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Culture as a Mirror: Reflections of a Career TESOL Instructor

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abstract

In "Culture as a Mirror: Reflections of a Career TESOL Instructor," the author explores the complex nature of culture through personal anecdotes and metaphors. Acknowledging the difficulty of defining culture, images like enigmas, icebergs, webs, and soups are employed to illustrate its multifaceted character. Drawing from experiences in diverse cultures around the globe, the author reflects on how these encounters have shaped his understanding and instructional practices of "teaching culture." This essay discusses the challenges of teaching intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in the TESOL classroom, referencing scholars like Michael Byram and Clifford Geertz to highlight both the possibilities and limitations of such efforts. In a rhizomatic move, the essay examines contradictions within American culture, particularly the ideals of freedom juxtaposed with the history of slavery, using historical accounts from figures like J. Hector St. John de Crèvecœur and Charles Dickens. Ultimately, the author concludes that while fully grasping another culture may be unattainable, embracing metaphors is an essential step in fostering cultural awareness.

Keywords: American culture, Michael Byram, Clifford Geertz, Crèvecœur, Dickens

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A Note to the Reader

When posed with the question, what is culture? I can only give my honest response, which is: I don't know what culture is. There are many scholars who have come up with some wonderful and reasonable answers to that question, so if you are looking for a textbook definition for your research paper, then I will refer you to them. Or, like the joke my dear old dad used to tell: An angry citizen upset about some regulation walked into the government office and demanded, "I want to talk to someone with a little authority." The doorman promptly replied, "Well then talk to me. I have as little authority as anyone!"

Culture is one of those topics that lends itself well to metaphor. Despite not knowing anything about culture, you're going to hear me say (read me write?), "Culture is blah-blah-blah." Insert any number of metaphors for the blah-blah-blah. I will write shortly about how confusing culture can be. If you're like me and you ever get into those big, fat hard-to-read papers or books on the topic, you're going to eventually say, why is this so confusing? Since I can't answer (with any authority) what culture is, allow me to suggest a reason why it is so confusing: Culture is so confusing because it lives in a different medium than our logical mind, similar to the way the dream lives in the night in our sleep, and to bring the dream into the day world is as futile an endeavor that anyone has ever ventured upon. Just like culture, there are scholars of the dream, but in the end their explanations, erudite though they may be, are merely postulations. And that's fine; as people who are obsessed with things such as culture and dreams, we need to be okay with postulations.

As dream lives in the realm of night and sleep, culture lives in the realm of metaphor. (Yes, yes, I know: Isn't dream also metaphor? For sure. The house of metaphor is large.) And the nature of metaphor—to quote an extremely smart scholar of metaphor— "…is to release the imagination by paralyzing discursive reason" (Intellectual Deep Web, 2019, 4:56). Discursive reason is to metaphor what the daylight is to the dream. For example, there is a bridge in a city I lived in in Vietnam. It's a tall, long bridge spanning a river, and the local Vietnamese are fearful to cross at night because it is haunted. Two times I remember I had to cross this bridge in the dark with a local friend, and both times he would draw near to me and take my arm, and we would go together holding on to each other as he whispered, "Maa, maa…" (Ghost, ghost…). It was indeed a tragic bridge, a place where heartbroken lovers or bankrupt businessmen were known to throw themselves to their deaths on the shallow rocks far below, and it was thought the ghosts of past suicides could grab you and pull you over. There was no reasoning him out of his belief in the ghosts. The animistic culture in that area of Vietnam where I lived sees the spirit world and the "real" world mixed like honey into warm milk. The burden of acceptance was on me.

We have an idiom in English about seeing the world through rose-colored glasses, meaning when you wear these glasses you are always seeing the optimist even in bad circumstances. Likewise - and this is always my lesson to my students when I am called to teach a thing or two about culture - when looking at culture we must put on our metaphor-colored glasses so that we can disable our discursive reasoning and unleash the power of our imaginations.

Vientiane, Laos

As I draft this paper, it is hot. The front of my shirt is soaked with sweat. A droplet runs down my forehead into the corner of my eye and stings, causing me to pick up the sweat-damp napkin and dab. It's summer, the middle of the rainy season. I'm in a small dining area of one of the ubiquitous boutique hotels. The desk clerk across the room looks concerned at me. She has already turned on the overhead fan, which makes a soft squeak every dozen or so revolutions. Short of fixing the broken air conditioner, there's nothing she can do. My Scandinavian blood boils in this tropical heat. I don't speak Lao, and she doesn't speak English, otherwise, I would explain with an embarrassed laugh that this high-mountain Montana boy is not used to her climate. There will be no acclimation in a few months; my perspiration is a thousand years in the making. Somewhere in the expanse of culture studies there must be a paper on how temperature and humidity affect culture; from sarongs to mukluks, it goes without saying that geography and its various climate zones are important ingredients in the cultural recipe.

1. WHAT IS CULTURE? PART 1

Culture is an enigma—it's mysterious and obscure; it's a puzzle—it requires thought until suddenly a piece fits and you get a sense of a larger picture yet full of gaps; it's a paradox—it exudes truth while being contradictory and absurd; it's a trap—it's inescapable, snagging you by surprise; it's a labyrinth—its complex network of passages leads you to dead ends, stunning panoramas, and back-arounds; it's a chimera—its illusions are like a glittering mirage that lures you out of your comfort zone; it's a web—and you are the fly caught up in threads connected to past and future while being eternally present; it's a soup—flavored by a history and multiplicity of ingredients; it's an iceberg—what you can see with your senses only means that beneath you is a vastness you do not know and probably cannot know; it's an amalgam—it is at once real and unreal, concrete and abstract, within you and all around you, and you can know it only by its traces, its echoes, its lingering smells, its artifacts, of which you are one, the only species on the planet driven to create mirrors in which to reflect.

I will not attempt in this paper to expand the field of culture studies, forge new research, create a novel ethnographic technique, nor follow an old one. However, due to my career as an itinerant English teacher, culture is a hydra that I encounter again and again, with a plea or mandate from my institution to please teach it! There have been, literally, hundreds of books and thousands of articles written about culture, and in my field, without fail, every TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) conference I have attended has had multiple presentations on the importance of teaching (or how to teach) culture or ICC (Intercultural Communicative Competence). During engagements with students, I'm invariably asked to expound upon a cultural aspect from my native land ("Does every American have a gun?" "Why is America so violent?" "What's wrong with saying the N-word?" "Why do Americans do this or that?"), or I'm asked to answer the impossible question: What is an American? When this happens, I stutter to a stop while I dig for a plausible explanation and always an inadequate definition. I've yet to find them. I remember more than twenty years ago, a friend from France said to me: "America is a land of contradictions. You're all very prude about sex, yet your media is full of hypersexualized messages. You talk of being a peaceful force in the world, yet your gun-violence at home is off the charts, and you're always at

[1] Early on, I will make the distinction between what I term culture studies and "cultural studies." Despite intersecting now and then, cultural studies often have a goal of activism, whereas culture studies, as I see them, usually have no such inclination.

war!" Yes, these incongruencies puzzle me too! But, to varying degrees, cannot the same observation of hypocrisy be applied to any country and culture?

1.1. Teaching Intercultural Communicative Competence

Since Michael Byram published his influential book, *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*, it has been en vogue, some may say crucial, to have an element of Intercultural Communicative Competence as part of the language classroom's curriculum. To this, I wholeheartedly agree. In his work, Byram (2021, 28) argues that through ICC we might overcome the tourist's objectification of a culture different from our own and strive for the sojourner's perspective of compatibility, harmony, and consciousness. But, like many of my colleagues, I am conflicted, if not confused, about how to go about this. Byram suggested that language "[l]earners become ethnographers rather than applied linguists"(40). It is this aspiration that I think should inform the practice of foreign language teachers when teaching, talking, writing, or thinking about culture.

1.2. Flashback: The Saint John Valley, and then France, 2001

I had been living in Fort Kent, Maine for the past seven months in an attempt to perfect my French—the language had infected me for no other reason than I found it extremely beautiful. Fort Kent, like the other Acadian towns cradled in the Saint John Valley, despite being American, was perfectly bilingual. The villagers habitually begin a sentence with English and finish it with French, or the other way around, or sometimes they just speak French. Sometimes young children speak, not knowing which language they are using. Culturally, at that time, probably still today, it was as far removed from my native Montana as possible while still existing in the lower 48.

The valley is separated from Canada by the St. John River. Back then, my companions and I would cross the international bridge on Sundays for brunch at the Maple Leaf Restaurant in Claire, New Brunswick—at a mere three bucks and some change, we felt like we were gaming the system at the all-you-can-eat buffet. It's been years, but to this day I can still remember the small, buckwheat pancakes called ployes, a local cuisine, on which you spread a pork pâté or drench it with butter and maple syrup. Buckwheat and not wheat flour because of the short growing season so far north, and the syrup harvested from the valley's own maple trees. Each summer, Fort Kent holds the Ploye Festival, during which a giant ploye measuring twelve feet in diameter is cooked over a massive bed of coals and then broken apart and eaten communally (ployes.com). People from local villages on both sides of the river join in the festivities.

Les Trois Bons Dieux (The three good gods), or as Shakespeare wrote in the *Twelfth Night*, "If music be the food of love, play on;"(2004, 1:1) music, food, and love are the languageless portals to deep culture, for even if you don't speak a single word of the dialect, these three gods will ferry you to a profound, communal experience of wordless laughter—for laughter, aside from death, is the universal translator, the great leveling agent.[3]

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[2] Byram 2021, 40. I.e. adopt the attitude of the sojourner instead of the tourist.

[3] I'm thinking of the laughter as expressed by Mikhail Bakhtin: "Not only does laughter [Medieval laughter] make no exception from the upper stratum, but indeed it is directed toward it. Furthermore, it is directed not at one part only, but at the whole. One might say that it builds its own world versus the official world, its own church versus the official church, its own state versus the official state. Laughter celebrates its masses, professes its faith, celebrates marriages and funerals, writes its epitaphs, elects kings and bishops. . . The acute awareness of victory over fear is an essential element of medieval laughter." M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helen Iswolsky, First Midland Book Edition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 88 - 91.

Before September 11, 2001, crossing the international bridge from America into Canada was as simple as walking to the grocery store. "Where ya goin' today?" the border guard would say in either English or French. "Just goin' to eat some breakfast," we would say, and the guard would wave us through with a kind word of "Bon appétit!" After the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York, a wall came down, severing the communities; it remains in place as of the writing of this essay.

That December, after final exams, I stole a semester off university and flew to France to learn the "real French," or so I naively thought. This is what my valley friends would sometimes say, "the real French." In the valley, there can exist a sense of inadequacy about their French compared to the French of the outside world. Even I thought, naively, that I might be picking up some bad habits, certainly some local curse words. To this day, I still utter the T-word when I stub my toe (Tabernacle in English; I shan't say it in French for it is taboo.). I nostalgically pray that the language and culture of the Saint John Valley is a treasury that will never change.

In France, I would encounter a sensation of cold indifference compared to the warm embrace of the valley, and I remember several occasions in which I tried to use my French and was rebuffed and replied to in English, which, as any learner of a foreign language knows, is a blow to the sensitive ego. Of course, this cool reception was only in my mind, a thing called culture shock and not representative, as I would later understand, of French people.

I recall most vividly—besides kissing of the cheeks to say hello—the architecture and how everything seemed to be made of stone. And the windows of the houses perhaps being my first honest reflection on culture. In Montana, we enjoy large windows with scenic views of majestic mountains. In France, I found the windows small and dark and impenetrable. When I brought this up in conversation once, an American friend who had been living in France for some time stated frankly: "In America, windows reveal what is inside the home, but in France they conceal the home and are more for opening to get some air and not necessarily for looking in or out. I think this says less about France versus America, and more about urban versus rural architecture; for when I'm in America, I'm almost always in the vast, open country, and when I'm abroad, I usually live in a city.

2. WHAT IS CULTURE? PART 2

Ask a hundred people to define culture, and you will get a hundred different answers. That's probably what is so frustrating and fruitful about culture studies. While ethnography—the discipline within anthropology that directly studies individual cultures—has developed rigorous approaches to the collection of information, ethnology—the field that compares, contrasts, and interprets the anthropologic data—is infected, and rightly so, with an anxiety about its epistemic legitimacy (Sapir, 1949, 200). In short, culture is an everything-word and an everything-concept. Like a compressed computer file or overstuffed suitcase, when used, it needs to be unpacked and sorted.

I have a memory of a learned professor from my university days saying something along the lines of: "When in doubt, follow the etymology of a word, the etymology will never betray you." According to Merriam-Webster, culture works as both a noun and verb and has the following usage on the noun branch: "beliefs or social forms shared by a group. . . enlightenment. . . the act of growing living material. . . cultivation, tillage. . . expert care and training." And on the verb branch, it has two very similar uses: "to grow in a prepared medium" and "to start a culture from." (merriam-webster.com). The root of culture, the Latin verb colere (cŏlo), feeds into all our uses of

culture with the sense of habitation, tilling, and agriculture: “to foster,” “to honor,” “to care” for, and “to adorn” (online-latin-dictionary.com).

The American anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) made a wonderful metaphorical move when he wrote that “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs” (5). Years later, in a recorded interview, Geertz (2022) made three important observations about culture that, at the very least, should help to lighten the anxiety of knowing exactly what it is. First, “it’s important to have more than one concept” of culture. Second, culture is “distributive,” “multiply focused,” and the “lines between culture are not as sharp. . . they fuse into each other.” Third, culture (as Geertz sees it) is a “symbolic structure that gives meaning to [people’s] lives”(33:30-35:05).

Playing off Geertz, I would like to contribute to culture’s metaphorization. A “web” is a trap spun by a pancultural, mythic creature. I say “trap” in order to throw some shade on the colloquial view that culture is always a positive entity. In everyday parlance, we like to endear culture, but anyone who has been in a situation where their existence is countercultural will attest to the crushing, unforgiving power that culture holds over them; this individual might identify as the insect caught in the spiderweb of culture, where the consequences could very well be life or death. Additionally, we cannot bypass the textile relationship that webs have with weaving, be it the Navajo tradition of Spider Woman (Na’ashjéii Asdzáá), who wove the first pattern of the universe (Weindling, 2023) or Arachne, who challenged the goddess Minerva to a weaving contest - for her hubris, she was metamorphosed into a spider (Ovidius Naso, 1893,190). Just as one silk thread of the web vibrates at the lightest touch of the moth, so culture vibrates at the lightest touch of the characters within it.

2.1. The Iceberg Theory

The most common and accessible framework for thinking about culture that I have encountered in my teaching practice is the Iceberg Theory. The implications of the iceberg theory should be self-evident and inspire in the student a sense of profundity and direction (down, deep down) about the stakes of culture. In culture studies, the theory is usually attributed to Edward Hall in his book *Beyond Culture*, though he calls it “covert culture”(1976, 58); however, it is from the writer Ernest Hemingway in his novel *Death in the Afternoon* that the iceberg theory is initially and properly conceptualized.

> If a writer of prose knows enough of what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water (1955,192).

Let us take a mental journey. Through the magic of imagination, we teleport ourselves to some distant, unknown land where we do not know the language or the customs. Like a transparency, we overlay upon this scenario the iconic image of an iceberg: a water line with a bit of the iceberg above it and the titanic portion lurking beneath. Culturally speaking, the visible part of the iceberg represents the artifacts of culture we can experience with our five senses: the people, the music, the clothing, the smell of food and the taste of it, a ritual such as a wedding or a birthday party, architecture, voices, gestures, eating utensils or the lack thereof. In *The Life of Pi* by Yann Martel, the main character, displaced from his native India, is chastised by a waiter at an Indian restaurant in Canada for eating with his fingers: “My fingers, which a second before had been taste buds

savouring the food a little ahead of my mouth, became dirty under his gaze. They froze like criminals caught in the act."(2001, 7). These surface artifacts can make a modicum of sense to the foreign observer based on the universal human needs of sustenance and shelter, or we have somehow been introduced to them via the prevalence of the internet. We must keep it in the back of our minds that every artifact also contains an immediately ungraspable subsurface aspect, that understanding which lies beneath.

Extending our imaginative journey, we walk to the icy shore and look down. The subsurface (because it is too cold, because we cannot swim, because we do not have gills, because we do not possess a nictitating membrane on our eyes) remains inaccessible to us, providing only a limited and distorted view of the iceberg's majority. This underneath is what Hall calls covert culture (1976, 14). Covert is a fantastic term for it is cognate with the word covered, or hidden, possibly even disguised. Anyone who travels to a new country and stays long enough to engage with the host culture will quickly experience, after the enchantment of tourism wears thin, a desire for a fuller, thicker experience. But such a communion is not easily gained, and, as our metaphor should imply, the journey down to the unconscious depths is one of life-altering experiences.

2.2. Back in Laos

In Vientiane there is a long, dusty, seldom-trodden lane I walk to get to the gym. It takes thirty minutes each way, and because of my schedule I go in the heat of the day. In the months since starting this habit my neck and arms have tanned exceptionally dark. There's a woman I sometimes encounter who covers herself from head to toe. She wears boots, long pants, a hoodie, a scarf around her ears and over her mouth, sunglasses, and a conical hat. She's a seller of mysterious items in a basket she slings over her shoulder, and I know her from a distance without seeing her by the tinkle of a bell she rings when she approaches a house. When I first encountered her, I admit that I thought her getup was insane for such a hot climate, but I soon came to realize how crucial it is to keep the sun off your skin when work requires you to be outside all day long. From time to time, it's not uncommon to pass a man in a business suit or a monk in a kāṣāya (saffron-colored robe) carrying a parasol. Again, this makes the utmost sense, but in the culture of my upbringing, only a lady would use such an instrument to ward off the sun—we men endure it, or we would wear a cowboy hat, but that would be culturally awkward in this country, or so I think—maybe cowboy hats are perfectly acceptable? But my walk is only thirty minutes, and I can shelter now and then under a canopy or in the shade of a palm. The power of culture is as nonsensical as it is sensible. It is as forgiving as it is unforgiving.

2.3. The Soup Theory

In my mind, culture is more fluid than a spider's web. I find a watery metaphor indispensable in my own conceptualizing of culture; therefore, I would like to show a little hubris of my own and dare to introduce another metaphor to help bend our minds around it: soup, a giant, all-encompassing caldron of soup in which we humans are slowly cooking, bobbing up and down next to the potatoes, carrots, little chunks of garlic, or whatever else might be in there. This image, I feel, pays homage

[4] Here ***thicker*** is consanguine with ***deeper***, both difference and distinction unimportant at this time; inspired by Geertz's conceptualization of "thick description," where he challenges the ethnographer to describe not only the what (the thin) but the why (the thick) to go into the "multiplicity of complex conceptual structures. . . superimposed upon or knotted into one another. . . at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit. . ." (Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*: Selected Essays, 10.)

to the liquid deep in which our iceberg floats, mostly submerged, but also to culture's personality of cultivation and to the vegetable nature thereof.

2.4. On Being an American

"What is an American?" This exact syntax has been posed to me, but the question is never phrased too boldly; sometimes it is an inquiry about this or that stereotype of America, or sometimes it's a question to see what I think about an aspect of my students' culture (my host culture - Danger! This territory is riddled with mines!). On being an American, my answer must consider that the United States is a landmass with many people from diverse backgrounds, each possessing a different perspective about the meanings of being an American. Deconstruct or problematize the analogy as you like, but America is truly a melting pot. Go to any international port of entry and look for the characters who are in the "U.S. Passport Holders" queue. The only thing homogeneous about that line is its diversity.

2.5. On Being Montanan

Just as I cannot speak for everyone in my country, I cannot even pretend to say anything profound about Montana, the state where I was born and raised, other than my own experiences and observations. The Montana I know best lies west of the Great Continental Divide, that highest part of the Rocky Mountains spanning North and South America from the Bearing Sea above Alaska all the way down to the Strait of Magellan at the very tip of Southern Chile. On my side of the Divide, the rivers flow into the Pacific Ocean; and on the eastern side, the other side, they spill into the Atlantic. Growing up, the idea somehow got cooked into my brain that, firstly, this is the natural and God-intended order of nature, for not only was west the direction of the watershed, but also the sun and the moon, and my osmotic indoctrination of manifest destiny ("go west, young man"), that this way is freedom and liberation from the cosmopolitan old world of hierarchy and decree; and, secondly, the belief that Western Montana is more rugged, more green, more beautiful than anything east of it - a prejudice I hold to this day with religious fervor. These sentiments may be viewed as the idiosyncratic mental mapping of a boy's burgeoning awakening to geopolitics; for "Griz Country" west of the Continental Divide is named after the Grizzlies, the American football team of the University of Montana, and "Cat Country" to the east of the Divide is so called because of the Montana State University Bobcats - a bitter and long-standing sport rivalry that has ever existed. Whenever the fate of a road trip took me across this geographical boundary, I felt a certain trespass, and when I crossed back, a definitive sense of homecoming.

2.6. Iceberg Theory Applied

At the beginning of my intercultural communication classes—after getting everyone's take on the What-is-culture? question—I like to start with the picture of a police officer. The role of this character is above the surface at the visible part of the iceberg. Everyone knows that police are there to enforce laws and keep us safe by responding to emergencies; however, in the United States—and I believe this goes for the world entire—there is a fraught relationship between law enforcement and the citizenry. The next picture I show is of a donut, again a cultural artifact that is globally ubiquitous. Immediately, I hear chuckles around the room. The third picture I show is of the law enforcement officer eating a donut. This always gets a laugh. I don't know the origin of this meme, but for my purposes, I'm going to plant the American flag in this deep-fried pastry. "Why

did you laugh?" I ask. "Because he's eating the donut," says one student. "Police eating donuts are funny," says another. We are at the boundary now, ready to plunge our heads into the water, into the thick culture of what lies beneath. "Why is a cop eating a donut funny?" Somewhere around this question, I explain that the word 'cop' is an informal synonym for police. A joker in the back of the room shouts out, "Pig!" The potency of American culture has flavored the soup. "But why do we laugh?" The room quiets. The next few pictures I show are of police violence, a reemerging archetype in the American psyche: a black and white photo of state troopers teargassing and beating civil rights marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama on March 7th, 1965; a grainy video capture of LAPD officers viciously clubbing motorist Rodney King in Los Angeles, California on March 3rd, 1991; a high-definition photograph of MPD officer Derek Michael Chauvin kneeling on the neck of George Floyd in front of Cup Foods Grocery Store in Minneapolis, Minnesota on May 25th, 2020.

The meme of a cop eating a donut is funny, but it is not simply funny, I tell my students. It is satire. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary online entices us upon another etymological journey by revealing that satire (arriving into English at the beginning of the 1500s) derivates from satura, (merriam-webster.com) which could mean "full, well fed, stuffed, plump, or fertile," (online-latin-dictionary.com) depending on its context. Merriam-Webster carries two definitions of satire. The first: "a literary work holding up human vices and follies to ridicule or scorn." But it is the second definition that really gets to the meat of the issue: "trenchant wit, irony, or sarcasm used to expose and discredit vice or folly." "Trenchant wit" is what we are getting at. According to Merriam-Webster the word trenchant can mean "keen/sharp. . .vigorously effective and articulate," "caustic," which means "capable of destroying or eating away". Trenchant spawns out of the French "trencher" (to cut) (merriam-webster.com). Satire cuts at culture's power structure, not a fatal slice to the jugular, but a slash across the heel which disables, diminishes, deconstructs, and reveals the systematized hypocrisy within the cultural system. This is why a picture of a cop happily eating a donut provokes such instantaneous and ironic laughter. In the American mind, it is ironic that an officer of the law, whether of his own will or directed by higher powers, would use his position of authority to abuse the populace that he is sworn to protect. And it follows that to ridicule him by making him out to be a fat, lazy bastard is satire. The literary critic Northrop Frye wrote that "The satirist has to select his absurdities, and the act of selection is a moral act" (2020, 224).

This example of the donut-eating cop has taken us from the surface-level artifact into the subsurface world of high-context culture. It brings us to a recognition of meaning because the same rhetorical move has no doubt been played in many cultures and at many points in history. But it beggars the question: how does one come to understand anything of significance about another culture if every artifact that exists on the surface possesses a similar depth? The short but honest answer is that you don't. You can't. This is the problem I've always had with teaching culture, especially the project of intercultural communication in the English language classroom. It is a hopeful aspiration on an impossible mission. At its absolute best, ICC has only ever been a practice in awareness and tolerance.

2.7. A Recipe for Soup: 1 Cup of Education

A rudimentary search of journal archive JSTOR returns more than ten thousand articles on the topic of cultural studies. This scholarship comprises both scientific-esque quantitative and theoretical-

esque qualitative investigations into the matter. Despite all this, because of the special nature of culture as an everything-word, as something both concrete and abstract, the study of culture is, and always will be, open for play. Therefore, I am now going to put on my chef's hat and articulate just a few elements that go into the culture soup of an American. I will add my disclaimer by stating that by no means am I attempting to speak for anyone besides the figure looking back at me in the mirror; but just as there is a thread of truth in every stereotype, so too is there a tread of generality in every individual, just as what applies to all applies to me and what applies to me applies to some.

I was born under the sign of Pisces in the year 1979, in northwest Montana, in the little town of Ronan, nestled in the heart of the Mission Valley, on the beautiful Flathead Indian Reservation of the Salish, Kootenai, and Pend d'Oreille tribes. My father was of Nordic blood, an entrepreneur, restauranteur, mechanic, engineer, and townie who had already lived one life traveling the world as a civil servant (a proud term) before settling in the hinterlands of Montana to start a family. My mother was half Honduran, kind, and devoted to God in the tradition of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, a faith in which she raised me and my siblings. My family was "well off" for a time in regard to money, but due to the economic downturn in the late 1980s, we fell on hard times; my parents divorced, and I and my siblings stayed with my father. We moved from a large farmhouse near the foothills of the mountains to a single-wide trailer house in the middle of a section of wheat and potato fields near the Flathead River. It was here I would live until eventually going to university. So, despite an adulthood of city dwelling, I still have a rural heart.

From first through eighth grade, I attended a small school run by the church. It was set in a beautiful meadow outside of town, not far from the railroad tracks. I still remember the horn and the train's distant rumble interrupting my studies. In my day, the school had about thirty students and two classrooms, each with floor-to-ceiling windows giving a vista of the majestic Mission Mountains. The south room educated the elementary students, or "little kids," and the north room the middle school students, or "big kids." Therefore, grades 1–4 would study communally, each level visiting the teacher at her table as another level did their lessons, and likewise in the north room with grades 5–8. The third room was a large gymnasium, and next to that, a kitchen and restrooms. The gymnasium was used by the church for meetings, ceremonies such as 8th grade graduation, the yearly Christmas pageant, potlucks, and Passover. (N.B. Seventh-day Adventists is an Old Testament religion which recognizes, uniquely, Saturday as a holy day of rest instead of Sunday.)

A typical day included time for individual and communal lessons. Two students who arrived early were entrusted with respectfully raising the flag on the flagpole, which stood across a large yard near the road. In the mornings after prayer—each student was given a chance to say the morning prayer in his or her turn—we would put our right hands over our hearts and recite the Pledge of Allegiance, and then do Bible study. In this culture of my childhood, God always came before country. Communally, we studied the King James Bible and said the Bible verses that we had committed to memory. Though not a religious person, to this day I can still recite many of them, particularly the 23rd Psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. / He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters." A pastoral verse for a pastoral education. After Bible, there was Math, then P.E., when we would play softball or kickball in the summer on the yard beneath the flag, or in winters retire to the gym for a variety of indoor games—back then, before the cancellation years, dodge ball was a popular option. At noon came lunch, blessed by a communal prayer, again rotated among the students but always containing the same blessing: Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for this food that will nourish our bodies so that we may serve you… Amen. Monday through Thursday, we would eat a sack lunch outside in good weather or at our

desks in inclement. A sack lunch might consist, traditionally, of a sandwich, potato chips, some fruit, and a drink. Fridays was always "hot lunch," which was normally prepared by a group of mothers, and we would take it at tables in the gym that were the responsibility of the big kids to set up. A typical hot lunch was served buffet style and might consist of a casserole, bread, vegetables, salad, and a delicious dessert. Pitchers of fruit juice were ready for a drink. After lunch, there was recess, which was usually a bit of free time to play sports or hang out with friends. The second half of the day started with free reading and Grammar in our biblically themed workbooks, then Science or Social Studies, which on certain days were communal, as we would listen to classmates give a report or presentation. The day ended with another prayer given by the teacher and usually touching on a moral theme that we ought to be good Christians out there in the fallen world. I can remember always the ending, "Lord watch between me and thee, when we are absent one from another." And then the flag would be lowered and folded ceremoniously by the same students who raised it that morning. It wouldn't be until I entered high school that I would learn my formative education was unique. And though I may have suffered because the religious education did not have resources and specialties for the sciences, I prospered in other ways; for instance, my reading and writing skills were above my age group, and I have a good knowledge and appreciation of the King James Bible which, along with Shakespeare, is the most beautiful form of English there is. The faculty at the church school always consisted of a husband-and-wife teacher team. The wife, who had some musical ability (piano or auto-harp), always taught the little kids and the husband the big kids. In addition to our standard education, we also had special classes that took advantage of our rural setting. I remember a demonstration of firearms (something that would be unheard of today); once, the father of a student brought his antique flintlock and showed us how to load it and shoot it. We learned, as well, wilderness survival techniques such as how to build a lean-to shelter, how to start a fire without any matches, and the proper technique for rowing a canoe.

Montana is Spanish for mountain, which makes sense, as the western third is marked by the Rocky Mountains. If you search on the internet for The Great Seal of the State of Montana, you will find a circular design centered on a picturesque landscape symbolizing Montana's natural beauty and resources. It depicts the Rocky Mountains, the Missouri River, and the Great Falls, along with a plow, a pick, and a shovel in the foreground to represent agriculture and mining. A ribbon at the bottom bears the state motto, "Oro y Plata" (Spanish for Gold and Silver), highlighting Montana's mineral wealth. This seal gives the state its first nickname, The Treasure State. But there are two other nicknames: "Big Sky Country," taken from A.B. Guthrie's 1947 novel *The Big Sky*. This nickname makes sense if you were to ever see the flatlands east of the Rockies where the author grew up. Out there is just land and sky that seems to go on and on forever. The final nickname is "The Last Best Place," also taken from a 1983 book by the conservationist author Douglas H. Chadwick. In his book, Chadwick studies the dwindling population of mountain goats that live on the steep sides of the Rocky Mountains and argues for a conservationist mentality in order to preserve their habitat. I remember growing up and visiting Glacier National Park with my family and the thrill of spotting these elusive and majestic creatures. "The Last Best Place" has become an ethos in the culture of many Montanans; it fills us with a sense of pride at our natural wonders and a slight feeling of superiority over the other states that are not the last best place. After school, I would return to my family's house on the farm. I remember a distinct sense of freedom in being able to walk without worry for miles around, exploring the fields, woods, and abandoned buildings dating back over a hundred years. Treasure State, Big Sky Country, The Last Best Place were flavors and ingredients in my cultural soup.

2.8. Recipe: Mix it in The Melting Pot

In every country around the world, early education is also a time of patriotic indoctrination. This comes in America with a sense of both exceptionalism at the accomplishments of our country and a sense of guilt at the many things we got wrong growing up as a nation. One of the first things we learn in school is that diversity in America is an asset. Even outside of our borders, I have met people who tell me that America is truly a melting pot, as can be evidenced, as I've already mentioned, by the varied ethnicities one sees in the lines at the airport for those who hold a United States passport. But this melting pot idea is not new; it goes all the way back to an enigmatic French American farmer and writer by the name of J. Hector St. John de Crèvecœur.

De Crèvecœur's American defining contribution is strongest in a single chapter of his book *Letters From an American Farmer*. De Crèvecœur himself can be viewed as a symbol of the contradiction of American identity—contradiction, as my French friend espoused to me more than twenty years ago, is a dumpling in the cultural soup of my country. Born in France as Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur to a family of "minor nobility," (Moore, 2011, 133) he was, perhaps due to a family dispute, "shipped off to England," (133) where he engaged to marry, but the early and tragic death of his fiancé propelled him to Canada, where he would eventually fight the British and get wounded in September of 1759 (Mazlish, 1982, 142) during the Battle of the Plains of Abraham. According to Bruce Mazlish, this is when "a mystery clouds de Crèvecœur's life" (142). In October of that same year, he is "forced" to leave his military commission, and the next we spot him, he is in New York before Christmas having taken the name J. Hector St. John, "and a new American was Born" (143).

Letter III, What is an American?, from *Letters From an American Farmer*, in one epic literary move implanted into me (via my education and the ambiance of America in general) that mythical and indomitable sense of Americanness. In this letter, the fictitious narrator called Farmer James, ostensibly de Crèvecœur himself, writes to an anonymous audience about the inhabitants of a cultivated land that "a hundred years ago was wild." Contrasting the "new continent" of freedom and mobility with an old Europe of static hierarchy, he writes: "It is not composed of great lords who possess everything, and of a herd of people who have nothing. Here are no aristocratical families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical dominion…"(1782, 46). In America "we are all the tillers of the earth…united by the silken bands of mild government, all respecting the laws, without dreading their power, because they are equitable"(47).

Our early American writer paints a dystopian view of the old world in Europe, one of starvation, political and religious subjugation, and intellectual rot (53); whereas in the new America the "new man" lives in a picture like The Great Seal of the State of Montana, an agrarian utopia bursting with individualistic, entrepreneurial spirit, because here there is no "despotic prince… rich abbot… mighty lord" to steal the rewards of one's labor (53).

[5] As an aside, continuing the theme of contradictoriness in American culture, Bryce Traister puts forwards a convincing, though inconclusive, argument that de Crèvecœur could have been an informant for the British crown against the colonies. Bryce Traister, "Criminal Correspondence: Loyalism, Espionage and Crèvecoeur," Early American Literature 37, no. 3 (2002): 492, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25057283. Looking at his rhetoric, the argument of his allegiance may have swung either way, at the very least he walks that uncertain, confused line of identity that is part of our American cultural soup.

2.9. Recipe: 1 Cup of Shame

Despite this heavy flavor of freedom, the cultural soup of America has always contained the bitter history of the most despicable practice man has ever created: that of slavery. In his book, de Crèvecœur does not always wear the rose-colored glasses through which we look in Letter III. In Letter IX, we come upon the rich excesses of "Charles-Town," South Carolina, chiefly inhabited by an elite class of wealthy "lawyers, planters, and merchants" (215) whose obese bodies show the signs of their uninhibited lives of eat and drink (214-215). And like the despotic princes of the Old World, these new lords have become obsessed with wealth and power (215-216).

In the midst of Charles-Town's largess, there is darkness to which the ruling class have become deaf and blind and "hardened"(216). "Here the horrors of slavery, the hardship of incessant toils, are unseen; and no one thinks with compassion of those showers of sweat and of tears which from the bodies of Africans, daily drop, and moisten the ground they till. The cracks of the whip urging these miserable beings to excessive labour, are far too distant from the gay Capital to be heard" (216).

De Crèvecœur now meditates on the earliest of American contradictions: the owner and the owned. The rich owners "enjoying all that life affords most bewitching and pleasurable," while the owned suffer from "wars, murders, and devastations…committed in some harmless, peaceable African neighborhood, where dwelt innocent people, who even knew not but that all men were black." He describes families torn apart and "arranged like horses at a fair" to be sold and "branded like cattle." "Strange order of things!" cries out Farmer James, "Oh, Nature, where art thou?—Are not these blacks thy children as well as we?" (217) What follows is a sociological and psychological argument against slavery (ironically contrasting the evil as it is practiced in the south with the humane slavery from his home in the north, where slaves are considered part of the family (221)), stating that the end result of such an abhorrent institution can only be the cultivation of hatred from the owned towards the owner: "is there any thing in this treatment but what must kindle all the passions, sow the seeds of inveterate resentment, and nourish a wish of perpetual revenge?" (223)

The section concludes in a nightmarish scene with Farmer James on a walk to visit a plantation owner when he comes upon a slave hanging in a cage. The birds have pecked out his eyes and the flesh of his cheeks, revealing only bones; insects cover his body, "eager to feed on his mangled flesh and to drink his blood" (234). He writes, "Had I a ball in my gun, I certainly should have dispatched him" (234). Unable to kill this suffering wretch, he instead offers him water, to which the slave asks for poison, that he may finally die. Leaving the slave and arriving at the plantation, the planter tells him that this slave rose up and killed his master, and thus was his punishment under the "doctrine of slavery" for "the laws of self-preservations rendered such executions necessary" (235).

2.10. Will You Hold This Mirror for Me, Mr. Dickens?

When Charles Dickens stepped foot on American soil in Boston, Massachusetts, in the winter of 1842, it would be hard to overestimate his celebrity. By that time, he had not written his great books - especially *Great Expectations* or *A Tale of Two Cities*, which one-sentence paragraphs confounded me in my high school years - but his sketches from Boz and characters from *The*

Pickwick Papers were as familiar to the reader at that time as, say, Harry Potter is to us in our time (Jenkins and Skogen 2015, 11.00-11.55). In the series entitled *Conversations at BSC: Dickens and America*, professor Larry Skogen cites the author as writing about the difficulties he had getting around due to his notoriety: "I can do nothing that I want to do, go nowhere where I want to go, and see nothing that I want to see. If I turn into the street, I am followed by a multitude" (Jenkins and Skogen 2015, 50.13-50.26).

Though Dickens was impressed with certain facets of the upstart democracy in such institutions as schools and hospitals (1996, Chapter IV), the book he would publish upon his return to England is a scathing critique of cultural artifacts that, to this day, might be a difficult mirror for the American to look into. For instance, on the issue of presidential elections, he notices how strong political partisanship is, and if, say, one man's candidate did not win the election for president, his attitude is to be quiet and just wait three and a half years for the next election to turn it over (Chapter IV). In Washington, D.C., he comments on the "offensive and sickening" habit of chewing tobacco. In a court of law, the judge spits, the witness spits, the criminal spits. In hospitals, the doctors spit. Everyone spits so much it's like "a shower of yellow rain" (Chapter VIII). Gun violence in the land of liberty is not special to our current era of mass shootings in schools. Dickens cites newspaper notices of gun duels. In one, each man had six pistols each, and the shooting only stopped when one of the combatants took a bullet in the thigh. Another notice describes the gun fight between "two young bloods of our city," aged fifteen and thirteen, each armed with rifles; when a bullet went through the top of the thirteen-year-old's hat—not hitting him—the duel ended and "the difference amicably adjusted" (Chapter XVII).

But Dicken's harshest critique was of the prevailing institution of slavery. He no doubt was familiar with de Crèvecœur's critique sixty years earlier, and, as the internal slavery debate in America was a firestorm at the time of Dicken's visit, perhaps he thought he could hasten its demise with a vicious literary lashing.

Dickens describes three "classes" of slavery in America. The first class includes slaveholders who see slavery as wrong and dangerous, but keep it for financial reasons. The second class fiercely defends slavery, denying its cruelty and putting their power above all else. The third class uses slavery to boost their social status, needing enslaved people to feel superior in a society that claims to value equality (Chapter XVII).

The pro-slavery argument at the time rested under the democratic ideals of America, wherein if the majority of those in the slave-owning states agreed to slavery, then slavery would stay-ideals that, in the face of such an evil practice, Dickens found absurd and hypocritical. He quotes from a newspaper advertisement for runaway slaves, each one more horrific, each one sanctioned under the American system of democratic values.

> *'Ran away, Negress Caroline. Had on a collar with one prong turned down.'*
> . . .
> *'Ran away, the negro Manuel. Much marked with irons.'*
> . . .
> *'Ran away, a negro boy about twelve years old. Had round his neck a chain dog-collar with "De Lampert" engraved on it.'*
> . . .
> *'Ran away, a negro woman and two children. A few days before she went off, I burnt her with a hot iron, on the left side of her face. I tried to make the letter M.'*

> . . .
> *'Ran away, a negro woman named Rachel. Has lost all her toes except the large one.'*
> . . .
> *'Ran away, Sam. He was shot a short time since through the hand, and has several shots in his left arm and side.'*
> . . .
> *'Ran away, a negro girl called Mary. Has a small scar over her eye, a good many teeth missing, the letterA is branded on her cheek and forehead.'*
> . . .
> *Ran away, from the plantation of James Surgette, the following negroes: Randal, has one ear cropped; Bob, has lost one eye; Kentucky Tom, has one jaw broken.' (Chapter XVII)*

It was fitting that Dickens should end his travelogue with the atrocities he witnessed in the slave states. He, a foreigner from a monarchy against which America battled and won its independence, held up the cultural mirror to the American face, and by the weight of his fame, forced a nation and the world to look cleanly at the flagrant hypocrisy.

> On one theme, which is commonly before our eyes, and in respect of which our national character is changing fast, let the plain Truth be spoken, and let us not, like dastards, beat about the bush by hinting at the Spaniard and the fierce Italian. When knives are drawn by Englishmen in conflict let it be said and known: 'We owe this change to Republican Slavery. These are the weapons of Freedom. With sharp points and edges such as these, Liberty in America hews and hacks her slaves; or, failing that pursuit, her sons devote them to a better use, and turn them on each other (Chapter XVII).

3. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

When I put on my metaphor glasses, I realize that from the haunted bridges of Vietnam to the sun-drenched lanes of Laos, from the bilingual communities of the Saint John Valley to the stone edifices of France inlaid with dark windows, these are just a few of the experiences that compose the artifact that is me. I've come to understand culture as a multifaceted entity, both visible and deeply hidden. My early education in a small, rural school in Montana, steeped in religious teachings and close-knit community values, colors, in part, my perception of the world. The practices, rituals, and communal experiences of my youth are threads in the vast web of culture that Clifford Geertz describes—a web we are all weavers of and ensnared within. Or, it is a soup, a blend of diverse ingredients simmering together, each flavor influencing the other.

In the works of J. Hector St. John de Crèvecœur and Charles Dickens, I see the enduring complexities and contradictions that culture embodies. De Crèvecœur's portrayal of America as a melting pot, a land of freedom and new beginnings, and Dickens' mirror reflecting hypocrisies and injustices as dark as one could ever imagine, reveal that culture is not solely a celebration of shared values but also our shared failings.

As a TESOL instructor, these reflections can't help but inform my approach to teaching intercultural communicative competence and culture in general. Acknowledging the visible artifacts of culture—the iceberg's tip —is essential, but always remembering the mass of it we cannot see. That which is submerged, as Hemingway wrote, gives it all that "dignity of movement."

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