

From: Michael Malek Najjar
Sent: Monday, July 20, 2020 10:02 PM
To: Ethnic Studies
Cc: Superintendent; [emails redacted]
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Please Retain Arab American Studies in CA Ethnic Studies

TO: California Board of Education Instructional Quality Commission
FROM: Michael Malek Najjar, PhD, MFA
Associate Professor of Theatre Arts
University of Oregon
DATE: 7/20/2020
RE: In Support of the CA Model Ethnic Studies Curriculum

Dear CA Board of Education IQC Members:

My name is Michael Malek Najjar and I am an associate professor of Theatre Arts with the University of Oregon. I am also a member of the Arab American Studies Association and my research focus is Arab American and Middle Eastern American Theatre.

It has come to my attention that you plan to eliminate Arab American studies from your California Ethnic Studies Curriculum. In addition, you plan on branding any mention of Palestine as anti-Semitic.

Our Arab American community is currently under siege. This community, which is comprised of a dazzling array of ethnicities, cultures, and religions, has faced societal and governmental persecution since the first Muslim slave was brought to these shores in 1527. The people that comprise the so-called Arab World have been coming to the shores of this nation in successive waves since the late nineteenth century and have contributed to virtually every facet of this nation's economic, political, and cultural life ever since. Along the way they have been victims of untold numbers of anti-Semitic (yes, Arabs are Semites too), anti-Arab, anti-Muslim, and xenophobic attacks. There have been many governmental actions that have sought to limit their immigration, curtail their rights, and create conditions in this country that have made their existence here difficult, if not untenable.

To add insult to this injury, Middle Eastern Americans (including Arabs) have been perniciously stereotyped, maligned, and debased in American popular entertainment. From relatively harmless portrayals as belly dancers and exotic sheiks to the more recent malicious portrayals of them as suicide bombers, hostage takers, and oppressed maidens, the ugly and hurtful images that are produced in major entertainment studios and theatres have led to more fear and loathing of this group.

Therefore, Arab American studies is necessary within the rubric of Asian American studies. In an era rife with Islamophobia, Arabophobia, and xenophobia, it is necessary to educate our youth about this Asian American group (yes, the Middle East is part of Southwest Asia and North Africa). To label this group as anti-Semitic is both terribly reductive and semantically incorrect. As I stated above, Arabs are Semites and, being so, are also portrayed negatively in anti-Semitic literature and entertainment. If this curriculum defends human rights, how can that possibly be negative? Arab American studies champions the rights of oppressed people throughout the Middle East including the various pogroms against Jewish groups, the oppression of political rights and free speech by dictatorial regimes backed by Western powers, the rights of Palestinians who are living under occupation, the rights of Christians who have been persecuted and forcibly removed from many Arab countries. The list goes on and on.

I teach Middle Eastern American theatre and I am always astonished by how little U.S. students know about the Middle East and its people. Highly educated university seniors have difficulty finding two to three nations on a map of the Middle East. There is very little knowledge of the people of this region, their religions, their cultures, and their day-to-day lives. I am telling you that we have a woefully underinformed and, frankly, ignorant populace regarding the Middle East. My students are uniformly pleased when they take my course and thank me for filling in gaps in their knowledge left behind by our education system. That is why this curriculum is necessary. I urge you to do the right thing and to include this curriculum in California Ethnic Studies. Our young people deserve more knowledge, more perspectives, and more understanding. Thank you for your attention.

Sincerely,

Michael Malek Najjar, PhD, MFA

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Michael Malek Najjar, PhD, MFA

Associate Professor of Theatre Arts

Pronouns: He/Him/His ([what's this?](#))

University of Oregon

Eugene, OR

Author: *Middle Eastern American Theatre: Communities, Cultures and Artists* (<https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/middle-eastern-american-theatre-9781350117044/>) and *Arab American Drama, Film and Performance: A Critical Study, 1908 to the Present* (<http://www.mcfarlandpub.com/book-2.php?id=978-0-7864-9516-0>). Editor: *Heather Raffo's Iraq Plays: The Things That Can't Be Said* (<https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/heather-raffos-iraq-plays-the-things-that-cant-be-said-9781350145184/>), *The Selected Works of Yussef El Guindi* (<https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/the-selected-works-of-yussef-el-guindi-9781350057173/>), and *Four Arab American Plays: Works by Leila Buck, Jamil Khoury, Yussef El Guindi, and Lameece Issaq & Jacob Kader* (<http://www.mcfarlandbooks.com/book-2.php?id=978-0-7864-7486-8>). Co-editor: *Six Plays of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (<https://mcfarlandbooks.com/product/six-plays-of-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict/>).

"Once you have perceived that life is very cruel, the only response is to live with as much humanity, humor, and freedom as you can." --Sarah Kane, playwright (1971-1999).

I'm a Dreamer Ally & support all students & coworkers, regardless of immigration status or country of origin. I stand with our international students.