

Ripples without Estimation

Gille, Zsuzsa. 2014. "Transnational Materiality." In *Framing the Global: Entry Points for Research*, ed. Hilary Kahn. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Reviewed by Mohanalakshmi Rajakumar, Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar

As the female child of immigrant parents, the traditional rites of passage for the American teenage experience passed me by. Friday night basketball games, with their post-dinner start times and close to midnight endings, were inappropriate for a respectable young lady from India. No sleepovers, or summer camps, and I didn't spend a night out until I moved out of my family home to attend college at the then all-female Peace College. Two years later, I still needed parental permission to travel without accompanying family to study abroad in China. A permission slip stood between me and six weeks of exploration. Yet my parents ultimately permitted me to study Chinese with 15 other students in China because, as my father put it, "We don't want to stand in the way of your education." Four years later, my brother's summer of French language study morphed into a year and a half spent in Europe. His extension included an unplanned stop in Italy to pick up an additional Romance language, along with some culinary skills. We were the wonder of our family and the envy of friends.

However, from the perspective of millennial college students, neither of our experiences is that exceptional. Studying abroad has become synonymous with the U.S. university experience. Were we in university now, either of us could participate in summer- and semester-long programs led by faculty on cruise ships, stopping into ports at various locales around the globe, while sitting in class on board learning about culture, literature, or language.

The value of international education and the globalization of the U.S.'s largest corporation—universities—have expanded the possibilities of international education. International branch campuses (IBCs) are an educational phenomenon that challenge the ethnocentric assumptions of international education. They are the result of social, cultural, and economic choices undertaken by U.S. higher education administrators as well as the educational bodies in foreign countries.

Zsuzsa Gille, in her chapter from the edited volume *Framing the Global: Entry Points for Research* (2014), explains how the physical world contributes to the construction of social institutions, and her theory is useful in understanding the complex network that makes IBCs possible. She examines how "socio-material assemblages," a phrase she uses in place of institutions, are a way to further understand issues related to the globalization of U.S. education. We must, she reminds us, consider the myriad forces that influence commodities on the international market (Gille 2014, 159).

We should consider IBCs as "socio-material assemblage" created through the resources earned by foreign governments from the global capital markets. The Arabian Gulf countries, including Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates, have aggressively pursued an agenda of educational development that

prioritizes relationships with high-ranking U.S. universities, enticing them to set up cobranded branch campuses. The higher education projects in the Gulf are intersections of local, translocal, and transnational educational agents (Gille 2014, 163).

Since the late 1990s, Gulf monarchies have been able to pursue such agreements because of rising oil prices. One result of the switch from coal to oil was the rise of the Gulf monarchies and the petrodollar. The petrol and natural gas powering the SUVs driven across North America is an example of the materiality of the global economy. In the case of the Arabian Gulf, these petrodollars have funded the expansion of U.S.-style education. The benevolent, male, Gulf monarch leads his nation toward progress by providing his citizens access to a Western education from within their own borders and cultural context.

In her work, Gille measures the benefits of globalization through the concrete practices humans relate to, in particular, economic activity (Gille 2014, 162). A U.S. university housed in a marble and glass building, designed by Mexican architects, and paid for by Gulf Arabs is further evidence of the built materiality of globalization. We can see the dynamics of socio-material assemblage at work in the case study of the multiversity Education City (EC) in Doha, Qatar, one of the largest and most ambitious American IBCs in the world. The EC project is the flagship of the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development (QF). It features the branch campuses of six U.S. universities that were established in succession over an 11-year period: Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar (1998); Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar (1999); Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar (2004); Texas A&M University at Qatar (2003); Georgetown University, School of Foreign Service in Qatar (2005); and Northwestern University in Qatar (2009). Instruction at the branch campuses is conducted in English. Due to the coeducational nature of the classrooms, the first in the country, the QF branch campuses are perceived as liberal, and because of the high cost of tuition when compared with other educational institutions in Qatar, they are often considered elitist. However, the branch campuses charge the same tuition as their main campus counterparts in the United States. Qatari students do not pay back student loans in the traditional monetary sense of debt. Rather, government ministries sponsor their education, or private entities in the oil and gas sector finance their degrees. Qatari graduates pay back their tuition in professional service as employees of their sponsors' organizations.

Gille is concerned with the interactions between the physical world and the humans who occupy specific spaces. She outlines the ways in which nature, manmade objects, and our bodies occupy space. In this sense, Qatar is a foreign place for most participants in the EC project because the temperatures and arid climate make the Arabian Desert one of the harshest environments on earth; in the summer, temperatures soar over 100 degrees Fahrenheit or 40 degrees Celsius. The physical makeup of the multiversity campus that is Education City is a simulacrum for Gille's insistence on analyzing the materiality of a space. Each university is assigned a building constructed for a specific purpose and crafted with input from representative teams across the functions of the institutions, alongside their assigned design architect. EC is five square miles, making it more comparable to a small liberal arts college than a land grant university. Yet, because of the contractual agreements with the Foundation, each university operates on its own prerogative, rather than as a cohesive whole.

A heightened awareness and undercurrent of competition persists between the institutions' faculty, and even among the students. Tension has been growing between faculty as they compete with other universities and their own colleagues for grant money from the Qatar National Research Fund, a research funding group in the style of the U.S. National Science Foundation. Year after year, the majority of the funds go chiefly to engineers, medical doctors, and increasingly, the energy sector. IBCs replicate the dynamics of U.S. academic research, both the positive and negative.

These distinctions are not lost on students, who are well aware of circulating stereotypes of their counterparts at other universities: "I don't like Georgetown girls, they are snobby," said one of my VCUQatar students. To rise above the specificity of buildings and reputation, faculty members need something that is very rare in expatriate circles: enough time spent in-country to meet others outside of their own organization who share their research interests. Collaborations do occur, but over the span of years, the faces around the water cooler—like social milieu of employer-provided living spaces—grow less and less familiar. I was able to convince a chemistry colleague to participate in a housing and residence life panel on diversity, from the sidelines of our children's weekly sports class. I considered this a successful attempt at multitasking, and an example of the possible educational collaborations of the present. Even as we were discussing our plans, my colleague said, "Seven years, I'm thinking it's time to move on." A few weeks later, on the same sidelines of the same sports class, he begged off the panel because of his considerable academic search committee responsibilities. The pressure to produce concrete collaborative efforts is real because at some point, everyone has to move on. The considerations facing faculty at IBCs are indicative of many key considerations for the future of global education, including the erosion of the tenure track faculty system.

While colleagues in the United States gain tenure, those who have taught in EC find themselves back on the job market. Tenure is a luxury in Qatar and other IBCs will not offer it; the possibility of permanent, lifelong employment and the attendant intellectual freedom is not linked to academic programs that are offered on 10 year-contracts between universities and the Foundation. "Oh that lecture was cancelled because someone in administration didn't like the speaker," a colleague said while passing me in the hallway. No one wants to raise a cry, or an eyebrow, to suggest this is an infringement on academic freedom because to do so would be tantamount to deportation. That is the consideration that tinges every decision, the lingering reminder that there is no security.

Examining the IBCs exposes the underlying power inequalities between branch campuses and their main campus sponsors. The main campus of a U.S. university that decides to establish an IBC in the Middle East or Asia becomes a transnational organization at the very moment the agreement is signed between the home institution and the overseas campus. Hiring international faculty and staff, admitting a diverse undergraduate population, and modifying customs to suit a new context transforms any educational institution, which previously operated as a quasi-nonprofit covering its costs through tuition and donors, into a multinational corporation earning revenue for its main campus.

For students who are receiving some of the best education that such a project can offer, the results are also mixed. Many international students and children of longtime residents of Qatar will not be able to find employment after they cross the stage at graduation because of the nationalization of the labor force. They are also

being inculcated in an entrepreneurial, American-centric worldview that values hard work and ingenuity. Upon graduation, however, this worldview puts them at odds with a stratified professional workforce that values degrees not broad-based education. “My parents didn’t want me to study design,” is a common refrain from the students at VCUQatar; equally repeated are the warnings against politics or journalism, though not surprising in the regions of the Middle East and South Asia with state-controlled media and totalitarian regimes.

So what is the EC project about? The beauty of it is that no one person really knows. We could ask the sponsor and mastermind, Qatar Foundation. They reply that they are focused on human capacity development. We could ask the twenty-three-year-old, unmarried, female petroleum engineering major and she would say, to make her a better mother. The power of the IBC is that no one can predict the ensuing ripples into the societies in which such projects are based, just as my family could not have predicted the results of my own experiment with studying abroad.

Four years after my first trip to China, my younger brother went to France for a semester abroad. He extended his international education with a summer of teaching English in the French countryside and a few weeks in an apartment in Italy before his much-awaited return home. As a male, he was entitled to more leeway, but his explorative semester and summer were part of his curriculum whereas mine had been merely elective. In the four years between our journeys, the way in which U.S. universities thought about study abroad had shifted dramatically.

My brother and I bookend the Gen X generation. By the time we entered university, even as children raised in the United States by Indian immigrants, diversity, multiculturalism, and Kwanzaa were household names. During my high school years in our north Florida town, few of our white friends ever asked to eat Indian food with us, but by the time graduate school found me bleary eyed and in the convenience store on campus, I could reach for supermarket sushi.

In the 10 years since I moved to the Gulf, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the push for democracy in the Arab world, and more recently, the Syrian refugee crisis have brought issues of Islamic identity and Muslim cosmopolitanism into the 24-hour news stream. During this decade, students I taught have graduated, entered the workforce, married, and become parents. As they raise the next generation of leaders facing decisions about women’s mobility and juggling the considerations of religion within a pluralistic society, we will see the social fabric bend and stretch. For this is the real challenge facing the IBC: to produce graduates who are every bit as influential as those who earn degrees on the main campus. In the case of the Arabian Gulf, where family and tribal prestige still carry considerable social weight, the individual in society is every bit, if not slightly more, important than the academic pedigree. Increasingly, university classrooms in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries are populated by highly motivated women who outnumber the men by ratios as high as 6:1. For them, professionalization means they can delay marriage and even be choosier in their selection of a marriage partner. However, the patriarchal social structure still privileges men as heads of households, higher wage earners, and providers of the family and thus eligible for certain allowances such as housing.

American students are persuaded to study internationally to gain an awareness and appreciation of the values and customs of other societies and become global citizens. The next push in international education will be to help students of diverse backgrounds and in myriad locations contextualize their educational experience to

improve their corner of the world. Rebecca Harvey (2014) is right to remind us that the specificity of the local contains the global. Having eaten a McDonald's burger with my Lebanese student living in Qatar, I couldn't agree more.

References

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