Becoming a SoTL Scholar

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Identity Exploration Student Reflective Essay

CHAPTER 3

SOTL CITIZEN

A Memoir of Home and Exile in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

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Writing to understand herself and her Asian American identity, feminist Elaine Chang (1994) settled on a story her mother told her of a blue frog. The frog was not actually blue, but called that through a mistranslation by her Korean mother. And yet, Chang identified strongly with the blue frog. She adopted the "counterfeit" story because the blue frog "is a (by-) product of cultural and linguistic cross-fertilization," (263) just as she was, and the mistranslated story became something new in its evolution. Chang ended her retelling of the story by asking, "Do blue frogs have a place in feminist theorizing?" (1994, 263). In 2010, Trinh Minh-Ha retold Chang's story and changed the question to ask: "Do blue frogs have a place in academic discourse?" (39).

I think the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) is a blue frog in academic discourse, a by-product of disciplinary and linguistic cross-fertilization. My theory is that the disciplinary and linguistic blending in SoTL make it a space of both home and exile for those within it. My process of becoming a SoTL scholar has echoed my process of becoming myself: grappling with a sense of "never being fully adjusted" (Said 1996, 53), restless and unmoored from my very early childhood. Perhaps I developed a resultant comfort in that restlessness, the way a baby is rocked to sleep by constant movement. I sought out that feeling in academia, looking for the

places I felt rocked, and I found SoTL. Becoming myself has been a process of creating my home in this academic space.

In the following, I share my personal experiences of feeling exiled and at home as an introduction to examining how SoTL may hold those same feelings for other scholars. I use theory and present my own through this piece. This kind of theory is intended to offer a possible lens through which to differently understand something (Kezar 2006)—in this case, SoTL and scholarly identity—but it is not intended to serve as a "grand theory" aimed at near universal generalizability. Leaning especially on Trinh Minh-Ha and Edward Said's theories about exile, I describe how those new to SoTL are like travelers filled with the possibility of transformation, and how those who stay in SoTL may become exiles—both in their experience of challenge and creative possibility. I offer examples of people who are exiles in the field and those who are exiled by the field before returning to unpack the implications of being an always-SoTL scholar as I am—a SoTL citizen. Through this grounding, I blend my critique and hope for the field to dismantle constructed differences among scholars and disciplines. Doing so, I hope, will help us all understand the possibilities of scholarship anew.

Many will not recognize themselves in my experiences—my entrance to the field has always been somewhat unusual, and SoTL citizens, as I will argue, are rare. Nonetheless, the longer this text exists, the more who will see their paths in mine. To all, I say *welcome.*

First Exile: Fairhaven Primary School, Te Puke, Aotearoa New Zealand

I recall standing behind a trailer that was being used as a classroom, rectangular boxes dotting the field behind the rest of the one-level school. My cousin Laura was likely with me. We were seven and I was shy. I kept my shoes on in the dirt and grass behind the building and stuck out sorely. The boy who approached me was older—maybe nine?—and I remember his red polo, part of the school uniform for the older students. He was angry, though I don't remember why. My

journal that day reports that he appeared unprompted to shout *Fat Slob!* before disappearing again into the shadows behind the school building. I remember I cried and I had the sense his accusation had something to do with my Americanness. I also remember paying far more attention to my utterly normal tummy and a new and persistent worry that my body was too much.

When I was very little, I had an in-between voice. My American teachers asked if I was British. "New Zealand," I corrected them, and I could spell it, too. This kind of singling out felt special. When I spent two weeks at Fairhaven Primary with Laura, I felt inadequate. Being American wasn't special: I was further behind in math, I knew almost no Te Reo Māori, I couldn't run as fast. Back in Brooklyn, my first-grade teacher celebrated my return. She sat me before the class, where I read my journal aloud to my peers. Shortly after returning to Brooklyn, a classmate pulled my seat out from under me as I sat down. I was dislodged and unmoored.

I grew up in New York City, a place of constant movement. Nearly everyone I knew in high school were immigrants or children of immigrants. Most were from places that experienced political upheaval in the 1980s and 90s: Russia, Korea, Venezuela, Bangladesh. New York was our home at the same time as it was their families' exile. I was not *in exile*, but I lived in a borderland (Anzaldúa 1987). Like many of my friends, I was told stories of "returning": New York was temporary. The timing was never right, but I kept hoping that if we did go back, I could relearn my accent and start to fit in. Of course, if the timing had been right, I would have realized my Americanness will not disappear. I have roots here both in my maternal family, and also in this cultural context I know most intimately. When I wished to return to a place I never started in, I expected to find somewhere I fully belonged. That place does not exist.

I write this trying to map out my own complicated understanding of self and home, my own questioning of where I belong. In all the pilgrimages back over my lifetime, I have spent a little more than one year of my life in New Zealand—about three percent. Is there

a specific measure that marks when one is enough of a place? I am in a constant state of oscillation, both recognizing and incapable of understanding that "[my] self is unstable, evolving, always exceeding its description" (Cohen and Dalke 2019, 386). This feeling of exile—though not *exiled*—is a part of my very being: too American to be a New Zealander, too New Zealander to be an American. I have always been both too much and not enough.

Traveling to SoTL / Travelers in SoTL

Like my hometown of New York, SoTL is filled with travelers and exiles. There are more travelers in SoTL than there are citizens, as scholars pass through prompted by a teaching problem or question before returning to the security of their disciplinary work. The traveler is always negotiating between home and abroad (Trinh 2010). Home for an academic is the discipline whose questions echo one's own, whose methods feel familiar and natural, whose theories form the lenses through which one sees the world. For most, to step into SoTL is to step into the unfamiliar. This process can be an uncomfortable as scholars struggle to reconcile the differences between SoTL and their academic discipline and begin to question their scholarly identity (Simmons et al. 2013); in the previous chapter, Nowell offers some strategies for working to overcome this discomfort.

Each person entering SoTL faces some kind of marginalization—if you feel this way, know you are not alone. The artist and humanist discover they are "regularly harangued by colleagues from more empirical fields, told our methods [are] insufficient or invalid" (Bloch-Schulman et al. 2016, 109), told to learn a new language and translate themselves to fit a new mold (Chick offers a different path in chapter 8). The scientist finds their typical approaches no longer work: Can one ethically implement a control group if one believes deeply that a certain pedagogical approach is better (Bernstein 2018)? Can one generalize from statistical data in a class of only eighteen students? (Fisher shares a reframing for STEM researchers in chapter 7.) The social scientist often feels most at home. Their

disciplinary dialect is one of the most commonly spoken in SoTL (Bernstein 2018). Yet, like the rest, their work still frequently faces questions of legitimacy and value by colleagues and administrators (McKinney 2018; Baron and McCormack review some of these critiques in chapter 6). How does SoTL fit into the research story one was hired to tell?

Many discomforts a SoTL traveler faces are tied to hegemonic expectations of knowledge that they and others bring to the field. Scholarly research and writing is filled with norms constructed by those with more power, which gatekeep those with less (Tuhiwai Smith 1999). The dominance of social science methods, for example, generally represents what Leibowitz (2017) described as "Western Cartesian" approach. In other words, knowledge is presumed to stem from rational, relatively objective study and analysis, is easily packaged into autonomous pieces, and is generalizable to a larger population (Leibowitz 2017). While SoTL often pushes against these assumptions, the SoTL research process and its representation through presentation or publication remain relatively uniform, in spite of calls for diversifying its production (Chng and Looker 2013) and genre (e.g., Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather 2020; Mercer-Mapstone and Abbot 2020). This academic uniformity comes at the exclusion of other kinds of knowing, which may result in the loss of those knowledges and the practices from which they stem (Leibowitz 2017).

If a discipline is a nation, scholars who step into SoTL are crossing borders, boundaries (Kensington-Miller et al. 2021), thresholds (Chick 2014; Webb and Tierney 2020). They are creating trading zones (Bernstein 2018) and coming to terms with their liminality. SoTL is a borderland, "created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants" (Anzaldúa 1987, 3). Borderlands are ecologically rich. Likewise, SoTL is filled with a diversity of peoples and questions, filled with catalytic energy to affect change in higher education. Those who come to occupy this space more

permanently—who become "prohibited and forbidden"—are what I would call SoTL exiles.

Exiles in SoTL

Many scholars find SoTL and never leave. These scholars are disciplinary exiles now living in SoTL, existing in a space of "never being fully adjusted," a state of "restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others" (Said 1996, 53). They may be forced to abandon the safety of their disciplinary sphere when they embrace this study of teaching—though they do not forget their culture, and they may continue to bring in the methods, theories, and assumptions that are native to their first homes. SoTL calls to these scholars even as they may be marginalized or passed over, left unfunded or unhired due to their participation (McKinney 2006). As their work is pushed into the periphery, they may disproportionately occupy teaching-centered (Simmons et al. 2021) or educational development positions (Felten and Chick 2018), rather than more secure, tenured positions within their discipline. These risks are disproportionately felt by faculty of color and women (Marquis et al. 2020). There are challenges to this state of being.

And yet, the experience of exile also brings benefits. Said (1996) argued that exiles are the only true intellectuals. This may seem hyperbolic, but there are some benefits to the condition, which include "the pleasure of being surprised" (59), a "double perspective" of "what is left behind and what is actual here and now" (60), and a recognition of situations "as contingent, . . . the result of a series of historical choices" that people have made (60). These elements are key to both doing SoTL and being a SoTL scholar. Many good SoTL questions come from following the surprise that one encounters in the classroom (Poole 2018). Recognition of limiting assumptions held about teaching ("what is left behind") and one's present students and classroom ("what is actual here and now") helps scholars adapt and innovate in their research and pedagogy. The context and the history of the students, the institution, and the nation are all relevant to SoTL, which values context in its knowledge production.

Together, these elements allow the "*exilic* intellectual" (Said 1996, 64) to reject the conventional and become a change-maker. SoTL's blend of study and application is change-making.

Finding Home in Exile

Trinh suggested that exiles are "condemned to write only autobiographical works" (2010, 28). SoTL is in many ways autobiography: it is a field largely centered on one's own pedagogical practices and the intuitions that rise out of those practices (Poole 2018). Even many meta-reflections on SoTL as a field draw on personal experiences. Chick's 2014 defense of humanistic methods in SoTL pulls from her own background as a literary scholar. Chng and Looker's 2013 critique of western hegemony in SoTL stems from their experiences as SoTL scholars in Asia. Each is improved by that blend of personal investment, theory, and scholarly evidence.

Autobiography is a home that exiles build for themselves (Trinh 2010). My own SoTL autobiography starts with feeling exiled. In college, I jumped from class to class, enjoying nearly everything I did, but not feeling quite right in any single space. Choosing a college, I had the sense that I could make a home for myself anywhere I went. In picking a discipline, though, I was less convinced of finding home. I expected a gut feeling, an inner tingle that couldn't be sated. The hungriest I felt was in education courses, where questions of power and privilege drove me down rabbit holes and where every class was a lesson not only in content, but in the dynamics of interaction themselves. But we were a liberal arts college, which meant we could not major in a professional field like education.

The people who created their own major advised, "Don't do it." My professors said, "It will be harder if you are alone. You'll have to fight for everything." But something inside me kept whispering "what if?" When the professor I most wanted to become said, "If you are sure you want to do this, I will help you," I released the floodgates. Within two days, I had a plan fully drafted, recommendation letters secured, and a title for my major: *Educational Identities*

and Empowering Pedagogy. I had missed the declaration deadline, but my dean agreed to put forward my case. It was accepted without revisions.

Declaring an independent major was the stamp that secured my place in the in-between of academic disciplines. I pulled together coursework in English, education, sociology, disability studies, women's and gender studies, and history. Even some of those "disciplines" were interdisciplinary. I had no direct field to step into for graduate school, and I had no alumni in my department who could say, "This is what you can do with your major, because this is what I did." It wasn't until after graduation that I learned about the field of SoTL. Even then, I wasn't sure I could identify as a SoTL scholar. I was at a conference for the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL), in a newcomer's session, when I was asked to introduce myself with my name and discipline. Everyone else shared something recognizable: biology, or anthropology, or—

"I think my discipline *is* SoTL? Can I say that?"

Someone I had yet to meet affirmed me with a smile: "Yes, you definitely can." An assertion that gave proper name to the space I burrowed for myself in academia.

Students Exiled by and from SoTL

Because my start in SoTL was as a student and my existence in SoTL continues through my student role today, I want to reflect on the exile of students. Despite the actively growing work of students as partners (Mercer-Mapstone and Abbot 2020), and though our engagement in its co-production is considered a fundamental principle of SoTL (Felten 2013), students are still only infrequently the co-producers and co-authors of this field (Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017). This restriction may prevent students from developing the tools to engage in self-study and participate in SoTL knowledge production—especially those students who will not continue in the academy, whose perspectives make up the majority of undergraduates in higher education today.

The marginalization of students in authorship occurs even as students serve as sources of data and objects of analysis (McKinney 2012). Students who participate as true partners too frequently bear the burden of justifying their legitimacy in a space where they are still seen as a novelty (Wilson et al. 2020). SoTL is not often written explicitly for a student audience (Maurer et al. 2021; McKinney 2012), and writing that *is* aimed at students tends to focus on those at the graduate level (Mauer et al. 2021). We can see the implications of this reflected in participation in academic societies: for example, of the nine students, including myself, who have served on the board of SoTL's leading academic society (ISSOTL), only one, as of 2023, has been an undergraduate.

I have been immensely privileged to have started in SoTL so early in my life—I now have a decade of experiences in this field. Yet even I have not been free from exiling experiences. After cultivating my voice in the warm embrace of my women's college, my self-doubt was reseeded by my first boss who said my attitude was "too empowered" (in August 2015). It returned when a reviewer wrote: "Possibly very new academics or those in the arts?" (September 2019). Again, last year, when a reviewer wrote:

> We find it unclear whether the workshop will only be facilitated by Sophia. . . . We find it necessary that [colleague] is present as a co-facilitator . . . partly because she is the most experienced/renowned [educational] developer. We kindly remind you that pre-conference workshops are intended as high-quality offers run by renowned developers. (January 11, 2022)

Each statement is an exiling attempt and I wonder at the true source of the critique. My youth? My gender? My age? My lack of degree, my interdisciplinary background, my assertive voice, my critical spirit? What was it that gave me the scent of inadequacy? Which hidden rules had I failed to follow? I have had to justify my presence in all these ways, as well as justify the legitimacy of SoTL itself throughout my academic path.

My resilience as a student in SoTL is due largely to the privileges I hold as a white English-speaking scholar. Those privileges have helped me find many wonderful mentors and colleagues in SoTL, whose support have advanced my career. My CV reflects their "relentless welcome" (Scobey in Felten and Lambert 2020, 20). My mentors are mostly white and English-speaking like me; I have likely found an easier home in SoTL due to some of our shared culture and identities. Others may not have the means and support to push past repeated questions and gatekeeping (e.g., see Yahlnaaw 2019).

These challenges exist across academia. Yet SoTL's reflexivity and cross-disciplinarity means it has the potential to lead a change. Students' active engagement in SoTL may constitute a form of epistemic justice in which students are affirmed in "their own capacity as knowers" (de Bie et al. 2019, 40). My own entry to the field began through pedagogical partnership experiences. I had the opportunity to feel deeply affirmed in my capacity to ask meaningful questions about teaching and learning and to seek out answers to those questions (and in chapter 4, Green similarly describes engaging in SoTL as a student, driven by questions about her then-current educational experiences). Mercer-Mapstone and Mercer (2017) suggested this kind of partnership—which positions students and faculty as active collaborators in teaching and learning—can give a "seat at the table" to those who have traditionally held less power in a space (e.g., students), and that doing so might "deconstruct the table itself" (6).

Home for the SoTL Citizen

As in my youth, I have faced exile, but I am not exiled. To be exiled would presume I have another home that I cannot return to—but I do not have a space beyond SoTL. Unlike these Travelers and Exiles, I am a SoTL citizen. I speak multiple dialects because there is intentionally no "official" language. SoTL is a borderland, and even a borderland, a boundary, or a threshold has a space where one might stand. That ledge is my home.

Being a SoTL citizen is filled with possibility. Gloria Anzaldúa described learning how to develop a "tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity" through her borderland identity (1987, 79). She said the consciousness grown from this tolerance—*mestiza consciousness*—could help her "sustain contradictions" and "[turn] the ambivalence into something else" (Anzaldúa 1987, 79). Without diminishing her experiences or suggesting I share a *mestiza consciousness,* I do wonder whether my always-SoTL, always-interdisciplinary-self grants me its own *different* kind of consciousness. I enter classrooms without reinforced assumptions of what a particular pedagogy should look like; I question traditional scholarly norms because I have seen how many norms are possible.

Being a SoTL citizen means I am asked: how do I make myself legible in a higher educational context that expects me to follow a coherent line of questioning, related methodologies, a single pool of foundational theories? I steep myself in feminism, queer theories, organizational and systems theories, pedagogical and educational theories, critical race theories. SoTL and I are both blue frogs. And if SoTL is autobiography, then I can use SoTL to map my edges. I hope my research will be strengthened by its need to be made explicit, free from assumptions of shared knowledge in a walled disciplinary community.

Said (1996) suggested that the last element of the *exilic intellectual* is that of becoming a beginner again (62). Webb and Tierney (2020) identified the process of beginning again as a barrier to SoTL participation, but Said might have said that that is the strength of the field. He exalted amateurism, which he described as

> the desire to be moved, not by profit or reward, but by love for and unquenchable interest in the larger picture, in making connections across lines and barriers, in refusing to be tied down to a specialty, in caring for ideas and values despite the restrictions of a profession. (Said 1996, 76)

Said's view of amateurism was filled with hope and potential. In contrast, Chick (2013) noted that disciplinary experts "don't like playing the amateur any more than others like to see the work of the amateur" (20). Her discomfort likely stemmed from the simultaneous vulnerability of not knowing and the challenge of seeking scholarly legitimacy (indeed, chapter 5 by Suart, Ogrodnik, and Suttie acknowledges these emotions and offers a model for growing confidence and knowledge in community). I resonate with Said's romanticism, however. His description captures the hunger I sought when I looked for a major, and the excitement I feel in this "restless" community. Students are an exciting addition in the equation between amateur and professional because students are still becoming within their disciplines. Some students may even be in the process of becoming SoTL citizens like me, as more and more of us find our way to the field through student partnership and increasing recognition of SoTL itself. I hope our collective presence can sustain a blue-frog consciousness in SoTL that keeps the field open, that pushes it towards cognitive justice, that helps it create radical change. There is a home here for us.

Reflection Questions

- Do you identify as a SoTL Traveler, SoTL Exile, or SoTL Citizen? How has that identification shifted for you over time? How might it change in the future?
- Try to map the edges of yourself as a scholar. Where does SoTL fit on that map?
- What might you do to ease the transition of SoTL travelers and exiles in the field? How can you support the development of SoTL citizens?
- Think about the assumptions you hold about what scholarship should look like. Which assumptions could you do without? What would it look like to create scholarship differently?

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