

Editors-in-chief, Brooke Norton and Lubna Safi sat down with fellow NES graduate student Aria Fani to speak with our JAGNES 2019 Spring Lecture speaker, Mohammad Rafi about his research, pedagogy, free speech, critical theory and more.

BN: This is Brooke Norton, sitting here with Lubna Safi. Mohammad Rafi is our speaker for tonight, he was invited to give a lecture as part of our *JAGNES* Townsend Center Working Group spring 2019 programming. We're happy that Aria Fani recommended him and facilitated this and we're excited to hear your talk tonight. Welcome!

MR: Thank you very much. I'm happy to be here.

LS: So we maybe just wanted to have you talk a little bit about your research as an introduction. Your talk today is very interesting, it's titled "The Importance of Being Aryan: Confronting Nazi Racial Law and the Determination of Iranian National Identity." If you could talk just a little bit about your research and then we can follow up.

MR: Ok. Certainly. I did my PhD in German Studies as my field but I worked in the Iranian Studies Center, both at UC Irvine, the Jordan Center [for Persian Studies], because my project is interdisciplinary. So the foundation of it is in German Studies but a lot of the work that I do involved aspects of Iranian Studies. So the focus of my research is questions of nationalism, of transculturalism. What does that mean transculturalism? So how do ideas travel essentially. I was specifically interested in how ideas travel from Germany to Iran. How did Germany influence Iranian nationalism? That was a big question that I asked, that I aim to answer partially as part of my research. And different aspects of it resulted in different publications. But the one I've been working most recently on and the one that is closest to my heart because of its current applicability to society is these questions of race that I'm tackling. Specifically racial superiority, which you know, hence the title "The Importance of Being Aryan," which sort of comes from the "Importance of Being Earnest." I'm trying to of course lure people in with this title but you know, expose the people who come for the wrong reasons.

LS: That's really good.

MR: You gotta have a little fun with it as well. But essentially I'm mostly interested in discussing questions of race and the intent is to show that even the Nazis, who were so serious about their work, and had scientific evidence for biological differences between people supposedly, did not have their stuff together when it came to defining what it means to be an Aryan, which is which I like to expose and then use that to have more questions about race and how hierarchies, what kinds of hierarchies exist today, and we can dismantle them perhaps.

LS: So you just mentioned applicability, in our current political climate, and I'm wondering when you started your work on this, I can remember writing an article and using the word "facism" in my paper, and this was maybe in 2013 or 2012, and thinking oh in the academic context people use it a lot, and then fast forward now to 2019 and the term is in the news, and antifascism, so do you, have you noticed that change? Or have you felt like your work has, like was there a time when you felt...oh this is kind of in an academic context and now it feels very like urgent, beyond that?

MR: That's a great question. Absolutely. Absolutely. I started with being interested in the traveling of ideas, so I looked at how Martin Heidegger was received in Iran, which is a very interesting project. I wrote a chapter on it and it was satisfying to do this work but it was very scholarly in that sense. Now fast forward to 2016 and, you know, sort of the global turn towards the right, I sensed there not just the urgency of the matter but I sensed that I can contribute in a meaningful way to the discourse that's going on rather than just focusing on something very specific that I might be equipped to do well. But I found it more important to give my students specifically the tools to understand the world that we live in. And to transfer that sense of urgency to my students. So that's when my research honed in more on questions of nationalism and how I can use my own research to inform my teaching in the sense of explaining racial theories, explaining the significance of race for culture. Sort of positioning race as an ideology rather than this concretized idea or concretized notion that we have to adhere to. Because many people in this country and around the world still believe in biological differences through race. So we can't be sitting on our high horses and saying "well of course there are no biological differences, we all know this right." If a lot of people assume there are biological differences, then we need to find ways to reach those people without patronizing them and saying "oh you guys are all fools." That doesn't work, clearly. Look at where we are.

BN: So you mention talking to and involving your students in this conversation. We know that your pedagogy and making your research available to students is very important so what do you see as the most important conversation to have with your students in the classroom?

MR: So specifically for me because I teach a humanities course, called Humanities Core, the theme the last three years that I've been teaching was *empire. Empire and its ruins*. So this is a very useful time to teach *empire and its ruins*. We go through historical empires from the Greeks all the way to the American empire. So many times students see these historical events as so far away and distanced from us and removed. Rightfully so. Why are we studying something from 400 years ago? That was supposedly so great or not. My role as an educator is to bring anything, literally anything that I teach that is of historical significance and apply it to today. Every single lesson, that is my goal. Because that is how you create a sense of urgency for your students to see...ok we're studying this historical idea but how is that relevant to your life? Well it's my role to make that connection. To first establish a connection to what's happening today and then put

students to task showing them that their future relies on what's happening, these developments. You do not want to be fooled. You want to at least have the tools to understand what is going on. What do you do with this? I don't see that as my task to have students lean ideologically one way or the other. I take pride in the fact that they can't tell if I'm liberal or conservative in that sense. You know of course we all know I'm liberal at heart but surely I take great precautions to make sure every voice is heard and that my role is to navigate students and help them think through matters in a clear fashion rather than nudge them towards the way I think. I don't think that's good education.

LS: That makes me want to ask about free speech but I think I'm going to stay away from that.

AF: You recently gave a talk at UCI about the role of universities in free speech. So that's funny that [you came to that]

LS: That's immediately what came to mind, I'm sure you heard at Berkeley, was it last year?

BN: All of last year...

LS: We had free speech week...free speech month... essentially, you know, this kind of controversy over the university as a platform for anyone to speak at and this idea that you know we heard in the media that universities are becoming liberal bubbles, that they don't want to hear the other side. But the other side tends to be people like Ann Coulter or Yiannopoulos who want to attack minorities under the guise of free speech. So I'm interested in your take on that. I know this is something that students at Berkeley were really thinking about last year.

BN: We were sort of brought into the national spotlight.

LS: We've been brought into the national spotlight. Exactly. And that kid a few months ago who was punched in the face. Did you hear about that? There was a conservative student who was punched in the face by a non-student. It was on CNN. And Trump passed the executive order about free speech at

AF: About free speech on campuses

LS: free speech at universities or else no funding. So I guess, what's your take on all that?

MR: First I should acknowledge that it's a very complicated question, but since I have talked about the subject because I deem it very important and generally I think it's important to talk about subjects that are uncomfortable to talk about. Freedom of speech is one of those because we support freedom of speech but once it gets to the point where we have hateful people wanting

to spread hate as protected under freedom of speech it's hard to take a side because what do you do? You try to fight for the right of those people to speak as it's constitutionally granted to them and as we all agree this is what makes this country special essentially. This really vast freedom of speech that we have. But can you stand behind people spreading hate and those words hurt, they're hurtful, they actually could, they have effects on people, just because they don't on us particularly. If you're not targeted it doesn't mean you shouldn't try to feel for those people. So I want to acknowledge that first and foremost.

But on the other hand, the way I approach this problem, is to look at what the role of the university is. If you look at what is the history of the university in the United States. If you look at the last few hundred years, universities were established in order to create new knowledge. And not to pass on knowledge that has already been concretized. That is more what happens in religious factories if you will. So the university in its essence, as it was established based on the Humboltian principles, coming from Germany, the most important principle is to create new knowledge. How do you create new knowledge? This is by allowing any and every idea to be exposed and to be thoroughly discussed. So based on this principle foundation, I would lean more towards allowing speakers, even if they have what is perceived to be hateful messages that are disguised in pop cultural anecdotes, in the case of Milo or whatnot. That we should tackle the people, that we should use our most brilliant minds that we have to confront these people at these events rather than trying to shut them down, which ends in a victory for these people, political victories. Because it shows people who already think that liberals or universities are places that aren't as effective as they should be, that they aim to shut down speech, that they have a political agenda. It makes it easy for the other side to dismiss universities. So I think we should do the hard work of confronting these people and use our resources to counter it with more speech rather than prohibiting speech because I think once you prohibit any kind of speech we're going down a slippery slope. Where do you draw a line? And that's when things could fundamentally change and history has shown that when you start restricting speech it's usually minorities and people of color who suffer more than any other group. So many students who have good intentions, they are not aware of the history of freedom of speech in this country and if you argue for restrictions toward speech in order to protect minorities it hurts people of color ultimately more than the status quo. But surely this is a big discussion and this is the approach I take.

AF: I have a follow up question. I was following closely, all the events surrounding free speech, the panel that was put together at the law school, Judith Butler's talk that I attended, and so many other events. And I think, if anything, if we came to any agreement, it was that hate speech as a category, is not useful, is not nuanced, is not a robust category. Because it can be weaponized by the other side easily to flag any speech they happen to disagree with as hate speech. Do you think we have come up yet with a category that affords us a certain degree of distinction to flag somebody like Milo, and not just someone as Milo at all times, but certain things that he does? For instance, when you project images of people on the screen and you put their phone numbers

and you encourage the crowd to call them, harass them, or be violent physically towards them. Does that not cross the line? Does that not stop being speech and being an incitement of violence? And just generally what are your thoughts on this?

MR: Your example would, I guess, qualify as inciting violence towards people, if you give out their numbers and sort of ask for people to do something actively about it. But again there's no one definition whether from the university or the government or any institution that we could stick to and say this is it. They all, if you look at universities, and how they regulate freedom of speech, it differs from public to private university, and private universities of course have much more leeway of defining it as they want and public universities have to be more in accordance with what the federal regulation has put out there. Now with Trump's new order it's becoming even tighter, right? For political reasons, of course. We can acknowledge that. But that's exactly the question, what qualifies as hate speech? Where do you draw the line? Because we all agree there should be some sort of line. We shouldn't just let somebody come onto campus and, I mean, when somebody screams fire, you can't do that, right? Because this is also a safety issue. We know that through speech you can, speech act theory tells us that you can do things with speech as well. Speech is not just speech. You can do a lot of things that can have real life influence and especially in this new age, the technology being at the focal point here. We have to rethink all these issues anew, right? What counts as hate speech within the internet? And what counts as hate speech in a public discussion? As part of a university? So I'm not claiming I have the answers as to what exactly is the definition of it. But I'm saying we should do the hard work to rewrite laws that are more precise, that will protect the most people, and not resort to our base instincts, which is to just fight conservative causes that ultimately want freedom of speech and vice versa. Because that ends in a political match that is not as productive as when you do the hard work of trying to get certain policies passed, etc, etc.

AF: You know, you said something that really resonates with me. You said, we're living in an age when we're increasingly asking ourselves "what is speech?" And I think the landmark decision reached by the Supreme Court in which a Supreme Court Justice ruled that corporations may give unlimited amounts of money to lobbyists to special interest groups and that's political speech. So, and as you rightly said, that has targeted communities of color and undocumented communities more than anybody else. And so, one issue that I have with conservatives saying that universities are hostile to our ideology or to our political disposition is that they think universities are self-contained entities and that they have no connection to the real world. We're in the real world, these corporations are also taking over universities, and increasingly, business is the law of the land, not being liberal or conservative. How do you, in the space of the classroom, bring in conservative students to think along with you and to think in this very polarized time not about their political camp but about the health of our body politic. And even if they score a certain political point, get them to think in the long run that would come to hurt them because institutions are being eroded?

MR: I mean yeah, in terms of the classroom, that's quite a task to fulfill because, look I think it's true that the majority of students are left leaning, in the classroom. Whether it is at Berkeley or UC Irvine where I teach, or UCLA, places I have taught, that's the overwhelming majority. So there is, what one could describe as, a dominant narrative, often in classrooms, right? I can say this after a decade of teaching that I have detected this. Now, many times in classrooms, when there is a dominant narrative, people who have differing opinions don't want to speak up. Because if you have out of 20 people, 18 people all think in a certain way, you have to have a lot of courage to speak up against that, to even question it. So this creates echo chambers within the classroom that I've noticed mostly throughout the time under Obama. Where I found people to be very comfortable. Questions of race were not as pertinent because we had a president who was half black, right? It sort of gave people, well you know, yes we have problems with race, yes, you know, there are still a lot of issues still, but look at how far we've progressed as a country that we can have this president who is black. Now, taking these truly exceptional cases such as a person like Obama becomes president and apply this to be the norm is dangerous, yeah? This is the same kind of politics one person can play with black people in America. What kind of black people do we like in America? We like the ones that are safe, the ones that entertain us, like LeBron James. Or the message is conveyed to us that black people in America are dangerous. Is this because we're all racist in America? No. That would be too easy of an answer. Could it be because systematically we are sort of trained to think to associate black people with violent and dangerous situations. Where there's victims or perpetrators, right? So these are facts that you sort of confront. You try to demystify a lot of ideas that have concretized themselves in America. Through this process of demystifying or deconstructing, basically taking things apart, piece by piece, students come to their own conclusions so there is no need for me to frame the issue as "alright let's have the conservative speak now," right? If you do your job well, you should have an array of opinions about any topic. Without framing it as a liberal or conservative issue. So through opening the field to all kinds of thoughts. And that's my role to make sure everyone does this in a respectful manner and preserves each others' dignity. You can come to conclusions that satisfy both sides of the spectrum in the sense that they see the government often does not work for the people in the way that it should be, whether you come from a conservative standpoint or a liberal standpoint. So, but again I would say that it's a lot of hard work that as educators we should take on and we should continuously struggle in doing that. It's not easy and nor should it be.

LS: I think one aspect, I'm going to move away from free speech, one thing I'd like to add to our discussion is that it's also about access, which is what you were highlighting earlier. I mean, who has the platform to speak? And we know that historically that universities have been the purveyors of a certain...you know position... it has been more conservative, recently it's become more liberal, and I think that use of science to justify racial laws is an example of that, institutions of learning are producing these racist knowledges, racist rhetoric. So it is definitely

about access. And I want to come back to this other, to your work, and your work in critical theory in particular. You're affiliated with the critical theory institute. And I'm interested, I assume your work is mostly as you said the German-Iranian intellectual tradition, but have you come across critical theorists working beyond the Germanic or Eurocentric paradigm at all? Or do you find that...because I myself am also in Critical Theory and I'm interested in non-Eurocentric paradigms of critique and whether this has come up for you or not?

MR: I mean, you're right, my work has leaned a bit away from critical theory, but it always serves as a foundation. What I immediately thought of was Said's *Orientalism*, right? Because it's so useful in terms of its structure. The argument that he makes, you know, of course, it has persisted so long, and it's so important. But I like to use the structure for other kinds of ideas in terms of how something is created. It's so hard for students to understand that the East, or the Orient, is fabricated by Europeans. Because what does that even mean? How? The question comes to mind, first and foremost, are the Europeans that powerful that they can construct the East and everything that comes with it? The whole exoticism and everything that we ascribe to it, right? That's a lot of power that you have. But that raises questions of colonialism and sort of different power structures that have existed throughout history. Using the paradigm of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, as the most critical theory aspect in terms of my teaching. In the early years of my graduate studies, I did read a lot of critical theory to try to grasp what does it even mean, critical theory? Because it's critique, that's what we do, we try to read and to read between the lines and find ways to read differently, and interpret texts, and appropriate ideas, etc, etc. It's exciting work. But what's really the function of critical theory? How does it differentiate from textual analysis that we do in high school? Does it have more subtleties to it? Does it come to conclusions that are more important? Who says so? What are the structures that confirm that? So I'm a bit critical of critical theory in itself. Because I think the field needs to define itself clearly before it can rise to the top, in that sense. Critical theory is a bit esoteric in the way it approaches literature and philosophy. And that's something that turns me off because I think clarity is king. When you do research, when you teach, you need to aim to be as clear as possible. You shouldn't use words that confuse people in order to elevate yourself. That is rubbish in my opinion. You should aim that everybody understands you and if everybody doesn't understand you, you should rephrase to make sure, you know. And not, I see this in the academy too often, a lot amongst critical theorists, who use obscure language and make an argument that is hard to discern. In my eyes, this is not useful, for students, for the university, even for the scholar, him or herself. So that's my approach towards critical theory.

AF: I'd like to ask a follow up question because I really like Lubna's question and it's not that hard to discern the critical tone with which you asked it. One of the first courses I took in my first year here was *Introduction to Comparative Literature* and one question that they asked was "what is comparative literature as a discipline?" As a critical theory subfield? An approach? A perspective? In any case, this has proven apparently to be a question that doesn't get answered.

And it's ok that it doesn't get answered. But one answer that I have come to through researching my dissertation is that comparative literature in some ways is the sum of all the critical debates within it, that use comparative literature as a fixture, that identify as comparative literature. So, you know, in many ways, for instance when you're talking about world literature you are talking about David Damrosch and Emily Apter and Pascale Casanova and Edward Said and whatnot. And I think what Lubna constantly critiques here is the danger of creating an echo chamber where you are constantly engaging with the same type of people, recycling the same type of people, even if you put forth a new reading of Casanova or Said as Michael Allan has done, as Aamir Mufti has done, you are still engaging with the same people. And you're not asking, say, what does critique look like from the point of view of Jurji Zaydan in the 19th century writing for Arabic language journals in the Levant or Egypt? What does it look like from the point of view of Shibli Nu'mani, a south Asian scholar writing in the same century? And if you do, you want to apply those critical theories to their work, in a field that poses as neutral, and as using interpretive tools that pose as universal but they're anything but. So how do we move away from comparative literature as a sum of all of the debates within it? And also pretends to be this...so it's not even a question of Eurocentrism anymore, it's a question of elitism. Being in an echo chamber and hearing certain debates and when you step outside of it you hear other debates and you don't even know the terms of those debates so you can't even insert yourself, you have to ... And when you go to comparative lit talks, they're always exposing the limits of their engagement with other people because they constantly have to make it visible within their own field so that they can then ask a question. Does any of it resonate with you?

MR: Absolutely. It seems counterintuitive. Because, what is literature? What is it that we have as humans and try to connect you with something, some idea, or some human elements, right? But sometimes, in the academy, exactly the opposite happens, you have scholars interpreting a piece of work in such an exclusive way that it doesn't allow for people to even comprehend their take, their appropriation of these ideas. It becomes more about the act of performing something with a text in order to validate your own status. These are things that happen too often in the academy and aren't addressed. By asking questions like "what is the function of literature?" period, not inside the academy. Because it has been bastardized to an extent due to discussions going on that are just not useful to the larger public. And I acknowledge that somebody might say that, you know, not all of these discussions should be for the larger public and there's a reason why scholars get trained in the way that we do and that you can't include everybody. So, surely that can be acknowledged, and I'm not saying that we should aim to do every single thing for the public. But our main task should be aimed towards the public rather than to satisfy our peers. It seems counterintuitive to me as someone who is an educator that I should try to impress my peers more so than the people who I'm actually serving, which is my students. So going back to basics helps me to remember that this is your task. It's not to impress your colleague, for getting a big grant, right? But unfortunately, this is the way it goes. Unfortunately, that's how we measure ourselves often too. And if we're going to be on our high horse in academia, I feel it

should be due to reasons that we take pride in educating people, and giving them the tools, critical tools to survive in this world. And not to raise our own prestige, in order to, you know, move up in the world, and perform resistance within literature but not in actuality.

BN: So jumping on this conversation of presenting this work to the public, part of our mission here at JAGNES is to allow for the publication of innovative modes of writing and presentation within the traditional milieu of publishing. Do you see this as important to works such as yours that's so comparative and interdisciplinary? Focusing on allowing for the presentation of innovative ways of writing, presenting your work, within what can be perceived as a very traditional field or discipline?

MR: Yes, that's another great question. In terms of accessibility of writing. So what is the traditional way? You want the most clout free writing, you aim at a top tier journal in your field that 72 people read and you go through the rigorous process of trying to get your article published, which we all know that even if you're good at what you do it takes about a year or two, right? Due to long waits. Now, I did this and then I was unsatisfied because, you know, I, for example, I wrote an article about Iran and Germany throughout World War I. Now WWI was from 1914 to 1918, those four years. The article that I wrote, it took five years to publish it in an edited volume. So longer than WWI. That for me was the final straw. I said, if this article took longer to get published, which is about WWI, than WWI, then something is not right. So these kinds of little moments encouraged me to find outlets that are more easily accessible to the public. So these days, with the internet, with as much damage as it can cause, it has a great way of spreading your work across the world. So I decided to publish with places that aren't as exclusive in terms of their readership. That allowed me to spread my work and publish it within weeks. And you write more concisely, you write more loosely, in order for a larger public to make it more accessible. I have gotten many good reactions to my work and people personally contacting me because of that, not because they read those edited volumes, and the articles that took so long. Because who reads those? Other academics. Other academics, who are all in competition many times. To the general public, our ideas are eye opening, and they can get much more out of it than we can. Many times it leads to debates that become very exclusive among scholars. I don't find that as valuable as somebody who has no idea about Iran and Germany and the connection that Aryanism has between those two, and reads a short 3 page article of mine, and finds this useful. So I absolutely support innovative ways of publishing and all kinds of ways for having your voice heard, beyond the constraints of academia that is very elitist in its base and foundation. And we have to think about this as scholars. If we are here positioning ourselves as people who are serving the public, who want to do certain things, then we should also walk the walk and not just talk the talk. And one way of doing that is to make your work, that we work so hard on, accessible to large readership. Even if that means you don't get the clout of publishing in your top tier journal. So that's what I think about it.

LS: That brings us back to Edward Said and academic activism. And engagement both with the scholarly group and also the dual role of also serving the public, which as you said, is ultimately what our work is. Our work is not only to serve our scholarly groups but also for the larger public.

BN: Thank you very much.

AF: This was very lively.

LS: We're looking forward to your talk "The Importance of Being Aryan: Confronting Nazi Racial Law and the Determination of Iranian National Identity."