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Montaigne's *Essays*, Study Abroad and Intercultural Learning: A Critical Examination

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ABSTRACT

In the late sixteenth century, the aging French thinker Michel de Montaigne wrote more than one hundred essays on a wide variety of topics ranging from classical literature and history, the human imagination, sickness and recovery, and the cultural encounter between the New and Old Worlds. Whereas Montaigne's *Essays* are frequently studied in classical and literary courses, they are less commonly included in intercultural learning and study abroad curricula despite the interesting connections between them. As such, this article examines the relevance of his *Essays* for intercultural learning in the context of international education. To what extent do Montaigne's ideas about self-awareness, self-examination and cultural relativism serve as pedagogical tools for promoting intercultural competency today? How did the encounter between the so-called New and Old Worlds shape Montaigne's thinking about cultural differences? What are the limitations of Montaigne's ideas about cultural relativism, suspending judgment and frameshifting, and how do they relate to intercultural learning in the context of study abroad?[2]

KEY WORDS: Montaigne, Study Abroad, Intercultural Learning.

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In the late sixteenth century, the aging French thinker Michel de Montaigne composed a series of essays in which he aimed to preserve his end-of-life reflections on human experience. His intended audience was his family and friends, but one can deduce that he considered reaching a wider audience. He drew on his classical studies as well as his lived experience and wrote more than a hundred essays on varied topics, ranging from the human imagination, idleness and the wandering mind, habits and customs, sickness and recovery, Roman history and literature, to historical events that marked his lifespan such as the European colonization of the New World. While Montaigne's *Essays* are frequently studied in European Renaissance, classical philosophy and literature courses, they are less commonly found in the reading lists of intercultural syllabi, which tend to incorporate material from cultural anthropology, history, regional and minority studies, communication, post-colonial and cultural studies.

As Richard Handler has aptly observed, Montaigne's essays "On Cannibals" and "On Habit" are particularly useful for teaching the concept of cultural relativism and its historical tradition in Western thought (12). His *Essays* also make reference to other concepts and practices currently taught in intercultural curricula such as self-awareness, frameshifting and suspending judgment. For instance, in his concluding essay, "On Experience," Montaigne sums up perhaps one of the most important themes of his work: that all men [*sic*] should take seriously the task of deeply knowing themselves (1219). Likewise, in the 23rd essay of Volume I, he explores how habit's "treacherous" and "authoritative foot" violently informs cultural judgement, beliefs and practices in early childhood. As Montaigne's reflection suggests, this occurs in such a forceful and unconscious way that we are later rendered submissive through convention and custom: "then by this gentle and humble beginning planted firmly within us, helped by time [Habit] later discloses an angry tyrannous countenance, against which we are no longer allowed even to lift up our eyes" ("On Habit" 122). Undoubtedly, the resemblance of Montaigne's Renaissance-era ideas to current intercultural concepts such as cultural programming[1] invite us to contemplate the incorporation of his *Essays* in

1 Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov define cultural programming in the following way: "Every person carries within him- or herself patterns of thinking, feeling and potential acting that were learned throughout the person's lifetime. Much of it was acquired in early childhood, because at that time a person is most susceptible to learning and assimilating. As soon as certain patterns of thinking feeling and acting have established themselves within a person's mind, he or she must unlearn these patterns before being able to learn something different, and unlearning is more difficult that learning for the first time" (4-5).

contemporary intercultural reading lists and course design.

At the same time, however, Handler cautions that Montaigne's *Essays* present a myriad of contradictions and complexities, many of which have been examined by scholars such as Tzvetan Todorov, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Michel de Certeau, among others. For instance, Handler points out that while Montaigne proposes a relativist approach to the cultural practices of the New World, he continues to posit the existence of a neutral, universal rationality that supersedes cultural influence (13). For this reason, we find Montaigne's *Essays* particularly suitable for advanced students of intercultural learning who already have a reasonably good understanding of concepts such as cultural relativism, frameshifting and self-awareness. In this context, Montaigne's *Essays* offer a propitious starting point for critically discussing the possibilities and limits of these practices. For example, what are the pitfalls of cultural relativism and frameshifting, and how do they relate to power? To what extent can we fully understand the cultural view of others without imposing our own implicit cultural values? As we will see below, the critical readings of Todorov and other scholars provide stimulating reflections on these topics.

In this framework, the present article examines the relevance and limitations of Montaigne's *Essays* for study abroad and intercultural learning curricula. What role can the reflections of a sixteenth century aristocrat play in contemporary study abroad and intercultural course design? To what extent do Montaigne's ideas about self-knowledge, self-examination and cultural relativism serve as pedagogical tools for promoting intercultural competency today? How did the encounter between the "New" and "Old" Worlds shape Montaigne's thinking about cultural differences? Is it possible to reconcile his critique of Eurocentrism and European notions of savagery with his tendency to idealize and exoticize indigenous cultures? In terms of organization, the first part of this article seeks to link Montaigne's quest for self-knowledge with the contemporary intercultural concept of self-awareness. The second part explores the impact of the New World on Montaigne's approach to cultural differences and traces concepts such as cultural relativism, suspending judgement and frameshifting in his writing.

CULTURAL SELF-AWARENESS, STUDY ABROAD AND MONTAIGNE

> "If all complain that I talk too much about myself, I complain that they never even think about their own selves." (Montaigne, III, 2, 908)
>
> "I would rather be an expert on me than on Cicero." (Montaigne, III, 13, 1218)

Leading study abroad practitioners and scholars widely agree that cultural self-awareness, defined here as the critical examination of one's personal and cultural lens or frame of reference, constitutes an integral component of intercultural development and competency. For instance, in Milton J. Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), the ethnorelative stages (Acceptance, Adaptation and Integration) are characterized by deep levels of cultural self-awareness, whereas the ethnocentric stages (Denial, Defense and Minimization) are associated with low levels of cultural self-awareness (102-111). In a similar fashion, the Association of American Colleges and Universities' *Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Value Rubric* considers cultural self-awareness as an essential knowledge area, placing it alongside other fundamental competencies such as empathy, curiosity, and verbal and non-verbal communication skills. Within this framework, a student who demonstrates the highest level of competency is able to: "[Articulate] insights into own cultural rules and biases (e.g. seeking complexity; aware of how her/his experiences have shaped these rules, and how to recognize and respond to cultural biases, resulting in a shift in self-description.)" (2). Quantitative intercultural assessment tools such as the Intercultural Development Inventory (Hammer) and the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (Korn Ferry/Kozai) also weigh heavily on cultural self-awareness and self-reflection.

Despite scholarly consensus, the concept and practice of cultural self-awareness is occasionally met with resistance by students and, in some cases, even by instructors of intercultural learning courses. Some students are reluctant to engage in self-awareness exercises prior to and during study abroad for the simple reason that they prefer to focus on learning about the host culture.[2] Traditional international programs often prime students to associate studying abroad with

2 In traditional study abroad paradigms, "host culture" is often used to refer to the dominant national culture, supposedly homogenous in nature. Contemporary conceptualizations focus on the heterogenous, transnational and fluid nature of cultures. In this sense, it would be more appropriate to speak of "host cultures" to recognize the presence of multiple and varied cultures within national borders.

cultural literacy that is, the exploration of the host country's material and immaterial culture. This perspective fails to consider that intercultural development also implies unpacking one's own cultural values, biases and perceptions. Therefore, even though students might show significant interest in learning the host's language, history, literature, customs, gestures, and culinary practices, they are often less inclined to reflect on how their own cultural lens plays a role in interpreting and evaluating these cultural phenomena. As Bennett argues, this is symptomatic of "paradigmatic confusion," in which the stated learning goals of a study abroad program are incompatible with underlying program designs (92). Some students also perceive self-awareness as non-academic in nature and therefore incongruous with university coursework. In some cases, instructors are reluctant to teach self-awareness for the same reasons that students are hesitant to study it: it can be perceived as a non-serious, self-absorbed endeavor, unfit for university curriculum. Additional pedagogical concerns include how to effectively evaluate self-reflection activities (e.g. journals) and how to facilitate group discussions that include personal and subjective experiences.

Reluctance toward self-awareness curriculum might not come as a surprise, however, given its relatively recent inclusion in study abroad pedagogical frameworks. As Bennett suggests in his overview of the evolution of U.S. study abroad paradigms, introspection and self-exploration did not become a core element of intercultural curricula until very recently. Early models of U.S. study abroad that were developed in the 19th-century were based on positivist epistemologies and their search for the underlying universal laws of nature. Valid knowledge was the product of empirical evidence and the use of reason and logic; other forms of knowledge, such as emotion or introspection, were disregarded based on their inability to be proven empirically (Bennett 92-96). Study abroad models of this period placed emphasis on Western European cultures with the hope that students would become more sophisticated and polished, by being exposed to the material and intellectual heritage of the West. Moreover, cultures and nations were mostly conceived in hierarchical ways (superior vs. inferior cultures; high and low culture) and in fixed, essentialist terms. Because culture was believed to exist in an external, objective and material realm outside the traveler (e.g., in great monuments and works of art), little emphasis was placed on the examination of one's

own cultural mindset. As Vande Berg, Paige, and Hemming Lou argue, the ideal representation of this study abroad model was the 19th-century Grand European Tour, through which universities sought to increase students' worldliness by exposing them to the great works of Western history, art and literature (15-16).

In the mid-20th century, Bennett observes a shift toward a new paradigm of study abroad based on relativist theories, many of which continue to inform program design today. Instead of seeking the existence of one universal truth, relativism focuses on frames of reference within complex systems of multiple components. In this sense, one's point of view is always relative to that of others; there is no single, universal way of viewing the world. In other words, no perspective is inherently better than another, but simply different. As such, culture was no longer understood as solely external and material, but also as existing within the individual in the form of their worldview or perspective.

As relativism was adopted by the social sciences, cultures and nations were no longer viewed as hierarchical but in relative terms, paving the way for the establishment of study abroad programs outside Western Europe. Programs inspired by this paradigm tended to prioritize "full" immersion and long-term programs (semester to a year) in order for students to deeply and authentically engage with the host culture. However, they tended to offer little guidance about how to do so effectively and appropriately (Vande Berg, Paige and Hemming Lou 17-18). This often led to a desire to "go native" or "pass" as the cultural other without critically examining the colonial, conceptual, and practical implications of such a goal. At the same time, numerous programs encouraged students to examine their own perspective and often employed metaphors like the "colored glasses" to promote cognizance of their cultural frame of reference. But as Bennett argues, even though this practice might lead to greater cultural self-awareness, it did not necessarily provide students with the ability to shift perspectives (96-99).

In more recent years Bennett identifies a shift toward the constructivist paradigm, which is based on the idea that reality is constantly constructed by the observer. "This is a quite different notion than that of relativistic perspective, which simply describes different views of reality. In this

constructivist paradigm, the observer interacts with reality via his or her perspective in such a way that reality is organized according to that perspective" (Bennett 99). As such, the constructivist model argues that there is no inherent meaning in the phenomena, but rather that meaning is constructed by the observer via an inseparable relationship with the observed. Culture is no longer understood in fixed or reified terms, but as patterns of social behavior that are shaped by an ongoing process by which reality is constructed and organized. In consequence, Bennett discards the idea that people have a single, unchanging worldview; on the contrary, they "are constantly in the process of interacting with the world in ways that both express the pattern of the history of their interactions and contribute to those patterns. They are constructing a view of the world" (101). For this reason, cultural self-awareness and reflexivity are at the core of this paradigm's approach to learning:

> When we encourage intercultural learning, we are asking people to engage in a self-reflexive act. Specifically, we are asking them to use the process of defining culture (which is their culture) to redefine culture in a way that is not their culture. Because our different experience is a function of how we organize reality differently, the only way people can have access to the experience of a different culture is by organizing reality more in that way than in their own way. (Bennett 101-102)

This has multiple implications for the design of study abroad programs. In contrast to the positivist paradigm, in which learning is a result of the environment imprinting itself on the individual, programs designed in the constructivist vein understand that learning happens when students intentionally reflect on their interactions with the host culture(s). As Vande Berg, Paige, and Hemming Lou argue, the "primary goal of study abroad is not, then, simply to acquire knowledge but to develop in ways that allow students to shift cultural perspectives and to adapt their behavior to other cultural contexts" (18). But the ability to shift perspective and adapt behavior are not an automatic byproduct of living in another cultural environment; studies like the Georgetown Consortium Project confirm that the great majority of students only develop these skills when they intentionally partake in intercultural learning curricula facilitated by trained cultural mentors (Paige and Vande Berg 34-38).

Within this framework, the development of cultural self-awareness –a deep inquiry into how we construct reality and the ways in which we perceive, interpret and judge the world around us— is considered a primary competency. As we have seen, the learning process is not about attempting to remove our cultural lens in order to discover some underlying inherent reality, but rather reflecting on how meaning is constantly being created from different cultural lenses. Nor is the purpose to assimilate into another cultural frame, but rather to become aware of how different cultural frames of reference organize reality (Bennett 98). Only then may we begin to contemplate the existence of other ways of constructing reality: "The ability to use self-reflexive consciousness in such a way as to construct alternative cultures and move into alternative experience is the crux of intercultural adaptation" (Bennett 101).

How can we, then, use Montaigne's *Essays* to encourage, stimulate and problematize self-awareness and reflexivity in intercultural curricula? What aspects of his writing are most relevant to this topic? What insights does he offer about the process of becoming more culturally self-aware and reflexive? As Montaigne's English translator M.A. Screech points out, he was one of the earlier Western writers to underscore the importance of self-awareness. When Montaigne retired to his family estate following his father's death:

> his plan was, like cultured gentleman in Ancient Roman times, to devote himself to learned leisure. [...] [But Montaigne] was not a professional scholar: he had no subject to write about. He soon decided to write about himself, the only subject he might know better than anyone else. This was a revolutionary decision, made easier, no doubt, by his bout of melancholy, for that humour encouraged an increased self-awareness. No one in Classical Antiquity had done anything like it. In the history of the known world only a handful of authors had ever broken the taboo against writing about himself, as an ordinary man [*sic*]. (xiv-xv)

In his celebrated book, *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach also suggests that Montaigne's most important contribution to Western thought was precisely the validation of the act of self-examination. Unlike many Western scholars who disregarded self-based knowledge as presumptuous or trivial (with the exception of St. Augustine), Montaigne elevated the examination of the changing

self and positioned it as the most valuable and worthwhile activity a human can pursue. In fact, Auerbach reminds us that the very title of his voluminous work, *Essais,* suggests the practice of "self-try-outs" or "Tests upon One's Self" (292). From the Preface onward, examples abound of Montaigne's quest for self-knowledge: for instance, in the oft-quoted opening lines of "On repenting" he declares: "Others form Man; I give an account of Man and sketch a picture of a particular one of them [...] The brushstrokes of my portrait do not go awry even though they do change and vary" (907). Later on, in the same volume, he reflects: "I who make no other profession than getting to know myself find in me such boundless depths and variety that my apprenticeship bears no other fruit than to make me know how much there remains to learn" ("On Experience" 1220).

As Auerbach explains, for Montaigne the study of his inner world was worthwhile for the simple reason that it shed light on the essence of the human condition. Auerbach contrasts Montaigne's approach to that of traditional history, which focused on the major episodes of an individual's life, and therefore presents a piecemeal and segmented interpretation of the human subject. Self-examination, on the other hand, allows one to contemplate the vicissitudes of daily lived experience, and in turn, consider the full spectrum of human existence in all its complexity and contradiction (Auerbach 302). As Montaigne writes about his process of self-reflection: "I am expounding a lowly, lackluster existence. You can attach the whole of moral philosophy to a commonplace private life as well as to one of richer stuff. Every man bears the whole Form of the human condition" ("On repenting" 908).

This quote makes reference to a second reason why Montaigne deemed it so important to examine one's inner world: because it opened a path for developing a complete moral philosophy, or in other words, how to live well: "self-knowledge [...] represents a direct way of reaching what is the ultimate goal of his quest, namely, right living" (Auerbach 293). Because formal moral philosophy was often obfuscated by abstract ideas, obscure language, and a conspicuous disconnect from reality, Montaigne believed that the art of moral living should be based on real life experience (Auerbach 302). As Auerbach reasons, "If every man affords material and occasion for the development of

the complete moral philosophy, then a precise and sincere self-analysis of any random individual is justified. [...] The method of listening can be applied with any level of accuracy only to the experimenter's own person; it is in the last analysis a method of self-auscultation, of the observation of one's own inner movements" (297).

Moreover, Auerbach's reading of "On Repentance" illuminates the way in which Montaigne's writing models a method for self-examination (292). As any reader of his *Essays* undoubtedly has noted, Montaigne's writing often takes on a meandering, exploratory and even conflicting character. His thoughts do not always appear to follow a straightforward logic or a single overarching train of thought. And at times he contradicts himself within the same essay without explanation. For Montaigne, however, this did not present a logical problem nor an underlying incoherence, but rather an authentic tracing of the fluctuations and vicissitudes of human existence within an ever-changing world:

> The world is but a perennial see-saw. Everything in it [...] all waver within a common motion and their own. Constancy itself is nothing but a more languid rocking to and fro. I am unable to stabilize my subject: it staggers confusedly along with a natural drunkenness. I grasp it as it is now, at this moment when I am lingering over it. I am not portraying being but becoming: not the passage from one age to another [...] but from day to day, from minute to minute. This is a register of varied and changing occurrences, of ideas which are unresolved and, when needs be, contradictory, either because I myself have become different or because I grasp hold of different attributes or aspects of my subject. ("On repenting" 907-908)

As Auerbach argues, Montaigne's composition method allowed him to trace his inner world as authentically as possible:

> Such words mirror a very realistic conception of man [*sic*] based on experience and in particular on self-experience: the conception that man is a fluctuating creature subject to the changes which take place in his surroundings, his destiny, and his inner impulses. Thus Montaigne's apparently fanciful method, which obeys no preconceived plan but adapts itself elastically to the changes of his own being, is basically a strictly experimental method, the

> only method which conforms to such a subject. [...] It is this strict and, even in the modern sense, scientific method which Montaigne endeavors to maintain. Perhaps he would have objected to the pretentiously scientific-sounding word "method", but a method it is. (292)

From this method we can derive a basic premise for developing a practice of self-awareness: the act of systematically registering and recording one's ideas, thoughts and perceptions as we experience them, including contradictions, paradoxes, tensions and conflicting ideas. This, in turn, provides the raw material from which we can uncover and deconstruct our underlying cultural values, assumptions, interpretations and judgments, in other words, the elements which constitute our cultural lens at any given time. This process of surfacing our thought patterns is precisely what allows us to critically examine the process by which we make meaning and construct reality.

In his critical re-reading of Auerbach, Luiz Eva argues that Montaigne's quest for absolute self-knowledge actually ended in failure.[3] But for Eva the process was far from pointless: not only did it allow Montaigne to observe his underlying thought patterns and critically evaluate unconscious expectations, but also to identify alternative ways of reacting to said expectations: "I take Montaigne here to be suggesting that, even if we cannot properly attain knowledge about our individual selves [...], we may still discern some regular patterns in our actions and feelings [...]. As we try to look at ourselves at some distance from our present situation, we can discern better how differently we proceed and accordingly better regulate our
expectations" (Eva 85).

As we have seen, Montaigne's *Essays* granted legitimacy and validation to self-knowledge in Western thought. For the author, the examination of real-life experience not only leads to greater self-understanding but also to a deeper comprehension of the human condition. It also provides the basis for living fully and well: "If you have been able to examine and manage your own life you have achieved the greatest task of all. [...] Our most great and glorious achievement is to live our life fittingly. Everything else –reigning, building, laying up treasure— are at most tiny props and small accessories" (Montaigne "On Experience" 1258-1259). In summary, Montaigne establishes

3 Eva situates Montaigne within skeptical philosophical tradition, the reason for which any search for definitive knowledge, even self-knowledge, would be in vain (73).

that the cultivation of self-awareness is a worthy and gratifying endeavor, which makes his writing particularly relevant to current intercultural curricula. The discussion of partial or full versions of his essays (e.g. "On Habit", "On Repentance", "On Experience"), provide ample material for exploring the role, purpose, and limits of self-examination.

MONTAIGNE, CULTURAL RELATIVISM AND THE NEW WORLD "CANNIBALS"

Even though Montaigne never traveled across the Atlantic, the European encounter with the so-called New World had an undeniable and profound effect on Montaigne's understanding of cultural differences. From the very beginning of the *Essays* he underscores the juxtaposition between what he considered the "sweet liberty" of the New World and the increasingly corrupt and degraded cultural practices of European civilization ("To the Reader" n/p). As Rigolot points out, "[The natural man] is one of the leading themes of the book. A number of passages in the *Essays* themselves bear witness to the effect the discovery of a new continent had on him" (16). It is not surprising, then, that the New World and the ensuing European colonization constitute a key theme in many of Montaigne's essays.[4] Throughout his work he references the cultures of Americas not only to comment on the cultural practices of its inhabitants, but also to denounce the ills of European society.

In his article on Montaigne and the Americas, Vicente Raga Rosaleny argues that the encounter with the New World was precisely what allowed the French thinker to propose a new conception of the human condition that veered away from the ancient Greek categories used by the Spanish to classify the indigenous peoples as barbarians. In "On Cannibals", Montaigne rules out the applicability of barbarism by arguing that the Aristotelian conception of human nature was ill equipped to make sense of the cultures and peoples of the New World. He does this by first pointing out that the Greek philosophers' cosmology of the un-inhabited world did not contemplate the land masses colonized by Columbus. Neither Plato's description of the long-lost Atlantis nor Aristotle's description of a Carthaginian settlement on a rich island beyond the Straits of Gibraltar aligned with the physical and geographical coordinates of the New World (Raga Rosaleny 95). After

4 "In Moderation", "Of Coaches" and the oft-cited "On Cannibals" all comment on the cultures of the New World (Rigolot 19). Montaigne was an overt critic of Spanish colonization (Fielbaum).

demonstrating the inapplicability of ancient geography, Montaigne then proceeded to refute the use of the word barbarian when referring to the indigenous groups living in what is now the coast of Brazil (Raga Rosaleny 95; de Certeau 271; Montaigne "On Cannibals" 230-231). This allowed Montaigne not only to question the ethnocentrism implicit in this type of classification, but also to decry the European tendency to overlook their own acts of barbarism. In "On Cannibals", Montaigne writes:

> I find (from what has been told to me) that there is nothing savage or barbarous about those people, but that every man calls barbarous anything he is not accustomed to; it is indeed the case that we have no other criterion of truth or right-reason than the example and form of the opinions and customs of our own country. There we always find the perfect religion, the perfect polity, the most developed and perfect way of doing anything! (231)

Montaigne then goes on to argue that the cannibalistic indigenous tribes were much less barbarous than French society itself. He contends that, unlike the ancient Scythians who consumed humans for food, the native people practiced ritualistic cannibalism as an act of vengeance in the context of noble warfare.[5] Cruelty and torture were not part of this practice.[6] In comparison to the violent and bloody French civil wars that marked Montaigne's era, the indigenous tribes were less barbarous:

> It does not sadden me that we should note the horrible barbarity in a practice such as theirs: what does sadden me is that, while judging correctly of their wrong-doings we should be so blind to our own. I think there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead; more barbarity in lacerating by rack and torture a body still fully able to feel things, in roasting him little by little and having him bruised and bitten by pigs and dogs (as we have not only read about but see in recent memory, not among enemies in antiquity but among our fellow-citizens and neighbors - and what is worse, in the name of duty and religion) than in roasting him and eating him after his death. ("On Cannibals" 236)

Effectively, Montaigne carries out a re-reading of the practice of cannibalism, inverting the negative

5 "Their warfare is entirely noble and magnanimous; it has as much justification and beauty as that human malady allows: among them it has no other foundation than a zealous concern for courage." (Montaigne "On Cannibals" 236)

6 Montaigne notes that prisoners were kept comfortable for the period leading up to their death, which was then carried out relatively quickly. Once dead, their bodies were cut up, cooked and then consumed by the victors in a ritual of honor.

stigma by contemplating its ritualistic importance and the positive cultural values associated with it (bravery, dignity).[7] As Michel de Certeau argues, Montaigne proposes a double re-signification of barbarism and savagery, contending that the real barbarians were indeed his own countrymen who willingly tortured and maimed their neighbors while still alive (276). What was more barbarous was his own society's inclination to ignore its own acts of cruelty, while simultaneously belittling and judging the cultural practices of the New World.

Evidently the aforementioned excerpts from "On Cannibals" provide abundant material for teaching and problematizing key concepts and practices in intercultural learning such as ethnocentrism, suspending judgment and cultural relativism. Montaigne not only critiques the ethnocentric tendency to judge another culture from one's own point of view, but also the tendency to assume *a priori* that one culture is superior to another (what current interculturalists might call polarization in defense mode).[8] Secondly, Montaigne hints at the practice of frameshifting or perspective taking, understood as consciously stepping away from one's frame of reference in an attempt to understand other cultural practices in their particular context. Thirdly, Montaigne employs the concept of suspending judgment, or the process of intentionally postponing one's cultural judgments when engaging with cultural difference. As Montaigne writes in another essay:

> I do not suffer from that common failing of judging another man by me: I can easily believe that others have qualities quite distinct from my own. Just because I feel that I am pledged to my individual form, I do not bind all others to it as everyone else does: I can conceive and believe that there are thousands of different ways of living and, contrary to most men, I more readily acknowledge our differences than our similarities. I am as ready as you may wish to relieve another human being of my attributes and basic qualities and to contemplate him simply as he is, free from comparisons and sculpting him after his own model. ("On Cato the Younger" 257)

7 Montaigne highlights the dignity and bravery of the prisoners, who preferred to die than to succumb to cowardice. "There is not one prisoner in the hundred years who does not prefer to die rather than to derogate from the greatness of an invincible mind by look or by word; you cannot find one who does not prefer to be killed and eaten than merely to ask to be spared" ("On Cannibals" 237).
8 In Milton Bennet's DMIS model, polarization is defined as an us/them mindset in which cultures are positioned against each other in a hierarchical scheme. Bennett has identified two versions of polarization: the defense mode in which a person considers their own culture as superior to others; and the reversal mode in which the adopted culture is perceived as superior to one's own culture (105).

This quote is particularly useful for intercultural learning, as it encapsulates the practice of setting aside one's cultural frame of reference and standards when evaluating other individuals and cultures. In this sense, it aligns well with intercultural debriefing activities such as the D.I.E., which teaches learners to suspend judgment –albeit temporarily— by first describing cultural phenomena in the most neutral terms possible and then exploring possible interpretations of them.[9]

As the D.I.E. method suggests, the idea that one can indefinitely suspend judgment or fully take on another cultural perspective is problematic in many ways. In Montaigne's case, he never met the indigenous groups he wrote about. Was it possible for him to understand their cultural practices when his reference material was European in origin?[10] Although Montaigne is keen on redeeming certain indigenous cultural practices, they are always mediated by European translators and Montaigne himself. And even though he valued their cultures, his understanding of them oscillated between idealization to simplification. Consider the following description from "On Cannibals":

> I would tell Plato that those people [the indigenous] have no trade of any kind, no acquaintance with writing, no knowledge of numbers, no terms for governor or political superior, no practice of subordination or of riches or poverty, no contracts, no inheritances, no divided estates, no occupation but leisure, no concern for kinship - except such as is common to them all - no clothing, no agriculture, no metals, no use of wine or corn. Among them you hear no words for treachery, lying, cheating, avarice, envy, backbiting or forgiveness (I, 31, 233).

Here it is evident that Montaigne's theoretical commitment to suspending judgment falls short. The practice of setting aside his European frame of reference proves much more complicated than he anticipates, as the long list of negatives –no writing, no government, no agriculture, etc.—, implicitly draws on European notions of the civilized and the uncivilized (Todorov). Although Montaigne highlights what he considers the "redeeming characteristics" (no cheating, lying or avarice), he falls

9 The DIE method stands for Describe, Interpret, Evaluate.

10 Montaigne's sources were all second and third hand, including Girolamo Benzoni's *La historia del mondo nuovo* and F. López de Gómara's *Historia general de las Indias*. It is also likely that he read the André Thevet's *Les singularitez de la France Antarctique, autrement nommée Amerique* (Paris, 1557) about the author's experience residing in a short-lived settlement on the Brazilian coast. (For further information, see the footnotes on page 274 of Bayod Brau's Spanish translation of Montaigne's *Essays*, referenced in the Works Cited). Montaigne's only direct contact seems to have been with a small group of indigenous men sent to France to be displayed and examined at court, which he mentions at the end of "On Cannibals".

back on the traditional European categories from which he claims to distance himself. In this sense, Tzvetan Todorov rightly argues that Montaigne's radical cultural relativism masks an underlying form of unconscious universalism. His exaltation of the Brazilian cannibals' bravery and polygamy (the two practices he admires) is, in effect, a projection of his own cultural values, which are in turn based in classical categories.[11] As Todorov argues, Montaigne's projection is problematic not only because it espouses an overt indifference toward to other, but also because it assumes the facade of cultural relativism: "El universalista consciente puede condenar [a los otros]; pero lo hace en nombre de una moral abiertamente asumida y que, por ello, puede ser puesta en tela de juicio. El universalista inconscience es inatacable, puesto que pretende ser relativista; pero esto no le impide emitir juicios sobre otros, e imponerles su ideal" (63). Critiques such as Todorov's provide a rich counter-reading of Montaigne's work, and the concepts he introduces —for example, unconscious universalism— constitute a propitious platform for reflecting on the limits of cultural relativism and suspending judgment, as well as their relation to power.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have examined the relevance of Michel de Montaigne's *Essays* to contemporary intercultural curricula and suggested multiple ways in which they are applicable to intercultural learning. On the one hand, Montaigne validates the practice of self-examination and models a method for tracking and observing one's underlying assumptions, values and perceptions. Moreover, his quest for self-awareness sheds light on the complex and changing nature of human thought, as Montaigne himself notes the many contradictions and tensions surface as he writes. As Eva suggests, even though Montaigne is unable to achieve absolute self-knowledge, the process of looking inward is by no means futile; on the contrary, it offers rich insights into his own expectations and assumptions, and in turn, grants him the ability to adjust them accordingly.

On the other hand, Montaigne's writing illustrates a myriad of intercultural concepts such as relativism, cultural programming, frameshifting and suspending judgment. In this sense, his reflections about the New World are useful for exploring and problematizing the scope and limits of

11 "El juicio del valor positivo se fundamenta […] en la proyección sobre el otro de una imagen propia o, más exactamente, de un ideal del yo, encarnado, para Montaigne, en la civilización clásica. Lo cierto es que el otro jamás es percibido ni conocido. Lo que Montaigne elogia, no son los 'caníbales' sino sus propios valores". (Todorov 63).

these concepts and practices. A critical reading of "On Cannibals" allows readers to reflect on the complexities of cultural relativism and can serve as a platform for candidly discussing the challenges of suspending judgment and shifting frames in everyday practice. For instance, to what extent can we take on the perspective(s) of the host culture(s)? What checks and balances are needed to ensure that a theoretical commitment to suspending judgment does not fall short in everyday life? How can we use self-awareness practices to trace unconscious universalism in our thought patterns and assumptions? These questions are enriched even more when paired with critical readings such as Todorov's, which brings to the forefront questions of power and positionality. In conclusion, Montaigne's *Essays* offer valuable teaching material and invite us to consider other classical works in the development of course design.

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