

## Research::Culture::Exchange: Complex Cultural Exchange Amid a US-Pakistani Education Partnership

By Ryan Skinnell

In 2013, I was an assistant professor of rhetoric and writing at the University of North Texas.<sup>1</sup> My friend and colleague, Masood Ashraf Raja, invited me to participate in a US State Department Public Diplomacy Program grant that he was applying for and subsequently won. The grant was one of seventeen throughout Pakistan and Afghanistan, and they were designed to fund cultural exchanges that connected arts and education institutions in America with arts and education institutions in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Dr. Raja's grant connected the University of North Texas (UNT), where he and I worked, with the National University of Modern Languages (NUML) in Islamabad, Pakistan. Over the course of four years, fifty-eight NUML scholars traveled to Denton, TX to conduct research and build their scholarly networks. As well, half a dozen or so UNT scholars traveled to Islamabad to teach various summer seminars at NUML in subjects such as Shakespeare, sociolinguistics, and postcolonial theory. In June of 2014, I traveled to Pakistan to teach a two-week faculty research seminar about writing for publication.

Pakistan, like many other countries around the world, is in the middle of a precipitous rise in what many higher education analysts call a "culture of research." There are various ways of defining what a research culture is and even more various ways of arguing over how to establish a research culture and what it should bring about (see Hanover). Nevertheless, the rise in research cultures is becoming a global standard—scholars at universities around the world are being asked, and often compelled, to produce and publish research in ever-increasing amounts. This is as true in countries with thoroughly established research cultures as it is in countries that are just beginning to build them.

There are plenty of good reasons to pursue a culture of research, including institutional advancement, faculty development, and pedagogical enhancement. At the same time, there are significant challenges that arise as well. As A. Suresh Canagarajah forcefully argues in *A Geopolitics of Academic Writing*, for instance, access to resources, power, and legitimacy are neither evenly distributed nor equally accessible around the world. Nevertheless research expectations—both locally and globally—are very often not keyed in to that reality. And even in places where faculty and administrators are well aware of these kinds of resource

challenges, and even where good-faith efforts are made to address them, there remains the additional challenge of research training and development.

It was in this global educational context that I went to Islamabad. NUML faculty administrators and faculty were well aware of and working to address the resource challenges that accompany research. My participation in the UNT- NUML cultural exchange was intended to address the latter challenge of research training and development. To be clear, I was not invited to develop NUML researchers' ability to research. Thirty faculty from seven NUML campuses in various parts of the country enrolled in the seminar, and many of the participants were already accomplished researchers in their own rights.<sup>2</sup> They were capable scholars trained in research on topics ranging from cognitive and sociolinguistics to global literature, class and gender geopolitics, second-language acquisition, and national and international language pedagogy. Most were well trained in research methods and others were in the process of training. Some were already PhDs and others were graduate students in the advanced stages of earning PhDs. They didn't need me to teach them research, even if I could have.

What I was invited to do was help the researchers who enrolled in the seminar develop an orientation to, and methods for contributing to, a globalizing network of research *publication*.<sup>3</sup> In other words, in keeping with my disciplinary identity as a rhetoric and writing scholar, I was brought in to teach writing.

A quick digression: It is common to think of writing as a thing that doesn't need to be taught to smart people. For complex historical and political reasons, post-secondary writing instruction is often treated as a remedial activity that people should purportedly have learned before they move into higher-level instruction, and certainly before they are graduate students or professors. As I have written elsewhere:

Until very recently, writing instruction has been all but absent from upper-division, graduate, and professional contexts in higher education, even though there has been a sharp increase in writing requirements for students and professors around the world. For instance, post-secondary faculty are seeing significant rises in publication expectations globally, and failure to produce research articles has serious consequences. Still, even with the critical expansion of academic and professional writing requirements, and even with the increasing presence of students in US institutions who need writing instruction beyond the first year, writing instruction has largely retained the complexion of remediation—as a thing people should have already learned. (Skinnell 132)

My goal in this reflection is not to rehash this argument, nor even to fully elaborate it. I gesture to it here, however, to point out what seems obvious to me

but may not actually be obvious to everyone. Developing a research culture obviously requires research, but it also requires writing, and writing is hard.

Writing for publication is especially hard—even for highly accomplished researchers and thoroughly engaged scholars and teachers. When I noted above that training and development are central challenges to establishing a research culture, I meant that researchers must be given resources to do research, but they also need support to learn (and relearn) how to write for publication. The two are intimately connected, but they are not the same, as the vast scholarly literature on writing for publication attests (see, e.g., Casanave and Vandrick; Feak and Swales; and Rose). Learning to research is not learning to write, and learning to write is a lifelong endeavor that is best accomplished through research, consultation, practice, feedback, and revision on an endless loop.

What I had to offer as a writing teacher—or more realistically, a writing consultant—was perfectly in keeping with what I might have offered to any other group of advanced researchers in a writing for publication workshop. We discussed writing habits such as planning, getting feedback, and revising. We discussed how to assess audiences, how to evaluate journal and book publishers' needs and values, how to situate research in a body of scholarship, and so on. And the participants in the seminar were perfectly up to the task. We were, I think, quite well-matched.

I could conclude this narrative here and feel pretty confident that I proved my initial argument—(1) Pakistan has raised research requirements in higher education, (2) doing so requires resources, (3) NUML administrators procured resources (specifically, me and other UNT scholars) to help their faculty, (4) their faculty have subsequently produced more and better research. The lesson is clear and perfectly tidy.

But quite honestly, it's more than a little unsatisfying. As I noted above, the US State Department Public Diplomacy Program grant that funded my trip to Islamabad was designed to fund cultural exchanges. The story I've been telling, which is true so far as it goes, is not a story of exchange. It is a story of benevolent altruism. And if it was the sum total of my experience in Pakistan, I would be apprehensive to reflect on it here because it's clichéd (and, frankly, damaging for being so).

There are two common narratives that Westerners (especially white Westerners) have enjoyed telling each other for centuries about traveling to the East—one is essentially an old colonizer's tale: we (Westerners) come bearing all manner of civilization to bestow on the unwashed (Eastern) hordes. We bring religion and medicine and democracy (sort of) to tame the wild impulses of the natives. There is an extensive catalogue of colonizer's tales in Western literature,

but for me, Rudyard Kipling's poem, "The White Man's Burden," and Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tarzan* are the quintessential examples. As it currently stands, the story I tell above about my trip to Pakistan in 2014 is more or less the colonizer's tale. The other common West-to-East narrative is somewhat more recent, and an attempt, perhaps, to reverse the colonizer's tale. In this story, a troubled Westerner travels East on a journey of personal discovery. In the course of the journey, the (Western) protagonist rediscovers him or herself by (re)discovering the simplicity and uncomplicated goodness of humanity embodied by the (humble, spiritual, technologically naïve) people in the East. *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert is probably the most prominent example in the current moment, though again, there is no shortage of examples to choose from.

The profound problems with both of these narratives—including, but not limited to exoticizing and fetishizing non-Westerners and reinforcing global systems of Western, white supremacy and predatory capitalism—have been well documented by post- and anti-colonial scholars.<sup>4</sup> But both ur-narratives are seductive in their ways, and I will admit, having written and rewritten this reflective essay more than a dozen times over the past three months, I've struggled to tell a story about traveling from West to East without lapsing into one or the other of those well-trod narrative paths.<sup>5</sup>

Ultimately, it is to the notion of exchange that I have returned. It is true that I taught a writing class to faculty in Islamabad. It is true that the participants seemed to value what they got from the class. It is also true that I learned a lot from them as well. For one, any pretensions I had to being the smartest person in the room because I have a PhD from a Western university were pretty quickly dashed. The members of that class were not just smart, which I expected, but they were also working in areas of research that made me feel positively dumb. I am grateful for this feeling—it helped to be more receptive to intellectual exchange, as such.

But there were also important cultural exchanges. Many of the people I met in Pakistan became my friends. They invited me to their homes, introduced me to their families, fed me, and engaged me in thoughtful conversation. On one afternoon, I ended up in a restaurant with Dr. Raja and two other men—one who had driven us to a meeting across town and the other who came along as an escort. They did not speak English, and I do not speak Urdu (or any of the other multiple languages they spoke). At the restaurant, two local musicians were busking for tips. We paid them to play for us, and in the course of their performance, we learned that they were classically trained musicians picking up extra money by playing in restaurants in between jobs at state functions and weddings. The musicians played ghazals, a form of music that was completely

unfamiliar to me before I went to Pakistan, and which frankly are rather distant from my musical tastes. But in that restaurant, translating through Dr. Raja, my hosts (all of them) taught me how to understand the music better, how to understand its relationship to Pakistani culture and history, and how to understand some of its critical complexity.

I tell this story—one of many I could have told—because it helps to round out my reflection on my experience in Pakistan. I went to Islamabad with things I could offer as a writing teacher. I think what I took was important, but it was also relatively narrow. The seminar participants welcomed me, challenged me, learned from me, and taught me. Likewise I came with cultural beliefs and values, and nearly everyone I met welcomed me, challenged me, learned from me, and taught me. In effect, my time in Pakistan was, thankfully, an exchange, or better yet, a series of exchanges—presumably of the sort that the grant was intended to encourage.

And this notion of exchange hints at the complexity that characterizes both Pakistan and its international counterparts. I saw beautiful art and stunning landscapes, I experienced warm and sincere hospitality, I ate food that I still crave four years later, and I learned about the history of Pakistan by attending rehearsals for a play that was written, directed, and performed by a group of brilliant high school students. I saw in equal measure strains on the economic order, violence and its omnipresent possibility, and seemingly insurmountable limitations on people's capacity to live full lives. I saw Americans in Pakistan acting foolishly, and I saw Pakistanis in their own country also acting foolishly. I also saw their opposites. And perhaps more importantly still, I saw Pakistanis, Americans, and people from a variety of other cultures acting foolishly at some times, valiantly at others, and unexceptionally at other times still. The people I met were complicated and worth knowing because of it. In the end, that is the true promise of exchange—not easy connections but rather the willingness to grant complexity to people who may challenge you to live and think differently long after the formal exchange has ended. The stories of going West-to-East are so often heroic and simple; but the experience of going West-to-East resists easy characterization. That is what I hope this reflection demonstrates.

I want to conclude by expressing a message that multiple Pakistanis asked me to convey to other Americans, which is that Pakistanis and their culture(s) are poorly represented in most Western media—films and journalism, in particular. The people I met asked me to convey their goodness, humanity, generosity, and so forth. I am happy to do this because it is certainly in keeping with my experience. But I also want to suggest that one of the chief reasons for Pakistanis' misrepresentation in the West is the familiarity of West-to-East narratives, which

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impose simplicity and naïveté at the expense of richness and complexity. I want to suggest further that merely discovering that Pakistanis are good, humane, and generous is not sufficient.

Ultimately, what I am most grateful for are the people I met with whom I still have the good fortune to keep in contact. But in large part, I keep in contact with them (and hopefully they with me) because they helped me experience the complexity of our cultural exchange rather than the simplicity of benevolent altruism on the one hand or naïve virtue on the other. It is worth remembering, of course, that experiencing complexity is built directly into the promise of a research culture, from which this reflection began. Research and culture, in the best exchanges, teach us to act differently in the hopes of making people's lives better. The challenges entailed in doing so never go away, and I am as grateful for the reminder now as I was four years ago.

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**Notes:**

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<sup>2</sup> The thirty participants in the seminar were: Bashir Ahmed, Afsheen Ekhteyar, Yasser Ghayoor, Azher Habib, Farah Hashmi, Farheen Hashmi, Saima Hassan, Bilal Hussain, Sadiq Hussain, Noveera Jaffar, M. Kashif Jaleel, Arshad Mahmood, Ayyaz Mahmood, Aisha Makhdoom, Ejaz Mirza, Jaweria Mobeen, Mudassir Mukhtar, Saima Niazi, Samina Qayyum, Farhat Sajjad, Hadeeqa Sarwar, Khurram Shahzad, Atteya Shahnaz, Amarah Sumbal, Hazrat Umar, Saima Umer, Shahida Usamah, M. Uzair, Faiza Yunus, Faiza Zeb.

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Raja offered a Postcolonial literature seminar at the same time I was teaching the writing for publication seminar. I suspect some of my seminarians wished they had been in his seminar instead of mine, but they were gracious enough not to mention it in my presence.

<sup>4</sup> Homi Bhaba, Franz Fanon, Masood Ashraf Raja, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and countless others have helped to track the ways these narratives shape beliefs, understandings, and relations across various parts of the world, and especially between what have traditionally been Western (colonizing) nations and Eastern (colonized) nations by reinforcing the cultural-geographical divide, despite how empirically artificial it is.

<sup>5</sup> I hope to avoid the trappings of the two West-to-East narratives I sketched above. Where I fail, as I fear I will, I sincerely hope readers will not make excuses on my behalf and will instead hold me accountable. Where I succeed, as I hope to do at least occasionally, I hope readers will recognize those successes as the result of astonishing goodwill of a global network of friends, colleagues, and interlocutors.