

Reading *Teach for Arabia* in Qatar: Self-Critical University Studies

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It was my suggestion that our academic reading group at Education City in Doha read Neha Vora's 2019 publication *Teach for Arabia: American Universities, Liberalism, and Transnational Qatar*.¹ I was told that the book was banned in Qatar, although I could not find any evidence of this. So, if the book was banned, it seems that instead of a public denunciation, or an old school book burning, the strategy was to just not speak of it (although one colleague said that she may have seen some angry tweets on Arabic twitter). I wanted to discuss the book because it was about the Education City "experiment," about what happens in Doha (and elsewhere) when western, primarily American, educational institutions are invited in to change the local academic culture, among other things.

Our reading group session to discuss *Teach for Arabia* was one of the most well attended that semester, with professors from four different universities present, and most people had actually read the book. I gave a brief presentation on how the book fit into the field of Critical University Studies before focusing on what parts of it stood out to me as an American teaching at a British university in Education City. Critical University Studies deconstructs the workings of the modern university in order to understand the ways in which it can serve to uphold societal inequalities – often in contradiction to its stated mission and ideals.

My discussion of the book focused on how Vora (or her interlocutors) positioned Education City, with its American and European branch campuses, as a zone of encounter that is simultaneously a "site of elite citizenship production," (49) a site of anxieties, (74) an "egalitarian space," (124) and, as a postcolonial site, also a space "of ongoing uneven imperial encounter." (166) As a professor who has taught at University College London (UCL), Qatar, for nearly three years, I have experienced or witnessed each aspect of this multifaceted description of Education City, a place where, as Vora demonstrates, (national) identities and cultural practices are both reified and challenged daily. Her synopsis was validating to my lived experiences and challenging to the tepid acceptance of the status quo.

I was also intrigued by Vora's exploration of the role of whiteness as a necessary requisite for western expatriate expertise in the Gulf. Vora adeptly writes that "[w]hite western expatriates brought with them not only expertise but also symbolic capital, in which their whiteness became the marker of their expert status, regardless of their skill set in comparison to other nationalities" (47). As a Black American academic, this is something that I also experience quite frequently. In many situations in the Gulf (and elsewhere) my blackness negates or neutralizes my research experience and American doctorate degree. It means that, in contrast to whiteness, my presence has to be explained instead of simply welcomed or fêted. Of course, this is not unrelated to the long history of the enslavement of Africans in the Gulf, which only ended officially in Qatar in 1952, but that is a topic for another essay.

Decolonizing International Education in the Gulf

Teach for Arabia resonated with me, but when pressed by a disparaging white male senior scholar in the reading group to cite any worthwhile passages, I felt shy to respond and reluctant to get into a subjective battle over the worth of the book. He closed his criticism of the book by suggesting that we just "forget about this book." What it deserves, he said, was to be forgotten and not even

¹ Neha Vora, *Teach for Arabia: American Universities, Liberalism, and Transnational Qatar* (Stanford University Press, 2019).

challenged. I assume that he took this position because he himself felt challenged, and because decolonization, which is the logical path the book leads us to, is literally and emotionally “unsettling.”² At that point, a female scholar of color joined in the conversation to say that, actually, she could cite several worthwhile passages that spoke to her, and she directed our attention to the following passage where Vora writes:

I explore how expertise in the Gulf mapped on to whiteness, and how whiteness mapped on to Doha’s geographic and ethno-racial segregation. American universities in Doha recuperated some aspects of white supremacy that are endemic to US institutions but attributed them to the Gulf and its demographics, thereby resolving institutions and individuals from facilitating change. This enabled racial self-segregation without the white guilt experience of the metropole. The experiences of non-white, non-Western, and Muslim faculty and staff were especially insightful in highlighting how the home spaces of academia and the branch campus both required forms of performance and offered different comforts and discomforts. My rights in Qatar and the Gulf were supposedly diminished by its exclusionary citizenship regimes, authoritarian police state and Islamic gender expectations. However, I have always found modes of belonging, a level of respect from my students, and a sense of physical comfort in my brown body there that I have rarely experienced in the United States.³

Of course, this was not enough to convince our naysayer. We should ignore the book. What he, and so many of us are resisting, is the kind of self-scrutiny that could lead to the tangible decolonization of dominant forms of education. Decolonization is not just a trendy academic buzzword, nor is it a metaphor.⁴ As de Lissovoy explains, “Decolonial theory is concerned with confronting, challenging, and undoing the dominative and assimilative force of colonialism as historical and contemporary process, and the cultural and epistemological Eurocentrism that underwrites it.”⁵ Furthermore, decolonial theory challenges the idea of American exceptionalism in education. It begins with the “decentering of the dominant content and standpoint,” but then moves on to build new knowledge taking into account the “subjugated knowledges” of those forced into the periphery.⁶

It might seem forced for some, to connect this decolonization agenda to branch campuses in the Gulf. After all, the universities are invited guests of the Qatari government, which generously covers all of their operating expenses. However, if we look at what is happening in many classrooms, the need to confront and undo dominant and assimilative epistemological Eurocentrism is conspicuous. Our teaching should not alienate students from their culture(s) nor produce seismic rifts that trigger never-ending searches for cultural authenticity. It is a belief in our ultimate good intentions, or in what Vora terms, our “liberal piety,” the idea that we are “liberal, cosmopolitan, and inclusive rather than parochial and complicit in ongoing forms of imperialism, Orientalism, exclusion, and American exceptionalism” (9) that make us unable or unwilling to face the social and material consequences of our actions as imperial educators.

Vora’s book is premised upon the idea that the misleading legitimizing discourses of liberalism and the knowledge economy, which are promoted by both American universities and Gulf nations who invite them in, “are easily undone through grounded empirical research” (32) such as what is presented in *Teach for Arabia*. However, more empirical and ethnographic research needs to be

² Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1.1 (2012): 1.

³ Vora, 28.

⁴ See Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor.”

⁵ Noah De Lissovoy, “Decolonial Pedagogy and the Ethics of the Global,” *Discourse: Studies in the Cultrual Politics of Education* 31.3 (June 2010): 280.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 286.

conducted on western higher education in the Middle East in order to support the ongoing efforts to decolonize international education. The challenge, of course, to decolonizing international education in the Gulf is that for the most part Gulf countries, including Qatar, have elided the colonial eras of their recent pasts and in general don't find western dominance nor the ascendancy of whiteness problematic in education. Vora says that this elision creates an oversimplified narrative of Arabia as being "untouched until oil development" that "effectively erases anti-colonial dissent" (35) and with it more complicated histories. It is good, however, for tourism and for patching together (a narrative of) a modern nation-state from disparate social groups.

Vora suggests that looking at Education city through an "analytic of encounter leaves openings to think about the possibility of decolonized knowledge production and of the branch campus as a site of agency." (19) As Tuck and Yang⁷ remind us, decolonization is not always the proper term for all forms of social justice work, as it is a term that is grounded in the genocidal experiences of Indigenous peoples. . . Furthermore, it is not just an intellectual exercise, but requires action, the repatriation of land, life, and whatever else has been taken from a community. What does decolonized education look like in context of the Gulf? I don't know if there is a viable example for us to point to at this time. Could Qatarization, the government's plan to replace expatriate professionals with Qataris, be integral to the decolonization process? The plan has been criticized for its focus on quantity over quality and for the lack of semblance between non-elite education and the needs of the Qatari labor market.⁸ Yet, Vora shows how it could be reframed as a process to "redress past injustices." (60) Considering that Education City has been integral to the plan of Qatarization, due to its stated goal of providing (elite) Qataris with education at an international standard, how can it be ensured that imperialist prototypes are not being produced who will continue the same west-centered policies and colonized worldviews of (some) expatriate educators? I would hope that natives of the region and "local expats," a term Vora uses, would be spearheading whatever initiatives do take place. Only they can begin to address how modern Gulf education can be decolonized, how it can be used to restore what has been lost to colonialism and neo-colonial globalization, without being (seen as) regressive.

Think with the Book

In trying to counter the criticisms of *Teach for Arabia* made by the aforementioned senior scholar, another member of the reading group, a male scholar of color, made two salient points. First, he noted that for us as academic researchers, this would most likely be one of the few times in our lives that we would be on the other side of a research project, reading about ourselves. Second, he said that even if he had some issues with the methodology or the extent to which research at one or two institutions at Education City universities could be made to speak for the entire eight-university campus, he decided to think with the book, especially as it concerned decentering the west, specifically the United States, in the classroom. This is something that I had already been trying to do in my classes in Doha and even before as a doctoral student teaching in the United States. However, in Qatar the need to decenter the west seems more immediate.

Vora reminds us of the imperial origins of the American University, but personally, I am not on a cultural civilizing mission. As an educator in the Gulf, this means that I currently walk a tight rope between exposing my students to the "seminal" literature in my field without shackling them to it

⁷ Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor."

⁸ Maryam Al-Subaiey, "Qatarization Policy – Implementation Challenges" Brookings Doha Center, 2011 https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/06_bdc_essay_winner.pdf

and without (even indirectly) creating a sense of civilizational inferiority. It means speaking with transparency about the cultural biases and blind spots in the very articles I assign for them to read.

I make an effort to find research that speaks to the experiences of the region, which also means taking into account guest workers, maids, etc. One of my proudest moments occurred after my Research Methods class read the work of the late Elfreda Chatman, a Black female scholar in the field of Information Science who studied the information-seeking behaviors of non-white and marginalized people. I assigned one of Chatman's most cited articles⁹ in which she used alienation theory to understand the information-seeking behaviours of Black janitors at a university in the American South. One of my students, originally from Yemen, said that Chatman's article really struck a chord with them and they decided to replicate it for their master's thesis by interviewing janitors in Education City in order to understand how they found the information they needed to live and work in Qatar and how they made use of, if at all, the world class libraries that they cleaned and to which they ostensibly had access. The student faced multiple obstacles with ethics approval and language barriers, but in the end produced a thesis that contributes to the decentering of hereto-dominant narratives and discourses even about Education City.

I actively and consistently encourage my students to publish their research in order to add to a corpus of sound, non-western, Gulf-based literature in our field. Qataris are a demographic minority in Qatar and also within my classes.¹⁰ Although for the most part, they are a political majority with greater access to social status and power than most residents here, I have watched painfully in class as Qataris showed obvious discomfort with research questions pertaining to Qatari culture and their related assumptions be put forth by other students. It is my goal to support Qataris and those that make Qatar their home, as knowledge producers, not just as native informants, and certainly not only as the subjects of research.

I suggested that our reading group read *Teach for Arabia* because there are real consequences for the presence of multiple, mostly American, universities teaching the elite of this small country that should not go unexamined. I lived in Qatar briefly fifteen years ago as an exchange student studying Arabic at Qatar University. Since my return, I have witnessed, sometimes with naïve shock, how much has changed. Now, as a professor at a British university in Qatar, I hope to challenge "the material and discursive Eurocentrism that underlies the politics of knowledge in education,"¹¹ and that is why I will not ignore *Teach for Arabia* and the pedagogical and ethical issues it raises.

⁹ Elfreda A. Chatman, "Alienation Theory: Application of a Conceptual Framework to a Study of Information Among Janitors," *RQ* 29.3 (1990): 355-68.

¹⁰ The large influx of expatriate workers in Qatar, has made Qatar nationals just 10% of the population. At Education City, Qataris make up in a class can fluctuate via institution, from between 10 to 50% of the student body. Other students are non-citizen long-term residents or international students.

¹¹ De Lissovoy, "Decolonial Pedagogy," 286.