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“ANA MAFI KHOUF MIN KAFEEL”: COUNTER-  
NARRATIVES IN COMEDIC VIDEO REPRESENTATIONS OF  
MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE ARAB GULF STATES

**Abstract**

In the Arab Gulf States, migrant workers are perceived as temporary and economic by dominant nationalist narratives that justify restrictive migration policies and exclusive citizenship laws. This article argues that online popular culture productions offer a space for the emergence of counter-narratives that assert the presence of migrants and advocate social change from below. I examine representations of South Asian workers in short comedy skits and song videos produced during the last decade by comedians and actors in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Focusing on both aesthetic innovation and limitations, my analysis demonstrates how these videos utilize parody and satire to criticize the exclusion of migrant workers. I compare videos produced by Gulf citizens and South Asian migrants and argue that, even though the producers navigate different boundaries and offer distinct performances, they challenge authority and national boundaries by centralizing spaces of labor and turning them into sites of agency and cultural expression.



INTRODUCTION

In the Arab Gulf States where the presence of a large population of migrant workers from South and Southeast Asia, Africa, and neighboring Arab countries is regulated through restrictive laws, the figure of the migrant worker is often associated with two kinds of images. One corresponds to dominant nationalist and cultural discourses that espouse homogenous and exclusive conceptions of identity and belonging and that see migrant workers as a threat. The other is derived from experiences of victimization that marginalize migrant workers and deprive them of agency in the face of laws that treat them as temporary outsiders. As in other immigration states where contested views on migration policies express the urge to either protect or deconstruct the imagined boundaries of the nation, public

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discourses debating the place of migrant workers in Gulf economies and societies have become more visible in recent years through the use of digital spaces which offered new platforms for either affirming, or challenging dominant narratives. Social media became an apt means for the expression and instant dissemination of anti-migrant sentiments, but it also made possible the emergence of new forms of popular culture whose aesthetic innovation allows sociopolitical critiques by artists, comedians, and activists to attract large audiences. In the Gulf region which has the world's highest rates of mobile phone penetration and internet usage,<sup>1</sup> representations of migrant workers in popular culture productions can significantly contribute to asserting counter-narratives, despite the difficulty of assessing their impact. This article explores this contribution by focusing on short comedic song videos and skits produced during the last decade by comedians and actors on social media in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Some of these videos are produced and performed by Saudi and Bahraini citizens, thus calling for an investigation of the politics of representing the vulnerable other through comedy,<sup>2</sup> while others are produced by Pakistani long-term residents in Saudi Arabia. I bring together local and diasporic South Asian cultural productions not only with the purpose of comparing them, but to contest the political, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic borders of the Gulf States and of the Middle East and North Africa more broadly, both of which cannot be approached without being recognized as the home of historical and contemporary diasporas.

This article examines the contributions and limitations of these videos in their representation of South Asian migrant workers in particular, as the largest and most vulnerable group, taking into account how the form generates new ways for tackling issues of social exclusion, power relations between citizen employers and migrant employees, and cultural heterogeneity in diasporic Gulf spaces. My main argument is that online cultural productions on migration in the Gulf can offer a space for contesting nationalist and cultural narratives that justify structural exclusion. Such contestations can advocate social change from below, thus illustrating the importance of tracing the potential of counter-narratives in the Gulf,<sup>3</sup> which is typically perceived through exceptionalist discourses that do not acknowledge the agency of migrants and depict them as a homogenous victimized group.<sup>4</sup>

During the last decade, social media and online popular culture productions have risen to the fore as tools of resistance in the Middle

East and North Africa, especially following the Arab uprisings, because they enabled the creation of new public spaces for political dissent in the MENA in general and in the Gulf. However, videos depicting South Asian migrant workers do not appear to provoke similar sociopolitical critiques. Firstly, dominant understandings of popular culture in the MENA after 2011 centralize political dissent against state regimes, which is not evident in these videos that mostly satirize the figure of the *kafeel* (sponsor) or the employer, and everyday practices of exclusion. Secondly, criticism of labor conditions and demanding fair treatment for migrant workers in the Gulf, through strikes and protests for example, tend to be deliberately depoliticized by state narratives and pushed into “the sphere of private employer-employee relations” in order to maintain their vision of a neoliberal economy that exists alongside an authentic and homogenous nation.<sup>5</sup> The reality is that labor migration is integral for constructing meanings of citizenship and national identity in the Gulf. While most of the videos I examine criticize the conditions of migrant workers and cannot be simply understood as forms of political opposition, my secondary argument is that they challenge state narratives by centralizing spaces of labor, whose marginalization legitimizes state regimes and facilitates capitalist exploitation,<sup>6</sup> and by turning these spaces into sites of agency and cultural expression.

Migration in the Gulf has recently become the subject of much research in the social sciences, particularly in the field of anthropology,<sup>7</sup> but less attention has been paid to how migrant workers are represented, or how they narrate their own experiences, in writing and other forms of cultural production. Their invisibility and silenced voices have been documented in some studies which point out the marginal status, if not the complete absence, of migrants, including non-Gulf Arabs, Africans, and South Asians, in Gulf literature and other cultural productions.<sup>8</sup> Other studies show how the figure of the migrant worker, particularly from South and Southeast Asia, is depicted negatively and seen as a social and cultural threat.<sup>9</sup> Even though migrants, particularly from Arab countries, have long played an important role in the cultural sector in the Gulf, this has not resulted in more visibility of their stories and concerns. As Mona Kareem writes, “They composed stories about the citizens and for the citizens, remained in the shadows, their names were edited out (in the example of post-war Kuwait) or forgotten, and when they played the protagonist roles, they blended in, erased any markers, altered their tongues and looks.”<sup>10</sup> The advent of the internet and the easy creation

and proliferation of social media videos have arguably given both citizens and migrants the space to propose different representations and narratives, which could offer a much-needed insight into the social and cultural implications of migration in different Gulf societies, as well as to how migrants perceive themselves and navigate their relationship to their host countries. However, the relative freedom of social media productions from some restrictions imposed on literary and cultural works does not mean that representations of migrant workers can easily and unproblematically mediate their voices. As my analysis shows, artists and comedians can continue to reproduce stereotypical images that reinforce racial and class prejudice even while they intend to give migrants agency and to criticize their marginalization.

Rather than only look at how the figure of the South Asian worker is represented in local Gulf productions, paying attention to diasporic South Asian cultural productions allows us to push against the racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic boundaries that justify the exclusion of South Asian bodies and voices despite historical and contemporary entanglements between the Gulf and South Asia. Furthermore, by researching representations of South Asian migrants in the Gulf, this article both contributes to, and illustrates the necessity of, centralizing the MENA as a migrant destination. The last decade has witnessed proliferating images of refugees and migrants fleeing wars, political instability, and economic crises in the MENA in pursuit of safety and better life opportunities in Europe and North America. The emphasis on these kinds of mobilities, which reflects how migration studies tend to be dominated by movement from the global South to the global North,<sup>11</sup> overshadows mobilities occurring within the MENA as well as African and Asian migrations to MENA countries. Exploring representations of South-South migration can generate new ways for rethinking common tropes and images in studies on MENA migrations and diasporas in global North contexts. After all, the geographical and imagined national boundaries that determine experiences of mobility or immobility amongst migrants in the region are interlinked with the conditions that push migrants outside it, including political authoritarianism, restricted citizenship rights, and exclusionary conceptions of identity and belonging. Exploring such connections in the realm of popular culture, however, would be the subject of a bigger and more ambitious project for which the modest contribution of this article is one stepping-stone.

## AESTHETIC CREATIVITY IN ONLINE CULTURAL PRODUCTIONS

All seven videos examined in this article are characterized by comedy and creativity in their depiction of migrant workers, which explains their large number of views on social media. This is the criteria by which I have chosen these videos, as it indicates their popularity and their potential for social impact, despite the fact that any impact they have would vary with the different audiences they intend to reach. Two of them are song videos produced by Telfaz11, a Saudi media company based in Riyadh and which has become specialized in the production of entertainment on YouTube since it was established by a group of Saudi comedians and artists in 2011. Creative YouTube content led to the formation of new public spheres in all Arab countries. However, its particular popularity in Saudi Arabia,<sup>12</sup> as well as its development into a professional industry, indicate the absence of similar content on mainstream media channels which are either dominated by imported content, or do not represent the everyday concerns of different publics, especially young Saudi audiences.<sup>13</sup> Telfaz11, like other media creators, oscillate between the need to produce commercial entertaining content and the urge to push for change through sociopolitical criticism, this being a result of censorship as well as social and cultural taboos.<sup>14</sup> Herein lies the importance of music and comedy, especially satire and parody, as the creative means by which such boundaries can be navigated and pushed in ways that promote change while entertaining audiences.<sup>15</sup>

The professional and artistic production capacities of the Telfaz11 team have allowed their videos to have a special aesthetic and their music to achieve popularity beyond Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region. Indeed, Telfaz11 aims to create locally inspired but universally appealing narratives that “resonate strongly with both regional and global audiences,” even if most of their “content consumption” happens inside Saudi Arabia, as they indicate on their website.<sup>16</sup> However, the effectiveness of comedy and music in representing everyday local reality is evident in how they are similarly utilized by other less professionalized or popular YouTube video producers. *The Khalli Walli Show*, produced by Pakistani actor Faez Choudhary, has many videos depicting the concerns of South Asian migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, a number of which have achieved large popularity through their parody music. While many Saudi producers have gained popularity and broken social boundaries through using Western music and mixing it with traditional forms,<sup>17</sup> the two *Khalli Walli Show* videos I focus on reuse famous songs from Indian films by adding Arabic

lyrics and include performances of Indian dance. This gives the videos a different aesthetic, one that appeals to South Asian audiences in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, even if the videos are also aimed at Arabic-speaking Saudi audiences in order to spread social awareness of unfair treatment by Saudi employers. At the same time, this South Asian aesthetic asserts the presence of South Asian music and culture in the physical and media spheres of their host countries. This is not an exclusive result of Choudhary's positionality as a second-generation Pakistani in Saudi Arabia, for even videos created by Gulf citizens can assert the presence of migrant communities and the cultural diversity of the region. We see this in one of the Telfaz11 videos I examine, as well as in the Instagram videos of Ahmed Sharif, the Bahraini comedian whose comedy skits have achieved millions of views on social media. Sharif's skits are shorter than the song videos of Telfaz11 and *The Khalli Walli Show* and often feature Sharif himself playing different roles, including males, females, Bahrainis, and South Asians. They are primarily aimed at Arabic-speaking Bahraini and Gulf audiences, for they do not have the universal appeal of Telfaz11 productions, nor the South Asian aesthetic that makes *Khalli Walli* videos accessible to diasporic South Asian audiences. Despite these differences and their implication for reception and impact, the easy circulation of content on different social media platforms—for example, from Instagram to YouTube and vice versa—and the reality of multiculturalism in the region mean that these videos reach potentially wider and more diverse audiences, as evident from observing the comments they have received. Notwithstanding such variations in audience reach and reception, this article brings these different videos together because of their comedic representation of migrant workers in an attempt to trace how their aesthetic creativity allows them to convey sociopolitical critiques.

Humor in these videos is not unique, either in the context of the Gulf or the wider Arab region which has had a long tradition of political humor, often used to challenge authority and transgress social norms.<sup>18</sup> This remains one of the primary functions of political humor when used as a tool of dissent in contemporary Arab societies. Humor emerges from "the violation of what is socially and culturally perceived as normal," particularly when the audience recognizes incongruities between expectations and what surprisingly takes place.<sup>19</sup> In the context of the Gulf and other Arab societies where certain everyday social problems are not publicly discussed because of official censorship or fear of social backlash, the incongruity of humor allows

it to act as a “social corrective” and “to confront sensitive topics in an unthreatening way.”<sup>20</sup> Humor has also been theorized as the result of feelings of superiority against others, hence offensive and racist types of humor, or as a source of relief, especially in situations of hardship and oppression.<sup>21</sup> These functions are not rigidly defined and can intersect and occur at the same time,<sup>22</sup> as we see in the videos examined in this article.

The importance of comedy in work that has been produced in the region lies particularly in how satire and parody make it possible for the content to be understood differently by different people, thus allowing the producers to maintain a level of ambiguity needed to navigate censorship.<sup>23</sup> The ability to produce this kind of humor comes from intimate familiarity with the everyday experiences and social positionalities of audiences in a particular context, and it is this “localness” that marks the success of recent YouTube productions in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf.<sup>24</sup> Satire and parody can be utilized by comedians and social activists to produce entertainment that simultaneously promotes change and adheres to red lines.<sup>25</sup> In the Gulf, it has been argued that YouTube and other social media networks have led to the creation of alternative public spaces that empower citizens and allow them to express and promote counter-hegemonic discourses.<sup>26</sup>

It is important to acknowledge such possibilities of social change, especially that little research has been done on political satire in the Gulf.<sup>27</sup> However, the increased surveillance that has accompanied the emergence of cyberspaces suggests that we should not overestimate their positive social impact, as Ramsay and Fatani note with regards to how governmental control in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf has effectively silenced many voices and used social media to repress dissent.<sup>28</sup> In their work on the “new Saudi media,” which includes Telfaz11, they additionally argue that it would be naïve to understand critical content producers as working completely independently from the government as an “informal opposition,” even if they do express political critiques.<sup>29</sup> On the one hand, the ambiguity of boundaries and censorship measures means that the relationship between media producers and governments is complex, hence the difficulty of categorizing social media content producers merely through the positions they take. This ambiguity makes it challenging to navigate the terrain of censorship, but it does motivate aesthetic experimentation as the means for producing content that can also be described as ambiguous in its sociopolitical stance. For example, such

ambiguity can take the form of "camouflage tactics to pretend obedience," since "pretense" for many Saudi YouTubers "constitutes the dominant modality of the bargain within an authoritarian space."<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, social media cultural productions in the Gulf cannot be simply understood as a form of opposition because they may be involved in reifying official discourses, either through unconscious limitations in their critiques, or as a result of alignments between their visions and those of the government.<sup>31</sup> Telfaz11, which became a multimillion dollar production company after initial internet popularity, is one example of the alignment that emerges between governments and cultural producers and that provides the latter with capital to achieve wider regional and global fame. In Saudi Arabia, this has increasingly taken the form of Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman's investment in a creative economy that displays a new global image of the country, but which has been seen as a "cynical attempt by an autocratic regime to polish its reputation in the West."<sup>32</sup> For example, in her discussion of Telfaz11's collaboration with Sudanese rapper Flippter on a video that I examine below, Kareem argues that these cultural actors "offer a non-radical counterculture which the regime utilizes" to legitimize itself.<sup>33</sup>

In video representations of migrant workers, self-censorship restricts the assertion of sociopolitical critiques. At the same time, my analysis shows that the limitations of these videos can be manifest in their content and form. Limitations can express how the place of migrant workers in society is perceived and articulated by producers in their work, or they could result from the problematic use of humorous linguistic registers and images in representing vulnerable social groups.<sup>34</sup> Investigating such limitations is necessary, first in order to appreciate the impact of censorship and structural exclusion on silencing the voices of migrants in cultural productions in the Gulf, thus further increasing their marginality. Second, limitations reveal how cultural productions can perpetuate nationalist narratives that perceive migrants through their temporary labor. The fact that social media representations of migrant workers in the Gulf can challenge or reify boundaries indeed reflects the nature of popular culture in general as a space of contestation where identities, ideas, and narratives clash, dominate each other, and reproduce themselves.

#### COUNTER-NARRATIVES ON GULF MIGRATION

Because of its accessibility, popular culture in the MENA is often understood as a "site of resistance," an expression of the voices of



ordinary people when they come together in response to different forms of domination.<sup>35</sup> This definition has been especially useful for approaching political humor in online media productions that have contested state authoritarianism in Arab countries during and after the 2011 uprisings. However, in order to capture the complex ways in which migrant workers are represented in YouTube videos in the Gulf, this article relies on a more nuanced understanding of popular culture, one that goes beyond the dichotomy between resistance against and complicity with hegemonic regimes.<sup>36</sup> Charles Tripp unpacks the association of popular culture with oppositional power and proposes a more inclusive definition which acknowledges the fluidity that arises from ambivalent relationships between people and dominant regimes.<sup>37</sup> One part of this definition includes thinking of “popular cultures” in the plural to recognize “neither a single ‘popular’ constituency, nor a single direction for cultural manifestations.”<sup>38</sup> This expanded understanding of popular cultures “takes into account the many, sometimes antagonistic forms of cultural expression to which they may give rise, even when making common cause against, for instance, an oppressive political regime.”<sup>39</sup> Tripp also argues that the notion of “the people” cannot be understood as singular and monolithic and suggests “the public(s)” as an alternative term that emphasizes “the plurality of communities and individuals that make up any given ‘people’ imaginatively and in reality.”<sup>40</sup> The complexity of popular culture thus derives from the fact that there are multiple publics who are entangled differently in relationships of power and who accordingly produce distinct kinds of culture, none of which can be held representative of “the people” or assumed to take an oppositional nature.

This article is primarily interested in video representations of migrant workers that assert counter-narratives, rather than in cultural productions that reproduce the logic of exclusion. However, an inclusive and nuanced definition of popular culture is essential for recognizing the limitations of such representations and for avoiding an analysis that overestimates their role as tools of opposition, or their ability to express the voices of all publics. I also unpack the association between popular culture and resistance in order to make room for cultural productions whose critiques may not be seen as forms of opposition against dominant power regimes, because they mainly target social attitudes and cultural discourses, but whose political implications need to be investigated. I demonstrate this in the case of videos critiquing the exclusion and victimization of migrant workers

in the Gulf, often perceived in public discourses as social rather than political issues. Fatema Hubail makes a relevant point in her analysis of comedic videos by *Sheno Ya3ni*, a YouTube channel created by a group of Kuwaiti comedians in 2011 to criticize various social and cultural issues. She argues that even though *Sheno Ya3ni's* work may not be seen as a revolutionary kind of cultural production for "focusing on the hegemonic power of culture more than that of the state," cultural hegemony cannot be separated from the state, for it is forged by its authority, which means that both are targeted by the subversion of normative cultural identities and practices.<sup>41</sup> Hubail seeks to establish the connection between the Arab uprisings and works of popular culture that emerged in Kuwait during the same period. This point is worth emphasizing in this article as well in order to highlight the interconnection between social media trends and innovative cultural productions in the region. However, by exploring the political implications of video representations of migrant workers, my aim in this article is to demonstrate how such representations can go beyond demanding better living and working conditions to challenge nationalist narratives that marginalize migrant workers and spaces of labor by relegating them outside imagined national boundaries.

With the increasing numbers of South Asian migrant workers in the Gulf after the oil boom in the 1970s, policing became the means by which governments responded to their perceived threat and to what came to be identified as a demographic imbalance that turned the local population into a minority in most of these states. Restrictive migration policies and exclusive citizenship rights aim to guarantee the temporary presence of all migrants and their descendants, despite their indispensable economic role. The most prominent and widely critiqued is the *kafala* (sponsorship) system which allows individual citizens to act as *kafeels* (sponsors), giving them direct authority over migrants. This feature of the *kafala* makes the "mechanisms for enforcing" its laws "widely dispersed" and facilitates the victimization of migrant workers through informal citizen practices.<sup>42</sup> "The dependence upon sponsors can breed human rights violations because the system is highly discretionary; it depends upon the idiosyncratic nature of individuals who may subject workers to abuse and exploitation."<sup>43</sup> Low salaries and poor working and living conditions result in spatial segregation and exclusion at the level of everyday mobility and social interactions. Furthermore, the ability of citizens to represent the authority of the state, even when they do not occupy the role of *kafeel*, has created unequal power relations based on ethnicity, nationality, and class. This

explains the centrality of the figure of the citizen *kafeel* in many of the comedic videos that represent migrant worker experiences.<sup>44</sup>

The perception of migrants as socially and culturally threatening infiltrates discourses of national and cultural identity in the Gulf States and arises from a number of reasons, including the fragility of newly constructed nation states and rapid social changes which small traditional societies experienced as a result of oil and globalization.<sup>45</sup> Narratives of cultural homogeneity not only justify the exclusion of migrants, but also obscure the ethnic and cultural diversity of the region and its historical and contemporary transnational connections.<sup>46</sup> These narratives and the rigid social and spatial boundaries they impose do not acknowledge either the existence of long-term diasporas from Asia and Africa that have arrived before and after oil, or the fact that "Gulf societies have absorbed outside networks, agencies and traditions within their local historical, economic, political, cultural and social settings."<sup>47</sup> Herein lies the importance of counter-narratives in Gulf scholarship that endeavors to "challenge the myths that states tell about themselves,"<sup>48</sup> but also in cultural productions that negotiate national boundaries and assert the presence of migrants and diasporas.

Counter-narratives can additionally contest exceptionalist discourses with which migration in the Gulf, as well as the region itself, have tended to be approached in many academic and human rights critiques.<sup>49</sup> Perspectives that exceptionalize the Gulf because of its policies have produced a homogenous and economically reductive image that deprives migrants of agency and only perceives them through the conditions of their labor, without appreciating other aspects of their experiences.<sup>50</sup> Cultural productions, by both citizens and non-citizens, that criticize the exclusion of migrant workers illustrate the existence of a space of contestation in a region where exceptionalist discourses also depict citizens as lacking agency in the face of authoritarian regimes. After all, counter-narratives that negotiate the place of the other in Gulf societies ultimately question the meanings of citizenship and national identity as they have been defined by the state and dominant cultural discourses. It is through the contrast with the other that the economic and social privileges of citizens become defined and acquire value in these oil-producing welfare states.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the demographic imbalance and the politics of exclusion give legitimacy to the state and its nationalist narratives, which "rely on the bounding of nation and economy as mutually exclusive."<sup>52</sup> Adopting exclusive citizenship laws and the

reliance on temporary migrant labor that can be controlled through spatial class structures fuels Gulf economies and maintains national boundaries while depriving workers of having any rights to space in their host country.<sup>53</sup> In the following analysis, I suggest that social media videos which criticize the conditions of exclusion can contribute to contesting the boundaries that place migrant workers and spaces of labor outside the national sphere.

#### PERFORMING THE SOUTH ASIAN MIGRANT OTHER

The most popular of YouTube videos representing migrant workers in the Gulf is "Kafeel," a rap song performed by a group of Saudi comedians who play the role of Pakistani and Bengali workers, and which was uploaded in 2015 by *Al-Jisr*, one of Telfaz11's channels.<sup>54</sup> It received more than 14 million views since then and achieved wide popularity outside Saudi Arabia. The video begins with a brief scene in which a Saudi employer insults and shouts at his Pakistani driver, the main character called Abdulkhaliq, played by Ibraheem Alkhairallah. The domestic setting then immediately shifts to a construction site where the power hierarchy is temporarily reversed. Abdulkhaliq joins a group of South Asian workers in an intimidating performance in which he repeats "ana mafi khouf min kafeel" (I am not afraid of my sponsor), the catchphrase that defies both the individual Saudi *kafeel* and the state whose authority he represents. It is from the margin, from spaces of labor that are often experienced as spaces of exclusion, that these workers remind Saudis that their country is nothing without their labor. Abdulkhaliq, joined by the Bengali character of Mr. Arshad (played by Moayad Alnefaie), lists all the jobs that migrant workers do without appreciation from Saudis who all think they are "the boss" and look down on them. Abdulkhaliq repeats, "I carry everything / I assemble everything," while Mr. Arshad asks, "Who does everything in Saudi Arabia? Who built the infrastructure?" The lyrics mock Saudis not only by reminding them that "they won't survive" if the workers leave, but also by calling them "idiots" because they "talk too much" about cancelling the visas of migrants and deporting them to their home countries once their jobs are done. However, the reality proves their inability to run the country on their own. In reply to accusations that Bengalis are "thieves" who do not perform their jobs well, Mr. Arshad tells Saudis that they "never keep it 100," a slang expression for doing things right.

The video criticizes discrimination and the attitudes of superiority with which many Saudis treat South Asian migrant

workers, who are the most vulnerable to racial and class marginalization. At the same time, it departs from reiterating narratives of victimization that dominate much of this criticism in news and human rights reports by representing workers who have the agency to criticize their employers and to assert their role in the country. A number of aspects mark the aesthetic creativity of this representation and allow it to register its message in an innovative way, even if it does not make a critique that is completely new to Saudi society and the Gulf. Hip-hop has become increasingly popular in the Arabic-speaking world amongst youth, including second-generation migrants in the Gulf, because it “satisfies the need for a politicized medium for marginalized individuals and groups to express themselves without the need for official venues or industry platforms; thus, allowing singular narratives to come against mainstream ones.”<sup>55</sup> This is evident in “Kafeel” where rap music enables an intense confrontational performance in which workers defiantly rebel against the expectation that they have no agency to protest or express their opinions. The audience would not expect to see South Asian migrant workers in such positions of power, asserting their contributions to the country and even threatening the Saudis who think that they can just deport them with no consequences. Abdulkhaliq the Pakistani driver sings while gesturing with two fingers (V sign) moving between his eyes and the camera, “You think I’m afraid? I see everything you do.” Breaking this expectation allows the video to offer a powerful, albeit satiric representation of migrant workers. Humor emerges from this imagined alternative reality where marginal spaces of labor turn into the powerful territory of workers, and where racialized South Asian bodies that tend to be seen as docile and inferior protest against and defy their Saudi employers. They are depicted lounging on sofas placed in the midst of dusty construction sites, dancing in slow motion, and lowriding a station wagon that is manually jolted by workers standing outside it (rather than with hydraulics), scenes that mimic American music videos with bouncing lowriders and which are often associated with defiant statements made by youth cultures in the American context. In contrast to how workers are often perceived and depicted, their cool attitude in the video thus symbolizes their agency and authority over the place.

Another primary element of humor in “Kafeel,” as well as the videos I examine in subsequent sections, are the lyrics of the song, which are in the pidgin Arabic used for communication between South Asian migrant workers and native Arabic speakers. Pidgin is no longer

restricted to the sphere of labor and everyday interactions with workers, for it has become a "recognizable trademark" with "comic and artistic potential."<sup>56</sup> Simplified Arabic in language and concepts implies the intellectual incompetence of migrants, especially when they are addressed in an "infantilizing manner," and is also used as a tool for excluding them linguistically.<sup>57</sup> Using the language that is associated with inferiority in a Saudi rap song breaks audience expectations and allows criticism to be received with humor. In the same way in which the setting of the video turns the space of labor into a site of resistance, singing in the same language that is used for practical communication between workers and their Saudi employers turns it into a language of protest as well as cultural expression. The linguistic register thus allows "Kafeel" to criticize the ill treatment of migrants and to emphasize the integral presence of the other in Saudi Arabia. At the same time, the playful use of pidgin by Saudi comedians, a language often used by employers to mock migrants,<sup>58</sup> and the unlikely possibility of workers chanting "ana mafi khouf min kafeel" raise questions about humor in the video. After all, humor can derive from feelings of superiority against the other and contribute to perpetuating their inferior social status. Indeed, one of the song's primary limitations is that it does not allow migrants to speak for themselves and in their own language. It is important to acknowledge then that the song does not contain possibilities for self-representation.

At the same time, the fact that Saudis dress like Pakistani and Bangladeshi migrants and embody their roles does blur the racial and ethnic boundaries that delineate insiders and outsiders through physical appearance and the assumptions it generates. In the Gulf, the marginalization of South Asian laborers is not just a reflection of a social hierarchy that relies on categories of nationality and class, for their bodies are racialized through a process of differentiation that dehumanizes them, thus justifying their exclusion and control. This process is both a legacy of imperial and colonial racialization of nationalities to manage labor and facilitate capitalist exploitation in the region, and a result of building citizenship and national identity on the basis of Arabness in the Gulf States.<sup>59</sup> Nationalities like "Indian," "Pakistani," and "Bengali" are "racial formations" that are associated with certain presumptions about physical appearance, character, and ability and that are crucial for the construction of a pure Arab Gulf identity, itself a "racial formation" that does not represent the heterogeneity of Gulf nationals in their origins, color, features, and cultural heritage.<sup>60</sup> When Saudi actors play the role of South Asian

migrants, they challenge racial boundaries. More importantly, the potential threat of such a transgression, even if it is only a comedic performance, demonstrates how dependent national identity is on the assertion of these boundaries on an everyday basis in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, through social exclusion, spatial segregation, discrimination, and racism.

The centrality of racial boundaries for the construction of citizenship and the assertion of a pure national identity is also evident in two Instagram skits by Bahraini comedian Ahmed Sharif, despite being different from “Kafeel” in their form, aesthetic, and critical awareness of racism. Sharif has achieved fame through comedy skits in which he plays the female character of Mama Zelikha and different members of her family, including Kumar, the Indian driver. Kumar participates in the family drama in some videos, but also represents the role of the Indian migrant worker in sketches set outside the family. I look here at “Get Out of Our Lives,” which consists of two parts in which Sharif appears both as himself and as Kumar, joined by Bahraini actors who contribute to his other videos as well.<sup>61</sup> Both were uploaded on Instagram in 2016 and each received around 2 million views. In the first part, Sharif finds himself surrounded by “Indians” everywhere, his daily life infiltrated by the noises of languages he does not understand at the construction site beneath his bedroom window, at the barber’s, and in the hospital.<sup>62</sup> He shouts in frustration, “Get out of our lives” only to wake up the next morning to find that all Indian workers have disappeared and are replaced by Bahrainis, a situation that no one is happy about because, as the video suggests, they do not perform their jobs well. The Indians, led by Kumar, go on a strike to regain their dignity, demanding an official apology from Sharif on Instagram, or they would hack his account. In the second video, Sharif finds the place where the Indians are striking and apologizes to them by acknowledging that they have an important role in society and that he did not expect things to be so different without them. The Indians with Kumar in the lead accept the apology under the condition that it appears on Sharif’s Instagram account. The video then ends with group selfies and dancing to an Indian song, Salman Khan’s “Selfie Le Le Re” from the Bollywood film *Bajrangi Bhaijaan*.

Like “Kafeel,” Sharif’s skits emphasize the role of migrant workers in Bahrain and mock the perspective that sees them as an economic and social burden. Reading through people’s comments reveals that these comedy skits have touched upon a controversial and hotly debated issue in Bahraini society and the Gulf more generally.

There are some who acknowledge the indispensable role of migrants and others who think that their numbers have crossed the limit and should be minimized. Humor in Sharif's skits lies in the unexpected. First, his wish for them to disappear from his life does come true, contrary to the actual challenge of fixing the problem of the "demographic imbalance" that has become the obsession of governments and people in Bahrain and the Gulf. Second, the imagined reality of life without South Asian migrant workers turns out to be a nightmare to the extent that Sharif has to perform a dramatic scene in which he begs them to come back, saying "We need you," but also not to hack his Instagram account (it was hacked in reality shortly before Sharif posted these videos). What makes this humor possible is the brevity of the skits, exaggerated acting, and dramatic sound effects, particularly the Indian song that marks the reconciliation between Sharif and the workers. This aesthetic underlies Sharif's other comedy skits in which the norm is temporarily disrupted to reveal an alternative reality where a social issue or a dominant social behavior can be criticized in a satiric way.

As in "Kafeel," the figure of the South Asian male migrant worker in "Get Out of Our Lives" has the agency to protest and assert his role in the country. Yet even though Sharif's skits counter the common image of migrant workers as merely voiceless and transient because of the reality of their marginalization in the Gulf, it is important not to overestimate their role as tools of opposition to hegemonic narratives. As a comedian and social media celebrity who produces commissioned advertisements and, more recently, a YouTube series, Sharif's videos are mostly recognized as a form of entertainment rather than a critical attempt at social intervention through comedy. This, alongside the nature of comedy skits, creates shortcomings in both content and form. For example, while the comic aesthetic generates innovative ways for criticizing discrimination and exclusion, the videos do not include the voices of migrants themselves and even stereotypically reproduce the figure of the "Indian" migrant in a way that illustrates how the term "Indian" circulates in the Gulf as a "common-sense racial category" and not just a nationality descriptor.<sup>63</sup> As Neha Vora and Amélie Le Renard write, "'Indian' is a lived experience of racialized marginalization and, in certain uses, a racist slur," and the fact that it is also a nationality "serves to mask the centrality of race and racism in the Gulf."<sup>64</sup> As I suggest in my reading of "Kafeel," the fact that Sharif himself plays the role of Kumar is worth noting for similarly blurring the boundaries between "Indian" and



“Bahraini.” However, there is still an issue with the language that Kumar speaks when he does not use pidgin, a gibberish imitation of how “Indian” or South Asian speakers sound to Arab ears, and which can be seen as reductive and offensive. It stereotypically reproduces the figure of the “Indian” migrant whose unintelligible speech is often scorned and ridiculed for being an unpleasant noise. These points highlight the need to take into account the limitations of social media videos and the comedic form in general, which is necessary for a nuanced understanding of the potential social impact of popular culture productions in which Gulf citizens represent the migrant other. In what follows, I examine two videos produced and performed by Pakistanis in Saudi Arabia to demonstrate how they are similarly involved in criticizing the situation of migrant workers, even though they are faced by different kinds of limitations.

#### NAVIGATING BOUNDARIES THROUGH GENTLE CRITICISM

Saudi-based Pakistani actor Faez Choudhary, who produces *The Khalli Walli Show* on YouTube, has achieved popularity in recent years for using satire and parody music in a number of skits and song videos that tackle the plight of migrant workers. Choudhary often plays the main role, joined by other Pakistani actors who play migrant workers, and a Saudi performing the character of the *kafeel*. One video produced in 2013 and which reached more than 5 million views is “Why This Khalli Walli,” an Arabic parody of the Tamil-English song “Why This Kolaveri Di” by Indian actor Dhanush from his film 3.<sup>65</sup> The video is set in the dilapidated and poorly furnished accommodation of migrant workers where Choudhary and another Pakistani worker confront and criticize their Saudi *kafeel* during what turns out to be a dream, as we find out after the song ends. The Arabic lyrics mimic the original, but while Dhanush in the film feels dejected and struggles to reproach the girl who broke his heart, the two workers here reproach their *kafeel* for his ill treatment. *Khalli walli*, a common phrase in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf which literally means to let go, refers to both the way in which the workers are not taken care of by their employers and to the situation in which migrants lose their working visas and end up staying illegally in their host country.<sup>66</sup> A number of Choudhary’s videos address the particular case of these migrants who lead a precarious life, constantly on the lookout from the police. However, *khalli walli* in this video refers to the lack of sympathy which workers receive from their *kafeel* and which they seek to gain from the audience by explaining their bad working and living conditions and their inability to switch employers.

Parody and satire make it possible to imagine a scenario in which migrant workers have the agency to confront and mockingly dance around their *kafeel*, calling him blackhearted and greedy. Amidst the randomness of their dancing and gestures, an imitation of the original song, we even see the *kafeel* himself dancing with the two workers, which further adds to the satirical way in which he is represented.

The Saudi *kafeel* is subjected to sarcasm and deception by the migrant worker in another of Choudhary's videos, "Bait Kafeel," which has reached more than 3 million views since it was uploaded in 2014.<sup>67</sup> Here, we have the story of an Indonesian female domestic worker attempting to escape abuse at her employer's house before Choudhary, the driver in the same household, declares his love for her and convinces her to stay by recreating a classic Bollywood romance song, "Tujhe Dekha Toh" by Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol from *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*. We discover at the end that the *kafeel* promises his driver money as a reward for deceiving the domestic worker so that she returns to the house, without knowing that this deception is not a onetime performance, but an indication of the driver's future intentions towards her. The *kafeel* calls the driver the "biggest idiot" after hearing about the fake "Indian film," but the irony is that he is the idiot for not realizing that he gave the driver his blessing to start a relationship that will not end in marriage behind his back. "Bait Kafeel" thus criticizes victimization, but it also reveals how migrant workers can have the agency to cleverly navigate power relations, even if at the expense of other workers. In fact, the domestic worker's deception in the process illustrates how the intersection between gender and citizen/non-citizen power dynamics makes female migrant workers the most vulnerable to victimization in a patriarchal society. Like the music parody in "Why This Khalli Walli," Choudhary's recreation of a Bollywood song with creative Arabic lyrics and a setting that resembles the original romantic scene allows "Bait Kafeel" to be both humorous and distressing. The song is amusing because of exaggerated acting and the unexpected possibility of a happy love story in the house of the *kafeel*. At the same time, parody accentuates the contrast between the film and the reality of the domestic worker's deception and anticipated tragedy.<sup>68</sup>

The *Khalli Walli Show* videos are didactic and often push for change in social behaviors and employer-employee relations. They give migrant workers agency and tools for self-expression in the space of labor. However, despite the importance of this criticism, these videos target the figure of the bad *kafeel* without challenging the boundaries

that shape the power hierarchy between employers and migrant workers. “Bait Kafeel” ends with a message in Arabic and English that says, “Your household laborers are like your family, some are good and some are bad. It is our duty to take care and pay attention and be kind to them,” with the Arabic version even using the expression to “monitor” or to “keep an eye” on them.<sup>69</sup> This message simultaneously indicts abusive *kafeels* and affirms their authority over their employees, thus justifying their policing of migrant bodies that are seen as sexually and morally threatening while placing this policing under the umbrella of “kindness,” which also affirms the moral superiority of the *kafeel*. This contradictory message is arguably an expression of self-censorship and of Choudhary’s attempt to offer a balanced perspective that moderately criticizes the reality of victimization without undermining the authority of employers to which they are entitled by the state.

Following the success of his videos, Choudhary admits in an interview his hesitation before uploading them on YouTube because of his fear of facing backlash or of being arrested. However, he explains that he was still confident about having done nothing wrong, because his videos do not criticize Saudis but only the practices of bad *kafeels*.<sup>70</sup> Choudhary’s videos offer what I describe as a gentle kind of criticism which empowers migrant workers to demand better conditions but without any transgression of boundaries. Even when they mock and deceive the *kafeel*, they also appear in a vulnerable state, crying as they complain and pleading for better treatment, including food, money, and the permission to stay in the country. Their exaggerated pitiable performance, particularly in “Why This Khalli Walli,” emphasizes their dependency on their *kafeel* and the latter’s ultimate authority. While this performance may be understood as a clever means of channeling their demands and of gaining the audience’s sympathy, it can problematically turn migrant workers themselves into the subject of satire.

Gentle criticism is similarly evident in Telfaz11’s “Kafeel” and Sharif’s “Get Out of Our Lives” where one overarching limitation is the emphasis placed on the economic contribution of migrant workers to their host countries, a perspective that reproduces the dominant perception of their identity as outsiders who can only exist in the Gulf through their labor. The videos demand recognition for the indispensable role of migrants and criticize the exclusion they face, but they do not question the laws that facilitate these experiences and that enable hierarchical power relations to shape everyday interactions

between citizens and migrants. Instead, as in Choudhary's videos, the target of their satire is the figure of the *kafeel* and certain social attitudes amongst citizens, which makes the challenges of migrant workers appear to be a social problem with no legal and political implications. In the alternative reality these cultural productions advocate, migrant workers are at best well treated and appreciated for the role they play in society, but this reality does not go further into the territory of more intimate social inclusion, or of potential change in laws and policies. Gentle criticism here could either be a result of self-censorship, or an expression of how the reality of migrant workers in the Gulf is conceptualized by producers, which arguably reflects predominant perceptions of migrants and the limits to which local society is willing to accommodate them. Similarly, gentle criticism in *The Khalli Walli Show* can be understood not only as a result of censorship, but as a reflection of how migrants define their relationship to their host country. Migrants refrain from staking claims to the Gulf and from demanding rights beyond decent working and living conditions when they perceive themselves as temporary residents who ultimately belong to their home countries, legally and culturally.<sup>71</sup>

The videos of Telfaz11, Sharif, and *The Khalli Walli Show* all utilize comedy to criticize the exclusion of migrant workers, but they offer distinct performances of defiance and power on the one hand, and vulnerability and helplessness on the other. Comparison is important, not to rank these representations, but to understand the avenues by which the place of migrant workers in the Gulf has been approached in the cultural productions of social groups who have to navigate different boundaries and limitations. *The Khalli Walli Show* videos make demands strictly within the space of labor by focusing on the relationship between employers and employees. The Saudi and Bahraini videos place spaces of labor inside the nation. Even though their politics of representation need to be scrutinized and they do not criticize political and legal structures, they allow migrant workers to assert their presence in their host country and to claim recognition for their contributions, which makes their representations part and parcel of political discussions surrounding questions of citizenship, national identity, and state legitimacy. My analysis in the final section of this article examines two other videos by Sharif and Telfaz11 that engage more directly with these questions.

## CHALLENGING NATIONAL BOUNDARIES

The perception of migrant workers in the Gulf as temporary outsiders

in dominant nationalist narratives that seek to protect the myth of ethnic and cultural homogeneity is fallacious because it both overlooks the cosmopolitan history and present of the region and produces workers as “politically irrelevant.”<sup>72</sup> Depicted in these narratives as merely economic, and further deprived of agency in human rights critiques, their practices of resistance do not tend to be seen as political.<sup>73</sup> Spaces of labor are relegated to the economic sphere and placed outside the imagined boundaries of the nation through policies that seek to ensure the temporariness of the large non-citizen population and the continued entitlement of citizens to exclusive rights. The marginalization of spaces of labor is evident in how the Gulf States have responded to strikes and protests by migrant workers, understanding them as the responsibility of employers despite being expressions of anger at the absence of basic rights and lack of recognition in their host country.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, the division between the nation and the economy is illusory because the Gulf States have derived legitimacy for their national and economic visions from the politics of exclusion, and the latter are in turn fundamental for constructions of citizenship and national identity, which shape everyday articulations of national belonging amongst citizens.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, systems of labor management for both citizens and non-citizens in the Gulf are political, making different forms of migrant worker activism political as well.<sup>76</sup> Like activist attempts that demand fair working and living conditions for migrant workers in the Gulf, cultural productions that make similar critiques are inevitably entangled in these political questions, which is not to say that they are necessarily political, or that they exhibit forms of opposition against authority. Rather, my aim here is to explore the potential to negotiate national boundaries and discourses in social media representations of migrant workers and their everyday experiences of exclusion.

I give as an example a comedy skit by Sharif called “What, Are You Indian!” that reveals the entrenched presence of the Indian diaspora in Bahrain, although here again the term “Indian” could be seen as a reference to all South Asian migrants.<sup>77</sup> The skit was uploaded on Instagram in 2018 and reached almost 3.8 million views. Sharif here also plays the role of Kumar who confronts a Bahraini for sarcastically calling his friend “Hindi” or “Indian” because he did something stupid. Commonly used by people in the Gulf as a pejorative, the term “connote[s] certain types of unwanted people, behaviors and affects – which are fundamentally about class, labor and comportment.”<sup>78</sup> Upon uttering the word while walking and chatting in a shopping district,

the Bahraini and his friend find themselves in a narrow street with Indian or South Asian shopkeepers standing and glaring at them from all sides, ready to retaliate. The Bahraini tries to distract them by singing and dancing to one famous Bollywood song, Vishal Dadlani's "Malhari" from the film *Bajirao Mastani*. The trick succeeds for a short while and the shopkeepers join the dance before Kumar suddenly slaps the Bahraini and indignantly gives him a patronizing lecture about the greatness of India, a country of scientists and intellectuals that has multiple languages and religions. Kumar threatens the Bahraini against the derogatory use of the word "Indian" before music is back and they all return to dancing, albeit with some apprehension on the side of the shocked Bahrainis. The video delivers a humorous critique of racism and of the Bahraini sense of superiority and prejudice against Indians, but the confrontation is especially amusing because of mutual understanding and familiarity between the two sides. The Bahraini is both aware of the offense he has made and can instantaneously attempt a rectification through his knowledge of Indian music. Kumar too easily recognizes this slyness and goes with it without condoning the offense.

Familiarity between the two sides arguably stems from how the racialization of the term "Indian" and racism against South Asians in general have become naturalized along the years and are internalized by Gulf residents, including Indians themselves.<sup>79</sup> At the same time, Sharif's "What, Are You Indian!" demonstrates how a comedy skit can assert the inevitability of intercultural exchange between different social groups in spaces that are both cosmopolitan and hierarchical. The Indianness of the setting conveys this reality and destabilizes national myths that justify the legal and social exclusion of diasporic communities, or that inhibit expressions of hybridity amongst long-term residents as well as Gulf citizens.<sup>80</sup> The ability of these migrant workers to successfully defy Bahrainis in a space that appears to be rightfully their own suggests that they are not merely temporary outsiders, but are present with their culture and language in Bahrain, which makes it a "diaspora space" where the boundary between what is Bahraini and what is not, what is local and what is foreign, has collapsed.<sup>81</sup> Bahrain appears as a diaspora space as well in Sharif's "Get Out of Our Lives" (parts one and two) which I examine in previous sections. In the alternative reality these skits construct, migrant workers have the agency to retaliate in response to the lack of recognition they receive from Bahrainis, but they are also represented as rooted in their host society. Their protest disrupts Sharif's everyday

life, but unlike the defiant confrontation that is enabled by the rap performance in Telfaz11's "Kafeel," their conditional forgiveness illustrates a fraternal kind of relationship with Bahrainis, one in which they coexist and depend upon each other despite the reality of racism, inequality, and everyday tensions.

Another video whose aesthetic innovation captures the entrenched presence of migrants in the Gulf without being centered on critiquing their working and living conditions is "Tamees," a Telfaz11 song that was uploaded on their *Al-Jisr* channel in 2019 and that has reached almost 7 million views on YouTube.<sup>82</sup> "Tamees" brings together Alkhairallah from "Kafeel," who here plays a Pakistani *tamees* (Afghani bread) baker, and Saudi-based Sudanese rapper Loay Karim (known as Flippter), who performs the role of a Sudanese working in a restaurant that makes *foul* (fava beans), a traditional Middle Eastern dish famous in Egypt and Sudan, typically eaten with *tamees* in Saudi Arabia. This collaboration between Flippter and a major production company that has in recent years been gaining more governmental support and funding attests to the "power that singular cultural actors, citizens or migrants, hold via their mediums" and the interest of the Saudi regime in utilizing this power to assert its dominance in the cultural scene, even if Flippter has successfully distanced his work from the "Saudi scene" in a way that "deems him non-threatening" to the regime.<sup>83</sup> Alkhairallah sings in pidgin Arabic with a Pashtu accent while Flippter sings in Sudanese dialect, each depicted in their workplaces, amidst the families and communities to which they belong in Saudi Arabia, but also preoccupied by watching news of political conflict in their home countries. The song with its witty and humorous lyrics is about the popularity of *foul* and *tamees*, a simple dish that is loved by people from different cultures and social classes in Saudi Arabia. At the same time, "Tamees" is a tribute to the migrant communities whose culture and food have become part of everyday life in Saudi Arabia, as well as to their hard work and commitment to their jobs and families in their host country and back home. The song illustrates how spaces of labor are essential for constructing the nation with its multiple cultural and culinary identities, despite being typically understood as separate from it and only consequential to the economy. By placing spaces of labor inside the nation, cultural productions like "Tamees" and Sharif's skits make them integral for negotiating national boundaries and for posing counter-narratives that contest the exclusion of the migrant other.

## CONCLUSION

In the Gulf States, restrictive migration policies and exclusive citizenship laws allow the dominance of nationalist narratives that see migration and ethnocultural hybridity as a threat. However, even though these laws and policies facilitate the victimization of migrant workers and do not acknowledge the reality of multiculturalism, they do not preclude the presence of counter-narratives that seek to imagine alternative realities by pushing against boundaries. This article has argued that both Gulf citizens and migrants are involved in producing such counter-narratives through social media videos that utilize comedy and aesthetic creativity in their representation of migrant workers. Popular culture offers ordinary people the means to provoke social and political reactions, and to advocate change from below, even if their contributions are restricted by limitations or their politics of representation may be seen as problematic, as I have shown throughout my analysis of some videos produced in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Acknowledging the potential of these contributions is important not only to contest nationalist perspectives that reduce migrants to their labor and understand them as a threat that needs to be contained, but also to challenge exceptionalist discourses that do not appreciate everyday expressions of agency amongst ordinary citizens and migrants in the Gulf in the face of the systems that marginalize their voices. In the case of migrant workers, marginalization derives from the boundary that prevents them from transgressing spaces of labor that define their identity in their host countries. The videos examined in this article centralize these spaces and make them integral for changing everyday social attitudes and practices, or for reimagining national boundaries and the identity of places in the Gulf. Cultural productions that tackle the concerns of migrant workers can thus contribute to rethinking citizenship and identity by revealing how these concepts are perceived and navigated on an everyday basis in the Gulf.

## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> Helen Davies and Sarah Illott, "Mocking the Weak? Contexts, Theories, Politics," in *Comedy and the Politics of Representation: Mocking the Weak*, ed. Davies and Illott (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1–24.



<sup>3</sup> Madawi Al-Rasheed and Robert Vitalis, "Introduction," in *Counter-Narratives: History, Contemporary Society, and Politics in Saudi Arabia and Yemen*, ed. Al-Rasheed and Vitalis (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 1–10.

<sup>4</sup> Neha Vora and Natalie Koch, "Everyday Inclusions: Rethinking Ethnocracy, *Kafala*, and Belonging in the Arabian Peninsula," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 15, no. 3 (2015): 540–52; Ahmed Kanna, Amélie Le Renard, and Neha Vora, *Beyond Exception: New Interpretations of the Arabia Peninsula* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Zahra R. Babar, "The Vagaries of the In-Between: Labor Citizenship in the Persian Gulf," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52 (2020): 766. See also Ahmed Kanna, "A Politics of Non-Recognition? Biopolitics of Arab Gulf Worker Protests in the Year of Uprisings," *Interface* 4, no. 1 (2012): 146–64.

<sup>6</sup> John Chalcraft, "Monarchy, Migration and Hegemony in the Arabian Peninsula," *Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalization in the Gulf States*, Working Paper No. 12, 2010; Adam Hanieh, *Capitalism and Class in the Gulf Arab States* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 60–66.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Andrew M. Gardner, *City of Strangers: Gulf Migration and the Indian Community in Bahrain* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2010); Neha Vora, *Impossible Citizens: Dubai's Indian Diaspora* (London: Duke University Press, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> For example, Hamad Mohammad S Alhazza, *Social Marginalisation in the Saudi Novel between 1990 and 2011* (PhD diss., University of Manchester, 2014); Dale Hudson, "UAE Filmmaking Beyond Arabization, Cosmopolitanism and Exceptionalism," *Arabian Humanities* 14 (2020): 9–12, doi.org/10.4000/cy.6297.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Abdulfattah Sabry, *al-'Amala al-Wafida wa-Atharoha fil Adab al-Imarati* [Expatriate Labor and its Impact on Emirati Literature] (Cairo: al-Dar al-Thaqafiyya Lil Nashr, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Mona Kareem, "From Rap to Trap: The Khaliji Migrant Finds His Aesthetic," *Arabian Humanities*, 14 (2020): 9, doi.org/10.4000/cy.6285.

<sup>11</sup> Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, "Introduction: Recentering the South in Studies of Migration," *Migration and Society* 3, no. 1 (2020): 1–18.

<sup>12</sup> Khadija El Alaoui, Azza Ibrahim Alajlan, and Maura A. E. Pilotti, "Nailing It à la Saudi: Satire and the Subject in Times of Crisis," *Arabian Humanities* 14 (2020): 17–18, doi.org/10.4000/cy.6292.

<sup>13</sup> Marwa Ihsan Fakh, "The Saudi YouTube Phenomenon: From Anarchism to Institutionalism," in *Everyday Youth Cultures in the Arabian Peninsula: Changes and Challenges*, ed. Emanuela Buscemi and Ildikó Kaposi (London: Routledge, 2021), 36.

<sup>14</sup> Gilbert Ramsay and Sumayah Fatani, "The New Saudi Nationalism of the New Saudi Media," in *Political Islam and Global Media: The Boundaries of*

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<sup>15</sup> Magdalena Karolak, "Music for Thought: Examining Saudi Identities Expressed through Music on Social Media," in *Gulf Cooperation Council Culture and Identities in the New Millennium: Resilience, Transformation, (Re)Creation and Diffusion*, ed. Karolak and Nermin Allam (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 165-67.

<sup>16</sup> "About," Telfaz11 (website), accessed 30 July 2021, <https://telfaz11.com/about>.

<sup>17</sup> Karolak, "Music for Thought," 165.

<sup>18</sup> Sabine Damir-Geilsdorf and Stephan Milich, "Forms and Functions of Political Humor in Arab Societies: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives," in *Creative Resistance: Political Humor in the Arab Uprisings*, ed. Damir-Geilsdorf and Milich (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2020), 15.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>20</sup> Fakih, "The Saudi YouTube Phenomenon," 41.

<sup>21</sup> Damir-Geilsdorf and Milich, "Forms and Functions of Political Humor," 22.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>23</sup> Ramsay and Fatani, "New Saudi Nationalism," 198.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>25</sup> Karolak, "Music for Thought," 165.

<sup>26</sup> Fatima Hubail, "From Kuwait's Margins to *Tolaytila's* Mainstream: *Sheno Ya3ni* Challenging Social Positioning through Dystopian Satire," in *Creative Resistance: Political Humor in the Arab Uprisings*, ed. Damir-Geilsdorf and Milich (Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag, 2020), 267; Ramsay and Fatani, "New Saudi Nationalism," 187.

<sup>27</sup> Marc Owen Jones, "Satire, Social Media and Revolutionary Cultural Production in the Bahrain Uprising: From Utopian Fiction to Political Satire," *Communication and the Public* 2, no. 2 (2017): 137.

<sup>28</sup> Ramsay and Fatani, "New Saudi Nationalism," 187-88.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>30</sup> El Alaoui, Alajlan, and Pilotti, "Nailing It à la Saudi," 16.

<sup>31</sup> Ramsay and Fatani, "New Saudi Nationalism," 188.

<sup>32</sup> Nicolas Pelham, "The Medicis in the Desert," *Economist*, 31 May 2018, <https://www.economist.com/1843/2018/05/31/the-medicis-in-the-desert>.

<sup>33</sup> Kareem, "From Rap to Trap," 40.

<sup>34</sup> Davies and Illott, "Mocking the Weak?," 16.

<sup>35</sup> Walid El Hamamsy and Mounira Soliman, "Introduction: Popular Culture – A Site of Resistance," in *Popular Culture in the Middle East and North Africa: A Postcolonial Outlook*, ed. El Hamamsy and Soliman (New York: Routledge, 2013), 1–8.

<sup>36</sup> Dalia Said Mostafa, Nicola Pratt, and Dina Rezk, "New Directions in the Study of Popular Culture and Politics in the Middle East and North Africa," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2021): 1, doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2021.1885854.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Tripp, "Political Thinking Performed: Popular Cultures as Arenas of Consent and Resistance," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2021): 4, doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2021.18858564.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>41</sup> Hubail, "From Kuwait's Margins," 263–64.

<sup>42</sup> Noora Lori. *Offshore Citizens: Permanent Temporary Status in the Gulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 141.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>44</sup> Non-citizens can also become *kafeels* when they hire domestic workers and migrant employees in their businesses, but the focus in these videos is on the citizen *kafeel*.

<sup>45</sup> James Sater, "Migration and the Marginality of Citizenship in the Arab Gulf Region: Human Security and High Modernist Tendencies," in *The Crisis of Citizenship in the Arab World*, ed. Roel Meijer and Nils Butenschøn (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 226; Madawi Al-Rasheed, "Introduction: Localizing the Transnational and Transnationalizing the Local," in *Transnational Connections and the Arab Gulf*, ed. Al-Rasheed (London: Routledge, 2005), 3; Paul Dresch, "Debates on Marriage and Nationality in the United Arab Emirates," in *Monarchies and Nations: Globalisation and Identity in the Arab States of the Gulf*, ed. Dresch and James Piscatori (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005), 140, 156.

<sup>46</sup> Al-Rasheed, "Transnationalizing the Local"; Sheila Carapico, "Arabia Incognita: An Invitation to Arabian Peninsula Studies," in *Counter-Narratives: History, Contemporary Society, and Politics in Saudi Arabia and Yemen*, ed. Al-Rasheed and Vitalis (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

<sup>47</sup> Al-Rasheed, "Transnationalizing the Local," 7.

<sup>48</sup> Al-Rasheed and Vitalis, "Introduction," 1.

<sup>49</sup> Vora and Koch, "Everyday Inclusion"; Kanna et al., *Beyond Exception*.

<sup>50</sup> Attiya Ahmad, "Beyond Labor: Foreign Residents in the Persian Gulf States," in *Migrant Labor in the Persian Gulf*, ed. Mehran Kamrava and Zahra Babar (London: Hurst, 2012), 21–40.

<sup>51</sup> Anh Nga Longva, "Citizenship in the Gulf States: Conceptualization and Practice," in *Citizenship and the State in the Middle East: Approaches and Applications*, ed. Nils A. Butenschøn, Uri Davis, and Manuel Hassassian (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 179–97; Zahra Babar, "The Cost of Belonging: Citizenship Construction in the State of Qatar," *The Middle East Journal* 68, no. 3 (2014): 403–20; James Sater, "Citizenship and Migration in Arab Gulf Monarchies," in *Migration, Security, and Citizenship in the Middle East: New Perspectives*, ed. Peter Seeberg and Zaid Eyadat (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 27–42.

<sup>52</sup> Vora, *Impossible Citizens*, 178.

<sup>53</sup> Hanieh, *Capitalism and Class*, 24–26, 60–66.

<sup>54</sup> Telfaz11, "Al-Jisr / Abdulkhaliq – Kafeel," *Al-Jisr*, 24 February 2015, video, 03:05, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7MHRRcHah0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7MHRRcHah0).

<sup>55</sup> Kareem, "From Rap to Trap," 8.

<sup>56</sup> Fida Bizri, "Pidgin as a Counterlanguage: Asian Labour Migrants and Arab Employers Speaking," *Language Ecology* 2, no. 1–2 (2018): 129.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 139–41.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>59</sup> Neha Vora and Amélie Le Renard, "Who Is 'Indian' in the Gulf? Race, Labor and Citizenship," *Middle East Report Online*, 16 June 2021, <https://merip.org/2021/06/who-is-indian-in-the-gulf-race-labor-and-citizenship/>.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Ahmed Sharif (@a.Sharif92), "Tel'u Min hayatna – al-Juz' al-Awwal" (Get Out of Our Lives – Part One), Instagram video, 30 July 2016, [www.instagram.com/p/BIe0CB3gVW4/](https://www.instagram.com/p/BIe0CB3gVW4/); and Sharif, "Tel'u Min Hayatna – al-Juz' al-Thani" (Get Out of Our Lives – Part Two), Instagram video, 31 July 2016, [www.instagram.com/p/BIhZQsuAKo7/](https://www.instagram.com/p/BIhZQsuAKo7/).

<sup>62</sup> "Indian" is often stereotypically used in the Gulf to refer to all low-paid migrant workers from South Asia, regardless of their nationality, so the "Indians" in Sharif's video are not necessarily Indian.

<sup>63</sup> Vora and Le Renard, "Who Is 'Indian' in the Gulf?"

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Faez Choudhary, "Why This Khalli Walli Remake – Khalli Walli bil Saudi," *The Khalli Walli Show*, 8 May 2013, video, 4:52, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GfTWHanqYSc&list=WL&index=6&t=2s>.

<sup>66</sup> Sabine Damir-Geilsdorf and Michaela Pelican, "Between Regular and Irregular Employment: Subverting the Kafala System in the GCC Countries," *Migration and Development* 8, no. 2 (2019): 163.

<sup>67</sup> Faez Choudhary, "Bait Kafeel" (Kafeel's House), *The Khalli Walli Show*, 28 July 2014, video, 8:43, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1baJsEccPZo&list=WL&index=7>.

<sup>68</sup> It is clear from the song that the driver does not have marriage in mind because he cannot afford it, as he explains to her.

<sup>69</sup> Other *Khalli Walli Show* videos contain didactic messages as well, and some have gained the support of immigration authorities for spreading awareness about campaigns targeting illegal residents. See Rashid Hassan, "The 'Khalli Walli' Show: Comedy for Awareness," *Arab News*, 21 May 2014, <https://www.arabnews.com/news/574121>.

<sup>70</sup> "The Khalli Walli Show Yaskhar min Zolm Ba'd al-Kufala'" (The Khalli Walli Show Mocks the Injustice of Some Sponsors), *The Khalli Walli Show*, 16 November 2016, video, 2:38, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5FAmVPa2mp4&list=WL&index=3>.

<sup>71</sup> Vora, *Impossible Citizens*; Idil Akinci, "Culture in the 'Politics of Identity': Conceptions of National Identity and Citizenship Among Second-Generation Non-Gulf Arab Migrants in Dubai," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46, no. 11 (2019): 2309–25.

<sup>72</sup> Carapico, "Arabia Incognita," 23.

<sup>73</sup> Babar, "Vagaries of the In-Between," 765.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*; Kanna, "A Politics of Non-Recognition?"

<sup>75</sup> Vora, *Impossible Citizens*, 178; Chalcraft, "Monarchy."

<sup>76</sup> Babar, "Vagaries of the In-Between," 766.

<sup>77</sup> Ahmed Sharif (@a.Sharif92), "Shfeek, Hindi 'Int!' (What, Are You Indian!)," Instagram video, 24 April 2018, [www.instagram.com/p/Bh8yhzyjlfBH/](http://www.instagram.com/p/Bh8yhzyjlfBH/).

<sup>78</sup> Vora and Le Renard, "Who Is 'Indian' in the Gulf?"

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Al-Rasheed, "Localizing the Transnational," 8–9.

<sup>81</sup> Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 205.

<sup>82</sup> Telfaz11, "Al-Jisr / Tamees," *Al-Jisr*, 6 March 2019, video, 4:11, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x9kts0sKtIA>.

<sup>83</sup> Kareem, "From Rap to Trap," 40.