

The Introspection of Kathryn Schwartz: Printed Word as the Historian's Vocation
(on the article: "Book History, Print, and the Middle East," *History Compass* 2017)

Introduction: An Exchange

Kathryn Schwartz was someone who an integral part of our community—not just as an intellectual community—but also as a community of people, and it is enormously important that we are able to finally as a community commemorate come together and remember this person who was so much to many of us. I am enormously grateful to Malika Zeghal for organizing this event, and to all of you gathered here, near and far.

So that we can properly remember Kathryn as both a brilliant scholar and the very sunshiny person she was, I wanted to start with a bit of an email exchange that we had a few years ago. She was in her first semester at UMass, and amidst a marathonic email exchange, she told me:

Dec 6, 2018

Kathryn Schwartz

I have been tasked to write up "What is History?" for my department's undergraduate webpage. But, what IS history?

I responded in a characteristically helpful manner:

Dec 6, 2018

Ari Schriber

That's the worst task I can possibly imagine. I'm so sorry.

Ten minutes later, Kathryn wrote back:

Dec 6, 2018

Kathryn Schwartz

Do they not realize that I am not formally trained as a historian? Maybe this is a good opportunity to infiltrate and take over: History is the study of the Middle East. Only. In the modern period. And in ways that I find interesting. That which [I find] boring is not worthy.

This was all in good banter—and of course Kathryn *was* an eminently trained historian. But it does raise the question: What was Kathryn's history? And what *did* make it so interesting and indeed worthy of her and our study of the Middle East?

I'm going to talk a bit about a brief article from 2017 that she called, "Book history, print, and the Middle East" in which she provided a trenchant synopsis of the historiography, state of, and stakes in of book history in Middle East studies. While the article itself is relatively brief, it shows us some of the most important insights that Kathryn brought to her scholarship not only as a rigorous researcher but as a deeply thoughtful and compassionate (and hilarious!) person behind the research. And it is ultimately on these last points that I will conclude.

Why Books?

Kathryn began the article noting a truth about most of us who perform some time of historical research: that it almost always relies on some form the written world – “words that people committed writing,” she wrote, “to access the past.” But of course, it’s not just the content books or journals themselves at stake, but how the vast majority of us who use the written word as a source are performing research predicated on the social, political, and economic circumstances that let certain texts fall between our hands. This, in fact, is the task of book historians more broadly and a variable that underlies most of our work: in Kathryn’s words, questions that “apply to the history of everything, including the study of the Middle East.”

Indeed, Kathryn noted that despite the obvious integrality of book history to Middle East historiography, there had been rather few attempts to write book history in the Middle East, and more crucially, a yet-to-be defined methodology for seriously engaging the history of written word—manuscript, print, or otherwise—from a perspective befitting the region on its own terms—its relationship with written word, the culture of knowledge dissemination, and indeed its languages.

But we all know, as she quickly pointed out, that so many prevailing concepts of Western historiography, not least of all book history, tend to be developed in Eurocentric contexts. As a result, in attempting to assess book history as a historiographical component of Middle East Studies itself, she noted this familiar problem: a field of study inextricably attached to European modernity being transplanted into Middle East Studies with all of its accompanying.

Pushing back against these approaches would require, Kathryn understood, not only rigorous primary source archival work, but a deeper engagement with the type of conceptual scaffolding that had crystalized in Europe with respect to book history in its European context. As other have and I think will address tonight, Kathryn undertook that precise work with respect to print in late-Ottoman Cairo.

Kathryn thus proceeded to understand how this field had developed: giving proper credence to those on whose shoulders our scholarship stands while also making a case that it is time to go further, go beyond, and make its place in the study of Middle East history.

Historiographical Review

In assessing the rise and impact of book history in the region, Kathryn treated her intellectual predecessors with empathy and even compassion, noting the scholarly milieus of which they were a product, while also unambiguously showing us the need to qualify the myriad conclusions that they put forth.

Among the pervasive issues that she noted:

- The tendency for “librarian-scholars” who revered books as an object of study yet, she noted could not reconcile their contents with the society on which they purported to speak.
- More crucially, the nagging idea that a society’s adoption of print necessarily indicated its long awaited initiation into modernity, an idea whose effect, Kathryn noted, would have historians view Middle Eastern history as one divided by mode of textual transmission, manuscript vs. print, and perhaps more perniciously, bypassing manuscript

history entirely as though it were a mere stepping stone to what really mattered—print itself—and that, like for its European predecessors, print was to thank for the major political and intellectual movements of 19th and 20th century Middle East.

The past, it was implied, referred to manuscript and the Orient, attributes that were uniformly treated across time and space. To the earlier generation of historians, Middle East intellectuals had simply awaited the form of type print, an imagined vessel of modernity, and its vaunted notions of liberalism and nationalism, among others.

Even moving beyond the hackneyed philological obsessions of early orientalist, it was only in recent decades that scholars began to transcend these types of conceptual scaffolding that had inhibited a true reckoning with book history, or history of writing writ large: how had texts served transmission of knowledge? How were those texts produced and that knowledge consumed? How much, can we say, that the rise of print—Kathryn's own object of study—was itself an agent of the intellectual, social and political trends that the rest of us then try to study?

The point, as Kathryn saw it, was not to downplay the importance of print, but rather how to make sense of it in the context of the Middle East as greater Islamicate world. She did not make the shortcomings of past generations her own contribution- she wanted to understand their contributions to guide us into better doing the work.

She noted that a recent cadre of scholars had begun to take up this challenge, entrenching the written word within Middle East and Islamic studies proper by centering manuscripts as vessels of transmission in their own right, proper periodization of texts as Prof. [Khaled] El Rouayheb, or specifying the *precise* modes by which the print form of manuscripts contributed to intellectual trends, as Prof. [Ahmed] El Shamsy showed (with Kathryn's direct help!).

Conclusion: Kathryn's History

"It remains to be seen," Kathryn concluded, "whether or not more scholars will come to identify themselves as practitioners of Middle Eastern book history." This task would depend both on scholarly interest and, and as she admonished, whether scholars in Middle East Studies more broadly would accept to make book history part of the field.

I know that a lot of people will mourn the loss of an almost certain magnum opus, one that would have solidified her own place as the standard bearer of this historiography. But let me put a slightly different spin on it, one that situates us now as the bearers of Kathryn's legacy.

Studying manuscripts, print texts, and archives more broadly belong at the center of Middle East Studies—it is indeed a variable, all of us can attest, that determines our own capacity to make contributions to the region to which we devote our scholarly lives as Kathryn did.

But Kathryn also did all of this showing that she could be best of scholars, the most discerning and original, doing this because she knew it was critical work. And she produced her scholarship with self-awareness and the introspection needed to reckon with the future of this field as such a young scholar, the article being just a year after she finished her PhD.

This was indeed, Kathryn's vocation, Kathryn's history, one she would not do without incredible kindness and wit. So, I end by once again sharing a message from another of our marathonic email exchanges, this time from April 2019. She told me to be "a bit" more patient searching for archives, and once I elatedly told her that I had finally found them, she responded:

Ahhh yes, the emotional echo chamber of the archives! Highs are WAY too high, lows are WAY too low.

You could be on a steady emotional drip, with health insurance and disposable income and avocados galore.

But no, you gave that all up in pursuit of discovering this case. And now you've found it, so you made the right call.

And CONGRATULATIONS!!!! it's amazing when these things come together.

It is amazing, as Kathryn well knew, because she showed us that amazing work looked like. I hope and do believe she knew how much she was cherished during her time with us; she was a brilliant scholar and she was hilarious, compassionate, and so sunny. And I hope we not only remember all this, but accept to carry her spirit forward as we pursue our own vocation.

Ari Schriber

Toronto, April 24, 2023