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Learning the Scholar's Craft—The Distraction of Clio

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Agency is what we seek to understand as historians: the demiurge of that disciplinary holy grail, causality. Who or what stirs the cauldron of change? When and how? When we reflect on our own lives, the elusive nature of that power becomes even more palpable. How did I become this thing, a historian of modern Britain? Did I choose it, or did it choose me? And what kind of agency does my being a historian give me?

I landed in the Ph.D. program in history at UC Berkeley in 1997 to study South Asian history with Thomas Metcalf, funded for the first year with a Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) fellowship in Urdu. I had never studied history before. I had grown up with an imaginative awe of the past, perhaps enhanced by the unmooring caused by immigration and the marginalization that came with growing up brown in a white society. Raised in Los Gatos, California, I was hungry for stories about my family's past, a world made doubly remote by both space and time. On long stays in Hindustan, I collected nuggets of information about my mother's family's flight from West Punjab during the Partition of 1947 and of my father's family's anticolonial exploits—my great-grandfather in and out of jail, his daughters in the cotton underground in our small town of Muktsar. Obsessive reading and movie-watching also conjured lost worlds in other geographies, especially Europe, that my young brown self relentlessly romanticized.

The start of the Persian Gulf War triggered my first attempt to articulate a critique of colonialism, in my high school newspaper. I adored my AP U.S. history class and won the history award on graduation. But if the arrows were all pointing in a certain direction, they sank in the watery confusion of my undergraduate years at Stanford. My designated advisor left in the middle of my freshman year, and I had little guidance of how to navigate majors and the decision of what to choose as my major. The history department seemed like a black box without a clear entrance. The focus seemed to be European history, which was intimidating for its subject matter (for someone who'd only had U.S. history and ancient civilizations) as well as for who taught it and filled the classes. I was searching for the history of people who looked like me. There were no faculty in South Asian history. I took the one course offered in that field by the late Mark Mancall and the anthropologist Akhil Gupta but could not see where to step next. The sciences, by contrast, had a clear ladder for courses leading inexorably to understanding the universe itself. I wound up majoring in Chemistry—but also International Relations, a major that was flexible enough to complete alongside Chemistry and that allowed me to pursue my interests in global inequality, which I understood as rooted in colonialism.

But I didn't give up on history entirely. My first summer, age 19, I went on archaeological digs in Tunisia and France, which also exposed me to another postcolonial tie. These digs taught me how race and gender, at times harrowingly, limited who could fulfill a romantic vision of excavating the past like Indiana Jones. (Stubbornly, back at Stanford, I learned to fly a Cessna 152 to be like Indy.) A study abroad term at Oxford gave me a chance to soak in the humanities: courses on film and British society and decolonization (with John Darwin) and an intense, paper-a-week tutorial on South Asian history. With my abiding interest in Partition, while the movement for Khalistan in Indian Punjab gathered force, I decided to write an honors thesis on border-making in Punjab as a political science project, with the guidance of the wonderful David

Abernethy. I went to Indian and Pakistani Punjab to research my thesis but could not navigate the disarray of the state archives—or the simmering war within my family in Punjab. ¹ I gave up on the thesis. In my senior year, I took Judith Goldstein's graduate level political science course on international institutions, earning a discouraging B- (I think) on my paper on the neocolonialism of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). ² The nineties were a time of denial about empire: The Cold War was over, empire was over, history itself was over. I came to understand that denial of empire was part of the triumph of its ideological foundation, liberalism.

Page | 2

I went to film school at New York University the summer after I graduated in hopes of learning how to tell stories that transcended the divide between my love of Hollywood films and Hindi films, to find a way to bring South Asian experience to my American world without the monkey brains of Indiana Jones's *Temple of Doom.*³ In the fall I began a Master's degree in Development Studies at the London School of Economics, and though I earned the top score in Tim Besley's development economics class, my Master's thesis, a historically-minded study of the postcolonial development of the Indian film industry, was so removed from the course's assumptions about "development" that it received barely passing marks. But writing it was exhilarating. At some point, maybe in that year, I made an unspoken, inarticulate decision to be a writer. I read gluttonously, thanks to London's wondrous bookshops, about film, film history, and history, devouring Eric Hobsbawm's newly published *Age of Extremes*. ⁴ I remember feeling some significance to the discovery that I shared his birthday. For a year after I finished the degree and applied for further study, I wrote stories. Of course, all this prolonged confusion was a mark of privilege, the support and patience but also distraction of parents with four children.

I applied to Berkeley's history department because Berkeley didn't have a film studies or film-making graduate program, proposing in my application to study the history of film and partition in South Asia. I hoped to do something with film that would have its own anticolonial impact. I chose the Berkeley option over more film-focused programs to which I was offered admission, partly because it was close to home and I had always longed to attend Berkeley, and perhaps because at some level I wasn't sure if I wanted to commit myself exclusively to film.

Given my lack of foundation in history when I arrived at Berkeley in 1997, Tom Metcalf advised me to take Margaret Anderson's course in modern Europe, to learn the ropes, on the premise that European historiography offered the building blocks for the discipline. In class I was the one who asked questions that were weird then: why doesn't François Furet talk about Algeria? I did not have imposter syndrome but was a true imposter, and this was somehow liberating. I knew so little about the French Revolution that I did not even realize how embarrassing it was not to know about it.

Finding me at a loss for a topic for my first historiography paper, Anderson suggested I do something with music, which was a passion (though my taste was desi rather than classical European). So, it turned out that my first proper history paper was on the historiography of romanticism in music. I also took classes with the department's South Asian history scholars, Eugene Irschick and Metcalf, and with other Europeanists: the late Susanna Barrows, Martin Jay (for whose class I wrote a paper on the spatial dynamics of the Boer War, which would become the seed of the dissertation of my first graduate

¹ See preface of Priya Satia, Empire of Guns: The Violent Making of the Industrial Revolution (New York: Penguin, 2018).

² I was happy to see my youthful view validated recently in Robert Gildea, *Empires of the Mind: The Colonial Past and the Politics of the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

³ Among many racist depictions in Steven Spielberg's 1984 blockbuster set in British India (causing it to be temporarily banned in India) was an infamous scene in which Indians were shown to eat chilled monkey brains.

⁴ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991* (New York: Vintage, 1996).

student).⁵ As British history was then part of the European history program, I never took a course specifically in British history. I wrote my first research seminar paper as an independent study with Thomas Laqueur. In light of my science background, he suggested that I write on the invention of radio (after I rejected his suggestion of the history of the samosa).

I didn't know what I was doing. After I had 105 pages and was still not done, I showed Laqueur what I had. I think he thought I was crazy but a good historical analyst. I suspect my awareness of my ignorance was what made me what he called a "demon researcher"; I really didn't see any other way to understand a topic ex nihilo but to search obsessively, *endlessly* for sources. The paper showed how the Boer War had shaped radio's technological development, and many years later, in 2010, it appeared in *Technology & Culture*.

Page | 3

Later, as I prepared for my oral exams, Laqueur encouraged me to switch to modern Europe as my primary field. I was by then a little confused as a budding South Asianist: Irschick was mainly teaching Foucault, and Metcalf was working on connections between South Africa, Australia, and India, so I had never had a graduate course in South Asian history. I had written a second research paper with Metcalf, which somehow, staying with the technology theme, wound up focusing on the boats of the British Indian army in Iraq in World War One rather than on South Asia (published in *Past & Present* in 2007). I also took courses on colonialism and mapping and science, and I remember a gathering impression of a literature more focused on the epistemological than actual violence of colonialism.

I was also unsure about what it would mean to write academic South Asian history in the U.S.—how would that help me in the revolutionary struggle I had set out to participate in as an (increasingly imaginary) filmmaker? Perhaps in the U.S., where I saw echoes of the liberal mindset that had justified British imperialism and a penchant for romanticizing British imperialism, I might be more helpful as a historian of the British empire? I was trying to work through what kind of agency a historian could have. I wanted to write about colonialism to serve anticolonial ends. As a British historian, I could plumb the nature of imperial power; there was something about a Punjabi woman as a British historian that also felt anticolonial in itself. Why should I stay in my lane?

I had native ability in South Asian languages and fluency in French. I began to learn German to qualify as a Europeanist. Deciding on a dissertation on British policing of gold smuggling in the Persian Gulf, I also took an economic history course with Barry Eichengreen and Brad De Long. I read Middle Eastern history independently with Beshara Doumani. So, it came about that my orals committee (I think) included Profs. Anderson, Eichengreen, Metcalf, Laqueur, and Doumani.

The exam went terribly. I remember feeling paralyzed, being unable to state that cutlery came from Sheffield. It was made clear that my "pass" was thanks to the committee's generosity. Now I look back with compassion at that young brown woman with no background in history, between fields, intimidated by the Europe she was trying to study. This was an era before conversations about "diversity, equity, and inclusion," much less mentoring or institutional support for it. As far as I can recall, I was the only nonwhite person in my cohort of European historians.

I was bruised but bloody-minded, as after every defeat. Just then I moved to Princeton, having married a graduate student in economics there. The Princeton history department was not welcoming. So, I was more or less on my own as I wrote up a prospectus that was half-poem half-plan, about orientalism and how it shaped British actions in the Gulf region (switching

⁵ Later his book Aidan Forth, *Barbed-Wire Imperialism: Britain's Empire of Camps, 1876-1903* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017).

⁶ Satia, "War, Wireless, and Empire: Marconi and the British Warfare State, 1896-1903," *Technology & Culture* 51 (2010): 829-853.

⁷ Satia, "Developing Iraq: Britain, India, and the Redemption of Empire and Technology in World War I," *Past & Present* 197 (2007): 211-55.

now from economics to literature (with the late Alex Zwerdling) as my outside field). In January 2001, I left for the UK to start my research. With no idea how the National Archives worked, I simply began with A: Air Ministry. As I began plumbing its files, I learned about British air control in Iraq after World War One and began to wonder if orientalism, the idea that the Middle East was unknowable, inscrutable, mysterious, had something to do with the invention of a violent form of colonial surveillance aspiring to omniscience? Laqueur had taught me that you have to know what mystery your research is trying to solve—and I had found a good one.

Page | 4

And so began my effort to connect those dots, to explain the invention of air control as the result not merely of economy—which would have made it an option well beyond Iraq where it was first used exclusively—but of British cultural notions about the Middle East and what it meant to be an "expert" there. Smugglers yielded to spies and archaeologists (and I've been gratified lately to find other scholars giving those smugglers the attention they deserve). Here, too, I feel that my lack of foundation was ironically freeing, enabling me to take risks, both analytically and empirically, simply because I didn't realize they were risks. At some subconscious level, I was excavating my youthful fascinations with archaeology and flight and the white male power they symbolized.

On 9/11 I was in the map room of the British Library. In the conversation about intelligence failure in the Middle East leading up to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, I heard continual echoes of the era I was researching, the same tropes about the "Arab mind" and perception of an unknowable place. I could see how myths about the success of British air control were informing U.S. strategy—and how memory of the British era shaped those on its receiving end.

After a year in the UK, I wrote my dissertation almost entirely in solitude in Princeton, sprawled on the floor of the stacks of Firestone Library. I wrote it mostly out of fear that I would not write it, that I would move on from this interest as I had moved on from chemistry, flying, filmmaking, fiction, and economics. I had joined graduate school understanding that it would culminate in a Ph.D., something my overachieving self wanted for its own sake. And because I knew it would make me write a book. I still hadn't grasped that the purpose of obtaining a Ph.D. was (ideally, then) to become a professor.

So, it was something of a surprise when I found that I needed to ready myself for a job market in the fall of 2002. I had three dissertation chapters, all too long. I still hadn't mastered the genre of the chapter or article-length piece. I remember Laqueur's protective blessings as my Doktorvater as I stepped out to brave the AHA interviews. My husband was also on the academic job market, and we both got multiple tenure-track offers but in different places. But I also had the offer of a one-year visiting spousal lectureship at Stanford where my husband had a tenure-track offer and the history department's British history professor Peter Stansky happened to be going on leave—partly thanks to the lucky coincidence that the chair of Stanford's economics department was an Englishman with a passion for history and interested in my dissertation "on the Sykes-Picot agreement," as he understood it. Laqueur and his partner, Carla Hesse, helped me give myself permission to prioritize my personal needs. A Californian in exile since 2001, I could not resist the opportunity to go home. Instead of accepting the tenure-track offers, I took a gamble on Stanford.

As luck would have it, Peter Stansky announced his retirement the next year and the Stanford history department launched a search in British history. I applied, while lecturing in the department and still writing my dissertation. At some point that year, James Vernon, the historian of modern Britain who had joined Berkeley's department after I began my research and became an essential member of my dissertation committee, taught me the magic of shaping a piece of writing into a chapter or article. It turned out that my work was always too long because of a propensity to include every scrap of research in the text, presumably to allay imposter syndrome. I was among the finalists for the Stanford job, but it was offered to another, more senior candidate. When she declined the job, it came to me.

⁸ See Johan Mathew, *Margins of the Market: Trafficking and Capitalism across the Arabian Sea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

That summer of 2004, I finished my dissertation and earned my Ph.D., beginning in the fall as an assistant professor teaching modern British history at Stanford—the result of a lot of serendipity and good fortune, a lot of cluelessness on my part, and bloody-mindedness, a lot of good mentoring, some bad mentoring.

After a few months, I began to use feedback from my new colleagues to turn my dissertation into a book. I submitted an article to the *American Historical Review*—emboldened, again, by that sense of, what's there to lose? It was accepted, and I sent the corrected proofs just after my daughter was born. ⁹ The book, *Spies in Arabia*, came out in 2008, two weeks before my son was born. ¹⁰ I will never forget the wonder of realizing I had actually fulfilled a long-nurtured dream; I had written a *book*, one of those talismanic objects with which I'd had such a lifelong love affair.

Page | 5

It was at times challenging being who I was among the cohort of straight white American men hired as assistant professors just before me, but new hires gradually increased the department's diversity. Several senior colleagues were extremely supportive of me, and the AHA's validation of my book laid to rest some of my self-doubt.

Reflecting on a second book project, I realized that I had abandoned my economic interests in my exploration of state violence. I decided to incorporate the question of trade into my exploration of technologies of empire. In searching for the origins of British arms trading, I stumbled on the story of Samuel Galton, a prominent eighteenth-century gunmaker and Birmingham Quaker who, intriguingly, claimed that the industrial economy of his time was driven by war. I was expecting my son when I first went to Birmingham to look at the records of the Galton family. Though I had only a few days, digital photography allowed me to take much of the archive home. The "craft" I have learned is simply to be exhaustive in chasing down and combing through sources and secondary literature, mindful that things like technologies, economies, and institutions are culturally embedded. There is simply no other way, exhausting as it also is.

Given my family constraints, raising two small children, and the pressures of the tenure-track *and* the evident stakes of Galton's view, if it was true, I decided to make the most of my spadework and test his claim by investigating the extent to which contracting shaped industrialism in Birmingham. Here was a new mystery, tied up with the mystery of a Quaker gunmaker. If Galton was right, it was a whole new paradigm for understanding the industrial revolution—one that threatened the liberal assumptions underpinning development studies. I had not worked on the eighteenth century before. Here, besides the usual galvanizing sense of my rawness in the discipline, my advisor's example gave me some confidence: though most historians understandably tend to plough the furrow of time they know best, building on painstakingly acquired expertise, Laqueur moved frequently between and across the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. A senior colleague at Stanford said the book was a terrible idea, and that made me doubly determined to write it. I made many lightning visits to archives in the UK, the U.S., and India, and, thanks to photography, acquired a collection of sources to rival those for my first book.

Meanwhile, as I watched the U.S. consolidate its aerial strategy for a war against terror in precisely the same places— Afghanistan, Iraq, Somaliland, Yemen—where the British had invented aerial policing, I began to speak and write about my work in non-academic venues in the hope of puncturing myths about the success of British air control that were informing this strategy. Besides Laqueur, Juan Cole was an important inspiration and model as I thought about the public uses of history and tried to trace the line from British aerial policing to American drone strikes in journalistic pieces. Writing a book on the gun trade while the U.S. was plagued by mass shootings—Sandy Hook happened when my daughter was also in

⁹ Satia, "The Defense of Inhumanity: Air Control in Iraq and the British Idea of Arabia," *American Historical Review* 111 (2006): 16-51.

¹⁰ Satia, Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

first grade—also drove me to share my work in popular media to help dispel the historical myths on which lax American gun regulation is founded.

After more than a decade, in 2018, *Empire of Guns* was complete.¹¹ Though anchored in the eighteenth century, its closing chapters reached to our present, riding over some of the terrain of *Spies in Arabia*. My sense of the topic's stakes and relevance to contemporary issues, both gun violence and defense contracting, had encouraged me to publish with a trade press, and I was grateful once again for the AHA's validation of the work (and I had redeemed my Sheffield blunder!). Along the way I had been granted tenure and promoted to full professor. I received an endowed chair at the end of 2018.

Page | 6

In my grad courses on modern Europe, questions of empire were not on the syllabi. But by the time I had finished my dissertation, the field had shifted dramatically. In 2016-18 I participated in a stock-taking about this shift in British history in particular. ¹² But while scholarly writing about British history now routinely addressed colonialism's formative influence on Britain and the world, popular histories continued to praise British imperialism and the great men who presided over it—at times explicitly to encourage American aggression. Getting contrary views into popular media outlets was (and remains) a continual struggle. Through my interventions on debates about drones, especially after a visit to Creech Air Force Base in 2013, I experienced the powerful institutional resistance to the voices of scholars who saw American activity through the lens of colonialism. ¹³

I had evolved a sense of my agency as a historian as that of truth-teller. I had learned with excitement while researching my dissertation that E. P. Thompson's father was Edward Thompson, a colonial missionary in India whose experiences in the invasion of Iraq during World War One turned him into a critic of empire who saw historical writing as a means of truth-telling against the state. I looked back upon my seemingly off-topic questions in Margaret Anderson's class with less embarrassment: all along the greatest icon of an island version of British history, and the consummate activist-historian, had had personal ties to the history of empire! And, the nation-based historiographies we had trained in were not natural to the discipline but themselves an accident of history—in E.P.'s case, a way of coping with decolonization. ¹⁴ Still, I also questioned the extent to which historians' interventions could be *effectual*, given my own experiences in public writing, and traced the origins of our assumptions about their agency in a 2016 article in *History Workshop Journal*. ¹⁵ Again, a sense of being an outsider was, I think, helpful, in prompting me to use the discipline's own methods to analyze the assumptions on which they rested *from the outside*, critically.

I also followed the anticolonial criticism of Western historical thinking that had likely influenced Edward Thompson, through his friends the poets and anticolonial thinkers Muhammad Iqbal and Rabindranath Tagore. Their thought also looms over Partition, which I now saw anew as a world-historical event shaped by debates about historical thought itself. Shortly after it was founded in 2011, I had also begun to work with the Berkeley-based Partition Archive. I began to

¹¹ Satia, Empire of Guns.

¹² This was a conversation at the 2016 NACBS later published as a roundtable in the *Journal of British Studies*. My piece was Satia, "Britain and the World: A Fix for Provincialism or a Case of Colonialism?" *Journal of British Studies* 57 (2018): 677-708.

¹³ Some reflections on that trip appeared in Satia, "Drones: A History from the British Middle East," *Humanity* 5 (2014).

¹⁴ See Satia, "History from Below," Aeon.co, December 18, 2020, https://aeon.co/essays/what-shaped-e-p-thompson-historian-and-champion-of-working-people.

¹⁵ Satia, "Byron, Gandhi and the Thompsons: The Making of British Social History and Unmaking of Indian History," *History Workshop Journal* 81 (2016): 135-170.

understand Partition through anticolonial Urdu language poet-activists of that time, ¹⁶ many of whom were involved in the very films of the 1950s on which my Master's thesis had focused, as teaching and thinking about the Indian Ocean World and the history of capitalism also led me back to smugglers. So, I returned full circle to my original historical interests but now with a critical view of history itself.

Page | 7

If I embraced the anticolonial understanding of the historian as truth-teller, I also noticed the way Galton had enabled imperialism with arguments about his place in history, as had the archeologists in *Spies in Arabia*. So began my third book, *Time's Monster*, which connected these dots: how historians shifted from being architects to critics of British imperialism. ¹⁷ Drawing on two decades of research and reflection up to that point, and written in a mad fury, it appeared after just two years. As I strove to bridge what I had learned about the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, I tried to come to terms with the question that had dogged my personal and scholarly life all along: given this past, what sort of agency can a historian today have? And what can historians learn from poets, story-tellers, and activists? For the third time, my book appeared just when debates on its very subject filled the air. The idea of "the judgment of history" and wars over Britain's imperial past were central to public discourse; I again tried to share my work with the public.

My own past continues to spiral into my present and future. In my next work, I hope to return, at last, to the geography that first made me want to be a historian, to uncover stories of anticolonial Punjab buried beneath the rubble of Partition. Films continue to nip pet-like at my fingers as I write. Nothing is wasted. I will, unbelievably, be revisiting that first paper on romanticism in music for a conference this year. I also hope to return to my paper on "shahr ashob" (poetic genre of laments for the city) which I wrote for my class on the Urdu literature in my first year of graduate school—partly to honor the memory of my teacher, Aditya Behl, who passed too soon. The horrors of my children's school history textbooks have also got me thinking about a book on the British empire aimed at younger readers. In middle-age, I can see what I could not possibly have seen earlier: how one's own past spills continually into the present, informing the future, and how personal and scholarly lives are intertwined (though you are mercifully spared the personal here).

Perhaps it is risky to share stories of my struggles publicly. But it is an honor to being asked to write in this series, and I would be a poor practitioner of the craft indeed if I omitted those difficult bits. It would serve no one, and the very thought that my failures may be something to hide triggers the mutinousness that, I hope, is the trace of anticolonial inheritance. Moreover, if my orals were a debacle, Hobsbawm did little archival research. There are different kinds of historians, and there is no doubt in my mind that I am a historian, that my mind is now wired, helplessly, to analyze context and contingency, the particular and universal, the empirical and the poetic. I am not sure that I like this habit of mind, this mental discipline, that I like being a historian, that I chose it (privilege though it is to be a well-employed one). At times I wonder if the racism I encountered growing up and in the stories of my colonized ancestors wound up distracting me, as Toni Morrison tells us racism does, into a lifelong effort to prove over and over again that the struggles of brown and black people are not the result of their race but of the colonialism that racism enables; it keeps you explaining, "over and over again, your reason for being." But as Ghalib tells us, "Gham-e-hasti ka 'Asad' kis se ho juz marg ilaaj; shama har rang mein

¹⁶ Satia, "Poets of Partition," *Tanqeed* 10 (2016), http://www.tanqeed.org/2016/01/poets-of-partition/; "Poets of Partition: The Recovery of Lost Causes," 224-256, in Arie Dubnov and Laura Robson, eds., *Partitions: A Transnational History of Twentieth-Century Territorial Separatism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

¹⁷ Satia, Time's Monster: How History Makes History (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020).

¹⁸ Toni Morrison, talk at Portland State University, 1975, https://www.wweek.com/news/2019/08/07/one-of-late-writer-toni-morrisons-most-famous-quotes-about-racism-came-from-a-talk-at-portland-state-university-listen-to-it-here/.

jalti hai sahar hote tak." ¹⁹ He also says, "Hazaaron khwahishein aisi ke har khwahish pe dam nikle": ²⁰ It is also thanks to this vexed discipline that I was able to become what I genuinely always wanted to be: a writer.

Page | 8

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^{19 &}quot;Asad [Ghalib], by what besides death can the worries of life be cured; the candle burns in every color as it becomes morning."

²⁰ "There are thousands of such wishes, that for each wish one gives one's life."