ABSTRACT This article examines the working lives of creative-class professionals in the Global South using two case studies: university educators and museum professionals employed in Qatar. A small country on the Arabian Peninsula, Qatar is an ideal site for the study of professionals in a developing yet authoritarian nation. We argue that the cultural attributes of the professorial and curatorial communities, including creativity, autonomy, and intellectual freedom, are in conflict with the authoritarian political context, giving rise to professional dissonance. Professional dissonance occurs when the norms, values, and ideas embraced by a particular occupational group conflict with the norms, values, and ideas in the settings in which they work. To cope, university educators and museum professionals turn to five strategies—resistance, subversion, submission, conversion, and exit—although variations in the content and institutional structures of their work lead each group to deploy them in somewhat different ways. These strategies may be replicated in other contexts of high professional dissonance, caused by authoritarianism or otherwise. KEYWORDS Qatar, Middle East, Global South, professions, professional dissonance

Tim Snyder was working late in his office one evening when the phone rang unexpectedly. It was an associate dean at Georgetown University in Qatar, where Tim had been teaching undergraduate liberal arts classes for nearly five years. “I suppose you know why I’m calling,” the dean intoned.

Tim’s mind raced. Being a university professor in Qatar was a minefield of sorts. In this conservative Middle Eastern country, it was a crime to insult the emir or to even question the validity of Islam. Publicly defending Israel or expressing sympathy with Jews was a transgression. The behavior of women was scrutinized, to the point where some female students refused to ride alone in a campus elevator with male faculty members. The government monitored and sometimes censored or confiscated academic materials being shipped to campus. Faculty members told stories about books or teaching materials that had been seized by the Ministry of Culture and destroyed. At other times, books would arrive with pages systematically torn out or photographs that were blacked out with a felt-tip marker. Georgetown, like the other seven Western branch campuses operating in Qatar, was touted as having total academic freedom, just like its home campus. Unofficially, everyone knew better.

“It’s about Twitter,” the dean continued.
Tim was puzzled. He sometimes used social media as a teaching tool, but he was careful not to post anything controversial. “Did a student say something on Twitter?”

“It’s not about a student,” the dean responded. “It’s what you did.”

The dean explained to Tim that the Qatari government had opened a criminal case against him. A recent Twitter exchange between Tim and a student included a debate about the differences between slander and threats. “Imagine if I said, ‘I’d be really happy if everyone here died. That’s not a threat,’” the student tweeted. Tim replied, “What if you said, ‘I’d be really happy if the emir was dead?’”

Allegedly another student saw the tweet and complained, although some of Tim’s fellow professors hinted that the university administration and the government also monitor the social media accounts of faculty members. “I guess that’s how a dictatorship works and secret police works,” Tim said. “We don’t know if [Georgetown] self-censors or if there were really external forces at play.”

The dean assured Tim that the situation would “go away,” that Georgetown’s local fixer was working behind the scenes to quash the situation. “If you get a phone call, just apologize and that should probably take care of it,” the dean advised.

Tim quickly deleted his tweet, but he spent the next several weeks worrying that he would be arrested, jailed, deported, or worse. After all, this was a country whose government sentenced writer Mohammed al-Ajami to life in prison for penning a poem that was interpreted as insulting to the emir. (Al-Ajami ultimately spent more than four years in prison before he was released in 2016.) As a university professor and a professional with a PhD from Georgetown’s home campus who had been promised academic freedom, Tim was also offended.

“I was furious. I came so close to just resigning on the spot. I should know that I’m not safe to have free speech in my classroom. This was academic speech all the way; this was for a class. They have no excuse.”

INTRODUCTION

Most of what we know about professionals comes from studies of workers in the Global North. The bulk of this research assumes that employees work in a single place, in discrete, bounded nations. But simply applying the same theories and concepts to a different region, and not taking into account the transnational nature of contemporary work life, fails to explain the character of professional work in the Global South. As our introduction makes clear, even when U.S. or European institutions set up “identical” branches in the Global South, they operate in different political and cultural environments. This can give rise to tension and conflict. In this article, we focus on how professionals respond to and resolve these strains.

This article examines the working lives of creative-class professionals in the Global South using two case studies: college educators and museum professionals employed in Doha, the capital city of Qatar. A small country on the Arabian Peninsula, Qatar is an ideal site for the study of professionals in a developing yet authoritarian nation. The professionals we study play a central role in the government’s efforts to use cultural and educational institutions to achieve greater regional, if not global, prominence. While Qatar is a young country that has
experienced meteoric economic growth, its citizens and residents enjoy almost none of the political rights found in Western nations.

We argue that the cultural attributes of the professorial and curatorial communities, idealized as including creativity, autonomy, and intellectual freedom, are in direct conflict with the overarching social and political Qatari context, giving rise to professional dissonance. Professional dissonance occurs when the norms, values, and ideas embraced by a particular occupational group conflict with the norms, values, and ideas in place in the settings in which they work. To cope, professors and museum curators turn to five strategies—resistance, subversion, submission, conversion, and exit—although variations in the content and institutional structures of their work lead them to be deployed in somewhat different ways. We argue that these strategies may be replicated in other contexts of high professional dissonance, caused by authoritarianism or otherwise.

Of course, academics and museum curators working in Western settings also encounter restrictions on intellectual freedom that hinder their professional autonomy and creativity in ways similar to those found in Qatar. Some may posit that, in this regard, the differences between Qatar and the West are negligible. We argue, however, that the Qatari context is different. Qatar’s authoritarian government, overt censorship, and labor regulations place unique restrictions on creative-class professionals, evoking distinct responses from these individuals.

Our article begins by reviewing the relevant literature on value and norm strain and its resolution in specific occupational communities, followed by a brief overview of Qatar. We then describe our methods before explicating how the politics of surveillance and censorship shape the working lives of professionals in this country, and the five strategies they employ in response. To conclude, we consider the broader implications of our findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The museum curators and university professors that we study belong to Richard Florida’s (2003) “creative class,” which also includes scientists, engineers, actors, architects, cultural figures, and artists. These individuals are the “thought leadership” who “apply or combine standard approaches in unique ways to fit the situation, exercise a great deal of judgment, and at times must independently try new ideas and innovations” (8). They are accustomed to and take as given that they can work with professional autonomy.

Creative-class professionals often belong to what Van Maanen and Barley (1984) call occupational communities: people who see themselves as participating in the same sort of work, who generally identify positively with it, who share values, norms, and perspectives that guide their work but also their relationships outside it, and whose social relationships often combine work with leisure. These professionals frequently judge the appropriateness of their actions based on the values and beliefs they purport to share. This collective occupational culture includes the discourses, regimes, and assumptions embedded in institutions, and the repertoires of meanings used to respond to dilemmas and opportunities (Alexander and Smith 2010).

The occupational communities with which our respondents identify are constituted transnationally. They belong to curatorial and professorial classes that circulate regionally, if not
globally. They add and refine their skills, practices, and values each time they move to a new post (Kim 2009; Leemann 2010; Levitt 2015; Oishi 2015; Rogerson and Mushawemhuka 2015). This is a source of several points of tension. First, because this cumulative occupational toolkit combines elements from many diverse places, there are often inconsistencies and contradictions within it. Second, these professionals greatly value autonomy. They value free speech, critical thinking, and creativity, and generally believe these values are protected “back home,” in the countries where they were raised or began their professional careers, despite instances when they are violated. Authoritarian regimes such as Qatar, they say, are problematic because they abrogate valued rights, and because the line between acceptable and unacceptable is purposefully blurred as a mechanism of social control.

What results from these tensions is what Festinger (1957) called cognitive dissonance. The human organism, he writes, tries to “establish internal harmony, consistency, or congruity among his opinions, attitudes, knowledge, and values” (160). Dissonance occurs when there is disharmony or when the ideas, values, or opinions of the individual or group are not in line with one another. This is not an all-or-nothing scenario. Most individuals and groups want to reduce, if not resolve, dissonance. They attempt to do so by bringing the various inconsonant elements they face back into balance.

For example, Ashcraft (2001) writes that feminists purposely introduced “organized dissonance” into male-dominated organizations to create hybrid models of power. This reduced the discord between actors in ways that were ultimately productive. Taylor (2007) described professional dissonance as feelings of discomfort arising from the conflict between professional values and job tasks. Social workers are often required to formulate practices that protect society and maximize the rights of individuals, which is, she admits, “perhaps an impossible task” (90). When these two aims are incompatible, they must make decisions that are unwanted or in opposition to what they believe to be their client’s best interests.

According to Festinger (1957), there are three relations among cognitions: irrelevance, consonance, and dissonance. Cognitions that are unrelated do not affect each other, while cognitions that are in sync, or that are consonant with each other, do not produce tension or distress. It is when cognitions are in some way opposed to one another that problems arise. Lambright and Teich (1978) described this as “professional ambivalence.” The U.S.-based scientists they studied sometimes experienced turmoil when their professional culture conflicted with the expectations of their government funders. As professionals, scientists “are trained to think and act in one set of norms. In relation to government, they must adapt their behavior to a very different operating environment. Scientists face professional ambiguity; they face ambivalence” (138). Because such individuals and groups find it difficult to tolerate cognitive discomfort, they take steps to alleviate it.

Dissonance is reduced, writes Festinger: “(1) by changing one or more of the elements involved in dissonant relations; (2) by adding new cognitive elements that are consonant with already existing cognition; [or] (3) by decreasing the importance of the elements involved in the dissonant relations” (264). Taylor, for example, described social workers who, when forced to hospitalize their favorite clients, first rationalized their decisions and then minimized the impact of their intervention. Other examples included (1) the practitioner
who told herself she had no choice and thereby excludes the dissonant cognition, (2) the practitioner who told himself he is helping his client and thereby increases the number of consonant cognitions, (3) the practitioner who decides that her client did not mind being hospitalized, which also minimizes dissonant cognitions, and (4) the practitioner who decided that safety is the primary concern, which increases consonant cognitions (Taylor 2007; also see Harmon-Jones and Mills 1999). Similarly, genetics professionals in the United Kingdom used a variety of discursive strategies to counter the professional ambivalence that arose when they worked on ethically problematic cases (Arribas-Ayllon, Sarangi, and Clarke 2009).

Our focus is the kind of professional dissonance that arises, and how it gets resolved, among museum and educational professionals in Qatar. While these two occupational communities pride themselves on their independence of thought and action, authoritarian contexts like Qatar, with its conservative monarchy, rule of sharia law, and deliberate (and, at times, heavy-handed) institutional and governmental surveillance of professional and personal life, limit their autonomy in practice. We suggest five different strategies professionals use to resolve the ensuing dissonance: resistance, subversion, submission, conversion, and exit. We believe these are not unique to Qatar. Rather, we assert that they represent patterned responses to professional dissonance that would arise in places where there is a seemingly irreconcilable disconnect between the occupational community culture and the political context in which professionals work.

QATAR—A BRIEF OVERVIEW
Qatar, and the Arabian Peninsula in general, have always been sites of global economic and cultural circulation. These exchanges changed shape when Qatar discovered fossil fuels in the early twentieth century, although the country did not fully reap the economic benefits of these discoveries until 1971, when it gained independence from Britain. Qatar’s supply of natural gas transformed the country—in a single generation—from a pearling and fishing colony into one of the world’s wealthiest nations, with a per capita income of more than $88,000 in 2010 (Greenfield 2012; also see Fromhertz 2017, Katzman 2016).

In recent years, Qatar has undertaken a series of social, political, and infrastructural projects that have strengthened the nation and boosted its international profile, including hosting international sports events; funding disaster relief; mediating regional conflicts; opening Education City, with its branches of U.S., French, and U.K. universities; and building state-of-the-art museums. To accomplish these tasks, Qatar has recruited hundreds of thousands of laborers. As a result, the country’s population tripled in the first decade of the twenty-first century (Blanchard 2012:8). At present, there are approximately 2.6 million people living in the country; about 85% are expatriates, including blue- and white-collar workers (Amnesty International 2016; Katzman 2016). These laborers are responsible for turning Qatar into a globally competitive nation, including building and maintaining the universities and museums where our respondents work.

Qatar’s employment scheme for expats, known as kafala (sponsorship system), has three fundamental elements. First, entering workers must be sponsored by an employer for a predetermined period of time. This rule applies to museum professionals and university
professors as well as window cleaners and taxi drivers. Second, sponsors are responsible for their employees’ salaries, housing, and other benefits. Third, workers cannot quit their jobs and find other employment without written permission from their sponsor. Employees who are treated unfairly by their employers have little recourse or power. They cannot file an official complaint, resign, seek another job, or even leave the country without the sponsor’s consent.

The labor system leads to numerous abuses by sponsors, who have been known to change the terms of contracts without notice, refuse to pay workers, and physically and sexually abuse them (Gardner, Pessoa, and Harkness 2014). These maltreatments are thought to be widespread among blue-collar workers, but rare among the professional class. For example, university professors are generally granted renewable 12-month entry/exit visas that allow them to enter and leave the country at will. This does not mean, however, that professional-class expats feel comfortable. If anything, the labor system is perceived as an intentional mechanism to create a workforce that is careful not to say or do the wrong thing. “There’s a lot to like,” said an education professional who has lived in Qatar for a decade. “The difficulty for me is that you’re never encouraged to think of this as home. So even though we’ve been here ten years, we’ve had three children here, there’s no security. There’s always that sense that you could be on the next plane out. It’s a very different agreement than for hiring anywhere else in the world. It just lends itself to thinking about this whole place as a temporary thing. Because if you’re only here for three years, then there’s no reason for anybody to really get invested.”

In December 2016, Qatar abolished the kafala system, but the revamped labor laws offered few substantial alterations. Some new provisions, such as the right of an employer to legally hold an employee’s passport, are said to be even more draconian than kafala. In a report entitled New Name, Old System? Amnesty International (2016:8) said that “the new law does not significantly change the relationship between worker and employer.”

Education City

Qatar has invested heavily in post-secondary schooling. Founded in the late 1990s, Education City is a 2,500-acre compound on Doha’s outer edge. It is home to branch campuses of six elite American universities: Carnegie Mellon, Cornell, Georgetown, Northwestern, Texas A&M, and Virginia Commonwealth. HEC Paris (Hautes études commerciales de Paris) and University College London also have satellite locations on site, although some reports (Esler, 2016; Sarwar 2016) indicate that the latter will withdraw in 2020 for undisclosed reasons. Each institution specializes in a particular academic niche, such as Cornell’s medical school or Georgetown’s School of Foreign Service. Education City is also home to primary schools, research centers, and Al Jazeera’s children’s channel.

Education City is funded by the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development, which is owned and operated by the government. The foundation is widely considered the brainchild of Mozah bint Nasser Al Missned, the second wife of Qatar’s former emir. Sheikha Mozah, as she is popularly known in Qatar, is a hero to many of the female students on campus, who view her as a role model of a strong, ambitious, and intelligent woman. Due to its Western leanings, Education City attracts student from
Qatar’s relatively liberal families, both expat and native, and hosts students from about 90 countries. Gulf Arabs are heavily represented, and about half of the students on campus are local Qataris. The vast majority of the Qatari students are women, who outnumber male Qatari college students in Doha six to one (Morrison 2012).

Museums

The globalization of Qatar’s education sector goes hand in hand with the globalization of its cultural institutions. When we conducted our fieldwork, anywhere from 12 to 16 new museums were being planned, including the National Museum of Qatar (designed by Jean Nouvel and slated to open in 2018), a children’s museum, an Orientalist museum, and a Sports and Olympic Museum. (The number has since been reduced due to budget cuts.) At this writing, the only museums open are the Museum of Islamic Art (designed by I. M. Pei), Mathaf (the Arab Museum of Modern Art), and the Fire Station (a museum and “creative space” that supports Qatari artists-in-residence). There are also the Msheireb Museums, a collection of four restored “heritage houses” in downtown Doha. The most notable of these is the Bin Jelmood House, which examines the history of slavery in Qatar. These institutions are a second element of the country’s strategy to stake a claim on the global stage. The Qatar Museum Authority (QMA, now called Qatar Museums) employs a large cadre of expatriate administrators, educators, construction managers, educators, and curators, who are charged with creating this new cultural landscape.

Every museum in Doha tells at least two stories: one for Qataris and one for the outside world. Roger Mandle, the former head of the QMA and former senior advisor to the chair of its Board of Trustees, said that the Museum of Islamic Art tells foreigners that this is an important country with a long and rich history. It tells Qataris that they are not Bedouins in a small country in the middle of the desert. Islam connects them to a much bigger timeline, a social and intellectual movement that stretches four continents and seven civilizations. The museum says to the world that Qatar is as ambitious and culturally aware about museums as anyone else, but this museum is about Qatari culture. Mathaf encourages locals to embrace the art and artists from this region. It says they need to know about contemporary art. At the same time, it says to the world that the artists the museum celebrates should be recognized and appreciated. The National Museum tells Qataris their official history for the first time and says to the international community that this small place has a fascinating, important history that is worth knowing.

METHODS

The museum data for this paper were gathered in March 2013, when we conducted in-person interviews with 25 museum professionals. Participants were recruited through an initial email contact as well as snowball sampling. The education data were gathered in the spring of 2014, when Harkness conducted Skype interviews with 22 education professionals. Participants were mostly well known to Harkness, who worked as a visiting assistant professor of sociology at Northwestern and Carnegie Mellon Universities in
Qatar from 2010 to 2013. Others were recruited via snowball sampling and email inquiry. His three-year immersion in Qatar also informed the project.

CENSORSHIP AND INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM

Qatar is distinct because its labor regulations limit protections for all workers, including professionals. The experiences described by our participants might be similar to those found in the West, but the choices and compromises they require are unique to countries with authoritarian regimes—matched only in some neighboring Gulf nations, China, Singapore, and Russia.

Qatar operates under sharia law, the Islamic code of customs that sets standards for everything from criminal penalties to moral and culinary matters. As employees and guests in Qatar, expat professionals are obliged to respect the country’s cultural, religious, and social customs and obey laws and regulations. Penalties can be severe and include corporal punishment, deportation, and imprisonment. And it is standard operating procedure to bar people from leaving Qatar if there are any outstanding legal concerns, including unpaid loans or even bounced checks.

It is a crime to insult or criticize the emir, punishable by up to five years’ imprisonment. It is a crime to insult God, Islam, the prophets, or the Quran, be it verbally, in writing, drawing, gestures, or in any other manner. Doing so is punishable by up to seven years in the penitentiary. Opposing or merely doubting the tenets of Islam is also a crime that can result in a five-year prison stint. It is against the law to possess or display books, films, photos, drawings, or symbols that are deemed immoral.

Legal representation is not compulsory for court cases in Qatar. American expatriate professionals are cautioned that, in the event of an arrest, it is unlikely that the U.S. Embassy in Qatar will be notified. Even if it is, embassy officials are typically prevented from visiting arrested American citizens until after an interrogation has taken place.

Faculty at Education City are warned to be careful about what they say and do in and out of classrooms. While they ostensibly enjoy academic freedom, they are simultaneously obliged to obey the laws of the country. A single complaint from a student over an “inappropriate” or “immoral” reading, film, or discussion could lead to arrest and conviction. There are few solid answers to the question of what is offensive or insulting, other than a caution to use “common sense.” A professor at Education City described his orientation this way:

For a man, in terms of the culture, we were made hyper, hyper vigilant about things. In some respects, it’s blown out of proportion; it’s so over the top. Our [orientation] was a week-long thing. Mainly about cultural differences, either the academic cultural differences or the local cultural differences. Definitely a lot of stuff about gender differences—don’t shake hands with women. And then being careful about how you present stuff in class, especially if it’s religious or political.

Curbs on academic freedom also come from the top, with senior administrators sometimes admonishing faculty members for what they teach. When one instructor showed a film in her class that resulted in a complaint from a high-placed student, a dean intervened.
I really did not think that particular movie was problematic. It’s a very light movie. It’s not at all shocking. It’s not violent. But it has one short sex scene, like fifteen seconds. And one of my students, apparently from one of these important families, went and told the dean. So the dean had a little walk-around-the-building talk with me, which was very bizarre. He wasn’t very direct, but the message is pretty much to be very careful. So I guess I won’t show that movie again.

Another faculty member was warned that discussing labor issues in Qatar was problematic. Again, a student from an elite family lodged a complaint with the university, which sent an assistant dean to talk to the professor.

He was like, “Don’t panic, but a student from a prominent family told somebody in his family something about you.” Apparently I offend Qataris. It’s probably because of my research; it’s probably because of things that I discuss in my classes, the things that we read. His advice to me was not to talk about certain issues in class or don’t use [certain terms] because they have a lot of emotion. It’s very annoying. I take it very personally. Because I care. I care about my job; it’s more than a job. But to bring it to the next level, it’s not only a personal issue; it’s an institutional issue. Our academic freedom is being jeopardized.

The students told me, “Don’t you know about Q power? It’s the power that Qataris have in Qatar Foundation and at [the universities at Education City]. They get to do whatever they want to, and they go and complain to the administration and they get their way. Q power.” So I [told the dean], “I don’t want some Qatari guy who didn’t like me because I gave him a bad grade, because he deserved a bad grade, I don’t want him to be saying things that are not true about me. I don’t want our university to turn into what it is outside [the campus], with the Qataris doing whatever they want to, with Qataris having all this power.” And he was like, “We are not an island. We are in Qatar; this is their country.” So pretty much he said, “This is their country and they’re paying us to be here and do this.” I was like, “Okay, I have nothing else to say to you.” I work and keep a low profile.

Censorship can come from external institutions as well. For example, it is fairly common for shipments of textbooks to be seized by the Ministry of Culture. While most printed materials pass the review process without issue, and are delivered eventually, the process often leads to long delays. But sometimes books simply disappear without any official explanation. And sometimes various fixers, said to have wasta, or the clout and power to make things happen through local connections and networks, must intervene.

Censorship is not limited to printed materials. The government also filters the Internet. Pornography is banned, but most religious content is also inaccessible. The administration at the Education City campuses warns faculty that they should assume the Qatari government is monitoring everything they do online. There is a virtual private network at Education City that enables open access to the Internet, but faculty are cautioned that the IT departments keep a close watch on the use of this technology.

These restrictions also narrow what museum curators do and say. They have to think carefully about what they put on display, the kinds of explanations and guides they create, and the public and educational programs they organize. When an exhibit of works by
Damien Hirst was brought to Doha from London in 2013, it had to be customized to make it appropriate for Qatari audiences. Certain works considered objectionable were removed. Similarly, a “sneak preview” exhibit mounted by the planned Sports and Olympic Museum included two nude Olympians, which were removed after government officials deemed them offensive. Curators organizing research conferences at the Museum of Islamic Art must choose their topics carefully and avoid conflict. Curators at Mathaf enjoy somewhat more freedom, especially when their activities involve collaborating with Western partners, because part of Mathaf’s role is to prove that Qatar can be an equal partner in the edgy world of global contemporary art.

Museum curators are also cautious in how much they speak about their activities to the press or to researchers. Most signed nondisclosure agreements before being hired that prevent them from speaking about what goes on at the QMA. Fearing for their jobs, some took this literally, asking to review and edit what Levitt wrote based on their conversations. Indeed, there were several rounds of back-and-forth before an acceptable compromise could be reached on an appropriate text.

Intellectual freedom, of course, is far from unfettered for professionals in Europe and the United States. Numerous studies document the supervision, monitoring, and micromanaging of professionals there, including therapists (Shaw 2015), medical doctors (Rø, Veggeland, and Aasland 2016), nurses (Freshwater, Fisher, and Walsh 2013), and college professors (Mather and Seifert 2013). What is different is Qatar’s authoritarian context, overt censorship, and labor system. This results in professional settings where there are more restrictive limits on autonomy and omnipresent (though mostly implicit) threats. In such settings, the penalties for violating professional or even sociocultural norms can be more severe than losing one’s job; they may include deportation, arrest, and imprisonment. Furthermore, the boundaries that delineate tolerable speech and behavior are fuzzy. Because of this, many professionals in Qatar feel vulnerable.

This leads to ambivalence, in part, because despite experiencing professional dissonance most of these workers feel professionally fulfilled to some degree. Our participants were lured to the country by promises of unrestricted funds, opportunities to try new things, and the chance to work in a rapidly developing (and seemingly exotic) foreign country where no ambition is too ambitious. Unable in some cases to obtain employment back at home, they were thrust into positions of power and authority, starting several rungs up the professional ladder from where they would have begun at home. Some enjoyed salaries and perquisites typically found at the top of their profession. Interacting with people from every corner of the world in their day-to-day lives, they rightfully claimed the status of global citizens. They were enthusiastic about fostering social change in the Middle East, particularly for women.

When asked why he took the job, an assistant professor told us,

It was incredibly lucrative. It provided me with all sorts of resources that, as a junior faculty member, would be impossible to get in the U.S. This year, I went—during the semester—to a UN conference in Bali, Indonesia, for a week. As an assistant professor in the U.S., I can’t imagine a school that would bless me with that. But that is something I’ve done pretty much every year. I have that latitude, and I have that funding. My professional development is equal to or exceeds that of some
departments in the U.S. So the resources are just staggering. The only job that compares with what I have, the only thing that even comes close, is if you get an offer at a tenure-track institution at a top school in your specialty. Otherwise, this blows anything else away. Just in terms of base salary, for my rank, I am the most highly paid [anthropologist] in the world. Plus, the fact that they’re giving you housing and this huge professional development budget.

Despite these and other professional and personal amenities, however, there is a price to pay, which the professionals we interviewed reacted to in ways we describe in the following section.

**FIVE STRATEGIC RESPONSES**

Expat professionals in Qatar chose between five strategies for resolving professional dissonance: resistance, subversion, submission, conversion, and exit. These responses evolve over time, through a myriad of social interactions in numerous contexts, with many similarities but some differences between professors and museum curators.

The boundaries between strategies are not impermeable; they overlap. For example, resistance and subversion share common features. Moreover, professionals often employed these tactics situationally, using them selectively in reaction to particular contexts. They sometimes acted sequentially, using one strategy before moving on to another. A worker might first resist, but then submit, before eventually exiting Qatar altogether. Finally, different professionals used different strategies at various times, and successful strategies were employed more often than those deemed unsuccessful.

Although academics and curators share many professional values, the way they work and the institutional structures within which they work differ and therefore shape their responses to professional dissonance differently. Censorship and surveillance at QMA is described by some employees as “overt.” Intellectual freedoms are virtually nonexistent unless they are tied to projects supported by QMA chair Sheikha Mayassa. Education City came to fore as an explicitly Western project, but anti-Western rhetoric is described as an “explicit” part of the day-to-day interactions at QMA. Western museum professionals are viewed as a polluting influence. This sentiment (as well as steeper budget cuts and strong Qatarization hiring policies) has led to numerous layoffs. On the other hand, the challenges of the labor system may be more deeply felt by academics, whose annual hiring cycle makes it difficult to leave one job and find another right away. Both professors and curators face inherent limits on the substantive content of their work, although these may be somewhat greater for professors. While curators are constrained by the objects in their storerooms, they can borrow materials or share exhibitions developed by other institutions to cover more ground. The Damien Hirst exhibit is just one example of an event made possible by Qatar’s wealth. Professors, on the other hand, are often part of a larger university system or discipline. There is a mandate that particular subjects or topics be covered in certain classes so that students can move forward. Finally, each professional community faces different, although potentially critical, audiences. The professor faces a limited group of students—they know who their students are and may be able to take the temperature of the classroom, gauging student discomfort (even in advance) and proactively responding to it. The curator works for a larger, invisible
public, yet his or her work is more visibly on display. Therefore, the “minefields” involved in curatorial choices may cause these professionals to move even more cautiously than their academic counterparts.

**Resistance**

Resistance occurred when academics and curators deliberately provoked their audiences or pushed the envelope in some manner. These individuals diminished dissonance and increased consonance by telling themselves that what they were doing was good for students or museum visitors. Inciting students is a well-known technique of many educators (Rangachari 2011). Provocation is also a common feature of some avant-garde museums, which deliberately display artwork or hold exhibitions that are intended to titillate, goad, and engender strong reactions (Cooks 1998; Jagger, Dubek, and Pedretti 2012).

For example, one faculty member at Education City assigned readings in queer theory and showed films with strong sexual content, including homosexuality. Although some students and parents complained to the administration, the faculty member refused to limit the use of these materials in his classroom. The faculty member’s two-year contract was not renewed. “I don’t care if they deport me,” said a different professor, who was also known for using controversial materials. “Send me to jail. They will be giving me a gift. Because then everyone would be like, ‘Oh you were deported, let me find everything that you ever wrote.’ People don’t want to lose their jobs. But if you have more people like me who actually don’t care, who are slightly reckless, then we might actually get somewhere.”

Resistance was not always intentionally provocative. For example, some professors who discussed potentially sensitive issues exercised a degree of caution when doing so.

In class I try to bring up controversial topics or I throw out a polemic statement, get their reaction on something. This semester we talked about women’s rights and the women’s situation in Qatar. I always sort of ease into it, not be too aggressive. I don’t want to come out too hard, because I know some of these students will react and go to the dean. That’s happened. You just never know with some of the students what they’re capable of doing, so you have to be careful.

A common tactic described by professors at Education City was to preface potentially controversial lectures, films, or readings with a disclaimer intended to frame the content as educational. One professor explained her use of disclaimers this way:

If I’m going to talk about something controversial, I just give them warning up front. You kind of let them know the punch is coming. And that’s the magic trick. That shows that I’m not rubbing their face in it. There’s a purpose to it. Every time I’ve done something where I could see there being a reason to self-censor, but I feel it’s part of the course, I can’t avoid it, it’s just telling them and being honest about why we’re doing it, why it’s important, why they need to be exposed to it. Because I’m not here to shock anyone. I’m not a provocateur, but [I use] provocative examples that are going to shock you and you’re going to have a gut reaction.

Additionally, professionals who resisted various elements of Qatar’s politics did not always do so deliberately. In other words, they did not always view their actions as forms of defiance.
Interestingly, we did not find clear acts of resistance among curators. Even in the instances where curators knew they were crossing some line, as we describe below, they still believed in their ability to respect the system and to effect positive change from within. We believe this is because museums serve a larger, public audience that is unknown to the curator. The probability that someone will be offended and complain is higher. In contrast, when resistance occurs in the classroom, it is in a private setting and the offender and offended know one another. This context may serve as its own form of mitigation, whereas launching and resolving a complaint about a museum display would necessarily take more effort and evolve in a more public forum.

Subversion

Our respondents practiced subversion when they secretly worked to challenge the conventions and dictates of Qatar while appearing to accept and submit to them. They increased consonance in order to decrease dissonance. The professional simply appeared to be complying, while intending to subtly challenge the system.

For example, some faculty members developed strategies to discuss potentially sensitive subject matter in their classrooms. A political science professor, who has since departed, was careful not to criticize the government directly.

I allude, wink, when I want to say something about the government. Instead, what I do is I say, “Okay, in Abu Dhabi they do this kind of politics.” And one of the students will say, “Oh, that’s like Qatar.” I can smuggle it in through other examples that are nearby, so I don’t actually have to not touch on areas that are important, because I’m afraid of official censor. So there are issues that I soft-pedal, I attack through analogy or looking at examples that are close but not at home.

Other scholars claimed that their academic disciplines were inherently subversive. “All of the stuff that I teach—just because it has a lot to do with race, gender, and class—is subversive,” one professor explained. “By the nature of what I do, it could potentially end up offending people. I don’t actually seek to offend people, but the palette is so small that you could offend people.” As with resistance, scholars who framed controversial materials as “educational” and gave students warnings about controversial materials reduced the potential for complaints and, therefore, the contradictions between their professional values and actions.

Other education professionals viewed Qatar’s limits on free expression as rooted in patriarchy. They contrasted this with the free-thinking West (though, as we have mentioned, North America and Europe are not without limits of this kind). In interviews, these scholars were open about having a hidden curriculum in their classes. One professor explained,

I think first and foremost the lesson I try to get across is intellectual independence—teaching them to question all things and all people at all times. And I do recognize here that can be a bit more problematic. There’s more of an emphasis on obeying, for example, your father—especially if you’re a young woman—and not questioning. Not questioning religion. I think in North America, particularly in America itself, I think there’s a pride in questioning and challenging authority. Here that’s not the case. My focus is on intellectual independence. Believe what you want to believe, but make an informed decision to believe
that, not just because somebody told you. For me that’s the primary agenda and the hidden curriculum.

Similarly, other educators believed that teaching students to think critically served as its own catalyst for social change, even when they were not directly addressing social, political, or cultural matters. According to one educator, the creative-class professionals working in Qatar are sowing the seeds of destruction for these cultures, in no uncertain terms. Because we are prestigious institutions, we are educating them, relative to cultural norms, in very effective ways of thinking. We’re basically teaching them how to use fact-based reasoning, which is going to be more powerful in most situations than just sort of going with your gut. And we’re teaching the elite of these places, which are not necessarily the mass of the population. So we are in some sense implementing dissension within a culture all the time. And the long-term effect of this is to create cultural strife within the nation. And this will happen in any place we have an institution, in countries that are non-Western. That’s really where these kinds of institutions are popping up anyway. If a U.S. school has a partnership with say the Sorbonne, it’s different than if they’re opening up a business school in Bangkok. So we are providing a point of view, we’re educating people who are potentially the future leaders of that country in the tools and methods and ways of thinking that are foreign. And setting them up to lead the country in a direction other than the direction the country is inclined to move on its own, given its own cultural norms. So we’re agents of chaos in a sense.

This educator sees herself as a subversive agent of change, creating the next generation of Qataris who supposedly will be inspired and skilled enough to challenge the status quo. Of course, viewing oneself as subversive does not necessarily render it true, but subversives framed their pedagogy in this manner and thereby reinforced their belief that they were secretly upending the system.

Curators also claimed to subvert, although in subtler ways. An exhibit associated with the future Sports and Olympic Museum featured female athletes dressed in athletic wear deemed suitable for observant Muslims (burkinis, which cover the swimmer’s body entirely) alongside those wearing Western swimsuits. The government approved this display to bolster its bid to host the Olympics in Qatar. It also contributed to the state’s efforts to promote healthier and more active lifestyles among its citizens. But the curators had another agenda. They wanted to promote female athleticism and, through it, greater gender equality. They were able to show Qatari citizens and visitors, in seemingly non-threatening ways, that women are also accomplished athletes who compete internationally. (Qatar sent its first female Olympic athlete to compete in rifle shooting in 2012.)

Subverting the status quo also drives exhibitions of global superstars such as Takashi Murakami and Damien Hirst. They signal to the rest of the world that Qatar, too, can take its place as a global art destination and that Qatari citizens are capable of engaging with and appreciating abstract, political art. It’s just a matter of doing it with care. Jean Paul Engelen, former head of public art, described the exhibitions he sponsored as “progressive, and at the
same time respectful of everybody’s rights and everybody’s needs and for a local identity. I think that’s more progressive than conservative. But let’s do it without breaking that line, and that’s a really hard thing to thread... Make people not afraid of it.”

Submission
Submission occurred when professionals gave in to the authoritarianism of Qatar, abandoning elements of their professional training to reduce the dissonance to a tolerable level. Self-censorship in the classroom was a common form of submission for education professionals. Although many academics had also self-censored in the West, this reality was overlooked or minimized when discussing their work at Education City. According to one educator, who left Qatar after several years,

It’s really hard, especially in liberal arts classes, to skirt around issues that I would like to bring up and wouldn’t hiccup about bringing up [in the U.S.], because I wouldn’t really be concerned about whether or not it was something students wanted to talk about. I wouldn’t worry if it made them a little uncomfortable. In fact, I’d be just fine with that. Whereas in Doha, I’m sure that no matter how much I say that I addressed the same issues, blah blah blah, I’m sure that I didn’t. I’m sure that I was a lot more conservative in what I brought up in class then I would be in the U.S. I’m talking about everything, ranging from gender politics, religion, sexuality, those sort of things. I feel like classrooms were sometimes treated like proper parties where you don’t talk about certain things.

Self-censorship in the classroom took on a myriad of forms. Educators described an array of topics that they considered taboo: heterosexuality, homosexuality, race, religion, politics, Israel, Jews, violence, low-income migrant workers, gambling, drinking, drugs, and cursing. Others were more general. “Where I self-censor is challenging the deeply held cultural and political narratives,” explained one educator. Some educators talked about self-censorship in terms of format: books or readings they declined to include on the syllabus, lectures they would not give, discussion questions they would not pose, projects they refused to assign, music they would not play, or films they would not screen. “The only limitations are the movies that I can show,” one professor said. “I sometimes almost self-censor because I know this movie’s going to bring something up or contain a scene that’s going to cause some conflict among students.” Still others described specific works that they refused to assign. For example, one educator typically used a book by Salman Rushdie in his European classrooms, but “wasn’t sure if that would be a problem. I was ambivalent about that book, so I chose another book.”

Some educators lamented what they described as a loss of academic freedom, believing that it reduced the effectiveness of their pedagogy. “I’ve toned down the sex and violence content in my courses,” one professor said. “For undergraduate students, [sex and violence] can be a way to get their attention and keep them engaged. So some of the stuff that I would talk about [back at home], I don’t talk about here, or certainly not to that extent. I’m a little more conservative.”

Those who claimed to never self-censor tended to be scholars working in disciplines such as math and computer science, which—they said—did not directly address hot-button
issues. “I think it goes discipline to discipline,” one educator proclaimed. “If you asked some computer science person, I’m sure they’d say no. He’s just doing exactly what he’d be doing [on the home campus]. Whereas in the humanities, it would be totally different. And for me, I’m like halfway between there. I can bring up issues of social justice, but it’s not my disciplinary obligation to go really deep into it.” Virtually all educators working in the social sciences and humanities, even those who openly practiced resistance and/or subversion, described moments when they exercised self-censorship. A few participants were reflective about the ways Western academics working in the United States and Europe limit what they say and do in the classroom, but they did not view these situations as analogous.

As indicated by our interview data, censorship in the classrooms at Education City was not mandated. Educators ostensibly had complete academic freedom, but many exercised self-censorship anyway, not wanting to rock the boat or get in trouble. This strategy was panoptic in the sense that the social control was fear-based and self-directed. It was also post-panoptic in that the “eyes” that were watching were decentralized and democratized. The supposedly less powerful students, in fact, were viewed as having more control than their allegedly more powerful professors.

The same was true with curators. Because the administrative lines of authority at the QMA were so convoluted, and the leadership seemed to change so regularly (almost all of the people we interviewed are no longer working in the country), many curators were on guard. They did not know who was the ultimate decision maker, exactly what their vision was, how the rules differed for each of the institutions under development, and when that would suddenly change. Some believed that this was a purposeful strategy of the government to keep workers on their toes and institutions competing with each other. The official documents they were required to sign upon employment, which strictly forbid talking to outsiders about the plans underway or criticizing the government in any way, had “put the fear of God” in many, as one curator told us.

For those at the beginning of their careers, or who believed they had more professional responsibility and power than they would if they stayed home, this was not something they wanted to threaten. Among this group, the subculture sanctioned putting one’s own professional development ahead of world politics. Playing by the rules seemed a small price to pay to be able to move up the career ladder, another way of counteracting dissonance by focusing on the positive rewards each individual would reap.

Conversion

Conversion occurred when professionals were persuaded to adjust their professional norms or values to conform to Qatar’s authoritarianism. Whereas submission implied surface acting and awareness that one was operating in opposition to his or her professional norms and values, with conversion, there was no such dissonance; the crossing over was deliberate, intentional, and believed to be the correct path. Like those who had submitted, converts practiced self-censorship and were careful not to offend. The difference, however, was that these behaviors had become naturalized. These professionals believed they were making Qatar a better place by bringing in Western-style education and museum practices in ways they thought fit with local values.
One converted professor used the word “cosmopolitan” to describe graduates from Education City, defining the term as “people who can move comfortably through multiple worlds. We’re challenging the home world, the world of Qatar, the world of the Middle East, and giving them access to different information and different modes of thought. And we’re giving them the tools to move in the West. We’re giving students the tools to move in many different worlds.”

Converts viewed the government as more enlightened than authoritarian, and believed that Qatar was successfully charting a third way between the Muslim world and the West. Some were surprised by what they encountered, not imagining that a Qatari woman, such as QMA chair Sheikha Mayassa, could be so “progressive” and “enlightened.”

The professional charged with creating the new slavery museum was a case in point. He looked at museums in the West that were just now “adding in diversity and stirring,” and saw his work in Qatar as an opportunity to not repeat the same mistakes. Slavery in Qatar was only abolished in 1952, although many former slaves became officially or unofficially part of the families which had owned them. He admired Sheikha Mozah, who is credited as the visionary behind the Msheireb Museums heritage houses, for having the courage and vision to realize that Qatar’s slave past was something it needed to acknowledge. “She believes it is like a broken arm that has been badly mended. You need to fix it and heal it correctly before you can really move ahead.” He saw himself as leading an effort that could chart new museological strategies for the rest of the world. Not all would agree. According to a recent article published by Reuters, “That the Bin Jelmood house, which opened in October 2015, is located in a country regularly accused of sanctioning modern day slavery is an irony not lost on many visitors” (Finn 2015).

Exit

Exit occurred when a professional permanently left Qatar in response to the country’s authoritarian regime. Most workers eventually leave Qatar, and they leave for the same sorts of reasons expats do the world over: new job opportunities, boredom, medical issues, family matters, and so on. In Qatar, contracts are limited to only a few years and it is unusual for expat workers at either end of the prestige/pay hierarchy to remain in the country long-term. The professionals in the exit category, however, left before their contract was over. They felt constrained by Qatar’s authoritarian government and departed as soon as they found work elsewhere, typically in countries that they perceived to have more freedom and autonomy. Their professional dissonance became unbearable, so they opted out.

This strategy took root over time. Those who embraced it were likely to have submitted or subverted during a given period before deciding that they no longer wanted to compromise. They became disillusioned by the limits on their professional autonomy and decided they could no longer tolerate the costs. Museum workers were more readily able to use this strategy, in part because the academic hiring cycle makes it impossible to quit one job and immediately find another. Qatar was not a long-term proposition for most of the museum workers. Thus, they felt less burdened by labor regulations and less susceptible to the threat of immediate termination.
CONCLUSION

Qatar’s labor policies, combined with the politics of surveillance and censorship, shaped the working lives of creative-class professionals in key ways. Educators, whose inability to find work in their fields elsewhere had brought them to Qatar, were more cautious and careful than their museum-worker counterparts. They clung to their jobs in Qatar, wanting to continue working in their fields and earning good money. Concerned that they would get in “trouble,” they practiced self-censorship and did their best not to offend anyone. That said, they often applied for jobs in other parts of the world and departed as soon as they secured a similar position in what they deemed a less authoritarian setting.

The structural differences of the academic and museum job markets also affected responses. Because educators could not pick up and leave at any time, they were more likely to practice submission via self-censorship. For museum professionals, the lack of creative and intellectual freedoms was top-down, overt, and built into the structure of the workplace. Perhaps because of this, we found no examples of resistance among museum professionals, though many academics practiced it.

Most professionals in Qatar eventually decided that the money and opportunities the country offered were not worth the professional dissonance. They were unwilling to be party to what had become, in their mind, a pantomime of education and artistic expression. They aspired to return to the United States or Europe, which they viewed (and, at times, romanticized) as so much better from a distance. Thus they moved on, carrying these experiences and their transformative professional and personal imprint on to their next post—a cultural and professional toolkit that differed markedly from that of their sedentary counterparts.

While, as we have argued, the Qatari context is in some ways unique, we believe that as the labor market, professional cultures, and workplaces become increasingly transnational, we are likely to see more frequent, though less acute, versions of the professional dissonance experienced by curators and academics among people working outside of Qatar. We imagine this happening for female professionals in countries where religious or political values militate against gender equality. We anticipate this happening for scientists who feel that a particular religious or political climate limits the problems they can tackle. While newly rich or aspiring rich countries in Asia, such as China and Singapore, or in the Gulf, such as Kuwait or the United Arab Emirates, offer attractive professional opportunities with lots of money and resources, they also require serious professional compromises. And authoritarian regimes are not unique to the Global South. We expect that creative-class professionals working in countries with limited freedoms and government surveillance everywhere also experience some degree of the professional dissonance we describe here.

As a result, in the future, we may see different classes of professionals, distinguished not only by their occupational knowledge and skills but also by their ability to work in different kinds of work settings and their ability to accept and manage professional dissonance. This kind of professional expertise is likely to grow only more valuable as the labor market becomes increasingly global. □
REFERENCES


**NOTE**

1. Names, university affiliations, academic disciplines, and other identifying features have been changed to protect the anonymity of our participants.