

## On Being an Editor: Bungee Jumping Anyone?

Guest editorial by Dr. Meenal Shrivastava



**Meenal Shrivastava**

*After earning her degrees in History and International Studies in India, and teaching in South Africa for nearly a decade, Meenal Shrivastava became Professor and Academic Coordinator of Political Economy and Global Studies at Athabasca University, Canada where she currently works. She was also editor of *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies* (2007-2010), serves on numerous editorial and governance boards, and continues to review far too many manuscripts.*

In 2006, I bungee jumped from a bridge straddling Zimbabwe and Zambia atop the Victoria Falls Gorge. In the same year, I moved from my home of nine years in South Africa to the outer edge of the Arctic Circle in Edmonton, Canada. To add to the thrill, within months of accepting the position of Assistant Professor and Coordinator at Athabasca University in Alberta, I had also accepted my appointment as the editor of *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies* (Taylor & Francis).

As I think back about standing on a platform 111 meters above the gorgeous waters of the River Zambezi — my body poised to fling itself toward the horizon, my mind mutely screaming its rejection of the next step, free falling into a seemingly unending abyss (it was only a 70m drop!), heart and stomach gathering in my throat, jerky reminder of the end of the free fall, futile attempt to grab on to an imaginary anchor to steady myself leading to a violent rebound, sensation of the bungee cord tightening around my ribs and ankles, then letting go, then enjoying the thrill of swinging upside down, and then the sweet relief of seeing the smiling face of a recovery operator who attached a retrieval line to my body harness which righted the world and led me to terra firma, followed by sore ribs for days and a remarkable memory for the rest of my life. I see many parallels between bungee jumping and my journey so far as an academic, an editor, an immigrant, a person of colour, and a woman.

All these identities/identifiers are intertwined not just in how I define myself, but also in how others might choose to define me and my capabilities. My various identities have sometimes been imaginary anchors, and sometimes real recovery lines. My experience of being an 'immigrant'<sup>1</sup> professor in South Africa and Canada has had its fair share of moments of panic and thrill, sometimes not unlike the utter helplessness of hanging upside down from a high bridge. But just like bungee jumping, you will not know what you are capable of doing until you try it. And when you step into a new experience do your homework well, understand the mechanics of the structures that surround you, seek help from those more experienced than you, and take some time to appreciate the effort (your and others') in all its gut-wrenching glory.

Given the various identifiers mentioned earlier, my context might appear unique, but the lessons I learnt about the socio-political system we operate in as academics are likely to have a wider resonance. In this piece, I will focus mainly on my experience as the editor of an academic journal for a three year term (2007-2010).

### Passage to Editorship

I was a freshly minted PhD from India who moved to live in South Africa with my Indo-South African husband. A new democracy in its post-apartheid era, South Africa's reengagement with the world was still so new that I was one of the first Indian-trained non-whites to be granted tenure at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1999. My physicist husband, and I were settling in the leafy suburbs of Johannesburg as an academic couple at the same university, until the ever closing circle of violent crime in South Africa and a serendipitous opportunity in Canada made me move continents away from my husband, our two dogs, our legions of friends and family.

So why did a young early-career academic who was no longer living in the country thought she could be editor of the flagship journal of political studies in South Africa? The answer to that lies in my experience of the complexities of the burden of the many identifiers that most women, but particularly those of colour, have to bear. And heaven help you if you also happen to be young and foreign-born!

Having been raised in a politically progressive family in India, being the third generation of academic women in my family, or getting my doctoral degree from the premier university in India were totally irrelevant for my students and colleagues who were looking for confirmation of their racial/ethnic biases. As it turned out, I was a popular graduate research supervisor, but that did not prevent many of my undergraduate students from questioning my reading lists, complaining about my accent, or being disrespectful and disruptive in my class in myriad ways. I was appointed to high-level committees early in my career, but the experience of attending committee meetings made me doubt if I was there for my credentials or to serve as window-dressing. Slighting my favourable performance reviews, a senior colleague suggested that my academic progress at the university was assured since I fulfilled the affirmative action requirement. Instead of spelling out all the sordid details, suffice it to say, I felt over-worked and under-appreciated. So I did what most women tend to do under such circumstance — I worked harder.

In my six years at Wits University, I developed three postgraduate courses, taught seven different courses, supervised 22 research projects (including six at doctoral level), published seven journal articles, and presented numerous papers. Aside from an incredibly supportive spouse, what really helped me carry on were the many mutually nurturing relationships that evolved with other women colleagues, some male colleagues, and even some senior students in the institution. In the process of surviving the deep-seated gender/racial biases and the thinly veiled xenophobia, I experienced the strength we draw from helping others and by creating community(s). I am very cognizant of my own privileges of class and social capital, and I am not suggesting that such avenues are open to everyone experiencing marginalization, but becoming a mentor to colleagues and students struggling in an unfair system became my source of strength and fulfilment at the time. Nevertheless, without a mentor myself, at the age of 34, I was on the brink of burnout and only kept going on at the thought of my upcoming sabbatical for which I was preparing to apply. Instead, I accepted the Athabasca University offer, telling myself that a change is as good as a holiday — which is totally untrue by the way.

While I was still navigating the challenges of moving to a different country, living in a new city alone, working from home, finding my way through the logistical maze of an open distance university, and managing the sub-arctic climatic conditions in Edmonton, I was contacted by the outgoing editor and friend, Stephen Louw, to put in my application for the competition of the editorship of *Politikon*. I readily gave in to the emotional rush of feeling valued and saw it as an opportunity to prove my worth. I also considered it an opportunity to continue my ties with South Africa. In hindsight, I would say there are many easier ways to feel validated and to stay connected. I should have also questioned my need to continually 'prove my worth', which has been my unhealthy strategy from time to time to cope with the scars of overt and covert hostilities that I bear due to the various identifiers applied to me<sup>2</sup>.

Most editorship competitions involve putting together a team of editors, as well as your vision for the future of the journal. At the time, *Politikon* only required one editor and a book reviews editor. I included a woman colleague from an Afrikaans speaking university, Jo-Ansie Van Wyk, as my book reviews partner. I justified my choice as a potential bridge between the historical divide that exists in English and Afrikaans scholarship in South Africa. The plans for my editorship term included annual special issues on themes such as the political economy of hosting the 2010 FIFA World Cup, and Africa's relations with 'emerging powers'.

Aside from the prospect of an all-women-dynamic-duo, I think the strategic chutzpah of my application might also have played a role in swaying the selection committee in my favour, overlooking some limitations of my CV as an early-career over-stretched academic. I had been the book reviews editor of *Politikon* for a three year term, and was very familiar with the journal and the South African Association of Political Studies. Moreover, I pointed to my considerable experience in graduate supervision as providing me with a unique insight into emerging scholarship in the country. I pre-empted the committee's concerns with an 'off-shore editor' by explaining the utility of my international networks in India, South Africa, and North America for expanding the submission, reviewer, as well as subscription numbers. Finally, I highlighted the advantages of working at Athabasca University in its flexibility of schedule due to the absence of set semesters, and my growing familiarity with electronic platforms of research, publication, and editing in working with a distance learning university.

Convincing myself and the committee of my capability to handle the job was the easy part, the hard part was to command the means to deliver on my promises. This is where clear-eyed systemic knowledge and self-awareness are critical.

## Some lessons from my experience

When you jump from the bungee platform, your weight is transmitted through the ankle harness to the bungee cord which stretches around three times its original length as you decelerate out of freefall. Despite the terror of the unfamiliar sensation of freefalling at 120 km/h, I trusted the impeccable safety record of the operators and their instruments which had helped thousands of people safely bungee-jump before me. What I could not prepare for was my own reaction to taking a step into the vast unknown, where gravity and physics take over. Despite the theoretical knowledge, I could not prevent my instinctive reaction of reaching for a supporting anchor after the abrupt end of the free fall. It was a dangerous move which made my body jerk upright before violently twisting my ribs to head back toward the gravitational pull. Later, when I saw the video, I could hear people at the jump platform clucking in concern and whistling to signal to the recovery operator that I might need help. At the time, every counsel was drowned out by the sound of rushing wind and my heart trying to escape out of my ears.

In the slow motion bungee jump equivalent of the editorship experience, I saw my workload more than double, but unlike the bungee cord, the available time or resources did not stretch to accommodate the extra work. Hindsight is indeed 20/20 so now I know, and thus I need to share, that there were available resources which I could have harnessed to make my work more manageable. For instance, I could have negotiated teaching/coordination release from Athabasca University and/or an editorial assistant from the publisher/association. In a departure from the bungee experience, I needed to gather anchors instead of letting go to enjoy the ride. I now also understand this as a lack of self-awareness since I never asked myself why I needed to take on so much work and not ask for help. Instead, I worked afterhours, weekends, and holidays to stay on top of the deadlines of the equivalent of two full-

time jobs. It certainly helped that due to the intercontinental separation from my husband and family, I had no life during my editing term.

The biggest challenge was the sheer amount of grind work that is involved in being a journal editor. For the three annual issues containing six to eight articles each, I received 80-100 submissions of wildly varying quality per year. Aside from those articles that got rejected in my initial screening (about 50%), I lined up two reviewers for each of the submissions that I judged to have publication potential. Eventually, about 30% of the submitted articles emerged successful on the other side of the double-blind peer review process. After reviewing author revisions, I submitted the articles to the copy-editor and then oversaw the process of finalizing the drafts. It is a relentless cycle of overlapping deadlines which went on uninterrupted for three years.

Finding reviewers involved pleading, cajoling, and nagging academics into reviewing an article constructively and on time. Due to issues of workload (no good deed goes unpunished in academia) and the absence of academic recognition for this service, not finding sufficient number of reviewers who were willing and available to deliver was often the reason for a longer turnaround time than I would have liked. Having accepted my invitation, most reviewers delivered their reviews within the stipulated 4-6 weeks. Upon receiving the review comments, I paid special attention to the tone of the reports. If the comments were constructive, I sent them on to the author(s) to address within a strict timeframe. But sometimes, the review comments were unnecessarily harsh or personal despite the anonymous nature of the process since specialized sub-fields often betray the identity of authors. In such cases, I synthesised the main points and wrote a report myself.

In facilitating the review process, I did periodically land in hot water, once with an irate star author who questioned my gall to make revisions then withdrew the accepted article, and a few times with reviewers who reacted rudely to my reminder to deliver a long-awaited review. The mostly virtual communication exposed an interesting bias; most correspondences to the editor of *Politikon* addressed me as 'Sir' except from those few who had actually met me. I really enjoyed correcting those using the 'default' gender. All in all, it was a pleasant, though exhausting, experience of working with authors and reviewers from around the world from the cold comfort of my home office in Edmonton.

Although a time-consuming enterprise, the most fulfilling part of my role was the opportunity to nurture emerging scholars, particularly from Africa. I adopted a consciously constructive approach to editing submissions from early-career scholars. In the process, I learnt the importance of choosing the right reviewer(s) for a piece, which further challenged my naïve faith in the objectivity of the 'blind' peer review process.

Aside from these responsibilities, I worked with the publisher on marketing and publicity campaigns which made a difference to the quality, quantity, and breadth of submissions. During my term *Politikon* got included in several national and international indices and its subscription grew by more than 30%. I also negotiated a new royalty contract agreement with the publisher which increased the revenue share of the association. Additionally, I worked with the publishing company to adopt an online review and submission system. The association expressed its appreciation and offered me another three year term, which I declined. I did recommend that the next editing team should be expanded to include an additional editor, which the association agreed to.

When faced with a challenging job, there are a lot of things you learn on the fly about the work and about yourself. Aside from the ones mentioned before, here are some of the lessons about this experience I would like to share: never underestimate the amount of follow-up required for reviewers, authors, copy-editors and sundry other people; despite the valuable experience you will gain as an editor, the reward for this knowledge is not consistently

institutionalized or recognized and your own research and publication will certainly take a back seat during your term; as an editor particularly, and as an academic generally, you will work longer and harder than is necessary or possible; the more you have to juggle, the faster time passes before the next deadline is staring in your face; you are more than the sum of imposed identities/identifiers; and finally, be grateful to those who remind you to reconnect with life beyond your desk.

A year after my term as editor, I had spinal surgery for a ruptured lumbar disc, the cause could have been the bungee jump or it may have been the editorship, but they were both worth it.

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<sup>1</sup> For an interesting analysis of the differences in the usage of 'immigrant' and 'expat' see: 1)

<https://www.theguardian.com/media/mind-your-language/2011/apr/11/mind-your-language-expat-brits>; and 2)

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/mar/13/white-people-expats-immigrants-migration>

<sup>2</sup> For a brief glimpse into my experience of contending with racial/ethnic biases in Canada see:

<https://pomegranatewomenwriting.com/2011/08/24/close-encounters-of-the-urban-aboriginal-and-multicultural-kind-by-meenal-shrivastava/>