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Barriers to Creative Writing Among University Students in Qatar

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ABSTRACT

Matthew Salesses (2021) asks "How can we rethink craft, and the teaching of it, to better reach writers with diverse backgrounds? How can we invite diverse storytelling traditions into literary spaces?" This paper applies these questions to students in the Arab Gulf, by presenting and analysing the results of a research project investigating the barriers (culturally, locally, and in terms of colonial conceptions of craft) that impede student creative writers in Qatar. Aided by a Provost Grant from Northwestern University, we carried out interviews among students from a range of universities in Qatar in order to catalogue local writing habits, beliefs, and practices. We applied a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; Russell and Vallade 2010) of the interview transcripts we had generated, coding the qualitative data set to identify, analyze, and note emerging patterns. This paper contextualizes the background to education, culture, and creative writing in the region, and then proceeds to discuss the results of the thematic analysis by examining the key emergent themes that affect students in Qatar, namely issues of defining creativity; educational backgrounds and pressures; family influence on study, hobbies and career paths; and the effects of the local culture. The results thus reveal much about the socio-cultural barriers and ensuing internal conflicts regarding pursuing creative writing among students in the region. The paper concludes by discussing how the results of the study might be used to help adapt thinking about creative writing conceptualisation and courses to better benefit specific local communities.

INTRODUCTION

Much contemporary creative writing scholarship is focused on decolonizing the field and re-evaluating the assumptions that we (consciously or unconsciously) propagate both in practice and in the classroom. In 2021, books by Felicia Rose Chavez and Matthew Salesses both made it clear that traditional notions of craft are bound up with institutional and systemic conceptions of race, class, gender and sexuality. Salesses in particular asks, "How can we rethink craft, and the teaching of it, to better reach writers with diverse backgrounds? How can we invite diverse storytelling traditions into literary spaces?" (vii). Our starting point for the research project discussed in this paper was to apply these questions to a specific context: higher education classrooms in the country we live and work in: Qatar. We decided to investigate the conception and practice of creative writing in Qatar, by seeking to clarify and analyze the barriers (culturally, locally, and in terms of colonial conceptions of craft) that impede student writers in Qatar from writing.

What stops students from taking up creative writing? The question may appear, at first glance, a simple one. But from experience of classrooms in the region, it appears that interest in creative writing may depend on a range of social, cultural, and field-specific beliefs and assumptions. Johnathon Mauk has argued that "the physical geography of an institution, and the human geography which surrounds and constitutes it, have an impact on the topography of…courses – and ultimately influence the success (or failure) of pedagogical strategies" (374), and it therefore seems vital to interrogate the beliefs surrounding writing from a localized and intersectional standpoint in order to adapt courses and pedagogies accordingly. This is what we seek to do by investigating the barriers that stop students from taking up creative writing in Qatar.

The results of our investigation have revealed much about the socio-cultural barriers and ensuing internal conflicts regarding pursuing creative writing among students in the region. This paper will discuss the results of this research, the themes that emerged from our data, and how these findings might be used to help adapt local practices and pedagogies.

CONTEXT

Qatar is a small country: a sovereign Arab state that borders Saudi Arabia on the south and is surrounded by the Arabian Gulf. It is also a place of rich diversity, and the race to create the infrastructure necessary for the FIFA 2022 World Cup in Qatar has led to the population in the country growing dramatically. Qatar has rapidly transitioned from a tribal society to a globalized state; workers of all levels and from a vast number of nationalities have flocked to the country, with the side effect that non-Qatari's currently make up the vast majority: in the last official count in 2019, Qataris made up just 10.5 % of the population (Snoj). This means a range of cultures, ideas, expectations, and backgrounds all co-exist and intermingle, and nowhere more so than in education settings.

For most of its history, the *Khaleeji* traditions that existed in Qatar consisted of a strong oral storytelling culture. *Khaleeji* histories, knowledges and stories were passed down orally from generation to generation (Wu Lee & Van de Logt 20). Storytelling has thus always been a fundamental aspect of the region's culture. In the twentieth century, however, the structure of education began to change; as a former British colony, some of the government structures and public services which developed back in the 1950s did so under the influence and counsel of the British, leading to an English-medium education in most schools (Brewer et al 10). In recent years, the abundance of English-medium schools has raised concerns that Qatar is losing touch with its traditional culture due to this colonial influence, which was made more evident by Qatar University's shift from an English curriculum back to an Arabic one in the last ten years.

Though the society is largely stratified, with little interaction, for example, between the immigrant labourers building the world cup stadiums and Qatari families, the classroom can be seen as an exception to this stratification. As well as schools catering to many different expat populations (Indian Schools, Filipino Schools, Finnish Schools, Spanish Schools, and American and British schools are just some of the private institutions that exist alongside local Arabic schools), the higher education sector also offers many diverse opportunities. The oldest university is the publicly funded Qatar University, which was established by the then Emir Khalifa bin Hamad Al Thani in 1977. In 1995, Her Highness Sheikha Mozah helped establish the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science, and Community Development as a way to supplement QU and promote more educational opportunities in Qatar. Qatar Foundation's overall mission is to "raise both the competency of individuals and the quality of life in Qatar through investments in human capital, innovative technology, state-of-the-art facilities, and partnerships with elite international organizations." (Brewer et al 13). Established in 1997, this initiative, making up Education City, includes branch campuses of affiliate institutions such as the Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts, the Weill Cornell Medical College, Carnegie Mellon University, Texas A&M University, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service, and Northwestern University. This is a clearly a growing trend, given that "The number of American, English and Australian branch campuses in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region almost doubled between 2000–2007 from 140 to 260, and Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) alone have established over 40 branch campuses during this period" (Weber 60). In this way, the average classroom here is diverse in both composition and outlook; studying alongside Qataris are a large number of students from across the MENA region and South-East Asia, and also an increasing population from China, East Africa, and Eastern Europe. For instance, at Northwestern University in Qatar, from which many of our participants were recruited, the student body is composed of over 50 different nationalities ("Our People").

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This environment is both unique and broadly representative of many global classrooms, in that diversity is the norm. Yet the distinctions are interesting. We were well aware that "Research that does not account for the complexity of localization may only bring knowledge back to the 'centre' and reinforce North/South divisions, doing little to benefit the research locale" (Zenger 142) and so we aimed to focus on the unique complexities of this multicultural learning environment. For instance, though many (but not all) classes are taught in Arabic at Qatar University, all learning is carried out in English at the international branch campuses, even though it may be the second or third language for the majority of the students. In these same campuses, largely American or Western educational curriculums are followed (following the curricula of the home campus in Texas, Virginia, Evanston, etc.), despite the setting being the middle of a peninsula in the Arabian Gulf.

Though creative writing is not offered as a major in any of the universities or branch campuses in Qatar, elective three-credit undergraduate courses that fulfil humanities degree requirements (especially in majors such as Journalism, Communication, Art History, and Graphic Design) are offered at a number of institutions (particularly Virginia Commonwealth and Northwestern) and extra-curricular evening creative writing courses have been offered at Hamad Bin Khalifa University. These undergraduate courses range from 200-level introductory courses (such as survey-type courses on creative writing, or Introduction to Poetry) to 300-level workshops and in-depth courses that entail the creation of a portfolio of writing (such as Writing Short Fiction, or Memoir). Local instructors tend to teach creative writing courses as process-led (helping students to develop ways to conceptualise and discuss writing, and to build their own individual writing practice) rather than vocational, and situate the courses within their institutions as opportunities for students to develop their critical and creative skills, habits and awareness. However, enrollment tends to be low, and moreover anecdotal evidence from course fairs, local events (both student- and public-oriented), and in-class discussions reveals a lack of awareness of the availability, purpose and even definition of creative writing as a subject. Both this specific context and the unique educational environment in Qatar provided the impetus for this study.

Moreover, in a broader sense, research carried out among the student population here also offers a lens to consider the colonial aspects of Western educational (and cultural) hegemony, and also a provides a diverse sample of global perspectives.

METHODOLOGY

Aided by a Provost Grant from Northwestern University, our team of researchers carried out interviews of local students from a range of universities in Qatar and collated the gathered information about their writing practices, and beliefs about creative writing. Our initial research questions were designed to elicit students' own accounts of their perspectives and experiences. This therefore

determined both the interview questions and the subsequent analysis. We were able to interview 30 current undergraduate students in Qatar, making sure our data poll covered a range of genders, ethnicities, nationalities, educational backgrounds, and current institutions. This is of course a limited data corpus, so the analysis shown here is necessarily also limited, and yet it provides important revelations and pathways to further study and research.

We were influenced by research done in the field of composition, where much work has been done on using local responses to surveys and interviews to adapt courses and programs of study (particularly Anderson et al; and Miller et al), and which prioritize engaging with students from a range of backgrounds and listening to underrepresented voices. To widen access, we recruited participants via posters put up in the university campuses across Qatar; this poster was also shared via email to different departments at these universities and, in a few cases, shared via those universities' social media accounts. We offered participants a QAR 100 Amazon gift card for taking part in the interview.

Each interview was 30 minutes, and conducted online using the Zoom Meetings platform. As Kirsch and Ritchie point out, "researchers cannot assume that they understand what is relevant in the lives of others or even what are the important questions to ask, research participants must be invited to articulate research questions, to speak for themselves, to choose the occasions for and forms of representing their experiences" (13), and therefore our questions were designed by students in Qatar for students in Qatar. The interviews were semi-structured: each interviewer asked the same five questions, but also asked follow-up questions to elicit further clarification or details based on information given in the participants' responses, and to therefore make the interview closer in format to a conversation. Each interviewee was sent an informed consent form beforehand which detailed the background and purpose of our study, the potential risks and benefits involved and our confidentiality and payment procedures. While there were few risks associated with participating in the study (specifically the minimal psychological harm of embarrassment or distress if the interviewee were to have an emotional reaction to any of the questions asked), we confirmed that they may refrain from answering any of the questions and/or leave the interview at any point, and that this would not have any negative effect on them, their payment or the study. Our confidentiality measures comprised keeping the collected study data in a password-protected folder, which only the primary investigator and the researchers of the study would have access to. Furthermore, the data was anonymised by the interviewer assigning each of their participants a code number. We also let the participants know that the data will be destroyed in five years after the interview. The participants were also made aware that the School of Foreign Service in Qatar Institutional Review Board (IRB-Q) and the Supreme Council of Health of Qatar would be allowed to access their study records if there was any need to review the data for any reason.

For the interviews, we focused on five interview questions to identify the main barriers to writing in their own educational and personal experiences, as well as the proviso that each question would be followed up with prompts that would encourage participants to elaborate and speak freely and at length on their answers. These questions focused on students' past writing experiences, and current writing habits, practices and opportunities. After explaining the purpose of our study and informing participants that the audio of the interview would be recorded for transcription and analysis purposes only, we began by asking about the types of creative writing the participants were most familiar with, and what forms of creative writing they had engaged with in the past (whether in educational environments or in their own free time). We then proceeded to ask participants what kind of creative writing they currently do, their motivations behind this writing, and what potential barriers stopped them or inhibited them from writing more. We ended the interviews by asking what kind of resources or opportunities might make the participants more inclined to take part in creative writing in the future. Please see Appendix A for the Interview Protocol and Script. These one-on-one interviews were then transcribed verbatim. The study was ethically approved by the Georgetown University Institutional Review Board (IRB protocol number IRBSITE00001513).

We applied a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke; Russell and Vallade) in our analysis of the interview transcripts we had generated. Thematic analysis is a method for analyzing qualitative data that involves searching across the data set to identify, analyze, and note emerging patterns (Braun and Clarke), and it therefore served to help us gain not only an understanding of the emergent themes but also a process for their analysis in order to understand and speak to a set of experiences and beliefs that were expressed across the data set. As Maguire and Delahunt point out, this is a "very flexible method", and this "means that, unlike many qualitative methodologies, it is not tied to a particular epistemological or theoretical perspective" (3352). This therefore freed us as researchers to focus solely on any emerging patterns in the data rather than view the results through a preconceived lens. We followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework for thematic analysis: becoming familiar with the data; generating codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and analyzing; writing up (16). We were primarily concerned with addressing our specific research questions, and so for our process we followed a theoretical thematic analysis (rather than an inductive analysis) whereby we used manual open-coding to identify and code each part of the data that spoke to barriers, reluctance, frustration, constraints, confusion, complication, environment, experience, and beliefs around writing. Our familiarity with the data from the first step led us to manually generate these codes that could be modified and developed throughout the process, which in turn led us to search, review, and finally define themes. In so doing, at the fifth step of analysis we identified and characterized four main reasons that impede student writers in this region.

The sample of participants was broadly representative in terms of intersectional identities, educational backgrounds, and institutional enrolment in Qatar, and as such offers an important window into the local barriers and conceptions that stop students in the region from taking up creative writing.

THEME 1: DEFINITION

One theme that emerged from our coding was the issue of confusion over what exactly constituted "creative writing." Despite a basic definition being included in our interview script (where we noted that "When we talk about creative writing in this interview, what we mean is the creation of original writing that expresses ideas and thoughts in an imaginative way. Examples of this include poetry, short stories, flash fiction, scripts, screenplays, songs, memoir, and novels") many of the subjects expressed a degree of uncertainty about whether or not what they had done in the past, or were doing in the present, constituted creative writing.

This is, in some ways, to be expected. Definitions of creative writing have changed as the academic discipline has evolved over the past century and as programs have emerged in different countries around the world, as well as in response to popular reading and writing habits. Different contexts also affect the ways we think about writing; we live "in an era of blurred generic boundaries, multimedia storytelling, and open-source culture" and this affects conceptions of creative writing (Koehler 380). However, the scale of the lack of clarity about the distinctions of creative writing was surprising.

At first we noted this as a limitation of our study (and of the clarity of our definition). Our definition was based on a large sample of definitions given on university websites, specifically on the pages that introduce their creative writing programs. As such, we soon realized that we were to a certain extent imposing a Western-centric notion of what creative writing is (particularly within a higher education setting), and that is likely to have therefore influenced participants' responses. However, as well as a limitation, it soon became clear that this was a theme that emerged through analysis of the transcripts. Coding for this theme allowed us to identify an issue at the heart of creative writing study, particularly in a global environment: that students (and indeed researchers) are frequently uncertain of the relationships and boundaries between literature, creative writing, and composition. For instance, Participant 15 noted that they learned to write both short essays and short stories in a composition class at middle school, while Participant 16 talked about being asked to write a story in a first-year undergraduate composition class at their current institution.

Meanwhile, more than a third of our participants talked about poetry and short stories mainly in relation to literature classes. This is revealing, particularly about the blurred line between literature and creative writing. The distinction is often unclear: analysis of poetic tools is fundamental in learning to write and produce poetry, as well as in learning to create a literary analysis. It

is unsurprising that students might show confusion about the distinction between creative writing and the study of literature, especially since creative writing courses, minors, and even full degree programs are often embedded within more established English Literature departments at a large number of universities. Institutional structuring is, in this sense, mirrored in students' own confusion about where literature ends and creative writing begins. Gerald Graff has noted that the traditional division between literary study and creative writing is rooted in "an opposition between creativity and criticism that lies deep in the roots of modern culture" (278), but this is to suggest that modern culture is monolithic. What many Western-centric views of this opposition ignore or elide is the fact that in this distinction between reading and writing, indeed between studying and making, does not exist to the same degree in much of the world.

This confusion over the broad scope and meaning of creative writing encompassed a range of genres, with, for instance, Participant 24 expressing confusion about whether journal entries 'counted' as creative writing and others talking about essays and diary entries. This uncertainty mirrors ongoing negotiation and contention within the field itself. Indeed, debates within the scholarly world of creative writing reflect the lack of clarity that this theme illustrates. In the *Writer's Chronicle*, the former executive director of AWP argued that "the goal of creative writing is to [enable students to] become, first and foremost, accomplished writers who make significant contributions to contemporary literature. All the other goals…are ancillary to that artistic goal" (Fenza in Mayers 19). Yet this narrow definition is certainly not shared by all practitioners or instructors in the field, and serves to add to the kind of confusion that a number of our student participants expressed. This kind of definition has also, in part, led to the recent critical distinction being made in the field between creative writing and creative writing studies. Tim Mayers delineates the two as follows: "creative writing is the academic enterprise of hiring successful writers…to teach college-level creative writing courses", while creative writing studies "is a still-emerging enterprise that has been set in motion by some of the problems and internal contradictions of creative writing. Creative writing studies is a field of scholarly inquiry and research" (222). These distinctions make for important scholarly discussion and debate, but they also potentially add to the confusions facing students considering creative writing (or creative writing studies) as an academic or extracurricular pursuit. Such distinctions also remind us that creative writing remains a relatively new academic discipline (particularly outside the US) and as such its parameters and definition may not be as well established in many students' minds as more traditional academic subjects.

This lack of clarity over the definition of creative writing is, in and of itself, not a direct barrier, but it is revealing for both educators and scholars. It also suggests that educational backgrounds and practices play a key role in the conceptualization of creative writing both as an activity and potential area of study.

THEME 2: EDUCATION

Multiple participants reported that their education poses a barrier to engaging in creative writing. While this is a broad theme, many participants narrowed it down to several key issues, such as the intensity of the university workload restricting time and energy that could be spent on creative pursuits or courses, the lack of creative writing opportunities and encouragement within classrooms, and the pressure of being graded for their creative writing

The majority of participants mentioned that they do not have the time and/or energy to engage in creative writing while at university. There is an assumption that students at the higher education level can handle an increased number of responsibilities, but studies have shown that this increase in workload and pressure overwhelms a large number of students and facilitates the perception that there is not enough time to complete all tasks (Baghurst & Kelley 238). This was reflected in our data, and was expressed by participants who used to do creative writing prior to university and those who had not. Participant 1, whose view reflects a majority of participants, noted that “I’m really worried to fall back on, like, my academics and stuff like this. So I tend to deviate away from doing creative projects and creative writing pieces.” Often in deciding what to prioritize, participants reported that they focused on their studies at the expense of any creative pursuits. In addition, Participant 8 also suggested that “…in college it’s not just like classes are the only things that you have, you have classes, you have social events, you have like, you know, you want to hang out with your friends, you have all these things that you have to keep doing.” This sentiment was repeated frequently across interviews, and suggests that even when creative writing was appealing to students, limited time meant that it was passed over for more urgent concerns. In other words, unless students were already studying creative writing (or had plans to study it), the situational context of higher education pressures in Qatar meant that students passed over creative writing both in terms of elective courses and as a hobby, in favour of focusing on their studies and social life.

Moreover, many participants reported that focus on the act of writing itself was an issue. Studies have shown that students with high study-related exhaustion struggle mentally, especially with increased workload times, which means their exhaustions bleed into other aspects of their lives (Räisänen et. al 1148-1149). This explains why many participants felt they did not have enough energy left from studying to do creative writing. Participant 10 elaborated: “I have poured in so much creative energy and just writing for my assignments that I don’t want to think and write more about, for a story or for creative writing.” Other participants clarified that since writing constitutes so much of a university student’s workload, it is less appealing to engage with this medium in a creative way. Participant 9 summed up this viewpoint: “So one of the main reasons why I don’t like writing is because it consumes my life, already. Academically, that’s all I do. And also, like, work and internship wise, that’s all I do.” Participants’ exhaustion from studying clearly has a direct

effect on their desire to actively engage in creative writing.

Engagement in creative writing for university students in Qatar was most frequently reported when it was incentivized; namely, when it was part of a course assignment or class activity. While some participants talked about their experiences taking specific creative writing classes like screenwriting and short fiction, a number of participants enthused about creative writing activities in other classes. For instance, a number of students brought up the creative journaling they had done in composition courses, with Participant 8 reporting that "I found those particularly fun because I didn't really have to plan anything for the way I'll note it down. It was just like little stories, little events, little things that happened. I quite enjoyed that." Similarly, Participant 3 noted how being required to create a blog for a course encouraged them to create one filled with their own poetry and micro-fiction. These low stakes activities suggest an appetite for integrating creative writing activities into a range of courses, and further indicate that many students would enjoy engaging with creative writing if only they were more frequently exposed to it. Indeed, for participant 28, creative writing in the classroom led to more writing in their free time after they took a short fiction class. They explained, "That class was like an enabler for me to write because I had to do it for like an assignment. But then when I started, it kind of encouraged me to write a little bit more outside of that class."

In this sense, education is a complex theme: it can act as both a barrier and an enabler. This tension was mentioned by several students who struggled to find a balance between the pressures of higher education and the opportunities it offered, with participant 28 again noting: "But the main barrier is just not feeling like I have enough time or feeling like stressed about university stuff, so I can't like relax and write." Participant 11, who also described how they had been inspired by creative writing classroom activities in the classroom, expressed a similar sentiment: "It was actually the other classes that were very stressful, both journalism and even history class, all of them are slightly pressuring." In this way, external pressures and stresses reduce both interest and ability to engage in creative writing. This is not surprising, since studies have shown that the perception of not having enough time can cause students to feel stressed and anxious and forgo necessary relaxing habits, such as creativity, which will lead to more stress (Robotham 378-379). Therefore, it seems clear that low-stakes exposure creates interest in creative writing, but it is not on its own enough to encourage a consistent writing practice in an environment where grades and graduating are prioritized.

Moreover, the general conception of writing as primarily academic in nature and therefore tied to success appears to have spilled over and tainted student views of creative writing. While this chimes with the first theme we identified (namely confusion over the delineation between creative writing and other forms of writing), it also reveals the beliefs that underly student choices.

Participant 15 expressed a common sentiment when they noted that "whenever I think of writing, it's normally to me just tied with, like, I have an assignment to work on. So it doesn't become fun anymore." The association of writing with scholarly and academic assignments is harmful for student engagement with creative writing, because it both connects the idea of writing with goals, pressure, and work (rather than creativity and pleasure), and also furthers the divide between what students consider older forms of creativity (such as writing) and newer mediums (particularly via social media platforms).

One final barrier that emerged relating to education was the negative reaction of the majority of participants to the idea of being graded for creative work. A large number of students explained that even when they get a chance to do creative writing in the classroom, they feel they cannot be creative as they would like to be because of the pressure of grading and therefore adapting their work to instructor preferences. Studies have indicated that the setting of a grade to an assignment can serve to warp student perception of time management and approach to writing (Ireh 235-236), and the reactions of our participants back this up by demonstrating that (academic) pressure often inhibits student creativity. This is one of the dilemmas of creative writing classrooms; another study focusing on high school instructors recorded that they sometimes avoided teaching students to write poetry because of the difficulty of fairly and encouragingly grading students' poetry (Hughes & Dymoke 49). The issue of grading is a clear inhibitor for students to engage with creative writing in this context. Participant 9 summed up the majority's concerns by noting that "I feel like the classes that are offered for us when it comes to writing, like, although it is creative, like you can't be creative, because at the end of the day, there's one person who's going to be judging you based on that thing. And I feel like creative, anything creative is just subjective, whether it's writing or not, like, someone's just gonna tell you, oh this is bad." Participant 11 further elaborated on this point by explaining what goes through their mind: "I'm not used to having my writings be graded all the time. All of a sudden, I'm sitting, I'm sitting here just thinking, Wait, is this correct? Is this not? And then I'm just stuck." It is unfortunate, therefore, that even when students are offered creative writing courses and have the time to take part in them, preconceptions about how their work might be shared, judged or graded inhibits them from taking such courses or fully engaging with such assignments. Alongside time pressures, the effects of stress, and the conception of writing as an academic activity, concerns over judgement of creative work create barriers to local students engaging with creative writing in universities in Qatar.

THEME 3: FAMILY INFLUENCE

It is not only educational contexts and restrictions that prevent students in Qatar from engaging with creative writing. Family pressures were a clear theme that emerged in our study. This is perhaps not a surprise in a collectivist rather than individualistic Western society, but it was also revealing

that a large number of participants mentioning barriers such as having their parents decide their future career paths, the common cultural inclination in Arab and South-East Asian households toward careers in STEM, and their family's beliefs and assumptions about the financial woes that accompany a career in creative writing. However, it is important to avoid generalizations and to note that at the same time, several participants also described their family's unconditional support for them and their interests, and some who engage with creative writing already noted the influence of family who are involved in the arts. Our findings are thus reflective of the complex relationship that exists between family and creative writing among students studying in Qatar.

Our coding revealed that the primary reason families of students studying in Qatar tend not to support a career in creative writing is due to their fears of financial hardship for their child and their desires for their offspring's future success. Participant 11 noted the widespread concern (echoed by many other participants) that creative writing is not a viable career option: "[My family] definitely were thinking of careers [other than creative writing], careers that can make better money with writing involved in it, because especially here, writing doesn't really get you anywhere." Many participants mentioned that creative writing is not viewed as a viable pursuit by their family. Participant 4 stated that "but it's not really perceived as a career on its own. Not at the get-go, at least. Maybe it could be a creative writer later on when you have a bit more money and a bit more out of a bit of a larger fan base. But from the get-go, you need a job, another job." This reflects the global reality of writing in the modern age; a recent survey by the UK's Society of Authors found that "the average earnings of a full-time writer were just £10,500 even before the health crisis… Meanwhile, most writers need a second job to survive, with just 13.7% of respondents making a living from writing alone without a second job, down from 40% in 2006" (Solomon 2022). It is unsurprising that parents may therefore wish to steer their children towards more secure fields and areas of study and pursuit.

Thus, while strong writing skills are seen as a benefit in terms of future employability, more than half the participants noted that their families viewed creative writing as a hobby rather than something worse studying or pursuing as (part of) a career. This frequently-articulated belief suggests that familiar in this region create and sustain "micro-social environments" that influence how students see and experience the larger world and how they ought to behave within it (Teachman & Paasch 705). The social and cultural beliefs that parents hold about which careers offer more stable salaries and opportunities and, in turn, the encouragement and advice they offer their children about which professional directions and majors to pursue, ultimately shape students' own assumptions, preferences and choices.

In addition, the metrics by which traditional careers are measured (notably title, position, company worked for, and salary) complicate beliefs about creative writing as a worthwhile pursuit. Many of the participants noted that either they themselves or their families did not view any career

related to creative writing or creative endeavours to offer a stable income. Instead, a number of participants noted that careers in STEM are widely prized and encouraged in this region. Participant 13 commented directly on the social and cultural attitudes in the region, noting that "there are cultural aspects to take into account where parents have huge roles in the lives of their children … that keeps family values intact. Parents basically have the last say. And when it comes to jobs, they have their own expectations. So, if I just say, out of nowhere that I want to be a poet, that'll feel like a slap in the face." This was reflected in the response of many participants, who described how their parents urged them to consider technical subjects for study rather than creative or humanities-based ones. This likely stems from the fact that most counties in the MENA region have built their knowledge-based economies from innovation in science and technology (Islam 96), and so reflects the socio-economic context in which the study was carried out. Moreover, STEM has been observed to be the most rapidly growing, lucrative, and in-demand of fields in the MENA region, with its largest established industries comprising of oil and gas, aviation, and healthcare ("Executive Briefing: The Future" 7). The beliefs of our participants thereby align with the economic realities of life in the region. As another example, research carried out at the University of Sydney on women from Arab backgrounds found that their "decisions were joint and interactive where career goals and the means of attaining them were shared and negotiated; however, generally under the control and direction of parents" (Labib). This profound familial influence cannot then be discounted, and it is a stark reminder of the importance of considering this socio-cultural environment when proposing and designing creative writing courses, programs, or community-based initiatives.

The role of family influence in pursuing creating writing as a hobby or course of study is further complicated by the issue of language. Some students professed that their parents placed a higher value in Arabic language and poetry than in writing in English, and so would support efforts in one over the other. On the other hand, however, some participants noted that English was a valued asset in their household. Comparing preconceptions about learning in English and Urdu, for instance, Participant 3 notes that "There's a value in your child speaking and writing in English. They are accepted. Even if it's a curse word, it doesn't seem to matter, nothing happens." This aligns with recent research which suggests that many parents prize English for its "access to employment, a modern identity, information channels, and the global economy" while the native language instead "cultivates and nurtures local, cultural, and societal bonds" (Ashraf). In other words, when English is seen as offering access to employment and socio-economic opportunities, it is prized; but it is often seen as something separate from culture and identity, both things that creative writing both explores and facilitates. The role and nature of English in education is complex: it potentially offers opportunity and privilege, but only in the context of certain activities, careers and fields of study. At the American branch campuses in Doha, creative writing courses are only offered in English, and as such the choice of taking up creative writing is often affected by the cultural assumptions

and beliefs surrounding English in the region. As long as English is linked to the idea of economic advancement and career opportunities for families in this area, it seems likely that students will be steered towards those subjects taught in English that more explicitly align with those goals.

THEME 4: CULTURE

Another barrier to engaging in creative writing that was mentioned by a large number of participants was the lack of a writing culture in Qatar which encourages writing. Many participants voiced the desire for writing opportunities and events which would inspire interest and education about creative writing, and a number expressed frustration at the lack of a writing community, with many mentioning the hunger for local book festivals, writing forums, readings by local authors, and Spoken Word poetry events.

This is not to say that Qatar is devoid of such events. On the contrary, a number of students highlighted local initiatives such as the Ajyal film festival, Outspoken Doha, and the Doha International Book Fair as inspiring venues for creativity. Indeed, Participant 14 described the monthly open mic night run by Outspoken Doha as "a great opportunity for people in Qatar, writers in Qatar, to share their work in front of each other… It was an exciting experience to see that there is such a culture here in Qatar, which was surprising for me to find out." This latter statement highlights the fact that a clear perception exists that Qatar is lacking in a cohesive creative community, and any events or communities that do appear are exceptions that prove the rule. Indeed, many participants mentioned that they knew about a few book festivals and local writing competitions, but the majority affirmed that there were not enough opportunities to create the feeling of a culture or environment that fostered or encouraged writing. For instance, Participant 13 noted that they had not heard of many writing events in Qatar, and furthermore drew an important distinction between reading and writing opportunities, explaining that although there are reading-centric events such as readings by local authors at the Qatar National Library (QNL), there are not enough writing-specific events in Qatar. This sentiment was echoed by a number of participants, who expressed the fact that they would be more likely to take part in writing if they had a local outlet or community in which to share and develop their writing.

Moreover, many participants voiced the idea that a stronger local writing culture in Qatar would likely encourage them to write more. Participant 20, who described themselves as a "Tumblr teen" growing up, explained that their introduction to creative writing was through online international forums. Although they had attended many local events such as the Doha International Book Fair and QNL's National Novel Writing Month, the participant said there was a greater need to create a writing community within the MENA region. They also identified another barrier to a cohesive

writing culture and community in Qatar as the lack of publicity and information around creative writing events and opportunities, which add to the perception that creative writing is a lonely and solitary activity, which dissuades them from engaging

Several participants also linked this to the covid-19 pandemic, mentioning that covid further decreased these few opportunities or moved them online, which reduced the willingness of participants to take part. Participant 10, an avid writer and international student, said, “I don’t think I have come across any (writing events or opportunities in Qatar), but I also haven’t actively tried to look for them, because I’m a very covid-cautious person.” This is unsurprising, and studies have already begun to demonstrate the impact of the pandemic on writers and literary organizations across the world. For example, a survey conducted by the NYC Literary Coalition investigating the impacts of the pandemic in New York City found that one-third of writers lost more than $10,000 in income in 2020 and had to cancel at least 10 income-generation opportunities including live readings and workshops. Similarly, 75 percent of literary organizations across the US suffered financial losses, many of whom had to cancel 25 to 50 in-person events (“PEN America”). These effects are broadly generalizable, since events have been cancelled everywhere during these pandemic years, and these have had a clear effect on literary communities. In Qatar, participants noted that covid has exacerbated a pre-existing problem, by limiting events and attempts to build writing cultures.

Another barrier to engaging in creative writing was the belief that local culture may not be friendly or encouraging to unfettered creativity. Participant 1 noted that they were discouraged from creative writing by the issue of “whether the topic that I’m discussing is going to be accepted by the community like in Qatar for example.” Indeed, it is clear that cultural norms can compel writers to self-censor their work, with recent research suggesting that “In autocratic states, self-censorship often means that the writer is working with the censor in mind, rather than the public, adapting ideas and expressions to suit the prevailing cultural norms. This may be conscious and strategic, or unconscious and the result of the naturalisation of censorship within society” (O’Leary et al). Many participants believed this to be the case in Qatar. For instance, Participant 21 said, “I like to write romance novels, romance stories, [but] I could never publish those here.” They also described the experience of a friend who tried to publish a graphic novel locally and was forced to edit and omit many things from their manuscript which were deemed culturally inappropriate. Local cultural norms impact not just the choice of topics that writers feel comfortable writing about, but also the type of work that local publishers are willing to publish, and in this way self-censorship or fear or offence “not only affects writers, but also publishers, theatre producers and translators who play a role in conveying the work to the public and who also stand to be punished if the work in question is in breach of the rules” (O’Leary et al). Slam poetry events in the US and UK often involve participants commenting on local, national or international political talking points, while

writers in states that do not function as democracies are likely to feel some reticence about publicly sharing political views and commentary. Participant 2 summed up this situation when they noted that everyone was conscious of "the environment in Qatar, like some people write about sexuality, some people write about a lot of controversial things, which they have strong opinions about, and having strong opinions in a Gulf state can at times lead you to a lot of pushback. So I think everyone has, has this kind of a feeling in the back of their minds. And that writing probably never sees the light of day".

Furthermore, this creates an environment where students are not comfortable sharing their work. Participant 29 echoed many other interviewees when they stated that they are put off writing by not feeling comfortable sharing the results: "But I have like an even bigger barrier for me. I don't know how to explain this. But like, kind of a fear of judgment…I'm, like, always so afraid to show them what I write." This suggests the lack of an open and encouraging writing environment is detrimental to creative pursuits. Many participants added that the thought of being judged by those around them for their creativity fills them with anxiety. The effects of such anxieties are thus a barrier to fully engaging in creative writing as students, especially since "Educationally relevant anxieties…have been shown to substantially impact specific forms of achievement and engagement, both in school and in career pursuits." (Daker et al.).

Finally, a number of participants noted that the local writing culture presented a barrier for engaging in creative writing because of the dichotomy between the opportunities provided to local writers and those available to expats. Participant 2 summed up this common conception: "I always find, especially in Qatar, whatever they do for local writers is great. But again, Qatar is comprised of 90% expats. So, you need to also find a way to include voices of people who happen to be living here." A recent study conducted by the University of Jordan on the level of creative writing among non-native Arabic language learners found that 64 percent of students fall in the lower levels of creative writing (Rababah), and in Qatar the majority of expats are non-native Arabic speakers. This therefore further reduces their chances of being able to avail local opportunities for writing that may be offered only in Arabic. Many participants suggested that there should be more opportunities to write in native languages such as Hindi and Filipino to accommodate the interests of Qatar's diverse population.

The absence of a writing culture open to all residents was a clear source of frustration for many participants. The conception that there was a lack of community initiatives, the absence of many opportunities and the language barriers restricting access to the ones that do exist, the effects of covid on writing-focused events and communities, and the fear over breaking cultural norms all contributed to the belief that there is little in the way of support in Qatar for students who want to engage in and develop at creative writing.

LIMITATIONS

While the study has shown important insight into barriers to creative writing for university students in Qatar, there were limitations. Firstly, our sample may not be reflective of all university students in Qatar. The majority of participants ended up being from either Northwestern University in Qatar (NU-Q) or from Qatar University. Furthermore, most of the participants were non-STEM majors. A second limitation is that many participants likely agreed to take part in the interview because they already had some form of interest in creative writing. Only a few participants did not express any interest in creative writing. In this way, the topic of the study may have dissuaded disinterested students from volunteering.

Another limitation of this study, beyond the small data set, was that the interview was optional (though incentivized through a gift voucher for participants) and advertised as a discussion about creative writing: meaning that the body of participants was skewed towards those students who were already interested in (talking about) the topic. Therefore, to a certain extent, the writing beliefs and experiences analyzed in this paper need to be interpreted in a context of motivated participants, interested in talking about writing.

A further limitation was the online method of interviewing students. Due to the pandemic and timing of the study, the interviews were conducted over Zoom. The majority of the interviewees opted to have their cameras switched off, which limited the researchers' ability to analyze and assess participants' facial reactions and body language to gain more insight on their thoughts and feelings about creative writing. Finally, language may have been a barrier to reaching a larger sample of the student population, since interviews were conducted in English. This is the language of instruction at the majority of universities in Qatar, and also serves as the lingua franca; as such a large number of international students arrive in Qatar without much proficiency in Arabic, which is what informed our decision to attempt to reach as diverse a body of participants as possible. However, it is probable that some students who cannot communicate in English, or do not feel comfortable doing so, were therefore excluded.

CONCLUSIONS

These four clear themes emerged from our data highlight the complexity of engaging students with creative writing in Qatar. On close analysis, it is clear that interest in creative writing frequently depends on a range of social, cultural, and local influences and assumptions. What this tells us primarily is that it is vital to localise how we study, teach and talk about creative writing, rather than assume or import global or Western-centric models.

The findings of our thematic analysis of interviews emphasise the need for educators, scholars and community organizers to rethink how we talk about and frame creative writing. A growing body of scholarship is devoted to reconceptualizing creative writing norms and lore through an intersectional lens to promote a more diverse array of voices (Adsit; Chavez; Cruz; Salesses; to name but a few). Much prominence has been given to thinking about intersectional identities in terms of race and gender, yet it is clear from our study that class, cultural context, and socio-economic background also need to be more carefully considered. A number of groups of people are excluded from the world of writing because of familiar or cultural pressures, or because of the conception that writing does not offer any career or financial security. Some ways to begin localising creative writing in Qatar, then, might include encouraging all students to help in the construction of the syllabus and weekly schedule by sharing the texts, approaches and stories that matter to them; integrating professional visits (from publishers, editors, marketing professionals, etc.) into such courses to allay familial and financial concerns; prioritizing individual experiences and knowledges over canonical rules, such as through encouraging reflexive work on how we write and how we are influenced; and by including in classes discussions and examples of how issues of identity (along with pedagogical features of the writing class such as voice, style, authenticity and craft) are intertwined with questions of privilege, power and, frequently, marginalization.

Accardi has suggested that "actively positioning the local at the fore of course design, being responsive to local conditions (to one's students and community) produces an engaging, challenging, and meaningful course" (156). In other words, local concerns and cultures need to be addressed and represented in local courses. This might involve setting up local community open mic events, journals or zines, and professional interactions as part of courses. It is also imperative to provide a wide range of examples of different models and types of texts: Steiner has suggested that access to multicultural literature both confirms that the beliefs, backgrounds and experiences of minority students are valued, and that students are most likely to engage with texts when they see themselves reflected or represented within those narratives. In this way, students from all backgrounds and intersectional positions might be shown that their perspectives and stories are of value.

This study was limited by its small scale, and pertains directly to the specific local situation in Qatar. Yet though the findings are understandably idiosyncratic to this unique context, they also serve as a reminder that all environments and spaces are idiosyncratic, and require a specific and local lens to understand and interact with them. Yet the themes raised in the data are reflective of larger concerns within the field. Institutions across the world are likely to only grow more diverse, and so the issues facing the diverse body of students in Qatar (whether at the national university or at a branch campus of an American institution) are broadly representative and are therefore important for all instructors to consider when planning how to engage with them in higher education

environments: concerns over what creative writing really is and how it intersects with other forms of writing; lack of time to focus on creativity and lack of value placed on such pursuits; lack of opportunity and exposure to writing communities; and the effects of familial and social pressures. The conclusions are clear. More work needs to be done to understand these barriers and to study how educational, scholarly and community initiatives can transform or break down said barriers. There is no one-size-fits-all way of engaging with diverse groups of student writers, and so the first step in localising and decentering creative writing pedagogy and practices has to be understanding the specific needs and concerns of local groups, communities and individuals.

Most vitally, the data indicated the paramount importance of specific cultural and socio-economic contexts. Patrick R. Grzanka has noted that "space and place are integrally implicated in the structural elements of intersectional oppression", and it is clear that institutions cannot just import US or globalized models that do not cater to the concerns and needs of local students. One starting point would be to question the assumptions surrounding English as the default medium of instruction and scholarship for creative writing. This is particularly true in a postcolonial environment, since "As a pedagogical tool prone to fostering prejudicial thinking, monolingualism in English is colonialist and outdated. In the multilingual field…it is also simply inadequate" (Cruz 21). Creative writing courses, programs, and publishing must adapt to local contexts rather than attempting to impose a 'global' notion of writing on them. Junot Díaz has noted that his own MFA experiences were "Too white as in my workshop reproduced exactly the dominant culture's blind spots and assumptions around race and racism (and sexism and heteronormativity, etc)"; in an environment where cultural assumptions affect many ideas about writing, it is vital to avoid reproducing globalized or Western-centric blind spots and approaches in order to engage students with writing and meet their concerns head on. This indeed applies not only to classrooms in Qatar, but those around the world: all instructors need to consider the local and cultural assumptions that surround creative writing in their locale, and adapt accordingly to avoid reductive and one-size-fits-all teaching models.

The onus then is on educators, institutions and communities to combat these barriers. As Janelle Adsit notes, both instructors and authors have a duty to consider how both their writing and their classes foster inclusion and exclusion, adding that "Writers are shaped by the cultures they are part of, but they in turn can influence the culture" (308). Our study revealed some of the ways that local and international cultures shape writers and would-be-writers, and it seems likely that if institutions and communities worked to cultivate a clearly-defined local writing culture alongside connecting students with local writing opportunities, students in Qatar may find the solid foundation and support they need to continue creative writing, whether as a hobby or a career.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol and Script

Thank you for agreeing to take part in the interview portion of this research study. This study is focused on student creative writing in Qatar. I am interested to learn more about the experiences you've had as a student here. This conversation should take about 30 minutes, and you can decide to stop participating at any time. I will be recording the audio of this session for transcription and analysis purposes only, and the recording will be destroyed as soon as those activities are complete. I am putting a link in the chat to refresh your memory on the study information and consent form. I'll give you a few minutes to look it over once again.

Do you consent to the interview?

Do you have any questions about the study before we begin?

We will be discussing creative writing. When we talk about creative writing in this interview, what we mean is original writing that expresses ideas and thoughts in an imaginative way. Examples of this include poetry, short stories, flash fiction, scripts, screenplays, songs, memoir, and novels.

What types of writing have you done in the past? Which ones are you most familiar with?

[If some are given, follow up A: Did you learn about these at high school or elsewhere?

If none are given, follow up B: Did you not learn about any at high school?]

What kind of creative writing do you currently do?

[If some types are given, follow up A: What motivates and inspires you to write?

If none are given, follow up B: Do you not enjoy it? What about it do you enjoy or not enjoy?]

What are the barriers that stop you from writing?

(OR What are the barriers that stop you from doing more creative writing?)

[Encourage elaboration and details/examples on the answers they give]

What factors in your current university environment encourage or discourage you to write?

What events and opportunities in Qatar encourage or discourage you to write?

[If some types are given, follow up A: Can you please give us an example?

If none are given, follow up B: Have you ever heard of any book festivals, readings, competitions, or local events?]

What are your family's beliefs about creative writing?

[If some are given: Why do you think that is the case/please elaborate.

If none are given: How would they feel if they knew/know you do creative writing?]

What kind of learning resources or opportunities would make you want to write more?

[If some are given: Please elaborate/give details.

If none are given: Why is this the case?]