

AIPS STRG Abstract- Osama Ahmad

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I am a fourth-year PhD candidate in the History department at Brown University; after successfully passing my PhD qualifying exams, I defended my dissertation prospectus in spring 2022, and currently (AY 2022-2023), I am conducting archival research and fieldwork in Lahore, Pakistan. I am applying for this research grant to financially support my fieldwork work in Lahore through the summer before I return to Providence in Fall 2023. Tentatively titled “City of Knowledge: Lahore’s Urdu Bazaar as engine of Print, Urbanity and Self-fashioning,” my dissertation showcases the efflorescence of Urdu print culture in mid nineteenth century colonial Lahore and demonstrates how this led to the emergence of the Urdu Bazaar. Using the backdrop of Lahore, Punjab, this interdisciplinary dissertation functions at the intersection of South Asian history, History of Knowledge, and Urban History making major interventions in each of these fields: instead of viewing cities as ‘spaces of control’ as asserted by traditional colonial and post-colonial scholarship, it argues that envisaging them as ‘spaces of autonomy’ is far more insightful – the city as an agentive space instead of being a passive physical one. It also opens new paths in the burgeoning field of History of Knowledge by identifying Lahore’s Urdu Bazaar as a distinctive space of knowledge production. Analyzing it as an arena where complex social and intellectual exchanges occur amplifies our understanding of how knowledge is produced and disseminated. Viewed more broadly, the articulation of bazaar as a space of knowledge production, and the exposition of the social milieu of print and knowledge it engenders, therefore, also rearticulates the city itself, Lahore in this case, as a city of print and knowledge – thus, rescuing our understanding of cities of the Global South from hackneyed binaries of ‘dirty vs. sanitized’ and typical categories of ‘native’ or ‘colonial’ cities in Urban History. To execute this project, for the past six months, I have been working in several archives in Lahore – the Punjab Archives, GCU Archives and Punjab Printing & Stationary Press Archives to name a few – and conducting fieldwork in Urdu Bazaar itself. This includes mapping both the social and physical space as well as charting its spatial and economic evolution over the years. Moreover, to better articulate the relationship between space, experience, time, and text I am employing walking as a methodological tool – used by scholars like Michel de Certeau for Manhattan, Ziad Fahmy for Cairo, and by Manan Asif and Taymiya Zaman for Uch and Thatta respectively. Methodologically, I am focusing on walking because by literally walking in the streets of the bazaar, or across any physical space, one can move beyond the two-dimensional maps drawn by officials, and in essence, escape the colonial gaze. And by physically experiencing the streetscape one gets a better ‘feel’ for the space as well; this way the lived and embodied spaces and movements of the people working in the streets of the Urdu Bazaar can be faithfully captured, revealing a great deal more about their everyday life and engagement in knowledge production processes. In addition to traditional archival research and fieldwork, I have also actively cultivated relationships with local historians, educators, craftsmen, printers, and vendors in the Urdu Bazaar as well. LUMS, my alma mater, has been an important institutional resource: via its library, but even more useful has been conversations

with its faculty – Ali Usman Qasmi on Lahore’s Urdu literary production; and Ilyas Chattha’s work on the Gold Bazaar has been especially insightful. GCU’s archive and faculty have also been very helpful, where Noor Rehman has generously made introductions to a host of locals that have proved intellectually very fruitful. Spending extensive time in Lahore and Urdu Bazaar has indeed revealed the complex and multi-layered socio-economic and political relationships governing these spaces. However, it has also become apparent that understanding these processes, experiences and relationships requires careful, deliberate unpacking, and crucially additional time. Therefore, I have decided to extend my stay here beyond May 2023 – when my university fellowship period ends – into the summer, to continue cultivating these relationships and my archival research and fieldwork. If awarded, this research grant will furnish the requisite financial support to continue my work through the summer – June to August 2023 – by offsetting the shortfall in my monthly stipend during the summer. Primarily, I intend to use this grant to cover living and local travelling costs, and if possible, to purchase a flight ticket back to the US in time for Fall semester 2023, to resume my teaching responsibilities at Brown