

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

## DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Faculty Publications: Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education      Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education

---

2020

### Book review: Neha Vora, *Teach for Arabia: American Universities, Liberalism, and Transnational Qatar*

Loukia K. Sarroub

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/teachlearnfacpub>



Part of the [Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons](#), [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), [International and Comparative Education Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

---

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications: Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Book review

Neha Vora, *Teach for Arabia:  
American Universities, Liberalism,  
and Transnational Qatar.*

Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019. 232 pp.

**Loukia K. Sarroub**

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*

With a provocative title that inherently questions who might be served and educated best by the branch campuses of top US universities in Qatar and Gulf states, Vora's new book debunks some old myths and reminds readers from the outset that "liberalism has Arabian roots" (18). Vora wonders about and studies the transplant of liberal education into "so-called illiberal" countries like Qatar and other Gulf States. Her timely book offers on-the-ground perspectives of students and faculty in these transplant institutions as they engage with curriculum and one another in a new knowledge economy. The book contributes to scholarship about how the cultural ideological framework of liberalism informs and shapes discourses on educational policies and the restructuring of nationalistic reforms for development across the Arab world.

Vora frames the book through a knowledge economy perspective that is tension filled. For example, throughout the book she examines the effects of educational reform and nationalism as they are enacted in the US branch campuses of the Gulf. As Vora notes, branch campuses such as Education City in Qatar are simultaneously "spaces of contradiction" and "sites of new agencies and belongings" (29). As such, she argues that conceptions

---

Published in *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 93, No. 2 (2020), pp 261–265.  
Copyright © 2020 by the Institute for Ethnographic Research, George Washington University. Used by permission.

of knowledge economy become realigned with on-the-ground Arab nationalist orientations in combination with notions of the civilizing mission of Western knowledge economies. Furthermore, Vora examines the tensions that non-national students—the majority of the student population in the branch campuses—and Qatari students attending college experience, but as the author notes, there is no critical mass of Qatari students, and more importantly, there is little Qatarization of the workforce in this oil-rich Gulf state, wherein most people do not work.

Vora devotes attention to five themes (across five chapters) that characterize academic life at a branch campus such as Education City in Qatar: unlearning knowledge economy, pedagogies of essentialism, mixed meanings, local expatriates, and expatriate/expert camps. In Chapter 1, Vora argues that the Qatari nationalist projects and educational reform efforts are divergent. In Chapter 2, she notes that educators take a culture-relativist approach akin to that of anthropologists in cultivating liberal pedagogies and liberalism. In Chapter 3, Vora examines how state-sponsored feminism and liberal feminism influence women's identities inside coeducational spaces. Chapter 4 focuses on the experiences of expatriates, those students who are non-citizens but grew up in Qatar. In Chapter 5, Vora offers an ethnographic account in the study of her own experiences and those of her colleagues (via pseudonyms) in the elite setting in which they work, closely examining how whiteness and religion offer an insightful context for understanding the "il-liberal pleasures afforded to Western and white expatriates living and working in the [Gulf] compounds" (27).

One of the key findings of Vora's fieldwork focuses on the segregation of Qatari students because they do not typically participate in extracurricular activities—i.e., Texas A&M or Carnegie Mellon branch campus orientations, clubs, or dances. Lack of participation in social activities reinforced administrators' views of the Qataris as a homogenous, conservative group, when in fact Qataris, especially women, were not interested in college night events because of high levels of homework and family obligations. Non-nationals, on the other hand, were more likely to participate in the "real college life" that was available as well as the liberal subjectivities as envisioned by the branch campus administrations.

With regard to coeducation and women in the branch campuses, the author discusses her own experiences as a faculty member at the Texas A&M branch. She explores misconceptions of feminisms that characterize Qatari women, in particular, as subjects of college life feminist notions that do not account for their own agency and empowerment. Vora makes the salient point that forms of Islamic feminism are less centered on gender difference and segregation; indeed, they are mainly focused on domestic equality via the *Qur'an* (84). As others have found in connection to immigrant

women from Gulf states, Qatari women were similarly active in participating as agents of their own social encounters *in relation* to the “in-between” private and public spaces they occupied and the men, Qatari versus non-Qatari, with whom they communicated on campus (Sarroub 2002, 2005, 2009, 2010). In fact, Vora highlights that gender “could never be a cultural-neutral term” (94) in Qatar because it was mediated by surveillance, spatial boundaries, and the binary lived experience of being Qatari/non-Qatari.

The book also promises in Chapter 5 an ethnography that focuses on Education City’s faculty and staff. Readers are introduced to a staff member via vivid descriptions of the “expat/expert camp” to describe exclusionary spaces and communities. Vora explains that “faculty and staff were both laborers segregated into compounds and a privileged elite who could enjoy the pleasures of racial and class segregation” (133). Examples are given of staff and faculty members who earned salaries that were much higher than those of their colleagues in the United States, who traveled to Europe once a month, and who wore designer clothes and had cars and other living privileges assigned to them by the government. In this chapter the author describes via some sketches her consternation with some of her colleagues because “they trafficked in a discourse of respect for their hosts” (141) that ultimately legitimized Qatari state power. Faculty, most of whom are non-nationals (and Qataris in university leadership roles are a rarity), reside in secluded, luxurious homes akin to resorts.

It is in this chapter particularly that the author veers away from presenting her arguments with the voices of faculty and staff that she identifies as white. The other chapters of the book are filled with excerpts of interviews and field notes rich with verbatim talk, but this final chapter is strangely silent in connection to what she might call white Western voices, as most of what these people have to say is summarized by the author without direct quotations. For example, with Ramzi, an Arab-American professor, the author notes that they quickly moved into “interview mode,” but with colleagues and acquaintances, Margaret, Lizbeth, and Mark as well as others, it was not clear whether Vora was meeting them socially or was engaged in informal and formal interviews about which they were aware. Perhaps the research participants’ expressed views were also mediated by their understandings of the purpose(s) of their interactions with Vora— i.e., visiting with a potential guest or friend in their home(s) versus an ethnographic interview related to the research project of the book.

Vora’s analysis in the fifth chapter begs the question: How do we understand abstract academic notions of identity when the folks we study do not ascribe to them, but we as researchers believe that they should (a normative view) and thus hold them accountable to categories they do not themselves use? Several assertions on pages 140–141, including “they

believed they were more egalitarian, and thus superior to Qataris and non-Westerners" (141) are not elaborated by research participants' own words, and it is difficult to separate the author's clearly expressed frustration with colleagues who did not express their identities through the ideologically informed whiteness frame from the analysis of interviews that support such claims. The strength of this chapter is not so much ethnography as it is the author's narrative exploration *in dialectical tension* with others around important topics that plague (and engage) both academia (on any university campus) and everyday life interaction.

Importantly, Vora's book informs readers that faculty and staff in Qatar's branch campuses, while they continuously face job insecurity, also live in comfortable and luxurious work and residential environments. Incentives to work there include salaries that are 15 percent higher than those American academics might earn elsewhere, cheap domestic labor, and a high status because of their non-Qatari professional credentials. This book makes a nuanced contribution to scholarship about the debates about "knowledge society" and "education for work" in Arab societies. In the same vein as the scholarship of sociologist of education André Mazawi (2007, 2008, 2010), Vora's book also critically examines the sources, institutional policies, and discursive reproduction of knowledge economies across the Gulf states.

As *Teach for Arabia* demonstrates, Gulf branch campuses are contested pedagogical, national, public, and global terrains wherein a microcosm of the world gets educated. Unlike many other places, diversity characterizes their populations of students, faculty, and staff. Ironically, even in this transnational, diverse milieu, there is a paucity of recognition and understanding of the Qatari student population vis-à-vis their work futures and their academic trajectories socioeconomically and culturally within the campuses and nationally. As Vora astutely shows throughout the book, the divergent discourses of nationalism and education reforms puts young college students at cross-roads in the "new" Qatari society.

## References

- Mazawi, André. 2007. "'Knowledge Society' or Work as 'Spectacle'? Education for Work and the Prospects of Social Transformation in Arab Societies." In L. Farrell and T. Fenwick, eds. *Educating the Global Workforce: Knowledge, Knowledge Work, and Knowledge Workers*, 251-267. London: Routledge.
- . 2008. "Policy Politics of Higher Education in the Gulf Cooperation Council Member States: Intersections of Globality, Regionalism and Locality." In C. Davidson and P. Mackenzie Smith, eds. *Higher Education in the Gulf States: Shaping Economies, Politics, and Culture*, 59-72. SOAS Middle East Issues Series. London: Al-Saqi Books.

- . 2010. "Naming the Imaginary: Building an Arab Knowledge Society and the Contested Terrain of Educational Reforms for Development." In O. Abi-Mershed, ed. *Trajectories of Education in the Arab World: Legacies and Challenges*, 201-225. London: Routledge.
- Sarroub, Loukia K. 2002. "'In-Betweenness': Religion and Conflicting Visions of Literacy." *Reading Research Quarterly* 37(2):130-148.
- . 2005. *All American Yemeni Girls: Being Muslim in a Public School*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- . 2009. "Finding Husbands, Finding Wives: How Being Literate Creates Crisis." In Laurie MacGillivray, ed. *Literacy Practices in Times of Crisis: Practices and Perspectives*, 121-137. New York: Routledge.
- . 2010. "Discontinuities and Differences among Muslim Arab-Americans: Making it at Home and School." In Malu Dantes and Patrick Manyak, eds. *Home-school Connections in a Multicultural Society: Learning From and With Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families*, 76-93. New York: Routledge.