When you add it all up, I have been working on this book off and on for nearly fifteen years. As one can imagine, in that time I have accumulated more debts, large and small, than even I can really comprehend, much less tally here with any degree of justice to those who have helped make this work possible. I have benefited immensely from the guidance of some of the greatest scholars in the world; the support of numerous institutions, foundations, colleagues, friends, and family members; and even the help of any number of shopkeepers and innkeepers in dusty towns of the North Indian plains where I did some of my early archival research, baristas and chai-wallas in places like Chicago, New York, London, Berlin, Cairo, Beirut, and just about everywhere else I’ve traveled; support staff in all the various universities where I have studied, taught, done research, and given talks over the years; and of course the many, many librarians and archivists who make our research possible, yet rarely get the credit they deserve. I remember them all with gratitude, even if, I’m embarrassed to admit, I do not remember all of their names, or have space to thank them all individually even if I could.

First books like this one are somewhat unique, too, in that they usually have their origins in unexpected moments or turns in one’s life, in most cases long before one could have even properly conceived of oneself as a professional scholar, much less an “author.” In that sense, they often come about almost accidentally, and in my case Writing Self, Writing Empire began as a simple term paper in Muzaffar Alam’s first graduate seminar on Mughal history after he joined the faculty at the University of Chicago in 2001, a class in which I was lucky to have participated and in which I first became curious about this “Persian-knowing Hindu” named Chandar Bhan Brahman. At the time, of course, I had no clue that I would
spend much of the next decade and a half thinking and writing about Chandar Bhan’s cultural world, or that there would be so many ups and downs, not to mention three children, along the way.

From that early seminar paper, my interest in Chandar Bhan developed into a tentative dissertation proposal, followed by a successful application for a Fulbright-Hayes Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad (DDRA) fellowship from the US Department of Education, which generously supported my wife and me through a year of archival work in India and London in 2004. Much of that year was spent shuttling back and forth between New Delhi, where my wife and I were based, and Aligarh, where I did much of my research. We enjoyed the hospitality of many in India, but I owe special thanks to my cousin Sunil Kalra, who throughout my adult life has always opened his home to me and my family graciously and generously for weeks and months at a time whenever we came to Delhi, as he did for much of 2004 (and several subsequent trips to India). I owe him, and all of our extended family of Kinras, Kalras, Kakkars, Khannas, Sharmas, Bahlis, Vaidis, Vermas, and Vijis in Delhi and elsewhere in India, in the United States, and around the world, a continuing debt of gratitude.

In Delhi I also benefited from the guidance of Shahid Amin, Sunil Kumar, and S. H. Qasemi, who were all gracious with their time and generous with their insights. My work in Aligarh, meanwhile, could not have been possible without the extraordinary kindness and assistance of Ishtiyaq Ahmad Zilli, who arranged for my affiliation with Aligarh Muslim University and gave me steady mentorship during my entire time there, and A. S. Jeelani, whom I hired as a Persian tutor, but whose contribution to my development as a scholar goes far beyond mere language instruction. I also owe great thanks to the entire manuscript department at the Azad Library in Aligarh, who took me under their wing and facilitated my work there in countless ways, especially at a time when the idea of digitizing manuscripts was still actually something of a novelty. I should also like to thank the directors and staff of several of the other archives where some of the research for this book was done, including the Gujarat Vidya Sabha in Ahmedabad, the Oriental Manuscript Library and Research Institute in Hyderabad, and the National Museum in Delhi. Dr. Nasim Akhtar, the curator of manuscripts at the National Museum was especially generous with his time and assistance. I am also most grateful to the entire staff at the British Library, where I spent nearly four months reading manuscripts and rare printed books in late 2004, as well as during several subsequent shorter visits to London.

After coming back from India and the United Kingdom, I was fortunate to receive a Whiting Dissertation Fellowship, which gave me a year of support, and a residency at the University of Chicago’s Franke Institute for Humanities. I thank all of the other Franke fellows that year for their conversation, camaraderie, and intellectual stimulation, as well as Jim Chandler, the longtime director of the
Franke Institute, his entire staff, and of course the Institute’s generous benefactors, Barbara E. and Richard J. Franke, for their financial and institutional support. That year at the Franke Institute was transformative for me in many ways, and even today there are times when I come up against some intellectual problem or conundrum and my mind wanders back to some illuminating discussion we had that year.

In September-October 2006 I was lucky enough to travel to Beirut as a participant in a workshop organized by Berlin’s Forum Transregionale Studien, “Travelling Traditions: Comparative Perspectives on Near Eastern Literatures” (part of the larger initiative “Europe in the Middle East, The Middle East in Europe” [EUME]). There I presented some of the research that is now in this book for the first time in front of an international group of scholars, artists, and graduate students, and I remain grateful for their feedback and friendship, which left a lasting impression on me, expanded my intellectual horizons for the better, and opened my eyes to a new world of comparative possibilities in the study of the global humanities. Since then, I have also been fortunate to participate in two other FTS “Academies” in connection with the Zukunftsfhilologie (“Future Philology”) project, one in Cairo (December 2010) and the other in New Delhi (December 2012). Together, these three workshops have been among the most rewarding intellectual experiences of my life, and, needless to say, I am extremely grateful to the FTS for creating these opportunities for international humanists to come together, exchange research, and learn from one another. This book would not be what it is without those conversations, all of them made possible by generous funding from the European Union and the municipal government of Berlin. I also want to express my personal thanks to Islam Dayeh, the director of the Zukunftsfhilologie program, and Georges Khalil, the academic coordinator of the Forum Transregionale Studien, not only for setting such an exemplary standard of intellectual and administrative excellence, but for doing so with inimitable style, wit, and panache.

My greatest debt from that entire period, however, is to the friends and faculty at the University of Chicago who taught me so much and continue to do so. To all of my teachers and advisers, and to the entire department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, you have my unending gratitude for making my time at Chicago the engrossing and rigorous experience that it was. They say in jest that Chicago is “where fun goes to die,” but that was certainly not my experience. I especially want to thank Professor C. M. Naim for teaching me that I didn’t know my “mother tongue” of Urdu nearly as well as I thought I did (and still don’t), making me understand that when it comes to language and literature there is always another level of mastery to be sought after, and inspiring me to always stay thirsty in my pursuit of knowledge. Thanks also to Dipesh Chakrabarty, Steve Collins, Wendy Doniger, and Clint Seely for their consistently genial guidance
and support, even though I wasn’t technically their student. Further, I would like to thank my Persian teachers in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, John Perry, Heshmat Moayyad, and Franklin Lewis. Finally, my deepest gratitude to James Nye, the seemingly indefatigable South Asia librarian at the University of Chicago’s Regenstein Library. A good percentage of what is contained in the pages to follow would not be there at all if not for my ability to access the extraordinary collections in the “Reg,” and James Nye deserves as much credit for acquiring and maintaining those collections as anyone else in my lifetime.

For the last eight years I have been a member of the History Department at Northwestern University, which has been as collegial a place to work, study, and do research as anywhere I’ve ever been. My great thanks to the entire department, just about every member of which has helped me at some point with advice, encouragement, or even just a kind word on a cold snowy day. I can’t list you all by name, but I am grateful to each and every one of you. I do, however, especially want to thank Peter Carroll, whose support, friendship, and mentorship have been a crutch that I have leaned on more times than I can count; Michael Allen, for being there whenever I needed to sound off about the contradictions of liberalism and empire, or just talk movies, catch a ballgame, and hang out; and Amy Stanley, for always being a source of steady wisdom when I needed it. I’d also like to thank John R. (“Jock”) McLane, who started teaching at Northwestern in 1961 and spent nearly five decades as the only South Asia historian on campus before I arrived. Your continuing support even in retirement has meant the world to me. A special thanks, too, to the department’s entire support staff, without whom none of our teaching, meetings, or writing would ever actually get done.

There are many others in the Northwestern community to whom I, and this book, are greatly indebted. I want to especially thank Laura Brueck not only for her many years of friendship, since long before she joined us here in Evanston, but for being an even better colleague than I could have ever possibly imagined once she got here. Ann Gunther, Holly Clayson, Jessica Winegar, J. Michelle Molina, Claudia Swan, and Brian Edwards have all helped me in ways both big and small over the years, and I thank them all. I also must thank Harriet Lightman, who has never once hesitated in acquiring books for the NU library collections, many of them obscure and expensive, whenever I’ve asked. We are only as good as our librarians, and you are one of the best.

During my time at Northwestern I have enjoyed the great benefit of a National Endowment for the Humanities research fellowship for the 2010–11 academic year. My thanks to the director and staff of the Endowment, as well as the reviewers who took the time to read my proposal and endorsed the project. Though I missed my students while on leave that year, the financial support of the NEH was pivotal in allowing me the time to reflect and to do further research on a great
many of the themes discussed in the pages that follow. It would have been a much different, and certainly less ambitious, work without that support.

But speaking of students, I would like to thank the many who have taken my classes since I arrived at Northwestern in 2007. Teaching can be exasperating and exhausting at times, but there is a reason it is integral to the scholarly profession: it has a way of helping clarify what’s important and essential, of forcing us to see the big picture and think about the basic elements of the historical narratives that constitute the received wisdom in our fields. I can honestly say that the experience of teaching global history and the history of early modern and modern South Asia at Northwestern for the better part of the last decade has made a crucial difference in my thinking about what is at stake for twenty-first-century Mughal historiography and has fundamentally changed (hopefully for the better) my view of the kind of historical intervention this book could, and should, try to make. A number of my students have been asking me for years when they’d be able to finally read this book; I do hope that they and other students of Mughal history will find it useful and, at least in the case of my own students, that they will recognize within its covers something of the conversations we’ve had over the years. I have also had the good fortune to work with a number of outstanding graduate students in my time here, conversations with many of whom have directly affected my thinking about some of the themes explored in this book. In particular, I’d like to thank Zirwat Chowdhury, Liza Oliver, Nathaniel Mathews, and Marlous van Waijenburg for their help, questions, and enthusiastic interest in my work these last few years.

I owe another kind of debt entirely to the University of British Columbia–Vancouver for inviting me in 2009 to serve as one of their spring Virani Lecturers in Islamic Studies. Working with the UBC students and Asian studies faculty during my time there was a fantastic experience that I still cherish, and I am especially thankful to Anne Murphy for the invitation and her generous hospitality. It was Anne, in fact, who first convinced me to write something about the “fresh-speaking” movement discussed in chapter 5 below, so I have her to thank for that as well.

I have presented material related to this book in many, many conferences and seminars over the years, and I am grateful for the hospitality and useful feedback I have received from audiences at Oxford, Cambridge, Berkeley, Yale, Columbia, George Mason University, Frei University in Berlin, the University of Washington, Cornell, Southern Methodist University, the Library of Congress, the University of Maryland’s Roshan Institute for Persian Studies, the Center for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi, and even my alma mater the University of Chicago. I must also thank the organizers of the Annual Conference on South Asia at the University of Wisconsin–Madison for always doing a splendid job creating a congenial atmosphere for South Asia scholars of all stripes to meet with colleagues and present their work. And I have benefited tremendously from several oppor-
tunities to present aspects of my research and learn from colleagues at the annual meetings of the American Historical Association, the Association for Asian Studies, and the International Society for Iranian Studies.

There are many friends, colleagues, and other interlocutors who over the years have given me helpful advice and feedback on specific aspects of this book or have simply enriched my intellectual life with their collegiality and support. Some have been friends for years, while others I have met on only one or two consequential occasions. Some might be surprised to find themselves on this list, while others surely deserve more elaborate and affectionate expressions of gratitude than I’m able to give here. But at the risk of offending with a mere alphabetical list (that is in any case almost assuredly incomplete), I thank Sunil Agnani, Jameel Ahmad, Daud Ali, Bernard Bate, the late C. A. Bayly, Eric Beverley, Rajeev Bhargava, Bronwen Bledsoe, Kristin Bloomer, Yigal Bronner, Allison Busch, Dr. Chander Shekhar (Head of the Department of Persian, Delhi University), Indrani Chatterjee, Kavita Datla, Prachi Deshpande, Purnima Dhavan, Thibaut d’Hubert, Jennifer Dubrow, Arthur Dudney, Richard Eaton, Will Ellison, Thomas Ernl, Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, Munis D. Faruqui, Arnika Fuhrmann, Supriya Gandhi, David Gilmartin, Nile Green, Sumit Guha, Jack Hawley, Brannon Ingram, Sonam Kachru, Abhishek Kaicker, Ahmet Karamustafa, Sudipta Kaviraj, Atiya Khan, Mana Kia, Ebba Koch, Hajnalka Kovacs, Sunil Kumar, Corinne Lefèvre, David Lelyveld, Paul Losensky, David Ludden, Rochona Majumdar, Karuna Mantena, Rama Mantena, Justin Marx, Anubhuti Maurya, Lawrence McCrea, Barbara Metcalf, Jane Mikkelsen, Christopher Minkowski, A. Azfar Moin, Harbans Mukhia, Sarah Neilson, Christian Novetske, Luther Obrock, Rosalind O’Hanlon, Francesca Orsini, Heidi Pauwels, Stefano Pello, Frances Pritchett, A. Sean Pue, Teena Purohit, Kapil Raj, Ajay Rao, Nikhil Rao, Kristen Rudisill, Guriqbal Sahota, Adheesh Sathaye, Katherine Schofield, Kevin Schwartz, Sunil Sharma, Dan Sheffield, Prithvi Datta Chandra Shobhi, David Shulman, Hasan Siddiqui, Sunit Singh, Travis Smith, Rupert Snell, Fabrizio Speziale, Ramya Sreenivasan, Adam Talib, Robert Travers, Audrey Truschke, Ananya Vajpeyi, Andre Wink, Ed Yazijian, and Karin Zitzewitz.

I would also be remiss if I did not thank the David Collection, Copenhagen, for permission to use a Mughal miniature from their holdings (#3/2012) on the cover of this volume, and to Pernille Klemp for making the digital image of it. Thanks, too, to Mr. Edward Weech of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland for his most generous assistance in locating and digitizing several crucial folios from an unpublished (and, as it happened, uncatalogued) manuscript of the Akhbārāt-i Darbār-i Mu’āllā, the official Mughal court records of the seventeenth century. I should note that an earlier version of portions of chapter 2 appeared in a special issue of the Indian Economic and Social History Review (2010) devoted to secretaries and other service elites in early modern India, and edited by Rosalind O’Hanlon and Christopher Minkowski; parts of chapter 5 first appeared in a
special issue of *Sikh Formations* (2007) dealing with time, memory, and historiography, and edited by Anne Murphy, as well as a follow-up volume entitled *Time, History, and the Religious Imaginary in South Asia*, also edited by Anne Murphy and published by Routledge (2011); and parts of an earlier incarnation of chapter 6 appeared in the *Journal of Persianate Studies* (2009). I am grateful to all the editors of those journals, and to the journals themselves for permission to reprint revised portions of those essays.

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For all its perks, the academic life can be far more hectic and grueling than most nonacademics realize, especially for those whose research takes them to faraway places for conferences, research, and the like. Even when we are at home, though, there are seemingly endless meetings, conferences, events, associated dinners, and other functions to attend, often in the evenings, and sometimes running late into the night. On the one hand, these are among the most lively and invigorating features of the academic life; but on the other, for those with families and especially those with small children, they come at a price—a price often borne by one’s partner, who must tend to things at home while we are off conferencing, or researching in some dusty archive, or drinking wine with the latest star writer or scholar who happens to be passing through town. My ability to do these things with any degree of success has been largely due to the unstinting support of my wife Sonia, whom I married barely one month before beginning my PhD at Chicago in 1999, and with whom I have had three children in the intervening years. Mere thanks are not enough to express what I, and this book, owe her. She has been there every step of the way, supporting me even when the work, and doubts about the work, and outright doubts about the career, made me irritable or otherwise difficult (and surely at times downright exasperating) to live with. If this book is worth anything, then a good deal of the credit goes to her.

Some of the credit also goes to our larger extended families for their unwavering encouragement and support, going all the way back to when I first embarked on this eclectic career, destined for years of the sort of job and financial insecurity that usually make Indian parents squirm. But my parents, Kavita Kinra and Lalit Bahl, and my in-laws, Satish and Uma Sharma, have always been behind me and have helped us immensely over the years in ways too numerous to reckon. If this were a film, they would all get executive producer credits. As it is, all I can offer here is my deepest gratitude and affection.

I’d also like to add a special word of thanks to Ms. Akua Mansah, who has spent the better part of eight years as our children’s caregiver during the days (and sometimes nights), while my wife and I pursued our respective careers. Raising three small children while trying to write, teach, and manage all the other obligations of an academic in today’s university is a challenge even with help, but
without Akua’s steadfast and dependable partnership the task would have been
genimpossible.

Indeed, not all academic debts are purely academic, and I must also acknowl-
edge the personal one I owe to my dear old friends Timothy Beynart, Kevin
Fitchard, Eric Gorman, Philip Higgs, Seth McClure, and Colin Murphy, as well
as all of their respective families. None of you are academics, but you’re still the
smartest, funniest guys I know, and your friendship has sustained me through
many a period of academic doldrums. Your influence, too, is lurking in the pages
that follow, even if you may not recognize yourselves.

Finally, to return to the world of my academic colleagues, I have saved my
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Astrological explanations aside, however, none of us would be where we are
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at Chicago despite my lack of what most would consider the conventional training
for this line of work. It is therefore no exaggeration to say that I owe my entire aca-
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with Muzaffar Alam’s arrival in Chicago in 2001. This was yet another transfor-
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in a paper for one of Alam Sahib’s classes, and he has been there to guide, instruct,
challenge, and encourage me ever since. Nearly every conversation I’ve ever had
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tickets in Italy, or the best way to translate the word _sulh_, has ended up being so
illuminating that I later regretted not having recorded it for posterity. I can never
even partially repay the massive intellectual debt that I owe him, but, as a small
token in that direction, it is to him that this book is dedicated with love, respect,
and affection.

It was also through Muzaffar Alam that I first met Sanjay Subrahmanym, who graciously agreed way back in 2003 to serve as an external member on my
dissertation committee and who ever since has pushed me to expand my intellectual horizons even further, in ways that I could never have conceived before. All three have taught me so much, not only through their direct instruction and (sometimes) tough love, but also through the example they’ve set by continuing to produce bold, innovative, and rigorous scholarship long after they’ve earned the right to rest on their laurels. They have already achieved so much, yet all three remain among the hardest-working people I know—which may well be the biggest lesson of all.

Despite learning so much from so many, and accruing so many incalculable debts along the way, at the risk of stating the obvious I should close by emphasizing that I alone bear responsibility for any errors, gaps, or lapses of judgment in the pages that follow. I have also made a conscious effort to try to write this book in a way that is, as the old Persian adage has it, “both interesting to specialists and intelligible to a general audience” (khâss-pasand wa ‘âm-fahm). Only the reader can judge whether I have succeeded on that score, but whatever the verdict, I thank you too for the opportunity to occupy your thoughts for a little while with these dispatches from the cultural world of a Mughal state secretary.