

## GEORGE N. ATIYEH AWARD ESSAY

### Considerations of Access and Their Impact on Middle East Scholarship\*

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**A**ttending the 2006 MELA and MESA meetings in Boston was a very interesting and informative experience. Thank you MELA members for your gracious hospitality and engagement. I thoroughly enjoyed the content of the programs, and appreciated learning more about facets of Middle East librarianship through your questions and remarks.

What resonated for me throughout the MELA and MESA meetings were considerations of access and how they impact Middle East scholarship. How has information been recorded? How has information been collected? How has information been made accessible? How is the management of information changing? How do these changes shape the work of Middle East librarianship?

MELA's program, *Coming Full Circle in Middle Eastern Research: Transcending Pen and Ink While Excavating the Unseen*, offered a very interesting overview of alternate resources for scholarship, and of the parameters imposed by the sociopolitical landscape in the region which influence collection development. It was exciting to "experience" the

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The George Atiyeh Prize was founded by the Middle East Librarians Association in 1999 to honor George N. Atiyeh, retired Head of the Near East Section of the Library Congress, founding member of MELA and of the Middle East Microform Project, for his many contributions to Middle East librarianship and scholarship. Dr. Atiyeh is the first and only honorary member of MELA. The George Atiyeh Prize offers financial aid to attend the annual meetings of MELA and of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA).

Awardees receive a cash award in addition to their registration fees for both the MELA and MESA annual conferences. They also agree to attend both the MELA and MESA conferences in their entirety, to allow their names and photographs to be used in any publicity by MELA or other organizations contacted by MELA, and to write a report on their conference experience, to be published in MELA Notes.

rich cultural history of the Middle East through non-textual materials. Learning about the scope and development of Harvard's collections of historical photographs of Greater Syrian lands and sound recordings of music from the Arabian Peninsula was fascinating. Reflecting on the substantive value of ephemera as cultural markers of time and place was also thought-provoking.

The GIS presentation exploring the infrastructure of the Middle East through geospatial imaging highlighted the profound impact that technology has had on the transfer of information. Observing the ease and immediacy with which one can digitally access remote sources of information and manipulate a convergence of data was tremendous. This globalization of information crosses over physical boundaries—the world literally is at our fingertips! Such a realization was underscored by the unfettered access we had to Iraq, a seemingly incongruous prospect given the current turmoil. It was also quite a surprise to “drop in” on the grandeur of Sharm el-Sheikh, a favorite camping spot of memory.

With considerations in mind brought forth by these presentations, I gained a better understanding of the need for collaborative efforts around material acquisition and preservation as addressed by the activities of the Middle East Microform Project (MEMP) and the Middle East Cooperative Acquisitions Program (MECAP). It was interesting to discover the range of serial publications under review and conversely the small number of items held in institutional collections worldwide. What became apparent to me was the importance of expanding access to these primary sources for scholarship through the efficacy of a collective plan maximizing limited financial resources.

It was also beneficial to learn about the merger of RLG into OCLC first-hand through the exchange between OCLC representatives and MELA catalogers in the RLG-OCLC Transition Forum. While much of what was said was unfamiliar to me in its technical detail, the complexities and challenges of organizing information were evident. I gained an awareness of the enormity of the endeavor, and of the significant impact an integrated catalog will have on access to information worldwide, from both ends as manager and user.

Moving from the MELA meeting to the MESA meeting offered me an opportunity to consider access from the other end of scholarship, namely in the content of ideas. I attended a number of programs which addressed Palestine, gender, and the Muslim experience in the Dias-

pora. Throughout these programs, notions of access echoed in the dialectic of identity.

One presentation explored Palestinian national identity through the narrative of expulsion, touching on the relation between exclusion and abandonment. Another presentation investigated the construction of that identity through local templates, looking at how social history has been construed through photographs. And yet another presentation examined the genre of Palestinian folklore as a vehicle for identity, conceptualizing it as a “pickling of the past, to be preserved in a solution, and put on a shelf for consumption at a later time.”<sup>1</sup>

Most vivid for me were reflections on the representation of the hijab in America since September 11, and how cultural perceptions of Muslims have become increasingly charged. One presentation addressed how the hijab had once rendered a woman “invisible, anonymous, undifferentiated,” and now made her “visible, a target of contempt, differentiated.”<sup>2</sup> Another presentation explored the hijab as a visual manifestation of the “cultural other,” challenging the script of assimilation, and thereby defining what it is to be “American.”<sup>3</sup>

With these thoughts of cultural identity in mind, I relished my visits to the book exhibit to get a first-hand look at the wide array of Middle East materials. What an experience it was to have access to such a comprehensive selection of resources. I didn’t walk away disappointed or empty-handed.

Thank you very much for awarding me this opportunity to come and learn about Middle East scholarship and area librarianship. I enjoyed the meetings immensely, and took away much to think about. It was invaluable to hear you talk about aspects of the work you do. Your comments informed me about the requisite skills I should pursue. Overall, I was struck by the possibilities that digital technology holds for expanding access to collections globally.

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<sup>1</sup> See Rochelle Davis, *Representing Palestinian Folklore: Local Practices and National Symbols*, Middle East Studies Association 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Meeting, Boston, MA, November 20, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> See Sarah Islam, “Negotiating Femininity: How American Muslim Women Navigate in Domestic and Public Social Spheres,” Middle East Studies Association 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Meeting, Boston, MA, November, 20, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> See Ashraf Zahedi, “Impact of September 11 on Civic Participation of Muslim Women,” Middle East Studies Association 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Meeting, Boston, MA, November 19, 2006.

