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An Archaeology of Rare Books in Arab Atlantic History

STACY D. FAHRENTHOLD

HISTORIANS OF ARAB AMERICAN HISTORY have long tangled with the problems of area studies.¹ They have argued that the division of social histories into Cold War–era cantons contained within national borders lends itself to the dual marginalization of peoples who do not fit neatly into the logic of methodological nationalism.² Among those marginalized by this logic are migrants, diasporas, displaced persons, nomads, and refugees, communities that are increasingly at the center of historical debate but are still, nevertheless, shunted to the margins of archives built upon the assumed ordering supremacy of the nation-state and its disciplinary apparatuses. Social history cautions us against allowing the state to condition the questions we ask about migrants. We must, for instance, push past respectability narratives that celebrate assimilation and elide the coercion that existed in Americanization projects.³ When dealing with diasporic communities like those in the Arab Atlantic, the challenge is not only to create a story that moves beyond immigration-as-restriction but also to demonstrate and justify a new analytic geography that undermines the disciplinary cleavages between Arab communities in North American and Latin American contexts.⁴

New research on Middle Eastern transnationalism has made successful inroads into the problems posed by container model theory by demonstrating the circulation of Middle Eastern migrants across American contexts, the construction of diasporic migrant institutions in the Arab American *mahjar* (diaspora), and the emergence of homeland politics from abroad. This research frays the edge of the formal archival repositories it draws from, calling into question the tyranny of the state in its ability to determine the historical place of migrants, refugees, and other mobile peoples. The formal space of the archive, however, continues to shape research in Middle East migration studies in practical ways, presenting immediate challenges for researchers (especially new researchers) in the field. Anemic funding, chronic political instability, and the closure of important Middle Eastern archives compound the challenges researchers face when pursuing migrant

histories. All in all, three sets of challenges present themselves: the marginalization of migrants in archives frozen in the area studies approach, which dashes their documentary footprints across five continents; the hegemony of single-site research as the funding model in Middle East studies; and the ad hoc unavailability of state archives in Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and elsewhere. In a moment when we need migrant histories more than ever, the obstacles are multiplying.

These same troubles, however, create a radical opportunity for social histories of Middle Eastern migration that build from the perspectives—and the documents—that migrants carry with them as they travel, rather than from the confining lens of the state and its archives. To be sure, the state is a legitimate subject of analysis. Compelling new work on passports and identity cards carried by labor migrants, nomads, and refugees, for instance, demonstrates how mobile persons circumvent state goals to pin them down using state records.⁵ But if social history is to pursue Middle Eastern migrants into spaces beyond the state and its regulatory goals, the historian must build up from a different type of archive. Specifically, he or she must locate and analyze the other papers that migrants carried with them: photography, letters, diaries, poems, pulp serials, and propaganda were all carried across the Arab Atlantic mahjar. Accessing these materials requires digging for them, adopting an archeological approach to rare manuscript depositories, and working largely outside the sanitized spaces of state records. In this contemporary moment that precludes access to formal state records, however, these indigenous archives carry additional historical power. An archaeological approach to Arab Atlantic history focusing on uncatalogued rare books, manuscripts, private collections, and family papers not only places migrants and refugees at the center of their own histories (itself a worthwhile endeavor); it also combats the state-centrism that has remained an enduring feature of modern Middle East history up to now.⁶

What is an archaeology of Arab Atlantic history? First, it is an understanding of how the diaries, manuscripts, letters, and personal papers of Arab migrants find themselves scattered across continents, usually shelved in off-site depositories lacking cataloguing or internal coherence. To trace the social geographies of migrant populations requires building relationships with collaborators and across institutions, disciplines, and continents.⁷ Fortunately, there are specialized archives in Middle Eastern migration and Arab American history that promote a norm of collaboration among researchers.⁸ Most of the available collections in Arab Atlantic history, however, continue to sit in off-site depositories at research libraries, institutions that operate

largely through an area studies prism and are unaware of the origins of the materials they own. Often, these collections are found only by accident. They needn't be.

Like my colleagues in mahjar studies, my work reconstructs Syrian and Lebanese migrant communities in the Americas through migrant associations, organizations that operated in conjunction with private reading rooms, cafés, and the diaspora's much-remarked-upon periodical press.⁹ The connection with the press has made these Syrian clubs archivally fecund, but recovering their records requires working across several archives and the reconstitution of social networks of individuals. The contents of a São Paulo's men's club called the Homs Club (al-Nadi al-Homsi, or Club Homs), for instance, arrived at Harvard University Libraries in pieces among the estate bequests of several individuals. Established in Brazil in 1920, the Homs Club moved its library from its original location in the 1930s, emptying its shelves of most of its original books, pamphlets, and Arabic language club records. These papers were preserved in the attics and private collections of individuals like Najib Sawaya, Salwa Salama Atlas, and Ilyas Qunsil. Originally from Homs, Syria, Salwa Salama Atlas came to Brazil with her husband, Jurj Atlas in 1914. They co-founded al-Nadi al-Homsi in 1920 and edited significant Arabic periodicals in São Paulo, including the bilingual *al-Karma/a Vinha*.¹⁰ When Jurj passed away, Salwa took full editorship of *al-Karma* and managed the affairs of the library of al-Nadi al-Homsi. Her estate papers arrived in boxes in Cambridge, where like other bequests from Syrian São Paulo, they were shelved without remark of either the names of their owners penned inside the cover or al-Nadi al-Homsi's embossed stamp.

Recovering these materials requires digging for them quite literally, but the archaeological approach also prompts historians to treat rare manuscripts such as these as physical evidence, as objects carried with individuals during their lives and bearing their own historical trajectory since then. Reconstituting the Homs Club's original library involved recalling every Arabic title printed in São Paulo, opening each cover to discover the club's stamp. In some cases, the practice of penning one's name in the margins to mark a reading of the manuscript established a stunning visual chain of transmission as a book moved through the hands of Syrian lenders. Because these manuscripts were meant to be lent out, their value was not only in the ideas represented on their pages but also as physical objects of transmission. Annotations, for example, turned these works into conversations among sets of readers. The club stamp reveals where these Syrian readers

met; their names gathered along the margins provided important clues for reconstructing their social networks. As I put together the Homs Club's social world in Brazil, the club's ties to similar philanthropic clubs in Syrian communities in Argentina, Chile, Mexico, and the United States were evident, as were the endurance of ties between Club Homs and the city of its founders' origin: Homs.¹¹

The Homs Club developed its own social gravity and, thanks to the loquaciousness of its founders (many of them printers), an abundant archival footprint could be tracked through a simple networked method. Beginning with the names of the club's founders and a collection of books and periodicals with the club's stamp, I tracked the arrival of visitors from other places in the *mahjar* or from Syria in the marginalia: Jurj Sawaya from Boston, Khalil Sa' adih from Buenos Aires, 'Abd al-Masih Haddad from New York, and Hanna Khabbaz from Homs each visited from abroad. Along with press pieces he collected from Club Homs (published in *Jadat al-Rishad*), Khabbaz brought donations from the Homs Club back to Syria to found a new school in the city, along with the club's Syrian sister organizations, *Jam 'iyyat al-Rabita al-Adabiyya* (which was, like the Homs Club, supported by the Greek Orthodox Church of Homs). In this pursuit of Homs social networks in the *mahjar*, I learned that the printing press housed in the Homs Club was itself purchased from a printer in Cairo by the Orthodox Archbishop of Homs, 'Atallah Athanasius, in 1909.¹² It was sent from Syria to Brazil in an effort to evade new censorship laws imposed by the Ottoman Empire's post-revolutionary regime that year. Decades later, the Homs Club closed its Arabic library, and the printing press was sold to Jurj and Jubran Bunduqi. They opened a printing house called *Dar al-Tiba' a wa-l-Nashr al-'Arabiyya*, which turned into one of Brazil's largest Arabic language presses and which itself hosted a South American "pen league" called al-'Usba al-Andalusiyya (the Andalusian League).¹³

If understood simultaneously not only as textual evidence for a particular Syrian-Brazilian milieu, but also as physical artifacts in evidence of migrant connectivity, rare books and manuscripts like those printed by São Paulo's Homs Club provide a rich indigenous archive for Middle Eastern migration in the Atlantic basin. These materials are more than a mere compliment to a historical record based firstly on state records; rather, they offer a powerful corrective to that record. Their use in multi-sited transnational research, furthermore, allows the researcher to pare down the size of a project in meaningful ways that are more resonant with the migrant social geographies while honoring the diasporic frame.

Archaeological approaches to manuscript history certainly are not new. Rather, what this piece proposes is a return to classical social historical methods in order to confront the dual challenges of political instability and financial austerity imposed by our current political moment. Compassionate histories of migrants—especially Middle Eastern migrants—are more pressing than ever, but accessing migrant lives requires breaking out of archival silos and tired state-driven narratives about people who cross borders.¹⁴ Accomplishing a social history of the Arab Atlantic requires that historians rethink the scope of their project around demonstrable and empirically sound social networks linking Arab American individuals or their institutions to one another, as opposed to place-based studies. Arranged around cross-cultural themes, such studies are worthwhile, but this value is diminished if they come at the expense of flattening the experiences of dynamic migrant populations to a conflict between “here” and “there” or reading migrant experiences solely through the lens of integration (thus naturalizing the state and its assumption of a mandate to restrict immigration). Basing new studies on the papers migrants carried with them across the Arab Atlantic—letters between individuals, newspapers, pulp serials, passports, family papers, or rare books—retrieves a frame that is faithful to the institutions and cultures of these communities beyond the assimilation narrative and its cognates.¹⁵

Emerging studies of the Arab Atlantic provide this kind of extra-state narrative and promise to develop further in the direction of reclaiming the agency of Middle Eastern migrants. What will be interesting, also, will be how this work contains within it the capacity to denaturalize the state’s extraordinary efforts at restricting Middle Eastern and Muslim migration. In 2018, it is clear to many who work in Arab American studies that we must denaturalize the history of Islamophobic discrimination, examining it not as a naturally occurring extension of a restrictionist immigration regime but also a historical preoccupation with intense policing, surveillance, and restriction of Arab, Middle Eastern, and Muslim migrants in the United States (and further, the conflation of these three categories).¹⁶ Islamophobia itself has a deep history that only migrant-centered history can recall.¹⁷ This work is worth doing, of course, because the histories of Middle Eastern migrants are worth reclaiming, period. They are worthy histories not *despite* the ways they slip out of a territorial frame offered by Cold War–era area studies and the national paradigm, but also *because* they do so. A new social history of Middle Eastern migration can offer correctives to the endurance of state-centered, bordered histories of the region, perhaps even employing

migrant and network-based methodologies to revise what we think we know about the modern Middle East itself.

NOTES

1. Akram Khater, *Inventing Home: Gender, Emigration, and the Middle Class in Lebanon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Sarah Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

2. Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, "Methodological Nationalism and Beyond: Nation-State Building, Migration and the Social Sciences," *Global Networks* 2, no. 4 (2002), 301–3.

3. For an excellent example of this recontextualization through peddling, see Charlotte Karem Albrecht, "An Archive of Difference: Syrian Women, the Peddling Economy and US Social Welfare, 1880–1935," *Gender & History* 28, no. 1 (April 2016), 127–49.

4. Maria del Mar Logrono Narbona, Paulo G. Pinto, and John Tofik Karam, eds., *Crescent over Another Horizon: Islam in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Latino USA* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015).

5. Lauren Banko, *The Invention of Palestinian Citizenship, 1917–1948* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016); David Gutman, "Travel Documents, Mobility Control, and the Ottoman State in an Age of Global Migration, 1880–1915," *Journal of Ottoman and Turkish Studies* 3, no. 2 (2016), 347–68; and Will Hanley, "What Ottoman Nationality Was and Was Not," *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 3, no. 2 (2016), 277–98.

6. See Natalie Zemon Davis, "How the FBI Turned Me on to Rare Books," *New York Review of Books*, July 30, 2013.

7. Since 2012, the Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies (KCLDS) at North Carolina State University has hosted a biennial conference in Middle Eastern migration studies that has promoted the virtues of collaboration and public engagement among researchers working across the humanities and social sciences. The center's open-access publication, *Mashriq & Mahjar: Journal of Middle East and North African Migration Studies*, produces new scholarship in migration issues twice annually.

8. See the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Michigan; the Immigration History Research Center Archives at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis; the Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies at North Carolina State University; and the Center for Arab American Studies at the University of Michigan, Dearborn. In the Middle East, the Lebanese Emigration Research Center (LERC) at the Notre Dame University, Zouk Mosbeh, Lebanon, maintains the largest single repository on migrants from Lebanon and hosts visiting scholars.

9. Lily Pearl Balloffet, "From the Pampa to the Mashriq: Arab-Argentina Philanthropy Networks," *Mashriq and Mahjar: Journal of Middle Eastern Migration Studies* 4, no. 1 (2017): 4–28; Hani Bawardi, *The Making of Arab Americans from Syrian Nationalism to U.S. Citizenship* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014); Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

10. Jurj Atlas, *al-Kalimat al-Khalida: wa-hiya Majmu'a ba'd ma Nashr min-Khutub al-Marhum Jurj Atlas fi-Jaridat al-Ittihad al-'Arabi wa-l-Zahrawi wa-Majallat al-Karma*, ed. Salwa Salama Atlas (São Paulo: Dar al-Tiba'a wa-l-Nashr al-'Arabiyya, 1930), 12, 97–99.
11. Stacy Fahrenthold, “Sound Minds in Sound Bodies: Transnational Philanthropy and Patriotic Masculinity in *al-Nadi al-Homsi* and Syrian Brazil, 1920–1932,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46, no. 2 (May 2014): 259–83.
12. Hanna Khabbaz, “Matba'at Homs,” *Homs*, 13 June 1924, 8; 'Isa As'ad, *Tarikh Homs*, vol. 2 (Homs: Matrana Homs al-Urthodoxiyya, 1983), 417.
13. The “Pen League” refers to a well-known group of poets and writers in Syrian New York, including Gibran Kahlil Gibran, Ilya Abu Madi, Abdel Massih Haddad, and Amin al-Rihani. In Brazil, the Andalucian League carried on poetic tradition styled in the same vein within the walls of Club Homs. On *al-'Usba al-Andalusiyya*, see 'Umar Muhammad Duqaq, *Shu'ara al-'Usba al-Andalusiyya fi-l-Mahjar al-Amriki al-Janubi* (al-Maktaba al-Islamiyya al-Jabaliyya, 1966). The printer Jubran Bunduqi was also a personality in São Paulo's *al-Hizb al-Watani al-Suri*, a Syrian nationalist party opposed to French colonialism in the Middle East. See letters between Bunduqi and Antun Sa'adiah in *al-Athar al-Kamila: al-Risa'il, al-Juz' al-Awwal* (Beirut: 'Umdat al-Thaqafa, 1978), 7.
14. Elizabeth Claire Saylor and Lily Pearl Balloffet, “Editorial Foreword: Mashriq and Mahjar Today: Migration Studies at a Crossroads,” *Mashriq & Mahjar* 4, no. 1 (2017), 1–3.
15. Stacy Fahrenthold, “The Syrian and Lebanese American Federation: A Case for Connection,” in *Connections and Ruptures: America and the Middle East*, ed. Robert Myers (Beirut: American University of Beirut Press), 273–88.
16. Khaled Beydoun, “Antebellum Islam,” *Howard Law Journal* 58, no. 1 (2014), 141–93.
17. Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, “Islamophobia and American History,” in *Islamophobia and American History: Religious Stereotyping and Out-grouping of Muslims in the United States*, ed. Carl Ernst (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 53–74.