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The geopolitics of sport beyond soft power: Event ethnography and the 2016 Cycling World Championships in Qatar

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Abstract. Leaders in the Arabian Peninsula have increasingly sought to host globalised sporting events to broadcast a cosmopolitan and modern image of the region. These efforts are typically interpreted as examples of states exercising 'soft power.' This article challenges the state-centric assumptions built into the soft power approach by employing an event ethnography of the 2016 UCI Road Cycling World Championships in Doha. Advancing a more grounded geopolitics of elite sport in the Gulf, I examine how geopolitical identity narratives about Qatar, and the Gulf region more broadly, circulate at various scales and through countless contingent encounters at the event. I ask specifically how these identity narratives are constructed and challenged, both materially and discursively by athletes, spectators, and urban residents. Sporting events, I argue, are key sites of geopolitical encounter: where subjects and spaces are not predetermined, but actively constituted through people's interactions in the host cities and countries.
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Introduction

I won a selfie contest. In fact, I suspect anyone who entered this particular contest was a winner. Set to host the UCI (Union Cycliste Internationale) Road Cycling World Championships in Doha in October 2016, Qatar's organizing committee was offering an all-expenses paid trip to the event for 30 lucky winners. I have been conducting research in Qatar for several years and am myself a cyclist, so when I learned that 'Worlds' (as the event is often called) would be in Doha, I immediately went to the official website to look around and discovered the contest announcement:

> Want to watch the UCI Road World Championships, Doha 2016 LIVE? All you need is to share your UCIRWCDoha2016 themed selfie and stand a chance to win a trip to Doha! The 30 selfies with the most likes win, and the winners will be announced on June 30, 2016. (Doha Cycling 2016d)

Doubtful that 30 people would enter, I decided to try my luck. All I had to do was take a selfie (which included me in cycling gear, holding a miniature Qatar flag), post it to my social media account with the @UCIDoha2016 and #UCIRWCDoha2016 tags, and email my contact information to the Selfie contest organizers. Lo and behold, my entry was successful and I joined 18 other winners from the United States, France, Sweden, Australia, Belgium, and South Africa to attend the event, courtesy of the Qatar Olympic

Council (QOC).[1] I was the only one who had been to Qatar before and, it seemed, knew really anything about the country. The trip was thus an impressive introduction to Qatar for some of the Selfie winners, who were paraded around the event in matching warm-up suits and hats (I admit that I refused on this count, as my commitment to ethnography did not extend quite that far). Though I can only guess at the costs, organizing the logistics and covering all the travel expenses for the winners was certainly not cheap.

This article asks why the QOC chose to invest funds for the 2016 Worlds event in this manner and what it can tell us more generally about recent efforts among several of the Eastern Arabian Peninsula states to promote large-scale sporting events in their countries.[2] Through the case of the 2016 UCI Road Cycling World Championships in Doha, I examine the narratives and images that planners in Qatar have used to craft their capital as a new hub for international sporting events in the Middle East. I draw on participant observation and informal interviews with event organizers, volunteers, spectators, athletes, and local residents during 2016 Worlds to answer two interlocking questions: (1) What images and identity narratives about Qatar generally, and Doha as a 'sporting city,' do planners spotlight for the tourist's gaze? (2) How are these narratives challenged, both materially and discursively by athletes, spectators, and locals? Informed by research in political and urban geography, as well as interdisciplinary research in sports studies, this ethnographic case study illustrates how sporting events in the Gulf are key sites of geopolitical encounter: where subjects and spaces are not predetermined, but actively constituted through the contingent interactions that they allow.

Elite sport and geopolitics beyond statist approaches

In the past several years, boosters across the Arabian Peninsula have worked hard to bring large, international sporting events to the region. Focusing on elite sport – those globalized sports that attract more affluent participants and spectators – these have recently included high-profile championships for tennis to cycling, sailing, golf, and equestrian sport (Amara 2012; Amara and Theodoraki 2010; Attali 2016; Brannagan and Giulianotti 2015; Bromber 2014; Bromber and Krawietz 2013; Scharfenort 2014). State and city planners

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[1] For more on the history of the QOC, see Rolim Silva 2014.

[2] The research for this article was conducted prior to the regional blockade of Qatar in June 2017. The current situation is only one example of many prior flare-ups among the Arabian Peninsula neighbors, which are typically smoothed over within a year. As such, speculating on the current crisis is outside the scope of this paper.

– primarily in Abu Dhabi, Doha, Dubai, and Manama – have thus sought to craft their cities as sporting hubs and cater to a sports-oriented 'visitor class' (Eisinger 2000), while advancing an image of the region as a place of wealth and supreme luxury. Often these projects have entailed significant infrastructure investment. Bahrain, for example, hosted the first Formula One Grand Prix race in the Middle East, upon opening its International circuit in 2004. Abu Dhabi followed suit shortly thereafter, with its impressive US $1.3 billion Yas Marina Circuit, where spectators can watch the car races from their yachts. In Qatar, state and urban planners have also been spending billions of dollars to transform Doha's urban fabric ahead of the 2022 FIFA World Cup. In addition to developing the required sporting facilities, the region's urban planners seem to be continually revamping transportation networks ahead of special events. Combined with achieving certain infrastructural goals, hosting a sporting mega-event can offer local leaders an opportunity to showcase their cities and their countries to the world – an exercise wherein nation-building, place-branding, and urban boosterism all intersect, and a trend that scholars in the interdisciplinary fields of urban studies and sports studies have analysed extensively (e.g. Carter 2011; Chalkley and Essex, 1999; Cornelissen 2008, 2010; Gaffney 2010; Koch 2018; Lee 2017a; Hiller 2000; Horne 2011; Lauermann 2016a, 2016b; Maenning and du Pleiss 2009; Ren 2009).

As in many contexts explored by this body of research, the Gulf Arab states's leaders pursuing event-focused boosterism are concerned with fostering a positive image of their countries and cities. In promotional materials, the region's rapid development is a key trope reiterated by sparkling images of hypermodern sporting venues set against impressive new skylines. Advancing elite sport is thus an important means to broadcast an image of Gulf cities as 'cosmopolitan,' 'modern,' and 'globalised.' While regional leaders have also promoted more nationalistically-oriented sports, like falconry and camel racing (see Khalaf 2000; Koch 2015b), the viewing audiences (both in-country and virtually) of globalised elite sporting events are far more international. Given the more obvious 'outward' orientation of globalised sporting events, scholars of mega-events typically focus on their role in elite-led imaging campaigns. Seeking to explain why policymakers choose to host such costly events, a number of sports studies researchers have turned to Joseph Nye's (2004) concept of 'soft power' as a tool that elites in smaller or less geopolitically-influential states use to exert global influence or assert a new identity on the global stage (e.g. Attali 2016; Black 2008; Black and Van Der

Westhuizen 2004; Brannagan and Giulianotti 2015; Connell forthcoming; Finlay and Xin 2010; Giulianotti 2015; Gorokhov 2015; Grix and Houlihan 2014; Grix and Lee 2013; Manzenreiter 2010).

This work offers some important insights, but the soft power approach poses a number of problems that have long been of concern to political geographers. For example, in a recent article by Jonathan Grix and Nina Kramareva (2017), the authors assert that Russia's hosting of the 2014 Olympic Games in Sochi is indicative of the country's 'unique soft power strategy.' Throughout the article, and others like it, states (e.g. 'Russia' or 'China' or 'Japan') are framed as actors that *do* things, such as deploying 'power' to achieve certain ends. This statist language is problematic for many reasons that cannot be fully recounted here (but see Kuus and Agnew 2008; Martin 2009), though the most significant issue is that it depoliticizes some very political processes. That is, when specific actors or decision-makers get subsumed through a nebulous reference to the 'state' as an actor, this effectively erases their agency, as well as their unique positionality and specific political agendas. The commonplace framing of soft power through statist language, if only implicitly, mischaracterizes the nature of politics by according the state a degree of coherence which it does not deserve (Foucault 2008, 77).

Beyond this challenge, the literature on soft power also tends to mischaracterize the nature of power itself, treating it as something that is 'held' or 'wielded' – as if it is an object with a discrete or discernible essence that states choose to employ or not. This essentialist understanding of power is what Michel Foucault critiques when advancing his alternative notion of 'capillary power,' which posits that 'power is neither given, nor exchanged, nor recovered, but rather exercised, and that it only exists in action' (Foucault, 1980, 89). Methodologically, this means that:

> Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. (Foucault 1980, 98)

In contrast to the literature on soft power, Foucault's approach to power relations is decidedly *contingent*. Power has no 'essence,' but is instead produced contextually through a range of relations, materialities, and

social structures – ‘its infinitesimal mechanisms, which each have their own history, their own trajectory, their own techniques and tactics’ (Foucault 1980, 99; see also Mitchell 1991, 1999; Veyne 1997).

To move beyond the soft power approach to analysing the geopolitics of sporting events, and its statist underpinnings, this article is inspired by the theoretical and methodological imperative set out by Foucault’s work. His analysis of power and its spatialization is particularly useful for tracing the infinitely varied symbolic politics and geopolitical encounters that arise out of sporting events. Foucault’s analytical lens directs our attention to specific practices and relationships between people, things, and ideas. Notably, this emphasis on tactics or strategies helps to push beyond the all-too-frequent unitary readings of why political leaders choose to host sports mega-events. Returning to the Sochi Games, for example, some scholars have argued that what made Russia’s hosting of the Olympics ‘unique’ was that the country’s leaders were concerned with domestic, rather than international, agendas (e.g. Grix and Kramareva 2017; Golubchikov 2017). By implying that one ‘real’ motive can be uncovered, however, such interpretations erase the fact that *all* state policies or practices (including decisions to host a sporting event) are the result of competing and contrasting motives. Even if this erasure is the passive result of word choice, it is nonetheless problematic because it reinforces a form of statist thinking that diverts attention from the politics of competing narratives ‘within’ the state, i.e. among those claiming to speak on behalf of the state. Furthermore, as this article illustrates, a statist approach diverts attention from other key geopolitical actors and encounters, which exist outside the obvious domain of formal politics and decision-making.

As I have argued elsewhere, sport is *geopolitical* in that its associated politics and practices reproduce ‘territorial imaginaries and spatial hierarchies, whereby certain countries are imagined to be superior to others, either for the prowess of their athletes or for the quality of their stadiums’ (Koch 2015b, 523). Sport is also inextricably related to place-based identity narratives, not just of and about the competitors, but also those of spectators, volunteers, workers, businesses, and city residents (Attali 2006; Broudehoux 2016; Brown, 1998; Dittmer and Dodds 2008; Giulianotti 2002; Keys 2006; Koch 2013; Shihade 2011). These various actors frequently encounter one another through the ordinary practice and spectacle of sport, but large-scale sporting events intensify these circulations for a defined period of time. Hosting sporting events can also draw certain actors, along with their diverse identity narratives about themselves and others, into new contexts. This was

abundantly clear during Worlds in Qatar, which event organizers continually boasted was the first time a cycling world championship had taken place in the Middle East. The event, and others like it, was indeed part of an state imaging project, but it set into motion a wide array of geopolitical encounters, which unfolded well outside the scope of the 'state.' Insofar as the region-wide promotion of elite sport has worked to promote these circulations, the state is not irrelevant to this story. However, as this case study illustrates, understanding the power relations materialized in and through international sporting events requires attending to informal politics. For this, special methodological tools are needed.

Event ethnography

This study was designed as an 'event ethnography' of the one-week UCI road cycling world championships in Doha ('Worlds'). A qualitative approach is well-suited to research on large scale events or celebrations because it is structured to allow for unanticipated factors, narratives, and themes to emerge. While it is unrealistic for any single scholar (or even a research team) to capture all perspectives and ways of experiencing an event, ethnographic methods are essential to capturing the dynamism of an event, its spatial and temporal ups and downs and rhythms, and the variable intensity of its affective pulse. Social scientists from a range of disciplines, including geography, have employed event ethnography with significanct success in jointly analysing the macro- and micro-political implications of short-term events, ranging from environmental summits (Büscher 2014; Campbell et al. 2014; Corson et al. 2014) to sports championships (Fox 2006; MacAloon 2006; Tomlinson and Young 2006) and diverse international and national celebrations (Duffy and Mair 2107; Ley and Olds 1988; Koch 2016; Kong and Yeoh 1997).

Building on the tools of political ethnography (Bernard 2011; Schatz 2009), event ethnography shifts from the more traditional, long-term approach to studying places and instead focuses on short-term or temporary events. As scholars using event ethnography have emphasised, events are important sites of analysis despite the fact that they are temporary. They serve as venues for a unique confluence of diverse actors, who are normally dispersed in time and space, allowing for an intensified interaction among individuals, ideas, and infrastructures. Events are an 'active political space,' in which 'researchers can observe the processes that

produce (or fail to produce) outcomes, as well as the particular politics (e.g., of knowledge, scale, or performance) employed in such processes' (Campbell et al. 2014, 4).

Like traditional ethnography, this method involves attending the diverse events, displays, and special meetings associated with an event and recording extensive field notes to produce 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1973) of the scenes and people's actions and non-verbalized affinities. By observing and participating in these social interactions, the goal in this case study of Cycling Worlds in Doha was to document how people moved through spectacle venues and interpreted the city space. I also aimed to use event ethnography to shed light on how people 'align around sanctioned concepts at particular moments, but also how they change how they frame, translate, and make sense of particular […] ideas over time' (Corson et al. 2014, 27) – specifically the geopolitical tropes and imaginaries about Qatar engaged by the various actors brought together at the event. Lastly, event ethnography is especially useful for capturing the affective atmosphere or emotional 'pulse' of an event, which people are often unable to verbalize during or after the event. To this end, I engaged in participant observation as one of the selfie contest winners. This allowed me to conduct informal interviews with event organizers and officials, spectators, athletes, and local residents in Doha during Worlds. Most interviews were brief and informal, ranging from 5-20 min, but some were an hour or longer. For visitors, my questions centred on their reasons for attending, their impressions the cycling event, its organization, and their experiences in Doha. For residents, by contrast, my questions centred on whether they were attending the races and why (not), how they were personally impacted by Doha's hosting of the event, and how they understood the role of Worlds and other large sporting events in broader political agendas at play in Qatar.[3]

To contextualize the prevailing narratives and responses found in the interviews and participant observation, I also employed textual analysis. Since the communities and individuals engaged through the other methods are embedded in particular discursive contexts, textual analysis was designed to document and assess this broader semiosphere. First, prior to and after the field research, I developed an archive of all relevant newspaper articles and government and UCI reports and announcements (stored and analysed in

[3] This research was conducted entirely in English. This was because it is (1) the primary language of communication at most major cycling events, Worlds included; and (2) the primary language of communication in Qatar, where the country's population consists of 85 percent non-citizen foreign residents for whom English is the most likely common language.

Evernote). Second, during the visit itself, I collected a wide range of materials, based on an expanded definition of ‘texts,’ including discussions on social media platforms, maps, newspapers, brochures, advertisements, and other ephemera. Through photographs, I also documented related public events, awards ceremonies, decorations and built landscapes, billboards, and other multimedia images. This kind of textual analysis has historically been used by qualitative researchers aiming to understand how identity narratives are confirmed and/or challenged through a wide range venues. Accordingly, it allowed me to both account for and move beyond state-controlled narratives about Doha and its role as a host of the 2016 Road Cycling Worlds.

Contesting Qatari modernity: The 2016 World Road Cycling Championships

Narrating Qatari modernity through sport

The Qatari planners’ rationale for hosting 2016 Worlds is explained on the dedicated event website[4] under the section header, ‘Doha: a World Sports Hub!’:

> In line with Qatar National Vision, Qatar has been contributing in the promotion of sport in the world and in using it as means of communication and of strengthening ties between different nations and peoples by hosting multiple regional and international sports events in recent years. This led the sport infrastructure to being comprehensively and increasingly developed, allowing Qatar to become an international sport hub. (Doha Cycling 2016b)

The Managing Director of the organizing committee, Amani Al Dosari, explained the benefits of Doha hosting the event to a Eurosport interviewer in a parallel manner:

> Doha has become an important hub in term of Sport Events Organisation. The organisation of an event such as this fits in with the Qatar Vision 2030 program, that aims to diversify the economy and reduce our economic dependence to oil and gas. The goal is to develop the knowledge economy but also to develop key economic sectors such as the sport industry. During the eight days of the championships, Doha will be under the spotlight with worldwide broadcast coverage which will allow people to explore our modern and beautiful country and its strong Arabian heritage. (Eurosport 2016)

In similar language, these two statements both link the city’s role as host to the Qatar National Vision 2030 (MDPS 2017), which was introduced in 2008 and is now the main reference point for nearly all policy decisions in the country. As I have argued elsewhere, Qatar’s National Vision ‘functions as a disciplinary technology that brings all ranges of actors in line with the government’s priorities’ (Koch 2014, 1124),

[4] In addition to this website (http://www.dohacycling2016.com/), the event’s social outlets pages included a Twitter page: (https://twitter.com/UCIDoha2016) and a Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/UCIDoha2016/).

ensuring a degree of discursive uniformity across the government and private sectors. The quotes above reflect the fact that planners are well aware of the need to frame Worlds as representing the National Vision objectives.

This boosterist language is also exemplary of a wider effort among leaders in the Eastern Arabian Peninsula, who have sought to craft their cities as 'world class' hubs for business, entertainment, and major international events, set in suitably spectacular urban landscapes and broadcast to the world through a range of digital media. The world's most costly and prestigious sporting mega-events include the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup – and they have accordingly received the most attention from boosters. Although these top-tier events are largely out of reach for many prospective hosts, leaders in less geopolitically-established states and cities are increasingly eager to host a mushrooming number of smaller, 'second-tier' events (Black 2008; Koch and Valiyev 2015; Lee 2017b; Müller 2015). Even though such events receive far less media attention, they nonetheless afford leaders in these contexts a number of opportunities. These range from financial incentives (e.g. justifying massive infrastructural projects with state support) to political (e.g. raising their city's or country's international profile). As Lee (2017b, 380) pointedly notes, 'regardless of the scale and scope, what makes a sporting event a politically significant occasion is the context in which this specific sporting contest is staged.' In analysing the UCI World Road Cycling Championships, I am thus concerned with the significance that one such second-tier event assumes in a unique geopolitical moment in Qatar.

Local planners have consciously and strategically used Doha's urban landscape to challenge stereotypes about the Gulf region. Framing its recent transformation as an advertisement of Qatar's rapid development and its 'modern,' 'engaged,' and 'cosmopolitan' outlook, they actively work to broadcast images of the city to global audiences. In a statement reproduced on various promotional materials, for example, Khalid bin Ali Al Thani, Chairman of the Organizing Committee for 2016 Worlds, explains:

> The road championships will provide the opportunity to show the beauty of Doha, with the Arabian Gulf surroundings, passing by iconic locations such as The Pearl-Qatar, Qatar Foundation, Lusail, and AspireZone, which all reflect the modernity and development of Qatar. (Doha Cycling 2016c)

Similarly, on the event website's 'About Doha' page, readers are told of Qatar's uniqueness:

> Home to more than one hundred different nationalities, from the moment you land, you can sense diversity in all its aspects. Accordingly, Qatar has become a popular hub for regional

> and global cultural, intellectual, artistic and sports events. Both visitors and residents have the opportunity to experience the welcoming and friendly nature of Arab culture and enjoy the exhilarating experiences that Qatar offers. […] Qatar is one of the few countries that were able to mix between modernity, with its gleaming skyscrapers and advantageous gas industry, and history. (Doha Cycling 2016a)

The identity narratives apparent here are representative of a now-common trend in Qatar to use civic nationalist language about the country's diversity, alongside ethnic nationalist scripts that position Qataris themselves as Arabs of the exceptionally modern variety (Koch 2014, 2016). Qatar's leaders are eager to attract positive press and the financial and symbolic capital supposed to accompany it. Much of this language reflects a reaction to broadly negative treatment of the country in the Western press, 'which has overwhelmingly cast it as an overly zealous, young upstart, with reckless spending habits and dubious political alignments' (Koch 2014, 1120). The dismissal of Qatar's imaging agenda is indicative of a broadly Orientalist lens that still pervades Western media accounts of Asian cities (Koch 2012), the Gulf region specifically (Smith 2016), and many other Asian hosts of international sporting events beyond the Western 'core' (Amara 2005; Finlay and Xin 2010; Grix and Kramareva 2017; Manzenreiter 2010).

Far from a simple public relations campaign, however, recent urban development in Doha bears testament to the developmentalist priorities of Qatar's ruling Al Thani family, afforded by the country's substantial gas-based resource wealth. As the capital, Doha had been growing rapidly since Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani came to power in 1995, but investments were redoubled after the 2010 announcement that Qatar would host the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Tremendous changes have been underway in Doha ever since, with direct and indirect state funds being earmarked primarily for transport networks, venue construction, and hotels in the new West Bay downtown area.

Beyond these infrastructure developments, local leaders believe that preparing to host the World Cup demands gaining further experience by hosting a range of 'test' events – ostensibly to gain practical experience via smaller, but still international and logistically-challenging events. The 2016 Cycling World Championship was one such event, which was confirmed in my interviews with the Qatar Olympic Committee employees. Promoting a major international cycling event is markedly different from hosting the World Cup, however. Part of the difference relates to simple urban geography: the central action of a series of football matches unfolds in a confined venue, whereas road cycling races take place over hundreds of miles of city streets. The

jointly spatial *and* social challenges that this posed in Doha were many. Indeed, they became serious obstacles to the effective (re)production of narratives about Qatari modernity that planners hoped to coordinate through hosting Worlds, as the remainder of this section details.

Qatar as an attractive tourist destination and a sports hub in the Middle East

Worlds were supposed to showcase Qatar's modernity by promoting Doha as an attractive tourist destination for sports enthusiasts, though the event was most notable for the marked *absence* of spectators. This did not go unnoticed by the athletes. German cycling star, Tony Martin, for one, was not impressed. He won two world championship titles in Doha (the individual time trial and team time trial), but he was not pleased with the atmosphere surrounding his victories because of the deafening silence of the venue, remarking: 'About the crowd, it would sure be nice to have some more fans here to celebrate with. The real celebrations will be when I get home' (quoted in VeloNews 2016). Other athletes were similarly critical about the lack of spectators and social media discussions within the wider cycling community were alight with criticism about how inappropriate Qatar was as a venue for Worlds. Many commentators suggested that the UCI's decision to award the championship to Doha was simply a 'money-grab.' While UCI president Brian Cookson did not hide the fact that his organization had received nearly $11 million from Qatari officials, he defended Doha's selection saying:

> Obviously, this is a part of the world where cycling is not a popular sport, but some riders have said some good things, too. I don't think we're going to be in the Gulf every three years for the worlds. We've got to bear in mind it's not just about the spectators on the ground, but about television images and the television audience as well. (quoted in Hood 2016)

The challenge of attracting spectators is not a new challenge in Qatar, where local residents told me of elaborate schemes to fill football stadiums when attendance might be embarrassingly low. In fact, as one of the selfie contest winners, I felt that I was part of one such scheme.

However, according to numerous sources, officials apparently expected large numbers of visitors for Worlds. Leaflets and brochures circulated prior to and during the event cited an expected attendance from '1000 racers, 75 countries, 5700 participants from national federations, delegations, technicians and journalists, 30,000 fans from abroad [and] millions of spectators from all over the world.' Amani Al Dosari,

the organizing committee's Managing Director quoted above, also gave some optimistic figures in his interview with Eurosport, when he was pushed on the issue of low fan turnout:

> The credibility of an event is on the field but even more so in the stands. There were more than 40 different international sport events organized last year in Doha. It was sometimes difficult to attract a lot of spectators. It is therefore one of our key challenges for this champiosnhips [sic]. We have developed a huge communication program, and expect to host more than 20,000 cycling fans. We have designed a fan zone close to the finish lines with dedicated entertainment program, especially for the families. We are targeting the fans but also our local community. (Eurosport 2016)

Al Dosari's mention of the organizing committee's 'huge communication program' is significant. Based on my own observations and interactions with the organizing committee, the communications team members appeared to be the only true experts involved in the entire affair. None of the QOC employees or volunteers had even the most basic understanding of cycling as a sport and, in turn, of the logistical and social elements of promoting a cycling event.

From the communications standpoint, however, knowing the ins and outs of the sport is far less important. The public relations (PR) and social media campaign launched by these staffers was professional and pervasive. In comparing my own experiences at the event and reviewing the online materials they produced, it was clear that the athlete interviews, camera angles, and stunning photographs, were all highly coordinated to hide the lack of spectators and guide the non-attending observer's gaze to the most positive aspects of the event and various icons of Doha's 'modernity.' This notwithstanding, there are limits to the discursive production undertaken by the communications team – outspoken athletes like Martin and others being one. Further, because of the spatially extensive nature of a cycling event as it runs through a city or country's road network, the lack of spectators could not simply be erased from the images of the event that circulated online and in the television coverage.

In explaining the lack of fans, media and social media commentaries tended to focus on the hot temperatures in Doha in October (most days hovered around 37°C), the long travel distance for cycling's traditionally European fan base, and the lack of local interest in the sport. Indeed, the event organizers expected all of these critiques and sought to overcome them through a range of positive PR stories, as well as various on-site accommodations. However well intended, many of these accommodations were ultimately ill-advised. For example, the only spectator seating near the Finish Line was a block of bleacher seats. These were

not covered, so race volunteers passed out free race-branded umbrellas to early arrivals. People did use them, but it was often insufficient to stay cool on a long day. So many instead chose to pass the time at an air-conditioned ‘Fan Zone’ tent, which included various booths with food, merchandise, activities for children, and BMX cyclists showing off their tricks inside and outside. Ostensibly near the Finish Line, it actually took about 5-10 min of walking in the hot sun to reach it, so golf cart buggies regularly shuttled people back and forth. Many spectators preferred to stay put, however, watching a live broadcast of the races from the comfort of bean-bag chairs in front of a big-screen television. Given the heat and since it was difficult to see much at the Finish Line anyway, many people opted to watch the race from here until the very end. The Fan Zone tent was certainly a welcome escape for ordinary spectators, but they were notably excluded from the large, three-story VIP tent directly on the Finish Line (see Figure 1). As one of the selfie contest winners, I had access to the air-conditioned third floor lounge. This was bustling with a range of visiting dignitaries, local VIPs, and race organizing staff, who could enjoy comfortable seating, live race streams, and an impressive buffet and free drink service all day.[5] Not only did ordinary spectators lack access to this space, but the enormous tent’s placement on the Finish Line also ensured that they were excluded from the very best views of the racing action.

Figure 1. Large white VIP tent spanning the final 200 meters before the Finish Line. Source: Author.

[5] UCI officials also had access to the second floor lounge, but neither I nor any locals could access it. I could peek in on occasion to see a sports-bar style set-up, which I speculated was a specially-permitted space for alcohol consumption (it being banned everywhere in public, except for select international hotels).

One key issue that was completely overlooked in the international reporting on the low spectator turn-out at Worlds was the very difficulty of getting to the Finish Line. The Pearl is an artificial island community, which is one of the only areas in Qatar where foreigners may own real estate (on the politics of this issue, see Koch 2015a). As a result, it has become an elite enclave, populated mostly by Doha's white, Western, middle- and upper-class residents. Constantly referenced by officials and in race-related publications as being 'iconic' and 'luxurious,' the Pearl was chosen as the central venue because it fit well with the aims of broadcasting visually-impressive images of Qatar's ultra-modern built environment. Again, these imaging concerns collided with practical realities of the race logistics. As shown in Figure 2, there is only one road-bridge to access the Pearl. Most of the races crossed over it, which meant that it was shut down to traffic for much of the day during the week of Worlds. This created significant issues for the 12,000-plus Pearl residents getting to and away from their homes, but it also limited spectators' access to the event.

Figure 2. Race map showing one of the course routes on the Pearl. Source: Doha Cycling, 2016a.

Both groups had two options on race days: they could either leave or enter the Pearl by car when the roads were still open, or they could take a 'water taxi' ride on a dhow boat from across the bay at any point in the day. For the race spectators who opted to arrive before the roads closed, they would have to wait for hours until some of the races arrived on the Pearl. If one opted to use the water taxi service, this instead meant a long trip that necessarily included: a car ride to the Katara Cultural Village, a 10-min walk to the docks, between 5-30 min of waiting for a boat, a 20-min boat ride, and after disembarking on the Pearl, a series of three golf cart

trips and transfers across the island to finally arrive at the Finish Line (broken up because of the series of canals and bridges that the carts could not pass). I made the trip approximately 4 times and estimated that it took about 90-120 min each way. An additional layer of complication was added when one wanted to return to the city after the races. When disembarking at Katara, there were no event buses to transfer spectators to the city centre and hailing a taxi was nearly impossible. All this is to say that the journey was extremely difficult for any ordinary visitor and it is thus understandable that only the most dedicated fans made the trek every day – but ultimately contributing to the low spectator turnout.

Though this was missed by the media reports on Worlds, they did accurately hit on another reason for the absence of spectators: that Qatar and the Middle East more broadly lack a strong cycling culture. Lacking the necessary infrastructure and accommodating drivers, safety was a serious issue in Doha. In particular, athletes struggled to find safe places for training rides in advance of their races, and some simply rode their bikes on trainers indoors, as I saw among those staying in my hotel. The situation was most exaggerated in terms of training, but it still had much in common with the early organization of the Giro d'Italia races in the 1920s and 30s, which 'unavoidably drew unflattering attention to the dismal state of the country's roads,' and 'offered an international audience the annual display of the country's transportation problems' (Cardoza 2010, 360). The difficulty of pursuing cycling in Doha has no doubt contributed to both the lack of a cycling culture and the dearth of local talent.

Nonetheless, in 2013, the Qatar Cycling Federation announced that it was launching a women's cycling development team, with the aim of having riders to compete at Worlds in 2016. Former professional cyclist Pia Sunstedt of Finland, who was tasked with setting up the program, gave her own response to critiques about the lack of local talent, saying: 'You have to remember that 50 years ago, they were Bedouins, they were living in tents, and with 50 degree heat, you're not doing any sport. We have to remember this, because this is the start for a very young country in sports. They are just discovering sports' (quoted in Ryan 2014). The Orientalist vision Sunstedt affixes to young Qatari women is troubling in itself, but perhaps more fundamentally because it erases the deeply political structures that limit women's participation in cycling – not just in Qatar, but around the entire world (see Bertine 2014). In the end, no woman representing Qatar

participated at Worlds and only three men were represented.[6] Nonetheless, the Cycling Federation's decision to initiate this program reflects an overarching pattern in Qatar, whereby international criticisms – in this case, that the country has done little to promote grassroots sport despite its relentless efforts to host major events (Ryan 2014) – are taken seriously enough to implement some changes. More often than not, and as seen in this case, they are largely cosmetic and do not address the core issue at hand – here with the ultimate result of the country failing to field substantial local teams.

While the inability to develop a serious national team challenged the Qatari sports officials' narrative that they were legitimately interested in promoting local sport, the organizers and their professional communications team recognized that this could be partly overcome by introducing a 'mass participation event', called the 'Ride of Champions'. This event, which allowed the general population to ride parts of the course routes for the Worlds competitors, was planned last minute. Nonetheless, it rapidly became a major part of the PR team's efforts to showcase Qatari interest in popularizing 'local' sport. They invested heavily in documenting and disseminating news about the ride, which reports later heralded as a great success. In the event's final newsletter, quotes from participants and other dignitaries were used to bluntly assert Qatar's commitment to local sport. For example:

> 'The large turnout of participants proves that cycling is a very popular sport here. It was a perfect way to showcase the sport in the country and help it grow further in the region.' -Belgian Ambassador Christophe Payot
>
> 'Qatar has demonstrated over their years its biking interest, passion and potential. Events like the UCI Road World Championships or this Ride of Champions shows this to the world, besides showcasing the beauties of Qatar as a country.' -Dutch Ambassador Dr Bahia Tahzib-Lie
>
> 'It has been amazing. We are proud of being from Qatar. Having so many world-class events here is great and we try to enjoy every single one of them.' -Rashid and Abdul (Qatar) (Doha Cycling 2016f, 12-13)

The unusual degree of uniformity across these quotes suggests a coordinated messaging campaign, but as I have argued elsewhere with regard to such publications in Qatar, these responses are not exactly 'fiction' (Koch 2016). Many people willingly reproduce officially-sanctioned discourses, knowing that nothing else

[6] Of the Qatari men participating in the event, one finished 60 of 66 in the men's elite time trial, while two juniors did not successfully complete the junior men's road race, nor did they come to the start line for the junior men's time trial.

would be printed or, as in the case of the ambassadors quoted, knowing that it might at least put them in the good graces of the country's leaders. Praising the Qatari organizers' commitment to grassroots sport as demonstrated by a one-off event may seem a small price to pay on this account, but the cumulative effect is to reinforce a culture that does not merely discourage freedom of expression, but actively stamps it out.

Qatar as a cosmopolitan and 'inclusive' polity

Qatar is not a democracy, nor does the ruling family pretend that is. Furthermore, the country has a strict *jus sanguinis* citizenship regime, which has resulted in only 10 percent of the country's 2.6 million residents being full citizens. The remaining 90% are non-citizen residents with no chance of naturalizing (Babar 2014). Contrary to common media and academic accounts of Gulf citizenship policies, which typically focus on the how these 'expats' (as they are locally called, regardless of class) are *excluded*, the Qatari leadership actually seeks to promote some forms of non-citizen belonging and to craft an image of their inclusiveness, benevolence, and paternalist care for the need of residents (see Koch 2015b, 2016; Vora and Koch 2015). Expat inclusion has rapidly become an important strand of nationalist identity narratives in Qatar, which are especially apparent in the descriptions of the World's mascot 'Khaz,' found in countless race publications:

> He has been chosen because he represents many of the values that we are trying to portray at the UCI Road World Championships - Doha 2016. He is a brave, independent, gentle young Hare who represents then Qatari values of peace, hope and community. He is proud of his country, loves his extended family and respects all other creatures who share his land. (Doha Cycling 2016e)

Referencing Qatari benevolence and inclusiveness through Khaz's respect for 'all other creatures who share his land' here works to highlight the country's modernity – in direct opposition to how Qatar is described in foreign press coverage, which constantly critiques its exclusionary citizenship system. Falling outside globally-accepted norms about citizenship policies, and precisely because of these critiques, Qatar's leadership consistently publicizes the many benefits and opportunities provided to non-citizen residents. This discourse is found throughout the public sphere and in the corporate sector, taking various forms akin to the language used to describe Khaz. Tolerating religious diversity is included alongside narratives about diversity of ethnicity and national origin, and expat women are not expected to cover as they are in some other countries of the region.

The values that Khaz is said to embody are *aspirational* narratives, however, and several encounters at Worlds shed light on the persistent challenges they face in representing daily realities on the ground. The first example is related to the fact that immodest dress among some expat women and tourists continues to rankle many religious conservatives. Usually, I do not experience any issues related to dress when I travel to Qatar because I always keep my arms and legs covered in public. But during one of my water taxi trips to the Pearl, I could not help but notice how elaborately kind one elderly Qatari man was to me when I boarded the ship, bringing me water and offering me a seat. By contrast, he was outright disdainful and rude to a nearby Dutch family, the female members being dressed in revealing tank tops and extremely short shorts. It was a small, but remarkable contrast, which clearly indicated his willingness to extend the much-touted Qatari hospitality to some but not others.

A second and much more dramatic encounter occurred for one of the female competitors at Worlds. The Norwegian rider Susanne Andersen was hit by a police car as she rode her bike back to her hotel, just after winning the bronze medal in the women's junior road race. One of the other selfie contest winners from Sweden told me about it, saying only that 'a man' had hit the girl 'because she was wearing shorts.' She was, after all, clad in tight lycra shorts and short-sleeves, as most racers are. However, I was immediately sceptical, thinking this was either complete fiction or an Orientalist lens taken to a non-motivated accident. I heard nothing more about it after that brief exchange and, in fact, nor did anyone else: the international media only corroborated the story one month later, when the Norwegian Cycling Federation broke its silence. The country's Director of Sport, Hans Falk, explained to a Norwegian broadcaster TV2: 'We were encouraged not to report the case to the police, and told that [if we did] we would not then be allowed out of the country. We thought it was best that Susanne came home before the case took a more serious turn.' Indeed, the UCI's statement to sports reporters upon the news breaking internationally was that, 'The matter was dealt with at the time and referred to the public authorities via the Local Organising Committee' (Robertshaw 2016). Nothing more is known about what happened after that 'referral.'

The cover-up itself galled some in the cycling community, especially those critics of UCI's decision to host Worlds in Qatar, who have framed it as a perniciously corrupt and nondemocratic country. Yet it did not stop there: another layer was added by Falk's statements, which slotted well into broader geopolitical

narratives in the West about the lack of tolerance and respect for women (and their public dress) in the Middle East. Falk was emphatic in his belief that the collision was intentional: 'I am convinced that it was a deliberate action by the policeman who drove right into Susanne. I cannot say for sure, but there were no skid marks, and he showed no empathy. Instead he lit a cigarette and talked on the phone oblivious to the girl who was lying on the ground and screaming' (quoted in Robertshaw 2016). In the full interview with footage of event available online, he adds: 'When she was brought to the ambulance, I was talking to several people and they told me that it is not unusual that a girl with cycling shorts gets hit by the car on purpose' (Sky Sports 2016). Indeed, the footage does show the policeman on his phone and smoking, looking quite unrepentant. Yet neither the man's comportment nor Falk's interpretation is any basis for assessing the 'truth' about what happened. Whether Andersen was hit intentionally and, if so why, will remain unknown. Rather than speculating on the issue, though, the incident underscores a crucial dimension of how geopolitics works through the micro-political encounters at international sporting events. First-time visitors to Qatar (or any other host country) invariably bring many assumptions with them about local politics and cultural norms. These are often never engaged explicitly and merely held in the background – unless someone is provoked to discuss them in a conversation or, in a more dramatic scenario, something like Andersen's run-in sparks a set of interactions and news reports that draws them into the open.

Whether they become publicly aired or not, the cultural and political assumptions or stereotypes of visitors comprise a geopolitical imaginary about the host locale and its residents. These imaginaries do not exist in a vacuum, but are shaped by an infinite range of discursive and material experiences prior to a visitor's arrival for the event. They are further shaped and reshaped during the event, as an individual moves through the shifting semiotic landscapes of the venue and engages in various personal encounters. Part of what makes the idea of defining such events around a statist project of promoting 'soft power' agenda so dubious is the fact that these encounters are entirely contingent and individual – and thus so unpredictable. They are nonetheless deeply geopolitical. So despite all the ambitious imaging efforts of the PR team, no one could have foreseen the tragic encounter between Andersen and the driver. The best they and the event organizers could do was try to cover it up and limit wider public exposure. But for both athletes and spectators, visitors and observers from afar, they were all working with a different set of geopolitical imaginaries about Qatar and its people that could

either be reinforced or challenged during the event. In this particular case, unfortunately, the incident rather reinforced for Western audiences the image of intolerance that the Qatari hosts wanted to combat by hosting the elite cycling event in the first place.

Conclusion

This article set out to challenge narrow readings of sporting events beyond the Western 'core' as motivated by elite 'soft power' agendas by showing how statist approaches can divert attention from other actors and power relations, which exist outside the obvious domain of formal politics and decision-making. The 2016 UCI Road Cycling World Championships in Doha was a week-long event that mobilized diverse individuals and materialities to bring it to life, leading to a wide range of encounters that I have described as geopolitical. Through the interactions made possible by the event, people came to shape their understanding of the Middle East, Qatar, Qataris and other residents, as well as one another. Opening up new sites of geopolitical encounter, subjects and spaces were not predetermined, but actively constituted through these interactions. Although the event organizers used the sophisticated media training and technologies at their disposal to craft the image of Qatar as an ultra-modern and inclusive polity in the Middle East, this imaging could not permeate all interactions or conversations that unfolded over the life of the event, nor could it fundamentally transform preexisting geopolitical imaginaries of its diverse participants and audiences. Yet by employing an event ethnography approach, I have aimed to highlight when, where, and how the imaging campaign failed, and what other scripts differently-positioned actors advanced. The very fact that the QOC chose *me* as a selfie contest winner may well be one of those failures, but the opportunity gave me a unique insight into why these extravagantly-funded events persist across the Gulf states.

This case study has also aimed to broaden the understanding that scholars and policymakers have about the significance of second-tier events, as well as broader logics of boosterism around creating 'sporting cities' beyond the Western core. Like their neighbours in the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, Qatar's leaders are relentlessly optimistic about the ability to transform international opinion about their country and to position it as a leader of the entire Middle East region. With funds from the state's deep coffers available (till now) to undertake this optimistic agenda, crafting their capitals as modern hubs for elite sport presents a

unique opportunity to stand out as exemplary in the region. In addition to financial resources, they can also draw on the energies of their staff, which is endlessly ambitious and, because they are almost entirely foreign guest workers, extremely eager to please.

Yet as skilled as their communications teams may be, some factors simply cannot be controlled. Whether this takes the shape of fans not showing, critical athletes, intolerant locals, or outspoken residents, hosting such an event (and boosterist 'sporting city' development more generally) necessarily works in and through prevailing power structures. The case of 2016 Worlds in Qatar illustrates that the result is a contingent outcome of geopolitical encounters, both physically embodied and filtered through individuals' interpretive lenses, which are just as likely to affirm official narratives as to reject them. Nonetheless, in the months since the country became subject to a regional blockade in June 2017, Qatar's leaders have doubled down on their international imaging projects and seem to be clinging to a relentless optimism that a good media campaign might overcome the paralyzing geopolitical rifts in the Arabian Peninsula (Koch 2017). The hubris of such a top-down vision suggests that they too might benefit from a more grounded understanding of geopolitical encounters, which I have sought to illustrate through this event ethnography of Worlds in Doha.

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