Modern students of Islamicate societies have long acknowledged that scholarly production in the post-classical period (ca. 6th–13th/12th–19th) was overwhelmingly carried out within the framework of multi-layered commentaries. Every discipline of learning—ranging from poetry and poetics, to grammar and morphology, to philosophy and exegesis—is represented by this genre of writing. Indeed in sifting through the manuscript evidence preserved in many parts of the world, one gets the clear sense that commentary of some form dominated the spheres of public and private learning, formal and informal curricula, literary and even documentary texts.

Since by their very nature, commentaries are invested in some textual tradition (the matn), until rather recently, they were considered to be no more than stale expositions of the works of revered masters of a bygone age. This assessment was especially endorsed in Orientalist scholarship in view of the observation that commentaries constituted the greater portion of the curricula of the madāris, which were presumably devoted to perpetuating existing interpretations and structures of authority. And so this genre of scholarship was almost entirely neglected by generations of scholars, since it was seen a priori to offer nothing original or innovative. This negative judgment of a pervasive scholarly genre was, in turn, commonly deployed as suitable evidence for the colonial meta-narrative of the pre-modern stagnancy and decline of Islamic intellectual traditions: the commentary was the representative genre of the long and tenacious Dark Age of Islam.

1) In this article, we use “commentary” to refer, without requisite differentiation, to a large range of complex scholarly exercises and products, known as sharḥ, ḥāshiya, taqrīr, tahārīr, etc. These terms require in-depth scholarly study; we have adopted the rubric “commentary” for the sake of convenience and do not mean to suggest that the various terms are precisely synonymous.
These claims were not actually grounded in a close study of the commentary. Yet since they were repeated and recycled by successive generations of Orientalist scholarship, they increasingly gained the status of untested conventional truths. In very recent years, however, as Islamicists have begun to pay attention to the intellectual history of the post-classical period and have had to rely on the lode of commentarial evidence at their disposal, their impressions of the contributions of this genre of scholarship have begun to change. Within a short period of time and with only a skimming of a fragment of the daunting mass of material, they have come to recognize that the post-classical Islamic tradition was indeed dynamic. This is a promising start for the revisionist narrative of Muslim intellectual history that must await further contributions.

As we move forward in our investigations, one of the fundamental tasks will be to provide frameworks internal to the Islamic intellectual tradition that may be used to assess it on its own terms. In other words, though at this stage of scholarship we should mainly be concerned with providing thick descriptions and technical analyses of the contents of our texts, we should also be preparing the grounds for a broader understanding of the movement of ideas by exploring the unique spaces of their production. Thus even as Islamicists engage and explore various contributions of post-classical Islamic scholarship, their ultimate and global assessments of these contributions will have to relate back to a localized understanding of disciplines and disciplinary boundaries, institutions, curricula, and genres (among other factors).

It is in view of this larger concern of framing Islamic intellectual history on its own terms that, in October, 2012, the Department of Near Eastern Studies of the University of California, Berkeley, hosted a Mellon Sawyer Seminar entitled, The Ḥāshiya and Islamic Intellectual History. The articles assembled in this volume were initially presented as conference papers on that occasion. Specifically, the contributions in this collection explore the nature of commentaries in post-classical Islamic scholarship in various disciplines standing in a complex relationship with each other. Taken together, these richly-documented pieces consider the following set of general questions: Why was the commentary a useful scholarly genre? What need did it fulfill? Can one speak of a form and format for the genre? How did some commentaries become authoritative over others? And what did the authoritative status of a certain commentary mean to the subsequent commentary on the same text? How were commentaries deployed in various fields as vehicles for pedagogical exchange and cultural transmission? What does this form of writing tell us about notions of authorship and originality? Can we find innovation in the commentaries and via what process does such innovation emerge? Do non-textual forces, e.g., pressures of patronage and sectarian identities, shape the topics selected by the author of a commentary? And on a very basic level, given the