KHALAS!: INSTITUTIONALIZED SWANA ERASURE, RESILIENCE, AND RESISTANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The question of SWANA (Southwest Asian and North African) diasporic identity formation has been widely debated in area studies, ethnic studies, and the burgeoning field of Arab American Studies with scholars such as Sarah Gualtieri (2009), Nadine Naber (2012), and Neda Maghbouleh (2017) arguing that people of SWANA descent are racial minorities even though the U.S. government classifies them as white. However, these works have not adequately addressed SWANA racialization in the context of higher education following 9/11. This co-authored paper closely examines institutionalized SWANA erasure from the shared intersectional perspective of one faculty member, one graduate student, and two undergraduate students at a California State University campus in Southern California. Specifically, in this co-authored paper, we draw on our individual and collective co-organizing experiences to illustrate (a) the persistence of specific structural inequities that SWANA heritage people face in the academy, (b) the multilayered impact of these educational barriers, and (c) our wide range of ongoing activist responses to them. We say "khalas!" (enough!) to systemic oppression and argue that the ultimate antidote to institutionalized SWANA erasure is solidarity within and between marginalized subjects at every level of academia in the service of anti-racist and anti-colonial education. This co-authored paper uplifts SWANA resilience and resistance in California's most diverse public university system to shed new light on the understudied issue of how higher education perpetuates SWANA racialization.

Keywords: SWANA, racialization, erasure, academia, student activism

We are four individual Southwest Asian North African (SWANA)-identified women in higher education. More specifically, we are all affiliated with California State University, Fullerton (CSUF) in Southern California; two of us are undergraduate students, one is a graduate student, and one is a faculty member. The four of us first met in the fall of 2019 following SWANA Week, a series of events initiated and organized by various SWANA student organizations to educate the campus community about SWANA peoples. In March of 2020, we began to co-author this essay, which examines the structural inequities that shape our commonalities as women of color from what is commonly referred to as the "Middle East" and how we have responded to said inequities at every level of higher education. Through our personal stories, we illustrate (a) the persistence of specific structural inequities that SWANA heritage people face in the academy, (b) the multilayered impact of these educational barriers, and (c) our wide range of activist responses to them.

Overview

While our personal stories differ in significant ways, they are connected by institutionalized SWANA erasure at every level of higher education. The challenges we have faced throughout our careers in academia reflect the ongoing racism that many SWANA individuals and communities face in U.S. society. From struggling to find a sense of belonging on campus to racial profiling in our Southern California neighborhoods, people of SWANA descent continue to face the consequences of institutionalized SWANA erasure in everyday life. We have identified three specific ways this erasure manifests in higher education: (a) the categorization of SWANA people as white in U.S. Census as well as university demographic reporting; (b) the simultaneous tokenization of SWANA peoples to perform a false sense of diversity, equity, and inclusion in academic and other settings; and (c) the invisibility of SWANA studies in college curriculum. Here, we highlight several consequences of institutionalized SWANA erasure, namely how it leads to a lack of administrative support—particularly student support services—and racial and cultural awareness. We are thus faced with ignorance, misrepresentation, and lack of representation, all of which silence our identities while widening systematic gaps.

In addition to silencing, institutionalized SWANA erasure results in other impacts that are often overlooked and understudied. First, the burden of educating others falls on SWANA individuals within the university. Educating others manifests in a wide range of ways, from correcting peers in the classroom to planning educational programs and creating safe spaces. Second, the "emotional exhaustion," or state of being "overwhelmed by the emotional demands imposed by other people," felt by SWANA people to fill these gaps negatively impacts our mental health and further distracts us from our duties as students, staff, and faculty members (Maslach, 1982). For example, student activists plan events, attend meetings with administrators, lead demonstrations, facilitate student organization programs to build unity among SWANA students, in addition to their roles as full-time students and employees. While educating our campus community is important, it is necessary to recognize the "cultural taxation" that our community faces in order to fully represent the SWANA region and the intersectionalities that exist within the

SWANA identity (Joseph & Hirshfield, 2011). Lastly, as we continue to navigate these institutions, we have taken the responsibility to build our own community to further enhance our collegiate experiences.

In order to begin to and further support our own community, SWANA members have responded to institutionalized SWANA erasure in three unique strategies. At CSUF, there has been an increase in SWANA student activism across campus. For instance, SWANA students have formed a SWANA student organization; passed resolutions ("A Resolution in Support of the Southwest Asian North Africa Community" and "Resolution in Support of SWANA Students") in student government; organized protests and other campaigns; and served as informal cultural educators in classrooms and campus-related events. Due to the clear gap in knowledge when discussing the SWANA regions and diasporas, students have felt obligated to share their personal experiences and knowledge to the campus community. This has also inspired the students to collect their own qualitative and quantitative data on topics such as demographics, satisfaction with community organized events, and overall sense of belonging to the university. At CSUF, SWANA students used this data to pass "A Resolution in Support of the Southwest Asian North Africa Community" through their student government, Associated Students Inc., to advocate for a student resource center, culturally competent staff, and accurate demographic data of the university's SWANA population. Additionally, faculty have taken initiative to embed the SWANA regions and diasporas into their curriculum by intentionally including works written by SWANA scholars, and by serving as advisors to SWANA organizations in support of this activism. These responses have transformed how students and faculty view their personal SWANA identity and have prompted universities across the country to consider and advocate for the SWANA community.

We uplift our acts of resistance to affirm our resilience. However, the root cause of this cycle is systemic oppression; the cycle will repeat itself until there is change at an institutional level. Therefore, our paper is a call to action—not for SWANA campus community members to "fix" the university (or for the university to hire more SWANA people who can take on these burdens), but for all institutions of higher education to include SWANA communities. In order for this to happen, we must begin with the premise that the university is a historically and fundamentally exclusionary system entangled with other local and global systems of oppression, from settler colonialism to gentrification to the military and prison industrial complex. We call for a total transformation of higher education so that we may rebuild a truly diverse, inclusive, and equitable place of learning.

Our Lived Experiences

Seleena Mukbel, Undergraduate

I live a life built on grounds made up of eggshells. To start off with a clear picture of what this looks like, I figured out I was Palestinian and not Jordanian at the age of 10. I was accustomed to believe academic school and Saturday Islamic school were two separate worlds that shouldn't ever be mentioned in the same sentence, under the same breath. When I did speak of these two

worlds under the same breath, I explained to my academic school peers in a way where they can relate. "I go to the masjid once a week the same way you go to church." This prevents their eyes from widening too much, and proves I am like them more than actually talking about myself. This led me to think I was so similar to them, simply because I didn't get the chance to know myself. If the picture isn't clear yet, let me fast-forward to my senior year of high school—it is January 2017, when President Donald Trump issued the executive order featuring the Muslim Ban. I am in my video production class when an academic peer asks our table, "Did everyone hear about the Muslim Ban?" Before I get the chance to respond, another peer adds to in the conversation, "My dad said kicking out Muslims was the best thing to happen to this country." I had no emotion at the moment. Was it my body reacting to an emotional shock? Did I not know how to respond? Was I so angry that I turned numb? Then, after minutes of the conversation continuing, I hop in and say, "So I am Muslim, what does that mean for me exactly?" The students are in shock and have a sense of guilt on their face. And this next line from a classmate—"But I am not talking about you, I am talking about the other Muslims"—sparked the beginning to my own beautiful path of acknowledging my roots and identity.

I went home, but without processing what was happening. I found myself pushing the record button on my phone. Without even writing, I started speaking to the camera about my frustration at the time. Rather than yelling at the camera, I expressed my frustration to the camera in a spoken word poetry style. By the time I stopped recording, this became my first and one of my best spoken word poems ever. The words came to me so easily. Most people didn't believe me when I said I just started recording and speaking. Later that night, I posted the video of me saying the spoken word poem about Islamophobia on Twitter. I got more views and attention than expected. People felt my frustration. Some people felt empathy. And others felt offended. Prior to this moment, I didn't know I was poetic. I didn't know I was capable of having these emotions. I didn't know what package deal the Arab Muslim American identity came with. The package deal of being angered and othered. The package deal that my parents spent my entire life for me not to deal with. I cannot thank my academic peers enough. I finally walked on these eggshells, but this time, I broke them. However, this is not to say my parents ever tried to assimilate to American culture and American culture only. It was never a matter of hiding my identity, but a matter to not care to prove who I was, and my parents taught me that well. My mom was the first person to teach me the lack of cultural awareness this country has. My mom would tell me how she was shocked to see how there was a mindset of thinking the world ended at America's borders. When my mom was judged and asked why she has an accent, she said with full confidence that it wasn't because she spoke poor English, but because it is a result of a language mechanism for speaking two languages. My mom would give my academic peers Eid holiday presents. You could say my mom was an informal cultural educator.

Mary Chammas, Undergraduate
California State University at Fullerton (CSUF) was not my first choice. It was tough to find a connection with the campus when there was no representation of my identity. I remember my first

semester I would go to class, drive home. I would have 30-minute breaks and I would go drive home and drive back to campus. I did not like to be on campus at all. It was really hard to make friends because it was a commuter school. So my first semester was hard for me, and I was going to transfer out. Within my first semester, I attended a University of Southern California (USC) Transfer Day program, where I spent the whole day at USC to get to know the campus life and see what opportunities USC had to offer for me. They had a Lebanese Club at USC, and they had a cedar tree—which is what Lebanon is known for—on campus for the Lebanese people. The environment felt more welcoming as well. I used to go home and cry every night to my parents how I wanted to transfer to a different Cal State University or a UC or private institution, just somewhere where I can build a connection to campus. My parents always told me you're not going to campus to socialize you're going to campus to get an education. So they never really understood the struggle. For me, I'm a community person. I'm a social butterfly. I love making friends and meeting new people. I love connecting with my community. At CSUF, there was no representation of any of this on campus. Coming from a happy place out of high school, I was now in a completely different world where I just wanted to get my degree and leave. One day, my friend encouraged me to make the most out of my college experience. He had wanted to start his own organization, but did not want to do it alone. A lot of other colleges had Lebanese Clubs on campus, and he told me to start one here at CSUF. We decided to work together and start up our separate organizations.

During my second semester at CSUF, the Lebanese social club was up and running. It started with just me and my treasurer. We would have five people attend our meetings, and around ten people attend our social events. Even with this club, I didn't feel a connection to campus there are not many members. The members seemed uninterested, and it was just a way for me to cope with the lack of representation that the South West Asian North African (SWANA)/Middle Eastern North African (MENA) community had on campus. Midway through my second semester, I was contacted by a member of Students for Justice in Palestine to go to a place called Asian Pacific American Resource Center (APARC) in the library and meet them for a meeting to discuss having a SWANA week on campus. Confused, I agreed and decided to have the Lebanese Social Club co-plan the first-ever CSU wide SWANA week. This was a week-long representation of the SWANA heritage and culture by showcasing dances, music events, and debunking any stereotypes and myths within the SWANA community. This was the first time I have felt at home at CSUF. Seeing everyone come together and having a sense of unity with one another created a place of welcoming for our culture. Although this was student-led, I got to bond with many of my peers and have formed lifetime friendships. From this, we held the second annual SWANA week, which consisted of new workshops, new presenters, and new environments. During this process, many people have come up to me and my peers and thanked us for planning SWANA week. They thanked us for turning a place where they had felt unwelcomed into a place of community and friendship. While there remains much work to be done on our campus, I am optimistic for the future of SWANA as the built-up anger has been released, and the SWANA/MENA community on campus is finally getting the recognition it deserves.

Gina Waneis, Graduate

I will never forget June 17, 2019. My professor starts a graduate class, "Okay, let's begin our activity." I get so excited because I love this class and enjoy participating in discussions about diversity, access, and equity. She instructs, "Alright, go ahead and sit with your affinity group members in regards to race."

The activity begins. As I watch my classmates lock eyes and smile, I notice a pit in my stomach. The Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA) students confidently migrate to the back of the classroom, while the Black students walk to the front. As I look to the left, I see my Latinx cohort mates making jokes as they move towards the center of the room. I notice the white students to my right, but knew that even if I could pass as White, I truly did not belong in that group. I look around the classroom hoping to meet a cohort mate's gaze. Eventually, I lock eyes with a friend. As she invites me to join this group, I instantly know I did not belong. This affinity group was filled with students who share a multiracial identity, but maybe I could make it work. "So, what is your group?" asks the professor. As my eyes fill with tears and my hands start to shake, I know I can no longer control my emotions. "Well, we are an ambiguous group," explains one student. The professor looks at me with confused eyes—of course I did not belong with these students based on this activity. As the class acknowledges the situation, the professor gives me a choice: I could leave the group to share their experiences of being multiracial students, but I would then be alone, or I could stay in the group to discuss the different ways we are perceived as racially ambiguous, but then I would not be giving myself or my cohort a chance to hear about my true racial identity. I did not want to be alone. I did not want to be the only one sharing about my culture. I did not want to feel all the pressure of speaking on behalf of the whole race. Although I did not want to, I challenged myself to leave the group and start a solo group.

The true reflection occurred on my drive home after class. As I thought about the activity, I tried to figure out why I was crying. After ten months of being in the Master of Science in Higher Education (MSHE) program, I have been aware that I am the only South West Asian North African student in my cohort. Why did this activity still catch me by surprise? Why was I crying? I have a new awareness of the amount of work that still needs to be done for my people. I study higher education and student affairs—I can tell you all about the student development theory and research conducted on the student experiences of Black, Brown, white, Latinx, Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer Plus (LGBTQ+), adult learner, parent, International, APIDA, Native American, undocumented, and so many others, but I cannot tell you about my own people. Ultimately, I ask, where are *we* in this research?

Tala Khanmalek, Faculty

I'm sitting at the feet of Asian American scholar and activist Ronald Takaki at the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) in Berkeley, California. He's there for a book club event with the staff, who read *Strangers from a Different Shore*. I was invited because I was an undergraduate volunteer at the YWCA and a student in the Ethnic Studies Department at UC Berkeley (UCB). Takaki was legendary even though he was a faculty member on campus and a

mentor to my friends. I had yet to meet him though I had learned about him in my classes and read his work. I was delighted to encounter an unbelievably friendly person and passionate scholar-activist at the YWCA. So, I decided to take a risk and ask him the question that had been weighing on me since my first ethnic studies class in my first semester of college: Why weren't Middle Eastern people included in Ethnic Studies curriculum? It doesn't make sense, I explained. As a person of Middle Eastern descent, I can assure you that we faced many of the same and also different experiences as other marginalized people in the U.S. Sometimes, I confessed with a bit of shame, it makes me want to drop out of the major. Takaki listened with great care. His answer was immediate and simple: "You're right, and that's why ethnic studies needs you. You should stay in the major—and movement—and in doing so, transform it." I took his words to heart and went straight into UCB's Ethnic Studies PhD program after graduating, then on to becoming a scholar of ethnic studies. The problem was that throughout my long career in the field, both inside and outside of the university context, one of two things always happened: either people assumed that I studied Muslim/Middle Eastern racial formation because I myself was a person of Muslim/Middle Eastern descent, or I encountered a total erasure of Muslim/Middle Eastern diasporic experiences.

There was rarely any in-between with the exception of San Francisco State University's Arab and Muslim Ethnicities and Diasporas (AMED) program and scholars like Hatem Bazian, Rabab Abdulhadi, and Keith Feldman (2015) doing the work of bringing issues like post-9/11 Islamophobia, anti-Arab racism, and Palestine solidarity into the mix of ethnic studies. Part of what makes me especially sad about the erasure of SWANA people, history, and counter-knowledges from ethnic studies is that in fact, we're part of the past and present ethnic studies movement. My own uncle was an international student at UCB during the Free Speech Movement and involved in local organizing efforts, which coincided with movements for decolonization across the globe. And he was not the only Iranian in the U.S. at the time; many others experienced racialization and joined Third World social movements as a means of fighting back and building bridges across borders (Yalzadeh, 2020).

Building Coalitions to Reimagine the University

We draw from our own lived experiences following feminist methodological approaches to research, autoethnography, and the "narrative" or "reflexive" turn in humanities scholarship. We begin with anecdotes that illustrate the challenges we have each faced as women of SWANA descent within institutions of higher education that do not acknowledge our intersectional identities. Our anecdotes highlight both the differences and significant similarities across our lived experiences. Importantly, we occupy different positions within the same university and have different racial, ethnic, and religious identities (e.g., Iranian, Lebanese, Palestinian, Syrian, Muslim, Christian, etc.). What unites our experiences is precisely the fact that these differences continue to be erased on a structural level. For this reason, we write the body of our article in one voice. The way we write reflects the function of the SWANA student group, which serves as a

common ground for students of diverse backgrounds and is the organization that initially brought us together.

In this article, the undergraduate students, Seleena Mukbel and Mary Chammas, are the founders of the SWANA student group and student activists on campus working to build a more welcoming and inclusive community for those who identify as SWANA. These students were taking a course on gender and sexuality studies which was taught by SWANA faculty member, Dr. Tala Khanmalek, who became the advisor for SWANA. In the process, Gina Waneis was a SWANA graduate student in Higher Education and assistant for Student Life and Leadership which oversees and guides the registered student organizations on campus. As a mentor and unofficial SWANA advisor, Gina Waneis worked alongside SWANA to advocate for systematic changes, such as the creation of surveys with a SWANA demographic, and mentored the SWANA student activists. We came together to share our experiences and inform others about the stigma towards and simultaneous erasure of the SWANA community. We met each Friday from March 2020 to December 2021 to co-write an article that was designed to educate others on the broader experiences of SWANA students, staff, and faculty in higher education as a whole. Our democratic and non-hierarchical approach to collaborative writing has meant that we wrote almost every sentence together and made project decisions as a group. In this way, we transformed writing and producing knowledge into a relational practice that strengthened our connections to each other and allowed us to continue our activist efforts during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Through collaborative writing, we narrated and archived the history of our work together, contributed to research about SWANA experiences, and co-created an equitable form of learning within but-not-of the university. We experienced learning as "a place where paradise can be created," in the words of bell hooks (1994), while navigating a world-wide crisis. This, we believe, is "education as the practice of freedom" (p. 207).

Historically and still today (despite numerous attempts to change this), the United States Census Bureau categorizes "Middle Eastern" people as "White." According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2022), the racial "White" category is for "a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa." Not only is this terminology inaccurate as it stems from a Eurocentric perspective, but it also prevents accurate data collection. As Loubna Qutami (2020) writes, misclassification on the census is dangerous because it "afflicts MENA [Middle Eastern and North African] communities by limiting them from acquiring public monies and resources, restricting the ability of CBOs to know and respond to the needs of their own communities, and impeding communities from organizing to engage civically and to establish strong political mobilization campaigns." Qutami elaborates, "without proper data, quantitative and qualitative needs assessment research for affected communities must be self-organized, self-funded, and self-implemented," which was the case for the SWANA community at CSUF. Since universities are not properly collecting data on SWANA in tools such as college applications, campus climate focus groups, or simply post-event surveys, the SWANA students at CSUF organized to create their own surveys to assess their community needs. Similar to the community-based organizations in the U.S. that must create their own data collection, which takes away "focus

on strategic planning, programming, service implementation, and political advocacy in accordance with their community's needs," the CSUF SWANA community also spent energy, time, and effort on creating and distributing our own assessment tools which is part of why it is necessary for all universities to collect and disaggregate data in a way that serves our communities.

SWANA stands for Southwest Asian and North African. Originally introduced by University of California students, the term SWANA—in comparison to "Middle Eastern"—is more inclusive of the complex identities of the region, including the Black community (Yoder, 2013). Importantly, for SWANA people, whiteness has been "probationary and imposed on them the burden of proving their eligibility through assimilation and performances of loyalty, as well as ongoing distance from Blackness" (Erakat, 2020, p. 477). Using the SWANA term intentionally challenges the anti-Black racism of the region and in the diaspora. This allows our readers to shift focus from the Eurocentric colonial perspective that the original term holds. As we aim to provide SWANA people with the proper recognition and education they deserve, utilizing the new term debunks the previous stereotypes and misconceptions that people hold towards the SWANA identity. The term additionally encompasses a geographically accurate definition by specifically including "North Africa" in the acronym rather than excluding the region. For instance, when many people think of the Middle Eastern identity, people may view being Muslim and being Middle Eastern to be interchangeable. Through the surveys we have created, the resolutions we have written, and throughout this article, we explicitly use the SWANA term. At the same time, we recognize there are great gaps in research and data collection on SWANA identity, especially as it pertains to intersectional identities outside of race and ethnicity such as queer Muslims, as explained by Ahmadi and Shah (2020). We hope that future data collection and research consider the vast diversity of the SWANA identity and the multiple and intersecting identities of our community members.

As students, faculty, and student affairs professionals in higher education institutions, we provide our experiences to educate members inside and outside of our community. We share potential solutions that may work on different campuses and invite readers to initiate and continue this dialogue to support the SWANA community further. Our article is essential because it validates SWANA students, staff, and faculty members' experiences. It serves as a reminder that higher education institutions were not initially created for us, but instead have become spaces we must intentionally create for ourselves.

The lack of a sense of belonging for the SWANA community impacts their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Due to the lack of visibility and hypervisibility experienced by our community, SWANA students may feel discouraged and not listened to, and therefore go under the radar. This makes it difficult for a university to assess their admission rates, and, therefore their retention rates. Colleges and universities that do not consider the SWANA population in their academic and student affairs will likely see increases in anti-SWANA and anti-Muslim discrimination, as already reported by several institutions since the 9/11 attacks and 2017 Muslim ban (Executive Order No. 13,769, 2017 and Executive Order No. 13,780, 2017). Ahmadi and Cole (2020) describe how immigration law and policies impact Muslim students as the FBI reports that

during the 2016 presidential election season there was an increase in the number of hate crimes, hate speech, and incidents of bias and discrimination again Muslim, Arab, and South Asian communities. Rather than reacting to acts of discrimination that occur on college campuses, universities need to take proactive and preventative measures against racism and other forms of discrimination. Furthermore, building coalitions across social differences will lead to structural change because when an institution fails to account for and address the needs of a particular group, in actuality it fails everyone, including those who are in privileged positions.

SWANA Diasporic Activist Legacies in Higher Education

Despite their racial classification in the census, SWANA people have long understood themselves as a racialized minority in the U.S. and other diasporic contexts. What's more, they have worked to raise awareness about their positionality as such, both in affinity groups and in solidarity with other minorities. Contemporary SWANA activism has a long legacy, particularly the activism of SWANA students against the erasure of their lived experiences as marginalized people of color. Current students have precedents to follow, including in local and transnational leftist organizing during the 1960s and 1970s in the U.S. and throughout the SWANA region.

Scholars often turn to the post-9/11 context as evidence of the racialization of SWANA people as non-white Others due to the sharp rise of Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism and backlash in particular. However, the articulation of SWANA identity formation dates further back. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, for example, many students from Iran were studying abroad and active in these diasporic contexts against the policies of the Shah of Iran and the U.S. support of the Shah's regime as well as their rights as students in the U.S. Radical leftist Arab-American organizing during this same time period—what scholar Pamela Pennock (2017) identifies as the origins of the "Arab civil rights movement"—focused on the Palestinian struggle. Throughout the late twentieth-century, we can also locate articulations of solidarity between SWANA people in the U.S. and other oppressed people across the globe. These articulations of solidarity shed light on the relationship between white supremacist violence against communities of color and U.S. imperial projects in the SWANA region and beyond. Most notably, these articulations included the internationalism of the Black Panther Party as well as Black feminists such as June Jordan, all of which had a focus on Palestine solidarity that also extended to other parts of the SWANA region such as Algeria. Furthermore, as Noura Erakat (2020) argues, the 2014 "Ferguson-Gaza moment" (the concurrent bombardment of Gaza and the police and national guard occupation of Ferguson, Missouri in 2014) catalyzed a new wave of Black-Palestinian solidarity that emerged from simultaneous and intersecting struggle outside the 1960s context of a Third World movement.

Our Work, Their Benefit: Stigmatization, (mis)Representation, and Tokenization

There are two main issues pertaining to the stigmatization of the SWANA identity that must be addressed and distinguished. These two issues are the lack of representation which can result in misrepresentation, and tokenization in the SWANA community. The lack of representation stems from the failure to provide any institutional demographic data to categorize the SWANA ethnicity.

The absence of implementing a specific categorization leads to the larger absence of SWANA inclusion. In simpler terms, when the SWANA category is not visible on paper, the SWANA people go unnoticed as well. Implementing a specific documented category for the SWANA population is the stepping stone to receiving the proper forms of inclusion and representation that institutions are lacking. Disregarding the SWANA population is a major factor of not having a physical SWANA resource center, a funding outlet for the SWANA-affiliated organizations on college campuses, and lack of resources and supportive staff. When data and proper documentation is nonexistent, the need for these resources are not prioritized. "Individuals of Arab/MENA descent have occupied a precarious position in the U.S. racial landscape given that they are simultaneously invisible due to lack of recognition as an ethnic minority by the federal government while also being hypervisible due to experiences of discrimination" (Awad, Hashem, & Nguyen, 2019). One consequence of this lack of representation is being forced to stay in the shadows. Since the proper representation is not being shown to the overall population, it is more than likely that the whole SWANA region will be seen as one single identity rather than a mix of intersecting cultures, countries, and languages. The other issue that stems from these failures in representation is tokenization, or when SWANA people themselves are suffering from not receiving equitable resources. In other words, their existence enhances an image to be capitalized from, even as the SWANA people are not receiving the same benefits.

The issue of tokenization represents a form of stigmatization towards the SWANA community. This tokenization can be manipulated by false acceptance and visibility as well as cooptation. For instance, at CSUF, the university pointed to having taken basic steps in acknowledging the SWANA community as evidence of the success of their own Strategic Plan and new diversity and inclusion program. In 2020, the Associated Students also implemented a strategic plan intended to support student organizations and events that drew on SWANA student activist efforts. At the time, SWANA students were hosting large-scale events, voicing concerns at public forums, and consistently being mentioned in the school newspaper. While the SWANA student community has been applauded for their own advocacy, they have received little to no material or administrative support.

The problem of tokenization should be resolved by implementing a system designed specifically to protect communities like SWANA. Research has proven that students choose college campuses based on the convenience and acceptance of their own community. This can only be done with the help of systematic support rather than relying on students coming in and out of college every four years to celebrate their own community while balancing their academics. As mentioned in an *Inside Higher Ed* article, "Students do not receive adequate attention to fulfill the requirements of mattering as implemented by the four factors of attention, importance, ego-extension, dependence and appreciation will present an increase in students' academic performance correlated to a sense of belonging on campus." The concept of mattering research has proven that the potential short-term and long-term success of students stem from their college experiences equally outside the classroom as they do inside the classroom. Although normalizing

the acceptance of diversity can be progressive, a gap remains since SWANA (and Muslim) students are still the ones advocating for their own belonging, safety, and campus needs.

Taking Matters Into Our Own Hands

Representation is especially important for SWANA students in Southern California because Orange County and Los Angeles County account for 40% of the Arab population in California, combined (Arab American Institute, 1). In addition, "The State of California has the largest number of Arab Americans in any state, with the Los Angeles area constituting the largest cluster in the state" (Arab American Institute, 1). Yet there was no option to classify as SWANA/MENA on any CSU campus-related survey, no resource center, no professional staff, no programming, and no president's reception in April for Arab Heritage Month. While CSUF does not recognize Arab Heritage month, it is recognized by Orange County, "While Anaheim and Fullerton have designated a month for Arab Americans, this is a first for the county government" (Shadia, 2019). SWANA soon became a stepping stone for MENA/SWANA students as the fight for representation and resources prevailed. We fell under the Asian Pacific Islander Desi-American (APIDA) community and the Asian Pacific American Resource Center (APARC) resource center welcomed us. APARC is one of the five identity-based resource centers on campus that are a part of the Diversity Inclusion Resource Centers (DIRC). DIRC and its resource centers allow for students to come together in community by providing professional staff member(s), job opportunities, safe spaces for students, events, and equips students with the necessary resources to succeed in school. Due to cultural differences as well as the center being small in size, however, we were left with no option but to continue fighting for our own. SWANA soon began to serve as an umbrella organization for SWANA-related organizations, and has created history on campus through all the programming and events. At APARC, student leaders from SWANA and Students for Justice in Palestine discussed having a SWANA Week on campus to celebrate Middle Eastern Heritage.

After months of planning what each day would consist of and logistics, organizing tasks, presenting to the board of directors twice for funding, and advertising such a large scale event, our first SWANA Week was April 22 to April 25, 2019. Our second SWANA Week was October 21 to October 24, 2019. This event was the first time any CSU represented SWANA/MENA culture, and it was all student-led. We are students, who have jobs, take care of our families, are overwhelmed with school yet still find a way to give our community what it deserves. We were not going to spend another year watching SWANA students overlooked and forgotten about by institutions of higher education. We had a survey at the end, and it is stated that 93% of students agreed this was the first time they have felt connected to campus. We had created an atmosphere of friendship, support, and allyship that was crucial for forming a closely-knit community on campus.

The students who planned this week started voicing their concerns not only to the student government but to the university administration as well. We sat in numerous meetings, created PowerPoints, sent out surveys, researched, and presented our findings to administrators and our

student government. This led us to co-create a resolution with our student government (ASI). Since ASI is the voice of the 40,000+ students on campus, it was important to include them in these discussions when writing the resolution so we can figure out ways to have more resources for the SWANA/MENA community. The resolution's list of demands spanned a resource center and our own funding council to allow us to have our own line of money to allocate to SWANA-affiliated organizations, making it easier and more convenient to request money to put on our student-led events in a timely manner. Each demand is important in amplifying a SWANA student's basic needs of support, and resources to ensure a valuable college experience. We have gotten several of the board of directors in ASI to sponsor and support our resolution. The student leaders have taken a crucial part in this process and have built a bridge between the students and administration. These SWANA/MENA events are seen as a light and a home for many students on campus. Due to this, we started a SWANA Organization which was officially recognized in January 2020. It acts like an overarching branch embodying all SWANA identified clubs on campus. Within less than a year, the SWANA Organization has managed to triple our mailing list, membership, and turnout to events. We have built a bridge between us and the broader SWANA/MENA students, and we were nominated for Program of the Year in 2019, and won Best Emergent Organization and Best Collaborative Program in 2020.

By doing the job of the student government, student affairs, and other stakeholders, though, students disproportionately carry the burden of maintaining a sense of community. It is culturally taxing to have to constantly advocate for ourselves and to develop programming for our community without adequate support (Shammas, 2016). As we continue to debunk stereotypes and myths through SWANA Week and by showcasing our culture and traditions, we are continuously sacrificing time and energy. While we are put under the pressure of cultural taxation, we have faced many challenges and bureaucratic roadblocks in our search for answers. With no culturally competent professional staff to help us, we are often forced to run in circles in search of advice and responses while holding ourselves accountable for tasks needed to be accomplished during this process of gaining acknowledgement. Many times, we find ourselves facing the same dead ends. Having a dedicated professional staff member to help us advocate for us, support us, and lead us one step closer towards our goal of inclusion would have helped us avoid our long nights and reduced some stress placed on students (Griffin, 2019).

Despite our advocacy work, SWANA students have not yet received a resource center. Due to APARC now covering the Asian Pacific American and Desi Islander regions, as well as the SWANA/MENA community, it is basically accommodating half of the world. Due to the high volume of SWANA students seeking refuge in APARC, it has led to our community blocking the doorway, causing accessibility and fire hazard issues. Many times, we are left to sit on the floor in the center, yet still block the doorway. In addition to this, there have been some tensions between the different communities APARC is serving due to cultural differences. Since we do not have our own safe space, we receive neither the same resources nor support as other student communities. By having a resource center where the SWANA community can unite and come

together, it will lead to (a) allyship for those who do not identify, (b) job opportunities, (c) scholarship opportunities, and (d) professional staff to help us with our endeavors.

The Impact: Serving SWANA and Educating Everyone

We refer to inclusion as "the act of creating environments in which any individual or group can be and feel welcomed, respected, supported and valued to fully participate" (IAC, 2021). For the SWANA population, inclusion can look like being accurately represented in data collection, having cultural centers or safe spaces, or seeing staff members that look like and understand you. It can mean entering a club fair and recognizing a familiar flag, religious symbol, or music. On campus, restaurants will have dietary options. The campus will give you access to prayer rooms/washing stations and having living-learning housing communities. When students feel represented and valued, they will feel a higher sense of belonging on campus and therefore do better academically and emotionally (Schlossberg, 1989). Our data from the second annual SWANA Week supports this. For example, 79.41% strongly agree that SWANA Week increased their sense of belonging at CSUF. Additionally, 76.47% strongly agree they feel more connected to CSUF after SWANA Week. Lastly, 82.35% strongly agree that SWANA Week positively contributed to my overall Titan Experience. Intentional programming for the SWANA community can increase engagement with the overall university. Unfortunately, for many SWANA students, institutions of higher education in the diaspora have failed to provide inclusive spaces and practices that ensure a sense of belonging.

The effect of this misrepresentation or lack of representation results in cultural taxation on the SWANA community. Cultural taxation, as defined by Amado Padilla (1994), "is the expectation placed on faculty of colour that they should address diversity-related departmental and institutional affairs…cultural taxation also refers to extra burdens that faculty experience due to their commitment to departmental and campus diversity issues or their race/ethnicity" (as cited in Joseph & Hirshfield, 2011). While cultural taxation is often discussed from the faculty perspective, we need to expand this to staff and, most surprisingly, students. Often members of the SWANA community will think to themselves, "If I do not educate them, then who will?" Ahmadi and Cole (2020) write about a similar case with Muslim students who often participate in many diversity-related activities as the "educators and information providers rather than the recipients of information." Once again, this places responsibility on students to educate their peers without structural support. While it is essential to use your voice to educate others, especially if they are intentionally misrepresenting your identity, this task can become overwhelming and eventually may lead to feeling like a burden. For example, in academia, a lot of this type of work falls on ethnic studies, but this work usually depends upon diversity initiatives and cultural centers in student affairs. However, student affairs professionals may unintentionally perpetuate racism because of their lack of cultural understanding of the SWANA identity. If people working within universities do not first understand the SWANA student experience, they will not serve them properly.

On the other hand, a SWANA-identified student affairs professional may feel like they must serve their population because no one else is willing to do so. One may think, "If not me, who?" While studying student development theory, you will find little research to help you understand and support your own community. When you attend conferences, you find no workshops addressing issues our SWANA students face every day. The purpose of these conferences is to be educational hotspots where student affairs professionals and administrators share trends, innovative ideas, and best practices. Why are we not being included? Let's start with trends. What about the shift from invisibility to hypervisibility in the post-9/11 era (Shoman-Dajani, 2016). Innovative idea? How about all the student-initiated celebrations and workshops by the SWANA students? Best practices? We can start with the importance of accurate data collection and disaggregation to better understand SWANA enrollment, retention, and graduation rates. There is a clear need for institutions to serve the SWANA population better, but this work seems to fall on one or just a few professionals who identify as SWANA.

So here you are, a SWANA student affairs professional serving SWANA students. You hold the privilege of hearing your students' anecdotes—their experiences, similar to your own as a college student, fuels your anger. You work for the institution that perpetuates the very things that marginalize your community. You believe students come first and are willing to be their essential advocate, but are met with compassion fatigue. Serving SWANA students may or may not be in your job description, let alone your job title, but here you are. At times, SWANA student affairs professionals doing this work may feel tokenized. You are one of a few, or so you think, because faculty/staff demographic data collection also needs improvement. How do you prevent burnout while making sure your students are empowered?

The Aftermath of Our Activism

The momentum continued even during a global online transition with the pandemic. As SWANA became a popular topic, in 2020 a philanthropist donated money to the SWANA student organization in order to continue creating educational outlets across campus. As the advocacy for institutional efforts continued, the SWANA-identified donor provided funding to hire a SWANA graduate assistant position that formally supports the SWANA population on campus. In 2022, this same donor made an endowment to SWANA programming in order to help students continue create these unique events, such as SWANA Week, that unites and advocates for the community and its needs. As SWANA leaders held student government positions during the pandemic, an Interclub Council was created in order to fund all SWANA-related student organizations by the university. The creation of an Interclub Council not only funded SWANA student organizations, but also served as a proper institutionalized space for all SWANA umbrella student organizations to collaborate in. The SWANA ICC serves as a place for representative students under the SWANA umbrella to discuss future events and ways to allocate their funds, as well as unite all regions and diverse members of the community in one room. These SWANA efforts resulted in being part of inclusive conversations on campus and pushing for the proper recognition. However, one of the main issues we had while creating the first resolution was the lack of proper

demographic data collection of SWANA students on campus.   In psychological research, preferences in ethnic/racial labeling have been linked to self-esteem in Asian Americans (Kiang, 2008), racial socialization in African Americans (Anglin & Whaley, 2006), and ethnic identity exploration in Latinos and Asian American ethnic groups (Cheon et al., 2018; Malott, 2009).

       The CSU system currently categorizes SWANA students under "white" or "other" which undermines SWANA/MENA students' racial identity by whitewashing their ethnic roots. A few SWANA students from different CSUs thus came together to change the system and write a resolution to add a SWANA demographic option on the Cal State Apply application. After months of writing, presenting to the California State Student Association (CSSA), and working with the chancellor's office, the resolution passed and will be implemented in Fall 2022. This progress resulted from the immeasurable hard work, time, and dedication of student activists.

       Having SWANA in a demographic form is important to institutions worldwide as it pushes the normalization of SWANA inclusion while accurately identifying the population and its needs. "Scholars have suggested that racial/ethnic self-labeling among ethnic minorities often holds meaning that reflects how these individuals understand themselves and their perception of how others see them" (e.g., Anglin & Whaley, 2006; Ghee, 1990; Malott, 2009). SWANA continues to be in conversations on campus as Seleena Mukbel and Mary Chammas pursued student government positions to further voice concerns on campus, in addition to bringing SWANA students to the conversation.   While slow progress has been made, SWANA students still experience gaps in justice and equality. For instance, in recent years Palestinian students across several campuses have been doxxed—negatively profiled on a website with a series of personal information—simply for their involvement in Palestinian organizations registered under the university. This affects the SWANA community as a whole as it underscores the need for safe spaces such as a resource center, especially because SWANA folks from different backgrounds intersect and participate in each other's organizations.

Conclusion

As SWANA women, we have provided our narratives, experiences, research, and responses to SWANA erasure in higher education. We also acknowledge and validate the feelings of other SWANA community members. We know what it feels like to have your identity misrepresented or misunderstood. We know what it feels like to be the only SWANA person in the room. We know how heavy the weight is of carrying the whole community on your back, as you try to represent yourself as an individual while dispelling the myths people have of the community from the media and their own biases. We aim to overcome these underlying injustices in our education system by educating the readers and suggesting solutions that institutions can abide by. We urge all universities to relieve the burden of representation that SWANA students have carried for so long. We envision a future where SWANA in higher education are not forced to repeat the cycle, but instead reap the benefits of our work by picking up the pieces, moving forward, and carrying on the legacy of our activism.

Our major takeaway for readers is not the inclusion of SWANA students into the institutions of higher education as they stand today. In order to transform the university into an equitable place of learning, SWANA students must transform, too. Rather than aspire to whiteness, we urge SWANA communities to divest from the false promise of liberal inclusion. By shifting our self-consciousness (meaning, how we understand ourselves) and articulating our identities in new terms, we can build solidarity across difference among and beyond SWANA communities. This involves working within but-not-of the university and in solidarity with minority groups to challenge institutionalized SWANA erasure, which stems from interlocking structures of domination that also oppress others. Only by joining forces with other marginalized communities and engaging in a joint struggle for liberation that targets supremacist and imperialist institutions, including but not limited to universities, can SWANA students contribute to making ourselves, academia, and the world anew.

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