

# French Anthropology & Literature Summative Essay

## ***“To what extent is *Tristes Tropiques* a meditation of travel?”***

Before proceeding it is necessary to define the key terms within the title that will have a significant impact on the content of this essay and in addition, avoid ambiguity. In looking at what a ‘meditation of travel’ really signifies, the idea of what travel potentially suggests in its meaning is important to examine as the word meditation merely suggests a reflection or deliberation of thought. One should not be too inflexible or otherwise too hasty in arriving at a definition of ‘travel’. We could assert that it must involve a journey. Metaphorically speaking, *Tristes Tropiques* could be called an ‘explorer’ narrative, for it is partly a work of self-exploration and alongside this theme of exploration the idea of travel is intertwined.

Unleashed on an unsuspecting world in 1955, its prose, philosophical meditation and ethnographic analysis was such that the organisers of the Prix Goncourt lamented they could not award the book a prize as it was non-fiction. Susan Sontag famously said of the book, “*Tristes Tropiques* is one of the great books of our century. It is rigorous, subtle and bold in thought.” But then why this fame?

At its simplest, *Tristes Tropiques* is a travelogue, laced with liberal lashings of philosophy and the roots of Lévi-Strauss’ personal experience. In this sense, it is firmly part of the tradition of travel writing since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. But is it just a travelogue or does it fulfil its status as one of the seminal works of modern anthropology? And if so, what is the relationship between travel writing and ethnography? When it was first published *Tristes Tropiques* was “the first work of ethnology which touched and even fascinated the general public. It was an event...”<sup>1</sup> Could a book with a populist appeal also aspire to intellectual rigour? To answer this question, we have to look at the role of the earliest European travellers, they were not just curious but scientifically curious, riving to understand, document and in some people’s books subjugate the new world. This was a tradition that Lévi-Strauss subscribed to, where literature, philosophy and ethnology combine to describe “a human society reduced to its most basic expression.” *Tristes Tropiques* was not only a voyage in the physical sense but a philosophical one as Lévi-Strauss was simply following in the wake of other great French explorers such as Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, Francois Rene Chateaubriand and Marcel Griaude.<sup>2</sup>

But any attempt to characterise *Tristes Tropiques* as merely a philosophical voyage would be an injustice. The book, while giving us a glimpse of an intensely lived personal experience, also demonstrates Lévi-Strauss’ belief in the relationship between sensorial perception and structural analysis. There is a *fin de siècle* thread running

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<sup>1</sup> Francoise Heir, National Celebration 2005, Ministry of Culture, Paris 2005

<sup>2</sup> Centre de Recherche sur la Litterature des Voyages, University of Paris – Sorbonne, [www.crlv.org](http://www.crlv.org)

throughout the book – the end of a civilisation, the start of a new one and the sudden discovery by our world that it might be getting too small for the few that inhabit it. Human institutions, customs and creations are meaningful only in relation to man, otherwise they appear disorderly. This disorder according to Lévi-Strauss, manifests itself both in Central Brazil and in Western civilisation “allowing itself to forget or destroy its own heritage.” The price of progress is that we are “dispossessed of our culture, stripped of our values we cherished – the purity of our water and air, the charms of nature, the diversity of animals and planets – we are all Indians, henceforth making of ourselves what we made of them.”<sup>3</sup>

*Tristes Tropiques* reveals Lévi-Strauss’ world-view. It informs us about the tenets of structuralism<sup>4</sup>, most particularly in his descriptions of the Amazon peoples and how Lévi-Strauss’ personal odyssey led him to become an anthropologist. But the underpinning of the book however lies in its sad beauty, as implied by its title which is open to many interpretations; the moods and sentiments evoked by the unwilling traveller’s story dominate the ethnographic or theoretical merit that it possesses. The book is a protracted travelogue long, poorly organised (one might say unstructured), full of prejudice and nostalgia but is also deeply engaging. *Tristes Tropiques* moved the American philosopher Clifford Geertz to compare Lévi-Strauss with Rousseau. It was critical in bringing the concept of structuralism to the attention of the French (and later the Anglo-Saxon) intelligentsia beginning with the infamous sentence, ‘I hate travelling and explorers’. So much for fieldwork, one might think, until, later, on the same page, Lévi Strauss adds:

**“Must I relate so many insipid details and insignificant occurrences? Adventure has no place in the ethnographic profession: it is merely a form of servitude,... it burdens effective work with the weight of weeks or months lost in travelling; idle hours in which informants disappear; hunger, fatigue, sometimes illness; and always those thousand duties which consume the days in pure loss and reduce the dangerous life in the virgin forest to an imitation of military service . . . That it calls for such efforts and vain expense to attain the object of our studies confers no value on what one should rather regard as the negative aspect of our métier. The truths which we travel so far to seek need to be stripped from such dross to have any value.”<sup>5</sup>**

Following this outburst the reader could be forgiven for thinking that perhaps the author would have been best advised to keep his prejudices (confined to his notebooks where they lingered for fifteen years before being published) or perhaps he should not have attempted at all! But Lévi-Strauss goes on to confess his desire to pen a different kind of travel book; he finds it incomprehensible that travel books enjoy such acclaim

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<sup>3</sup> Lévi-Strauss, C., *Saudades do Brasil: A Photographic Memoir*, University of Washington Press, Seattle 1995

<sup>4</sup> The humanist theory that argues that the organization of culture and society can be related to some universal features of the workings of the human mind, most often associated with Lévi-Strauss.

<sup>5</sup> Lévi-Strauss, C., *Tristes Tropiques*, 1955, pp. 15 -16, English translation by Weightman J. & D., Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1973

and popularity, a statement intended to make the reader expect that this book is going to be somehow different. The reader is subtly drawn in, he is lured into the universe of Lévi-Strauss' *Tristes Tropiques* where a traveller who hates travelling is accompanied by an ethnographer unable to communicate with his informants, an anthropologist unable to disguise his contempt for organised religion and a travel writer who despises travel writing.

The reader is baffled by all this perversity but is slowly able to grasp that the travelogue is in fact a metaphor for Lévi-Strauss' inner journey, an exploration or quest for his own identity or 'self'. At one level, therefore, *Tristes Tropiques* is an account of Lévi-Strauss' travels in Brazil and various other regions throughout the world. His declamation against travel and all that it entails argues against it being a typical travel narrative. There are extensive lyrical passages, including an eight page description of a sunset and extended digressions concerning a number of themes. These include whole chapters devoted to philosophical ruminations on the status of anthropology at the time and the differences between the religions.

Levi-Strauss attempts to be objective in his observations, but unlike previous ethnographers, he is aware of the distortions his presence can cause, and of his role in constructing the culture under study through his use of language. A philosophical solution, he says, would look at both the subject matter and the form of the description. But such "mental gymnastics," he warns, can soon become a circular, purely verbal exercise. Therefore, he concludes, the ethnographer should not indulge in them.<sup>6</sup>

**"While remaining human himself, the anthropologist tries to study and judge mankind from a point of view sufficiently lofty and remote to allow him to disregard the particular circumstances of a given society or civilization."**<sup>7</sup>

His own descriptions of the South American village of Kejara and its inhabitants are accordingly 'objective' in character and his strategy follows that of Kroeber and Lowie. He describes the village layout, the kinship, social structure, economic relations, tools and adornments but he also looks at the symbols used by the inhabitants, what these symbols mean to them, how they are manifested and what subconscious structures they emanate from. Most pertinently, he makes copious comparisons with his own culture. This presents us with yet another paradox: the comparisons help the reader (as they do the writer) understand the people under study, but they are perhaps, not valid by the criteria of "cultural relativity" laid down by Franz Boas et al.

The philosopher A. R. Louch once infamously insinuated that anthropology was just bad travel writing. "If ethnography were to adopt the literary ambitions of fiction, it would be but a short step from the genre of travel writing."<sup>8</sup> In this case, nothing would be ultimately gained from appropriating fictional texts dealing with societies under study,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp.51, 58.

<sup>7</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 1955, p.55, English translation by Weightman J. & D., Johnathon Cape Ltd., 1973

<sup>8</sup> Louch, A.R., *Explanation and Human Action*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1966

instead, anthropology would cease being an academic discipline. Ethnographic writing is intended to account objectively for the particular aspects of a culture according to the objectivity of that culture's own precepts. In other words, the ethical and epistemological condition of anthropological knowledge consists in the transfer of the 'self' into the context of the same and the 'other', of identity and 'alterity', an exchange that dominates the mood and content of *Tristes Tropiques*. Lévi-Strauss offers an insight into ethnography in *Tristes Tropiques*. He writes:

**"It may seem strange that I should so long have remained deaf to a message which had after all been transmitted for me ever since I first began to read philosophy, by the masters of the French school of sociology. The revelation did not come to me, as a matter of fact, till 1933 or 1934 when I came upon a book which was already by no means new: Robert H. Lowie's *Primitive Society*. But instead of notions borrowed from books and at once metamorphosed into philosophical concepts I was confronted with an account of first-hand experience. The observer, moreover, had been so committed as to keep intact the full meaning of his experience."**<sup>9</sup>

As much a travel narrative as an account of a quest for origins the book reads like a series of revelations of an almost mystical nature, evoking the great lessons one may expect from anthropology as a science. Among the cultures under consideration, the description of the Caduveo underscores artistic creativity and through the rituals of body painting and facial tattooing, while the description of the Bororo focuses on the concept of cosmic dualism and mythical ritual systems through an analysis of their dwellings and rituals, the social bonding and equation between trade and warfare of the Nambikwara through the analysis of their familial and political hierarchy and finally, that of the Tupi showing the dissolution of a culture.

Modern ethnography appears in several forms, traditional and innovative. As an academic practice it cannot be separated from anthropology. Seen more generally, it is simply a set of diverse ways of thinking and writing about culture, often from the standpoint of participant observation.<sup>10</sup>

Philosophical voyage or ethnographic text, *Tristes Tropiques* is a monumental work of meditation, a great monologue of which we as listeners, devoid of engagement and bereft of illusion, are spellbound as the book explores the nature of man. "The world started without man and it will be completed without him but in the interim our task is to understand humanity, contemplate the order, if any, of the universe, suspend belief and reflect on the meaning of life in front of a stone, a flower or even the eye of a cat." This is the book's ultimate text, whether it succeeds in its chosen task or not. The final answer must lie in the mind and the perception of the reader.

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<sup>9</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 1955, pp. 62-63, English translation by Weightman J. & D., Jonathon Cape Ltd., 1973

<sup>10</sup> A method used by the ethnographer in order to gain knowledge through participating in cultural practices, i.e. the participant-observer takes part in everyday life and carefully records such things as behaviour, events and conversations, in order to obtain a fully-rounded picture of beliefs, social groupings and customs.

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