



# Digital Scholars Research Fellowship 2024 Summer Report



## About Digital Scholars at Vassar College

The Digital Scholars Program connected scholars who have experienced forced displacement but had established stable living situations with virtual teaching and research fellowships. Digital Scholars guest taught in undergraduate courses during the academic year, after which they had the opportunity to pursue a summer research fellowship working with an undergraduate research assistant. In tandem, the two fellowships supported scholars' professional development while also enriching Vassar classes and providing undergraduates with intensive mentored research opportunities. Building on the integration of pedagogy and scholarship that is foundational to the liberal arts model, this program developed and supported a global network of 11 scholars for whom a more traditional in-person fellowship may have been impractical or altogether impossible.

By drawing on online learning platforms and technology that facilitates a hybrid classroom, we have been able to form deep and ongoing collaborations with scholars located around the world. The Digital Scholars Program was a signature project of the Consortium on Forced Migration, Displacement, and Education (CFMDE), a multi-institutional grant from the Mellon Foundation that leveraged the unique capacities of liberal arts institutions to learn from displaced scholars and students, engage in global and transdisciplinary study of migration, and welcome newcomers to our region. The Digital Scholars Program exemplifies the transformative learning that can take place in global liberal arts classrooms.

Digital Scholars were recruited through an open call, interviewed by a faculty-administrator team, and then matched with Vassar courses aligning with their areas of expertise. Scholars were diverse in terms of discipline and career stage. Each of them delivered 1-3 lectures per course match, and often matched with multiple courses in different departments or programs. Host faculty on campus served as resources for the Digital Scholars by providing feedback on lesson plans, orienting fellows to the expectations and conventions of a small liberal arts classroom, and networking beyond class engagements. Scholars' contributions to the Vassar curriculum broadened the horizons of our campus community and connected students and faculty to a global range of scholars and artists with distinctive expertise.

During the summer research fellowship following their pedagogical engagement in Vassar classrooms, Digital Scholars mentored Vassar students in a variety of scholarly activities, including conducting and preparing literature reviews, drafting interview question guides,

designing and conducting qualitative data analysis, editing and proofreading manuscripts, and preparing course materials and visual aids.

Overall, the Digital Scholars Program piloted a model of transnational collaboration within and beyond the classroom. The program rethought the bounds of the classroom to learn from a much broader network of scholars, not just those able to travel to our campus. We strove to model a multilateral exchange of knowledge, as host faculty members and students formed reciprocal academic partnerships with Digital Scholars over the course of their fellowships. While the program is coming to a pause with the end of the CFMDE grant, the model holds much promise, and we hope to connect with collaborators who may want to take it up.

Program Director: Kirsten Wesselhoeft

Program Coordinator: Sam Cavagnolo

## Summer 2024 Research Projects

### ► A Blue Humanities Reading of *Avatar: The Way of Water*

#### **Lead Researcher: Mohammed Abdullah Hussein Muharram**

Dr. Muharram serves as an assistant professor at Tamar University in Yemen and is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Bremen where he researches and teaches the intersections of postcolonial studies and the emerging field of the Blue Humanities with specific reference to Arabic literature and culture.



#### **Research Assistant: Lydia Wright**

Lydia Wright ('25) is a major in Media Studies with a minor in Arabic.

#### **Project Description:**

Muharram and Wright collaborated to analyze the film *Avatar: The Way of Water* and conduct a review of relevant literature in the Blue Humanities. The Blue Humanities is an emerging field of study which centers humanity's connection to the oceans and other bodies of water over typical land-centric discourse. Analyzing the film in this context, allows for an exploration of humanities relation to ecosystems as well as alternate ecofutures. This research was collected/used for an upcoming book chapter by Muharram "A Blue Humanities Reading of *Avatar: The Way of Water*" for the volume *Seas, Oceans, and Shorelines in Films* (Routledge forthcoming 24/25).

## ► Resistance to Epistemic Violence Among Faculty of Color in Norway

### **Lead Researcher: Juhar Yasin Abamosa**

Juhar Yasin Abamosa is an associate professor of pedagogy in the Department of Pedagogy, Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, Lillehammer, Norway.



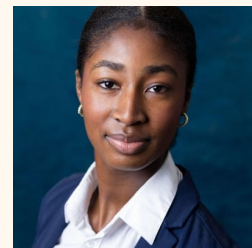
### **Research Assistants: Malachi Maguregui and Olivia Sparks**

Malachi Maguregui ('25) is an Education and Media Studies double major. Olivia Sparks ('26) is a Psychological Science and Africana Studies double major.



### **Project Description:**

Abamosa, Maguregui and Sparks participated in weekly socratic research discussions to conduct a thematic analysis of interview transcripts conducted with faculty of color at various Norwegian Universities. Abamosa conducted these interviews and introduced the students to Clark Braun's methodology of thematic analysis for qualitative data. Through this research, the team explored perceptions of epistemic violence among these faculty as well as their tactics for resistance. Abamosa collected these findings in a forthcoming book chapter entitled "Resisting epistemic violence in academia: Experiences and survival strategies of Faculty of Color in Norwegian public higher education institutions."



## ► Unraveling Diaspora Divides: Understanding Turkish Communities in Belgium

### **Lead Researcher: Ilhan Kaya**

Ilhan Kaya is a professor of human geography and a SAR scholar at University of Ghent in Belgium



### **Research Assistant: A'ishah Cerrato**

A'ishah Cerrato ('25) is a Geography-Anthropology major.

### **Project Description:**

In this project, Kaya and Cerrato used quantitative research methods to explore and map Turkish diaspora populations in Belgium and other European countries from the 1970's onwards. Turkish diasporic populations, mirroring the makeup of Turkey, vary in ethnic, religious and political background. By studying these populations, Kaya hopes to focus on contentions and divides

within the diaspora population in order to lay the groundwork for fostering cohesion and solidarity. Cerrato also assisted in drafting interview guides for interviews Kaya plans to conduct with members of the Turkish diaspora in future research.

## ► The Role of NGOs and Accountability in the Global South

### **Lead Researcher: Dr. Tonny Raymond Kirabira**

Dr. Kirabira is a lawyer and socio-legal scholar in the field of international law, currently teaching law at University of East London.



### **Research Assistants: Tasneem Hussein and Rameen Gondal**

Tasneem Hussein ('26) is a Neuroscience and Behavior & Political Science double major. Rameen Gondal ('26) is an International Studies and Economics double major.

### **Project Description:**

Hussein and Gondal collaborated to help Kirabira revise his upcoming manuscript being published in the series [International Law and the Global South](#). In this research, Kirabira investigates the impact of NGOs on transitional justice processes and NGO accountability initiatives in Uganda and Myanmar. Additionally, Hussein and Gondal helped to research and draft lesson materials on the use of force and other topics for a new course Kirabira will be teaching this fall, *International Law: Problems & Process*.



## Key Takeaways

1. The Digital Scholars program is a transformative professional experience for fellows. Through the institutional, pedagogical, and financial resources provided by the program, scholars are able to sustain, enrich, and expand their teaching and research agendas, and connect with an international network of colleagues and students.
2. Virtual partnerships, despite requiring careful coordination and some flexibility, are valuable educational experiences for faculty and students at

host institutions. Digital video platforms as well as hybrid classroom technology can support interactive guest lectures, seminar discussions, and workshops with scholars located around the world. Vassar faculty consistently reported positive student feedback from their hosting experiences. In the words of one Vassar professor, the Digital Scholars program allowed their class “to see global feminism in action” in a tangible way.

3. The model of the Digital Scholars Program could be taken up and adapted at other college and university campuses. Existing networks of displaced and at-risk scholars are available to support the recruitment of guest scholars. Colleges and universities that desire to host an in-person scholar at risk, but may find the logistics prohibitive, could establish a remote fellowship along the lines of the Digital Scholars Program at Vassar.
4. Any future iteration of a program on this model should consider: a) how to attract the participation of STEM faculty as on-campus hosts for Digital Scholars, who may find it more challenging to incorporate a guest module into their curriculum, b) how to forge a close collaboration with Information Services offices in order to foresee potential technological issues and troubleshoot as they arise, and c) how to foster close partnerships between host faculty and guest scholars, allowing scholars to feel part of an academic community even though they are joining from afar and for only a year or so.

**With inquiries related to this program, please contact**  
**[migrationdisplacement@vassar.edu](mailto:migrationdisplacement@vassar.edu).**