

Andrew Saintsing: You're tuned into 90.7 FM KALX Berkeley. I'm Andrew Saintsing, and this is The Graduates, the interview talk show where we speak to UC Berkeley graduate students about their work here on campus and around the world. Today I'm joined by Mohamad Jarada from the Department of Anthropology. Welcome to the show, Mohamad.

Mohamad Jarada: Hey, hey. How are you? How's it going? Thanks for having me.

Saintsing: It's great. I'm so glad you're here. How are you doing?

Jarada: I'm doing well. Beautiful day in Berkeley today.

Saintsing: Yeah, weirdly unseasonably warm when we're interviewing this in January – doing this interview in January.

Jarada: Yeah.

Saintsing: So, I'm so glad to have you on here. I don't think I've had anyone from the Department of Anthropology, yet. And so, I'm really interested to hear more about your research. I'm also really interested to hear about your research because I saw that you do a lot of it in North Carolina, which is where I'm from. Could you just kind of introduce us a little bit to what you're doing? What your research is?

Jarada: Yeah, sure. So, my research essentially takes civil rights as its focal point, but it does so by expanding our understanding historically and in the contemporary about how civil rights is practiced within local communities and how civil rights gets shaped within legal, political, and social discourses throughout post-Reconstruction United States of America. So, what I try to do in my research is look at certain communities certain, racialized communities, in particular communities who are criminalized, to see how they have used and construed the concept of civil rights and how that has been developed historically since again the late 19th century up until the present. And I do this in particular by trying to look at certain security documents because what I'm trying to do with the civil rights focal point is expand our understanding of civil rights beyond questions of voting political participation, etc., etc. And to think about how communities could protect themselves and defend themselves against things like hate violence and austere surveillance from the government or something of that sort.

Saintsing: Wow, so your research is very relevant right now, right? It's... you're getting a lot of news stories that could probably be something you could look at for your research?

Jarada: Absolutely, yeah. I mean right now civil rights is certainly a hot topic to discuss. I think it's sometimes, it's over-determined and misplaced about where it could be talked about or addressed publicly.

Saintsing: What do you mean by over-determined?

Jarada: I think that sometimes when we talk about racial struggles in the United States or communities who are criminalized by law enforcement agencies, oftentimes civil rights gets tokenized as the only resource or only form of recourse that these communities can seek. I think that it's important for me in my dissertation and in my research is to kind of delimit that space of what civil rights can do for these communities and the limits of what it can do for these communities as well.

Saintsing: Sorry, but can you just say what you mean specifically by civil rights then?

Jarada: Yeah, so the way I understand civil rights and the way I construe it as a, both as a historical concept and as a legal concept in my dissertation is something that is particularly referring to certain legal entitlements that are, that is offered by the state or by the federal government or by, depending on the time or era you're speaking about, by state government. And so, when I say civil rights I say the particular legal entitlement that a citizen, or a non-citizen for that matter, is given by the state generally and historically speaking. And this is where it gets kind of confusing or complex. It's differentiated especially by the Supreme Court by two different kinds of rights. So, there's civil, there's social, and there's political rights. And so, often times the Supreme Court, at least in the post-Reconstruction era, they differentiated these three different kinds of rights in order to address how they should matriculate formerly enslaved people into the national citizenry. So, the goal of civil rights is to ensure those legal entities and legal entitlements that are essential to being a citizen or living in the United States.

Saintsing: Okay, and so you're saying that maybe the other rights that you talked about are not as emphasized and could be more important to the discussions that we're having in racial justice and social justice issues?

Jarada: Precisely. So I mean these are discussions that are happening within political activists, social activist communities, where civil rights is often not really a significant part. Or it is a significant part, but the problem with civil rights is the legal regiment in order to get some kind of redress or get some kind of cure for a political, social, or legal injury. So, for example, if a civil rights of mine is transgressed, in order for me to get that remedied I would have to go through a large and extensive legal process that is a headache. And so, there are these other kinds of rights, particularly social, political. There are things like economic rights, too, that people are considering on the local level as well, to think about different ways or different forms of recourse that these communities could find in times of need or in times of vulnerability.

Saintsing: Okay, and so civil rights we're saying we have to go through legal channels to address injustices or to make sure that people have these civil rights. But these other rights, political, economic, social rights, these are things that are addressed outside of court systems?

Jarada: Well, no, they're... So, they are outside of court systems in the sense that they could be used or addressed or spoken about outside of legal processes and court systems, precisely. But they're highly defined by and created and constructed out of the Supreme Court essentially because... or legal debates that were happening, or presidential debates. So, part of my research is looking at this really funny early debate between this guy named Stephen Douglas and Abraham Lincoln. So, before Abraham Lincoln was the President of the United States, he was running for the Senator in Illinois. And he ran up against this kind of robust racist Stephen Douglas who truly believed in the institution of slavery. And so, it's in these debates (these are really famous debates) where the idea of social, political equality and rights somehow gets differentiated from legal, civil equality, rights, and entitlements. And it's so... they're constructed within these legal these legal arguments, these political debates, the court system. But they are... they have a more expansive capacity, or they're more expansive in the sense that communities can use them or address them or speak about them in a way that isn't limited by the courts per se. Okay, it is confusing. It definitely is. But it's both confusing, ambivalent, and unstable, and for all those reasons it makes political and social rights all the more contested and gives them potential to be used for these social justice or political justice initiatives.

Saintsing: Okay, so you research specific case studies around this. So, could you kind of walk us through like a specific example that could help illustrate you know the intersections of these rights and how communities use different rights to address different issues/

Jarada: Sure, so the community that I work in particularly is in North Carolina, and I've done research across the South. I've tried to do stuff in Virginia and Tennessee, but I chose North Carolina just because it was a pragmatic decision that I made. And it's kind of high... it's been highlighted within public channels especially within the communities I work with (which are particularly Muslim communities) because there was a kind of a brutal murder of these three Muslims in Chapel Hill, North Carolina by this guy named Craig Hicks. And so, after this kind of tragic situation where these three Muslims, you know, Yusor, Deah, and Razan (that's what their names were) were murdered, the question about how to protect the community and what resources to use in this community to protect them was, you know, kind of got, kind of exploded. It's like, "how can these Muslim Americans protect themselves both from the fact that they're being surveilled by the government and at the same time being, you know, hurt, murdered, assaulted, vandalism on their on their religious basis, etc. And so, what I do with this community, or what I examine in particular this community is the kind of language they use, and the kind of resources they use. And essentially to get to the nitty-gritty and to reduce it to one element it goes back all the way to the question about civil rights and how they're differentiated from things like political and social rights. And so, for example, this community wants to protect themselves from, let's say, the possibility of their space being vandalized. So, what do they do? Some communities find recourse in law enforcement. So, some communities, say in Raleigh, North Carolina, are engaging with federal and state law enforcement, particularly the FBI and local police

departments in order to protect themselves. And the language that they're using is civil rights, but on the side of things they're talking about how they could actually protect themselves socially and politically (precisely because the state or the federal government hasn't done their job) in order to protect themselves. Or those civil entitlements that they're given isn't sufficient to take care of themselves. So, how do they wield this concept of political, social rights is what I try to look at and what my conclusion essentially (or one of my conclusions is) that political and social rights get used to secure these communities. And it gives them impetus or motivation to take seriously their security. Like quite literally. So, they buy CCTV cameras. They go through the process of getting a license, a permit to carry a handgun. They are highly aware of their spatial awareness, and they take part in social initiatives to mend relationships between themselves and other communities. Or they take on political initiatives to make sure that people are voting for whoever they desire to vote for. In a place like North Carolina, which is a heavy purple state you know. North Carolina, when Trump won for the first time, he won by 0.5 percent. And so, it's these initiatives that they're focusing on. These social initiatives and these political initiatives that focus on their security, right? The focus on the security, not only of the physical livelihood, but the security of the religious practice that is outside of this boundary or this limited space of what we know as civil rights.

Saintsing: Okay, right. So, you're going through the materials that these groups, like Muslim American groups in North Carolina are putting out, both in like legal documents and just in materials that (maybe like pamphlets they're handing out or like materials they're using to communicate with other groups or within their own group) and you're just kind of seeing the language they use and seeing the strategies they use?

Jarada: Precisely, yeah. I mean, you're a great listener. I mean that is exactly what they're doing there. That's exactly what I'm doing as a researcher to kind of hone in on those like little sensibilities, those strategies, those relationships that they create that can't be reduced to simple civil rights or civic participation. There's something far deeper, and there's a deeper motivation, and there's a bigger stake at hand when we think about political and social justice in the United States for racialized and criminalized communities like Muslim Americans. The majority of Muslim Americans I worked with were either brown or are Black Muslims. And so, this was a heavy topic at hand that constantly got discussed in a lot of the meetings and interviews I had with my interlocutors.

Saintsing: So, I saw also that you kind of look at things from a historical perspective. So, what were... was there like a big change (you mentioned the specific event in Chapel Hill) was there like actually really a big change in the way the Muslim community in North Carolina started interacting with other groups and started looking at themselves? Like what were, what were kind of... how did they view themselves before the incident? And what were really the changes we saw afterwards?

Jarada: Great question. So, I mean... should... can I address the historical part?

Saintsing: Yeah, definitely.

Jarada: So, historically... I try to historically (again I said I look at Supreme Court cases and see how civil rights gets construed, but) I'm also attentive to the fact that, you know, North Carolina is a Southern state. And so, as a Southern state, we know that racism and racialization functions in pervasively... it's a huge part of a state like North Carolina. The first thing I remember when I got to North Carolina, and I first went when I was in... 2017. In the summer of 2017, I went to Durham. I got to Durham. I went on the bus, and the first thing I noticed was that everyone on the bus was a Black person and everyone near the bus station, which is near downtown Durham right next to Duke was white. And so, from the outset you could tell that there's these... there are these forms of racism or racialization or segregation that was just inherent to this part of the country. And so, the historical part both looks at, you know, Supreme Court cases (reading those cases trying to figure out how civil rights and social rights and political rights were construed). But the other part is being attentive to these kinds of ghostly specters that still reside and still have vestiges in a place like the American South. And so, I try to attend to that part as well in my research. But in terms of what had happened after the community had dealt with this big blow, this tragedy of these Muslims being murdered, there was a drastic change. I mean that event was a national event, not only for the Muslims in North Carolina. At that time, I was in Boston. I was doing my master's degree at Boston in Harvard. And students across the campus were worried. They were scared. They felt a sense of anxiety about whether or not they were being protected. And this is in Boston. And so, in North Carolina, where this had happened, (and all of my interlocutors the majority of which always point to this event as a threshold) security became the essential issue in this community about how to protect themselves. And the way they did it was they created relationships with law enforcement, and they try to amend relationships with their particularly Christian neighbors and Jewish neighbors as well. And so, you see like a wave a wave of like civic, political, and social activism that's happening from the generation that grew up after 2015 when this event happened. And so, there were a lot of drastic changes after that event.

Saintsing: And this was nationally. Like Muslim Americans in general. This is a huge event, and it's shaped across the country not just North Carolina.

Jarada: Absolutely, and I can only speak about the effects that have happened in places that I've lived (so North Carolina, Boston, and California now) where I've seen communities take this question about security far more seriously than ever before. And that event was only one of a series of events that happened, like the Dylan Roof shootings in South Carolina at a Methodist church also was impetus. The Christchurch shootings in Australia were also an event that happened. And so, that event in particular focusing on Muslims in the United States pretty much changed a lot of the things in a lot of the ways that Muslims and mosques and the wider community thought about themselves and how they arranged their communal makeup and their spatial makeup. Yeah.

Saintsing: Right, yeah, you brought up a bunch of different attacks on different denominations, different faiths and then there was also the Tree of Life massacre. Yeah. Is this, you know, thinking historically, is this an exceptional moment that all of these attacks are happening in these places of worship or on people specifically for their faith?

Jarada: Yeah, I mean it's really hard to tell just because I mean historically, you know, speaking of Black churches, Black churches have been arsoned or been used as a as a tool by the KKK in particular or other white supremacy and hate groups to be to be arsoned or vandalized to foster fear and anxiety within Black communities for a very long time. Albeit these things aren't reported or documented because when you burn something it's, you know, it just disappears, or we don't have those or at least I don't have the resources to know historically about how these things have happened within the United States. But I can say that in the past two decades... I could say this. I could say that the events that have occurred within religious spaces like murders, stabbings, shootings have had a kind of singular response that has been significant. It's a significant change in religious communities in the United States, I think, where these communities are now fully taking security into their own hands. They're soliciting not only the help of law enforcement, but (I mean we could call them mercenaries) like private security firms who take care of religious communities. There are now, I know of two security firms that are particularly focused on religious communities. And they have a kind of like Christian Biblical motivation, you know. And so, I know that in the past two decades those events related to religious spaces have taken on this question of security far more seriously. So, it's interesting, you know, as a Muslim myself, when I'm in a mosque and you see a man with a handgun, that's something new. That isn't something that I was always privy to or aware of or I had to care for growing up as a young Muslim in California. So, yeah.

Saintsing: It's so interesting to think about. You know, obviously this danger in public spaces in general is problematic and scary. But I guess in particular thinking about religious sites, you know churches, mosques, synagogues, temples... the fact that people have to worry about this and have to think about security when these spaces are supposed to be these welcoming spaces in general, you know. This is like a place where theoretically everyone could just come in and you know be welcome to worship. So, do you have any... has your research shown you anything about the way that, you know, these new security... thoughts about security and movement towards increasingly secure spaces has altered that aspect of places of worship?

Jarada: Wonderful question. I mean you're asking a really great question, Andrew. I really appreciate this. Yeah, so this is an essential question that I'm trying to ask in my research about how is it possible that these traditions, right? These are religious traditions, like Islam, Christianity, Judaism, that's really kind of honing in on the question of neighborliness or being a neighbor with someone or helping someone out or being hospitable to people and attending to the poor, you know. And creating these virtues within a community, right? Things like charity, things like service. How do they do that

given this fact that now mosques are (they quite literally... this one mosque in particular the Islamic Association of Raleigh has built a, you know... fortified their entire space with a wall, with a gate). And so, it's interesting to ask you know how the hell is someone going to know whether or not to come into space or feel welcomed into space if there's a wall blocking them from this and if they're not already part of the community. And so, the conclusion I've come to or from the interviews I've had and the people I've spoken to, it's really interesting. They believe that (and I would agree with them that) the construction of these walls, which creates a space or creates a division between oneself and one's community and another community outside, is actually the condition for hospitality. It's the condition for a healthy relationship to one's social world outside of themselves or welcoming someone inside the mosque, right? So, when you build a wall, one interlocutor would tell me, you're doing something to invite people in to ask questions and to be provoked in a particular way such that they ask "why is this Muslim community building a wall? And for what reason?" Or in the scenario where there was, there was cases where people would come outside the mosque wearing things like a pig, a hat with bacon and saying kryptonite for muslims or stuff like that, where they would stand outside of these mosques, and imams would come and invite them in. And so it's in this like really interesting scenario where you would think that building a wall and you would think that carrying guns and you would think that all these protective strategies that these communities are building and implementing are ways of pushing people away. But for them it's actually an invitation to both ask questions and to be welcomed inside the mosque. So long as they're safe, right? So, long they're also prepared in the situation in which someone wants to do something out of the ordinary. And I think that is where we get to the question of political and social justice or political and social rights. Where these communities take it seriously that the state or the federal and state government won't protect them. In these everyday situations, you won't have... 911 won't come immediately. And so, building these walls and holding guns, etc., etc. are both strategies to invite people in – strategies for hospitality – and strategies to protect themselves and their religious tradition. And so that they can have some kind of psychic relief when they're praying.

Saintsing: Okay, yeah. So I'm really interested... I think your research is super interesting, and like the content of your research is really interesting, but I'd love to know more about like what it actually looks like when you go out and do research as an anthropologist. So, are you... so, you talk a lot about interviews? So, you're going actually into communities and interviewing people. But then you're also like looking at documents. Like how do you choose what to look at? How do you identify people for interviews? Just tell us a little bit about that process.

Jarada: Yeah, I should say first and foremost, you know, I got really lucky. I mean the community I worked with in North Carolina were probably the most lovely people I've met in my life. I mean these people are caring, loving, welcoming, concerning, you know. Highly political and socially aware people that really care about both the community that are, that they live in (the non-Muslim community) and the communities they're a part of.

And so, for me, I was, my job was really easy. I mean I woke up in the morning excited to do the research that I was doing. As an anthropologist, the first step for me is to gain some kind of trust between myself and this community, right? And that was kind of... I have to admit it was easy just because my name is Mohamad. I'm Muslim myself. I speak Arabic. And you know I pray. And so, I was first intending to kind of put myself within this community as a Muslim, right? And as a researcher. They knew from the outset that I was a researcher. I first... what I first did was just attend a bunch of meetings. I mean I would attend things from like random-ass dinners to you know events about civil rights to concerts to gatherings, social gatherings. I mean fires, what are they, bonfires. I mean I went to everything for like the first four months. I mean I was exhausted. But it was a lot of fun. And then people got to know me, and I got to know them. And so, as I started going to the more important events, events surrounding questions about political rights or social rights or activism or people running, Muslims running for mayor or Muslims running for political office. When I went to these events, that's when the question started happening. And because they knew me as a familiar face, and they were so kind, they were so open to giving me, giving me interviews. And so when I would do these interviews, they were just... they were just a lot of fun, man. You know you get excited about these things and these people are as excited as you, and the people I would talk to range from people who worked in tech to people who devoted their entire life to the religious communities like imams and other religious leaders. Or people who own subways. Or people who were financial advisors or people who wanted to be lawyers, et cetera, et cetera. And so, you get a diverse group of people all who are concentrated on this one task: security. And when you ask them and you provoke them, boy are they willing to talk. The job of an anthropologist is, or the job that I took as an anthropologist for the way I see, is to kind of get to know these little social minutia that surround these really important issues, right? Like you hear about these things on the news every day. You hear about these things on your podcast. You hear about these things everywhere, but nobody really knows what goes into those little interactions or those little happenings in the everyday in order to protect a community. In order to garner your social, political, and civil rights. And that was my goal, and I enjoyed it very much.

Saintsing: Well, unfortunately, it looks like we're running out of time. It's been so great talking to you, Mohamad. Just a reminder: today I've been speaking with Mohamad Jarada from the Department of Anthropology about civil rights and other form of rights among different groups in America with a focus on Muslim Americans in the American South. Thank you so much for being on the show, Mohamad.

Jarada: Andrew, it's been honestly my pleasure. And I really thank you for giving me the time and space to speak about my research. And truly your questions were really great. And I appreciate that.

Saintsing: Thanks for saying that. Tune in in two weeks for the next episode of The Graduates.