

Episode 26: Conversations about Academic Labor, Academic Freedom & Palestine

Run time: 53:45

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SS: Steven Salaita (special guest)
VL: Vincent Lloyd (special guest)
CFC: Carol Fadda-Conrey (special guest)
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Cue Music: akaUNO "Hidden Leaves"

AH: You're listening to *This Rhetorical Life*, a podcast dedicated to the practice, pedagogy, and public circulation of rhetoric in our lives.

KS: Hello everyone. I'm Karriann Soto--

VK: --and I'm Vani Kannan, and today we will be talking about the intersections of academic freedom, academic labor, and Palestine.

KS: This past year there have been a series of events that have shaken people's "business as usual" attitudes, one of them being the events in Ferguson, which we discussed in episode 24. About a month before Michael Brown's death occurred here in the U.S., Israel launched "Operation Protective Edge," which killed over 2,200 people, over 2,100 of them being from Gaza. Within this context, numerous scholars and activists voiced a public outcry using a variety of media.

VK: The most publicized case of academic dissent was Steven Salaita's. During Operation Protective Edge, Salaita wrote a series of tweets condemning the Israeli government for its military offense. Salaita had just left his tenured position at Virginia Tech to accept an associate professor position in the American Indian Studies department at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Following his tweets, Chancellor Phyllis Wise of the University of Illinois informed Salaita that he no longer had the job. More than 6,000 academics pledged to boycott the University of Illinois unless Salaita was reinstated, and close to 19,000 individuals signed a general petition in his support. Much of the public outcry around the rescinding of Salaita's job offer was framed in concerns about academic freedom.

KS: There have been efforts from academics in Rhetoric and Composition to discuss the call to engage in solidarity work with Palestine. Matthew Abrahams's book *Out of Bounds: Academic Freedom and the Question of Palestine* explores how the concept of academic freedom applies to discussions dealing with Palestine. Discussions about the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement (also known as BDS) have also become more visible in professional academic organizations in recent years, particularly as academics have debated whether to support the call to boycott Israeli academic institutions. The call

for BDS was initiated by Palestinian civil society in 2005 and has been endorsed by over 170 Palestinian civil society organizations. In December 2013, The American Studies Association passed a resolution in support of BDS, and this fall, scholars from the National Communication Association held a teach-in on BDS, Karma Chavez being one of the organizers. Within MLA, scholars continue to push for a resolution in support of BDS. And during her keynote address at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Indianapolis last March, Angela Davis made a call for Cs—and rhet/comp scholars more broadly—to support BDS. Davis echoed this call at this year’s National Women’s Studies Association conference.

VK: After his job offer at University of Illinois was rescinded, Salaita began speaking at college campuses across the country. This October, he came to Syracuse University to talk specifically about the links between academic labor, academic freedom, and Palestine. We sat down with Salaita to talk with him about his experiences in academia, and the narratives surrounding his story. We also asked him for advice for young scholars who are doing academic work around highly-politicized issues. In addition, we spoke with two Syracuse University professors who helped to organize Salaita’s talk on campus -- Vincent Lloyd and Carol Fadda-Conrey. Both have a longstanding commitment to Palestine solidarity work, and speak to its intersections with academic labor and academic freedom.

First, we will share our conversation with Steven Salaita.

Cue Music: “Another Word” by The Left Curve

KS: Can you speak about your experiences writing about issues of colonization, imperialism, racism, indigenous rights at various academic labor tiers—as a student, junior faculty member, and tenured faculty member?

SS: I’ve found—and this is just in my experience—that the pressures are nearly identical, being an undergraduate student, graduate student, junior faculty, tenured faculty member, and that probably would be the case for, you know, endowed chairs. Any time you take on systems of state power, then there is going to be a backlash—not just an administrative backlash, but again, in my experience, a backlash from the communities that have branded themselves as respectable and responsible.

You mentioned free speech, academic freedom, labor, and Palestine. Labor and Palestine stand out to me as sites of discussion and contestation that tend to produce strong reaction, especially when we’re not just talking about labor in the abstract but as a site of material engagement, as a site of anti-corporate politics, as a site of capitalist critique, or I should say, critique of capitalism. And Palestine dovetails nicely into that because as both a political symbol and as a geography it stands in such stark contrast to the neoliberal imperatives of the American government and by extension the Israeli government.

I think that any kind of discourse that sort of challenges the commonplaces, the commonplaces I guess of corporate authority, right, is going to receive backlash, often

from people who don't feel particularly invested in maintenance of the capitalist state but who have sorof been socialized in such a way as to feel threatened by that sort of critique.

In some ways, the stakes might get even greater, you know, the more accomplished one becomes, or the more one advances in her or his career. And I don't want to in any way discount, you know, the tremendous things at stake for undergraduate and graduate students, and for junior faculty, at all, because there's a great deal at stake and I don't think it's wise to hierarchize these things. But see—academe is part and parcel of the capitalist system that thrives on the promise of reward, and there's always a reward to chase, always. So people think, *oh, when I get tenure, you know, I can just let it rip*, but no, you can't, because then you're going to want to get to full professor. And then when you get to full professor, *oh, I'll have all the power* – no, you're not going to have any power compared to the administration, and don't think that you do. And besides, then you have that endowed chair to chase. Or maybe you're sick of your campus and you want to move elsewhere, right? Nobody's going to hire a controversial scholar, you know, or very few places with. Or, maybe by the time you've gotten to full professor, you've become so accustomed to keeping quiet and to playing it safe that all of a sudden when you're 55 years old, you're not going to change all of a sudden and become that radical that you dreamed of being when you were 23. I don't think the pressure ever goes away.

KS: Salaita's observations about speaking out within academia echo Eileen Schell's in our episode 20, "Thinking Collectively about Academic Labor," where she encourages young scholars to not censor their voices. Both Salaita and Schell call young academics to task-- we can't wait to speak out until we have more job security. We asked Salaita how he sees this playing out at the different campuses where he has talked.

SS: I'm seeing a tremendous amount of enthusiasm at the idea of taking on these narrative and moral structures of power – these commonplaces of corporate dominion in the university – the corruption endemic to a lot of administrative practices. I think that on the whole, students are engaged in precisely the way that faculty should encourage them to be engaged.

VK: Salaita elaborated on the limits of academic freedom, and the relationship between discussions of academic freedom and discussions of Palestine.

SS: There's a certain set of conceits around academic freedom that limit its functionality and its practice, and those conceits often have to do with critiques of state power, critiques of colonization, critiques of structural violence, right, rather than critiques of obvious overt violence. And I think when we engage in that sort of analysis, we very often end up in a type of trouble that academic freedom doesn't always shield us from, right? Palestine is a great example. Anti-Zionism, I'll say even more specifically, is a great example of the inherent limits to academic freedom, as long as academic freedom remains tethered to dominant paradigms.

You can think of academic freedom as a resource, and like all resources in capitalist economies, its distribution is fundamentally unequal. It's not a resource that we all have access to, even though it feigns equality, but its practice is not equal, its accessibility is

not equal. But Palestine also, I think, invigorates is probably the right word—discussion of Palestine invigorates discussion of academic freedom, it forces us to look at its limitations. That's what my situation is doing. And I think discussion of academic freedom, in the inverse, can invigorate discussion of Palestine in important ways. So, I think it's important to look at the two, in an academic context anyway, to look at them in conjunction with one another, and think about the ways, think through the ways in which the inherent limitations of the neoliberal structures governing academe inform what sorts of political issues and modes of critique are verboten, and which of those are acceptable.

KS: Because Salaita has published numerous books, been included in anthologies, published popular journalistic pieces, and ultimately lost his job offer following a series of tweets, we asked him to speak about his experiences disseminating his scholarly work and political critique on these various media platforms. What are the different rhetorical approaches elicited by different genres?

SS: There's a politics of respectability that happens in academe, and it exists for a variety of reasons, some more convincing than others, some more useful than others. The lingua franca of academic writing tends to limit a sort of rhetorical creativity that publishing essays on online magazines or Facebook statuses or even tweets gives a little more room for.

Tweets in particular—the platform does certain things. The platform demands brevity. People who have been trained for 4,5,6,7 years of grad school aren't often the best at brevity. It happens in real time so there's always an implicit context, always. So you can't just read a tweet like it's an aphorism, right? It always exists in a context, and there's always a set of shared assumptions that has to be maintained in order for conversation on that platform to happen. That's not always the case in academic writing where quite rightly, we're meant to invoke, and to draw out, and to justify, with evidence, our assumptions.

If I'm having a conversation with on Twitter with somebody about Palestine, right, and we're in agreement, then a shared assumption is going to be that Israel is the aggressor. If I'm arguing with somebody on Twitter about Palestine, we might not necessarily share the assumption that Israel is the aggressor, but the person with whom I'm debating knows that that is my assumption, and I understand that his assumption is that the Palestinians are the aggressors. So again, there's a context there, that makes it an interesting platform to play around with.

But I'm skeptical about the idea that we can translate really difficult scholarly concepts onto that platform in a way that people are going to find legible, people outside of academe I mean. Because I've done that a lot, or I've tried to do that a lot – tried to take basic precepts of decolonial theory and decolonial thinking and sort of translate them into a pithy 140-character tweet. And people just sort of go mad, like *what in the hell are you talking about? That makes absolutely no sense*, you know? And it's like *no*—that one term I used, it's supposed to signal A, B, C, D, E, and F, but if people aren't familiar with that particular term, or a certain disciplinary usage of it, then it's going to signal nothing.

But I do think that social media platforms allow us a space for organizing, and for provoking, and for being thoughtful in a different way, that is very often restricted in academic forums, which in my opinion tend to have a very stringent definition of *polemical*, for example, or maybe you could say a very generous definition of polemical, right? I think that it's important—or not important, but it can be a useful thing—to go into spaces and onto platforms wherein you can state things directly and you can engage in a debate without all the baggage that comes along with academic debate.

VK: What kinds of scholarly and pedagogical tactics do you think we might be able to use to take on that marginalization of so-called political work?

SS: For me, it seems particularly important to communicate openly around the ways in which language is used to not only marginalize but very often to banish people, right, who--implicitly or sometimes even explicitly--who aren't playing by a certain set of disciplinary rules, or who insist on pushing disciplinary boundaries.

First thing we do, in my opinion, is take seriously our charge as graduate students or scholars, and that is to think critically, and to complicate and problematize linguistic and rhetorical commonplaces. So when we sense that somebody's being outcasted in some way, think about why, understand what's happening, understand who has a stake in what's happening, and think closely about what language is being used to make that ostracization seem normal or normative, right? We have to also be able to understand other people—our peers our colleagues or even our enemies—on a level that goes beyond simply categorizing them into specific political taxonomies. I think it's important that we communicate on a level that goes beyond mere analysis of rhetoric and somehow can get into the organic, right? Get into the spaces of consciousness where we can forge connections that go beyond a simple, for example, identity politics.

Most important, we can't let people feel isolated when they take on power. I think that's the important thing. And I know it's not a prescription—do this, do that, A, B, C, D—I guess I'm talking about a broad ethic. The reason people don't act, or don't always act, on their consciousness is because they know that they're going to be alone, or they feel like they're going to be alone. They're going to get caught up, they're going to get caught hanging in the wind, and people will tend to their self-interest. I think we have to recognize what a tremendous amount of power we have as communities of grad students and scholars, and groups of people with a commitment to making the university space and the world around it more equitable. And so instead of ostracizing or abandoning or ignoring somebody who is getting in trouble with the system in some way I think it's proper, and ethical, and useful to find out what's going on, and think about the terminologies of the conflagration, and figure out who's benefitting from this particular form of troublemaking or this particular form of repression.

I believe in activism with purpose, with integrity, definitely with unity, and most important—and this often gets overlooked—with compassion. I really feel like we need to act with compassion. It's a more important quality to me than being able to use the right key words in the right contexts. People are not only concerned about their own place

in the hierarchy, the academic hierarchy, but they're also concerned about my well-being as a human being, and that's a lovely thing, that's a beautiful thing.

As difficult as this era of higher education can be, one benefit to it is tons of organizations exist than maybe was the case in the pre-digital age. So for somebody working on ethnic studies, I would say check out Critical Ethnic Studies, go to the conference, or American studies—check out the American studies conference—tons of supportive people there. There are online communities. There are, if you're a graduate student, scholars in your field, that you might not even necessarily know and that you've never met, to reach out to, who will absolutely be responsive and who will plug you into supportive and sustaining communities. So, these places are there—seek them out. There are always politics and skirmishes, but I've been lucky enough to have participated in communities in academe over the past 10-11 years of deep friendship and deep closeness, and it makes, for lack of a better phrase, being outspoken a lot easier thing to do, because I know that we're going to take care of one another.

Go to the spaces that feel comfortable and stay the hell away from the people and the scholarly communities that give you an icky feeling. I would listen to my instinct there. Find the academe that actually practices what it preaches, rather than the academe that—the administrative-driven one that so many of us have come to find problems with.

Cue Music: "Another Word" by The Left Curve

VK: At his campus talk right after our interview, Salaita elaborated on the idea of how the "rhetoric of civility" functions in the academy. In his essay "Normalizing State Power," which appears in the edited collection *The Imperial University*, Salaita writes that the everyday, often passive-aggressive behavior of labeling scholarship "polemical" or "political" serves to marginalize academic work that speaks back to state power. Through the rhetoric of civility, Salaita suggested, state power ends up shaping an academic ethos, dictating what students and scholars feel that they can or cannot say on or off campus.

I think back to a conversation with a former professor, who told me that an article I was writing about post-9/11 Islamophobia was "radical," and that because of the combination of this kind of work, with being read as a person of color, I would have a difficult time in academia. In his essay, Salaita describes these types of comments as "insidious," and "undermin[ing] whatever protections academic freedom has the power to offer." The bodies we inhabit, and the scholarship we produce, dictates how much or little of the "resource" of academic freedom that we are granted.

Framing a discussion of Palestine within questions of academic labor and academic freedom could be seen as playing into a specific rhetoric of civility that prevents Palestine from being the framing piece. And yet, we want to engage with rhetorical frameworks that circulate critiques of state power more widely within academia. Following our interview, Salaita remarked that in the end he is glad that his case has led to a more public conversation about Palestine. But this has come at a high price for him.

So, the precariousness of academic employment--even when one has received tenure--demands that we further explore the intersections of academic labor and academic freedom. I sat down with Vincent Lloyd, a professor in the religion department at Syracuse, to speak about this link. He also discusses his experiences with campus-based BDS organizing, and the role that rhetoric and composition can play in countering the rhetorical commonplaces of civility that Salaita points to.

Cue Music: "Another Word" by The Left Curve

VK: Could you talk a little bit about your particular interest in Salaita's story and your experience organizing the event on this campus, and then also about how those experiences are reflective (or not) of larger trends?

VL: Sure. So first maybe I'll speak as part of the Labor Studies Working Group on campus, which is part of the Program for the Advancement of Research in Conflict and Collaboration in Maxwell. The Labor Studies Working Group, which has been around for about four years now, is interested in the various ways that labor is made precarious—at least this is one of the main themes that we've been thinking about and exploring through a series of events and symposia over the last several years. We've thought about dairy workers in upstate New York making the milk that goes into fancy greek yogurt, many of these workers undocumented and in very precarious situations with bad living situations and low wages. We've thought about the situation of adjuncts, adjunct faculty at Syracuse and elsewhere.

I think Salaita's case, on the one hand, because he seems like he's in the most stable kind of position, right? A tenured faculty member at a major research university. But I think what happened to him shows that all labor is being made precarious in our contemporary moment—that Salaita, who seems like he would be so far from the dairy worker in upstate new york or the adjunct instructor, is discovering that his labor is also in a sense contingent and his job can be taken away if the powers that be decide, with the input of wealthy donors, that his job is going to be taken away.

So, from the labor studies perspective, I think making those connections—and so speaking to members of the Syracuse community who might not feel like they're affected by the undocumented dairy worker a few dozen miles from us—showing them that there's something about the state of labor in our contemporary era in the U.S. and more broadly that needs our attention. So from the labor studies perspective I think that's why the working group has been particularly interested in Salaita's case.

As someone concerned with Palestine more generally and the politics of thinking about Palestine in the U.S., his case—because it's drawn a broad coalition of support—also provides an opportunity to get centrists and liberal-minded members of university communities thinking more critically about Palestine and thinking about why it is that this issue is so much of a hot-wire at universities around the U.S.

- VK: It sounds like part of both the interest from a labor studies perspective and from an investment in solidarity work with Palestine that Salaita as a sort of case example opens up space for potential solidarities, or at least ways for thinking about them?
- VL: Yeah—and I think “academic freedom” is a term that’s used in many ways and perhaps doesn’t have the most political potency behind it, but “academic labor” and “Palestine” are both the terms that do bring with them a lot of political potency, and so I think using academic freedom as a way to open these more political conversations and more potentially more transformative conversations about Palestine and about labor, and allowing people to see the connections between these issues is really important and the Salaita talk and visit is a great opportunity for those connections to be made visible.
- VK: I asked Vincent Lloyd about how he first became invested in links between Palestine and labor, and asked him to talk about his experience organizing on campus at various stages of his academic career.
- VL: When I was an undergraduate, I went to a talk and helped organize a talk by an alumnus of my college, Princeton, who had been active in organizing around South African divestment, a generation or two before I’d been a student. He recalled how this tactic of divestment had been used, talked about how the administration had responded, the sorts of organizing that just the call for divestment had made possible, and pointed towards other issues that called for this kind of—that students today (this was around 2001-2002) should get agitated about. Of course one of these was Israel/Palestine. And out of that, a core group of students got excited about calling for divestment. So we asked Princeton University to divest from businesses active in Israel until Israel was in compliance with the Geneva Convention and various UN resolutions, framing it very much in a sort of international law language.

So just seeing what happened in reaction to that--it was either the first or second university-based divestment campaign in the U.S.--which quickly snowballed and within a few months there were maybe a dozen or twenty campuses that were calling for divestment with a similar international law framework. Seeing how faculty were forced to make a choice, and how students who hadn’t thought about these issues could potentially be mobilized around the question of Palestine, was very enlightening for me as a 19- or 20-year-old just getting my feet wet in politics, ethics. I’d done labor organizing before that, but this was the first really contentious thing I’d done.

Seeing Jewish classmates whose parents didn’t want to talk to them when they got involved in the divestment organizing, and the contentiousness even on the Left community that I was around and the vegetarian co-op I was around--although everyone was generally supportive, some people were sort of scared to participate in the campaign, and got pressure from their families not to participate, or opposed the campaign. I had maybe 15 seconds of fame at the time and was on national news talking about the divestment campaign and got death threats via e-mail and that sort of thing.

I started as a junior faculty member at Georgia State University, a big urban public research university in Atlanta. There was a campaign to cut off ties between the university

and the Israeli security forces. There had been an exchange program between Atlanta police and Israeli security forces facilitated by the university, teaching Israelis drug enforcement tactics in Georgia, and teaching Georgia police anti-terror tactics in Palestine. And so, I became involved in that campaign, which was, you know--exciting to see I think just in the 10 years or so that had passed that the issue had become I think more palatable to a broader array on the Left although it was still very fraught. But we still encountered the sort of amazing resistance and corporate sponsorship on the part of the people who were running the program in question--the really bad program. They were getting all of this outside money that was not even going directly through the university but to endowment or foundations, and they were opposing our Freedom of Information Act requests and so on. So it was still the amazing energy that goes into the resistance by the pro-Israel forces to Palestine solidarity organizing. Which is still sort of astounding why--there must be something especially threatening, or especially scary--irrationally scary--to provoke that kind of reaction.

- VK: One of the questions that we asked Steven Salaita is how he's seen the various narratives about his story being picked up.
- VL: I think it's been really reassuring, the extent to which the academic community pretty much across the board, with some notable exceptions, has rallied behind Salaita, and seen Salaita's case as an example of administrative bloat, and corporate influence on universities, all sorts of problems that have concerned academics for a long time. And among them, especially notably right, the loss of power of academics, of faculty, to govern their institutions. The ideal of the university being a place that is run by its professors, is one that still a lot of professors hold and a lot of administrators have forgotten about. I think the Salaita case reminds faculty that this is an ideal that we care about, and gives leverage to continue the conversation about how can we as faculty take back the power that we have lost to govern these institutions to a combination of administrators and corporations and wealthy individuals that collude to make the university a business rather than an educational institution.
- VK: So thinking about the students and young scholars who might be listening -- where do you think we can find support for doing scholarship that might be labeled political and might call out some of these trends within the university, and implicit in that is asking, where have you found support or how have you found a productive space for those questions and that type of scholarship. And then specific to the field we're in, rhetoric and composition, where we're both wanting to push back and analyze dominant discourse and also working with students as they frame arguments both for popular and academic audiences, what are the various ways we can keep these things in mind and push against them, in our writing and scholarship?
- VL: Maybe I'll start with where I've found support. I think the Labor Studies Working Group here at Syracuse has been a really wonderful resource where I've been able to connect with other faculty across the university who have similar interests and concerns as I do and are oriented towards taking actions that are both increasing awareness on campus of issues we're concerned about and are in some ways, often small, confronting the powers that concern us. We organized a rally last spring--I think it's the first time I've been part

of an academic group that organized a rally, which was sort of an interesting process to see academics trying to figure out how to make posters and that sort of thing. But I think it's an exciting model that is not just about talking about our concerns or our justifiable outrage at conditions, but also sharing research, workshopping things that we're working on, and taking action that pushes these issues forward across the campus, not just within a department. I think every university has these sorts of corners or is receptive to having these sorts of corners created.

In terms of rhetoric and writing and training students, I think rhetoric at its best is the perfect way, the perfect place to be thinking critically about the world around us, and has the opportunity to take any issue or phenomenon that one finds and argue persuasively about it in a way that doesn't take conventional wisdom for granted, and that examines why is that the conventional wisdom? Who is it who benefits from this conventional wisdom?

One of the reasons that I was drawn to getting a PhD in rhetoric--although sometimes I think the discipline is either more or less critical, that's the case with every discipline--that the potential that that discipline has is the most exciting thing.

Cue Music: "Another Word" by The Left Curve

KS: Hello again, this is Karriann, and I'll be sharing with you my conversation with Carol Fadda-Conrey, Associate Professor of English here in Syracuse University. Before sharing our conversation with you today, I should emphasize that as Professor Fadda-Conrey and I talked about the role of her scholarship in creating communities and building solidarities, especially here in SU, there was an emphasis on risks and rewards, the theme for the 2015 Conference on College Composition and Communication--a theme that has been coming up in a series of exchanges about my own scholarship.

After my presentation at the National Women's Studies Association Conference, which was held in Puerto Rico this year, a woman spoke to me about her participation in the 1970's protest against ROTC recruitment of students from the University of Puerto Rico, a topic that I was addressing. She warned me against the repercussions that such political work might have in the future, as she found it really difficult to get a teaching position in the same university where she was protesting as a student. At one point she remarked, "it's just like talking about Gaza." In other words, it is *risky* to talk about topics that challenge state power. Discussing these issues with my feminist mentor, Dana Olwan, she remarked about risks in academia: she said, "there are risks that must be taken. What are the risks of not taking risks? Was it risky to challenge slavery, settler colonialism?" She further suggested that this is a moment where people who might already be politicized around race and imperialism can become politicized around BDS as well. This has been the case for me, as I continue my research on Puerto Rican nationalist rhetoric and their dissent towards military occupation of Puerto Rican territories.

Like Salaita, I do not see a choice in doing this type of research. I grew up noticing the effects of U.S. imperial occupation on the place I live. As a young academic, I am struggling with the question of what it means to negotiate academic freedom with being an academic laborer, what it means for some of us to be able to speak freely and with no consequence. In other words, I'm a subject of academic freedom. But I most certainly cannot equate my experiences with academic freedom and the discussions surrounding Steven Salaita's firing. When we do enjoy academic freedom, we need to recognize that this is not a universal condition. As Salaita remarked during our interview with him, academic freedom is a resource that is not equally distributed. So I'm left wondering: who has the right to speak freely and with no punitive consequences, and who does not?

In what follows, Carol Fadda-Conrey offers advice about how to move forward with these questions. Our conversation began with a reference to Steven Salaita's talk, her entry point into organizing the event, as well as the intersections of academic labor and academic freedom within the campus context. I asked: Could you tell us a bit more about your interest in his story and the experiences you had organizing this event? How does it reflect (or not) larger trends within academia?

CFC: Well, my entry point into Salaita's story is, Steven has been a tremendous help and mentor in my work. I work on Arab-American Studies, I'm also invested in narratives of Anti-Arab racism and Anti-Islamophobic narratives and how to respond and challenge these overarching racist narratives that target Arabs and Muslims, and surrounding specific struggles within the Arab world, including the Israel-Palestine struggle. So my investment in it was to have Steve come and talk about this debate and bring in his story because I know how much Steve is a compassionate and thoughtful and committed scholar and intellectual and I wanted his story and that perspective on it to be very evident on campus, I thought that was very, very important because with everything that is, or was and is circulating about the story, it's very easy--and it happens repeatedly--of dehumanizing someone based on the stories that circulate about them and I think there's something very powerful in him standing there and talking about his story and fielding questions so graciously. I know that there was a lot of resistance to his coming to campus, some worry about him being on campus because part of the narrative was presenting him as an anti-Semite. And my response to those worries and those concerns was that part of academic freedom and part of our intellectual community is to talk about these things, and talk about them publicly, and campus is the primary place where you can have these conversations. So that's why, for me it was very important to have Steve, on campus, addressing these concerns.

KS: One of the questions we asked Salaita revolved around how the different narratives of academic labor and academic freedom have been picked up, and how these are connected to Palestine. I also asked Carol Fadda-Conrey about how she's noticed these narratives circulating.

CFC: As far as academic freedom, you know, and what are these narratives that are being circulating or constructed around Steven Salaita's case—it is definitely about academic freedom but also underlying that narrative is of course, the Palestinian stance that Steven has taken, and along with that, his pro-BDS stance. So this is not merely any kind of case of academic freedom, but it is embedded in a very embattled case and context of BDS and how BDS now has been circulated and discussed within and across college campuses. College campuses are now the primary battleground for discussing and talking about BDS. So this whole shift in support to the BDS movement is very prominent and is specifically prominent on college campuses. So it's not really a surprise that the targeting of pro-BDS and pro-Palestine scholars, and thinkers, and activists, is also being done in the sphere of the campus—that's not very surprising. Part of the narrative—and some people are saying that, "Well, it could be anyone. What happened to Steven Salaita could happen to anyone because this is a case when academic freedom is being stripped away from the person, so if it happens to him, it could happen to anyone." I disagree with that because, I think, you know, his case is not merely—it is primarily an issue of academic freedom and freedom of speech, but it also has these roots and it is embedded in the Palestinian context, in the struggle over who gets to speak, and how are they framed when they speak—*framed* in the double sense of the term. So going back to what Steven himself has said that there is an exceptionalism around the first amendment because it definitely applies, but it doesn't apply when it comes to the Palestinian voice. So then, in thinking about the narrative of academic freedom, then we have to ask the question of whose freedom? Who gets to speak and who does not get to speak? Whose voice is heard? Because even when you speak it doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to be heard, so whose voice is heard and by whom? How is that voice that is often not heard made to reach a larger audience?

KS: In asking Prof. Fadda-Conrey about how she first became interested in questions of academic labor and academic freedom and about her experiences engaging with these issues at various labor tiers - as a student, grad student, TA, junior faculty, for example - it turned into a question about her specific genealogy, and how her stance has been impacted, changed or shifted all throughout.

The responsibilities change with the different stances that you take, or the different positions that you're in, right? And I think it's very important to be aware and reflect about these responsibilities that come with you being a student—you know, a student being in a classroom, sitting, versus you standing in front of a group of people, versus you having tenure and having that, and I'm using quotes here, a certain "power". So the stance doesn't change but the responsibility and the self-awareness of that changes.

I came to the States, you know, I started my PhD in 2000 as an international student. I came from Lebanon where I was born and raised and I had spent all of my life there and I had never come to the US before starting my PhD. And I came to the US, having been raised and lived all my life in Lebanon I was steeped in a kind of political perspective. I lived all throughout the war and of course I'm a product of that. So coming to the US—

and that was also right before 9/11, and witnessing the lack of politicization on campus in response to 9/11 and the aftermath—the war on terror and the war on Iraq, but that was pretty disturbing to me, as someone who is coming having been steeped in that political background and it's not really something that you choose. You don't choose to be a political person, or not, you're just that political person based on your background and experiences that you've had. So this is how I came in, and at Purdue you immediately start teaching, so I was also standing in front of students with a very marked body as a person of color, and also to kind of learn what it is to be, how it is to be a person of color in that kind of white-dominant society and intellectual community—the kind of expectations that are placed on you to educate others. So that's also part of the labor and part of the expectations, and then you start learning how to deal with that and negotiate that, and ultimately reject that because it is not our responsibility to educate—to kind of be the 'native informant,' and there's a responsibility on the part of fellow students, of colleagues to educate themselves too and not only rely on you for that education. Of course you do have a certain responsibility in intervening and teaching but that's in a different capacity. So that was my experience and entrance into that kind of intellectual, de/political, a/political atmosphere on a college campus in the US. And, really, that was consistent. Even at the height of the war on Iraq, first on Afghanistan and then on Iraq, I was deeply disturbed and stunned by the silence on campus, which is why this sit-in by students in Syracuse has been immensely—I hate to use the word exciting because I don't mean to kind of thrive on it that way, but it's making me hopeful. It's kind of making me see how these students are so invested, and that's really amazing to me, honestly.

KS: What she is referring to here was an 18-day student-organized sit-in at SU's central administrative building. A coalition of over 50 student organizations that calls itself THE General Body has been advocating for diversity, transparency, accessibility, health services, and democratic decision-making processes on campus. Over the course of the sit-in, students and their supporters were closely policed and monitored. Thinking of the institutional risks of advocating for justice on campus, particularly for those in vulnerable or contingent positions, but also reflecting on my prior conversation with Dana Olwan about risks that *must* be taken, I asked Fadda-Conrey what she thought about how these risks are experienced in different labor tiers.

CFC: The backlash is there. I'm very well aware that people occupy different positions of vulnerabilities based on where they are and, you know, there's always a risk. There's always—because we're all vulnerable when we are fighting and for towards these issues that are deemed problematic or unsavory by the dominant community. Because they want you to be, what Steven was saying about being the docile Arab: they want you to be the native informant, they want you to be the docile compliant colleague/student/person of color who's educating, but when you step out of the bounds of that "civility" then you're punished, then you're blacklisted, then you're placed in the AMCHA list like me and several, you know, a couple of other colleagues have been put on because of our support of BDS that's being construed as anti-Semitic. So, there's always a risk, but not everyone occupies the same place, or position of vulnerabilities, and I'm very well aware of that,

you know, as a tenured professor the risks and consequences are very different than the students who are sitting at Crouse-Hinds right now, because we occupy different positions of power and we have to be very aware of that.

KS: As young academics dealing with these differentiations of power, especially for those of us who are marked as students of color, but also thinking of the pressure to comply with the commonplaces of civility that Salaita mentioned in his interview, we need support systems. So I ended my interview by asking about her seeking out and building support systems.

CFC: I think organizing, and organizing around solidarity communities and connecting with allies and creating networks of solidarity in that way is so crucial. We cannot resist in isolation. We are stronger in constructing our power and working together. I think that's so important, and seeking out those allies is very, very important. You know, one of the main things that drove me to work on Arab American Studies was I was taking an Ethnic American Lit. class, and you know there were all these different constituencies and communities and I was looking and was like "where are the Arabs? Where are the Arabs?" And also it was coming from a need to connect, and to connect what I was going through to the needs and larger concerns of the community. So I was trying to, really forge a community through intellectual engagement, and I quickly found out that I cannot do that without actually being connected with these other Arab scholars who are also working on similar issues and have similar commitments. So that's why I ended up contacting Steve Salaita, *out of nowhere* and I was like, "I'm working on this." And that's why such generosity resonates, because it's really addressing a need that you have, and you forge these connections that are so *strong* as a result because they are not sort of on the surface, or they go deep into certain commitments and investments. So that's how I formed my intellectual community, by email, and then I started going to conferences where I actually met these people in person. And I've held these connections since then. So going back to these communities, even if they're not immediate—if you don't see them around you everyday, but also it's important to have, to seek out these allies around you and form these networks of solidarity—that's very, very important—and the word that comes to mind is resonance, like how you're intellectual investments also resonate with those by others. Thinking and maybe not specifically in your field, but you're thinking—and there's resonance, that what you're invested in and they're invested in, they resonate. And I think that's important. They don't have to be working on the same thing or the same exact thing.

KS: Thank you, thank you so much for talking with us.

CFC: Yes, definitely.

Cue Music: akaUNO "Hidden Leaves"

KS: We want to thank Steven Salaita, Vincent Lloyd and Carol Fadda-Conrey for sharing their perspectives and positioning themselves as mentors and allies to young scholars doing politicized work. Thanks to *This Rhetorical Life's* production team for their help

and for providing the space for us to engage in the conversations presented in this episode. Thank you all for listening.

BK: *This Rhetorical Life* is brought to you by graduate students in the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric program at Syracuse University. Executive producers of *This Rhetorical Life* are Ben Kuebrich and Allison Hitt with additional production and editing from Karrieann Soto, Tamara Issak, and Jana Rosinski.