Beyond the Frame: Toward a Collection-Level Redescription of the Colbert Held Archive

Ryan Zohar

ABSTRACT

This article argues for the collection-level redescription of the Middle East Institute's Colbert Held Archive, a collection consisting of more than 18,000 color Kodachrome slides of photographs taken by Held throughout his time in the region as a diplomat and geographic field researcher. After discussing the importance of the collection and its possible uses for researchers in the field, this article details how any description of the archives should contextualize the American presence in the Arabian Peninsula during the photographer's time in the region. Arguing that the archives places a dual emphasis on geography and ethnography (the concerted combination of which might be called geo-ethnography), the author argues that the archives would be best served by a collection-level, rather than an item-level, redescription. The article draws from academic literature on reparative description, the More Product, Less Process (MPLP) approach, and Total Cost of Stewardship to suggest that this path forward is the most feasible and meaningful step that can be taken by a small special library to contextualize Held's work and his photographs.

KEY WORDS

Arabian Peninsula, Archival redescription, Cold War, Diplomacy, Photography, Special libraries, United States foreign policy, Visual studies

Western photography of the Middle East has long held a storied place in archival collections of Anglo-American institutions. Despite a rich history of local photography—more of which has been written in recent years—historian Lucie Ryzova has noted that "for westerners, photography in Egypt conjures up images taken by travelers, adventurists, or archeologists, intended for western publics and nowadays located in western collections."[1] Beyond Egypt and the Levant, one might extend such statements to the Arabian Peninsula, where private photography collections produced by western travelers—often by diplomats, military officials, or industrialists—have come to hold prominent places in library and archival collections. The fact that western rather than local sources about the region predominate is not news to scholars working in the field of Middle East studies. When researchers visit the shelves for the Library of Congress (LC) classes dedicated to the history of the Arabian Peninsula (DS 201-248) in most North American institutions, for example, they are more likely to find tomes of T. E. Lawrence's impressions of the land and its peoples than the work of scholars from the region.

There are multiple examples of collections of western photographers in the Gulf, including the Graham Anthony Hill Papers at New York University Abu Dhabi, the Colbert Held Archive at the Middle East Institute (MEI), and the Bert Seal Arabian-American Oil Company (ARAMCO) Photographic Collection at Georgetown University among others. Holding the photographs of a British officer in the Trucial Oman Scouts, a US Foreign Service officer, and a public relations representative for an Arabian-American oil company respectively, these collections highlight urban development, government and industry, and social life in the postindependence period for much of the Arabian Peninsula. Providing researchers with insight into the nascent days of Gulf polities, these images, taken by individuals with unique access given their positions, are of significant interest to researchers in contemporary Gulf and Arabian Peninsula studies for whom visual representation often takes center stage.

The holdings of these collections serve as an important record of the aesthetics and social realities of a particular period and of what one might call the visual economy of twentieth-century Gulf developmentalism.[2] Archival descriptions of items inevitably reflect this emphasis in the collections. However, it is worth noting, even simply for contextual purposes that exist beyond the frame, how positionality, power, and foreign entanglement—certainly not things limited to the creator or collector as an individual figure—facilitated the access that made these collections' existence possible in the first place.

How, then, might scholars interested in the Gulf's social history use these rich collections in such a way that accounts for the role of foreign influence and imperial power at play in the postindependence period? What role might archivists play in reframing and redescribing these collections? Looking at the case of the Colbert Held Archive at MEI—where the author served as the lone librarian and

archivist in 2021–2022—this article contends that collection-level redescription is a meaningful, and crucially *feasible*, step that small special libraries and archives such as MEI can take to encourage users to think critically about the place of power in these archival collections.

Redescription efforts can help researchers see a collection's contents not only as epiphenomena of a particular kind of Gulf developmentalism, but, to borrow from Ann Laura Stoler, also to see its existence as an ethnographically rich diagnostic of American power and influence in the region.[3] Still, the proposed plan for implementing these descriptive efforts on the collections level mitigates the tension between the importance of thorough and multifaceted description, on the one hand, and efforts to work expeditiously to provide access as advised by proponents of the well-known More Product, Less Process (MPLP) approach on the other.[4] In this sense, drawing from the concept of Total Cost of Stewardship, this article aims to encourage responsible management and description of collections while recognizing the unique capacity constraints of small special libraries.[5]

The Colbert Held Archive at the Middle East Institute

In the summer of 1956, geographer Colbert Colgate "Cokie" Held (1917–2016) received a call from a US State Department official with a proposition. "This is Art Burt calling from the State Department," the voice at the other end of the line said. "Where do you want to go? Do you want to go to West Germany? You want to go to Beirut, Lebanon, New Delhi, India or Tokyo? . . . We need geographic attachés." After being dispelled of his initial impression that the phone call was a prank, Held replied, "I'll take Beirut." "Good," replied Burt, "That's going to be a coming area."[6]

For the next twenty years, Held would hold positions as a Foreign Service officer throughout the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula.[7] As part of his assignment, Held was tasked with taking aerial photographs to serve as the basis for cartographic work undertaken by the US Army Map Service, often in coordination with the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency.[8] Even after his time in the service, Held would return to the region for academic fieldwork as a professor at Baylor University. This later fieldwork would inform his influential and widely used textbook, *Middle East Patterns: Places, Peoples, and Politics*, now in its sixth edition.[9]

However, Held's photos went beyond the normal purview of this cartographic surveying, collecting, intelligence work, or the academic research of a geographer. Instead, all told, Held amassed a collection of more than 18,000 color Kodachrome slides of photographs taken throughout his time in the region as a diplomat and geographic field researcher.[10] The photos, donated in 2014 to the Middle East Institute in Washington, DC, include rare aerial shots of strategic sites in the region,[11] but

they also depict some of the earliest urbanization and development projects in Abu Dhabi and Dubai and serve as an important documentary repository of social life in the region. Interestingly, the geographic and intelligence-oriented photographs sit alongside and are integrated with the seemingly more banal representations of social life, customs, and the built environment in the region. Many of the photographs feature individuals, some of whom are officials, while others are passersby, laborers, or children at play. Figure 1 and Figure 2, juxtaposed here to show this contrast for the reader, can be taken as representative of the dual emphasis of the archives.

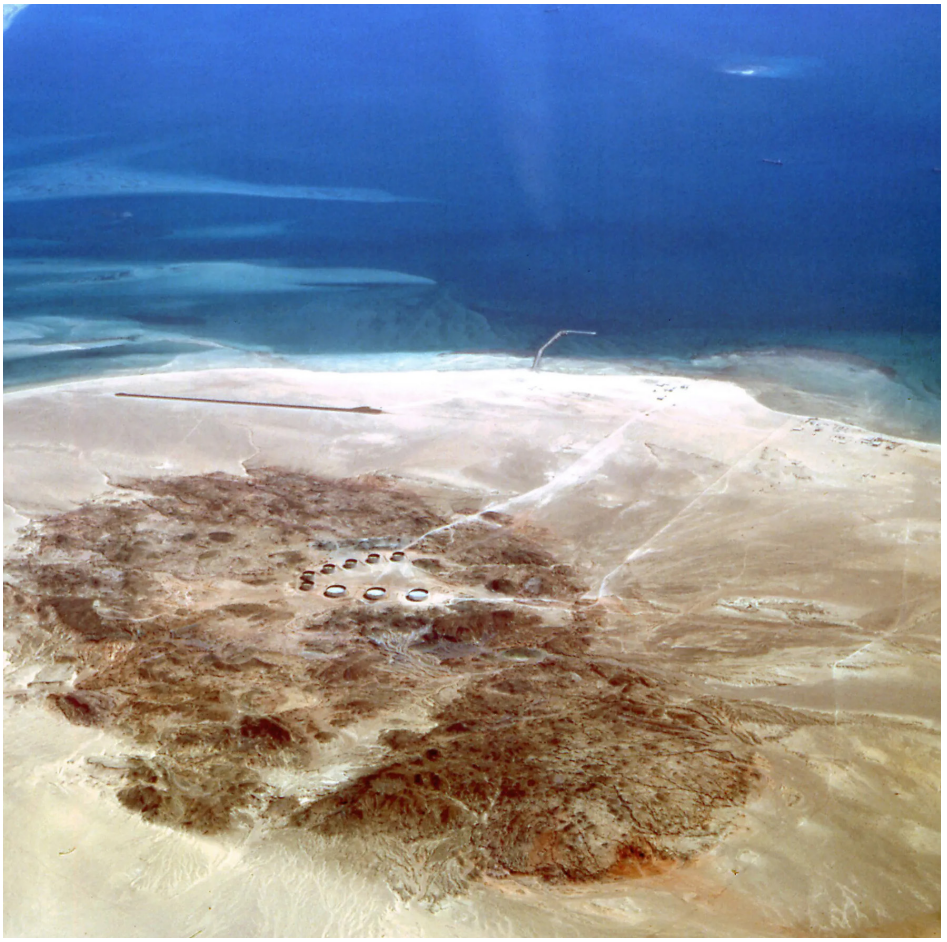

FIGURE 1. Coastal area in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. Colbert Held Archive 325-26, Abu Dhabi, 1970. *Reproduced with the courtesy of the Middle East Institute.*

FIGURE 2. Colbert Held Archive 320-07, Dubai, 1970. *Reproduced with the courtesy of the Middle East Institute.*

Current descriptions of the archives on the item level include basic metadata often noting the country, emirate or state, and city where a particular photo was taken; the year the photograph was taken; and an item number used to ensure *respect des fonds*. A portion of the collection has been digitized (approximately 10 percent), but the vast majority of the images are accessible only as Kodachrome slides. As the collection continues to be processed, digitized, and described by the institute's archivist or project catalogers, more detailed descriptions of the scenes captured by the photographs are added, enriching the item-level metadata. The prospect of enhancing item-level metadata evenly across the collection will depend on whether the institute succeeds in its searches for external funding to expand project personnel beyond its staff, which currently consists of a full-time librarian/archivist; a part-time librarian from the Sultan Qaboos Cultural Center (SQCC),

who works with the institute in accordance with an MEI-SQCC Memorandum of Understanding; and two to three library interns.

Institutional appraisals in the form of promotional pieces of the archives tout it as documentary evidence of a unique period in Gulf history: early paved roads in Abu Dhabi, images of leaders in the then-fragmented Emirates known as the Trucial States (see Figure 3), and photographs of structures since lost to violence or hyperdevelopment.

FIGURE 3. Sheikh Humaid bin Rashid Al Nuaimi (center), at the time deputy ruler of the Emirate of Ajman, with two of his aides. Colbert Held Archive 208-27, Ajman, 1964. *Reproduced with the courtesy of the Middle East Institute.*

To widen the user base of the collection, the Middle East Institute's communication officers and interns have produced blog posts and features for its website. In addition to these pieces contextualizing the collection and highlighting its value, an independent filmmaker created a short documentary including images of the archives. In the film, these images are used alongside recordings from Held's oral histories housed at Baylor University juxtaposed with contemporary testimonies of individuals from the region attesting to the importance of Held and his photos in serving as an essential window into mid-twentieth-century Middle East history, especially in light of the subsequent uprisings, destruction of cultural heritage, and rapid urbanization that rounded out the end of the twentieth century and began the twenty-first in many of the sites Held visited throughout his time in the region.[12] The film was featured in *National Geographic*'s Short Film Showcase in 2016.

There are important reasons for this promotional emphasis. First, the stewardship of a rich collection of images of social life in the Middle East produced by a former US Foreign Service officer aligns directly with the institute's mission "to increase knowledge of the Middle East among citizens of the United States and to promote a better understanding between the people of these two areas."[13] In fact, when George Camp Keiser founded the institute in 1946, he convened a group of scholars, political figures, and, crucially, diplomats to help plot out a vision for MEI's future with the aim of realizing this mission.[14] While Held's donation came more than fifty years after this vision was first expressed, his involvement with the institute is, in some ways, a natural outgrowth of its history and the legacy Keiser left behind. The institute has since become an important center for academics, policymakers, and government officials in Washington, DC, and in the United States more broadly.

Other motives for promoting the archives in this way relate more to its potential uses by scholars in contemporary Middle East studies. Many individuals seeking to use the archives may be interested in Held and his work. However, for a swath of other researchers, the person behind the camera may be of only secondary importance. Scholars writing monographs on the history of the region would see in the photographs glimpses of important cultural, environmental, and industrial sites that today look starkly different than their appearances during Held's tenure with the State Department. The Held family's Memorandum of Agreement with the institute in 2014 allows the liberal use of these images for educational purposes, including their reproduction in academic monographs or edited volumes.

An emphasis on urban images, spectacle, and photographic representation has become particularly salient in studies of the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula. One prominent publication in the subfield recently dedicated an entire special issue to the subject of urban images in the Gulf as research objects, investigating the production of this imagery, how these images come to guide the shaping of Gulf cities' urban trajectories, and, last, how images influence social actors by crafting an "economy of fascination."[15]

Similarly, scholars might probe the photographs for the aesthetics of an early form of state-promulgated developmentalism, which is itself in conversation with other global aesthetic modernisms, all during a period when the US and UK governments aided Gulf states in abating leftist insurrections in the region within the context of the Cold War—a history that is often effaced.[16] The potential use of archival materials to glean examples of formal and informal urbanism as well as examples of state-led "modernization" projects would provide fruitful directions for the growing body of scholarly work on visual cultures in the Middle East.[17]

From Service to Sightseeing

Despite the central focus on the role of Held's photographs as material artifacts evincing the social history of the region, the role of American entanglements in the Middle East during this period and how it facilitated the production of such an archives has not yet been fully considered. This is an archives, too, that, despite Held's post, exists as a private photography archives rather than a governmental one. As discussed earlier, the photographs themselves in the archives also straddle the divide between government work and private tourism. This, in many respects, separates the Colbert Held Archive from government document and archival collections. While materials in government repositories that document the private lives of individuals are often clearly used for surveillance purposes,[18] the blurring of boundaries between "work" and "play" and the often-voyeuristic nature of the images in the Held Archive leave viewers wondering which photos served which ends. Held's photographs of both types cannot be separated from the context of his work.

The fact that the archives specifically contains photographs rather than written documents is also worth noting. Photography, perhaps more than other medium, has often been touted for its ability to capture the realities of a particular place or situation. Yet, in his work on European photography in Palestine, Issam Nassar cautions against the notion that photography "renders its subjects exactly how they exist."[19] Photographs can be the product of techniques and special effects or rely on partial perspectives of the scene before the photographer. Beyond this, the circulation of these images outside of their initial contexts can greatly affect their meaning in the eyes of a viewer, a point that dovetails nicely with Arjun Appadurai's notion of a "social life of things."[20] Nassar continues, "The photograph—which originates as a product of a special relationship between the photographer and his/her subject—is transformed by virtue of a special relation between the subject and the viewer. These relationships incorporate not only aesthetic considerations but ideological ones as well."[21]

Writing on another photograph collection with boundaries blurred between "work" and "play," Debbie Lisle describes the photographs taken by American military personnel in Hawai'i during their leisure time as the result of a shift from a "tour of duty" to a "tour of pleasure."[22] Yet, we might add that the difference between the two is never clearly defined, nor is the shift a unidirectional one. For Lisle, "the intermingling of tourism and militarism in R&R sites . . . cannot be disentangled from the competing colonial logics they mobilize. . . . In that sense, the everyday practices of soldier-tourists (taking pictures; collecting souvenirs; visiting famous landmarks; and making use of local bars, clubs, and brothels) are constituted by 'exploiting fantasies' and therefore cannot be understood as benign."[23]

The comingling of the starkly different types of photographs in the Held Archive—with no discernable boundary between them—also brings to the fore that which gets occluded in prior institutional appraisals of the archives: Held's access to these spaces and places, on duty or as a tourist, was always mediated by his position as a US government official abroad, a fact rarely mentioned in writings about the collection.

In this sense, because the archives' creation relies just as much on the unseen as it does on the seen, it offers new imaginative possibilities for users. Recent work examining contemporary governmental operations and militarism via the visual plane often reveals just how contested and conflicted different "ways of seeing" can be.[24] While curatorial statements and institutional appraisals of archives may seek to imbue a sort of objective distance, the work of Ariella Azoulay shows us the way in which "exiting the limits of the frame . . . and viewing photographs *not* through the concepts which the archive attaches to them" (emphasis in original) allows us to view them in a new light.[25] In another version of what Azoulay details as "exiting the limits of the frame," Gil Hochberg sets her sights on an often overlooked status in the realm of visual studies: that which is concealed. In doing so, she interrogates the domain of "the visual" itself and zeroes in on "the appearance of a *visible absence* or a *visible invisibility*" (emphasis in original).[26]

Neil Smith's work on the role of geography in American empire offers some insight into what this "visible absence" might be in the case of the Colbert Held Archive. Writing on Smith's work, historian Martin W. Lewis suggests that Smith's central contribution is his assertion that "the new American empire of the twentieth century was constructed on the basis of a novel geography that *concealed* its own nature while obscuring the imperialistic goals of U.S. foreign policy" (emphasis mine).[27] This novel geography was in many ways promulgated from the lecture halls of American universities, but its on-the-ground dissemination was facilitated by the representatives, bureaucrats, and foot soldiers in the US State Department, the Army Map Service, and other ancillary institutions.

US aerial cartographic operations, such as those evinced by Held's work, were heralded by government officials as essential to research that would spur development in the Global South. And, in Held's case, this development inevitably involved American oil. Yet, officials simultaneously worried, as decolonization in places like sub-Saharan Africa took place, that a withdrawal of western powers would hinder mapmaking operations. In his book *Mapping the Cold War: Cartography and the Framing of America's International Power*, Timothy Barney cites the US Coastal Survey's H. Arnold Karo lamentation in a letter to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, "As the influence of these governments on the new countries wanes, the support for aerial mapping and surveying will diminish in like proportion."[28] Barney contends that this waning prompted other fears for the Americans as well: while the pretense of US geographic mapping missions was often to promote development, "the specter

of Cold War competition for influence lingered not far behind."[29] This specter would come to raise its head later in Held's mission when a procommunist insurrection in Yemen quickly shaped into a transnational conflict. These three major international events—the rise of Gulf oil, decolonization, and the Cold War—would greatly shape the context of Held's work and the world around him.

As discussed, Held's mission served the strategic priorities of State Department geographers, yet he also took great interest in photographing people and everyday life. Held was not the first to meld his geographic mission with more ethnographic or anthropological pursuits in the region. Indeed, Omnia El Shakry highlights the role of the Royal Geographic Society of Egypt during the late nineteenth century in representing Egypt, not only geographically but also anthropologically, to western audiences.[30] Literary scholar Ali Behdad has carried this thread to the Arabian Peninsula as well, looking at the geographic reports-cum-travelogues of Lady Anne Blunt during the nineteenth-century period of British colonial exploration of the region. Examining the production of these texts, Behdad calls Blunt's writings a *geo-ethnography*, drawing a direct link between her geographic observations and those she made of the regions' people:

> [S]o much of what [Blunt's writing] has to say about Bedouin culture depends on its descriptions of the geographical and spatial nature of the desert, descriptions that *à la limite* explain the complexity of cultural relations in Arabia. After all, let us be reminded that, as the proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society demonstrate, nineteenth-century geography as a discipline included ethnology, ethnography, and anthropology.[31]

One could argue that Held's mission, his oral histories, academic writings, and the photographs included in the collection equally bear this intertwining between geography and ethnography, even if not always veering into the geographic determinism evidenced by Blunt and that often plagues contemporary western writing on the Arabian Peninsula.[32]

More commonly, however, works historicizing government intervention, securitization, and tourism treat the concerted combination of military or intelligence work and tourism as an aberration. For many years, scholars have treated militarism and tourism as opposites.[33] War, it was thought, was bad for tourism; peace, then, would bring about its rise. Many believed the converse to be true as well: travel and tourism would facilitate cross-cultural understanding, bringing "world peace through world travel."[34] A closer look suggests that tourism and conflict are less inimical than they may appear at first glance. Just as the act of translation is not the inevitable "path to communication and thus to comprehension" it is often thought to be, the mere act of international travel is not a driver of coexistence and mutual respect.[35] In fact, recent works by scholars such as Elise Burton, Rebecca Stein, and Eric Zuelow show that, in many cases, the infrastructure and missions of

colonialism and militarism themselves motivate and even facilitate travel for pleasure or for academic research.[36]

As it pertains to the Arabian Peninsula, in particular, the work of Laleh Khalili is particularly instructive in dispelling any hardened views of a strict dichotomy between, not war and tourism as the abovementioned works do, but rather between wartime and peacetime themselves.[37] In her work on the role of the US Army Corps of Engineers in Saudi Arabia, she argues that the growing US military infrastructure in an allied country during peacetime mirrored the expansion of a capitalist geoeconomic order akin to colonial and neocolonial conquest.[38] Held's interactions with intelligence and military officials, as described in his oral history interviews, suggest that the geographic and diplomatic missions that birthed the archives similarly represent examples of the deployment of US military and scientific infrastructure in an allied country during peacetime.

Held's time in the Gulf followed the establishment and coincided with the entrenchment of American oil companies such as the Arabian-American Oil Company (ARAMCO) in Saudi Arabia and the American Oil Company (AMOCO) in the Emirate of Sharjah among others.[39] The rise of commercial and industrial infrastructure around these companies occurred, it must be noted, with significant military might to aid them. In cities such as Dhahran and Dammam in Saudi Arabia, the American presence would transform the built environment and the contours of social life for the cities' populations.[40] It must be said that the development brought by American companies did not benefit American personnel, Arab and South Asian foreign laborers, and the local populations surrounding Dhahran and Dammam equally. In fact, the US Embassy, then in Jeddah, was concerned enough about unequal and contentious relations between the different populations in ARAMCO sites that it sounded an alarm bell. "A danger exists, through housing and through the provision of other amenities, of drawing a permanent caste line between Saudi Arabs and Americans," the embassy's communiqué to the State Department warned.[41]

During his time in the region, Held, too, interacted with these groups, with the vaunted status of American diplomat in this highly stratified context. Figure 4 shows one of Held's photos, taken in Dammam while he was serving as geographic attaché in 1958, of a local guide hired by the Arabian Research Division of ARAMCO. The image not only reflects the entanglement of the US government with American oil companies in the region, it also provides insight into the relationship between American diplomatic-commercial ventures and the local populations of Dhahran and Dammam.

FIGURE 4. Colbert Held Archive 26-15/S, Dammam, 1958. *Reproduced with the courtesy of the Middle East Institute.*

In his oral history interviews, Held describes the concomitant growth of US diplomatic, military, and commercial infrastructure:

> In addition to the importance of the connections between the US government and Aramco, in many respects, we also had received permissions from Saudi Arabia, from King Ibn Saud, to establish an airfield, a military airfield in Dhahran. This was in 1941, and it was an important stopover and relay point for aircraft going from the United States and Western Europe to the Middle East and India, and also to help supply the Russians through the back door through Iraq and Iran. . . . [After the war,] Americans would have American aircraft and American personnel there in limited numbers, not to use it for American military purposes, but to train Saudis [through the United States Military Training Mission (USMTM)]. Of course, it continued to be of considerable use for American military purposes and liaison purposes.[42]

The renewal of US rights to air staging and a Military Air Transport Service (MATS) terminal at the Dhahran Airfield in 1960 were secured "in exchange for a US commitment to sell Saudi Arabia sufficient arms to equip, two divisions and an armored unit at an estimated cost of $110 million; extension of a $50 million credit to be applied to these purchases; and $70 million in grant aid."[43]

This continued US-Saudi security cooperation proved crucial throughout the 1960s as a civil war raged in the north of Yemen in the wake of Imam Ahmad bin Yahya Hamid al-Din's death in 1962. This conflict saw Nasser-backed revolutionary partisans of a Yemen Arab Republic clash with supporters of the Imamate, initially backed by the Saudis. The prospect of a Nasserist outpost on the borders of the Saudi Kingdom sufficiently spooked then-Crown Prince and Prime Minister Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud who sought the reassurances of the Americans. President Kennedy responded in 1963 that "[the Saudis] may be assured of full US support for the maintenance of Saudi Arabian integrity."[44]

The support Kennedy offered came in the form of Operation Hard Surface, largely staged from the oil-linked military infrastructural sites that proliferated in Dhahran.[45] During Operation Hard Surface, Held was a deputy principal officer in the Foreign Service and made frequent trips to Dhahran and Dammam where both ARAMCO and the USMTM were based at the time. He describes the operation in his oral history memoirs:

> [At Dhahran Air Field], we had a military training mission with a number of United States fighter aircraft. And the Saudis—we sold some to the Saudis for training purposes. So, in response to a Saudi request, we would send those [US] planes, armed, down to the Saudi-Yemen border. They would fly back and forth, saying to the Nasser forces, "It wouldn't be a good idea to cross this border." And, those planes were on patrol while I was there in Dhahran nearly every day.[46]

One year later, in 1964, Faisal would take the throne as king and serve as an important American ally and bulwark against budding Marxist movements in the region.[47] This came at the same time as the British began to, formally at

least, withdraw from many of the Gulf states in the 1960s and 1970s. Western oil companies in the region, then, needed to act more concertedly—and often accommodatingly—to maintain their footholds. This was especially true as Gulf oil-producing states acted more assertively through the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)—which from its founding in 1960 up until this point had not obtained much materially from its activities—to safeguard their national interests.[48]

Gulf states often took these steps under pressure from local political forces antagonistic to the US and British involvement in the region. For example, the Communist Party in Saudi Arabia, founded just after Faisal's death in 1975, highlighted US bases, such as the Dhahran Air Field in particular, and the Saudi arms purchase programs already mentioned as among the clearest examples of imperialism in the region.[49]

In combating the US.-Saudi military-industrial complex, Saudi communists sought common cause with the Bahrain National Liberation Front and other groups in the Gulf, with large labor mobilizations respectively targeting oil giants ARAMCO and the Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO).[50] Indeed, one might move beyond Saudi Arabia to take stock of transnational phenomena in analyzing the crucial role of American military-industrial entanglement in the region and its relation to the Held Archive. In fact, for scholars such as Fred Halliday and John Chalcraft, the Gulf oil companies' reliance on and then subsequent sidelining of Omani laborers from the Dhofar region were important drivers of the communist revolt waged against the sultan and his British military backers during the Dhofar Rebellion (1963–1976).[51] This is just one of many examples that shows the transnational import of phenomena that are often viewed more narrowly through methodologically nationalist framings of the region's history.[52]

It is crucial for Held's photographs to be seen against this backdrop. In fact, Held himself describes his dealings with Gulf officials, the US military, and intelligence officers during these events within his oral history memoirs. To separate the photographs from this context is to efface not only the conditions faced by the populations in Held's Gulf photographs but also the role of the US government evinced in many ways by the man behind the camera.

Widening our scope to reckon with the social, cultural, economic, and infrastructural conditions of possibility that facilitate the existence of such an archives can also be one way of addressing widening notions of provenance within the archival literature. Provenance, as a central concept and organizing principle of archival praxis, was once more narrowly associated with individuals as creators, collectors, agents, or purchasers. However, more recent literature has argued for more capacious understandings of the concept that account for sociohistorical context, communal cocreators, or postcustodial care.[53] It is important to note that not all scholars herald this expansion as a disciplinary success. Detailing this ever-

expanding notion of provenance, for example, Jennifer Douglas cautions against requiring the concept of provenance to do more than we should ask of it.[54]

Still, in the context of the Held Archive, the inclusion of sociohistorical context when considering provenance allows us to incorporate the historical phenomena narrativized here in work on the collection's genealogy, but it also might decenter the focus of the archives from Held and his status as the sole creator of the photographs. For example, the work of Tom Nesmith and his Canadian archivist colleagues has allowed the field to expand beyond visions of provenance viewed "narrowly, as the single individual or family (for personal archives) or the particular office (for institutional archives) that inscribed, accumulated, and used a body of records."[55] Instead, Nesmith argues, new engagements with provenance in archival studies afford a place to sociohistorical conditions of possibility, on the one hand, and the afterlives of items *post factum*, on the other:

> [This new literature] includes the societal and intellectual contexts shaping the actions of the people and institutions who made and maintained the records, the functions the records perform, the capacities of information technologies to capture and preserve information at a given time, and the custodial history of the records (which may result in many reorderings, winnowings, and even doctorings of them).[56]

Engaging with Held's work, his social world, the world of his subjects, and the geopolitical turmoil around them, I take seriously the archival imperative to consider provenance in this expanded sense that need not narrowly focus on individuals. It must expand its reach beyond "great man" visions of creator and institution to open up new ways of reading the archives and, indeed, new "ways of seeing," to borrow from the influential art critic John Berger.[57]

Rereading Archives, Redescribing Them

Scholars of archival science have long recognized the meaning-making role of archival description. Descriptions have the ability to frame collections around metanarratives, highlight certain perspectives, determine the language through which users can discover collections, or bring particular voices to the fore. Inevitably, descriptions often privilege certain perspectives and positions over others. Bowker and Star summarize the complicated relationship between this ethical tension and archival description, writing, "Each standard and each category valorizes some point of view and silences another. This is not inherently a bad thing—indeed it is inescapable. But it is an ethical choice, and as such, it is dangerous—not bad, but dangerous."[58]

Still, scholars have not shied away from this reality, and, in many cases, have come to view it as an opportunity to work toward inclusion rather than exclusion. In their pioneering work on the role of narrative in archival description, Duff and

Harris suggest that, like historians, archivists should embrace the role of storytelling in archival description.[59] They advocate for what they call a "liberatory descriptive standard," which engages not only with power but with the marginalized and the silenced as well.[60]

Many archivists have taken to this call, seeing the need to constantly revisit the stories embedded in archival descriptions and working to make the place of power in the archives clear without *reinforcing* the power imbalances in the process. To that end, in recent years, many institutions—galleries, libraries, archives, and museums alike—have made efforts to audit their collections' descriptions for offensive or harmful language. Representative of these initiatives are actions such as the efforts to remove harmful Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSHs) from materials on immigration at Dartmouth College;[61] addressing damaging colonial and racialized descriptions of the Queen Lili'uokalani Manuscript Collection in the Hawai'i State Archives;[62] and the overhauling of MARC records and finding aids at George Mason University Libraries in light of the mid-2020 Black Lives Matter protests against the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others.[63]

Leaders of another recent project at New York University working on reparative description for Japanese American wartime incarceration materials see their work as an instantiation of the iterative nature of describing and redescribing incumbent on all archival professionals, noting, "Archivists must think about our descriptive practices—inclusive of collection descriptions, finding aids, and catalog records—as iterative work and as an active process. It is our responsibility to describe individuals, groups, cultures, and subjects accurately."[64] These redescriptive efforts seek to remove harmful language, but they also promote new imaginative and liberatory possibilities for users working with these collections. They do so both by inviting users to read collections to recuperate the voices of those hitherto marginalized and by advising an attentiveness to the place of power in the production of these collections.

When it comes to the former, the work of Jeannette Bastian is particularly instructive. In response to a paucity of resources on the history and perspectives of enslaved Africans in the West Indies, Bastian shows in her essay, "Whispers in the Archives: Finding the Voices of the Colonized in the Records of the Colonizer," that approaching the colonial archives with an attentiveness to the traces of its victims' voices can bring forth their histories.[65] This is especially the case, Bastian argues, when the written record is examined in conjunction with other sources, such as material objects and oral tradition.[66] There are clear applications of these sorts of readings to the Colbert Held Archive. With a description that makes clear the historical context of Held's work and in conjunction with local sources about development in Dammam and Dhahran, we might return to a photo like Figure 4 with an eye toward centering the guide's experience and his social world. Why

might he have taken up such a post? How had his world changed with the arrival of American industry and infrastructure in the region?

Indeed, such creative readings of photographic collections against the grain have already been applied to photographic collections of the Gulf. As was the case for the Americans, aerial photography was of great importance to British intelligence organizations such as MI4, also known as the Joint Air Reconnaissance Intelligence Centre (JARIC).[67] In recent years, these images have been declassified and have since been deposited in the National Centre for Aerial Photography (NCAP) in Edinburgh, Scotland.[68] Seizing on this newfound access, scholars at the University College of London in Qatar (UCL-Qatar) used these images for archaeological research, retracing the histories of villages and towns in Qatar and the wider Gulf region at the moment the local pearl fishing industry began to collapse.[69]

Yet, Lila Abu-Lughod and Ann Laura Stoler have also emphasized that, in the search for occluded voices, scholars should not lose sight of the place of power.[70] For her part, Stoler offers the idea of reading "along the archival grain," that is, with an eye toward what motivated the production of colonial records in the first place and what they contained.[71] Approaching the archives ethnographically, Stoler argues, we can glean "an emotional economy manifest in disparate understandings of what was imagined, what was feared, what was witnessed, and what was overheard" by colonial officials.[72]

We might ask similar questions about the Held Archive: What stake did Held have in capturing images of this period of Gulf history? What was he privy to during

FIGURE 5. Colbert Held Archive 231-7, Abu Dhabi, 1965. *Reproduced with the courtesy of the Middle East Institute.*

FIGURE 6. Children salute Held as he photographs them. Colbert Held Archive 335-9, Trucial States, 1970. *Reproduced with the courtesy of the Middle East Institute.*

his time in the region? And, even though he exists beyond the frame, how was he seen by those whom he photographed? We might ask whether Held took the image in Figure 5 because it interested him as a sightseer or whether it had to do with the fact that oil permeated his professional life as well. We might even conclude that it is impossible to parse out one motivation from the other.

Similarly, we might look at Figure 6, for example, to get a sense of how Held was viewed while traveling in the Trucial States. While it is unclear whether Held was accompanied by military personnel at the time he took this photograph, the fact that the children, presumably unaware of Held's post, saw him as someone to be saluted is significant and speaks to the particular impression that Held cast upon the subjects of his photographs. The children's reaction likewise evinces the presence of those behind the camera's lens.

One recent exhibition of a humanitarian photography collection at the University of Bergen Library brings together both of these threads—highlighting both the particular gaze that structured an archives' production and offering alternative readings that bring the hitherto concealed to the fore through the recontextualization of the photos.[73] The curators of the exhibition, titled *More than the Humanitarian Gaze: Jørgen Grinde's Photography from the Middle East in the 1950s*, detail their approach in their introduction:

> Humanitarian photography produced for the United Nations' (UN) humanitarian work is made in service of "the good", to mobilise empathy and support for the aid

> work and to increase monetary support to the aid organisations, so that the refugees' basic needs are covered, and their human rights are protected. We have come to easily recognise the "humanitarian gaze." . . . But what does such a gaze and imperative conceal? In short, the political. The choices of motifs and aesthetics produce an image of the refugee: bereft of politics, both abject and aloof, with little to no agency of her own. The world is not of her making, and she cannot remake the world. . . . Grinde's photographs offer us a pathway to see the familiar motif again, to recalibrate what a humanitarian photographic collection can say, and what it might tell us about Palestinians and their histories. His images compel us to consider the possibilities of different stories.[74]

The exhibition also juxtaposes essays from scholars of Palestine studies with Grinde's photographs of Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, and other areas with large Palestinian refugee populations. In one example, historian Mezna Qato narrativizes Grinde's 1957 snapshot of a classroom in a United Nations Relief and Works Agency–run (UNRWA) girls' primary school in Gaza in an essay called "For the One in the Back Turning to Smile at Her Mates."[75] Elsewhere, commentaries remark upon imagined perceptions of Grinde by the figures in the photographs, as is the case in Sanabel Abdel Rahman's "Returning to Jasmine," centered on another of Grinde's images of a UNRWA school.[76] While not examples of archival description, per se, the extended commentaries on these images and the collection as a whole offer an interesting precedent for the recontextualization of an archival collection like the one being proposed in this article.

Collections-Level Redescription and the Colbert Held Archive

While the role that redescription might play in both highlighting power and bringing forth occluded voices has been widely written about, less commonly does scholarship wrestle with the tension that exists between worthy yet time-consuming redescriptive projects and other archival conventions, such as minimal processing to ensure the swift discoverability of materials. In this sense, the scholarly conversations around reparative description and the More Product, Less Process approach rarely intersect.[77] An exception to this is the work of Alexandra deGraffenreid, which seeks to reconcile "the conflict between archival values [addressed through reparative processing] and minimal processing practices."[78] Teasing out this conflict, she notes, "Processing approaches which encourage efficient, high-level arrangement and description are a legitimate method for confronting unprocessed backlogs and prioritizing broad access; however, these techniques can also force archivists into shallow relationships with collections."[79] These less-granular relationships with collections, in many cases, are not a sign of neglect or of disinterest. Rather, we often see them as the result of time-crunches, multiyear backlogs piling up, or, as is the case for the Middle East Institute, a severe shortage of staff.

Taking the case of Pennsylvania State University Libraries' processing of the Luis Alberto Sánchez Papers as her case study, deGraffenreid compellingly argues that, through prioritization and flexibility, archivists can reconcile these tensions:

> Reparative reprocessing does not necessarily require item-level processing but does require a commitment to transparency about archival practices and to more ethically describing materials using language preferred by and recognizable to communities represented within the records. As with all archival practices, flexibility is key to deciding how best to serve our collections and our researchers.[80]

Because item-level redescription is not a feasible solution for the Middle East Institute, the path forward proposed by deGraffenreid can serve as a useful model. As such, it is worth putting deGraffenreid's recommendations in conversation with other work in library and archival science that also takes into account the limitations faced by small or resource-strapped institutions. Engaging with the question of how libraries with limited resources can responsibly manage collections, a recent OCLC report puts forward the Total Cost of Stewardship framework.[81] The Total Cost of Stewardship framework encourages librarians and archivists to think concertedly about the cost of not only acquiring but also managing collections from the outset. And it does so by relying on the notion of capacity constraints, that is, "factors that limit production, performance, or output. In the Total Cost of Stewardship context, a capacity constraint impacts an institution's ability to accomplish collection management activities."[82] The Middle East Institute already holds the Held Archive, yet it is also marked by a significant capacity constraint with lack of staff, funding, technology, and space. Such limitations are not unique to the institute. Often, as noted by Tara E. Murray, they are characteristic of small special libraries.[83] Special libraries, while not frequently the subject of scholarly research, face unique challenges such as limited personnel, small budgets, limited user reach, and outsized recourse to activities considered nontraditional at other institutions such as fund-raising, website maintenance, and proof of return on investment (ROI) for the organization's leadership.[84]

Many of these same challenges are faced by the librarian/archivist at the Middle East Institute. For the institute, acting responsibly to steward the Colbert Held Archive moving forward means embodying the archival values spelled out by deGraffenreid while making sure it does not act beyond its capacity constraints. In line with this, I propose a collection-level redescription project for the Colbert Held Archive that highlights the historical context and particular perspective of American geographic work in the region by culling from Held's own oral history memoirs, local sources, and US government documents. Such an initiative can work toward highlighting American entanglement in the Gulf without requiring the more granular but unrealistic efforts that item-level redescription would entail. Embarking upon an item-level redescription might mean parts of these collections remain effectively "hidden" for years, hampering their discoverability and access.

Collection-level redescription offers other helpful benefits. As mentioned earlier, part of what makes the Colbert Held Archive so unique is its dual emphasis on aerial or topographic photographs on the one hand and its more ethnographic imagery on the other, even if the border between these images is not always clear. Emphasizing this duality cannot necessarily be done on the item level and is perhaps better gleaned from a description that is wider in scope.

Forging a Path Forward

What would such a redescriptive effort look like concretely? Rather than including a mock-up of a collection-level description for the Colbert Held Archive in this article itself, included here are guiding principles and questions to be incorporated into the descriptive process. I find this preferable for three main reasons. First, any redescriptive proposal should be malleable enough for the incoming archivist and project staff not to feel as if they are in the stranglehold of my interpretive priorities. It is important that this proposal not be tied to a single individual library and information science professional but instead enshrine ethical and adaptable descriptive principles around this collection into institutional memory at the library.[85]

Second, any redescriptive project taken on should keep in mind the iterative nature of description as cited earlier in my references to NYU-led reparative description efforts for archival materials related to the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II. For O'Neill, Searcy, and the other archivists involved in the project, description is "an active process" and something that is continually evaluated and revisited.[86] A framework of guiding principles allows redescription of the Colbert Held Archive to be mutable, reproducible, and scalable. For example, the iteration of these descriptive efforts could take place beyond the collection level to allow for more granular descriptive efforts—from "collection-level (minimally processed), series-level (moderately processed), folder-level (highly processed), [to] item-level (intensively processed)"—should time, staffing, and funding constraints at MEI change in the future.[87]

Last, while this article deals specifically with the Colbert Held Archive, its findings should be broadly applicable across several collections and disciplines. The following guiding principles are intended to illustrate this point more effectively than a mock-up description would. Taken as a whole, this framework is meant to emphasize that the redescriptive processes and workflows in place—and the ethical disposition they are meant to reflect—are ultimately more important than the exact text of the descriptive statement.

In forging a path forward, it is helpful to look to the recently adopted "Guiding Principles for Reparative Description at [the United States] National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)."[88] The six principles presented in the text

emphasize ethical approaches to "transparency, language, institutional change, collaboration, iterative/reflective process, and leadership," elaborating on each at length in the body of the statement.[89] Modifying this approach for the Colbert Held Archive, I propose that project archivists make a number of efforts to note publicly where the institute's terminology differs from that of the creator, include appropriate correspondence between the institute and Held's estate in the archives, recognize photographed communities' preferred terminology, avoid valorizing or harmful language, and invite feedback from the community of users at the library.

With these in mind, a collection-level statement that situates the archives within its social and historical context should 1) provide a full accounting of Held's various positions within the US government and academia during the time of the photographs' creation; 2) detail how specific geopolitical conflicts—on both the local and global scales—affected Held's work; 3) describe major governmental projects and initiatives in the Arabian Peninsula at the time; 4) consider the involvement of US corporate interests and infrastructure in the region and provide references to sources that show how these interests intertwined with US or Gulf government initiatives during periods photographed; 5) note major social and political transformations in Gulf cities and societies where Held traveled; 6) make efforts to identify individuals and communities left unnamed or unidentified in captions or slide notes; and, last, 7) describe where the capacity in which Held traveled (i.e., as a cartographer, as an advisor, as a tourist, etc.) was blurred. The example of Held's time in Dhahran and Dammam previously discussed serves as just one of many examples that show how the historical context in which Held's subjects were photographed changes the way we view those snapshots. Ample materials exist with which archivists might wrangle to do this, Held's oral histories chief among them, but also Held's academic works, archival materials related to US involvement in the region, and local histories of the mid-to-late-twentieth-century Arabian Peninsula. The insights gleaned from these materials could also influence series-level, folder-level, and item-level descriptions in the future.

There are interesting precedents for framing collection-level descriptions in this way. While not exactly undertaking archival redescription, the University of Bergen Library exhibition focused on Jørgen Grinde's photography similarly problematizes multiple ways of reading the archives. The curatorial statement draws viewers' attention not only to the humanitarian gaze but also to those on the other side of Grinde's lens: Palestinian refugees with moral and political commitments of their own.

A second precedent worth examining to that end is *Livingstone Online* at the University of Maryland Libraries, "a digital museum and library that allows users to encounter the written, visual, and material legacies of the famous Victorian explorer, missionary, and abolitionist David Livingstone (1813–1873)."[90] Livingstone was also a proponent of British colonialism and commercial expansion whose legacy is

intertwined with the European "Scramble for Africa."[91] The collection overviews and introductions on the project's site do not shy away from the complications of digitally presenting the manuscripts of such a figure. Instead, they tackle the place of power in the archives head on, stating, "Although no digital museum, library, or archive can redress [imperial] biases, *Livingstone Online* uses digital technologies to foreground the often lost hands, voices, and sources that shaped Livingstone's work and writing."[92] It also offers, within the digital museum and library, a variety of contextualizing materials on subjects related to the period and places central to Livingstone's writing, including the history of southern Africa, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European expeditions, Victorian medicine, and Livingstone's memorialization.[93]

Drawing on this precedent, the Held Archive could be described in such a way as to invite users to read the archives equally as a diagnostic of power and with an eye toward the perspectives of the images' subjects. It can offer additional information about the history of American militarism, oil, and geographic expeditions in the region. And, it might invite readers to dwell in the blurred geographic and ethnographic nature of Held's photography.

As with Jørgen Grinde's photography and *Livingstone Online*, the intent of this project is neither to lionize nor to vilify Colbert Held as an individual. Held, in many ways, reflects a particular moment in American history that should be rendered in its full complexity for users. By giving a historical overview of the American role in the Gulf during Held's time there, this article has attempted to show that, with this context, viewers might return to these photographs in a new light. The redescriptive efforts explored as part of this essay have the power to drastically reshape the way that viewers relate to collections. These new possibilities and opportunities for redress should be available to smaller institutions too. Because of the Middle East Institute's small size and unique constraints, any steps to recontextualize the collection should be taken with these limitations in mind. I hope that the model proposed here offers a way forward for the institute and for peer institutions too.

Notes

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[77] deGraffenreid, "Reparative Processing of the Luis Alberto Sánchez Papers," 33–46.

[78] deGraffenreid, "Reparative Processing of the Luis Alberto Sánchez Papers," 33.

[79] deGraffenreid, "Reparative Processing of the Luis Alberto Sánchez Papers," 34.

[80] deGraffenreid, "Reparative Processing of the Luis Alberto Sánchez Papers," 42.

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[82] Weber et al., *Total Cost of Stewardship*, 3. The report also cites the work of Matthew Beacom of Yale University, Carrie Hintz of Emory University, and Susan Pyzynski of Harvard University for introducing the concept of capacity constraint in the context of collection development.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ryan Zohar is the Middle East studies librarian at Georgetown University where he builds collections, supports research, and connects users with the library. He holds an MLIS from Long Island University and an MA in Near Eastern studies from New York University. He is active in the Middle East Librarians Association (MELA), through which he currently chairs the Book Award Committee. His research focuses on cultural production in the Arab world during the twentieth century, Mizrahi intellectual history, the Cold War in the Middle East, and the politics of knowledge. He has been published in *Banipal Magazine of Modern Arab Literature*, *Items—Insights from the Social Sciences*, *MELA Notes*, and *New Middle Eastern Studies*.