

## Transcript: Invisible/Hypervisible: Southwest Asian and North African Communities in the U.S.

### **Rosemary Ferreira**

Welcome to The Table podcast where we discuss questions regarding race, ethnicity, culture, norms and current events. My name is Rosemary Ferreira.

### **Courtney Jones Carney**

And I'm Courtney Jones Carney. This past year, the Intercultural Center made the decision to use the term Southwest Asian and North African or SWANA to honor students, staff, faculty, and community members from countries such as Egypt, Iran, Afghanistan, and Syria during the month of April. In previous years, we've used terms such as Arab and Middle Eastern but were called in by community members who shared that these terms weren't inclusive of the wide variety of ethnic groups, languages, and cultures within the region. We decided to move forward with SWANA because it is a decolonized term that centers geography rather than a history of European colonialism and American imperialism. By focusing on geography, it is also more inclusive of the various cultural histories that exist within the region.

### **Rosemary Ferreira**

Courtney and I wanted to know more about the evolving language used to identify these communities as well as how SWANA or MENA, which is shorthand for Middle Eastern and North African people are racialized in the U.S. Why are they simultaneously being invisibilized by being grouped under white in the U.S. Census and yet hypervisibilized by being targeted and discriminated against in everyday life for *not* being white? Why isn't there a distinct MENA or SWANA category in the census? What implications does this have for resources and funding towards these communities? And if MENA or SWANA does become its own category, would it be considered a race or an ethnicity?

If we rewind back in history, we will see that in the first waves of immigration from the SWANA region in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, many ethnic groups from the SWANA region, including Arabs and Armenians, actively pursued whiteness in legal courts. And if you've listened to our previous episodes, you'll know that whiteness was (and still is) tied to prestige, power, opportunity, and the liberties of full citizenship in the U.S. The court ruled in favor of designating SWANA people as white because many of the first immigrants from the SWANA region were Christian and were therefore viewed as more likely to assimilate into American society. These early rulings cemented the U.S. Census Bureau's current classification of SWANA people as white.

However, today many members of SWANA communities, particularly U.S. born children of SWANA immigrants, are arguing the opposite. They do not see themselves as white. And this is often because they are experiencing anti-Arab, anti-Iranian, and/or anti-Muslim discrimination and violence in the U.S. Later waves of immigration from the SWANA region in the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century were increasingly Muslim and political events throughout history such as the Iranian Hostage Crisis in 1979 and the

September 11 attacks in 2001 has resulted in a hypervisibilization of SWANA people as violent, barbaric people. Cue the opening song to the Disney movie Aladdin “Arabian Nights”

### **Archived Recording (Arabian Nights, Song)**

Oh, I come from a land, from a faraway place, where the caravan camels roam. Where it's flat and immense and the heat is intense. It's barbaric, but hey, it's home.

### **Courtney Jones Carney**

Without proper data and representation, the stories and lived experiences of SWANA people are often hidden from mainstream media. What we get instead are narratives like Aladdin that are steeped in stereotypes that are harmful to SWANA communities.

Today, the lack of census data results in a hodgepodge of studies for specific ethnic groups within the SWANA region. For example, one study of Arab Americans done by the Arab American Institute Foundation used data from the 2017 American Community Survey to estimate a population of about 2 million Arab Americans in the U.S., but the study states that this number is likely significantly lower than the actual number of Arab Americans, which they estimate is more than 3.5 million people. However, this number also excludes non-Arab SWANA people such as Iranians and Afghans. Advocacy groups, such as “Yella” Count Me In, have been fighting for a MENA classification for the 2020 census but the proposal was rejected by the Census Bureau because they “needed more research” for the change.

### **Rosemary Ferreira**

So, to answer the myriad of questions I listed earlier, I hit up a friend of mine and fellow alum of the University of Maryland, College Park’s Student Affairs program, Sama Sabihi. Sama identifies as Iranian-American and wrote her master’s thesis on the invisibilization of Iranian students and Middle Eastern students more broadly within higher education and other societal institutions in the U.S. Here she is introducing herself and her family’s story.

### **Sama Sabihi**

Hi everyone, thank you for having me. I'm so happy and excited to be here. My name is Sama Sabihi I use she, her pronouns. Yes, I met Rosemary through UMD College Park Student Affairs program, where I now am as a program coordinator, but I was actually born and raised in Northeast Ohio outside of Youngstown, if anyone knows where that's from, and I ended up going to Ohio State for my undergrad, where I studied neuroscience and had a very big change in my career path and became really interested in education policy, specifically at the collegiate level. I was really interested in creating equitable learning spaces at institutions and so I became super interested in higher education and student affairs. A lot of my upbringing, though... I'm going to rewind. I identify as an Iranian American and both of my parents are from Iran. My mom actually was sent here with a one-way ticket when she was 15 years old to come study, it was before the Iranian revolution back in 1979, so that is where she was. Meanwhile, my father won a lottery to study in the United States for Veterinary school, and so he actually was leaving Iran, also around the time of the revolution, and he left only a few days after the hostage crisis in 1979 and he actually got stopped and had to live in Costa Rica for two years where he worked on a farm and kind of got those veterinary skills, I guess, but anyway, ultimately he ended up coming to Ohio, and that's where him and my mom met, and got married, they moved in northeast and that's where I grew

up and where I grew up we were one of the very few, if not only Middle Eastern families in a large radius, and that was really important for me because the only community I had was with my immediate family or extended family, both in terms of culture, but then also my family is Bahai, the Bahai faith, so we can talk more about that later, but you know, growing up I grew up around a lot of Greek and Italian folks, and so they're Catholic and Christian, and so that was also a different experience for me and it wasn't until later in like middle school that my parents would drive us to Cleveland every week to get together with a larger Bahai community and so those are really foundational years for me, starting to figure out kind of who I am and oh, there's other people here in the world that look like me in the United States that aren't that far, both in terms of being Middle Eastern, but also that are part of the Bahai faith and so when I went to Ohio State it was really an amazing experience because it's a huge University. It's like 70,000 people over there and I started to become more involved with the Iranian community and culture there again realized how much I missed out on because of where I grew up and I also became part of a larger Bahai community, and again realized how much I missed out on because I wasn't near a community and didn't have some of that, like formalized you know religious experience or cultural experience because my parents also worked really hard to assimilate into the fabric of, you know, the environment that we were in, which was predominantly white and Christian and so it was definitely during undergrad that I was like changing a lot and kind of realizing some of the things that I missed out on some of the things that I wanted, and by the end of my undergrad I was like I'm really passionate about, like identity formation and students and sense of belonging and so I was like, OK, I don't know what I want to do with the rest of my life 'cause I don't want to go to Med school and I saw my sister doing research and I was like I don't want to do that and I realized that my undergrad could just be that you know my undergrad, something that I am interested in but it didn't have to be my life and what I really cared about was like I said, higher education. That's also a big part of my religion is education equity for men and women so that was something that I was just passionate about. I took a year off, I worked for the Columbus Metropolitan Library during that time and again became more part of my community and applied to grad school, where I ended up at Maryland and I ended up doing my thesis work on specifically Iranian students, but under the larger context of Middle Eastern racialization and ended up getting a job and working for University of Maryland College Park now where I'm program coordinator. So here I am.

### **Rosemary Ferreira**

Thank you so much for sharing that and for sharing you know, like your life journey and I definitely relate to, you know my higher education experience really being the place where I was able to really formulate or think more critically about who I am or what my identity is, right, and have that space and I think that's why I also decided to get my Master's degree in Student Affairs because I was like hey, higher ed is like really transformative and I really want to make sure that for other students, especially for students of color, navigating predominantly white spaces that we are able to develop a space of belonging and a space of healing and figuring out who we are. And so you mentioned your Master's thesis and I would love to hear more about your work and some of the findings of your work.

### **Sama Sabihi**

Yeah, thank you. Yeah, what you just said was so powerful too you know that's exactly and that ties into my thesis is... I totally realized that higher education was a place in a space that was transformative, and that you could learn more about yourself and I wanted everyone to have that opportunity to be there

and take advantage of that and so you know, I'm in student affairs. I started my first semester, and you know, we're reading about all sorts of students with different, with diverse identities, different backgrounds, ethnic, racial, sexual, you know and I'm just like learning so much and it was amazing and the whole time though I'm like waiting and I'm waiting and I'm like when, like when do you all think we are going to talk about Middle Eastern students you know, like when is this going to come up? And I would be reading some of the best scholar's work and like flipping through these books and like control find, never once even see the word come up right? And so, it was kind of frustrating, right? Like I'm like OK, I'm finally in this space where the whole purpose is to understand students, their sense of belonging, their identity but there is a whole population missing. Once again, I'm in a space where I'm invisible, you know, and I think it was more hurtful to because you're in a place that is intended to see you, right? Like you're in a profession that intends to create that sense of belonging for you that you know, a profession where you're trying to uplift students and I'm like, well, we can't even do that if they're not even being named, you know, nowhere, and so it was definitely frustrating and I was like, why aren't we learning about this? And so, for me, taking on a thesis of course, I wanted to because I wanted that work to get out there, but it was a lot of question for me is does anyone care? Is this worth it? Does it even matter? Because how have we gone so long without even bringing it up? So, I had to get over that, you know so many times whenever it got hard, I was like nobody even cares except me but as I continue through my process, talking with my participants, I'm like this this matters and I have to do this and so for my thesis really it starts by approaching higher ed by saying like, OK, a lot of times universities have our stuff ahead of society, right? Like a lot of people see them as more progressive and so I'm like OK, and as we know higher education universities are very big on retention and student support and so where is... where are we, where is the gap? And higher education like they follow the same demographic structure that the census follows, and so what that means is there's no checkbox for Middle Eastern students. They're checking white, and so we have no data. We have no idea how many Middle Eastern students are at any one university that doesn't collect that data. We don't know what their graduation rates are. We don't know retention. We don't know what resources they need. We don't know anything, and this was so powerful because as I was in the height of my thesis like last spring, I went to ACPA which is a conference for student affairs professionals and Kimberly Crenshaw was the speaker. She said something she goes "what doesn't get measured doesn't count." And that, just like, was exactly what I needed to hear at that moment. And it was so powerful because I'm like, you know, I really, I don't count and it just seemed so hypocritical and antithetical to what universities were trying to do, and so that was kind of the justification for like, let's look at this at the higher education level, right? Because I could write all day about, why doesn't the United States do this? But I work in higher ed. Higher ed has historically taken that step forward. Why aren't they doing it now when they can? As I'm doing this research, I'm realizing that the only information that's out there about this population has to do with Muslim students, and that was very angering, right? Because we're homogenized enough and so they're just like all Middle Eastern people are Muslim and all Muslim students have the same issues but there's a quote by Neda Maghbouleh who wrote *The Limits of Whiteness* and I actually have it here. She says, "the contemporary use of Islamophobia as a catchall term for discrimination against Middle Easterners efficiently, but erroneously flattens the extent of diversity within these groups and more importantly, critically obscures the consistent racial balance of such harassment." So, I have received discrimination. I have so many different examples throughout my life. I'm not Muslim, but because I'm a Brown woman and because of you know how I appear, that is where that comes from, right? But we don't talk about that we just want to paint it with a broad stroke

and just say it's Islamophobia and so that has really done us a disservice. So again, during that research process, seeing that all of the literature had to do with Islamophobia like it was helpful, but it really wasn't taking the conversation where it needed to go, which was about racism. Does that make sense? And so, my thesis really looked at how did second generation Iranians reconcile their racial identity as it's informed by their family, their peers in the education system? And I focused on Iranians because there's a lot of diversity within Iranians both like, religiously, culturally, and because of kind of the alignment with Europe and political issues. Also, I'm Iranian, so research is "mesearch", so there's a few reasons there, but it definitely was meant to give me more insight into the racialization, broadly of Middle Eastern populations.

### **Courtney Jones Carney**

Thank you for sharing that. Before I get into a question that I have for you. I do have like a clarifying point and so you said that you looked at second generation and so are you talking about second generation, US born? Or are you talking about you know like when we talk about a lot of times in higher education, we're having conversations about first gen and we're talking about individuals whose parents have or have not attended college, so you're talking more about US citizenship born in the US.

### **Sama Sabihi**

Yes, yes, thank you for that clarification.

### **Courtney Jones Carney**

OK, and then you mentioned, "no one cares except for me" and think you know, while you were going through the process of convincing yourself that this was a topic that was relevant, you're constantly second guessing yourself and wondering if there are other people who care and so when we, you know, think about the way that Census information has been collected Middle Eastern folks have been have fallen under the category of white. However, there have been plenty of activists who have been advocating for MENA or SWANA to appear on the census, and so can you talk a little bit about the development of MENA, SWANA the shift away from the term of just Middle Eastern on its own or any other information that you wanted to share related to that?

### **Sama Sabihi**

Yeah, so MENA came about... so Middle East is what, at least from a western point of reference, we understand, like the Middle East, as the countries like Iran, Iraq, Syria like that region of the world and it includes, you know, something that I think is important to note is that Arabs and non-Arab groups which would be Turks, Iranians, Israelis. They are ethnic groups within what would be potentially a racial categorization of MENA. I've seen people try to add the category and write Arab and again similar to, you know religion, not all Middle Eastern people are Arab, right? So, if you're Arab you speak Arabic and write in Arabic. Arab is also a culture, but Iranians speak Farsi, Turks speak Turkish, right? So again, there's that difference there. So Middle Eastern would be the umbrella term that in captures those ethnic group. There's a lot of countries that fall under that, but you did mention SWANA. So SWANA is a newer term. I've only seen it in academic references recently. More and more recently I should say, and this came about because people want to depart from this Eurocentric conception of the Middle East, like what is... It's not Middle East of anything. It's Middle East of the United States and Europe or UK, right? But geographically speaking, it is Southwest Asia and so SWANA is Southwest Asia and North Africa and

North Africa's included again because of the cultural similarities and countries that speak Arabic again. So, so that's part of that. SWANA also I think because again, we're talking about a geographical region, it captures more countries than MENA does, so it is a broader region. I want to say the UC University of California System has adopted this term for their students. I personally like it better; however, you know, it's kind of like Latinx, right like? It's a, it's an academic term, but if you're on the street, you know people don't know what that is, right? And so, I I don't know that having a SWANA category quite yet would make sense for everyone if it's accessible and something else to note is I saw that article about, you know, if there was a MENA category that there would be a large drop off from people that would traditionally have to choose white, they would end up picking MENA, but there are there has been conversations about folks not wanting to leave the white category, right? So that's important to note because for several reasons right one, that's been talked about is that Middle Eastern folk don't want a target on their back, and so they think by putting themselves in that box in that category of Middle Eastern, that is going to cause more discrimination towards them. At some level there is a protection of claiming you're white, right? And so, there is privilege that comes with that, and we can't ignore that either. When the category was created, I mean, when more and more Middle Eastern people immigrated to the United States, they wanted to be white because of the privileges that were afforded if you were white, right? Like land property, voting all of those things we now see that we're not getting those privileges, but we're forced to, not those privileges, but you know, we're not getting the benefits right that come with quote unquote white privilege, but we're also being discriminated against, but you know, if we think about like hate crimes and racial crimes like we can't say this was a race-based hate crime, because technically, we're white. So, it's just it's like a catch 22, you know, nothing. There's no benefit from it, so it's really difficult. I think something else important to note is for those that do want to hold on to the category white from my understanding, that's more of a generational thing, right? So, my parents, when they came during the hostage crisis right there might be more of an interest or willingness to identify as white because of the violence that was associated with that time, whereas more and more folks in what I shared earlier, the second generation wants to be identified as Middle Eastern because they you know they go through school and they're like I'm not white, right? Like I've, it is very apparent that my experience is different from my white peers. So, I think that that's important to note, as we're thinking about the racial categorization, but we will have to wait another 10 years for the next census.

### **Rosemary Ferreira**

Yeah, I wanted to highlight you know you made the comparison to the Latinx community and I see a lot of parallels between you know the MENA, the SWANA community and the Latinx community. And so I know this was part of my question was thinking about some of the previous relationships that I have had, you know, I mean, I knew someone who identified as Black and Arab, right? So racially identified as Black but ethnically as Arab and then I've also known folks who are perceived as white but were born in Palestine, born and raised in Palestine, Palestinian roots. And so, there's this like racial identity crisis that they're experiencing in terms of, you know, I don't see myself as a white person, but I am being perceived as white. I did have a question as to, you know if we move forward with this MENA SWANA category, which I think is critical that we do, would it fall under a racial category or would it fall under an ethnic category?

### **Sama Sabihi**

Yeah, I've seen people talk about having kind of like the white and then subcategory like they have like Hispanic. You know the thing is that I don't, do we even know the back end of that? Like why that's even like that now? We know that racial categories have changed multiple times for every group except white, like I think whites change maybe once or twice and I would say that MENA should be its own racial category. I would argue for that because why, why would it be under white, you know? Yes, there are people that are white passing or not, but that's part of, that's something in a lot of different racial categories, right? And things are different too if you, if you see a white passing person who's wearing a hijab, right? Like that also reads differently, so there's so so much complexity there. And the truth is racial categories, I mean it is creating a MENA category, the end all be all? I don't know like is that the end goal or is it more important to critique that whole system in the first place? But the reason that we want it is because we know that \$400 billion are allocated from census data towards education, towards health care, towards local, state, and federal programs, and it shapes the political landscape and so if you have no idea how many Middle Eastern people are in your country, or your state or your local community, then you have no idea how many translators you need at a hospital or a voting center. You have no idea how to wrap your mind around hate bias incidents, right? So, at some degree, yes, we need it but to the point of what does it mean for those that end up identifying as MENA? You know that's a big question mark right now, like how that trickles down and yeah, so I mean, I do think that it should be a racial category on its own because right now... I took a screenshot of when I filled out the census just last spring it was again like 2 weeks before my thesis, I was like this is great timing. It's like you check white, and then you're asked to write in your ethnic group and again I have no idea what happens that right, because I could write Iranian, but someone else could write Persian, someone else could write Middle Eastern, someone else could write Southwest Asian, right? Like, is that just getting thrown away? You know, we know in Higher Ed when there's not enough of a number, it's thrown out or it's aggregated to other with like whoever else didn't fit in the boxes that were there so I guess to answer your question, I would say yes there should be a racial category just because we know what comes from knowing your numbers right? So those resources. But what does that mean for discrimination towards this community? What does that mean for support for this community like we don't know.

### **Courtney Jones Carney**

So, this is where it gets kind of complicated for me, and clearly, I'm not the expert. I'm a Black woman. So, I just keep thinking about for folks who identify as MENA and are identifying with North Africa, but then it also might select Black, does it erase them altogether and does it you know are we missing some of the complexities?

### **Sama Sabihi**

That's a good question, and that's something that honestly even I haven't thought too much about. I have friends who are multiracial and talk about how that whole you know, that system in itself is complicated and people use it different ways, right? Like we we know, I've seen reports that will just put them into one of the categories. They check three like they'll just pick one, right? Or they'll put them in the other category or two or more races, right? Everyone kind of does that differently, and you're right to some degree it is erasing an experience there, right? So, I know Somali folks who are Black like appear Black, and they're also wearing a hijab, right? So culturally, there's that and it's just hard to conceptualize what that is... yeah, when you're when you're picking more categories, and I guess I would

say it depends on how whatever organization is creates this sort of demographic set is using that sort of data and I don't know that there's a good answer, but It's definitely worth... absolutely worth considering how that plays out because for sure you know my lived experience is different than someone who's more white passing, is different than someone who is North African or Black and culturally, you know, you know whether it be because of religion or language or whatever would also fit in the MENA category.

### **Rosemary Ferreira**

Yeah, and we've been discussing MENA, but we haven't really defined mean as much as I think we should, we should maybe do so, and so can you talk about what are the communities that fall under mean I think you did address this a little bit earlier is when talking about, you know Arabs and also Turkish folks but can you just define it for us?

### **Sama Sabihi**

It is similar to SWANA, right? There's just a couple more countries that are part of that, and again, the Eurocentric definition is different, right? But under MENA, So let's say we have Arab communities, this is referring to the culture and ethnic groups who speak Arabic or from the Arabian Peninsula and in within that region, right? And then we have non-Arab MENA people who largely, and I'm sure I'm missing some other ethnic communities or groups but largely what comes to mind is Iranians who speak Farsi, like I said, Turks who speak Turkish and Israelis. And so, they are distinct from Arabs, largely because of language. So that's like a big thing is linguistic barrier and the communities or the countries that make up this category is Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Georgia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kurdistan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, Yemen. Those are just the Eurasian countries and then we also for North African, SWANA would include Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Somalia, Sudan and Tunisia and I might... and people have different definitions, right? So again, I may or may not be missing a couple countries in there that fall into that geographical region. But I just listed a lot of countries and so if we think about that, like all of those people are being categorized right now as white. Like that is a huge... I don't even I didn't count, but that's a multiple multiple many several countries and populations that are here that are not being counted, that are being homogenized that are being erased, invisibilized, whatever you want to call it. We have no insight to their experience. People have estimated that there is anywhere between 2 to like 6,000,000 MENA people living in the United States. That's a big range, like there's just no understanding of that. And so that's so important, especially when we think about even, you know, the travel ban, the Muslim ban, like that was a huge thing under the last administration that I, actually, don't feel like enough people were talking about and it really impacted students, right? So, if we think about international students, yes they are, they have exceptions because they are on a student visa, but the reality is that because of sanctions on banks, these students were unable to send money to their home countries to their families. They're not able to receive money, so imagine being an international student that just had to spend all of this money to come to the United States to study. You have no money to send your family. You have no way to receive money to your family. You also, it's very difficult to work on an F1. I believe the first year you're not even allowed to work unless you're on a campus. And so again, student affairs like does everyone know this? Like where can we hire F1 and then you have to get all this approval in order to be able to work so we have no idea how that impacted international students that were here studying right. Did they leave, you know, could they come back? Could they not

afford to go to school here and that was so infuriating, even in my own work, you know, I work at the College of Engineering and I would have Iranian students come and in Farsi, tell me like I can't afford to live like "I don't have any money. I can't get money I can't send money I need a grad assistantship." And I would do my best to contact literally every office or contact that I had to be like "can you hire this person because they cannot afford food and there's only so much emergency funding to go around for grad students?" and we all know like grad students are very much underserved in a lot of ways, but I think a lot about how international students make up a larger proportion of grad students too. Now the travel ban, the Muslim ban, has been lifted under our current administration, but the impact is still there. I was lucky enough to have a conversation with Neda Maghbouleh in the fall, and you know she was talking about doing research on how this ban is creating a generational gap, right? it's cutting the diaspora in the United States, right? Like there is going to be more and more Middle Easterners who lose that language who lose pieces of that culture because this has really broken up families, and so it really has had a ripple effect. Also, the executive order that allowed that to happen is still there, and it's been historically used to exclude, remove many communities of color from the United States and so it's definitely a conversation that still needs to be had. I mean, yes, it was celebratory, and it was great. I was so happy to see that that was lifted, one of the first things, but also you know, it's not like four years went by and nothing happened to those communities, very detrimental.

### **Rosemary Ferreira**

Yeah, I feel like it's like the bare minimum was that it was lifted right? And yeah, the work is that it needs to be you know, there needs to be a consideration for the harm that it caused absolutely, and I think that you're bringing up a lot of great points on the struggles that folks within the MENA community are experiencing, as you mentioned by not being counted, you're not getting the resources that you need. I wanted to ask you if there were any other additional things that we should consider as higher education professionals while working with MENA or SWANA students and again acknowledging that this is not a homogeneous community but still thinking about you know what are things that we should consider when working with students.

### **Sama Sabihi**

I think one is just being knowledgeable, right? There's so many student affairs professionals and people within like the realm of social justice work and racial justice work who I love and respect so much and this hasn't been something on their mind which you know sometimes like we don't know what we don't know or what we don't experience and it's like when I tell people they're like, Oh my God like I never even thought about that and so one I think it's important to recognize how many students at this really affects and I mean you can you can tap on a Middle Eastern student that you're closer than be like, hey like, I just realized this and I am sure I can guarantee that they will rattle off that this has been a point of frustration for them in their lives, like when I know for me, like when I applied to universities and when I was taking the ACT, like that was the first moment I was like I don't know what I am. Am I Asian? and I was like I never thought white, you know like I was just like other I guess? So yeah I think it's important to be educated how you cannot just with the conversations about like who and what are Middle Easterners and what does that mean but also the politics around it because it is very, politics really shaped and impact this community in the United States, you know, the Iran nuclear deal, all of these things have... the Muslim ban, have really impacted how students navigate their daily life and their relationships with close family. So yeah, education, I think something I would love to see in my life is

more and more multicultural centers have a person just like they would for the AAPI community, just like they would for the Black and Latinx community, indigenous communities, for SWANA or MENA person. Like I said I've been at two universities and we haven't had that yet. There are students that will come in contact with our office and be like "hey, what like grant can I apply for or how can I get money?" and oftentimes it's left up to the students to figure out their own thing because we don't have the resources for them. So, thinking about you, know where in student services there is a need. Counseling centers, you know, affinity groups, again, they're not there. So that would be important. I think also, we're thinking about scholarship it's important to have an intersectionality framework. So, like I said, religion is often tied to this conversation about race. They are different, but they cannot be separated too. A lot of the time, you have to think about both of those and how religion is racialized in a lot of ways so that and disaggregate SWANA or MENA from white, right? Like I've never understood what powers there are that make that impossible you know at the University level like who I'm like, who is the person in charge? Where do I find them and why can't we just add this? You know, I know that for reports and funding and grants and all that stuff, a lot of times we have to restructure to fit the census, right? But for our University purposes, what's stopping us from having a category? What's the harm? You know who is being protected by having them aggregated? Who's not? You know, who is it really benefiting? I think those questions are really important to ask. Yeah, those would be my top 3 wishes is just start to really make these students visible. They're there, they're just a lot of times not being considered, and they need a lot of the support and resources that other students of color are getting and I think the last four years especially was a missed opportunity for that, but there's no reason that we can't make change moving forward.

### **Courtney Jones Carney**

So, I'm generally not a naive person. I'm thinking though, and I could be wrong, right? There could be malicious intent and you know all sorts of thought behind this, but I'm honestly thinking that many institutions specifically like these departments of institutional research haven't even given it any thought about not including this population in white, and so I've... I could be wrong, but I think that it is just a lack of even looking at the experiences of different populations that are falling under white and then determining does this even make sense. And I think that what you mentioned earlier about perhaps a lack of scholarship, then that kind of allows people to fall back onto it, like "oh, but there's no scholarship that says like there, we're not seeing things in academic journals that are saying that folks who identify as MENA are experiencing institutions in a different way." Therefore, we're not taking the steps right and so I think that we're in an interesting position because on our 2020 student climate for diversity survey, we did, have five students who identified as Middle Eastern, which was enough to not have to collapse them into like a other category, right? So, then we begin to see the experiences of people who are identifying as Middle Eastern. I feel like it maybe starts there. And recognizing that five selected, that doesn't mean that there are only five students on campus, but there actually were only five students who wrote it in because it wasn't an option. So now we move towards okay the next iteration will make sure that it's an option. Just because that it needs to be an option, and then perhaps that begins to inform what institutional research is doing as well and what sort of racial categories or ethnic categories they're capturing.

### **Sama Sabihi**

Yeah, That is wonderful. That makes my heart so happy. You know we... the DMV has one of the largest Middle Eastern populations. You know what I mean? Like they are here and yes, some will write it in, but a lot might have chosen white, a lot might have chosen Asian. You have no idea like I've done admission stuff and I will see a Middle Eastern looking last name and they either skip the question they chose Asian or I rarely actually see white chosen. And I mean I, I really didn't think about it until my later high school years and so of course, had I had the option of Middle Eastern, I would have known to check that in high school. Of course, now in my life I would check that and you could totally be right. I have no idea if there is an intention, if there's no intention behind not having that category. And I don't know what frustrates me more. You know, the fact that that there is this whole population we know there is. There's student organizations, there's groups. There's a whole language studies program at our University, but no one ever thought, like maybe they should be a separate category, or is there a reason, and what is the reason? It's really interesting and you know, at a large institution it's like who do I go to to have these conversations. I wish there was one person to just snap their fingers and add this category, but that's not how that's just not how life works. Maybe it does. I don't know if you're a University out there and you're listening to this and and you have that power, contact me. But yeah I would love you know what's so wrong in having that opportunity just to see if students if students did that And again UC (University of California) did that and now they have a SWANA coordinator now they have a space for them now they have you know what I mean? Like they have resources for them and students are using it and that is a perfect, that's a beautiful model, right? Like that's just one institution and they did it. It's a huge, It's a huge system, so you know, I don't see why Maryland or any Big 10 school or literally any school why that couldn't be an option for them too. If we say that we care about students and supporting students. Why not them?

### **Rosemary Ferreira**

I think that's a beautiful place for us to end but I'm gonna offer you like a space to share any other final thoughts that you would like to, you know, speak on.

### **Sama Sabihi**

Those are definitely my main talking points. Yeah, I think honestly, I just appreciate in my life more and more that people are having these conversations, I do. It makes my heart happy. I actually had a friend recently that sent me an article. I mean this made me sad but also happy because it was being talked about, but the article was about how you know when we think about Covid, we don't know how it may or may not have disproportionately affected Middle Eastern groups. That just... it breaks my heart, you know in California you know that's what the article is talking about. The hospitals there and they were seeing in a specific community a lot of they were based specifically said Arabs were losing their life or having many complications to Covid and that was like well, we'll never know, we'll never know how that affected this community at a large scale because nobody is talking about it and I mean that's not true. You know there are definitely people. I'm not the only person on this earth or this country, or even this region I'm sure that it's doing this work. And like I said, I do see more and more, but that's my hope. Like I really will hope and pray that by 2030 maybe we will have something. Maybe my kids will have something. And you know, like I said, that's a big, that's a big scale, as is the census, right? But I work in higher education. I work at a university and there's a lot of work to be done in this area, and I think about physical spaces too, you know, something that we didn't talk about as much. When I think about like things as simple as prayer spaces right like how many extra labs can we make on campus but we

can't have one extra prayer space anywhere on campus besides the student union where, where everyone that's not in the center of campus, which who is? Has to walk all the way over there in the middle of their day to be able to just simply pray you know there's a lot of things we can do at a small scale and we can go as big as we want, right? So, you know, I just, I really appreciate you all for having me, and it makes me so happy to hear that in your own office you are doing what might even seem like small steps or you know, just five students, but that's in a way groundbreaking and it will be so impactful and I hope that maybe other universities in Maryland, maybe the system will adopt that and take that on and that could just be so awesome for these students.

### **Courtney Jones Carney**

Absolutely, I just want you to know that, like when I saw that there were five students like yeah! Yes, like I get to include students experiences an although not really seeing anything that is the statistically significantly different. It's still a good starting point and it will help to inform the way that we move forward. And then for my personal research for my dissertation looks at employees and so at UMB I made sure that that Middle Eastern was a category and there were like 9 folks who selected it. I'm like yes! The numbers aren't huge, but it's enough to count people or you know, it's enough to show that people are here and that they are... and then to look at how their experiences might be different from other people's experiences based off of their race or their ethnicity.

### **Sama Sabihi**

100% Yeah, I mean I, I only interviewed five people for my thesis and their stories were one of their stories was powerful enough I felt for there to be some sort of change, right? Because their sentiments were similar, I mean their experience is unique, but they wanted to be seen. They wanted to be supported and that is the message at the end of the day and if we're committed to this work, then that needs to be part of this conversation.

### **End Credits (Producer, Angela Jackson)**

The Table is a production of the Intercultural Center in the Division of Student Affairs at the University of Maryland Baltimore. It's hosted and produced by Courtney Jones Carney and Rosemary Ferreira. This episode was also written by Rosemary. The show's executive producer and editor is me, Angela Jackson, senior marketing specialist in the Division of Student Affairs. A big thank you to our guest, Sama Sabihi. For joining us at the table. For more information about the Intercultural Center, including events where students can learn more about race, ethnicity, culture, norms, and current, visit [umaryland.edu/ile](http://umaryland.edu/ile). See you next time.