capable of grasping everything from what lies "[b]eneath the traveller's feet" through to "levels" of sensorial knowledge "corresponding" to "aerial ones". As I have argued in a recent article, it might be that spatial environments require forms of grasping scenes that extend the notion of the "gaze" through concepts like the "sideways glance" and "haptic visuality" (de la Fuente, 2025). Seeing the world through what appears at the periphery of our focus, and reframing vision as comparable to touching the world's textures, implies a multi-perspectival social science. It also suggests a mode of sense-making that artfully toggles back and forth between different levels of immersion and detachment, proximity and distance.

Fecund Tropicality's "Other": The Dry Landscape as Source of Insight

Early on in *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss reports reaching the top of a "serra" and acquiring an aerial or almost God-like view of Brazil's varied topographies. From a height of some 1,000-metres, on the lush coastal highlands between Santos and São Paulo, the anthropologist reports being able to see the following:

> The landscape slopes away gradually in a northerly direction. Its descent to the Amazon basin, into which it finally collapses through huge faults three thousand kilometres to the north, is interrupted in only two places by lines of cliffs: Serra de Botucatu and Chapada do Matto Grosso, respectively 500 and 1,500 kilometres from the coast. I would have to go beyond both before discovering, along the rivers of the Amazonia, a forest similar to the one clinging to the coastal wall. The major part of Brazil, the area contained between the Atlantic, the Amazon and Paraguay, is a kind of tableland sloping downwards from the sea: a springboard crinkly with undergrowth and surrounded by a damp circle of jungle and marsh. (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 92)

The reference to the territorial triangle sitting between "the Atlantic, the Amazon and Paraguay" and filled with "crinkly undergrowth" is noteworthy. The triangle in question forms what Lévi-Strauss refers to as the "major part of Brazil". Yet, despite its size and visibility from afar, the dry interior is defined by the landscape features that lie at its boundaries: mountainous fecundity on the coast and the "damp circle of jungle" at the end. The view Lévi-Strauss discusses is a type of cognitive map of the journey that is to come; and the dry triangle of the interior a liminal zone that will need to be traversed and endured.

Accordingly, *Tristes Tropiques*' most dystopian landscape imagery is reserved for Brazil's dry savannahs (see also Vasques Vital & Dutra e Silva, 2022). So much so that one intellectual biographer has proposed "Lévi-Strauss's *tristes tropiques* were not the lush rainforests…but this dusty plain, doused during the four-month rainy season and then baked dry for the rest of the year" (Wilcken, 2010, p. 87). Drawing on letters, journal entries and field notes by members of Lévi-Strauss's expedition, the same biographer plots when and where the poetics/mood attributed to landscape changes during the journey. One radical change seems to occur upon crossing the Mato Grosso territorial boundary: "After a change of train companies at the Mato Grosso state line, the tracks straightened and the landscape flattened out.… The greens deadened, the vegetation settled into dry bush, with scatterings of hardy trees and palms" (Wilcken, 2020, p. 60). We are a long way from the mountains, intensely green vegetation, and misty clouds discussed in an early chapter of *Tristes Tropiques*.

Another geographical threshold seems to occur upon reaching the 700 kilometre-long Rondon telegraph line: "From here onwards, twisted telegraph poles stretched into the distance of sand, gravel and scrub. The combination reminded Lévi-Strauss of Yves Tanguy's landscapes" (Wilcken, 2010, p. 87). A dry, flat landscape of brown scrub, the odd hardy tree, and sagging telegraph lines. The sagging telegraph lines serve as a reminder that some landscapes can't be tamed through modern engineering and technology. The Rondon line was finished in 1907 or thirty years before Lévi-Strauss's expedition to the region. The telegraph line "never really worked. Loose connections, power failures and substation breakdowns made the service intermittent and unreliable" (Wilcken, 2020, p. 79). The technological dysfunctions and visible signs of material decay of the infrastructure must have enhanced the sense of bleakness associated with the Brazilian dry interior.

To his credit, Lévi-Strauss recognizes that most tropical landscapes are likely to involve visible evidence of human impacts. This intellectual move serves to destabilize the material-semiotic associations between Edenic tropicality as untamed/untouched nature; and also problematizes the implicit hierarchies associated with tropic landscapes. Thus, in recounting the road trip between the port of Santos and the city of São Paulo, *Tristes Tropiques* suddenly shifts from a description of tropical lushness to contemplating landscapes impacted by mining and agriculture. The landscape account centres on colonialism and international political economy: "After gorging itself on gold, the world became hungry for sugar…and lastly…towards the cultivation of coffee. After being yellow, then white, gold became black" (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 90). Two hundred plus years of planting and extracting, meant that Lévi-Strauss (1974, p. 92) was confronted by the following sight: "Around me, erosion had eaten away the constantly evolving landscape…the land became exhausted and was washed away…the plantations were then moved further afield". Ever the aesthete, even in the face of ugliness or something appearing chaotic, Lévi-Strauss (1974, pp. 92-93) claims the landscape possessed "a discrete beauty" and that it resembled an "archaeological site" consisting of "exhausted mines" and "obsolete forms of agriculture". Lévi-Strauss can find beauty in the landscape forms left behind by mining and farming; but he is clearly moved by the human impacts on tropical nature.

However, even in the case of tropicality diminished by human activities, Lévi-Strauss retains his ability to make sense of the landscape and to draw insights from the experience of such landscapes. It is in the dry tropical regions of Brazil that the anthropologist feels his capacity for interpretation and insight are seriously challenged. It is while spending time in the dry savannahs that Lévi-Strauss starts to register self-doubts about the expedition, his chosen vocation, and his capacities to understand the world. At first, the self-questioning registers as "adventure" turning into "boredom" and a corresponding malaise stemming from weeks of seeing the "same bleak savannah

rolling past, so barren that its living plants were hardly distinguishable from the dead vegetable debris" (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 321). The psychic and existential distress produced by the landscape was compounded by not being able to source food directly from nature: "There had been no rain for five months and all game had vanished. We were lucky if we managed to shoot an emaciated parrot…or managed to roast in their shells a land-tortoise or an armadillo with black, oily flesh" (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 321). The Mato Grosso as a type of Garden of Eden in reverse. It is also during this part of the expedition that Lévi-Strauss succumbs to escapism, nostalgia for Europe, and bouts of strange reverie. He writes, for example, that it was "[o]n the plateau of the western Mato Grosso" that he began experiencing "fleeting visions of the French countryside" and hearing fragments of "the melody of Chopin's Etude no. 3, opus 10" (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 377). It is also in the dry tropics that Levi-Strauss experiences a crisis with epistemological overtones. He writes that if the Brazilian tribes he was seeking would not reveal their secrets to him (and throughout the trip he was dependent on first finding the tribes of the interior and second locating a suitable translator), then "perhaps the earth itself would speak" (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 333). Yet, in the dry interior of Brazil, even the earth speaking felt like a remote possibility. Despairingly, Lévi-Strauss (1974, pp. 333-334) writes of how, even if he were to give up on "the delusion" that the landscape "should fill [him] with rapture" and "reduce" his sense of focus "to this clayey beach and this blade of grass" in front of him, "there is nothing to prove that my eye…would not recognize the Bois de Meudon" (a forest close to Paris). In the hot, dry, interior of Brazil, the author experiences a rare crisis or period of self-doubt pertaining to whether the world can be understood at all.

This contrast with the hermeneutic affordances offered by wet or lush tropicality are stark. In the case of the latter, even if there were initial moments of feeling overwhelmed, the lushness of the landscape seemed to generate conceptual and expressive fecundity. Not so in the case of dry tropicality, Lévi-Strauss records an interpretative barrenness to match the aridity of the landscape. However, as with the discussion of how mining and agriculture had made their mark on tropical landscapes, the discussion of interpretative stumbling blocks also serves to destabilize the wet-dry duality. In an audacious and imaginative intellectual move, Lévi-Strauss claims that what prepared him for Brazil's lush forests were earlier experiences of the dry, rocky landscapes of Provence. The latter taught him how to "read" the distinct qualities of landscape: "I tramped excitedly over the rocky ground, repeating to myself that each sprig to be found was called thyme… rosemary, basil…sweet bay, lavender…and that each was an aristocrat of the vegetable kingdom which had been entrusted with its particular mission" (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, pp. 91-92). This earlier experience had taught him the intellectual benefits of adapting to what we might call the tonalities of landscape. If the landscapes of Provence required focusing on smell to be fully appreciated, then the wet tropics required paying attention to shape. As mentioned

earlier, Lévi-Strauss also registered the significance of the tropics as a smellscape. However, when it came to registering the peculiarities of the tropical rainforest as a set of material textures, it was the shape or "posture" of the vegetation: "What the flora of Provence had conveyed to me by its fragrance this tropical vegetation now brought home to me by its shapes…[the latter] was a vegetable company like a troop of accomplished dancers, each of whom had remained poised in the most telling posture" (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 92).

The emphasis on "what the flora of Provence" and the region's dry landscape had taught him, mobilizes a central trope in narratives regarding traveling to gain insight: namely, the value of spending time in dry, rocky or non-lush physical settings. Time in supposedly barren landscapes is a mainstay of religious and mythological storytelling. In *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss (1974, p. 340) recognizes these antecedents and alludes to the importance of "desert-like" landscapes for the "ancients". "Through having spent so much time crossing the desert-like savannahs of central Brazil, I was able to appreciate afresh that rustic nature so beloved of ancients: young grass, flowers and the moist coolness of thickets". He adds, there is nothing that brings the sensory "faculties closer to the soul" than when we encounter "[b]lessings such as silence, coolness and peace, which we had thought had vanished" (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p.341).

Surrender Experiences: Reading *Tristes Tropiques* Phenomenologically

In this section I would like to develop the idea that Lévi-Strauss's explorations of the tropical landscape can be extended further by connecting the analyses offered in *Tristes Tropiques* to the phenomenological idea of "open-ness" to what the world wants to tell us. In some respects, this is a risky move. Lévi-Strauss is occasionally scathing towards phenomenology and the closely related philosophy of existentialism. In *Tristes Tropiques*, for example, he denounces existentialism by employing the sexist and elitist slur that it is no more than a "shop-girl metaphysics" (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 54). At the same time, there is a materialist-cum-sensualist and ontological-cum-existentialist edge to *Tristes Tropiques* that can't be ignored. I am not alone in reaching this conclusion. For Cosgrove (2005, p. 214), doing the book justice requires appreciating "the ontological nature of Lévi-Strauss's physical encounter" (Cosgrove, 2005, p. 214). It might be said that *Tristes Tropiques* is phenomenological despite itself. The author also employs phenomenological devices such as suspending attitudes to reality to reframe the world. For Lévi-Strauss, landscape encounters demonstrate the value of suspending and then reframing perceptions of reality. He writes that, "[e]very landscape appears first of all as a vast chaos", and one feels as though one is "proceeding in a meaningless fashion" (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 56). But from such aimlessness a "miracle" often "occurs" in which "suddenly space and time

become one: the living diversity of the moment juxtaposes and perpetuates the ages" (Lévi-Strauss, 1974: 56). Our minds and our bodies remember every other time we have walked in this or some other landscape; and all those other moments create the conditions for unifying or fusing the present one. Landscape and experience become one when we reach the point "where every drop of sweat, every muscular movement, every gasp of breath becomes symbolic…. I feel myself to be steeped in a more dense intelligibility" (Lévi-Strauss, 1976, pp. 56-57).

Should social science aim for such moments of "dense intelligibility"? A social science model that captures what Lévi-Strauss is describing is that offered by German-Jewish-American phenomenologist Kurt H. Wolff. What Lévi-Strauss (1974, p. 56) describes as the "miracle" of "space and time" becoming "one", Wolff (1976) gives a very precise technical name to: the process of "surrender-and-catch". Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* features in the genesis story of how Wolff arrived at his sociology of the surrender experience. However, it was in the landscape of New Mexico rather than the Brazilian tropics that the relevant "breakthrough" occurred for Wolff. Having obtained a post-doctoral fellowship during the early-1940s at the University of Chicago, he undertook to complete a study of a New Mexico town he named "Loma". He had agreed to study this community in terms of the notion of "culture patterns" then popular in American anthropology. But the New Mexico landscape started to speak to the nascent phenomenologist in surprising ways; and forced him to rethink both the focus of the research and the style of analysis that might be pursued:

> The "field" as soon as I saw it, struck me as a landscape such as I had never known before. It was high, calm, yet exciting, with sagebrush rolling wide, rolling up the hills, mesas razed flat, shaking their green brown hues into nothingness buzzing with flowers: purple, blue, lemon tufts in the grey circled by rocky tables. The clear, blue seamed plain receded in a constant quiver toward the glassy ranges of mountains under the darker blue sky, where smoke rose from earthen houses. (Wolff, 1976, p. 71)

When trying to narrate the experience, Wolff (1976, p. 74) writes: "I can give no excerpts from my field notes that would exemplify or analyse the meanings of surrender. The reason is…what was going on in myself had not yet begun to announce itself". In a sense, surrenders can't be forced; and communicating such experiences—what he calls the "catch"—demands an experimental attitude. On this score, it is worth noting Wolff begins *Surrender and Catch* with a "stream of consciousness" account of going for a walk in Florence (the city where Wolff first took refuge, met his wife, and completed his PhD decades earlier). It serves as a kind of meditative foreword or poetic epigram to the book.

As with Levi-Strauss's reflections on tropical landscapes, Wolff is aiming for a form of writing that registers the poetics of experience. He went on to define surrender as a "total experience" or type of "cognitive love" of the sort required to grasp "what happens when we see a street for the first time, when we meet a new person, see a new part of the city, enter a house not entered before" (Wolff, 1974, p. 13). The catch was the "cognitive or existential result, yield, harvest…[the] new beginning or new conceptualizing" (Wolff, 1976, p. 20). Hence, surrender-and-catch. Wolff (1972, p. 82) identifies *Tristes Tropiques* as one of the inspirations for his phenomenology; and cites passages where, for example, Lévi-Strauss claims the book is an attempt to "recapture that early state of grace" associated with grasping "evanescent and constantly renewed forms" (Lévi-Strauss cited in Wolff, 1976, p. 82).

Wolff (1974, p. 83) laments that Lévi-Strauss's experiences in the tropics "seem to have been much less significant in revising his conception and practice of anthropology than they have come to be for my relation to the world, and some of its parts, such as social science". He seems to be saying: what a shame Lévi-Strauss never formally became an advocate for the type of phenomenology that Wolff spent six decades developing. Yet, although Levi-Strauss never formally adopts the kind of phenomenological terminology Wolff employs, as outlined earlier, the anthropologist refers to the positive consequences associated with "interruptions" to the natural flow of experiences as well as to the "miracle" that occurs when thought and experience fuse. Furthermore, *Tristes Tropiques* mobilizes key aspects of what Wolff (1976, p. 22-23; emphasis in the original) proposes characterizes the surrender experience including: "*Total involvement*" (the level of attention Lévi-Strauss devotes to his physical surroundings); "*Suspension of received notions*" (how Lévi-Strauss is constantly resisting his own pre-existing and culturally mediated notions of what a forest, vegetation, topography, is); "*Pertinence of everything"* (Lévi-Strauss reports on aspects of the journey that might not seem relevant including why he was in Brazil to begin with and aspects of the experience that may seem trivial or "fringe" to the central narrative); and "*Risk of being hurt*" (Lévi-Strauss's reflexivity extends to how well or not well he copes with the physical and mental hurdles presented by the tropics; including whether the whole venture was to some extent a "fool's errand"). In other words, the notion of surrendering to a time or place, or to a very specific experience of the world, seems like a good extension of the insights in *Tristes Tropiques.*

Embracing "Brownsville": A Personal Surrendering to the Tropics

I would now like to operationalize the kind of surrender to landscape and the materialities of place that Lévi-Strauss and Wolff highlighted by reflecting on my own experiences in the tropics. I moved to North Queensland for academic employment in 2015, having almost no knowledge of Australia's tropical regions prior to this. I didn't

know, for example, that there was a distinction between wet and dry tropical zones. Like everybody else I had seen visual and popular culture iconography connected with the tropics prior to my job interview. However, I'm pretty sure that the only image I had seen of the city of Townsville (in which the university's main campus is located) prior to moving there was of the university's then Vice-Chancellor (and therefore my future "boss"). She was photographed at a waterfront promenade-cum-parklands called The Strand, surrounded by palm trees, with an aqua blue sea behind her and Magnetic Island protruding on the horizon. The Strand is a very popular piece of urban placemaking and is used for everything from exercise to outdoor sculptural exhibitions. It is an example of urban design associated with the "greening" of Townsville. At The Strand, the lawns depend on daily watering; the planted trees were selected to produce a sense of manufactured lushness; and there is a fake waterfall on a cliff directly across the road which provides visual and acoustic sensations commonly associated with lush tropicality.

Upon taking up the position and moving to North Queensland, my family and I rented a double-brick house across the road from one of Townsville's northern beaches. It had air-conditioning in every room; and large picture windows providing views of palm trees, the Coral Sea, and Magnetic Island. I would describe this first Townsville house as sealed from the outside world; a space where one could experience "tropicality" without having to cope with the heat, mosquitoes, and anxieties provoked by the occasional saltwater crocodile seen at the local beach. Air-conditioning was the central motif. When we were inside the house the air-conditioning was mostly on; and the 30-minute commute to the university occurred in a hastily purchased car with artic air-conditioning. My initial time in the dry tropics then could be described as: living in an air-tight home; driving to work in a private vehicle; and quickly decanting into other air-conditioned spaces be it my office at the university or climate-controlled shopping malls, which are very popular in Townsville. The failure to feel grounded in the materialities of place had an existential edge. A frequent topic of conversation amongst the various professionals and paraprofessionals relocated by the army, the hospital, university, or the public sector for jobs in Townsville was: "How long are you planning to be in Townsville?". Why try to adapt to the discomforts of living in the tropics if living there may turn out to be temporary?

There was one important exception to my lack of openness to place sensory qualities. Echoing passages in *Tristes Tropiques,* I was happy to give myself over to tropical fruits. For his part, Lévi-Strauss (1974, pp. 328-329, emphasis in the original) writes of "a *soveira* [tree], which in a few minutes yields more milk than a cow"; "the *araça*, which has a purplish-blue fruit as big as a cherry"; the *"inga*, with pods full of a fine, sugary down"; and the "*bacuri*, which is like a pear stolen from the orchards of Paradise". Rather than harvesting directly from nature as Lévi-Strauss and his

expedition had done, my North Queensland version of fruit-Paradise entailed attending weekly farmer's markets. Yet the experience was still transformative. I have clear memories of the first few times I went to the local markets and the variety of fruits on display. There was an intensity to this display that extended to variety, colour, and flavour. There was fruit I knew like bananas and papayas; but the local variants seemed more luscious. There were also many fruits I had to ask the growers or stall holders the name of. I soon learnt about sapotes, durians, jackfruit, mangosteens and their South American cousins the *achachairú*—a name given to the fruit trees by the Indigenous peoples of Southern Bolivia, and which means "honey kiss".[2] Sold under the name "Achacha" in Australia, I can still remember been shown by the grower how to pop the leathery orange skin to access the sweet and citrusy white pulp; and also marvelling at how despite the South American origins of the trees, the world's first commercial plantation was in the Burdekin Region some 45-kilomteres south of Townsville. It is a "cosmopolitan" fruit that like me had originated in South America (I was born in Uruguay) but which was attempting to thrive in its new North Queensland home (on trees and plants as migrants see Casey and Marder, 2024, pp. 1-16).

However, the most significant role fruit played in my surrendering to the tropics was in how my habits changed regarding the selecting and storing of fruit. I learnt the value of letting fruit ripen naturally; and I came to appreciate ugly, bruised, and over-ripe fruit. I started liking, for example, "monkey bananas" that were so sufficiently ripe that mainstream supermarkets would have thrown them out. I also became a devotee of not putting fruit in the fridge. In addition to increasing the taste of the fruit, my new fruit habits altered the domestic sense-scape—arriving home meant encountering the all-pervasive scent of tropical fruits. On one occasion, this passion for natural ripening prompted an unlikely thought: "if out of respect for the fruit, I am no longer putting tropical produce in the fridge, should I also reduce my own reliance on air-conditioning"? A curious idea that seemed to rely on some mysterious connection between refrigerated/non-refrigerated fruit and the metabolic state of my own flesh/body.

The process of surrendering to the tropical sense-scape benefitted from two unexpected personal crises: in between the first and second years in the tropics my relationship broke down and I needed to move house; and, in my last year in North Queensland, I managed to lose my driver's licence. If the first home had been a brick and tiled floor house with industrial-strength mosquito netting for the rare occasions we opened the sliding aluminium windows, my new house was a small timber workers' cottage, perched on stumps, with old wooden "sash windows", and gaps between the floorboards. It also had a tin roof and no fly screens. At this new house, I remember spending lots of time outside in the backyard, despite the fact the only view offered

[2] For this and other relevant information see the grower's webpage: https://www.achacha.com.au.

was of a lane running behind the houses on my street. The back lane was unpaved and there was an odd mix of corrugated iron outbuildings, decrepit fencing and well-established fruit and ornamental trees. This second house felt much more "of the tropics" than the house looking out over the Coral Sea and Magnetic Island. Being forced to walk and catch public transport (the bus stop for the route that went to the university was a 30-minute walk from the house), complimented the greater sense of exposure to the external worlds of the tropics produced by the new house. I finally began to feel immersed in a radically different physical environment to places I had lived in before.

The walking alone made me appreciate I was in the dry as against wet tropics. I felt like I was seeing the imposing shape and brown-pinkish hues of Castle Hill—a prominent rocky hill that towers over its flat surroundings—as if for the first time; and I came to notice how, once you moved away from the manufactured greenery of The Strand, even the suburbs within walking distance of the central business district possessed large tracts of brown. I noticed that the hills and mountains that surrounded the university, and which dominated aerial views as planes came in to land at the local airport, were also brimming with different shades of brown. I finally understood why the locals affectionately and half-tongue-in-cheek called the place where they lived "Brownsville"; and why this moniker evoked a state of mind as well as a physical and sensory reality. The locals were people who despite economic and social challenges,[3] and a landscape-cum-place aesthetics that was often unflatteringly compared to lush tropical Cairns,[4] would call their town "Brownsville" and do so with a hint of pride. One is never quite sure with place-based humour how much highlighting something like the "brown" qualities of the landscape is ironic, celebratory, or some mixture of the two. What can be said with certainty is that people who call their town "Brownsville" aren't engaging in unmitigated "dry tropics denialism".

What do I mean by the latter? In the same way that humans can surrender or not surrender to place, organizations governing and strategizing with respect to tourism, place branding, and local economic development, can also end up accepting or denying the materialities of place. And the denial of place materialities seems more powerful when it occurs at an unconscious-level beyond contestation (i.e., when assumptions regarding "tropicality" operate within some non-explicit or unstated domain). Thus, for example, a Queensland Government webpage entitled "30 Things to Do in and Around Townsville" either ignores the dry tropics or positions the region

[3] Youth crime and limited economic opportunities is a recurring theme in tabloid stories about Townsville. In 2024, Townsville was also crowned "Queensland's Shittest Town" by the group Sht Towns of Australia. Thereby, giving the "Brownsville" label yet another level of irony.

[4] Note the following North Queensland joke: "Why did God create Townsville?". Answer: "To make Cairns more attractive to tourists". Needless to say, there is a wonderful irony at the heart of this joke: namely, if wet tropical Cairns is so great why does it need dry tropical Townsville to make it look good?

as close to the wet tropics. Over 90% of the listed activities on the government website in question require the visitor to leave Townsville and its dry tropical environs. The recommended activities include: driving to waterfalls, rainforests, and "misty" mountains in the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area; snorkelling in the Great Barrier Reef; and visiting the lush tropicality of Hinchinbrook Island (Quaid, 2023). The webpage's photos of mostly non-Townsville recommended activities are almost pornographic in their glossy imaging of aqua blue seas, golden sandy beaches, and lush tropical greenery. No brown to be seen here.

To locate imagery and narratives valorizing the local brown landscape one needs to go to the website of the not-for-profit organization NQ Dry Tropics (https://www.nqdrytropics.com.au/). The website has images of grassy savannahs of the sort described in *Tristes Tropiques*; and photos of reedy and marshy wetlands. Unlike the images of vacationing romantic couples and young travellers engaging in stereotypical tropical leisure activities in "30 Things to Do in and Around Townsville" (i.e., visiting waterfalls, snorkelling, or walking along empty beaches), the photos on the NQ Dry Tropics webpage include scientists doing fieldwork, and people who appear to be farmers or graziers. The colour palette ranges from pale, straw green and light brown, to a rich chocolate brown; the latter appearing in a NQ Dry Tropics Facebook post featuring drone video footage of rich-brown water pouring over the Burdekin Dam. Lest this all sounds bleak and unappealing (e.g., photos of productive activities, the local ecology, and even large-scale infrastructure), NQ Dry Tropics's focus is on the Burdekin agricultural area of North Queensland—a food bowl that produces everything from beef and sugar to more boutique tropical produce like the Achacha fruit discussed before.

Rather than seeking to increase tourism (indeed, a search of the word "tourism" on their webpage generates one hit: a news story about an educational tourism activity for university exchange students), the major themes on the NQ Dry Tropics website and social media pages appear to be the sustainable management of natural resources, celebrating the area's agricultural activities, and the livelihood/resilience of the community. Unmoored from the Edenic conception of the tropics seems to make it easier to appreciate the varied textures of tropical landscapes and the different ways of engaging with land. The result is a mosaic in colour and texture alone (on the colour of places see Edensor, 2023). Everything from the chocolate brown of the water behind the Burdekin Dam and the pale browns of the fragile wetlands through to the irrigated greenery of fields set aside for food production. Conveying this patchwork of place textures would require a significant re-think of what is meant by terms like place marketing and regional branding. It would require place-based narratives capable of grasping's Lévi-Strauss's subtle proposition: the senses get much "closer to the soul" when we find comfort, relief, and sustenance in unexpected places. Or in common

parlance: "don't judge a book by its cover". Place material and aesthetic textures are often richer than what first meets the eye. And this is especially true of the dry tropics.

Conclusion

Lévi-Strauss (1974, pp. 93-94) reminds us that all landscapes are "far from being a spontaneous manifestation of nature"; they are rather the "result...of agreements painstakingly evolved during a long collaboration between man and landscape". The real message of texts like *Tristes Tropiques* then could well be that the tropical "physical world is also an artificer" (Cosgrove, 2005, p. 214). It might be a virulent and sensorially-intense physical form (the wet tropics) or a seemingly non-fecund zone where vegetation is sparse and life-processes are unleashed by a short rainy season (the dry tropics). Either way, the tropics are an aesthetic and material culture construct—one that plays on longstanding associations regarding, on the one hand, paradise as the site of sensory luxuriance (the wet tropics); and, on the other hand, bleak dry liminal zones that, if endured, may provide self-knowledge and/or inner strength (the dry tropics). However, we sometimes treat landscape-as-text-and-narrative as reason to ignore landscape-as-texture-and-materiality. All the symbolism and cultural coding in the world doesn't diminish the importance of the tropical landscape-as-physical encounter. Our understanding of tropical landscapes deepens, and becomes more multi-dimensional, if we follow Tim Ingold's advice (2000) and treat landscape as a site of "dwelling" and practical engagement or what he terms a *taskscape*. In Lévi-Strauss's case, dwelling in the tropics while performing certain practical tasks (e.g., leading a large expedition, taking copious fieldnotes, reflecting on his chosen vocation, and fulfilling the demands of academic ethnographer and European traveller in the tropics), led to landscape experiences that were intensely material and embodied. The tropics are experienced as both "barren and fertile, 'fantastic garden' and 'bleak savannah'"; as places of "adventure" and as places of "boredom" (Cosgrove, 2005, pp. 214-216). Yet the landscape couplets found in *Tristes Tropiques* are relational, mutually energizing and conceptually generative (i.e., they suggest further contrasts and similarities worth considering). Additionally, there is a phenomenological-cum-existential edge to Lévi-Strauss's account that taps into the history and mythology of landscape as a type of "truth-spot" where, paradoxically, it is the non-fecund or non-lush landscape that leads to unexpected epiphanies or a deeper set of insights (Gieryn, 2018, pp. 2-6).

Landscape, then, as a window onto perception, knowability, and agency. When addressing the knotting of experience and agency, from the perspective of what he terms an *existentialist anthropology,* Michael Jackson (2013, p. xii; emphasis in the original) makes the point that we tend to identify "agency…with one's capacity to generate, perpetuate, and celebrate life"; and often forget that existence is also about

how actors possess the "*ability to stoically endure [life's] hardships*". As such, I would suggest that communicating how landscape experience shapes us, and what landscape teaches us about existence, requires us to ditch unidimensional understandings of agency. We enter a both-and rather than either-or conceptual zone, where the world and our experience of it, is not reducible in any straightforward sense to what is either empowering or disempowering, self-enhancing or self-depleting. Wolff proposed something similar with respect to surrender experiences and the communicating of such experiences through the catch. He suggested thinking and writing can make us feel both elated and secure, depleted and vulnerable. Thus, for example, Wolff (1976, p. 11) speaks of surrender experiences as moments where "we meet and fuse" with the world and we are able "to relax…to feel good". Yet he also says of the struggle to adequately interpret the world: "I make things on whose web to relax; but they always have elements that are holes, and the web is too thin to sustain me" (Wolff, 1976, p. 11). Wolff (1976, p.11) recommends we go on "creating" even when we realise, we have a metaphoric "limb dangling through a mesh into the void"; as well as when we come to the disquieting realization, that the various meshes supporting our thinking and writing "are temporal, historical creations" (Wolff, 1976, p. 11). We need to go on writing about tropical landscapes even after we realize, to paraphrase Lévi-Strauss, that no landscape is an unmediated instance of nature.

In summary, what the idea of surrendering to tropical places suggests is that people interested in understanding, writing about, and caring for, such places need models of engaging with place that are attentive to place qualities (including the physical qualities of such places). A shorthand way of saying this might be that we should see place as something we think "with" and act "through" rather than think "about" and act "upon". In this article I have relied on what might be considered Lévi-Strauss's least formalist text, *Tristes Tropiques*, and Wolff's phenomenological sociology of knowledge. Both accounts claim dislocation and the suspension of everyday frames are vital components of seeing the world afresh. In the case of Lévi-Strauss, I noted there is an interrogation of wet/dry tropical landscapes that is rich in insight and challenges the more generic tropical landscape of the global "tropical tourist gaze". My own autoethnographic account of surrendering to North Queensland's dry tropics sought to narrate the slow process of becoming more attuned to place. That account also noted a failure to absorb place qualities in local tourism discourse (a discourse that might be characterised as suffering from "dry tropic denialism"); and briefly contrasted this with the representation of the dry tropics in the landscape imagery used by the non-tourism organization NQ Dry Tropics. It was also proposed that the opposite of tropical landscape denial/elision is evident in how inhabitants of North Queensland refer to their city and its environs as "Brownsville".

I doubt *Tristes Tropiques* and *Surrender and Catch* will ever be on reading lists in undergraduate programs in tourism, marketing, and management. However, the point of such books is possibly not to find yet another type of knowledge to instrumentalize and render "relevant". In other words, I'm not advocating for the type of knowledge one might find in a handbook with a title like: *The Quick Guide to Surrendering to the Tropics for Tourism Branding Professionals*. Given the phenomenological-cum-existentialist themes running through *Tristes Tropiques* and *Surrender and Catch*, perhaps a more suitable hypothetical book would be: *Non-Lush Travel: Learning About Yourself and the Good Life in Dry Tropical Locations*. The latter might even recommend a pilgrimage to the Mato Grasso and invite afficionados of the famous anthropologist to "Follow in the Footsteps of Lévi-Strauss". But for those living—as I do—in Australia, why go all the way to the Brazilian dry tropics? We have our very own dry tropical savannahs. As Leimbach et al. (2025) recently argued, the native grasses of Northern Australia might be seen as a poetic and epistemological thread 'interweaving' Indigenous and non-indigenous knowledges with a 'socio-ecological imaginary' able to incorporate, the past, present, and future, of tropical places. The grasses of the dry savannahs as literal and metaphoric weaving devices; plants and landscapes as conduits for tracing the past, for experiencing the present, and for divining what is to come.

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