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# Embodying Tropicalities: Commentary on Felix Driver's 'Imagining the Tropics: Views & Visions of the Tropical World'

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# EMBODYING TROPICALITIES

## A Commentary on Felix Driver's "Imagining the Tropics: Views & Visions of the Tropical World"

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For at least a decade I have been following Felix Driver's thoughtful analysis of the contested nature of the history of geography, and his insistent urging for geographers to "world" geography in colonial and postcolonial social relations. This work has been influential in helping set a nuanced agenda for writing a historiography of geography for our times. In this essay Driver turns his attention to the contested "views and visions" of tropicality, and I was keenly interested to find out what he had to say about what they are, how they work in practice, and what they might mean for a history of geographical thought. Writing a commentary on this piece has oriented my intellectual radar towards a subject that I frankly had not previously given much thought; unless of course one counts my studies of New Zealand, which, though a place often portrayed as a "paradise" in tourist brochures and other venues, is about as "tropical" as New Jersey. But of course as readers of this journal know, that is just the point: "the tropical" is as much imaginary as cartographically locatable; "the tropical" has worked as a foil to "the temperate" in a similar way that Orient has to Occident, East has to West.

Driver lays out some promising terrain here. His focus is not so much "on the origins and evolution" of the subdiscipline of "tropical geography" (p.1) as it is on the knowledge of "tropicality" itself that would precede a disciplining of it. Toward this end he devotes much of the essay to how the tropics were envisioned by two eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European travelers, specifically

focusing on *how* they produced graphic images for natural history and navigation knowledges, respectively. Driver importantly discusses the relevance of embodiment in this process, which involves an array of practices such as use of instruments and techniques of observation. He pays special attention to how sketches that are made "on the spot", which allowed explorers and travelers to gain status as credible observers that they may not otherwise have enjoyed. In the case of John Septimus Roe, the physical challenges he endured (and documented) while surveying an Australian coastline for the British navy (p.11-12) lent a further validation to his observations, as did William Burchell's sketch of his wagon-full of instrumentation that he carted through Africa (p.7-8). Driver is right to question why Burchell might spend 120 precious hours sketching his own wagon, and one decontextualised from the African landscape at that. Oddly enough though, for a discussion of embodiment, Driver ignores the single most important aspect of it – that is, the type of body producing the knowledge in the first place.

There is an obvious need here for sensitivity to the social structures that allow for the acquisition of skills necessary to create naturalist or navigational knowledge, including the authority required for one's observations to be accepted as such. Authority or credibility gained by being an embodied producer of knowledge, "on the spot" and otherwise, depends on what kind of body is on that spot, and it certainly does not apply to all bodies in the same way.

Take women's bodies, for example. Many middle- and upper- class women who traveled within the context of European empire building were trained in sketching, and their artistic works, like men's, often accompanied their written descriptions of place. While there is a fascinating literature about masculine versus feminine sketching conventions (Norwood, 1993, Kay Guelke & Morin, 2001), more to the point here is that such women oftentimes needed to downplay their presence "on the spot" (in public or in the field), for fear of appearing too transgressive of social norms which dictated their proper place to be at home. In that sense, "being there" might in fact have worked against their ability to speak (and sketch) authoritatively, and be taken seriously. This raises a number of questions that are relevant to the study of how one gains authority to speak about anything, let alone the skills necessary to be a legitimate illustrator, scientist, naturalist, or geographer. The "authentic presence" (p.9) that William Burchell achieved through plantain juice dripped on his watercolor sketch in Brazil, and via collection of thousands of specimens, does not in the end, then, tell us all that much about why he would be accepted as "faithful witness" (p.9). (The fact that Burchell never "mastered" his collection of 49,000 specimens (p.9) – by unpacking and cataloguing them, presumably – also calls into question Driver's sense of Burchell's "achievement" or "failure" for geography or natural history. What kind of an achievement would it have been had Burchell got them all catalogued?)

Driver likewise opens some gates here for what might have been a fruitful postcolonial study of tropicality, yet does not walk through them himself. He makes the case for adopting a transculturation research method that decentres production of knowledge about the tropics by study of "transactions rather than projections" (p.3), yet does not adopt this in his treatment of Burchell and Roe. I also found it odd that when artists and others from the tropics make it into the discussion, they only do so to the extent that they "appropriate"

European ideas, albeit "for their own ends" (p.3). Despite Driver's efforts to the contrary, Europe thus remains the reference point for things tropical, whether in terms of complicity or resistance. (What about neither?)

Old news? Perhaps. Yet, Driver's mention of Brazilian landscape designer Roberto Burle Marx enticed me to read Stepan's (2000:86) instructive "transactional" study of tropicality published in this journal. Stepan argues that the Brazilian gardens Burle Marx designed were essentially the products of travel (Brazil-Germany), which effected an alternative understanding of the tropical. To Stepan, Burle Marx's gardens gave a "larger visual vocabulary or grammar to the tropics", by, for example, his purposefully moving away from the tangled "jungle-scapes" associated with tropical plants and by making use of the heterogeneity of Brazil's indigenous plants, including those from the arid hinterland.

Finally, for a paper that purports to be *about* tropical views and visions, Driver says very little about them, concerned as he is more with "process" than "product" or the links between the two. What *were* these men's views and visions? Driver does not address how the images created by Burchell and Roe can be constituted *as* tropical views or visions, or contributing to tropicality, or for that matter, to cycles of accumulation (to use Bruno Latour's (1987) term) within which their sketches were embedded. I am curious about what the content of Burchell's and Roe's sketches can tell us about how tropicality itself came to be constructed within their milieus. Driver usefully reminds us that embodied practices of actors producing views and visions of...well, any place really, are key to their understanding, but he leaves unconnected these embodied practices to tropical image-making per se. That Roe's work provided a means for his own "self-advancement" (p.11), for example, does not seem particularly dependent on where he produced the work or the content of it. In sum, Driver's essay raises many questions as to what *resulted* from the particular embodied practices so noted here.

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