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“Seeing” Between the Lines—Using Literature to Teach Cultural Awareness

Eileen Landis-Groom

What does it mean to be human? How do we express feelings and ideas and create relationships with others? How do we go about shaping and finding meaning in the world we inhabit?

These questions are at the center of a course I teach entitled Studies in Humanities (HU 141) at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. In exploring these questions, the students and I examine the assumptions that shape our perceptions and behavior as we come to understand more clearly how certain cultural assumptions determine how we “see” the world. Students usually end the course more self-aware and less ethnocentric.

One student clearly stands out in my memory as illustrating the above. After saying little throughout the semester and often looking grim and skeptical about points raised in class, he wrote a paper about how he initially wondered if the course was going to be at all worthwhile. By course’s end he had discovered that his self-imposed “constrictions”—that the world’s meaning rested in wealth and success—“were strangling the blood to the brain.”

While my students come from a broad variety of backgrounds and bring with them a great range of experience, I believe one of my roles is to act as a catalyst by presenting them with challenging material that may cause them to question some of their dearly held assumptions about themselves and others. It is my belief that a true democracy

cannot exist if its citizens lack the ability to think critically about their culture and the assumptions that guide them. Certainly a democracy cannot improve if its citizens think that their way of thinking and acting is the only and the best way.

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Since mine is a literature class, one of the primary means of challenging students is through my selection of reading material. Two books, in particular, that students read, discuss, and write about in HU 141 help sharpen their critical thinking about cultural diversity: *Travels* by Michael Crichton and *Ota Benga: the Pygmy in the Zoo* by Phillips Verner Bradford and Harvey Blume. Both books are nonfiction; both are highly personal, frank accounts that reveal the complexities of their subjects. The two books put into relief many of the assumptions Western people possess that determine how they “see” the world and, most important, encourage students in class discussions, writing, and projects to explore the

cultural assumptions that guide them and guide others.

To see the positions that students hold at the beginning of the semester, I have them respond to a questionnaire. The same questionnaire is then distributed at the end of the semester to see if any changes have occurred in their perception. Questions include but are not limited to explaining the primary factors (talent, relationships, intellect, self-expression, money, etc.) determining how the students perceive themselves and their world; explaining what would be required for the students to live a good life, as they define it; and providing definitions of **culture** and **nature**.

In the preface to *Travels*, Crichton discusses what he perceives to be a major problem of Western people—the lack of direct experience.

Also, before studying *Travels* and *Ota Benga: the Pygmy in the Zoo*, we discuss not only how perception is shaped, looking at, for example, optical illusions, to show how perception is illusory, but also how cultural assumptions affect how we see art, by reading John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*. The aim of these discussions is to demonstrate how often we are unconscious about many of these cultural "givens" and are inundated by images of our all-pervasive media that, as Berger points out, mold our thinking. Students then clarify their assumptions about a "good life" through class debates on the advantages and disadvantages of a classical vs. romantic posture and on holding firm to one's beliefs, the latter after reading Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*. The debate on Bolt's Sir Thomas Moore, who held fast to his beliefs because they defined his "self," segues nicely into a discussion on Michael Crichton, who, in *Travels*, stresses the importance of being flexible about one's beliefs.

Travels has been consistently well received in my HU 141 classes. It is a highly readable book for students because of Crichton's skill in maintaining suspense and also because of Crichton's honesty in revealing his numerous misperceptions, based upon either his faulty

assumptions about himself or other cultures or based upon assumptions that only work in a Western culture. Activities to help students become involved with Crichton's thinking include writing responses to journal questions on *Travels*, synthesizing those responses in groups and sharing them with the class, and conducting mock interviews with Crichton to clarify not only his positions about men/women, nature, science vs. mysticism, and western attributes but also their own positions and related experiences.

In the preface to *Travels*, Crichton discusses what he perceives to be a major problem of Western people—the lack of direct experience. He states that Western people are "so bombarded with opinions, concepts, and information structures" that they do not think for themselves but instead only through the "filter of these structures" (x). Crichton travels to escape from the blindness induced by everyday surroundings and to have "direct experience," "unfiltered by any theories or expectations" (388), in order to see clearly.

In initiating a discussion on the value of direct experience, we often talk about first impressions, connecting back to an experiment often done in the beginning of the semester in which students are asked to formulate certain conclusions about their classmates based on factual observations about their dress and behavior. We then examine the validity of those assumptions (the "theories or expectations") leading to those conclusions. For example, assuming that a student is conscientious because he/she has a well-organized notebook and all the books for the class on the first day may be erroneous. The student simply may have been to the bookstore right before class.

Right from the beginning of the book, Crichton shows how lack of awareness about culture can determine what one sees. In "Lousy on Admission," one of the beginning chapters of *Travels*, Crichton, interning in a hospital, reveals how a resident doctor had no awareness of the Bohemian or beatnik culture to which Emily, a patient in the hospital, belonged and thus incorrectly attributed her odd behavior to senility. Crichton notes how this doctor had little knowledge of the world outside of his scientific outlook, little knowledge about other aspects of his own culture that

perhaps would have allowed him to “see” Emily correctly.

Class discussion on this misperception of Emily usually is lively because Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University is a highly specialized school with many students similar to the resident doctor in their intense focus on their specialty—aviation. Students relate many examples of friends who suffer a kind of tunnel vision—who can only “talk” planes or work on their computers—and therefore are less aware. They share how their narrowly-focused friends and sometimes parents have “no life,” as they phrase it, or lack social graces, and the students usually end up talking about the importance of being well-rounded.

Students also discuss how the media shapes their assumptions about a “good life” after reading Berger and can understand Crichton’s points about how a scientific outlook, one that involves measuring and proving, likewise molds them when we discuss how science, to some, has become a religion. Crichton discusses in detail how his own background in science shaped his assumptions about life and led him to doubt the validity of any but a scientific outlook. Crichton decides to travel when he realizes that his mode of thinking could not alleviate his feelings of emptiness. By traveling and thus stepping outside of his normal routine and environment, his eyes are opened to what he might not have perceived otherwise, specifically, the assumptions he held that he discovered were either peculiarly Western or incorrect or sometimes both.

Sharing responses to journal questions and paper topics help students step outside of their culture. One of the journal questions that may help students see how culture-bound they may be involves interviewing an international student and describing what that student believes is the dominant aspect (good or bad) of American culture. This question has elicited a kaleidoscope of impressions—Americans perceived as selfish, concerned only with number one; Americans as wonderfully nonconforming, according to a Korean student; and Americans as inefficient, according to one student who had spent time in Germany.

Often I share their “creative” papers. One type of option follows: “Using the basic issue of cultural differences, write a narrative about one of these: experiencing conflict because of your love for someone of a different culture (for example, explaining this love to your parents) or sharing space with someone of a different culture (roommate, for instance) or living in a foreign country.” One fascinating paper was written by a white woman, married to a Navajo, who pointed out how difficult it was to accustom herself to her husband’s silences during conversations because Navajos do not always fill silences in a conversation with chit chat. Another paper written by a white male concerned dating a Chicana and being unused to the number of people in the girlfriend’s extended family.

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In the first trip recounted in *Travels*, to Bangkok, Crichton himself concludes that he is indeed “culture-bound,” much to his surprise because he previously had considered himself “an accomplished traveler” (128). He finds himself not following certain Thai norms, such as not touching a Thai person on the head (116), finds himself revolted by a child whorehouse (124), and in general has a “traumatic trip” (128).

Students vicariously experience Crichton’s epiphanies: his insight into the “opinions, concepts, and information structures” that guide our perceptions. Students appreciate reading about someone as famous as Michael Crichton who admits that he did not know as much as he thought, that, in fact, he was quite wrong about himself, in many instances. Moreover, his honesty in admitting mistakes is refreshing and frees the students to discuss similar experiences. A Spanish student related the difficulties he had in showing any interest in America’s favorite sport of baseball. My Hawaiian students talk of the difficulties they had adapting to the mainland culture.

Crichton finds his Western views put in sharp contrast by the attitudes of people of other cul-

tures. In a section of the book on Malaysia, he notes how Western people assume that it is necessary to control what is around them and that not to do so is somehow “shamefully passive” (152). For example, the people in the village of Pahang, which he visits, stopped keeping goats because a deer, who did not like goats, appeared in their village. As Crichton points out, a Westerner would have gotten rid of the deer (150-152). He realizes, in Pahang, how he could not “make” the wild animals appear when watching for them in a hide in the jungle, how he could only “tolerate” the bees that land on him to lick the salt off his skin, in short, how he was uncomfortable with the fact that he could not control everything. He states, “I couldn’t leave things alone. I was an urban, technological man accustomed to making things happen” (152). This tendency to “control” is most clearly seen by students when we talk about our relationship with nature, about agribusiness, for example, and also when we talk about trying to control other people, specifically boyfriends or girlfriends.

Crichton also comments on the tendency to idealize other cultures, as when he is in New Guinea, expecting to see noble savages and instead sees couples arguing, children crying, and a warrior dance that is continually being interrupted by time-outs: a culture where disputes do not have to be resolved. In class, we often talk about our culture’s tendency to idealize the “primitive.” The motif of the noble savage runs from the Romantics to the present and still influences movies and literature with which the students are familiar, such as *Tarzan*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, and *Dances with Wolves*.

The flip side of idealization, the tendency to look at people from different cultures as subhuman, also is addressed by Crichton.

The flip side of idealization, the tendency to look at people from different cultures as subhuman, also is addressed by Crichton. He admits that he himself is guilty of this tendency when he

recalls a time in Africa, meeting two Samburu women and thinking, because of their appearance, specifically the flies crawling on their faces, that he could not see them as human, only as animals. He feels guilt yet comfort in knowing that the women could not possibly know what he was thinking (228). Later, the tables are turned when some Masai boys try to look up his pants, clearly, according to Crichton, working under the same assumption that he was operating under with the Samburu women: “These aren’t really people; they don’t have the same thoughts and feelings we do, and they won’t understand what we are doing” (230).

In class, we list important attributes of human beings and discuss what causes Westerners to think about other human beings as subhuman. The most common response to the questions is Westerners’ advancement in technology/science. I then share with them a memo written during World War II by a Nazi describing refitting trucks to allow for more efficient gassing of the Jews, who are never written about as human beings but instead as merchandise. This memo, I emphasize, was written by a culture that deemed science and technology of prime importance.

This readiness to view people who seem less “advanced” as subhuman is seen even more clearly in *Ota Benga: the Pygmy in the Zoo* by Phillips Verner Bradford and Harvey Blume. Ota Benga was a pygmy whose tribe, in what was then the Belgium Congo, had been massacred by the Force Publique, a Congolese constabulary under Leopold II of Belgium in the early twentieth century. The grandfather of the author, Verner—missionary, anthropologist, businessman—bought Ota and returned to the United States with him, where he was exhibited at the St. Louis Exposition and at the Bronx Zoo. Contemporary descriptions of Ota included “elf, dwarf, cannibal, wild man, savage loose in the metropolis, beyond ape, but not quite human, stunted, retarded, incomplete” (xix), “the missing link” (xv).

This book shows a period of time that serves, as the author comments, as the “underpinning of our day” (xxd). Crichton as well discusses assumptions about science that most students admit to embracing and that reveal themselves in

Ota Benga as the “underpinnings” of modern American culture: that scientists today know everything or at least almost everything and that a materialistic approach to reality—one based on measuring, testing, and proving by numbers—is the only legitimate way to understand the world. Looking back at the early twentieth century in *Ota Benga*, we see the irony that Darwinism, which “posited such radical equality—all men descended from a common ancestor” (xx)—could result in people questioning “who **was** human” and “who **was most** human” (29) and the arrogance of scientists, who worked under the assumption that statistical analysis could lead them to a complete understanding of what it is to be human.

In *Ota Benga*, these assumptions are embodied in the way Ota and other primitive people were treated at the St. Louis Exposition by anthropologists, who “wanted to quantify everything about him—his head size, foot size...the space between the eyes,” how far he could throw a baseball (xix); his intelligence as compared with “intellectually defective Caucasians,” his reaction to optical illusions, his response to pain (113-114), all items “counting” the way to understanding, a “statistical method of distinguishing ‘the savage from the enlightened man,’ a numerical index of ‘what may be called the citizen value of an individual’” (98). “All these numbers... rubbed together” (xix) would substantiate the very reason the Fair was constructed, to show how Caucasians were superior to other races (123). When Ota was exhibited at the Bronx Zoo, this hierarchical view of the races was clearly evident, in comparisons made between Ota and an orangutan he became friendly with; in claims that only because he was not very intelligent did he allow himself to be placed in a cage; in the speculation by Americans that perhaps Ota was the missing link in the evolution of humankind (180-181).

What Bradford and Blume, however, clarify is that Westerners were not the only people passing judgment. The tables are turned, as they were when Crichton realized that the Masai children were judging him, just as he had been judging the Samburu women. Bradford and Blume discuss the Africans’ reactions to the white people enter-

ing their country. The Africans believed that white people came from the land of the dead and were white because they had shed their skins in the land of the dead, which must be painful, and thus they had to wear clothes to assuage the pain or perhaps because they were ashamed of who they were (30). The general consensus was that the appearance of the “whites” was not fortuitous, that death and destruction accompanied them and that they might be cannibals (30). When Ota and other pygmies brought by Verner to the St. Louis Exposition were treated inhospitably, with people laughing at them, staring at them, wanting to poke them, the pygmies reminded Verner of how he was treated when he arrived in their home and was given “everything that could be desired” (118). Ota was scrutinizing and judging the Americans as much as they were scrutinizing him, but his criterion was not an “objective” attempt to measure and quantify but rather to judge his hosts’ actions and intentions, in particular, what Ota called “a white heart” (222), a heart “devoid of malice” (80). Reading about Ota’s experiences and perceptions challenges the common assumption that “progress is good,” progress, as noted previously, being most frequently defined by students as advancements in technology and science and not as development in living together peaceably, with hearts “devoid of malice.”

In talking about the tendency to stereotype those who are different, what is most amazing to the students is the perception of Africans towards the white people. They note how in their own feelings of superiority, an I-am-looking-at-them; they-are-not-looking-at-me attitude, they forget that the “looking” and “labeling” is a two-way street. My students, conservative for the most part, discuss how they stereotype students at a nearby liberal arts college as “granola heads” and how they are pigeonholed (unfairly) by others as rich and spoiled.

The gap between pygmy culture and Western culture is great and obvious. The “natural order in the forest—monkey chatter, bird song, insect buzz”—is “quiet” to the pygmy (19). “‘Quiet’ is accord—not silence” (19) and is opposed to “noise,”

"anything thought to be devoid of sense, meaning, humor, harmony..."(19). "Noise is discord and discontent within a hunting band...lies, pretense, misinformation" (19). To operate effectively in a hunting group, sociability and working together was mandatory (206). Ota discovered much noise in America.

The idea of noise is further shown and discussed when watching clips from a CBS "48 Hours" documentary entitled "Fast Times," which shows the discontent and the alienation of our times in its quest for greater efficiency. Students are amazed by and incredulous about the frantic, "noisy" lifestyles of the Californians depicted in the show, but then I point out how sometimes I see them trying to do more than one thing, to listen in class but finish another assignment, and point out how competition rather than cooperation, being the norm in academic settings, leads to disharmony, to "noise."

In Ota's culture, their relationship to their environment was one of "love," "trust," and "confidence" (27). Verner at one point asks Ota why he dances. He responds that "they [the trees] like it" (147). In short, "the trees were tall, stationary, leafy pygmies" and the "pygmies were short, dancing trees" (147-148).

In defining "nature" in class, we discover how abstract the term is and how many different definitions arise, from all that is not touched by people to everything within and around a person. When I first began teaching HU 141 and we discussed the pygmy view of nature as a "thou" rather than an "it," some of the students initially howled in derision or apologized for simply not being able to look at a rock as a "thou" or wrote satirical papers about animals taking over the world. They were much like the people who saw Ota's close relationship with the orangutan in the zoo as a sign of his inferiority. In Western culture, as Crichton points out, we consider ourselves as not "another animal" (254), as masters of nature, not a part of it. To encourage them to "try out" a "thou" perception, one of the options for a journal entry is to take a walk and write about how your perception changed when looking at the world as a "you." Some of the students wrote entries on enhanced awareness and appreciation. Also, to

catalyze discussion about our relation to nature, I show them a photograph from the *Utne Reader* of a Peruvian woman nursing a lamb. We talk about the assumptions about human beings and animals that are shown by readers' responses to the photograph that range from accusations of bestiality to affirmations of the oneness of all creatures. Nevertheless, the pygmy perception of themselves as a part of nature is one that most students never quite seem willing to entertain. Nature remains "out there," all that is not "man-made," according to the responses in their questionnaires at the end of the semester.

At the end of the book, after Ota has committed suicide in 1916, because he realizes he cannot return home, Verner, who had not maintained contact with his "Friday," as he often referred to Ota, holds a prayer meeting for his friend and asks the question, "...what was better, a white man who saw no further than skin pigment or an African who judged by the shading of the heart?" (222). The answer is contained in the question. Verner had learned the hard way. Verner sank into despair after Ota died (220). Maybe, through HU 141, my students can avoid some of the blindness that Verner and Crichton reveal in their experiences. Maybe they can become aware of and examine some of the assumptions of their own and other cultures.

Examining these assumptions, I try to emphasize, does not mean being highly critical of the assumption of one's own culture and ever accepting of others'. Sometimes we talk about the controversy concerning clitoridectomy: should westerners accept this practice as being an integral part of another culture or should they oppose it. We talk about the importance of being able to "take a step back," in one student's words, to see how we are shaped by the media, by schools, by peers, by parents.

Toward the end of the semester, students present projects on a range of subjects. Some students research their ancestry and discuss what they learned about both their family and themselves in the process. They often discover that they are not "self-made," that their work ethic or their wanderlust has a history they previously had been unaware of. Others create a

collage of song lyrics, lines of poetry, advertising slogans, and newspaper headlines that illustrate one view of life presented by our culture, concerning, for instance, the concept of romance or the importance of technology. Researching old magazines to show how a certain cultural assumption has changed over time is another possibility for a project (possible "topics," with assumptions determined by students, being the following: what makes a woman beautiful; the wonders of technology; sexual appeal; foods). A supplemental list of books and movies also is provided to students who may want to do a project focusing on unconscious assumptions the book or movie that the student has selected to study invites from readers and viewers or on how it relates to one of the major questions of the course. Two of the movies often discussed have been "Grand Canyon" and "The Gods Must Be Crazy."

What elements from another culture should be adopted by our culture or vice versa is another project subject. Their points concerning this subject sometimes disturb and provoke discussion, such as the suggestion of one American student who lived in Singapore and suggested that Americans adopt harsher laws to punish criminals. Many students react negatively to suggestions that we might adopt aspects of other cultures because they assume that ours is the best way. More often, the insights on this topic refresh and enlighten, such as the one of the Navajo student who described how his mother would wake him up to see the sun rise each morning and how personal property in his tribe did not exist. A Hawaiian student found people from the mainland only concerned with what is good for them rather than concerned with the good of the community, and a Korean student wished that his culture would adopt more of the Americans' acceptance of nonconformity. A Yaqui Indian student explained, by discussing the symbolism of a certain flower, his culture's relationship with nature, which was similar to the pygmies'.

The projects described above and comments in the students' course evaluations have indicated to me that they can understand the importance of examining the assumptions of their own and other cultures. One student wrote that "just

as Crichton was able to open up his mind through his travels, I have been able to open up my mind through HU 141." In the class, the importance of looking beyond first impressions, of not being constricted by routine and ordinary assumptions is emphasized as is the need to gain a broader perspective through travel, experience, and reading. A young Mexican woman wrote, "I used to believe that what I thought of nature was what I taught myself to believe. I was wrong. HU 141 helped me to realize that the ways I respect nature all come from my culture." "The importance of traveling to see outside of Western culture, to see how one is molded, to understand why you act a certain way" were points made in another student's evaluation. Being "alerted" to what "lies between the lines...in our culture," as another student phrased it, allowed him to "feel more alive" and allows us all to understand more clearly our humanity, a knowledge that is crucial in a democracy **and** in a classroom.

Like Ota, my students and I belong to cultures that are "home" to us. They define who we are. However much we would like to, we can never completely disengage ourselves, never understand all the cultural assumptions that determine our perceptions and behavior. What *Travels* and *Ota Benga* help to teach us is that while complete understanding is not necessary nor probably possible, realizing that our understanding is incomplete is necessary and is possible. Understanding that different perspectives exist and that it is possible and worthwhile to study some of the assumptions that guide us is enough, perhaps, to experience both humility and wonder and, in the process, make our hearts a bit purer.

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