

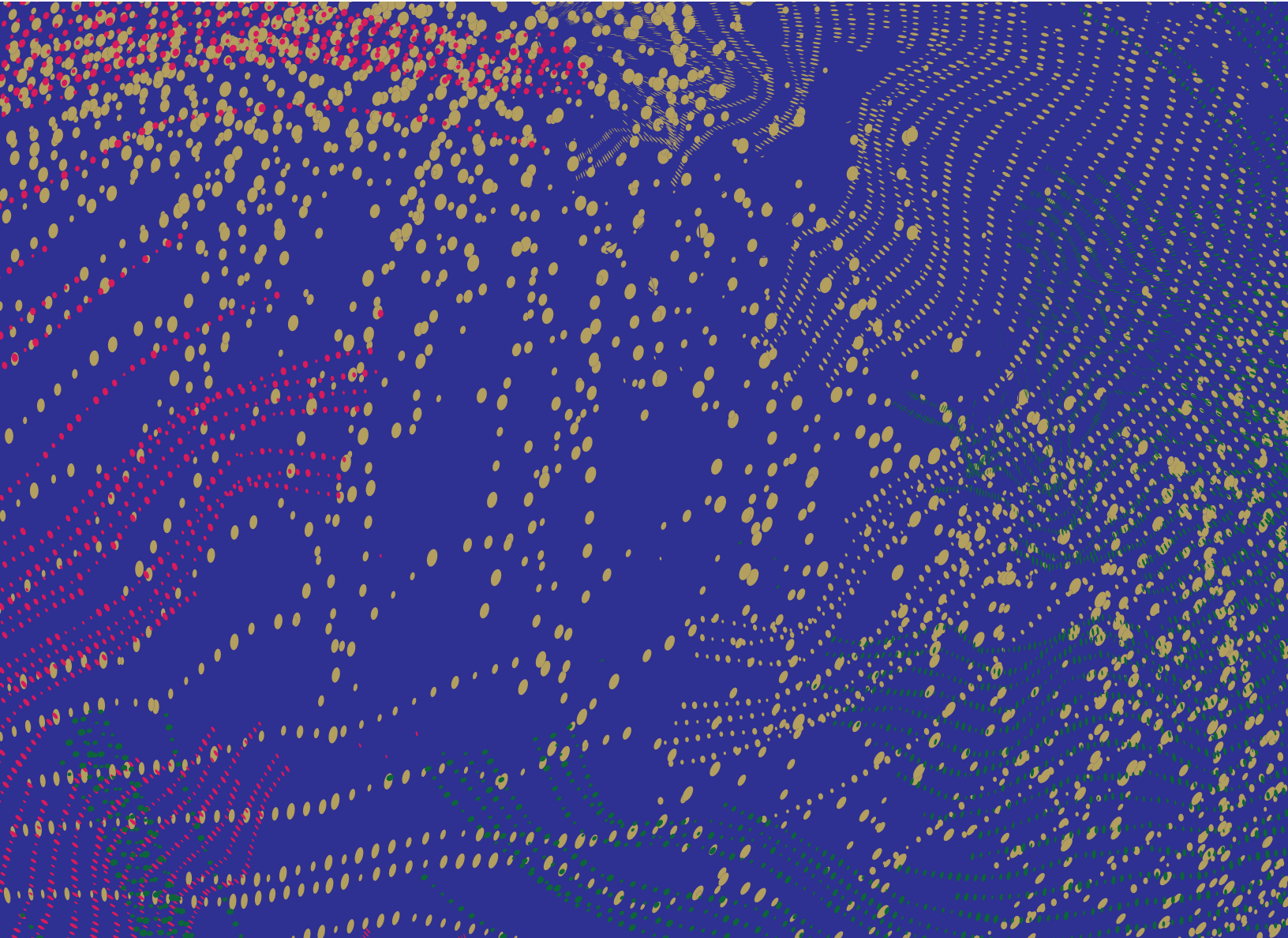
The World Humanities Report

# Self Tracing /

# استشفاف النفس

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May Al-Dabbagh



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# Self Tracing / استشفاف النفس

May Al-Dabbagh New York University Abu Dhabi

The night asks who am I?  
I am its secrets: anxious, black, profound  
I am its rebellious silence  
I have masked my nature with stillness,  
Wrapped my heart in doubt,  
And remained solemnly here  
gazing, while the ages ask me,  
Who am I?  
—Nazik Al-Malaika, “Who Am I?”<sup>1</sup>

الليل يسأل مَنْ أنا؟  
أنا سرّ القلق العميق الأسود  
أنا صمته المتمرد  
قنّعت كنهني بالسكون  
ولففت قلبي بالظنون  
وبقيتُ ساهمة هنا  
أرنو وتسألني القرون  
أنا مَنْ أكون؟  
—نازك الملائكة قصيدة “من أنا؟”

What does a decolonizing educational practice look like? How does one help students make sense of learning journeys that are specific to them rather than performative learning that compares students to one another? Educational institutions everywhere are having to ask themselves a lot of very difficult questions. Because responses to the global COVID-19 pandemic meant quick transitions to virtual learning, many announced the end of the traditional university classroom as we know it. What were they good for anyway? The list of negative things is potentially endless: professors that speak at you, unengaging classroom environments, and, in some cases, extensive debt. The spread of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States and globally drew attention to the ways in which educational institutions are implicated in reproducing inequality in the classroom, facilitating microaggressions, and reproducing racist and colo-

<sup>1</sup> The excerpt of the poem “Who Am I?” was taken from a letter written in 1951 by Ibrahim Al-Arrayed, a Bahraini intellectual and poet, to Nazik Al-Malaika, an Iraqi feminist poet, during their exchange about her free verse poetry and its relationship to Western poetic traditions and techniques. The translation from Arabic to English is mine.

I thank students who generously engaged a “poetics of relation” in the classroom and allowed me to use excerpts of their projects for this essay. *Shukran* to the editors of the World Humanities Report and especially the editors of the Arab Region of the WHR and the Arab Council for the Social Sciences: Hoda Elsadda, Seteney Shami, and Muneira Hoballah. I am grateful for generous conversations with Hannah Bruckner, Carol Brandt, Niobe Way, Carol Gilligan, and Peggy Levitt. Thank you to the Gender Brown Bag and the Identity Politics groups at NYUAD for their feedback, especially Eman Abdelhady, Saba Brelvi, Swethaa Ballakrishnen, Laure Assaf, John O’Brien, Kanchan Chandra, and David Cook Martin. Finally, a special thanks to Shamma Al-Bastaki who read my draft and taught me what it means to stan a queen.

nial forms of knowledge. It is time to rethink traditional syllabi, pedagogies, and approaches in new ways. In this essay, I explore an educational approach that aims to address the thinking/feeling binary in a university context. First, I describe my complex insider-outsider status, which is shaped by varying axes of privilege and disadvantage specific to my positionality at an American “global network” university in the Gulf region. I then present a case study of a critical pedagogy, self tracing, that I developed and illustrate its three parts: deep listening, embodied reading, and process projects. Finally, based on my experience teaching gender studies in the Gulf, I share my reflections about the relationship between knowledge production and teaching and argue that decolonial pedagogy is a form of research and practice.

### Especially Interesting

When people learn that I am a Khaleeji academic (half-Saudi, half-Bahraini) who teaches gender at New York University Abu Dhabi,<sup>2</sup> they frequently respond with something like: “Oh wow! You teach gender in the United Arab Emirates? That must be *so* interesting!” “Yes, it is,” I have learned to respond. “It is interesting. Everywhere.” It took numerous interactions like this to produce a response where I was no longer defensive, angry, or annoyed at the assumptions some people I spoke to had about what it means to teach about gender in the Gulf. Unsatisfied with that answer, some persist: “Well yes, but I mean, it must be *especially* interesting to teach on gender *there*, isn’t it?” The phrase “especially interesting” is loaded with a desire to affirm an assumption that because we are discussing the Gulf, the topic of gender must be somehow worse, more complicated, more exotic, more despotic, more anything really when compared to a hypothetical benchmark in which teaching gender is somehow simple, normative, and not marked by this difference. For many students who take my Women and Work in the Gulf class at New York

<sup>2</sup> *Khlaeeji* is an Arabic word that means “from the Gulf.” It is a colloquial term to identify people from countries close to the Persian Gulf (*Al-Khaleej Al-Arabi*) including, but not limited to, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates. The term is also used by governments of countries that are members of the Gulf Cooperative Council and by non-Gulf Arabs to identify citizens of Gulf countries. Not all citizens of Gulf countries identify as Khaleejis, and many noncitizens identify with the experience of living in more than one Gulf country and use the term Khaleej to signal that. I use the term here to invoke how I am often identified and named by others in my own context. I have also been referred to with other regional, national, or ethnic qualifiers (such as Hijazi, Saudi, and Arab, respectively), but Khaleeji is the one that is most salient in my current context. I have added this and the next clarifying notes at the request of WHR editors.

University Abu Dhabi,<sup>3</sup> navigating these quotidian discursive infrastructures about gender in the Gulf is often the reason they pick the class in the first place. Some have family members who are constantly worried about what they will do in a Middle Eastern country where all women are “oppressed.” They take the class because they want to have a well-thought-out response for their aunt during their next trip home. Others have a deep interest in learning more about how gender is constructed in the Gulf, because they are tired of being seen as “just another *abaya* on campus” or as in need of “saving” by some faculty or students who find themselves in the UAE for the first time. Yet another student who calls herself an Islamic feminist takes the class because she is trying to better understand how to deal with “pursed lips,” that oh-so-subtle cue she consistently gets from Western liberals who simply can’t imagine a non-secular feminism and from some Muslims who see feminism as a product of the West. These are three examples of how people’s everyday experiences inspire interest in learning more about gender in the Gulf; what they demonstrate is that students have differing experiences with the topic of the class, the geographic location of the classroom, and their own ability to articulate who they are in relation to audiences they care about.

Education, in my experience, is not simply about teaching students through academic texts and introducing them to key concepts and approaches in the academy. It is also about exploring the thinking/feeling binary in the learning environment that helps us learn about ways of being in the world. Critical pedagogy has a long history, of course. The real purpose of education, it has been argued, is to make and remake oneself in the world,<sup>4</sup> pursue freedom,<sup>5</sup> or to see oneself as a universal source of meaning.<sup>6</sup> But in today’s internationally “diverse”

<sup>3</sup> New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD) is a degree-granting liberal arts university formed by a partnership between the Abu Dhabi government and New York University in the United States of America. NYUAD is part of New York University’s Global Network that includes a campus in Shanghai and eleven academic centers in Africa, Asia, Europe, and North and South America. One distinguishing feature of NYUAD is the national diversity of its student body, which exceeds that of most US universities. For example, NYUAD class of 2023 includes 490 students from over 80 countries who speak more than 75 languages. Many of NYUAD’s administrative processes were based on NYU’s American ones, including faculty hiring and governance, and many have been modified to accommodate the domestic context. For a more comprehensive discussion of American branch campuses in the Gulf, see Danya Al-Saleh and Neha Vora, *US Branch Campuses in the Gulf as Sites of Imperial and Decolonial Knowledge Production* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Achille Mbembe, “What Is Postcolonial Thinking? An Interview with Achille Mbembe,” interview by Olivier Mongin, Nathalie Lempereur, and Jean-Louis Schlegel, *Eurozine*, January 9, 2008, <https://www.eurozine.com/what-is-postcolonial-thinking/>.

classrooms, whether facilitated by technology that attracts students from various locations around the world or by “global” academic institutions that produce classrooms in which no two students are from the same country, asking questions about decolonizing education, the geopolitics of knowledge production, and the link between education and self-actualization is more urgent than ever.

## Sticky Words

As a Saudi woman married to an Egyptian man and living in the UAE, I have experienced the Gulf as a citizen and through the eyes and experiences of my children, who fall in the category “children of expats” (foreign or guest workers are the terms used by Gulf governments). I have also experienced an insider-outsider status in the US academy due to my location, demarcated as the Global South culturally but not financially, which complicates any kind of postcolonial critique. I grew up middle class on a university campus in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, raised by highly educated parents whose own parents had little formal education but were active public intellectuals. This context gave me an interest and an advantage in seeking higher educational opportunities in the United States and United Kingdom. My experience of the Gulf is also connected to South Asia and North Africa, a heritage I carry on both sides of my family, and like many others, one that I was socialized to downplay due to homogenizing national

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Self tracing . . . is a way to connect the geopolitics of knowledge production with a situated praxis that helps students navigate sticky categories and discourses.

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al narratives. Perceived by some as the fringe of the Arab world culturally and historically, yet as the regional center financially and politically, the Gulf bears complex relation to its neighbors, to say the least. My experience as a

Muslim woman includes politicized religion, Western-centric narratives about gender equality, and national/class/ethnic/sectarian-based distinctions about what Muslim women can and can't do. Equally important is my own experience of shifting categories while at educational institutions in the West—in the United States, I was described as “a woman of color”; as “Middle Eastern” in the United Kingdom; and sometimes the rather ambiguous category “so modern!”—made me aware that the categories I occupied, even the ones I most identified with, changed when I moved from one context to another. Accordingly, teach-

ing in a university classroom for me was an opportunity to understand myself, my location, and my students. The classroom also enabled me to explore what it means to produce and consume knowledge when one occupies a complex insider-outsider status shaped by varying axes of privilege and disadvantage, including categories that are not readily legible in the US academy. To borrow Sara Ahmed's term, words for categories can be sticky, "saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension,"<sup>7</sup> and accordingly need to be deconstructed and challenged because they are confining and implicated in structural inequality. Having been socialized to read between the lines, like Nazik al-Malaika's description of rebellious silence in the epigraph, I do not assume that words are the only (or ultimate) signifier. Only through a dialogical process involving speech acts, silence, and reflective exchange can one locate generative spaces for creating new words to describe and construct categories from the bottom up. Extending Patricia Hill Collins's concepts of partial, situated knowledge<sup>8</sup> and dialogical practice in Black feminist thought, I experimented with ways to engage with the differential situatedness of students in the classroom through dialogical exchange. Over the course of a decade, I learned so much from these exchanges and a process of trial and error, refined my understanding of what I hoped would become a decolonial pedagogical practice. The received wisdom in academia is that real research occurs outside of the classroom and ideally is published in top-ranking academic journals. My experience was that teaching was a truly enriching place for my own learning and for the research interests of many of my students. Although I describe the self tracing method as having three distinct processes (deep listening, embodied reading, and process projects), they were not developed separately and are interrelated and have cumulative effects.

## Deep Listening

I dedicate a significant amount of time to making the classroom a place where my students and I can trust that we are in a process of discovering ourselves with one another. I try to acknowledge the power dynamics that operate in the room (Who gets to speak? Who doesn't feel entitled to speak? Who wants to speak on behalf of others?) to foster an environment that distributes discomfort more

<sup>7</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 11.

<sup>8</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

evenly among members of the group. To really learn, one has to be vulnerable to share what one doesn't know, what one is curious about, to feel able to change one's mind, and to know that sometimes, as we learn with others, we get offended (those moments are easy to remember), whereas at other times we also offend (and those moments are less easy to notice, let alone remember). I start the process by practicing this myself: I reflect on my learning journey and share what went into creating my formal CV but also many of the failures, confusions, and mistakes I made that were invaluable to my learning. Being vulnerable creates an affective space that goes beyond sharing a physical room or simply exchanging experiences and information for the sake of formal participation. Deep listening is about learning to see one another as agents of healing and nourishment and not simply competitors for the "right answer" or best grade. Deep listening is not easy and changes depending on the mix of the students in the room, their comfort with speaking in English, and their relationship to the subject matter. With consistent attention to fostering curiosity over the course of the semester, spaces start forming where students can dig deep into what is difficult, and the classroom can slowly move toward feeling like an "open air" space.

## Embodied Reading

Embodied reading is a dialectical process. It means learning to do two things: situate the text, or invoke the body that wrote the academic text, and read affectively, or activate one's body as a source of knowledge. The first part requires students to learn to situate the assigned text: Who wrote the text? When? For what kind of audience? In what language? In what kind of publication? What kind of debate was it a part of? The ability to situate the text means students can slowly move away from reifying academic texts/concepts/findings as necessarily knowledge-bearing to seeing them as demystified products of human labor, produced for a purpose, and part of a cultural and political economy that privileges some locations over others. By remembering the bodies that wrote the texts, we can stand outside of the text and challenge its claims to be universal, true, or complete. We are also reminded that other logics and debates operate outside of the academy and that might be equally urgent or important.

When learning to read affectively, we often start discussions with an inquiry into how students felt about the text. This is not a question about what you understood from the text, how you analyzed it, or how you critiqued it. Rather, how did it make you *feel* when you read it? Angry? Bored? Amazed? Meh? Often students struggle to do this because they are so focused on the content of



the article or book. So, we start with prompts like: Where were you physically sitting when you read the text? Who else was there? Were you drinking or eating anything? How did the temperature feel? Over time, students become more attuned to what the text is doing to their bodies. One student will say she goes home to read the text. She's sitting with her sister and cousins off campus. She feels ashamed to be reading a text about gender because if her older sister asks her about it, she won't be able to explain it to her in a way she would understand. Another student will say she is sitting in her dorm room to read on campus. She is constantly texting with another student in the class, discussing the readings before we discuss them in class because she's excited about them. Her home is a village on another continent, and her family doesn't have regular internet access, so her intimate relationships are being remade on campus. Over time, students move away from speaking about texts only as ideas and move toward connecting them to a lived experience and to their emotions in a social context in which their positionalities vary. Through weekly iterations of this practice, students come to know more about the other people in the room and see their learning trajectories situated in a time, place, and dialogic community.

Being in their bodies as they read the text helps students articulate a standpoint that is not a critique from nowhere but a view from a place that does something to their lives. For example, one of the texts we read for our class is Lila Abu-Lughod's classic essay, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?"<sup>9</sup> Abu-Lughod discusses how tropes of "saving" Muslim women from their oppressive culture are widespread in Western academia, journalism, and politics compared with substantive critiques of global capitalism or Western complicity in military intervention or economic inequality in the Middle East.

In our discussion, one student looks up wide-eyed and says she was so overwhelmed when she read the essay that she choked up. She finally found a text that articulates in academic terms a kind of experience she has had her whole life but didn't have "fancy words" for. She is excited to learn more about what postcolonial perspectives have to offer. Another student hesitantly describes how she finished reading the essay with a

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Self tracing turns the classroom into a space for situated knowledge production that enables students to deconstruct (and sometimes reconstruct) deeply held assumptions about their social world.

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<sup>9</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 783–90.

“hot face” because she came into the class with a firm belief that Muslim women are less free and that their religion is the source of their oppression. She describes how sharing this makes her feel ashamed, but she wants to know more from others about their experiences. A third student says that the text angered her because agents of state feminism in her country blame the West for everything, like the essay’s general premise, but they do it to defend entrenched domestic power inequalities. She says her anger led her to realize that the essay might enlighten people living in the West, but if you are living outside of the West, you already know you are going to have to save yourself. These are just three examples of affective reactions to one text. In all of them, students used their bodily reactions to access knowledge that is not simply “in the head” but also embodied and relies on their lived experience.

## Process Projects

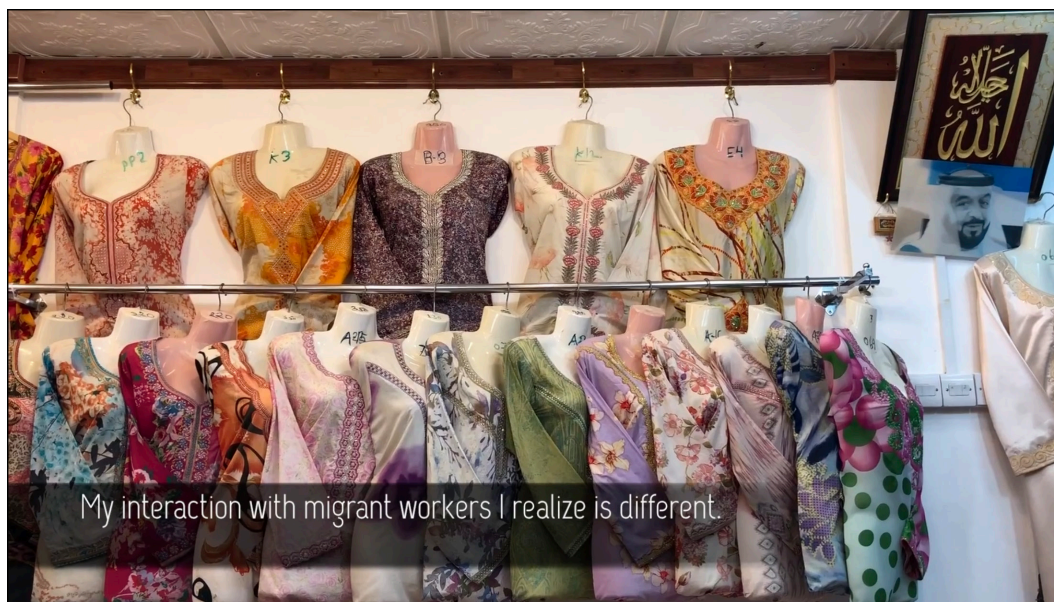
I ask my students to create “digital autoethnographies” in which they digitally document the spaces they occupy and conversations they share during the course of the semester. This exercise is followed by a self-reflexive process of thinking about how concepts we discuss in class are shaping their thinking, emotions, and interactions with others. I ask them to explicitly reflect on the identity categories that they feel are salient for them, including intersecting categories that structure their social world (such as nationality, race, ethnicity, class, gender, and/or sexual orientation) and those that are not represented or well understood in discussions of identity in a mainstream US context (tribe, sect, caste, religion, Global South, postcolonial). The process includes those experiences for which they don’t have readily available language to describe their feelings (i.e., experiences that demonstrate the limitations of available categories).

Students accompany their digital documentation with a text that narrates the collected images as they present their projects to classmates in a group setting. On a spectrum from diary to selfie, this is somewhere in the middle. Unlike the instagrammable selfie, this is not a projected best self to the world. It is not a private diary because the students express themselves dialogically and intentionally with their classmates. The digital part of the method is not driven by technical convenience; rather, it is one way to escape the hegemony of language. Because the language of instruction at NYUAD is English, a second or even third language for some students, language use always presupposes a certain kind of audience and associated cultural references. Instead, students capture material in images, and they narrate them as a second step. Students are also

free to write in any language they want and think critically about the role of language in their construction of self. The goal is to become more aware of their own positionalities and explicitly refer to them in their projects in order to see and learn from others about how gender is constructed and to develop their own voice on social issues and important debates around gender in their communities. To date, self tracing has produced process projects in more than eleven languages and dialects and in various forms, including photography, video, performance, collage, poetry, sculpture, installation, and music.

To better illustrate this process, I share four anonymized excerpts of projects made with this self tracing method.<sup>10</sup> The titles are my own framing of the project meant to highlight the vulnerability involved in the learning process and the self-reflexive nature of the account. The examples are not meant to be exhaustive but are simply illustrative of process projects produced so far.

### Migrant Workers Are Not Just Workers



**Figure 1.** Still from the video “The Conversations I Had,” showing a tailoring shop in Abu Dhabi, where a student reflects on her evolving understanding of migration and its relationship to the labor market.

<sup>10</sup> The authors of the projects have given me written consent to discuss their work in this essay. In addition, I gave them the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft version of their image and text used for the essay and incorporated that feedback here.

In a video project titled “The Conversations I Had,” the student reflects on how she had always believed that it was her “culture” that held her back from being an empowered woman. She describes how she came to understand that she is not only a woman but that her nationality, religion, and age are things that co-construct her gendered experience in relation to others. She describes how she came to understand that, similar to her, migrant workers in her everyday life occupy complex dimensions as parents, siblings, humans, and a source of income for their families. She gives an example of a tailoring shop in downtown Abu Dhabi, where she becomes aware of her interactions with others and how these interactions are shaped by structural conditions.

### Recognizing Inequality Entails an Affective State



**Figure 2.** Image from “Questioning Comfort,” where the student reflects on the porch of her home as a space where gender, race, class, and nationality intersect in a web of affective interactions.

In a project titled “Questioning Comfort,” a student writes a letter to her mother. She tells her that thinking about gender inequality is hard, because it is tied to comfort and loving moments. She describes how her grandmother’s traditional salutation, which had given her so much comfort in the past—“Welcome, welcome, my daughter. We wanted a son, but we got you instead” —هلا هلا ببنييتي بغينا صبي بس بيتي انت—now evokes a different emotional reaction from her as she starts paying attention to the implications of the words. She describes a variety of spaces, including the porch in figure 2, in which gender is constructed and performed in her daily life, including immediate and extended family members and domestic workers.

### North to South to North Feminist Interventions



**Figure 3.** Image from “Wash/Iron/Dress,” where a student documents a performance of domestic work on a public street.

In “Wash/Iron/Dress,” the student stages the performance of domestic work in a public space in Abu Dhabi. She reflects on her experience and recalls that her grandmother performed paid domestic work as a nanny and maid in New

Zealand. She discusses how visible issues of domestic work are in the UAE, which has allowed her to see with more clarity how domestic work features in her home country in ways that she hadn't given much thought to before. She reflects on how different her images would be experienced and perceived had the ethnicity of the person in her images been an Asian or South Asian woman.

### Gulf Intersectionalities Need Naming



**Figure 4.** Still from the video “Iqrar,” in which the student slowly adorns her body with bangles to signal intentional cultural identification.

The student names her project “Iqrar,” an Urdu word that means confession/acceptance. She describes how difficult it is to answer seemingly simple questions like: “Where are you from?” In her answers, she often refers to Pakistan, a country in which she held citizenship and where her parents grew up, but not to her attachment to Dubai as a city in which she has lived her entire life. She describes the complexity of being a non-Arab Muslim who speaks Arabic and not Urdu and that she has no words for a category of people like her who are neither expats nor migrants. In her project, she reclaims Urdu and interactional performances of identity and belonging as a way to come to terms with who she is.

During presentations like these, what unravels is far deeper than the texts that we had been reading all semester. Students narrate how their identities are constantly being constructed through everyday interactions, conversations, and

spaces. They question the social categories that feel like “sticky words” through knowledge that is both embodied and affective. The classroom becomes a space for performing a practice that is at once dialogical and self-reflexive. Rather than merely receiving social scientific knowledge about gender, students engage with explicitly situated knowledge. This means understanding that the position in which one is both materially and discursively located, simultaneously through body, time, space, and historical power relations, gives one the ability to see a specific part of that reality. By doing so, self tracing turns the classroom into a space for situated knowledge production that enables students to deconstruct (and sometimes reconstruct) deeply held assumptions about their social world.

### Theorizing Up

Writing about self tracing feels odd. No matter how much trust is built in the classroom, it is ultimately a performative space. The power asymmetrically rests with the professor who gets to grade students. Students take the class for reasons that may differ from what they actually share. But perhaps writing about self tracing is most problematic in that it does no justice to what palpably shifts in the room when students share their insights. There are tears, laughter, shame, rage, and often a resignation that one is in the middle of a process not yet complete. Furthermore, NYUAD is a contested place. It has been called a future educational model. A colonial outpost. A Gulfie-masterminded state project. A neoliberal global sham. In my case, teaching students at NYUAD has given me an opportunity to experiment with a decolonial practice that combines critical social science and humanities approaches so that we can move beyond the thinking/feeling binary so characteristic of educational institutions. As a Khaleeji academic, who is navigating two academies (one in English and one in Arabic), I have been enriched by this dialogue with my students. I developed self tracing for a diverse classroom, but it wasn't simply about taking advantage of diversity, as it is often talked about institutionally. It was a way to connect the geopolitics of knowledge production with a situated praxis that helps students navigate sticky categories and discourses. While the method was developed primarily as a pedagogical tool, it simultaneously produced research that “theorizes up” from this location and supports communities of inquiry that extend beyond the duration of the classroom. In other words, the method stands apart from extractive practices of knowledge production that are primarily about collecting data “here” for an audience “out there” in which students are reduced to being native informants. As I continue to experiment with this method, many important

questions can be explored. How does embodiment change in the virtual classroom? Can one foster vulnerability and trust in the classroom when students are social distanced and surrounded by family members at home? Can communities of reflexive inquiry create sustainable changes that go beyond academic spaces? Perhaps teaching gender in the UAE is turning out to be *especially* interesting after all.



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