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Women's Worlds in Qajar Iran Digital Archive and Website: What could writing history look like in a digital age?

By Afsaneh Najmabadi

Women's Worlds in Qajar Iran (WWQI) is a digital archive of nineteenth-century Iranian culture with a focus on the lives of women and issues of gender. The initial inspiration for the project arose almost a decade ago, sparked by a fortuitous collision between intellectual frustration and technological possibility.

The 1970s through the 1990s witnessed an explosion of women's history and the gendering of historical research and writing, but this development had a highly uneven global scope. The unevenness was not only geographical. While certain subfields of history proved more open to revisionary explorations, their broader integration into "doing history" remained marginal. In Middle Eastern historiography, for instance, gendering histories of the nation has produced important works on Egypt, Syria, Iran, Ottoman Empire, and modern Turkey, but these works remain at the margins of the field. Histories of Iran's Qajar dynasty (1796–1925) continue to be produced in the dominant mode of political history. Social and cultural history in general, and histories inclusive of women and gender analysis more particularly remain all but nonexistent in this field.

The exclusion of women from histories of the Qajar period was all the more troubling because many Qajar women lived culturally rich and active lives – including as writers and poets, calligraphers and painters, religious leaders, and in the final decades as social critics and activists. Yet gendered analysis in historiographies of the period remained sparse. The main reason historians of Qajar Iran offered for this situation was that sources for doing Qajar history

differently did not exist. It is true that historians of Qajar Iran do not have the institutional records and state archives comparable to those of historians of the neighboring Ottoman Empire. Nonetheless, the apparent lack of archival sources is as well an artifact of the predominant state-centered focus on political history.[1] This intellectual tunnel vision has virtually precluded the possibility of asking some rather obvious questions. If the state didn't preserve statistics, legal records, and other documents in an archival style ready for our research, where might we locate alternative memory traces? Where and how, for instance, did people preserve necessary contractual information and life registers?

The paucity of sources then becomes not a question of absence, but of inaccessibility. For instance, prior to the late 1920s, when laws requiring the registration of births and other life events and the recording of commercial transactions, were enacted, families recorded such information on the first pages of the family Qur'an or other cherished books and objects. Marriage contracts, endowments, wills, and other legal papers were kept at home or entrusted to local village headmen or neighborhood religious notables. In other words, these documents did exist, but not in state or national archives, nor in any recognized private library.

But how could any historian be expected to spend a lifetime going from family to family, from one local notable to another, from one cemetery to the next, to assemble a usable archive? The emerging internet technologies seemed to offer a perfect tool for consolidation of these materials into a globally accessible virtual archive.

Not a neat and cleanly conceived idea, begun in 2002-03, it took many years of slow incubation and maturation, of failed grant applications, before in 2009 a team of five Qajar scholars (Nahid Mozaffari, Dominic Brookshaw, Naghmeh Sohrabi, Manoutchehr Eskandari-Qajar, and myself) received its first major grant from the National Endowment for the

Humanities. The early failed attempts reflect the challenge we faced in articulating persuasively an imagined project that did not have any obvious prior model and that offered possibilities for historical preservation and research beyond its own domain of Qajar women's history.

Unlike most digitized archives, Women's Worlds in Qajar Iran (WWQI) did not begin with a discrete collection or, even, collections. Instead, the writings, photographs, and other primary source materials that WWQI is digitizing are dispersed across myriad locations and among numerous different owners. It is extremely unlikely that these materials would or could ever be released to research institutions *en masse,* in part because of its dispersed ownership, but also because of the personal value many of these items hold for their present owners. Captured in digital form, they have *become* an archive–albeit one for which a unified physical counterpart in the traditional form of accession numbers and boxes would never exist.

Initially imagined as a modest project–we had anticipated generating some 3000 images over the first two years –WWQI has grown beyond our wildest dreams thanks to the overwhelmingly positive response of families and institutions in Iran and elsewhere. As of April 2013, we have over 33,000 images, recorded from 43 private family collections and ten institutional collections. We are currently processing collections from 18 additional families and two additional institutions.

Initial selection of collections depended on availability -- on collaboration of families each of our team members happened to know. Once the project took shape and became known, we had the opportunity to discuss in our periodic workshops how we could more proactively overcome emerging limitations of social, geographical, and cultural diversity of the archive. For instance, we have addressed the issue of how not to be limited to the urban elite by reaching out to families with a line of local religious leadership, and digitize the voluminous books of

neighborhood registries they hold. We have recently been able to access a rich collection of documents from early-twentieth-century Kurdistan, and have begun to work with Zoroastrian families to address the absence of that community's records in the archive (previously, we had been successful with Armenian and Jewish families.).

The project has depended on teams of trained and dedicated assistants in Tehran and Cambridge, inclusive of skilled readers of nineteenth-century handwriting, photographers, data processing staff (tagging and creating digital items), and dedicated project managers {Ramyar Rossoukh (2009-11) and Farshideh Mirbaghdadabadi}. For its data and website design and continued development, we initially worked with Historicus, and now with Vermonster, and with Mahimoto.[2] Digital images are preserved in perpetuity as part of the Harvard University Library's digital collections but architecturally built in interaction with a public website that makes deployment of the latest smart search features possible, even on your smart phone!

The archive includes poetry; essays and treatises; travelogues; letters; marriage contracts and other legal documents; photographs; works of art; images of everyday objects; and a small collection of oral histories. The website is fully bilingual (Persian and English), and its search function includes filters for major categories, like genre, collection, people, subject, place and period, allowing users to drill down into the archive and narrow their search results. Digitized images provide detailed views of each object with additional descriptive content.

The challenge of pushing at the edges continues to energize the project as we implement one idea and begin to see possible potential for yet other new ideas. Our current plans include building tools to aid collaboration among site users and creating interactive genealogies, timelines, and maps, which will streamline researchers' ability to establish connections between the disparate items within the archive. While our Research Platform (in its final stages of

development, it will offer scholars separated by geography, culture, and politics to come together as active research partners) has benefitted from best practices in social and natural sciences with a long history of such collaborations, when it comes to developing interactive elastic searches, we are facing, yet again, inventing the wheel from the ground up. We aim to create a pioneering example of the potential that graph-oriented representations hold to explore the relationships between people, places, and objects that are eminently discoverable in digital humanities archives. Unlike search tools grounded in relational database frameworks, which tend to become more cumbersome to use as the size of an archive expands and the number of 'false hits' goes up as a consequence, graph-based discovery mechanisms grow more powerful as the volume of data they have to work with increases. They are also particularly well suited to multi-genre digital archives, which – although relatively well-established and incredibly valuable – have proved especially difficult to navigate in anything less than painstaking fashion.

The graph-based approaches that we have found most relevant are popular social networking technologies that we are redesigning for historical research. An obvious 'lens' through which to examine our archive is one of social groups and networks. For example, a set of basic questions, such as the following, could help map out the broad contours of the social landscape of Qajar Iran: *Who was related to whom? Which families were most important? Which individuals were members of multiple families? Which families and/or individuals interacted with one another the most, and in what ways/under what circumstances?* And thinking more politically: *Who were the members of social movements (such as the girls' education movement)? How did these individuals meet or know one another? How did various types of groups – families, religious groups, social movements, etc. – overlap and interact?*

All of these questions (and the infinite number of others like them) could also be examined against the backdrop of geography and time, again by adapting graph-based approaches already well-established in other domains. So, for example, in the case of the WWQI archive, researchers could query the data and find out: *Did travel outside of Iran, or contact with family members/friends outside of Iran, impact involvement in social movements and similar groups? How did an individual's engagement with one or more groups change over time? Which groups 'stuck' together for long periods of time, and which 'broke apart' more quickly? How did one group come to cluster in a single city or town, and how did another spread to distant locations?*

An example, generated manually for the moment, is a two-person User Interface. The timeline for Sadiqah Dawlatabadi (1882-1961) and her half-sister, Qamar Taj Dawlatabadi (1908-1992) references letters Sadiqah wrote to Qamar Taj from Paris, advising her much younger sister about her education. Whereas Sadiqah is shown to be an advocate for women's education and suffrage, the timeline demonstrates that Qamar Taj in her later years became intensely involved in the Azali community, eventually traveling to Cyprus to visit Subh-i Azal's surviving family members and writing a travelogue about the journey. {attaching relevant image here} Now imagine this kind of interactive mapping multiplied among an ever-growing number of "objects" in a historical archive. This is what we hope to generate.

Exciting as the project of fabricating the archive has been, the question remains: what could we do with it which was not possible, or even imaginable, without it?

First, at the most obvious level, it is our hope that the issue of non-existent archival sources can now be put to rest. Second, the sheer mass of some of the documents makes it possible to pursue new kinds of historical research with ease. For example, we currently have

close to 300 marriage contracts, ranging from that of the daughters of Fath 'Ali Shah (r. 1797–1834) to those of more modest families, including servants whose marriage contracts were held by the family where they lived and served. While a single marriage contract in one's own family would hardly lend itself to historical analysis, a large number of them make it possible to study the details of class and status among spouses, comparing amounts and kinds of bridal gifts recorded, and conditions embedded in different contracts. Moreover, since these contracts come from Muslim, Jewish, and Armenian families, it is now possible to compare the textual and illustration details of these contracts across various communities.

The more exciting possibility, however, is that by uniting multiple genres of sources — textual documents, visual material, everyday objects, recorded memories, etc.— in one virtual place, WWQI will make it easier to do history differently.

People in the past, as today, did not just write letters, books, newspaper articles —all the usual textual material that comprises the vast majority of archival sources used by most historians. These texts were intimately bound up with, and acquired their meaning from, the practices of everyday life. Even when we cannot witness these practices first-hand, we can find traces of them in objects, photographs, oral histories, etc. Reading a text through related objects and spaces, in connection with sounds and memories, we can gain new insights that would be impossible to reach by reading the text alone.[3] Recent works by cultural historians and interdisciplinary scholars have shown how fruitful this multi-genre approach can be.[4]

Several features of WWQI archive enable building on these gains. As we meet with families and work through their holdings to choose what is relevant for our digitization, we listen and digitally record their small and large stories about these objects. These recordings become tagged as well and are preserved on our archives as audio-clippings linked with an object, thus

preserving something of the memory-context of the object – something that is usually not possible with regular archives. Digital technologies have not only made it possible for WWQI to virtually consolidate otherwise inaccessible sources, but also to provide online tools that allow users to explore and analyze these sources across genres. We hope that it will inspire researchers to pursue new ways of thinking and writing about history.

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[1] See Cyrus Schayegh, "Seeing Like a State: An Essay on the Historiography of Modern Iran," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42.1 (Feb 2010): 37-61.

[2] I would like to thank the WWQI research and staff teams in Iran and in the United States, without whose loving labor the project would have been impossible. It has truly taken "a virtual village" to produce a digital archive. Please see About Us and Credits sections of the site for a full list.

[3] For an example of how historians have used material objects to overcome the limits of textual archives, see Alan Bray's use of tombstones as a non-elite social historical archive in his monumental work, *The Friend*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003.

[4] For my idiosyncratic selection of cultural/historical studies that in various ways do this kind of work, see Mieke Bal, *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991; Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000; Laurel Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001; Lorraine Daston, ed., *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science*, New York: Zone Books, 2004; Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood and Race from Slavery to Civil Rights*, New York: New York University Press, 2011; and Michael Amico, "Objects of Attraction at War: A Sword, and Two Civil War Soldiers," unpublished paper, 4/11/13.