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Unfamiliar Terrain: Transformative Learning at the Crossroads of Habitus

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Abstract

Drawing upon autoethnographic experience as a music educator, I make the assertion that transformative learning is particularly amplified in locations where a person encounters the unfamiliar, for those are often the precise places where an individual's habitus no longer holds efficacy. To build this argument, I propose that when inner consciousness intersects with place-shaping processes, transformative learning takes place in a connected, compassionate, and creative manner. I infuse this framework with Pierre Bourdieu's work on habitus, in which he suggests that inner consciousness shapes, and is shaped by, a person's social encounters. Thus, in this lived aesthetic inquiry, I propose that transformative learning has substantial intersectionality with socially constructed understandings of place.

To Trespass into the Unfamiliar: Beholding the Imperial Valley

The year was 2005. San Diego had disappeared into the rear-view mirror well over an hour before. Vegetation was becoming increasingly sparse, and the heat more pronounced. I was in the driver's seat, and my wife Carolee sat beside me in the passenger's seat. Momentarily, we would be descending "the grade," the 10-mile portion of the interstate highway where the road careens down a 2,800-foot elevation drop to reach the floor of the Imperial Valley. Our destination was El Centro, California.

As we descended the grade, my conversation with Carolee abruptly ceased. The sudden change in the landscape confronted me with what I was endeavoring to do and prompted an overwhelming urge to contemplate things in silence. One month previously, I had received my bachelor's degree in music education. Now, I was in a far-off and lonesome corner of the United States, about to discover whether the preceding four years I had spent at university held potency. As a student, I had proclaimed that I wanted to be a teacher at a 'disadvantaged' school in order to directly address the vast disparities schoolchildren encounter in educational opportunities. Teeming with such ideals, I had spent the previous month pouring through job postings, researching school demographics, applying for positions, and awaiting responses from would-be employers. Now, I found myself a scant 25 miles of desert highway away from "Kumeyaay" High School on my way to a job interview, hoping I could convince the hiring committee that I should be selected as the school's next orchestra director.

With seemingly blank emotion, the desert pronounced that I was entering unfamiliar terrain. I gazed across an endless expanse of parched earth, poignantly aware that the image before me differed considerably from the forests, lakes, and mountains of my upbringing in the Pacific Northwest. I became fixated upon the exoticism of the physical landscape, unintentionally shielding myself from the desert's caution about a different unfamiliarity. Shortly, I would assert that I should be entrusted with the responsibility of shaping the lives of El Centro's young people. Not only did this job require a level of responsibility I had not previously shouldered, but it was also located in a community where I represented a different ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and cultural upbringing than the students I would teach. Effectively, I was careening into ethical complexities pertaining to cultural hegemony, for which my prior academic experiences could not have sufficiently prepared me. I urged my car onward through the empty landscape, heeding—but not fully comprehending—the desert's pronouncement that I was propelling myself beyond the point where my habitus would fully hold efficacy.

On Transformative Learning, Autoethnography, and Place-consciousness

In the nearly twenty years since that drive into the Imperial Valley, desert landscapes, orchestra classrooms, and university libraries have merged into one as I have increasingly hearkened to the desert's call to consider the unfamiliarity of the terrain. As I continue to reflexively engage with such unfamiliarity, I have come to better understand the generative possibilities of transformative learning, autoethnography, and place-consciousness.

Transformative Learning

Transformative learning is described as “the epistemology of how adults learn to reason for themselves” (Mezirow & Taylor 2009, p. 23). In Jack Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative learning, learners progress through a ten-phase process, consisting of the following:

1. Disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination
3. Critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognition that others have negotiated change
5. Exploration of options
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquisition of skills and knowledge
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building of competence and self-confidence
10. Reintegration into life of new perspective

I opened this essay by recounting the disorientation I felt as I drove to a job interview in California's Imperial Valley. I intend the vignette to serve as a metaphor for the disorienting dilemma I experienced when I began teaching in El Centro. Such disorientation acted as a catalyst for me to undergo a journey of transformative learning, a journey which continues to the present day.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a research method derived by integrating *autobiography* with *ethnography* (Wall, 2008). Like ethnography, autoethnography is premised upon the reconciliation of etic and emic perspectives, but it is distinct in that it is the researcher's autobiographical experience. In autoethnographic work, researchers seek to disclose their own affective and cognitive meaning-making processes, while simultaneously theorizing, discussing, and commenting upon such processes. The deliberate embrace of subjective interpretation, affective understandings, and personal intuition has been celebrated as one of autoethnography's methodological strengths:

Autoethnography is one of the [research] approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011, para 3).

Correspondingly, autoethnography is responsive to the postmodern injunction for researchers to acknowledge their reflexive positioning within their research (see Reed-Danahay, 1997).

In autoethnography, the data-gathering process generally occurs through inductive means, with wide interpretive latitude given towards the meaning-making arising from experiences, documents, artifacts, and interpersonal interactions. Emic understandings are then dialectically reconciled with the etic perspectives of theory, and in this way, autoethnography coalesces into an epistemologically rigorous way to interpret lived experience.

As a medium, autoethnography is celebrated for situating complex social issues within a compelling narrative. Correspondingly, the aesthetic and artistic decisions pertaining to writing an autoethnography often become just as central as the ethnographic considerations of identity, power, and cultural understandings (see Snyder-Young, 2010; Hjorth & Sharp, 2014).

Place-consciousness

At the center of my transformative learning experience is the role of place-consciousness. Place-consciousness is an interdisciplinary movement within the field of educational research that seeks to theorize how people engage with their socio-geographical surroundings. Advocates for place-conscious education argue that engagement with the various particularities of a place can awaken new understandings that are unique to that context. David Gruenewald (2003), one of the pioneering theorists of place-consciousness, explains, "Place-conscious education, therefore, aims to work against ... the increasingly placeless institution of schooling. Furthermore, it aims to enlist teachers and students in the firsthand experience of local life and in the political process of understanding and shaping what happens there" (p. 620).

Beholding, Immersion, and Reflection

In the sections that follow, I recount the transformative learning journey I experienced as I began teaching in El Centro. I present El Centro as a literal and metaphorical crossroads, utilizing arts-based researcher Sheri Klein's (2017) framework of *beholding*, *immersion*, and *reflection* to autoethnographically explore how the unfamiliarity of the terrain sparked a disorienting dilemma, which ultimately caused me to rethink my onto-epistemological understandings of education, culture, and society. In the opening section of this essay, I

activated the notion of *beholding*, describing what it felt like to encounter El Centro for the first time. In the upcoming section, I draw upon the concept of place to present four pluralistic and metaphorically rich understandings of El Centro that arise from my own immersive experience of living in the community. In the final sections, I turn to sociological theory to offer *reflection* on why encounters with unfamiliar places can lead to transformative learning. Ultimately, this paper seeks to (1) explore the confluences between transformative learning and place-consciousness, and (2) utilize an arts-based framing as an aesthetic inquiry into complex meaning-making processes.

Immersion into the Imperial Valley

The city of El Centro, California sits in the Southern California desert. Though it is the county seat of Imperial County and the most populous city in the southeast corner of California, it remains relatively unknown and hidden. To access El Centro, there are four main roads, each one following a different point of the compass rose.



Figure 1. Driving Routes to El Centro, CA (adapted from Mapquest, 2024).

From the West: Remote Desert Outpost

In San Diego, the signs for traffic merging onto Interstate Highway 8 announce the available choices: “Beaches” to the west and “El Centro” to the east. Both options are put forward without commentary as if to say that either destination is equally desirable. Visitors following the signs to the beach are rewarded with increasingly familiar images of California as depicted in film, television, and tourism materials: palm trees, boardwalks, and crowds of people playing in the surf and on the sand. Visitors following the signs to El Centro find themselves relegating such images of the California coast to the rear-view mirror; their destination lies 110 miles away, over mountains and across desert.

It takes 45 minutes to reach the Laguna summit, a mountain pass with a respectable elevation of 4055 feet (1236 m). Wild yucca, sagebrush, and exposed rock are the lone features of the landscape, accompanied by a sign curiously announcing that the area is designated as National Forest. Once the eastern edge of the Laguna Mountains is breached, the landscape becomes otherworldly—an ogre’s ruined and forgotten kingdom. The mountainsides consist of piles upon piles of rocks, as if formidable castle walls had been besieged and reduced entirely to debris and rubble.

At the base of the mountains, the road is greeted by a desert so vast its eastern extremity is beyond the horizon. Though El Centro is yet another 30 minutes further, it is at this point—the edge of the Imperial Valley—where El Centro’s event horizon has irreversibly been crossed. The sun is still in its ascent, but the temperature is already approaching 120° F (49° C). The road bisects the flatness, the dullness. A few scattered ocotillos interrupt the monotony, their wildly splaying arms reaching heavenwards, begging for rain.

The road forges on into the inhospitable landscape for an additional and wearisome 30 minutes. Then abruptly, the long-awaited road sign appears: El Centro, next 4 exits. Accompanying the pronouncement of the city’s existence are other signs announcing services: gas, food, lodging. There is a sudden appearance of cultivated fields, which subsequently give way to homes, neighborhoods, playing fields, and schools. After miles and miles of lonely desert driving, El Centro’s services represent a welcome outpost of civilization, an oasis of familiarity, and an escape from the desert wilds.

From the South: Citadel of American Protectionism

To the south of El Centro is the California-Mexico international border. The border is flanked by two cities: Calexico on the California side and Mexicali—or “Mex,” as it is known by the locals—on the Mexico side. The Calexico border crossing is a highly trafficked route, ranking among the ten busiest border crossings in the United States (Morrissey 2023). Every year,

more than 5 million vehicles and 11 million people enter the United States via the Calexico border crossing. During peak times, the lines of vehicle can stretch for miles along the streets of Mexicali. Amid these queues, a horde of haggard people walk among the waiting vehicles, selling flowers, washing car windshields, or simply begging for money. Many are children.

Watching over this scene of waiting vehicles and weary peddlers is a 30-foot (9-meter) steel fence, marking the precise demarcation between the United States and Mexico. The fence stretches in a straight line for miles beyond the edge of the city, as if to warn the residents that there is no place where the two communities could merge into one (see Allen, 2020). The juxtaposition between the two sides of the fence is pronounced: long traffic queues on the one side, free flowing traffic on the other; potholes on the one side, unblemished road surfaces on the other; boarded up windows on the one side, clean and well-kept buildings on the other.

The border fence has been in place for decades. It has accumulated innumerable stories of desperate individuals trying to breach it: the pregnant woman who scaled the fence while laboring in hopes of giving birth to her child on American soil (see McDonald, et al., 2015); the drug traffickers who built a 415-yard (380-meter) long tunnel to transport their \$23 million hoard of marijuana and cocaine (Stimson, 2018); the hundreds of would-be immigrants who attempt to cross each night (Morrall et al., 2011); and the hundreds more who plunge themselves in the polluted waters of the New River to swim around it (Eschbach et al., 1999).

The fence has allies, a team of border patrol agents. Dressed in dark green, they are instantly recognizable. They have sophisticated equipment for tracking people and locating smuggled goods; they drive fast vehicles; they carry guns. At the port of entry, a border patrol agent reaches toward the window, speaking lines from a well-rehearsed script: “Your passport....” Eyes, hidden behind sunglasses, study it solemnly. “Your citizenship?” A pause. “Your purpose and destination in the United States?” Every statement is scrutinized. Hidden eyes make note of every movement. Further questions are asked and the whole story assessed. Finally, a verdict is pronounced.

From somewhere up above comes the rumble of military aircraft. A major military installation – NAF El Centro – resides just a short distance from the border. Flybys are a daily occurrence. For the most part, the military base remains independent from matters related to the international border crossing, but even so, its show-of-force presence evokes the symbolic message that if someone were to elude the border patrol, they would have to answer to the American military.

In essence, El Centro is a reinstatement of the medieval walled city and a monument to American protectionism. Like the ancient citadels, she has her walls and gatehouse, her

garrison of troops, and her military battlements. To gain entrance to this citadel, travelers must succumb to the border-crossing ritual, acquiescing to the unspoken America First doctrine: America must be protected from the heretics who seek to destroy her.

From the North: Ghosted Wasteland

The northern route into El Centro follows along the western shore of the Salton Sea, California's largest lake. The Salton Sea is an accidental lake, or rather, it exists because of a human-caused accident. For millennia, it had been a dry lakebed 252 feet below sea level. Then in 1905, heavy rains in the Rocky Mountains caused the Colorado River to surge, and the surging river proved to be too powerful for the headgates of the irrigation canal servicing the Imperial Valley. With brute strength, the river swept away the insufficient irrigation infrastructure and diverted itself entirely into the Imperial Valley, thereby creating the Salton Sea (Goldbaum, 2016).

With the birth of the Salton Sea came numerous development prospects. A new inland sea represented tremendous potential for recreation, tourism, and wildlife. Although it was feared that the accidental lake would dry up almost as quickly as it had been created, the Salton Sea proved to have staying power. When it became evident that the lake's continued existence was no longer in question, lakeside resorts and communities began to dot the shores of the Salton Sea. For a time, the area promoted itself as Palm Springs-by-the-Sea, a Californian French Riviera. Celebrities, recording artists, movie stars, and other people of wealth and influence flocked to its shores.

But, like the ancient Sirens of myth, who use their beauty to lure unsuspecting mariners to a menace that lurks beneath the surface of the water, the waters of the Salton Sea mask hidden dangers. First, there is the salinity. The Salton Sea concentrates salt content over time through evaporation. In the heat of the Imperial Valley desert, this happens rapidly. The Salton Sea is already at 4.4% salinity (SSA, 1997)—25% higher than that of the world's oceans—and thus wreaks havoc on marine and aquatic life (Smyth & Elliott, 2016). Second, there are the agricultural pollutants. As a terminal lake, the Salton Sea concentrates everything dissolved or suspended in her waters. The rivers which feed the Salton Sea traverse agricultural land, and they have been delivering fertilizers, pesticides and other agricultural run-off for well over a century. Third, there is concern over biohazards. One of the Salton Sea's rivers—the New River—is widely suspected of being infused with Mexicali's industrial waste and sewage (SSA, 1997). With this triumvirate of salinity, agricultural pollutants, and biohazards, the Salton Sea Sirens have ravaged the ecological health of the Imperial Valley. Fish and other aquatic life have died off; people have fled the beaches; resorts have ghosted. El Centro resides 30 minutes beyond the southern extremity of the Salton Sea—far enough away to feel safe from the poisoned water, but not far enough away to escape the briny, acrid,

and dangerous Siren stench. Whispered messages of neglect, exploitation, and abandonment seem to emanate from the Salton Sea. El Centro's downtown is succumbing to these persuasive whisperings: abandoned buildings, vacant storefronts, boarded up windows, empty streets, low-budget motels, homelessness. Like the Salton Sea, El Centro verges on the brink of becoming a ghosted wasteland.

From the East: Enchanted Valley of Prosperity

From the East, the Imperial Valley is entered via the Algodones Dunes, a gateway of majestic virgin sand. The dunes stretch for dozens of miles to the north and the south, safely insulating the Imperial Valley from the vastness and emptiness of the Sonoran Desert. Native American folklore describes a time when the Valley held water, and their people fished and lived in villages along a lush lake (Baksh, 2004). The local tribes knew that even though the Valley appeared desolate, it was patiently waiting to burst into bloom. Similar to the flora of the Imperial Valley—the ocotillo, yucca, agave, jumping cholla, and barrel cacti—which spectacularly bloom each spring after long periods of dormancy, the Valley herself would someday burst again into vitality. She was simply preserving her energy until the moment when water would once again come.

The geologic record tells that the waters did come, arriving in the form of cataclysmic flooding. Every few centuries, the Colorado River would breach her banks and choose the Imperial Valley as a flood plain. The Valley would fill until the water levels rose high enough to find a new exit into the Sea of Cortez to the south. This capricious courtship between the Colorado River, the Imperial Valley, and the Sea of Cortez meant that the Imperial Valley was continuously fickle in her identity: sometimes a dry desert, sometimes an inland sea, and sometimes a river delta.

Beginning in 1901, through the building of an 80-mile-long canal, water began to flow regularly and consistently from the Colorado River to the Imperial Valley. Accordingly, the Imperial Valley could now receive water without repeating the tumultuous dramas of her capricious youth. A nearly limitless source of water was available at minimal cost; the water flowed freely to this valley below sea level.

Once she received her water, the Imperial Valley quickly became an agricultural paradise: fertile soil, low-cost water, cloudless skies, frost-free winters (Rubio-Velázquez, Loaiciga & Lopez-Carr, 2023). Having once been an ancient lakebed and a river delta, rich nutrients had been deposited in her soil. The Valley has since become one of the most important agricultural centers of the United States, accounting for 13% of the nation's total cash receipts from agribusiness (USDA, 2012).

From her capricious past, the Imperial Valley has become an enchanted kingdom. Her previously slumbering beauty has been awakened by the water, which now flows unceasingly into her realms. Like a treasured gem, she remains hidden away by the Algodones Dunes, but those who venture into her lands find a valley of prosperity brimming with vitality and possibility.

(Re)Encountering El Centro's Pluralistic Identities

My first encounter of the Imperial Valley was shaped by the drive from San Diego, perhaps instilling in me a one-dimensional way of perceiving El Centro and my role as a high school music teacher. It did not occur to me at the time that El Centro also represented a place of complexity, with pluralistic identities and possibilities.

Years later, I would have the opportunity to travel again to El Centro, this time arriving via a 10-passenger single-propeller airplane. I remember gazing out the window and having an uninterrupted view of 121,000 acres of verdant agricultural land carpeting the valley floor. I was struck with the poetic appropriateness of re-entering the Valley in this manner. In contrast to my initial visit to El Centro when I had been fixated upon the barrenness of the desert landscape, I was now seeing this place as rich and fertile, an enchanted valley of prosperity. And yet, as I continued to look out the window, I realized that I was also able to see the other identities of El Centro represented. To the right side of the plane, military jets—the Blue Angels, to be precise—were practicing their maneuvers, affirming the Valley's role as a citadel of protectionism. To the left, the New River was delivering its toxic waters to the Salton Sea, a grim reminder that without intervention, the Valley would inevitably become ghosted wasteland. Off in the distance, it was possible to see the precise boundary where irrigation ceased, and the desert reigned supreme. As I gazed out on these divergent and simultaneously visible meanings of the Imperial Valley, I began to realize how profoundly my understanding of El Centro had shifted. The place I had previously regarded as a remote desert outpost now had more expansive meaning, and I could no longer see it from the one-dimensional perspective that had pervaded my initial experience. I had changed. By living in El Centro, I had undergone a transformative experience, one that reflected my engagement with socially constructed understandings of place.

Reflection: On Bourdieu, Habitus, and Hysteresis

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1990) offers a number of thinking tools for conceptualizing the complex sociological interplay between society, education, and culture. Specifically, the concepts of habitus, capital, and field provide a framework for understanding some of the ways individual agency interacts with societal structures, and how these can evolve over time (Grenfell, 2014).

Habitus, Capital, Field, and Doxa

In Bourdieusian thinking, the concept of *habitus* describes how behaviors, skills, dispositions, and attitudes are influenced by larger socialization processes. Habitus has a deterministic aspect to it in that it is primarily shaped by the various societal structures and interpersonal interactions that shape how individuals perceive the social world and react to it while also acknowledging that the aggregated social interactions across an individual's lifetime continue to shape their habitus (Maton, 2014). Thus, habitus is a fluid concept that describes the complex interplay between a person's past and present social interactions (Bourdieu, 2002).

The concept of *cultural capital* refers to a person's familiarity with cultural expectations, and the ability to work within such cultural expectations to acquire a desirable standing within the existing structure of society (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu offers the concept of *field* to describe the particular social situations that govern whether an individual's habitus holds efficacy. Like the fields of a sports ground, social fields represent the boundaries within which certain social rules and practices apply. They are bounded by *doxa*, which represents the shared beliefs, practices, and priorities that are particular to that field:

Doxa is the cornerstone of any field to the extent that it determines the stability of the objective social structures through the way these are reproduced and reproduce themselves in a social agents' perceptions and practices; in other words in the *habitus* (Deer, 2014, p. 116).

Although social fields have distinctly autonomous qualities, they are also interrelated: the doxa of one field can have an impact upon the doxa of another, which in turn suggests that habitus can be shaped by unseen but intersecting fields (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Regarding Hysteresis

When I began teaching in El Centro, I experienced what Bourdieu (1977) describes as an out-of-habitus experience in that I began to sense that there was social knowledge that was “placed beyond the grasp of consciousness and hence [could not] be touched by voluntary deliberate transformation, [and could not] even be made explicit” (p. 94). Even though I understood the doxa pertaining to school orchestra teaching and also possessed the skills, training, and cultural capital to select repertoire, plan rehearsals, teach technique, and present concerts, I gradually came to realize that I had much to learn about how school orchestras—and indeed schools themselves—were situated in a dynamic and socially-constructed understanding of place. In essence, I was experiencing the hysteresis effect, a scenario that occurs when one's habitus is misaligned with the field in which it operates (Graham, 2020). My habitus needed to adapt; I needed to learn how to better situate my teaching practice within the doxa of the wider community. During the two years I worked in El Centro, I began to perceive how the pluralistic identities of the Imperial Valley were refracted in the

classroom: the orchestra class functioned simultaneously as an outpost, a citadel, a wasteland, and an enchanted kingdom.

Hysteresis of School Orchestra as an Outpost of Civilization

When I first entered the Imperial Valley, I did not fully consider the degree to which my ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and cultural background had shaped—and would shape—how I positioned myself in the community. As a white, middle-class English-speaker, I perhaps regarded myself as possessing an affluence of cultural capital (see Bourdieu 1990), or at least I instinctively understood that my racial identity, cultural background, and upbringing afforded me educational opportunities and other privileges that were not necessarily as available to those of differing ethnic, socioeconomic, and culture groups.

Correspondingly, I carried a habitus that positioned me within the school based on my initial outpost-of-civilization assessment of El Centro. I saw myself as an emissary, bringing civilization and culture to a place far removed from celebrated cultural centers. Educational theorist Paulo Freire (1974) observes that educational systems often follow a banking model, in which the role of the teacher is to deposit knowledge, skills, and ideas into students, and that students become enriched through the process. Given that the field of school teaching, the doxa of my teacher preparation program, and the habitus of my upbringing were all in harmony with one another, I initially found little reason to question whether my habitus needed to expand.

Hysteresis of School Orchestra as a Citadel of Protectionism

In time, I made some journeys across the international border. In doing so, I realized that perceptions of value are highly contextualized and that the act of gatekeeping is one of the primary ways those perceptions are maintained. While my orchestra classroom seemed at first to have little to do with such notions, I soon learned that, as a teacher, I shouldered a major responsibility in deciding which curricular materials would be utilized and what music would be played by my students. In effect, I was a gatekeeper, making determinations on the aesthetic value of certain musics without fully realizing how ethically fraught an endeavor it was to set myself up as the arbiter of what should be considered culturally valuable. In Bourdieusian terminology, such a willingness to engage in the protectionism of arbitrary and culturally situated values is known as symbolic violence (see Bourdieu 1990). As I gradually began to perceive that I was perpetuating a form of symbolic violence, I became more willing to question my initial assumptions about my positionality in the community.

Hysteresis of School Orchestra as a Ghosted Wasteland

I also came to realize that I was making determinations about the type of musician that would thrive in the orchestra classroom. I regularly evaluated students' abilities to play passages

from the music we studied, assessing them on tone quality, rhythmic integrity, accuracy of pitch, and incorporation of dynamics. In other words, I was intent to check whether they could create an accurate aural representation of notated music. The emphasis was on reproduction, rather than creation, constricting the concept of “musicianship” to students’ ability to read printed music notation accurately. Such an approach was inconsistent with emerging understandings of creativity (Burnard, 2012) and expanding notions of the purposes of music education (Jorgensen, 2003; Allsup, 2016). My pedagogical approach represented a set of music education practices that were beginning to ghost. I would later learn of music education theorist Lucy Green (2002), who warns that if music educators overemphasize such practices, they “could be depriving our students of precisely some of that spark which attracts and holds so many musicians and listeners to popular music every day” (p. 177). Instead of actively nourishing, developing, and replenishing the students’ foundational creative impulses, I was using my pedagogical authority to cultivate and reinforce a superficial and narrow manifestation of musicianship. Inadvertently, I had created an assessment structure that would contribute to the ghosting of students’ inner musicians.

Hysteresis of School Orchestra as an Enchanted Valley

When I began teaching in El Centro, I felt confident in my identity and preparation as an orchestra teacher. However, within two years, I felt a disorienting loss of certainty, and a growing awareness of the epistemological distances between my existing habitus and the requisite understandings I would need to acquire in order to thrive in that particular community and teaching situation. Such an experience ultimately led me to find fertile ground for pursuing new understandings. The disorienting dilemmas I encountered as a teacher in El Centro became the catalyst for self-examination, critical assessment of assumptions, and the other stages of transformative learning. In other words, through my continued autoethnographic encounters with El Centro, I have found fertile ground for engaging with educational theory and music education scholarship (see Fairbanks, 2019), which has profoundly impacted my habitus. I have been able to experience what arts education scholar Liora Bresler (2019) describes as the generative power of Unknowing, wherein the realization of myself as an unknower has become the impetus for expanded visions and understandings.

Thus, for me, the Imperial Valley represents the safe and insulated place in which I discovered the need to renegotiate my own onto-epistemological understandings of education and self. As such, it represents an enchanted place where my knowing transformed into unknowing, opening an avenue for me to engage more deeply with my own assumptions and propelling me into the process of transformative learning.

Closing Thoughts

Writing from my current vantage point, in which I hold a music education faculty position at a large research university, it might be convenient to claim that because I had a generative experience with unfamiliarity, I am somehow qualified to prepare future educators for mediating their own future encounters with unfamiliarity. Such an approach would be consistent with emerging scholarship on place-consciousness and praxis shock (Schaller, 2021), as well as calls to design experiences for preservice teachers that go beyond mirroring and reinforcing the habitus-forming settings of their youth (Fiorentino, 2020). Yet, I wish to draw a slightly different conclusion.

As I reflect broadly upon the ongoing impact of crossing that desert so many years ago, I recognize that my epistemological understanding of self and other was dramatically expanded through the experience. At the time, I did not know I was propelling myself beyond the threshold of my own habitus. I thought I was traveling to a familiar setting – an employment situation for which I was well-prepared. I was seeking out the familiar when, unexpectedly, the unfamiliar happened upon me. In other words, it was not for the autoethnographic purpose of reconciling emic and etic understandings that I had initially entered the Imperial Valley. Thus, rather than claiming any credit for designing a transformative learning experience for myself, it would be more accurate to state that the transformative learning I experienced was the unexpected but natural outcome of my engagement with place. I conclude by asserting that place-based transformative learning is particularly amplified in locations where a person encounters the unfamiliar. After all, transformative learning has substantial intersectionality with socially constructed understandings of place. Thus, it can be deeply powerful—albeit disorienting—for emerging scholars to encounter places where their habitus no longer holds efficacy.

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About the Author

Stephen Fairbanks is an Assistant Professor of Music Education at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. As a researcher, he explores the phenomenon of cultural transmission in education, with particular focus on the ethical dilemmas which can arise when classical music is promoted as a medium for social justice. He aims to assist educators in developing greater awareness of the complex and entangled way their teaching can reinforce perceptions of cultural value. His research is deeply informed by his prior career as a high school music teacher. A lifelong string enthusiast, Stephen regularly seeks performance opportunities as a cellist and as an orchestra conductor. He holds degrees from Brigham Young University and the University of Cambridge.

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