

## An Embarrassment of Riches: Reflections on Visiting Fellowships

by RAPHAEL B. FOLSOM | University of Oklahoma | raphael.folsom@ou.edu

The phrase “embarrassment of riches” is one that comes readily to mind when thinking about the years I spent as a visiting fellow at Southern Methodist University’s Clements Center for Southwest Studies and the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies (DRCLAS) at Harvard. The scholarly, cultural, bibliographical, and aesthetic resources available to fellows often seem, like the universe, to be incalculably vast and constantly expanding. There are other reasons the phrase seems apt. In some measure this is because of the embarrassment one feels at wanting to devote all of one’s time to the talks, films, debates, exhibitions, libraries, interesting people, conferences, hors d’oeuvres, and wine on offer, and to neglect the work one got the fellowship to do. There is a further touch of awkwardness in the sensation one often has, while walking in the groves of academic paradise, that all scholars should be so fortunate. Many, if not most, deserving professors do not get such opportunities for focused research. I suspect that many visiting fellows are a little uneasy with what they fear is their undeserved privilege. I certainly was. Here, nevertheless, are a few reflections on the topic of visiting fellowships.

The best thing about them is, indisputably, the time and space they allow you to do research. Over the course of my two fellowships, I completed work on a manuscript dealing with the Yaqui people under Spanish colonial rule that is now under contract with Yale University Press. Perhaps the key moment in that book’s life came at the Clements Center’s manuscript seminar. This seminar, which almost all Clements Fellows pass through, brings together all the visiting fellows, most of the Center’s affiliated faculty, and three outside readers who fly in from all over the country. All seminar participants read the

fellow’s book manuscript and then proceed, over the course of a three- to four-hour seminar, to tear it to shreds. For most fellows, I suspect the experience is as difficult to weather as it is salutary for the future book. I recently had lunch with a retired army general whose comments on the military brought the Clements seminar to mind. He told me that most raw recruits realize, after a their first few months in the army, that the harsh treatment they receive from their drill sergeants is in fact the expression of the highest kind of love there is. Severity in the training process translates into survival in combat. The critiques I received at the Clements Center seminar burned away much that was weak or worthless in my manuscript and made it a vastly better book. This exposure to peer review was also a key preparation for the rigors of the tenure process. I remain enormously grateful to the colleagues who organized and participated in that seminar, and I am happy to take this opportunity to thank them once again for putting the book on its present trajectory.

My book on the Yaquis, now entitled *Imperial Ironies*, was also enriched by a second visiting fellowship at DRCLAS. Harvard’s unparalleled libraries, and the conversations I had with Latin Americanists working in a broad variety of disciplines, further sharpened my thinking about Yaqui history. Those same resources made it possible for me to complete the research on a second book project on the Chichimeca War, a pivotal series of conflicts in sixteenth-century north Mexico. DRCLAS is among the largest Latin American studies centers in the world; while there I was able to interact with art historians, anthropologists, and ethnohistorians working on topics close to mine. Those conversations brought about a deep shift in the way I think about the Chichimeca War. I learned that some of the

most exciting scholarship now being done on New Spain deals with the visual culture of the colony. My own research has revealed that the Chichimeca War had a powerful impact on the ways race was represented in the paintings and pictorial codices of colonial Mexico. Analysis of the visual and cultural aftermath of the war now forms the manuscript’s analytical core. The development of this project at DRCLAS reminded me vividly of the changes one undergoes in the course of traveling abroad. Each university is a foreign country, with its own tastes, culture, practices, and taboos. As with travel abroad, the process of adapting to and adopting elements of that foreign culture helps one become a better thinker and better person. I know the book that comes out of my research at DRCLAS will be far better for having traveled and lived among the Harvardians.

Visiting fellowships are not without their pitfalls. There were two quotations I taped over my desk at DRCLAS that helped me avoid them. One is from a letter quoted in Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*, in which Johnson tries to remedy his biographer’s tendency to procrastinate: “The dissipation of thought, of which you complain, is nothing more than the vacillation of a mind suspended between different motives, and changing its direction as any motive gains or loses strength. If you can but kindle in your mind any strong desire, if you can but keep predominant any wish for some particular excellence or attainment, the gusts of imagination will break away.” The mind of the visiting fellow often finds itself in Boswell’s circumstance of being suspended between different motives. The conflicting desires to gorge on archives, to write, and to dabble in talks, films, and cocktail parties are ever present. The key to a fellow’s success is that Johnsonian faculty of kindling one’s desire for some

particular excellence. The ubiquity of excellence of all kinds to be found at Southern Methodist University and Harvard helps one keep that desire predominant in one's mind. The second quotation I kept handy came from the late Norman Cantor, a scholar who resembled Johnson in learning, wit, and impetuous crustiness: "The American academic world," he wrote, "is a strange place. There 95 percent of humanists cannot do first rate work because they do not have the time, leisure, facilities, or income. The other 5 percent get all the plum jam and often don't do their best work because they are not pressed hard enough." Pressing oneself hard, in the absence of a boss or department chair, is the daily challenge of the research fellow.

It is critical to remember that these fellowships cannot be successful without the support of one's home institution. I know of a colleague (not associated with any of the institutions mentioned in this essay) who, on informing her employer that she had received an prestigious yearlong fellowship, was told that she would only be allowed to leave for a single quarter. It was only after a great deal of pleading that she was allowed to leave for two quarters. This was a welcome extension, but the university's policy nonetheless truncated her research fellowship by almost three months and rendered it impossible for her to remain at the granting institution's excellent libraries for the summer. Another colleague (also not from any university mentioned here) told me that she returned from her sojourn as a research fellow to find that colleagues at her home institution no longer wanted anything to do with her. Some combination of jealousy and resentment made it impossible for them to respond generously to her good fortune. They were also unable to appreciate the contribution to the local intellectual

community that her fellowship helped her to make. Only institutions such as the University of Oklahoma, where I teach, that have a very strong commitment to research and an intellectually magnanimous faculty and administration can give their full support to scholars who win visiting fellowships. OU has been completely supportive of my research agenda, and I have received only the kindest treatment from my colleagues. In this, also, I am aware of being exceptionally fortunate.

In thinking about the impact of visiting fellowships on my career, home institution, and community, I've been struck by the importance of sharing the wealth. In the end, the visiting fellow's embarrassment of riches is really not for the fellow to enjoy alone. What is the best way of sharing it? Publication is one key way. The grant maker and the fellow's home institution have communicated in the most forceful terms that they value the fellow's intellectual passions, curiosity, and work. Publishing one's research is a fitting expression of thanks. One can also share the wealth with one's students in the classroom. Knowledge of how excellent scholarship is done and what is going on at the frontiers of one's field is something both undergraduates and graduate students are eager to hear about. A further effort I've made to share my experiences with my home institution has been to run a grant-writing workshop for graduate students in my department. Fellowships like those I've had at the Clements Center and DRCLAS have been an extraordinary boon to my career, and it has been a pleasure to guide OU graduate students through the arduous process of applying for research grants like these. Another way of sharing the intellectual riches is to maintain one's ties to the granting communities and to support them in whatever way one can. Perhaps the best

way to think of visiting fellowships is as the beginning of a long cycle of reciprocal support and exchange. Over time, fellows may be able to help others as they have been helped, and it is incumbent upon them to pass on the generosity they have received. ■