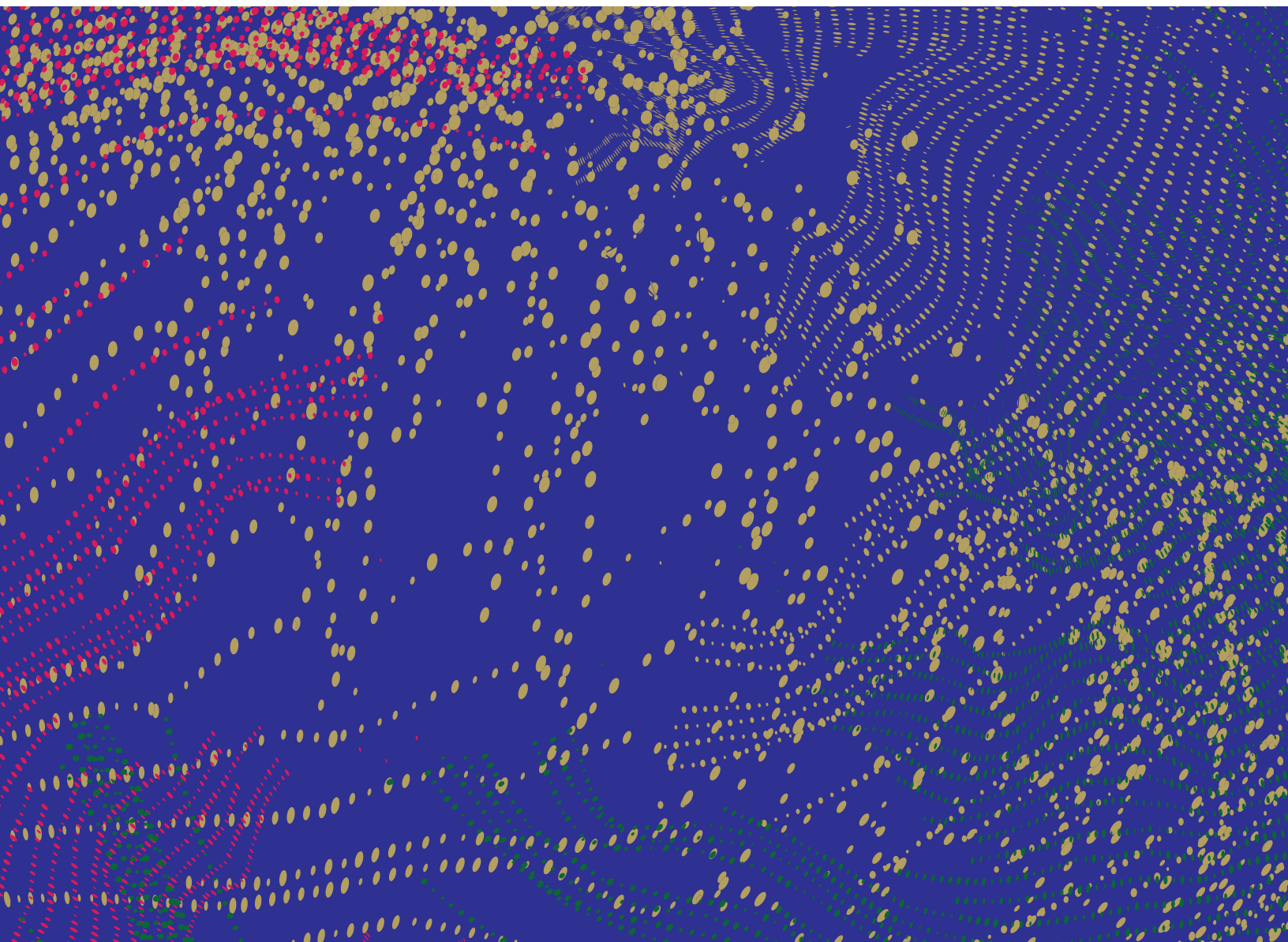


The World Humanities Report  
**US Branch Campuses  
in the Gulf as Sites of  
Imperial and Decolonial  
Knowledge Production**

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Danya Al-Saleh  
Neha Vora



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# US Branch Campuses in the Gulf as Sites of Imperial and Decolonial Knowledge Production

Danya Al-Saleh University of Washington

Neha Vora Lafayette College

Since about 2000, oil-rich states in the Arabian Peninsula have shifted their development strategies toward building “knowledge-based economies” and intensifying their tourism and real estate sectors. The outward-facing imagery associated with these branding projects highlights Gulf hypermodernity and luxury urbanism to lure foreign direct investment, multinational companies, tourists, and professional expatriates, especially from the West. Domestic discourses, on the other hand, have focused on how diversification away from oil reliance will create jobs for citizens and reduce what many Gulf leaders and experts of the region consider a “demographic imbalance” between citizens and immigrants (in some countries, like the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, citizens make up less than 15 percent of the overall population). A key component of knowledge-based economic development for Gulf states has been funding American and other foreign university branch campuses, which promote Gulf countries internationally as locations of world-class education and domestically as investing in future generations that will be well equipped to navigate a global capitalist economy after oil. These campuses attract a wide range of students, including the children of immigrants living in the Gulf, North American students from the main campus, and international students. In fact, citizens often make up only a small proportion of the student body. Faculty and higher administration at these institutions, on the other hand, are generally not as diverse as the student body: most are White North Americans or Europeans. Administrative staff positions are more often recruited locally from the immigrant population, and security, maintenance, and cleaning staff are subcontracted workers. In recent years, US branch campuses in Doha’s Education City have hired a small number of Qatari researchers and faculty. Most of these Qatari academics are graduates of the branch campuses that hire them.

For American universities, the Gulf has been a lucrative location for part-

nership: Gulf governments, with their large sovereign wealth funds, pay for campuses with world-class research facilities and luxury dormitories, as well as fronting all operating costs and salaries. They offer millions of dollars in consulting and management fees and other incentives (like endowed positions) that directly benefit the home campus in the United States. The replica, portal, or satellite campus model has raised concerns from American scholars about whether the quality of liberal arts education will be compromised in less liberal parts of the world, such as the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> These concerns often reproduce American exceptionalism and Orientalist understandings of Gulf societies, ideas that are linked to the history of US hegemony in the region, as well as to the historic and contemporary role of US higher education in the Middle East as an imperial institution.<sup>2</sup> In our own research in and on branch campuses in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, we have found that certain missionary ideas about the role of American education—as a civilizational tool of liberalism—are both institutionalized and reproduced by individual faculty, administrators, and students. Branch campuses not only teach Eurocentric and American exceptionalist curricula that foster imperial citizenship among students,<sup>3</sup> they are also spaces in which imperial knowledges are produced. In addition, these institutions normalize White American expertise and participate in longstanding colonial projects of ethno-racial segregation, which are attributed to Gulf “culture” rather than histories of British and US imperial intervention in the region.<sup>4</sup> However, we have also noted that as institutions have become more embedded in their local contexts through alumni networks, outreach, and research collab-

<sup>1</sup> Virginia Aksan, “How Do We ‘Know’ the Middle East?,” *Review of Middle East Studies* 44, no. 1 (2010): 3–12; Andrew Ross, “Human Rights, Academic Freedom, and Offshore Academics,” *Academe Online*, January–February 2011, <https://www.aaup.org/article/human-rights-academic-freedom-and-offshore-academics>.

<sup>2</sup> Özlem Altan-Olcay, “Defining America from a Distance: Local Strategies of the Global in the Middle East,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 1 (2008): 29–52; Betty Anderson, *The American University of Beirut: Arab Nationalism and Liberal Education* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008); A Special Correspondent, “Remaking AUC in the Corporate Image of US Foreign Policy,” *Middle East Report Online*, September 27, 2019, <https://merip.org/2019/12/remaking-auc-in-the-corporate-image-of-us-foreign-policy/>; Ahmed Kanna, Amélie Le Renard, and Neha Vora, *Beyond Exception: New Interpretations of the Arabian Peninsula* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> We understand imperial citizenship in branch campuses as ideas and practices of citizenship that accommodate and normalize US imperialism among racialized subjects outside of the United States and domestically. Danya Al-Saleh and Neha Vora, “Contestations of Imperial Citizenship: Student Protest and Organizing in Qatar’s Education City,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 4 (2020): 733–39.

<sup>4</sup> Neha Vora, *Teach for Arabia: American Universities, Liberalism, and Transnational Qatar* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).

orations,<sup>5</sup> and community members have established branch campus identities, social and political networks, and institutional memory, branch campuses have also become vibrant sites for the articulation of decolonial subjectivities, pedagogies, and politics. We focus on contestations around curriculum and research in these spaces. While US empire and Gulf petro-wealth are the conditions of possibility for these institutions to emerge, they are also generative spaces of anti-imperial and state critique.

## Curriculum Debates

One of the ways that US universities ensure a commensurable education between their main campuses and their overseas branches is through curricular oversight. Built into the desire to tightly control the content and delivery of curriculum is the idea that students from the region do not (yet) have the capacity to think critically or the tolerance to engage with the type of humanistic inquiry that liberal arts education offers. These framings of students in the Gulf and Middle East are produced by consultants that Gulf governments hire to advise on educational policy, like the RAND Corporation, which overhauled Qatar's K–12 system in the early 2000s, by international organizations, and by scholars and administrators who migrate to work in branch campuses, which is reflected in their public discourse and private conversations.<sup>6</sup> Although a branch campus is branded as a satellite or extension of the main campus, the resultant relationship between them is more akin to a colonial one, for the branch campus has minimal autonomy and is beholden to the main campus to maintain commensurability. For example, at New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD), which is officially branded by the main campus as a portal campus in NYU's decentralized "Global Network University," all tenure-track faculty hires have to go

<sup>5</sup> The embeddedness of NYU Abu Dhabi (NYUAD) and the six US branch campuses in Education City varies based on several factors, including when the institution was founded, the number of students it graduates, and research ties. In addition, Education City's evolving relationship to broader communities in Doha is different from NYUAD's position in Abu Dhabi.

<sup>6</sup> Rehenuma Asmi, "Cultural Translation: The Problem with Policy Borrowing in RAND Qatar's Education for a New Era" (unpublished paper, 2014); Asef Bayat, "Transforming the Arab World: The Arab Human Development Report and the Politics of Change," *Development and Change* 36, no. 6 (2005): 1225–37; Pascal Menoret, "The Imperial Liberal University: The Making of an Enclave in Abu Dhabi," Yale University Conference on New Directions in Arabian Peninsula Studies, April 29–30, 2016; Neha Vora, "Expat/Expert Camps: Redefining Labor within Gulf Migration," in *Transit States: Labour, Migration and Citizenship in the Gulf*, ed. Omar Al-Shehabi, Adam Hanieh, and Abdulhadi Khalaf (London: Pluto Press, 2014), 170–97.

through a New York–based approval process.<sup>7</sup> Some of the branch campuses in Qatar’s Education City require similar main campus approval for tenure–equivalent promotions.

Most branch campus students are offered an equivalent degree, often with identical curricular requirements and rigid regulations that mirror those at the US campus to ensure commensurability of education and a branded student experience. For example, students are taught about traditions of the main campus and are encouraged to exhibit school spirit through slogans and attire. At Northwestern Qatar, the course schedule is released to students with class timings set to the Evanston, Illinois, time zone, and at Texas A&M University at Qatar (TAMUQ) students are required, per Texas state law, to take a course that considers US state constitutions, with a special focus on Texas. At Weill Cornell medical school in Qatar, concerns about commensurability of education ran so high in the first years of operation that students were taught remotely from the New York campus. As anthropologist Tanya Kane observed as she shadowed the first class to matriculate:

Up to seventy percent of the lectures are recorded and video–streamed from the NY campus. . . . Recorded video–streamed lectures (VSLs) are supported by weekly Live Video Conferences (LVCs) where the students in Doha congregate late in the afternoon in order to have a face–to–face session at 7 am or 8 am with the professor stationed in NYC. In other cases, upon conclusion of a teaching block in NY, the professor travels to Doha to teach the same material to the students at WCMC–Q.<sup>8</sup>

Kane noted many ways that Cornell’s attempt to deliver identical curriculum in Doha required training in American cultural competence, since even a seemingly neutral and universal scientific program like medicine was infused with specific contextual knowledge that Qatari students did not understand, for example, around alcohol, addiction, veterans affairs, and some aspects of cross–gender interaction. However, students and faculty at the branch campuses pushed back against the early attempts to completely replicate the curriculum in Qatar, with liberal arts faculty at TAMUQ pointing out that students in Qatar do not benefit from taking the required course on Texas history and govern–

<sup>7</sup> John Sexton, “Global Network University Reflection,” NYU, December 21, 2010. <https://www.nyu.edu/about/leadership-university-administration/office-of-the-president-emeritus/communications/global-network-university-reflection.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Tanya Kane, “Transplanting Education: A Case Study of the Production of ‘American–Style’ Doctors in a Non–American Setting” (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2011), 155–56.

ment.<sup>9</sup> TAMUQ administrators explained to faculty that the course requirement could not be changed because Qatar Foundation (the parastatal group that funds branch campuses in Education City, where Texas A&M and other US universities are located) did not want any possible scrutinization of the degrees from journalists, academics, or accreditation and oversight bodies. These fears over commensurability, leading to absurd educational scenarios where students in Qatar are required to graduate with knowledge about the Texas constitution in compliance with Texas state law, are products of ideologies coming from the main campuses and the neoliberal reforms pushed by RAND and other consultants. These reforms, implemented in the early 2000s during many of the branch campuses' start-up periods, modeled US educational systems and curriculum without public discussion or inclusion of educational faculty and experts based at Qatar University, the country's public university.<sup>10</sup>

Eurocentrism and American exceptionalism are even more apparent in the curricula of universities and majors that

focus on the liberal arts. This was a criticism levied by students we interviewed during separate fieldwork projects in Education City, Qatar.<sup>11</sup> Their insights led us to reevaluate the ways our own class content and syllabi in anthropology and geography reproduced certain normalizations. At NYUAD, students have consistently challenged the lack of diversity and representation in their curriculum and among the faculty. They repeated some of these concerns to Neha Vora in interviews during a short research trip in 2014, and some faculty members expressed concerns about how their colleagues were responding to the challenges from students.

NYUAD is an undergraduate liberal arts campus, anchored by a core curriculum designed to instill global citizenship by teaching students how to critically explore universal questions. Although from the beginning the core curriculum has claimed to be cosmopolitan and cross-cultural, students repeatedly point out

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As institutions have become more embedded in their local contexts . . . branch campuses have become vibrant sites for articulating decolonial subjectivities, pedagogies, and politics.

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<sup>9</sup> Keith Graham, Aymen Elsheikh, and Zohreh Eslami, "Reflections on the Mobilities, Inequalities, and Traveling Ideas in Qatar," *Journal of Asia TEFL* 17, no. 2 (2020): 630.

<sup>10</sup> Rehenuma Asmi, "Language in the Mirror: Language Ideologies, Schooling and Islam in Qatar" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2013); Ali Khalifa Al-Kuwari, *The People Want Reform in Qatar, Too* (Beirut: al-Maaref Forum, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> See Vora, *Teach for Arabia*.



Figure 1. Student lounge space at NYUAD. Photo by Natalie Koch.

that courses are primarily Eurocentric. They are quite aware of how their classes reproduce Western civilizational ideas and American exceptionalism, and they push back on what they see as false nods to inclusivity. A student explained in the campus newspaper, *The Gazelle*: “We treat texts not written in Europe or the United States as little tokens; [we take] one or two pieces written in India, China, Japan and maybe South America . . . and include it in the core course and pat ourselves on the back for achieving multiculturalism.”<sup>12</sup>

NYUAD students have used the student newspaper and other strategies to challenge the core curriculum for its White supremacy and lack of regional representation, the lack of diverse faculty, and the power imbalance between the New York and Abu Dhabi campuses. Students also discussed insensitivities to difference by US faculty, who often visit for a semester or year from the New York campus, with no prior knowledge of the region or of Emirati and other non-White student nationalities in classes.

In 2017, an anonymous group of NYUAD students circulated a letter to faculty members, later published in the student paper, charging them to reflect on their pedagogy.<sup>13</sup> Although these calls to decolonize the curriculum and

<sup>12</sup> Conor Pearce, “Core Curriculum’s Global Requirement Sees Mixed Success,” *The Gazelle*, December 6, 2014, <https://www.thegazelle.org/issue/53/features/coresuccess>.

<sup>13</sup> Reading Group, “Reading Group Letter,” *The Gazelle*, February 11, 2017, <https://www.thegazelle.org/issue/105/commentary/critical-pedagogies>.



diversify faculty are common in the United States as well, they take on greater meaning in a context where faculty and administrators from the United States are educating a diverse group of students who primarily hail from countries that have been affected by US imperialism. Not only is the faculty-student power imbalance exacerbated by these geopolitical differences, the racial diversity of the students—much greater than at any US campus—stands in stark contrast to the Whiteness of the faculty.

Students reported that in response to their criticisms the administration tried to curb their freedom of speech by cutting off venues for public discussion on campus and they were met with patronizing responses from faculty members. This is reflected in a faculty response letter to the reading group, one that is toned down in its condescension from previous drafts, according to colleagues at NYUAD.<sup>14</sup> This letter and other resistance to changing curriculum and pedagogy by some NYUAD faculty and administrators reflect what Eng-Beng Lim, calls the “need to know” argument: “The ‘need to know’ argument is actually a mandate for all students to learn the theater history and vocabulary of Europe as their ‘own’ culture. Excursions to the exotic non-West are often couched as exciting but nonessential supplements to core training.”<sup>15</sup> Although an imperial structure and imperial knowledges underpin branch campus education, there are also ways that student and faculty efforts have succeeded in localizing these institutions and making them spaces of decolonial knowledge production and citizenship formation. In Education City’s branch campuses, for example, there are now many more courses that focus on non-Western people and places, especially the Middle East and Gulf region, including Arabic for heritage speakers.<sup>16</sup> Individual schools and departments have had success in diverging from curricula set by their main campus, whereas there was little opportunity to do so when these institutions were nascent. When we were conducting our research, we learned of a new hiring initiative in world histories at Georgetown Qatar, which was partially in response to student calls for more diverse faculty and classes. Faculty at TAMUQ have criticized the racialized inequalities undergirding English proficiency requirements and monolingual ideologies of White American English instructors in Education City.<sup>17</sup> Colleagues at Northwestern Qatar have been discussing ways to decolonize the first-year seminar that is

<sup>14</sup> Members of the NYUAD Faculty, “Letter to the Editors: The Reading Group,” *The Gazelle*, February 25, 2017, <https://www.thegazelle.org/issue/107/commentary/response-to-the-reading-group>.

<sup>15</sup> Eng-Beng Lim, “Performing the Global University,” *Social Text* 27, no. 4 (101) (2014): 25–26.

<sup>16</sup> Asmi, “Language in the Mirror.”

<sup>17</sup> Graham et al., “Reflections on the Mobilities.”

required of all students. At NYUAD, based on feedback from students and the experiences of faculty, there have been changes to the core curriculum, although these have not been without controversy. Student organizing around the curriculum continues at these institutions. Recently, the African Students Association at Northwestern Qatar organized for an African Studies minor in collaboration with Georgetown. The African Students Association president explained in a livestream on Instagram:

I'm not American, but I take American history. I'm not Arab, but I take Middle Eastern studies. Why should Africans be the only ones who take African history? That's rooted in a colonial mentality, exceptionalizing courses and studies of specific people and not others . . . we're promised when we come here that we will receive a liberal arts education that gives us a holistic view of the world and that includes Africa as well. So why should it be a problem to have an African studies minor?<sup>18</sup>

Contrary to criticisms from scholars based in the United States, the branch campuses have shown themselves to be vibrant spaces where debates over curriculum that are specific to the variety of social positions occupied by their community members play out—rather than vocational spaces for the transfer of diluted noncritical skills-based education.<sup>19</sup> Even though they are mostly serving elite students and are relatively removed (physically and socially) from local communities, they are spaces that are increasingly embedded in their Gulf locations. The programming offered by NYUAD's Arab Crossroads Program and the NYUAD Institute, for example, highlights some of the more cutting-edge research on the region, and the institute in particular engages in community outreach, inviting Abu Dhabi residents to scholarly talks and other events. Similarly, the branch campuses in Education City have started to offer more events targeting Doha residents every year. A recent rebranding of the Qatar Foundation to focus on local heritage, partly in response to criticism from Qataris and as a reaction to the 2011 Arab uprisings, has shifted the identity of the project away from its initial focus on bringing the best international brands of education to Qatar. Even the physical space of Education City has become more accessible as visitors no longer need to clear security and with the Qatar National Library, a seasonal farmers market, and a mosque in the Qatar Faculty of Islamic Studies school open to the public. The addition of Qatari institutions

<sup>18</sup> ASA NUQ, livestream, Instagram, June 10, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/tv/CBQsSlxhMrD/>.

<sup>19</sup> Lim, "Performing the Global University."

in Education City also signals a move by the Qatar Foundation away from a focus on American and European education as the best way to educate future generations for a post-oil economy.



Figure 2. Education City farmers market. Photo by Natalie Koch.

## Research-Based Education

American branch campuses are not just spaces where knowledge is transferred to students, they are also key partners with Gulf governments and other entities in producing knowledge in and about the region. Here we focus specifically on Education City in Qatar, where state investment in local knowledge production has been focused at a grand scale.<sup>20</sup> The Qatar Foundation has invested billions of dollars in research and development infrastructure, such as the Qatar Science and Research Park, a hub envisioned to develop and commercialize innovative technologies. The branch campuses, located next door, are meant to produce talented Qatari graduates to work at and manage these new research facilities. The Undergraduate Research Experience Program (UREP) was launched

<sup>20</sup> There are multiple ways that research across various Gulf branch campuses privileges Western researchers, which are beyond the scope of this essay. Institutional review board policies, for example, are used to police who can be a principal investigator on projects and who has access to students. Internal and external grants favor specific understandings of Gulf culture and history and publication venues that are located in the Global North.

in 2007 to create a pipeline between these new research institutes and higher education by encouraging branch campus faculty to design research projects involving undergraduate researchers. Some of the specific criteria through which UREP applications are assessed are mentor-to-student ratio, anticipated educational benefit to the student, intellectual merit, and collaboration across academic institutions. While the UREP website does not officially mention this, researchers in the branch campuses have indicated that the number of Qatari nationals involved in the project is a primary assessment criterion as well.<sup>21</sup>

Most faculty at the branch campuses did not arrive in Education City with

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Student-driven art projects reflect Qatar’s transnational complexity and offer open questions about its future. The high-profile state-funded projects, on the other hand, simultaneously reproduce imperial-style research relationships while producing knowledge that legitimizes state neoliberal development agendas.

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a research focus in the region. However, the majority of humanities and social science research currently produced at the branch campuses focuses on Qatar. While national funding opportunities made this possible, UREP plays a key institutional role by enabling faculty in the branch campuses—

particularly those without relevant language skills, knowledge of neighborhoods and communities around Doha, or established research networks in Qatar—to retool their training to establish themselves as experts about the country and the broader Gulf, with the assistance of undergraduate researchers. In addition, even for faculty with previous training and research experience in the region, UREP provides an institutional mechanism for them to instrumentalize students as “local expertise” and avenues through which they can access spaces that would normally require fluency in local dialects, carefully developed relations of trust, and knowledge of customs that are not publicly visible, such as those in private homes. In the process of working on UREP-funded research, students, particularly Qataris, are primarily tasked with offering their language skills and providing access to their family networks to recruit research subjects. This dynamic is exacerbated by the fact that UREP tends to focus on Qatar-specific research, which limits students’ ability to develop academic interests and research experience outside the funding body’s paradigm of priorities. In addition, this

<sup>21</sup> Jocelyn Mitchell, “Beyond Bricks and Mortar: Creating Knowledge through Student-Faculty Partnerships,” *Journal of General Education* 63, nos. 2–3 (2014): 73–93.

modality of knowledge production is limited in how it defines what “Qatar” and “Qatari” mean, often leaving out the country’s multicultural past and the immigrant communities that currently call Qatar home, as well as inadvertently making non-Qatari students less desirable research partners for particular faculty projects. The position of Qatari students in this model of research education extends to the primarily Qatari and Arab faculty at the public national Qatar University (QU) as well. When applying for research grants, faculty at the branch campuses, including UREP, consider partnering with faculty at QU as a strategic way to get funded, while disparaging QU as less rigorous academically. QU faculty, and by extension QU itself, are largely tokenized as necessary to include to secure funds and provide similar practical skills (language and access to networks) that undergraduate students offer.<sup>22</sup>



**Figure 3.** Poster of Qatari student at Texas A&M Qatar. Photo by Danya Al-Saleh.

This model of research-based education functions as a mechanism for US branch campuses to participate in the production of state-sponsored research in Qatar that benefits US-trained academic subjects (often White American faculty) and reproduces exploitative power dynamics shaping knowledge production about the Gulf. The dynamics of extractive research are similar to those that underpin much area studies expertise in the United States and have historical-

<sup>22</sup> This argument draws on the authors’ research in Education City. In addition, Al-Saleh helped prepare and submit a Qatar National Research Fund OSRA grant and worked on an UREP application as a research assistant at one of the branch campuses.

ly shaped our own disciplines of anthropology and geography. They resonate with analysis about the contemporary role of subcontracted research assistants in UK-directed research projects about Syrian refugees in Lebanon, where research assistants are vital for the political economy of social science research but are largely exploited in this research model.<sup>23</sup>

Scholars based at the branch campuses have made the opposite case. For example, Jocelyn Mitchell argues that UREP is an example of “a mutually beneficial educational partnership” that challenges imperial and commercial framings of US branch campuses in the Gulf. Using the example of her own UREP-funded research, she emphasizes the importance of students’ local knowledge in crafting culturally sensitive surveys in Qatar.<sup>24</sup> While undergraduates certainly contribute important insights and expertise to UREP projects, Mitchell’s framing of a mutually beneficial partnership positions Qatar’s national priorities, as defined by particular state institutions, as the limits of research and intellectual interests among Qatari students. In addition, “local” students, due to their access to spaces and research subjects, are treated as cultural consultants and vessels for extracting, transmitting, and translating intimate ethnographic information. Told that they are benefiting from the research training they receive, undergraduate students often make possible research for faculty in similar ways to how colonial and settler ethnologists depended on native informants to conduct their work.<sup>25</sup>

Since about 2012, UREP-funded projects in the humanities and humanistic social sciences at US branch campuses in Education City have examined questions of national heritage, oral history, and gender relations in Qatar.<sup>26</sup> Qatar’s development agenda specifically highlights the importance of citizen women to nation building as bearers of tradition by reproducing the family and as emblems of modernity by participating in the workforce. State-sponsored feminism in Qatar aligns well with the impulses of the US university, which include teaching about gender equity as part of its liberalizing mission. Research on gender in Qatar often fixates on the binary of traditional/modern and emphasizes Qatari women’s empowerment in balancing these expectations while eliding gendered

<sup>23</sup> Mayssoun Sukarieh and Stuart Tannock, “Subcontracting Academia: Alienation, Exploitation and Disillusionment in the UK Overseas Syrian Refugee Research Industry,” *Antipode* 51 no. 2 (2019): 664–80.

<sup>24</sup> Mitchell, “Beyond Bricks and Mortar.”

<sup>25</sup> Margaret Bruhac, *Savage Kin: Indigenous Informants and American Anthropologists* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2018). For a discussion of her experience as a Qatari research assistant for an anthropologist at the American University in Cairo, see Sophia Al-Maria, *The Girl Who Fell to Earth* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012).

<sup>26</sup> While only three of the six US branch campuses offer degrees in the humanities and social sciences, they all have faculty that teach and engage in humanities and social science research.

experiences of non-Qataris, in addition to other frames and objects of analysis, such as patriarchy, feminist debates and movements in the Gulf, capitalism, class, and sexuality. The promotion of state-sponsored feminism through UREP grants is significant given the premise that the branch campuses were established to realize the ruling family members' vision of providing Qatari women access to US education without having to travel abroad.

Not all research-based humanities education in Education City is necessarily characterized by an exploitative dynamic, however. Virginia Commonwealth University Qatar (VCUarts Qatar), established in 1998, was the first US branch campus in Qatar and offers degrees in graphic design, art history, painting and printmaking, fashion, and interior design. Other faculty and students will sometimes discredit this campus as an academic space because it started as a women's art and design school and continues to host mostly women in the student population (it was once described to us as a "finishing school for Qatari women"). In some ways, the feminization of this educational space and its students allows it to escape the branch campuses' general function of aligning with Qatar's national research priorities as well as neoliberal labor market agendas, which recently have focused on incentivizing the production of more Qatari science, technology, engineering, and math graduates and researchers. Many of the majors at VCUarts Qatar are required to produce a senior thesis that draws on substantial research students conduct with guidance from faculty mentors. In recent years, these projects have ranged from a visualization of the twelve-month uprisings in Sudan, which allowed a graphics design student to integrate her interests in political anthropology with speculative design and storytelling, to a fashion design major who created a collection that explored issues of belonging as a "third-culture kid," which is a common way immigrant students in Qatar self-identify. Through these projects, students also examine questions of gender in Qatar, but by considering spaces that are largely ignored in faculty-led UREP projects. For instance, a graphics design major created an interactive game for K-12 students at two different schools, one that is coeducational and one that is gender-segregated, to generate conversation and share perspectives on gender and education. This project drew on the student's own experiences navigating these educational spaces in Qatar, which is common for Qatari and immigrant students who attend K-12 schools in Qatar or the Gulf. These student-driven art projects reflect Qatar's transnational complexity and offer open questions about its future. The high-profile state-funded UREP projects, on the other hand, simultaneously reproduce imperial-style research relationships while producing knowledge that legitimizes state neoliberal and nativist development agendas.

## Conclusion

Administrators from main campuses in the United States regularly fly into the Gulf for short visits to ensure commensurability and institutional oversight. Faculty are offered ways to teach for a semester or year at a time, with the premium benefits of branch campus employment (free flights, free schooling for children, free housing, and elevated salaries). In these trips, they observe and celebrate a student body that appears quite diverse by US institutional metrics. However, from the vantage point of students and some faculty in these campuses, everyday life is marked by stark inequalities shaped by US imperialism.

In recent years, faculty and students across the United States have organized against the way institutions of higher education mobilize diversity to avoid structural changes that require redistribution of material resources, reparations, and the democratization of university governance.<sup>27</sup> As Nick Mitchell wrote in a letter to University of California, Santa Cruz's chancellor about why he was returning his achievement award for diversity: "If you only value diversity insofar as it smiles but sweep it aside when it expresses its grievances in public confrontation, your commitment to diversity is shallow and superficial at best. At worst it is exploitative and opportunistic."<sup>28</sup>

Struggles in the Gulf's US branch campuses over American exceptionalist curricula, lack of diversity and representation in the faculty and higher administration, racist presumptions about Gulf culture, and exploitative research hierarchies point to the ways that contemporary struggles in US universities over racial injustice must necessarily be international. The imperial structures that underpin branch campus education, and the way that students and faculty work to re-create them as spaces of decolonial knowledge production, offer important insight for US-based university struggles over curriculum and research, as well as the material resources that make these institutions possible.

<sup>27</sup> See "More than Diversity—A Call to Action from University of Chicago Faculty," accessed September 29, 2020, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1kstgmbLXr1lkoTLQ1yJ3n1nBQeaHljgP3-adH5UVtvw/edit>.

<sup>28</sup> Nick Mitchell, "Why Nick Mitchell Is Returning the Chancellor's Achievement Award for Diversity," Critical Race and Ethnic Studies, UC Santa Cruz, February 21, 2020, <https://cres.ucsc.edu/news-events/news/mitchell-cola.html>.



**Danya Al-Saleh** is an assistant professor in the Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington. She is a feminist geographer with research and teaching interests in development, US imperialism, energy transitions, and the Middle East and North Africa. Her current research explores the everyday politics of US universities in Qatar and is situated at the intersections of studies of fossil-fueled capitalism, engineering, and gender. Her work has appeared in *Gender, Place and Culture*; *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*; the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*; and *GeoHumanities*.

**Neha Vora** is a professor of anthropology in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at Lafayette College. Her research and teaching interests include migration, citizenship, higher education, South Asian and Muslim diasporas, gender, liberalism, political economy, and the state in the Arabian Peninsula region and in the United States. She is the author of *Impossible Citizens: Dubai's Indian Diaspora* (2013) and *Teach for Arabia: American Universities, Liberalism, and Transnational Qatar* (2018). She has also published a coauthored book with Ahmed Kanna and Amelie Le Renard, *Beyond Exception: New Interpretations of the Arabian Peninsula* (2020).