Everyday Inclusions: Rethinking Ethnocracy, Kafala, and Belonging in the Arabian Peninsula

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Abstract

Scholarship on Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC) states, which have the highest proportions of migrants in the world, usually explores how they are unique in their patterns of non-citizen exclusion. However, state discourses, geographies, and the heterogeneity of migration to the Gulf share similar traits with contemporary nations and states. Non-citizens are, as they are everywhere, active participants in Gulf state- and nation-building projects. Aiming to advance scholarship on belonging in the GCC states, in this paper, we propose a shift in focus from exclusion to *inclusion* in the way research questions are asked about Gulf societies and the people who reside in them. Doing so, we suggest, requires unpacking two hegemonic concepts in the regional studies scholarship: 'ethnocracy' and *kafala*. In their current usage, both terms have become 'black boxed', or reified, such that scholars have largely come to accept and reproduce the exceptionalism of the Gulf and refrain from asking a number of critical questions about the region, which might highlight the GCC states' fundamental *normalcy*. Through a reflexive approach that draws from our own previous and current research in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, we suggest ways that we might move beyond the rigidity of exclusion-centred narratives about the Gulf and instead consider the various ways that Gulf nationalisms themselves hail the non-citizen presence, and how non-citizens participate in discourses and practices of nationalism as well as statecraft in ways that cannot be reduced to nationality, class, race, or religion.

I. Introduction

In this paper, we propose a radical approach to Arabian Peninsula studies, and particularly studies of 'migrant labour' in the Gulf: one that begins with the idea that Gulf states are in fact rather normal in their forms of nation-building and governance in that they are societies of differential *inclusion*. Scholarly work tends to produce the idea of collective similarity across the Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC) countries, and distinction from other parts of the world (Carapico 2002). The region's seeming exceptionality is usually attributed to petro-wealth, with a strong focus on rentier state theories, which are used to explain a range of characteristics and changes in the region, such as the persistence of tribal monarchy and authoritarian governance, social conservatism, urban growth, and more recently, demographic 'imbalance' and migrant labour abuse. When non-citizens are included in Gulf scholarship, they are typically understood through the technologies and politics of exclusion, and thus considered external or unimportant to state formation and nation-building.

The focus on exclusion is readily apparent in two key terms that circulate in Gulf studies: 'ethnocracy' (which refers to a society based on ethno-national hierarchies) and *kafala* (a system of migration in which individual migrants are sponsored by citizens or companies rather than the state). Appearing in a range of conference papers,

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scholarly work, human rights discourses, and journalism, and commonly used in academic discourse about the region, these two terms have come to operate as self-referential indicators of the Gulf as a space of deep social stratification, and as a region distinct from the forms of variegated belonging and nation-building elsewhere in the world. The Gulf is indeed unique in its demographics, having the highest rates of migration in the world, with little to no access to naturalization. In the countries we study, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), citizens make up less than 15% of the total population, and a miniscule proportion of the labour market. However, unique and exceptional are not the same, and migration patterns and migrant experiences in the Gulf cannot be bound by territorial states but rather implicate global patterns.

In this paper, we revisit the concepts of ethnocracy and *kafala*, asking what work they do, as well as what they obfuscate. Rather than conjuring a long list of scholars who use these terms and critiquing their (often excellent) contributions to scholarship on the region, we instead take a reflexive approach in this paper. In our own individual research, we have challenged Gulf exceptionalism but have nonetheless found ourselves continuing to rely on the concepts of ethnocracy and *kafala*. However, as we show here, we have increasingly found them to be conceptual barriers to examining belonging and identity in the Gulf in ways that that move beyond over-determining resident experiences through exclusion and citizenship status. Such an exclusion-focused lens to Gulf studies tends to frame non-citizens as perennial outsiders, economic agents, and passive subjects of repressive power – those whose presence in the Gulf does not include joy, pleasure, or fulfilment, but rather empty exploitation or wealth accumulation. Meanwhile, citizens are often cast as a privileged homogenous group that experiences belonging universally and uniformly. Approaching the Gulf in this way risks missing or underplaying numerous, often unexpected, ways that non-citizens feel belonging and perform their identities as 'insiders', while also eliding stratification built into citizenship and the various exclusions that Gulf nationals experience.

We need to therefore broaden our understanding of *who* constitutes a subject in Gulf societies. In no country of the world can state–society relations be reduced to state–citizen relations, least of all in the GCC, given its demographics. We thus ask: what if we start by thinking of Gulf residents' lives, and the contradictions and complexities of migration, governance, labour, and sociality that shape them, as profoundly *normal* within the contemporary world? Drawing on our on-going ethnographic research in Qatar and the UAE, we argue that understanding how citizen and non-citizen agencies, materialities, subjectivities, and imaginaries are all called into service of the broader political projects of creating 'Qatar' and the 'UAE' demands, contrary to existing models, a new analytic: one that begins with inclusion.

II. Denaturalizing the Citizen/Non-citizen Divide

The long-time focus on migrant exclusion in the Gulf is not surprising because of the region's prevailing *jus sanguinis* citizenship laws and tight regulations around naturalization. One technically cannot be a citizen unless his/her father is one, or if a woman marries a citizen. In addition, the nation is described as Arab and Islamic in individual constitutions of the GCC. A citizen/non-citizen binary is therefore easy to naturalize given the differential rights and responsibilities that come with legal citizenship, such as free education, free healthcare, employment priority, access to property loans, and a host of other welfare benefits; a seeming lack of integration between different ethno-national groups, who often live in segregated communities; and sartorial performances of national identity. However, these definitions, and even laws themselves, do not reflect the practices of citizenship on-the-ground, nor do they fully circumscribe who has access to legal membership or feels inclusion because of their status as a national or non-national.

While a recent surge in multidisciplinary work on the Arabian Peninsula has paid greater attention to migration circuits, labour conditions, and forms of what we call non-citizen 'belonging despite exclusion', it is still rare to find much academic research that focuses on both citizens and non-citizens at the same time. An ethno-national version of citizenship-as-belonging is so powerful that much knowledge production and statistical data about the Gulf, unless directly engaged with the question of migrant labour, erases the majority of Gulf residents by focusing solely on citizens. Besides simply being inaccurate, it is academically untenable to produce knowledge about the Gulf (or any country for that matter) by centring on nationals rather than the full range of inhabitants, the majority

of whom, especially in the countries we study, are not legal citizens. Additionally, the citizen/non-citizen binary is itself fraught with difficulties – especially when it gets mapped onto territory, politics, and belonging.

By asking how we might move beyond the citizen/non-citizen binary, we are interested in looking at how a range of different actors are entangled with nation-building projects, with the production of the state (or 'state-effect'), and with forms of governance. Thus, rather than assuming that ruling power is legitimated through simply 'buying off' citizens with generous social welfare benefits – the so-called 'ruling bargain' (Davidson 2005) that prevails in rentier state theory on the region – we are interested in the myriad ways that non-citizen individuals, multinational corporations, and other states are invested in the political configurations that prevail in the region, and are in fact part of their production. That is, how do the differential inclusions of both legal citizens and supposedly temporary migrants simultaneously structure prevailing power structures, and produce these very categories as fixed, bounded groups? As Brubaker (2004:9) argues, for example, ethnic and other groupism is 'a key part of what we want to explain, not what we want to explain things *with*; it belongs to our empirical data, not to our analytic toolkit'. Indeed, citizen and non-citizen are legal, political, and rhetorical categories, but we need not assume they are groups that experience cohesion, nor that non-citizens are necessarily excluded from feeling a sense of belonging.

Groupist thinking is intimately connected to the myth of the nation-state, which assumes that citizens 'naturally' belong to a particular homeland because they are part of a bounded and relatively homogenous national group. Scholarship about the Gulf region often takes culture as self-evident, rather than investigating how culture is produced and who was and is invested in this production. The idea that Gulf countries have singular cultures, which are embodied by nationals, maps timeless identities onto territory, erasing both pre-oil and contemporary hybridities and transnationalisms, as well as the active role of women in pre-oil economies.[1] The naturalized alignment of nation and territory produces the idea that non-citizens can neither access nor have any influence on the nation or the state. This version of culture is often unquestioningly gleaned from state projects of heritage revival, which invent a uniform elite citizenry loyal to the state out of a heterogeneous group of people, and relegate the majority of residents to the status of perpetual outsiders. The ethnographic mapping of nationals onto territory, together with rentier theory, works to cement a citizen/non-citizen dichotomy as the primary determinant of an individual's political subjectivity in the region – a dichotomy that is supposedly real in the world rather than constructed through alignments of scholarship and state interests. In many ways, this divide has come to precede our research questions and shape our ethnographic gaze, obscuring the intensely varied experiences and forms of stratification within each category, the blurriness between these boundaries, intimacies across them, and the various ways that citizens might *not* feel belonging, while non-citizens might.

Scholarship that focuses on the daily lives of migrants in the Gulf is not entirely divorced from this dichotomy, as it still hinges on the theme of exclusion. This is seen, for example, in critiques of Gulf migration policies, which tend to emphasize workers' mistreatment at the hands of *national* employers. Not only do sensational clichés about 'modern-day slavery' produce a normative representation of Gulf migration that does not encompass the vast range of non-citizens, but they also erase the important role of non-nationals themselves in the processes of migrant governance and labour exploitation. In addition, what happens within the territorial boundaries of the Gulf states is produced by and inextricable from transnational networks of migrant brokers and middlemen, multinationals and global capitalism, and the policies and practices of sending states.[2] This is also primarily an economic reading of migration, which erases longer histories of diasporic communities in the region, and strips away the potential for migrants to be motivated by wider social or cultural desires, or to form place-based attachments.

Moving past a state–citizen nexus of power and belonging, and the citizen/non-citizen divide, we argue, creates space for more robust ways of attending to the many facets of everyday life for *all* Gulf residents. However, we must first consider the two most salient 'proofs' that seem to be strapping us into our current exclusion-oriented framework – *kafala* and ethnocracy. What would happen to our research if we were to abandon these concepts – which have, admittedly, done valuable work to open up research into migrant lives – in favour of less exceptional terminology that highlights not only inclusion but also the very normal aspects of migration and social formation in the region?

III. Moving beyond *Kafala* as Exclusionary System to Inclusionary Assemblage

Scholarship on non-citizens in the Gulf has recently focused on the large numbers of foreign residents, primarily working in the construction industry, who are building the skylines, stadiums, and other mega-development projects across the region. These studies emphasize how the *kafala* system of migrant sponsorship sets up the conditions for hyper-exploitation of subaltern subjects, creating a society built upon exclusion (see e.g. Khalaf et al. 2014). *Kafala* is thus imagined to reflect the state–citizen nexus of power in the Gulf, although labour-rights activists tend to represent it as a direct product of the illiberal state. As a term that has come to define the contemporary condition of the non-citizen in the Gulf, *kafala* becomes itself the proof of migrant labour exploitation. It also reifies the citizen/non-citizen binary in which citizens exploit, and migrants are exploited. As such, it presumes exclusion and economically-motivated migration as the centre of non-citizen lives in the Gulf, fixing in place a prototypical Gulf migrant (the South Asian construction worker) and his always-already condition of exploitation. This comes at the expense of a more thorough examination of migration networks and forms of governance in the region and the multiple, varied, and even contradictory forms of experience, subjectivity, and power that proliferate through the *kafala* system.

A notable amount of literature, especially from within anthropology, does explore migrant place-making and forms of belonging in Gulf cities. However, this work largely relies upon a logic of 'belonging-despite-exclusion'. It is also rarely 'scaled up' beyond a form of urban belonging, for example to a state-based affinity. Vora's work among Indian communities in Dubai, for example in her book *Impossible Citizens* (Vora 2013), has presented such a case – that Indians belong despite the legal circumscriptions they face. This produces what she calls a condition of 'permanent temporariness', and hence the title of the book, which considers alternate or substantive forms of citizenship that take place in Dubai among foreign residents, who cannot access legal citizenship. As we revisit this work and our newer research below, we can see that our empirical data itself showcases how the practices and relationships that encompass *kafala* as a legal system are so heterogeneous that they, in fact, cannot provide any kind of description of a typical migrant or typical migration process.

The historical and contemporary dynamics of *kafala* also show that it is not a system that derives from the 'state' *per se*. What has been consolidated as a migration 'system' that supposedly emanates from the state is actually a hybrid formation that predates the sovereign state, coming out of Bedouin forms of protection for visitors, Gulf servant and slave relationships, and the forms of patronage that traders from many parts of the world brought with them. Additionally, many of the pre-independence sponsors or patrons of labouring classes did not become citizens at all, but would today be classified as foreigners, such as Iranian and South Asian merchants, under whose debt many pearl diving expeditions took place.

Today's *kafala* similarly includes an assemblage of people and practices that go well beyond the citizen *kafeel* (or sponsor) in order to manage populations of migrants. What we have come to call a system is in fact a diffuse set of transnational practices that are in the hands of many different actors, including citizens and companies, but also non-citizen managers and employers, middlemen in home countries and in the Gulf that organize migration and profit from it, as well as sending states themselves. Secondary markets to translate, fill out visa applications, remit money, and a range of other services have developed around Gulf migration that are not separable from the individual migrant's physical and bureaucratic sojourn. Vora's research among Indian merchants in Dubai shows how Indians on both sides of the Indian Ocean are active participants in networks of migration, and she specifically focuses on how long-standing Indian merchant communities rely on the structures of migration in the Gulf to exploit their compatriots. Yet both the businessman and his employee are supposedly governed through *kafala* – the businessman requiring a 51% partnership with an Emirati (in which his business partner becomes his *kafeel*) in order to live and work in the UAE, and the employee requiring a sponsorship from the jointly owned enterprise in order to obtain a work visa. Who is the *kafeel* in this system, then, when the Indian merchant is both a sponsored migrant *and* the one who is doing the work of migrant governance, in fact standing in for the Emirati state?

If we take the quintessential low-paid construction worker in the Gulf, he generally has little knowledge of what a *kafeel* means: he is most directly managed by his own compatriots and by other migrants. In this respect, he is unlikely to have a strong sense of his labour in the Gulf as somehow exceptional or distinct from what he would

find if he went elsewhere in the world, or even from forms of employment in his home country. In fact, many Gulf migrants, including more skilled professionals who possess the English and/or Arabic language skills and social capital to navigate ministries and migration processes, have no direct contact with an individual citizen *kafeel*. And in the case of companies, many of the bureaucratic processes of obtaining visas and residencies are not much different from bureaucracies elsewhere. Lumping all of these people and practices into one category implies that migration is experienced uniformly, and as uniformly oppressive. Immigration is thus made into a state project *by scholars and activists*, when in fact *kafala* itself, as an individualized form of sponsorship that assembles many diverse actors and institutions, resists this framing.

Kafala is also not only an oppressive technology. For many migrants to the region, it produces privileges and pleasures they might not find in their home countries. For example, the Indian businessmen in Dubai that Vora (2011, 2013) interviewed described their ability to own and profit from ethnic enterprises as a form of freedom they could not get as easily in India. Both Koch and Vora, in their newer and on-going research, explore the experiences of knowledge economy 'experts', most of whom are from North America or Europe. These migrants, who, as Vora (2014) has argued, are often hired for their whiteness (as symbolic of expertise), enjoy the pleasures of racial/national segregation, class status, and profit that migration to Doha allows, often earning much more money than they could in home countries, and themselves relying on the labour of other migrants, such as nannies, drivers, house cleaners, waiters, and salespeople (see also Kanna 2014). Similarly, Koch (2015–C) conducted interviews with Western researchers at higher education institutes in Qatar and the UAE, in which she found that respondents routinely underplayed their privilege and high salaries, while stressing the pleasures available to them in the Gulf (ease of travel, shopping, the ability to easily replicate suburban American life), as well as a sense of freedom afforded by a security state that made them feel intensely safe from crime. There is, it turns out, freedom and pleasure in the production and transversal of so-called 'illiberal' spaces.

Our findings are not much different from those of other scholars who address how race, power, and class infuse daily life in the contemporary world. Migration experiences are both uneven and overlapping between different categories of people, who form new identifications and subjectivities through the process of living and migrating to the Gulf. These experiences cannot be contained under a rubric of exploitation or of profiteering. Nor are they overly exceptional: in many respects, they are consistent with uneven migration experiences under security state apparatuses elsewhere in the world (De Genova 2013). However, many foreign residents produce the idea that Gulf states are unique and illiberal, even though most of their daily life patterns are not much different from how they would look in another country. In this respect, migrants themselves actively produce the idea of a coherent object – 'the state' – out of a rather diffuse set of practices by multiple and diverse individual and corporate actors (Vora 2011).

Giving these prevailing narratives of Gulf exceptionalism, then, we as academics and residents in the Gulf need to attend to the ways that we are complicit in the production of the illiberal state-effect through the black boxing of *kafala*. The idiosyncrasies in experiences of surveillance and policing in the Gulf, the lack of uniform legal information, and the proliferation of rumours by all national and class groups challenge the supposed fact of top-down authoritarian rule (repressive power) and a 'system' of migration. The experiences of migration to Qatar and the UAE are so varied that *kafala* has little descriptive significance beyond that which we have given it. A reified construct that furthers Gulf exceptionalism, *kafala* works to separate migration and labour conditions in the region from processes and experiences that are actually global in scope.

In contrast, looking at inclusions and benefits that are part of migration networks and practices, as we have begun to explore above, illuminates how foreign residents are integral to producing the state through political/financial connections and rumour, and showcases the role of non-citizens in forms of governance, particularly when they act as *kafeels*. In addition, through their own modes of self-segregation and raced and classed pleasures, non-citizens actively contribute to the naturalization of racial, national, and other categories that circumscribe Gulf geographies and forms of belonging.

IV. Moving beyond Ethnocracy to Geographies of Inclusion

While the state has long been an object of inquiry in critical Arabian Peninsula studies, the nation remains a rather under-theorized concept. Even in works that look at national myth construction, for example, it is still generally assumed that nationals are the most relevant group in GCC countries, and that nationalisms and civic myths are both rooted in historical facts about indigeneity, as well as in discourses and projects that produce citizen loyalties by reaffirming non-citizen exclusion. Because of the long tradition of approaching non-citizens through the lens of temporary economic migration, their national homelands are always 'elsewhere' – across an ocean or mountain range, but certainly not on the Arabian Peninsula. Consequently, the prevailing assumption in Gulf studies is that nationalist projects and rhetorics are aimed solely at citizens. However, our research indicates that non-citizens are quite integral to the production of national imaginaries.

The assumption that nationalism is for nationals is aided by the concept of ethnocracy, which in Gulf scholarship is almost uniformly drawn from the work of Ahn Nga Longva (2005).[3] In the prevailing usage, ethnocracy hinges on the idea of the nation as a discrete ethnic group, which is the sole inheritor of state wealth and elite status, in contrast to other, less-privileged residents. Longva's use of ethnocracy in the context of Kuwait does in fact explore modes of inclusion for non-nationals, specifically Arabs and Muslims. However, the term, like *kafala*, has become black-boxed in the literature and is now predominantly used to refer to Gulf societies as exclusionary based on a citizen/non-citizen binary. As a result, ethnocracy has not necessarily provided the space Longva may have originally intended to allow scholars to explore how foreign residents are impacted by and included in Gulf nation-building.

There are two overarching challenges with the way that the term ethnocracy has been applied to the GCC states. The first is that it works to index the Gulf states' exceptional or aberrant global status. In the wider literature on ethnocracy, ethnocratic regimes are defined as a separate category, distinguished from both 'pure' democracy and 'pure' authoritarianism (Yiftachel 2006). As with all typological approaches, however, the inbuilt search for essences (what 'really' counts as an ethnocratic regime versus an authoritarian state) can rapidly get out of hand when applied to the messiness of the real world. This particular typology is also underpinned by a set of normative assumptions about statehood, whereby liberal democracies are imagined as the yardstick of normalcy, modernity, and inclusiveness, and 'ethnocratic regimes' as exceptional. This characterization obscures the fact that ethnic nationalism is common throughout supposedly 'liberal' settings, and continues to be leveraged to deny the claims of non-ethnic 'others' to the resources of the state and to national belonging all over the world. The unreflexive labelling of the Gulf states as ethnocratic has thus tended to reinforce the region's exceptionalism and backwardness together with our own systematic forgettings of the complex ways that 'liberal' institutions also reinforce privilege (and lack thereof) in and through 'ethnocratic' mechanisms and imaginaries of people, place, and claims to belonging.

Second, ethnocracy often leads to the assumption that regime legitimacy is tied only to the attitudes and affinities of the dominant ethnic group: the implication being that the opinions and agencies of non-ethnic others are more or less irrelevant to regime calculus. State legitimacy in Qatar and the UAE, for example, is imagined as narrowly staked to the support of Qataris or Emiratis. Such a top-down vision upholds the myth that Gulf nationals are the exclusive members of the nation and the dominant and domineering wielders of power. Framed in these exclusionary terms, it is easy to miss how 'foreigners' – their agencies, subjectivities, and imaginaries – are all called into service of the broader political projects of creating nations called Qatar and the UAE. Given the demographics of these two countries, it makes little sense to conclude that states, ruling elites, and non-national stakeholders are not concerned with the popular attitudes of the overwhelming majority of residents, who, as we noted above, are essential to local governance.

In challenging ethnocracy, we do not mean to suggest that ethnic national imaginaries are irrelevant. On the contrary, what makes nationalist discourse and nation-building agendas of the Gulf so powerful is the fact that they have relied heavily upon purifying the imagined citizen 'self' from the non-citizen 'other' – often through recuperating the Western Orientalist repertoire. As with any nationalist project, doing so requires a tremendous amount of work. The citizen self, like the non-citizen other, is in fact incredibly heterogeneous and infused with

deep stratifications. Privileges of citizenship vary by gender and between groups that can document lineage versus those who (even generations later) are considered naturalized citizens. Social status and cultural 'traditions' are shaped by tribal and family associations, ideas of 'pure' Arabians versus those who have pasts in Southern Iran or Zanzibar (Limbert 2014), notions of rural vs. urban, as well as a host of other classed and racialized differences. In addition, *Bidoon* (stateless people), who might in some cases be the most 'indigenous', are practically rights-less, while Gulf states are proffering citizenship to people they deem necessary for international prestige (like football players for Qatar's 2022 World Cup).

Nationalist projects are fundamentally about naturalizing ethnic nationals' claims to primacy in 'their' homeland, but their audience includes both the ethnic insiders who must constantly be taught to imagine a territorially bounded 'primordial' homeland*,* as well as the majority 'outsiders'. In this issue, for example, Koch (2015–A) explores how falconry as a 'heritage sport' has been constructed region-wide into a popular nationalist trope. It is mobilized to index Gulf nationals' autochthonous belonging in the Arabian Peninsula, and to quietly naturalize elitist, ethnicized, and masculinist conceptions of the national homeland and its desert landscapes. Such narratives bely the fact that the sport itself relies on non-national labour, imported birds and their prey, and a whole host of 'foreign' as well as modern elements and technologies required to produce the image of a purified, timeless Gulf national self. Heritage sports and other symbols of primordial culture (pearls, wind towers, dhows, etc.), combine with the ubiquity of national dress in the Gulf (white *thob* for men and black *abaya* for women), to create the image of 'national distinction' (Le Renard 2014) in Qatar and the UAE, and further reinforce the idea that citizens are the only ones who are affectively connected to the nation.

Alongside these attempts at purifying citizenship-as-belonging, both of our ongoing research agendas on national development projects and spectacles in Qatar and the UAE, such as National Day celebrations, cultural investments in museums and art, and sites of 'knowledge economy', like American branch campuses, reveal deep investments in more inclusive language and practices around territorial belonging in these two states. This is manifested in a set of discourses that hail the non-citizen presence and promote a geographic imaginary of the Gulf among non-citizen populations as their 'second' homeland. Koch (2015–B), for example, considers civic nationalist narratives in the Gulf National Days, exemplified in Qatar's new 'One Love' slogan of expat-citizen unity, accompanied by a logo of two hands of different shades forming a heart. Similarly, Vora is exploring in her current book project how knowledge economy projects in Qatar, as well as state national plans, project a vision of a transnational future, one that centres ethno-national origin stories while also hailing neoliberal non-citizens as members of the nation. The recent actions of the Qatari and Emirati leaderships to improve working conditions for workers of all class backgrounds also suggest that they are in fact concerned with their ability not just to entice 'temporary' labour, but to *retain* and garner the affective support of non-citizens, both within the borders of the state and internationally.

These trends suggest a shift towards a kind of civic nationalism in Qatar and the UAE, which aims to instil a sense of gratitude for the opportunities for personal advancement that the local leadership is said to grant non-citizens. In these examples, non-citizens clearly do not belong in the same way that Gulf nationals supposedly belong, but by harnessing the tropes of multiculturalism and cosmopolitan modernity, they provide a space for patriotic 'love of country' and invoke tolerance across the citizen/non-citizen binary. While non-citizens are increasingly being invited to imagine a sense of state-based territorial belonging in the region, the civic nationalist rhetoric in Qatar and the UAE clearly emphasizes coexistence and living side-by-side, rather than integration *per se*. Rather than dismissing these inclusionary scripts, however, many migrants are taking these semiotic and material openings quite seriously and, as Koch (2015–B) illustrates, are actively participating in discourses and practices of nationalism in ways that cannot be reduced to nationality, class, race, or religion. Civic nationalist tropes, then, instead of rehearsing an 'ethnocratic' society based on exclusion, are working to produce attachment to place for foreign residents. These nation-building projects, while constantly invoking the privilege of nationals, have also created the sense among many citizens that they are increasingly marginalized in national futures – *precisely because* they offer belonging and access to the nation to non-citizens. The production and naturalization of such differential landscapes of belonging is the perennial and pervasive story of nation-building the world over, a story that provides little traction for the concept of ethnocracy as somehow limited to certain spaces. In this sense, then, the Gulf again appears to be quite ordinary.

V. Conclusion

As linked explanatory concepts, ethnocracy and *kafala* have tended to exceptionalize labour and migration in the Gulf region, disconnecting them from other patterns of exploitation and profit/pleasure around the world. There is a liberalist myth commonplace in readings of the 'illiberal' Gulf that presumes that power is working through individuals and institutions as *negative* and repressive, and that this repression begins when one reaches the shores of Arabia, rather than migration experiences being the product of global power differentials and transnational networks. Because of this, the Gulf states often appear in Western geopolitical imaginaries as abnormal, and residents there are imagined to be more exploited than anywhere else in the world. Along with the assumption of a loyal citizenry made docile through petro-wealth, agency and resistance are then written out for both citizens *and* non-citizens at the same time in the formulation of illiberal state and hyper-capitalist economy in the Gulf. This produces the idea that migrant labour abuses or citizen repression in liberal societies are not as bad, or are merely exceptions to the norm. This is, of course, a myth, belied over and over through cases such as police brutality and student protests in the racial state of the United States; scores of migrants dying to cross seas and borders to enter Europe and North America; prison- and military- industrial complexes worldwide; the failure of democratic states to alleviate conditions of poverty; and the temporary visa structures and ethnic enterprises that proliferate in Western societies, along with their secondary industries of exploitation (which actually look almost identical to *kafala*). Our point here is not to engage in a quantitative debate about how many workers are in poor conditions in which places, but rather to assert the *qualitative* similarities between structures of exploitation and profit, which implicate both so-called liberal and illiberal spaces, states, processes, and agents around the world to produce the idea that territorially bound migration experiences are somehow ontologically different from one another.

As it turns out, among the many ways that migrants *are* included in the Gulf, we find both pleasure and profit in forms that run painfully counter to liberal normative commitments. In the ways that citizenship is stratified, we find forms of exclusion and resistance/critique of state projects that are supposedly (but not actually) exclusively for nationals. So what if, as we asked at the outset, we reverse our inquiries about Gulf societies by foregrounding the ways that non-citizens are actively included, and how power is *productive* of particular socialities and subjectivities? Can we see commonalities between the GCC countries and other countries in the forms of immigrant inclusions and belongings, as well as in the forms of governmentality that enable them? Can we abandon once and for all the liberalist mythologies that frame our entry into research on the region, and the moralizing baggage that accompanies them? Of course, all places around the world are characterized by differential landscapes, where some people are imagined to belong more than others, but this is precisely the point – that modes of belonging and inclusion for non-citizens are quite ordinary *everywhere*. Like all territorial modes of identification, what we see at work in the Gulf is not somehow more or less inclusive or exclusive. Rather, 'they are *differently* inclusive (and exclusive). And not only are the *exclusions* on which they are premised normatively problematic, but so too, in certain contexts, is their very *inclusiveness*' (Brubaker 2004:142).

Notes

[1] There is a large body of historical work on the Arabian Peninsula that, primarily within the emerging field of Indian Ocean Studies, documents the region's pre-oil and pre-imperial cosmopolitanisms. See, for example, the roundtable of articles, 'The Indian Ocean and Other Middle Easts' recently published in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* (Low 2014) for summaries of this literature and ongoing discussions about Gulf transnationalism. For historical work that details the role of women in Gulf societies from pre-Islamic times to the modern period, see the excellent volume *Gulf Women*, edited by Amira El-Azhary Sonbol (2012).

[2] We explicitly reject terminology like 'slavery' to account for migrant exploitation in the Gulf. It contributes to exceptionalization of processes (like indebtedness, holding passports, lack of job security, and illegal pay and work conditions) that exist everywhere. In addition, it profoundly diminishes the importance of actual slavery, especially the large scale of it in the Atlantic, which was a systematic trade in human bodies based in racial and other ideas about who constituted a human. In the Arabian Peninsula as well, slavery was not similar to the exploitation conditions of workers there today, and was much more relegated to household servants, who also were often incorporated into families after manumission.

[3] A Google Scholar search on 'ethnocracy and Arab gulf' shows over five hundred publications that use this term to discuss the region.

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