

From: Omar Zahzah

Sent: Tuesday, August 11, 2020 10:20 AM

To: Ethnic Studies

Cc: Superintendent; [emails redacted]

Subject: [EXTERNAL] Include Arab American Studies in CA Ethnic Studies Curriculum

To Whom it May Concern,

I am a concerned community member and independent scholar writing to voice my shock and dismay at the excision of Arab American studies from the model curriculum for state-wide ethnic studies programs. I urge you to rethink this action, which, however much you may assure yourselves to the contrary, is ultimately a vindication of the very forces of racism that ethnic studies seeks to counteract through community empowerment.

In June of this year (2020,) I received my doctorate from the Department of Comparative Literature at UCLA. Arab American literature and, by extension, Arab American studies formed a crucial component of my emphasis and my methodological approach. As you have no doubt learned through your outreach and information-gathering studies, Ethnic Studies in this country has a rich, vibrant and powerful history. It is a history of refusing white supremacy's official sanction to repress and exclude by uplifting marginalized communities' narratives of resilience and resistance. It is a history of fighting back against euphemisms for racism such as "objectivity" that at their root contended such narratives were regressive and unintellectual, unfit for "elevated" debate and discussion. It is a history to be admired and respected, but one that is still very much unfolding, and today is in great jeopardy.

What you have before you, right now, is the chance to respect this history and continue in the bold tradition of uplifting all who have been silenced by systemic racism and oppression--or not. Arab Americans are a community that have long been subjected to institutionalized racism and Islamophobia. The incorporation of "Arab/Middle Eastern/Arab American" into the WHITE category may help to make this less institutionally inscrutable, but it certainly can't make it disappear, especially not for all of us who have to live with its horrid manifestations every day. Imagine growing up having nothing to look to as far as mainstream recognition other than news story after news story of "terrorists" flickering from TV screens. Imagine hearing the worst kind of vitriol about the "savagery" and "primitivism" of people from your nations blaring out from radio stations. Imagine being told that the nations from which your people hail are nothing but bastions of terrorism that deserve to be bombed into oblivion, or worse yet (if there can be something worse than this) being told they don't even exist, that your people don't exist, that you have no culture, nothing, that the best thing you can do for everyone around you is to simply disappear.

Too many individuals in the Arab American community have memories of such occurrences. Unfortunately, they have formed the backbone of childhood pedagogical experience for too many of us--if not the backbone of continuous socio-political circumstance in this country. When we were mentioned at all, it was often for sections or segments that encouraged fear and anger in others around us. I'm sure I don't need to dwell upon all of the indignities that such emotions can in turn lead to, but when you factor in the uptick in institutionalized anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia that followed 9/11, I'm sure it will become clearer how the oppression of Arab Americans is in many ways relentless and multi-scalar, from the classroom all the way to official government profiling for nothing but name and ethnic identity.

The ethnic studies that emerged in the '60s was a necessary challenge to the norms of institutional Whiteness that disguised themselves as universal and objective. It turned the question of "objectivity" upon its head by asking: who decides what is objective? What is worth studying--or not? And how? But most importantly, it asked why so many populations that had faced myriad oppressions while being silenced in so many ways ought to continue to have their voices erased.

No two communities are exactly alike. But Arab Americans have long been an oppressed and resilient community that has resisted silencing. Their contributions to cultural and intellectual life have been immense, from countless novels, stories and poetry collections to scintillating academic works like the Palestinian American Edward Said's *Orientalism*. And even as they faced many unique challenges, Arab Americans also took part in some of the most seminal manifestations of ethnic resistance on the part of other communities of color in this country, such as the United Farm Workers Strike; Nagi Daifullah, an immigrant from Yemen, was a UFW strike leader who was killed by Kern County Police during a demonstration in 1973. Nagi may have passed, but his legacy lives on, a proud testament to the imperative to forge solidary coalitions against injustice whenever and wherever it appears.

These are stories that deserve to be told, lessons that need to be learned.

So I urge you:

keep Arab American studies.

Honor this history for all of us who continue the fight.

Omar Zahzah, PhD

Department of Comparative Literature

University of California, Los Angeles