



## **AASA** **Arab American Studies Association**

### **An Open Letter from Ethnic Studies Scholars in Support of Arab American Studies Curriculum in California High Schools**

January 21, 2021

*Update: This open letter was originally written and submitted as a public comment in response to the initial draft of the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum, a document which was written by a group of ethnic studies scholars and K-12 practitioners familiar with the field and submitted to the California Department of Education. That draft included lesson plans on a range of topics within Arab American studies, and located them in the Asian American studies section. Subsequent drafts of the curriculum have significantly altered the original framing and watered it down. All initial signatories to this letter reference the first draft of the ESMC, which upheld the anti-racist, decolonial, and liberatory tenets of Ethnic Studies. We now have gathered additional signatures, all of whom continue to urge the CDDE to retain Arab American Studies as an exemplary dimension of the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum, along with all other critical components of the draft.*

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The cascading crisis laid bare by Covid-19 reveals vulnerabilities among and between communities that are deeply entangled, differentially distributed, and stretched across geographical borders. These vulnerabilities have been produced and sustained by deep social inequalities sedimented over many decades. As the Arab American Studies Association has [recently underscored](#), this moment reveals how the insidious effects of racialization based on militarized engagement with countries of origin, fears of the 'enemy within,' and logics of contagion continue to manifest in ways that can lead to intensified racial animus, as witnessed in the overt anti-Asian racism surrounding the pandemic.

In the face of this crisis, we are grateful to the California Department of Education (CDE) for its strong Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum draft, and its ongoing commitment to offer coursework in Ethnic Studies for California's students. In doing so, the CDE recognizes the enduring significance of race in American life, the ethical grounds of multi-directional approaches to history, the necessity of offering curricula relevant to communities of color, and the critical importance of studying the ways ordinary people work towards equity, dignity, and justice. In expanding access to the critical frameworks Ethnic Studies offers in this time of great uncertainty, the CDE holds space for students to engage in pedagogies oriented towards building more just worlds and better possible futures.

However, we are troubled by efforts to exclude Arab American studies from the final Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum. The interdisciplinary field of Arab American Studies is a vibrant and long-standing dimension of Ethnic Studies, with deep and lasting connections to Asian American Studies. In drafting a rich and rigorous model for Arab American Studies in California's high schools, the CDE's curriculum writers have powerfully recognized this reality. They build on decades of research and teaching that place Arab American lives, cultures, and histories at the center of inquiries into the racialized operations of gender, sexuality, nationalism, immigration, war, political economy, etc. The [Association of Asian American Studies](#) and the [Arab American Studies Association](#) have both applauded this vital work, and see it as a crucial dimension of any Asian American Studies curriculum. We concur.

From the ferment of 1960s social movements against warfare, U.S. imperialism, and racism and towards a substantive multiracial democracy--what the late Black Studies scholar Manning Marable called the "second reconstruction"--scholars affiliated with the Association of Arab American University Graduates situated knowledges about the variety of Arab American life in relation to histories of immigration, labor, and war in Asia. As the 1970s and 1980s saw the widespread normalization of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racisms in popular media and political culture scholars, including Jack Shaheen and Edward Said, documented orientalism's arcs of power and authority that gave such baleful discourse traction. In the 1990s, Arab American feminist scholars challenged the imperial narratives of rescue and reform marshaled to legitimate the first Gulf War and the decimating sanctions regime imposed on Iraq, while connecting to domestic struggles against expansive forms of policing, incarceration, and the thinning of social programs. Since September 11, 2001, scholars in the field have reckoned with the expansive targeting of Southwest Asian and North African (SWANA) Americans -- i.e., those often labeled as Arab, Muslim, and Middle Eastern Americans -- as a pretext for wider regimes of surveillance, and the shrinkage of democratic governance disproportionately affecting all communities of color. In recent years, the logics of exclusion and surveillance that buttressed the earliest immigration restrictions (from China and Japan, and then the whole "Asiatic Barred Zone,") have again been given life through the national security rationale of the Trump administration's policy banning entry from Syria, Iran, Yemen, and Libya.

The racialization of Arab, Muslim, and SWANA-affiliated Americans in the US thus follows a linked trajectory with the field of Asian American studies, particularly in terms of the role of US military action on the Asian continent, as well as the role that orientalism has played in exclusionary policies toward Asian Americans and SWANA Americans. These links between Arab American and Asian American studies are institutionally reflected in a number of ways including, but not limited to, the West Asian section of the Association for Asian American Studies, the fact that the director of the Arab American Cultural Center at UIC holds an appointment in the Global Asian Studies Program, and that a recent special issue of the *Amerasia* journal focused specifically on Arab American studies.

The above summary shorthands the dense texture within which Arab American studies is woven. It refutes the specious claim that the study of Arab American histories, communities, forms of expressive culture, and the particular conjunctions of power and difference that shape them are somehow external or ancillary to Ethnic Studies. Arab American studies offers students critical insight into the long arcs of U.S. immigration, nationalism, religious belonging, and refugeehood, and the communities of care, sustenance, and political engagement that emerge from these conditions.

Finally, we fear the possible exclusion of Arab American studies from the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum is due to its consideration of Palestine, Palestinians, and Palestinian Americans as topics worthy of high school study. No genealogy of the field is complete without recognizing the importance of Palestine to its formation. Palestine crystallizes for students questions of territory, memory, nationalism, settler colonialism, and dispossession; questions of race, class, gender, and sexuality; questions of solidarity, agency, interconnection, and transnationalism; questions of equity, dignity, and justice. Were the CDE to adopt the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum by affirmatively excluding Arab American studies on these grounds, it would reproduce and exacerbate precisely the social problems the curriculum purportedly sets out to address.

We urge the California Department of Education to retain Arab American Studies as an exemplary dimension of the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum, along with all other critical components of the draft.

Signed by,

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