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“Making (Up) an Archive: What Could Writing History Look Like in a Digital Age?”

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“Making (Up) an Archive: What Could Writing History Look Like in a Digital Age?”

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Recent developments in digital humanities have posed new challenges as well as possibilities for doing history differently. Much debate has been focused on whether -- given the quantity of and the ease of access to the archives that digitization has made available to scholars -- methods of quantitative social science research could be meaningfully employed by historians and scholars of the humanities.¹ Quantitative analysis of text-mining, for instance, has been used to find more precisely patterns of language change – such as when “threwed” gave way to “threw” and “thrown.” For historians, this may seem a trivial exercise. But consider the following two examples. Decades from now, when we have forgotten some of the contemporary patterns of language use, a text-miner may notice that at some point in the latter part of the first decade of the 21st century “friend” became a verb, or during the last decade of the 20th century there was a perceptible shift from usage of prostitution and prostitute to sex-work and sex-worker. These could become clues for social and cultural historians of these later decades.

But that is not what I want to argue in this paper. I would like to do two things: first, present a brief report on a digital archive, Women’s Worlds in Qajar Iran (WWQI), that we have been fabricating over the past five years. And second, to discuss what kinds of history-writing the existence of this archive makes possible.

¹ See, for example, Stephen Marche, “Literature is not Data: Against Digital Humanities,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, October 28th, 2012, <http://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/literature-is-not-data-against-digital-humanities>; and responses by Scott Selisker and Holger S. Syme, “In Defense of Data,” November 5th, 2012, <http://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/in-defense-of-data-responses-to-stephen-marches-literature-is-not-data>.

I use the word fabrication advisedly. The archive has been fabricated not simply in the sense that all archives are: persons/institutions make decisions about what to keep and archive, how to archive the saved material, and what to mark as insignificant and discard. But I am also using fabrication to suggest that, like fabric-making, the WWQI archive has used digital technology to pull together disparate archival threads -- multiple genres of documents -- that are ordinarily not pulled together in regular archives, and has produced a fabric that is not simply the sum total of the separate threads. The resulting fabric generates connections that facilitate doing richer histories. While focused on lives of women and issues of gender and sexuality, the resulting texture of the fabrication “makes concrete the idea that ‘gendered history’ is not a category separate from history itself ... [and that] showing ‘women’s world’ [is] showing the Qajar world itself.”² As importantly, the archive invites historians of other fields (other than Qajar history) to use its resources -- such as photographs, objects of everyday life, and illuminated texts -- for visual and cultural studies, and it invites other practitioners (beyond scholars) to use its resources for their creative purposes. Already fiction writers and visual artists have used the archival material for their writings and artistic productions.

I. What is WWQI?

[Women’s Worlds in Qajar Iran \(WWQI\)](#) is a digital archive of the “long” 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

² Naghmeh Sohrabi, email communication, 10/22/2013. For a fuller discussion of this point, see Joan W. Scott, “Women’s History,” pp. 15-27, in *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988; and her expanded essay under the same title, pp. 43-70, in *New Perspective on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001).

global scope. The unevenness was not only geographical, but also intra-disciplinary. Certain subfields of history proved more open to revisionary explorations, yet their broader integration into “doing history” has 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 marginal in this field.

The exclusion of women from histories of the Qajar period was all the more troubling because, contrary to some popular misperception – namely, of Qajar Iran as an age of ignorance and victimhood as far as women were concerned -- many Qajar-era women lived culturally rich and active lives. Women were among writers and poets, skilled calligraphers and painters; a few women of the urban elite had their own private libraries and patronized women artists. Women educated in religious sciences, usually by their fathers or brothers but at times by their learned mothers, have left behind a legacy of public religious leadership. A few manuscripts that have emerged into public view provide first-person descriptions of women’s pilgrimages to Mecca and internal travels, and, from the end of the nineteenth century, a number of treatises of social critique are also available. Finally, in the beginning decades of the twentieth century -- the era of constitutional politics -- a full-fledged flourishing of women’s press and published writings accompanied urban women’s participation in the Constitutional Revolution and their active pursuance of education and legal reform on their own behalf. Such fragments of women’s worlds in Qajar Iran provided small but important glimpses of women’s lives during this period. Yet gendered analysis in historiographies of the period remained sparse.

The main reason historians of Qajar Iran have offered for this situation has been that sources for doing Qajar history differently did not exist; consequently, we could at best do anecdotal patchworks; not substantive, properly documented, histories.

There are two ways of hearing this oft-articulated problem of sources: the first I'd call Qajar historians' Ottoman Envy. It is true that historians of Qajar Iran do not have institutional records and state archives comparable to those of historians of the neighboring Ottoman Empire. Destruction of much of the Safavid archives, and Qajar kings' style of governing that does not seem to have concerned itself with meticulous centralized data collecting, until at least late into the nineteenth century (with the government sponsoring of a few modest census data collections in Tehran), would attest to the scale of archival lack, so-to-speak.

Nonetheless, the apparent lack of archival sources is as well an artifact of the predominant state-centered focus on political history.³ This intellectual tunnel vision has virtually precluded 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? In the case of groups underrepresented in the established archives, scholars of many other regions and time periods have turned to other places (attics, storerooms, local family holdings) and other types of material cultural effects (beyond textual records), including photographs, paintings and other visual resources, oral narratives, grave stones, objects of everyday life, and used corresponding methodologies to "listen to things."⁴

To give but one example from a recent collecting venture: This past summer in Yazd, we

³ 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.

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; Alan Bray, *The Friend*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003; 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.

visited an old people's home and explained the project to a large group of women and men in their eighties and nineties. As expected when working with communities with a history of persecutions, the initial reaction was "we don't have anything, we didn't keep any documents." But then slowly things changed: an old man said he had his mother's weaving equipment, another had a large box of old photographs, a family had a huge pile of clothes and cloths – each fabric with its own tale. In another Zoroastrian family, while the husband was showing us photographs, certificates, and objects related to celebratory occasions, his wife disappeared to the kitchen and returned with several large bronze ladles, saying "you may be interested in these." On the end of the long handle of each, on both sides, information about birth of named persons had been carved: we didn't keep any documents turned out to mean we didn't keep any paper documents.

This question brings me to the second way in which we could hear the challenge of sources, namely, not as paucity or lack, but of inaccessibility. For instance: we know that families, prior to the late 1920s, that is before the creation of state offices for, and legal requirement of, registration of birth/marriage and divorce/death, or for recording of property transactions, recorded such information in the first pages of the family Qur'an or other cherished books, kept marriage contracts, endowments, wills, and other legal papers either at home or entrusted them to local kadkhudas (village headmen), or neighborhood mujtahids (religious notable). In other words, these documents do exist, but not in state/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 mujtahid holding to another, from one cemetery to the next, to assemble a useable 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 digitizes 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 (in Cambridge, 2009-11) and Farshideh Mirbaghdadabadi (in Tehran, 2012-present)}. For its data and website design and continued development, we initially worked with Historicus, now with Vermonster, and with Mahimoto. 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. We also have a small number of [interviews](#), and many more audio-clips linked to specific items. As we meet with families and work through their holdings to choose what is relevant for our digitization, we listen and record their small and large stories about these objects. These recordings become tagged as well and are preserved on our archives as [audio-clips](#) linked with an object, thus preserving something of the memory-context of the object – something that is usually not possible with regular archives.

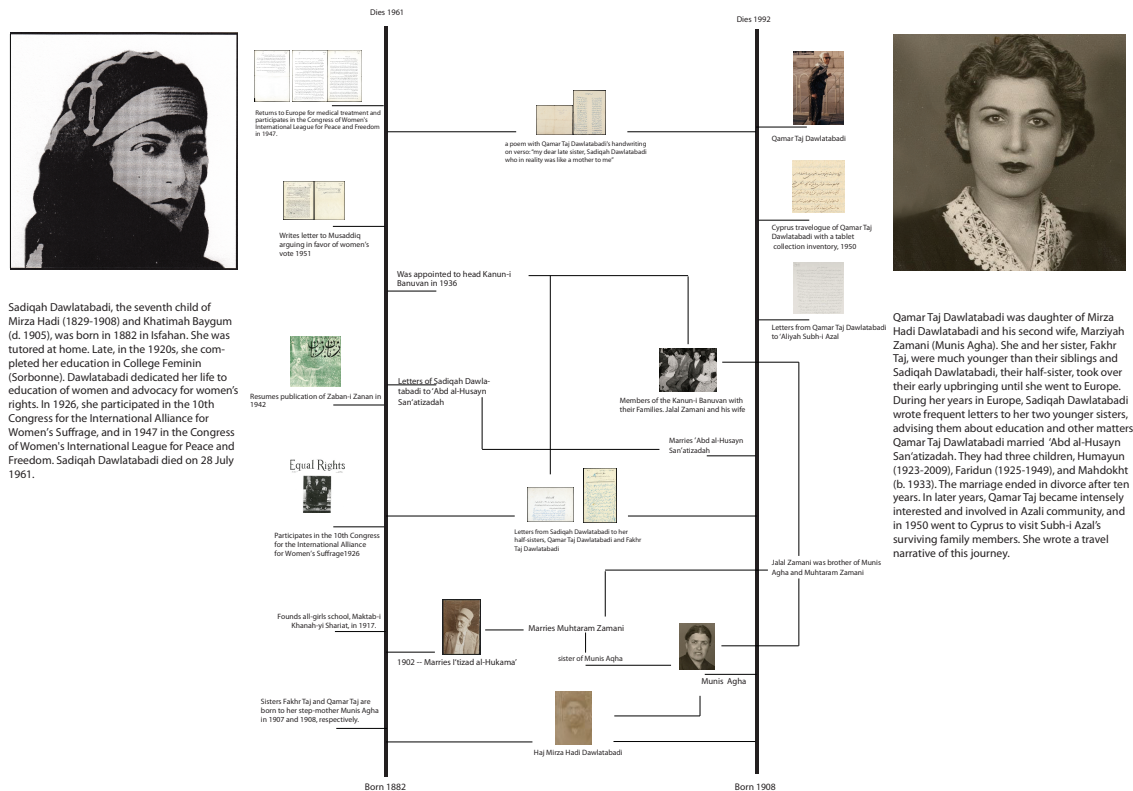
More technically minded among you could visit the site's FAQ section and check the links to the technical description of the project and the history of the site design.

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. Our Research Platform, in its final stages of development, will offer scholars separated by geography, culture, and politics to come together as active research partners. Its design 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, however, 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? 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 {slide}.



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. 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 that 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 makes 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.

Third, the kind of technical facility that graph-based approaches generate will make it enormously easier to study women's daily practices of life. As historians of women have argued, to understand women's lives, we need to pay special attention to reconstruction of the many overlapping and intersecting circles of affection and attachment, of work, of social activity and advocacy, of affiliation, support, and patronage, of reading, writing,

and gossip – to borrow Valerie Traub’s words, producing “a thick associational field.”⁵ These networks may not be as visible as those that have been studied for men’s lives; yet they defined the meaning of lives lived as significantly.

Finally, the more exciting possibility 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, other 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.

The major challenge of doing multi-genre history is that we need to learn multiple languages of reading. Using photographs as historical documents requires us learning the grammar of photography, in Laura Wexler’s words, “photographs have meaning only as elements of a set. Photographic meaning is a system of relations that are established not *in* but *between* images.”⁶

Similarly, “Items of material culture *script* in much the same sense that literary texts *mean*: neither a thing nor a poem (for example) is conscious or agential, but a thing can invite behaviors that its maker did and did not envision, and a poem may produce meanings that include and exceed a poet’s intention. ... To read things as scripts is to coax the archive into divulging the repertoire.”⁷

⁵ Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 12.

⁶ Wexler, *Tender Violence*, p. 66.

⁷ Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, pp. 12-13.

More challenging than learning grammar of photography and scripts of things is working across several genres with their respective languages to understand a single historical topic, as for instance, Robin Bernstein has done in her book, *Racial Innocence*, and Michael Amico has produced in his essay, “Objects of Attraction at War: A Sword, and Two Civil War Soldiers,” and the larger dissertation project.

We hope that Women’s Worlds in Qajar Iran will inspire researchers to pursue such new ways of thinking and writing about history for modern Iran.⁸

⁸ I would also like to thank a large number of people who have been part of this project, without whose loving work the project would have been impossible, including the research and staff team in Iran, from which location most of our archives’ holdings originate. This project has been truly of the category “it takes a village” to produce a digital archive. Please see [About Us](#) and [Credits](#) sections of the site for a full list.