Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Professor Gabe Rosenberg

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by Professor Gabe Rosenberg, where I ask him: What does farming have to do with gender and sexuality? Welcome to Getting Curious. This is Jonathan Van Ness. I am so excited for today's episode because it is mind blowing. It is so interesting. Let's get to it. Welcome to the show Gabe Rosenberg, who is an associate professor of gender, sexuality, and feminist studies. Yes, you! And history at Duke University. He researches how gender sexuality, and the global food system connect through history and today. So, first of all, welcome, Gabe, how are you?

GABE ROSENBERG [00:00:47] I'm doing great. It's wonderful to be here. Thank you so much for having me.

JVN [00:00:51] So I first met Gabe on Twitter, then we got to do a project together for Getting Curious the TV show that did not get to make it all the way to air, because, really, your whole scene could be its own series. You study the most fascinating, complex, interconnected issues. And I learned so much from the time that we spent together. And I am also a queer person who comes from rural America. I grew up literally, I mean, for like five years of my life, I was, like, literally adjacent to a corn field slash sometimes soybean field, you know, with the whole alternating thing. And cow farms and pig farms. And so the, the, the idea of what, like a farmer person and what city people are, is something that has, like, very much affected my outlook on life, very early on. And also this idea of, like, the farmer and the farmer's wife. These are ideas and stereotypes that are really driven into your mind when you come up in rural America. You think about how we learned about sex via, like, barnyard animals and the 4H Club. And so where do people's minds go when we first started to think about this topic, and the connection between gender and farming? And why?

GABE ROSENBERG [00:02:08] I think that immediately the iconic image that's going to jump into a lot of people's minds as we talk about this is the Grant Wood painting "American Gothic," right, where we've got the farmer with the pitchfork and a person who's next to him, a lot of people assume is his wife, that's contested. I don't actually know. Maybe it might be a sister or something like that, but that's, that's the image, right? The image is that farming is sort of done on what we would call, like, "the small family farm," that's, like, the classic or the traditional way of organizing life in rural America. And that rural Americans, have family structures and have social mores and have sort of assumptions about gender and sexuality, which are traditional, which are conservative, which are "the way things used to be." And even in a phrase that we probably have heard a lot, like, "the Heartland" or something like that, the sort of assumption that, like, rural America is what the world used to be, like, before things kind of got busy, got modern, got urbanized.

JVN [00:03:13] So take us back. Can you set the scene for us with the history of US farming? What is the history of farming in the US?

GABE ROSENBERG [00:03:22] You have to go back long before Europeans ever arrived in the United States. Because of course, Indigenous peoples lived in North America. They lived in the territories that would become the United States for thousands and thousands of years before Europeans arrived. And they practiced agriculture. And that agriculture in fact worked very, very well in most cases, in the environmental sort of context that was developed. It operated very, very differently from European agriculture and from the agriculture that we know today. And so there's a really profound transformation, not just in, like, how food is produced, but also actually in the environment as a result of colonization. And this is the result of, of Europeans entering into the scene. They're, they're radically changing the landscape and with it, they're also displacing Indigenous ways of, of, of being on land and producing food, which is the sense that they're uprooting Indigenous agriculture. That actually has a, has its most profound consequences in some ways in how gender relates to agriculture, because in fact, Indigenous populations had very, very different ways of organizing agriculture, in terms of gender divisions of labor.

JVN [00:04:37] We ended up getting to learn a little bit about that on Getting Curious the TV show. We also learned about some of the ways that the disruption of food for Native Americans was so pervasive throughout the creation of the United States. So how does, like, the displacement by white colonials into, like, the expansion of rural farms solidify these gender roles that we kind of adhere to today?

GABE ROSENBERG [00:05:02] We associate, today farming as, a form of, of labor that is usually done by men. For many Indigenous peoples that just wasn't the case, that they tended to have, gender sex systems that were, were much more complicated, were not necessarily binary. And that when they intersected with agricultural labor, it was usually the case, that, that women were, were doing a large amount of that labor, that in fact, they were the primary laborers. Which, from a global perspective, by the way, and I would note this, continues to be true around the world, that a lot of, a lot of people, outside of the United States and outside of the global north, still operate, with this kind of gender division of labor that, that agricultural labor is often "women's work," so to speak. And it's, it's European colonization that comes in and uproots that system with a very, very different organization of labor. And it's an organization of labor that's primarily, sort of oriented towards producing agricultural commodities for, for the market and for that labor to be associated with a male head of household. So a man who is the head of the household, which is to say the farmer, and there's also another word that goes in here, which is "the husband." And we can, we can talk about that, cause that's a word that has a really intruding etymology. Now, I want to be very clear, like, certainly in the colonial period in the 19th century and into the 20th century, in fact, like, women were still doing a tremendous amount of important labor for the household that was producing value. But, the primary question of who controlled agriculture and who was responsible for agriculture, who was the boss of agriculture, so to speak, shifted from an organization that was largely matriarchal in some senses to one that was patriarchal.

JVN [00:06:56] So what does husband mean? What's the etymology of husband?

GABE ROSENBERG [00:06:59] We think of, like, "husband pairs with wife," right? So you have a husband and you have a wife. But in fact, those words don't sound anything alike. So the, the actual sort of like original pair of wife from old English is "wer". So "wer and wife." And, and that just means essentially, the old English terms for man and woman, a husband, is, is an older term that that comes, I believe from, from Norse. And it's a combination of two terms that means essentially like, "The holder of the farm." It's the head of the farm. It means, "the master of the dwelling," but, but generally speaking, the, the roots of, of the, the second syllable there, "bond" is "bóndi" and that's the tiller or the cultivator. And so conceptually, what a husband is, is he's the guy who's, like, in charge of the farming. And so when people say that, you know, they're, they're at a party and they're, like, "This is my husband, Todd." They don't know it, but, but they're actually using a word that has an agricultural sort of origin. And that, that means this guy, Todd, even though maybe he's an accountant or something like that, happens to be the guy who's the head of the farm. We're, we're still sort of, like, stuck in that language. And in a real sense, what it meant was that the husband was the figure, who was responsible for organizing and bossing around people as far as, controlling reproduction was concerned. And that's really what it meant to be a husband in that sense.

JVN [00:08:41] Have you been watching The Gilded Age? [CROSSTALK] Me too, I'm like, "Work, honey!" I feel like I'm, like, really into it. As a historian, are you, like, obsessed or are you, like, "Oh, you could have gone deeper."

GABE ROSENBERG [00:08:54] I mean, well, you gotta be careful. Historians are such nerds. We always feel that.

JVN [00:08:58] Cause I am fucking obsessed. I am, like, so obsessed. I like harping it up with, like, a fucking, I just, I missed Downton so bad that I'm just like, "Ah, get in my belly," I really like it.

GABE ROSENBERG [00:09:10] Oh, I, I love it. I absolutely adore it, but it could also, it could go deeper.

JVN [00:09:15] But then, I feel like we're all, like, elbow deep in shit right now. So, you know, but I agree! But so, so, but I think about, like, that's 1880, you see so much sexism in, just in a lot of the interactions at play, this idea that, you know, men are going to be more away from the house, women are going to be more in the house.

GABE ROSENBERG [00:09:37] Yeah. And, and in the 19th century, in the United States, it's heavily attached to what gets called kind of republican ideology of separate spheres. And the notion here is that men are responsible for participating in public life and sort of organizing the economy, being men of, men, of finance or men of business, all of these questions of economy, that's, that's the man's responsibility. And then public affairs, running the government. That's what men are supposed to do. And then women are supposed to be responsible for the home, and for domesticity and the kind of moral

education of children that happens there. That's, that's the ideology. And you want to be very, very kind of, like, careful about that, right? Because that's a, that's a dominant ideology. It's very obvious, and you would know this from watching Gilded Age, of course, is that, like, not everyone has access to that. They don't have the material access to that. That's obviously their, the conditions that they find themselves in terms of their class, in terms of their race, in terms of their embodiment, all of these things are going to mediate their access to that kind of ideological space.

And so for most people, the reality is much more complicated. Many women, certainly many poor women, many Black women in the 19th century, don't have, really the possibility of kind of indulging this separate series of theology. They have to be out there working. They aren't, they aren't going to be compensated as, as they probably deserve and as their labor really is valued, but they are out there, and they're earning money for their households. That plays out specifically in how, how sort of, like, most farms in the north work. And I want to be very clear. This is kind of important. This is like, this is Northern agricultural ideology. This is what happens when you don't have, like, a slave system in place, the slave system in the South really, really changes the story with regards to how gender and sex are going to operate. But as far as Northern farm, farms are concerned, you have a kind of separation that is sort of, like, spatial.

And women are responsible for the actual physical environments of the home conceptually, right? That's the ideological sort of, like, perspective of it. And then anything that's kind of, like, proximate to the home. So, like, gardening, dairy work, frequently, poultry work. Those are things that may also be coded as women's work, whereas men's work is going to be further out into the field and it's going to be concerned with the production of these, like, staple commodities for the market. But the reality is, is that, like, in the United States at this time, like, labor is really expensive. And so there's a, there's a also just sort of like an imperative to "make do." So, so at moments of like peak labor demand, everybody's got to work. People have got to– they've, they've got to make do, right? They've got a, they've got to actually just sort of, like, figure out how to do it. And that means that women are working in the fields very frequently. And it means that, like, sometimes pa is mending his own socks and cooking his own dinner.

JVN [00:12:58] So what, what developments lead to these gender roles starting to change?

GABE ROSENBERG [00:13:06] There's a strong motive to be able to figure out, how to sort of, like, reduce the amount of labor that's necessary to produce agricultural commodities. There's a strong economic incentive to do that. There are a lot of introduction of mechanical implements, improved sort of seed varieties. And all this does is, like, in some senses, it, like, makes farming over the course of the 19th century and more and more productive. And, and that creates a lot of like economic pressure that also creates farm consolidation and all of these farmers that we're describing increasingly get knit into first regional, then national than global networks of exchange through things like the construction of the railroads. Remember our, our, our super rich guy in Gilded Age is, of course, like, a rail baron. And this is, this is not a coincidence. Right? So. One thing to remember about the rails, and this is like a really important lesson for understanding how

agriculture works in the United States: the rails go in not to, like, connect farms that were already there or to other markets, but to make it possible for people to go to places where there weren't farms before, where there may in fact have been Native populations that were engaged in, in other forms of agriculture, but they weren't doing this kind of market-oriented agriculture for the most part, and to settle those places.

Right. And so that's the process that happens roughly between about 18, 1860, and 1890. And then in the 1890s into the 1900s, you start to see this, this kind of, like, consolidation and competition. And, and then increasingly you need fewer people in, in rural America and they start migrating into, into cities. And that's a process that happens really over the course of the entirety of the 20th century. The United States sort of sees a big explosion in number of farms after the civil war. And then after WWII, it really, really tanks in terms of the total number of farms. And there's a similar sort of statement that, like, the majority of Americans are born in the countryside until, until the 1920s and 1930s. And then there's a steady kind of depopulation that happens after WWII. Those changes also have pretty remarkable impacts on how gender and sexuality operate in rural spaces though.

JVN [00:15:25] Okay. Yes! How is agriculture about the organization of non-human reproduction for human purposes?

GABE ROSENBERG [00:15:39] It's a great question. And that is my very, very eclectic, and I would say not universally accepted definition of what agriculture is. So that's, my that's, like, how I define agriculture. So it may be the reproduction of a plant, right? So a corn plant, a soybean plant, it may be the reproduction of a pig or a cow or a chicken or a goat. But fundamentally the process that we're kind of describing, is the, the process of creating life, managing it, making sure that it reproduces, and then harvesting the sort of excess of that, of that reproduction. And it clarifies a lot of the ways in which agriculture is going to connect to how humans conceptualize and organize of human gender and sexuality, because we get a lot of practice in organizing reproduction by intervening in the reproduction of plants and animals.

JVN [00:16:38] I remember being very young and going to farms for, like, the 4H Club and, like, holding baby pigs. You know, you learned about the birds and the bees you learn about, you know, the circle of life. And, and these are very young ages, I think, to be kind of like, you know, when we say, like, "Don't push about, like, your, your gay agenda on children," but it's, like, but I was four, you know, in preschool on a farm holding a pig that was going to be fucking butchered and, like, taken out away from it's like crying mom, like, we're indoctrinated in these ways of, like, "straighthood" and, like, reproduction, you know, very early. And that was kind of one of those things where I was thinking, like, well, it's, like, old McDonald had a farm honey, and we're seeing these, these nursery rhymes very early on, that really are speaking to like, bigger things. But you just it's, like, the whole, not to make another Dante's Peak reference so soon, but you know, the whole frog in the water thing, I, don't got to say it on this podcast, again! You throw the frog in boiling water, how to it's jumping out. But if you boil it to death and lukewarm water, which that's what I feel like equating humans and sexuality and gender is to like some of these things. We got to get the people there. First, I just went to the end at the beginning of my bad,

but yeah. So please tell me, so, as I'm in the United Kingdom and I keep cutting intermittent, Madonna-like, horrific British accent. How have your views on livestock reproduction foods are not yours? Jesus Christ. I can't do a British accent and ask questions at the same time. I'm just not Christian Amanpour, okay? But how have views on livestock reproduction influenced views on human reproduction in the US?

GABE ROSENBERG [00:18:18] So. What you said there were about like, you know, like seeing, seeing some, like, pretty raw truths about life by just, like, living around agriculture, I think would probably resonate with a lot of people who've spent a fair amount of time in, in rural America or rural anywhere. Right. And just living around farms. It's a, it's a dance of life and death, right? That you, you come to face to face with the realities of both sex and death when, when you're involved in farming. And humans learn things about themselves, about what it means to be human, about the way the world works, about how nature operates, all of these things by looking at animals, right? So you want to, you want to sort of, like, think about how it is that being in proximity to animal reproduction might influence how people think about human reproduction and human gender and human sexuality.

It turns out that, like, as farming and specifically the organization of animal reproduction, undergoes this really startling sort of industrialization over the course of, of, you know, a century, essentially, in the United States, that there's also a pretty fundamental change in how we think about whether or not we can control human reproduction. And in the United States, there are a lot of efforts to instrumentalize human reproduction, to put it under what we would call "scientific" or "expert" management. This is called human eugenics. It results in some, some serious, just horrible, horrible, injustices in American history, things like coerced sterilization. And what's really interesting, and what sort of drives my research at the moment, is that a lot of this thinking comes out of industrial livestock breeding. In other words, that, like, a lot of you eugenicists, people who were taking the position that it was possible to scientifically manage the reproduction of, of humans through things like marriage registries and anti, anti-miscegenation laws, and the last one would be coercive sterilization. Those are all, those are all ways to, like, to manage human reproduction.

But the same people who are making these arguments in many cases had, had sort of, like, worked previously or done research previously, within the context of livestock breeding for commercial purposes. And there are all sorts of delightful, historical giblets. They're not actually delightful. They're, they're, like, creepy and terrible and awful and horrible. So I'm being like a little bit sarcastic there, but, you know, the, the Journal of Heredity, which is the most important publication of the American eugenics movement, at least, amongst intellectuals and academics, originally is called something like "The American Breeders' Magazine." The American Genetics Association, which is the main line sort of scientific research organization that popularized this eugenics is originally The Human Eugenics Board of the American Breeders Association. With the American Breeders Association being an organization that claims as its kind of domain, the reproduction of plants, animals, and humans, and that sort of refrain of plants, animals, and humans is where these people are really coming from in a way it's, it's not that surprising.

I mean, they're, they're Darwinian or they're trying to apply certain understandings of Darwin to, to, to all forms of life, so to humans and also to animals. And they misapply a lot of Darwinian insights where they have a pretty flawed understanding of, of what natural selection is and what artificial selection is. But regardless, they, they wind up doing a lot of, a lot of damage and creating a lot of injustice and suffering in the world as a result. But I think about that a lot, I think about what it means to live in a world in which humans invest so much time and energy in managing the reproduction of non-human creatures, intervening in that reproduction. And I always want to ask the question of, like, "What does that do to us?" "What does that do to our understanding of things, like, life and reproduction?" In the United States, we, we, we, we bring into life and then we kill, 10 billion sentient creatures. Every year it's a, it's a staggering number, right? Most of them are chickens. And I want to know what does it mean for us to be engaged in that really massive sort of world transformational process of reproducing so much life, right? How has it changed us? Because it is a very, very different way of approaching life than what, what had come before with the world was like, even in the 19th or 18th century.

JVN [00:23:22] So, basically, in the early 19 hundreds, it was, like, and 18 hundreds, it was, like, fierce to just be, like, an out and proud eugenicist in America, like, it wasn't, like, a weird thing to say?! That was just, like, "Oh, I'm part of the ping pong league. I love to play tennis. I find eugenics fascinating in terms of proper breeding." So if we were to bring it back to the Gilded Age, that's, like, why Christine Baranski is, like, so worried about her, her niece being seen in public, not necessarily cause she's, like, a eugenicist, although maybe she was, but she was like, "You can't, like, reputation and, like, what women were seen as your class, your status was such a big deal."

GABE ROSENBERG [00:24:01] Unfortunately, as with everything in history, it's really complicated, which is why, which is why the nerd, like, that's why we said before, we can always go deeper. We can always go deeper. So one of the, one of the themes in Gilded Age, which is very familiar to the kind of thinking that we're talking about, is an obsessiveness with genealogy and the notion of, like, bloodlines.

JVN [00:24:27] Oh yeah, cause she was, like, "Their family's been here since the Mayflower or whatever."

GABE ROSENBERG [00:24:32] Yeah. Yeah. And, and so, like, there's an underlying sort of assumption about what gets called, like, a "natural aristocracy." And this is certainly a very common, a common view of the way things work, in that, like, it's, like, really important to have great ancestors. And so eugenicists are pretty obsessed with this. Like, like they, they spend a lot of time trying to come up with, like, genealogical registries of "great men," for example, to like, to demonstrate or prove that like great men always have great ancestors, and it's kinda, it's kind of a bizarre exercise because if, like, you define great men as like rich men, then it's not surprising that rich men have rich ancestors. Right? But that, that doesn't have anything to do with their genes. It has to do with the fact that, like, they're getting actual, literal inheritances of, like, money. But, but they spend a lot of time on this. Or they're, they're very, very invested in the notion that like greatness and worthy qualities are things that get passed on.

What's really, really interesting is that at the same time that this is happening in, like, the 19th century, as this is happening in a, in, in a, in a television show, like, like Gilded Age, right, in that moment when it set, is that like in, in animal breeding communities, there's a sudden like uptick in obsessive focus on the genealogy of what get called "purebred animals." And so, like, in the United States, you have the creation of, like, breed associations, which are, are actually, like, organized to, to, like, popularize and champion particular breeds of animals. The first one is the American Berkshire Association. It's the Berkshire pig, a very distinctive kind of, like, American pig. And if you read these sorts of documents and you read what they're saying about the genealogy of, of their boars, they're using the same language. They're, they're, like, they're like, "This boar is, like, so great," and, like, they'll say he has, like, "a masculine brow," and, like, "Look at, look at his, his, like his fine fine countenance." Or "The sow is a great mother, a great, a great feminine sow, and she comes from a long line of such." Or "This great boar is also the son of this prior great bore." And they're creating a, kind of, like, an aristocracy of swine.

JVN [00:26:57] Do they talk about gay stuff? Is there ever, like, gay pigs?

GABRIEL ROSENBERG [00:27:01] It's probably the saddest story in my archive, well, not the saddest story in my archive, but it is a sad story in my archive. [CROSSTALK] But I should tell it to you. I also have a tattoo that's based on it. Which I can't, I can't show you. Well, I could guess I could show you, but it's on my calf. So it would be a little awkward to try to do this.

JVN [00:27:18] At least it's not on your dick, honey, the way you first said that I was, like, "Jesus Christ. He's really going there." But yeah, so that's good. It's just some of your calf. That's not bad. It's totally fine.

GABE ROSENBERG [00:27:27] It's on my calf. He's a very lovely, he's a very lovely pig.

JVN [00:27:31] What happened to him? A gay pig? What happened? He was gay, and he loved other boy pigs. And so they fucking killed him. Like all the other pigs.

GABE ROSENBERG [00:27:39] I, I, I don't want to tell you that that's what happened, but that's basically what happened. Like there. Okay. So again, you gotta remember I'm, I'm, I'm the, I'm the kind of nerd who's always going to go deeper. So I'm, I'm reading through my, my pig breeding magazines from, you know, a century ago. And I'm reading an advice column that this one, this one guy, AJ Lovejoy, writes for other pig breeders. So, so, like, people, like, write in and they ask him questions and then he gives them advice about their pig breeding. And Lovejoy gets a letter from these, these two brothers in Colorado who spent, like, a bunch of money on this really, really expensive purebred hog. He's going to be the new boar, he's going to be their new, like, herd bore, their new stud, they're bringing them in because they want to just go nuts with all the sows. Just knock up all the sows that this bar can. And so when they put them with the sows, it turns out that he's not interested in them. That he's, like, very afraid of the sows. He doesn't like to spend time

with them. He's very timid. This is how they're describing him. I haven't met the pig, so I don't know if it's true.

But he instead likes to spend all his time nesting with the old boar. So this is the bore that's aging, and it's going to, going to pass soon. So it goes to the innocence with him and the Sessions are pretty irate about this. Pardon me, that's the name of the Sessions brothers, I believe they're pretty upset about it. They spend all this money on this pig and he won't breed. He won't get with the other, other pigs. So I, I can't tell you and they didn't document it whether or not like. He was getting humped by the old boar, what the story was with the nesting. I mean, I don't know. And we could anthropomorphize that and, like, assume that there was a kind of, like, sexual orientation or something like that, but we don't really need to do that. The only thing we need to note is that, like, what does Lovejoy tell them? Like, Lovejoy looks at it. And he's like, "Well, you can give them this herb called Damiana, which tends to be an aphrodisiac for pigs. And this may arouse in the pig, some lust and some desire, and maybe he'll go get busy with the sows." But, but he's pretty, he's, like, kind of skeptical. He's kind of, he's pretty "meh" on that idea. And he says, "No, really you probably should stop wasting your time. You should castrate them, fatten them up and send them off to, to the feedlot."

That's, there's a really powerful lesson there that I think is quite important for people to think about, you know, same sex behavior as well-documented in, in, and among animals. There's just no doubt about that. Like, it's, it's extraordinarily well-documented, the reasons for it are debated. It's contested, different, different scientists have different arguments about why, why it happens. If it serves a functional purpose, if it's something genetic, but it happens. We don't have any doubt about that. The context of, like, industrial agriculture, interestingly enough, is that, like, it reduces animals in some senses to either meet on the one hand, which is just creatures to die, or if they're breeding animals exclusively to their reproductive role. Right. And that means that, like, when an animal doesn't fit its reproductive role, it gets immediately slotted into the other. You can sort of, like, I suppose, like, exaggerate that story in some senses or, or exaggerate the sadness of it, you would want to note that like, whatever happened to this pig, and he probably got eaten, it's the same thing that happened to the overwhelming majority of other pigs. So it's not a unique fate that he suffered, but it is to sort of note that there's an implicit way in which kind of like an assumption or an enforced form of heterosexuality operates in that space.

JVN [00:31:34] Like, your worth is based on how effective… and yeah. So, ew.

GABE ROSENBERG [00:31:43] Well, it's not surprising then that eugenicists also then are really agitated about homosexuality. And that they regard, like, homosexuality as one of the defective traits that needs to be eliminated. And in fact, they posit, many, that homosexuality should be grounds for coercive sterilization, which is by the way, like, conceptually kind of a nonsensical position, because, like, ostesensibly…

JVN [00:32:14] We're not gonna go get a girl pregnant anyway, honey!

GABE ROSENBERG [00:32:16] Right, right. That's, it's sort of, something else is going on there. Right. It's it, the argument sort of, like, collapses in on itself, but, yeah, they, the, there there's a similar, there's a kind of, like, echo across these spaces where creatures are being reduced to their value, their worth, their, their dignity, if you want to call it that, is to reduce to what they can do as far as reproduction is concerned. And that's, that's what life is like if you're a breeding stock animal. And by the same token, you look at all of the victims of the human eugenics movement. And the question is always, like, "What kind of offspring while they reproduce? What kind of traits will they pass on?" And their worth, there is again, being measured according to their reproduction. And that's the justification for all kinds of violence, really, really horrible, abominable stuff. And not just in the United States, the eugenics movement travels. It really has its strongest institutional origins in the United States, but it's foundational in a lot of ways to how things proceed in Nazi Germany, where they are also explicitly eugenicist. And in those cases, it's not just coercive sterilization. It's also euthanasia. It's also actually putting people to death who are perceived to not have value as reproductive members of society. That history is also is, is, is really complex. Some of the people who help that transmission and connect the United States to Nazi Germany. They also got their start in livestock breeding.

JVN [00:33:57] Really?

GABE ROSENBERG [00:33:58] I can talk about Harry Laughlin, who's one of the figures, he's pretty key for this.

JVN [00:34:01] I guess I don't know why I'm shocked, but wow.

GABE ROSENBERG [00:34:03] So Harry Laughlin is a guy who grew up in rural Missouri. So not, I mean by Midwestern standards, not too far from where you grew up and actually not that far from where I grew up; I grew up in Indiana, so there's a nice big stretch of Illinois separating us. But he grew up, he grew up in Missouri and in his early career, he was like a vocational agriculture teacher at a school that would, that is now known as Truman State University.

JVN [00:34:35] Oh my god!

GABE ROSENBERG [00:34:36] Yeah, he's a Truman State guy. That's where his, that's where his papers are. I have to go, I have to go to Kirksville, I believe, in the very near future.

JVN [00:34:46] Kirksville-Ottumwa honey. [CROSSTALK] Yes, girl. Yes! I, my hometown, like, Kirksville-Ottumwa! It's, like, part of the, like, the TV station goes there!

GABE ROSENBERG [00:35:01] Wow, okay! Well so he, he's, like, teaching agriculture, so he's, like, he's in the community. He's teaching people how to be farmers. He gets really, really interested in cattle breeding and the genetics of cattle breeding. And this is, this is the very early 20th century. And he writes a letter to this guy, Charles Davenport. Charles Davenport is a scientist, at the time, who works at the, at an institution in Cold Springs,

Harbor, New York. He's sort of, like, the preeminent American intellectual on the question of eugenics and basically like Loughlin writes to, and is, like, "I'm really interested in genetics. You know, can, should I come out there?" And, and he does. And he travels out and he becomes Davenport's right-hand man. And he has this, long-term kind of very, very sincere interest in cattle breeding and also horse breeding. He works a lot on horse breeding and these are his two things that he's super, super interested in. He spends a lot of time over the course of his career. With one big exception, in addition to those two things, she is obsessed, absolutely obsessed with human breeding and human eugenics. He becomes the architect, first of the California Sterilization Law, under which the largest number of people in the United States were sterilized. It's a state law in California. He's the architect of it.

JVN [00:36:24] What years was that?

GABE ROSENBERG [00:36:26] This is in the 1920s when this happens. And although the majority of those sterilizations actually continued after 1950, which is an important thing to remember. We sometimes think that all of this is the ancient antiquated past. It continues, the majority of sterilizations actually happened after, after World War II. And you know, like, Loughlin is, he's doing that. He's, he's an architect of, or heavily involved in lobbying for immigration restriction, and explicitly along national origins, racialized national origins. So he's trying to restrict immigration in the 1920s to only people of Anglo-Saxon descent. And, and then, in the late 1920s and into 1930s, he's involved in ongoing correspondence with, with scientists and bureaucrats in what becomes Nazi Germany about how his course of sterilization law works. And so there, there is a, there is a line here, like, like, there is a genealogy where he's starting out thinking about, "How do I organize the reproduction of cattle?" and the question keeps getting bigger and bigger and it pushes him further and further along where he starts moving in the direction of thinking to himself, "Well, you know, I have a right to decide how cattle will, will reproduce. And I think these people are less, less than humans. So I ought to be able to decide how they will reproduce as well." And that's the sort of, like, mental logic that he gets trapped in. And again, it's a, it's a really sinister story. It's a, it's a really, kind of appalling set of circumstances, but it's not particularly unique. That history is pretty thick.

JVN [00:38:14] So speaking of that, scary. One thing that, like, has been a running theme of this podcast is as different we think that things are, how similar things still are. And just, like, how, like, in rural America, there has always been LGBTQ people. It's not always been conservative. There has been diverse people just like me in rural America. Just like you. Just like all people within the LGBTQIA+ spectrum that are in rural America. But for reasons like we've already said, if there is access for those people to, like, not be there, sometimes they take about other things. People in the LGBTQIA community are really happy in rural America and would never leave and like really love their home and, like, want to be there. And those people are so often erased and their histories are so often erased.

A lot of these ideas around eugenics are still around now. You know, the people are still kind of into this stuff, and it's not, I mean, even now, it's, like, you know, 23andMe, this and

that, really wanting to understand like even how they say in The Gilded Age, you know, “My, their whoever was on the Nina, the Pinta, the Santa Maria,” like, I feel like my family is like, “Oh, we were, like, related to Benjamin Franklin.” I feel like there's always like some white people always love to say like some fucking founding father that they were, like, related to. And what I just does that, I just loathe it! So moving on from that, ha! This is a really a hard left turn. How have views on human sexuality affected the livestock industry specifically with anti-bestiality laws.

GABE ROSENBERG [00:39:53] We're, we're, we're going for, we’re going right for it! So this is, this is really complicated, but I'll try to, I'll try to keep it relatively simple. Okay. So it, it used to be in the colonial era that same-sex intimacy was criminalized under a statute that was called a sodomy statute or crimes against nature statute. Right. And this was, like, an omnibus statute that forbade any kind of non-procreative sex act. So, so, like, sex between two men, that's illegal. But also it was, like, oral sex, can't do oral sex. That's, that's a form of sodomy. One of the varieties of sex acts was also like beastiality, right? So that's actually classed under, under crimes against nature and sodomy statutes. And so a lot of these laws are around for literally centuries, right? They're, they're, they're, they're put onto the books in some form or another going as far back as to, like, the 17th century and they sometimes get modernized and updated in various ways. But they continue on basically uninterrupted up until the 1950s and 1960s.

And in the 1950s and sixties, you have members of the medical community coming forward with various other kinds of social activists who are saying that, like, criminalizing consensual sexual behavior is really, really damaging. And some medical professionals would, would add the caveat and they would say, “Well, if homosexuality is wrong, it's best treated through therapeutic or medical means, we shouldn't involve the criminal system.” So in the 1960s, there's a movement to repeal these sodomy statutes and it's, it's not entirely successful, but it's pretty successful. And so a number of states take their sodomy statutes off the books, and a number of crimes against nature statutes bite the dust. So when this happens, a lot of the states didn't realize that they were also decriminalizing bestiality, or perhaps if, if an individual legislator was aware of it, they just thought it wasn't a big deal because it wasn't happening a lot. And so basically then what happens is that in the 1980s and into the 1990s, you get really publicized, gruesome incidents of bestiality and people want to prosecute them. They want to hold the people who are doing it responsible, often for, for, for harming animals. Right. And they find out that they don't have a way to do so in the law that a majority of the states in roughly 1990 or so don't have a statute that criminalizes beastiality. And so they want to do, they want to do something about this.

The Humane Society eventually gets involved in it as well, but there's a number of reformers who come forward to pass laws, to breed criminalized beastiality. And it's a little bit idiosyncratic because people, when they see this, they're like, "How is it possible that in 1990, this, you know, this state didn't, didn't have a law against beastiality?" Well, it's because they had accidentally decriminalized it and didn't realize it, for the most part. Regardless, the initial efforts to do this are unsuccessful and they're unsuccessful in no small part because the agricultural lobby, at least in a few instances, is putting pressure on people not to pass the statutes. And the question is why, like, why would they be doing

this? Why would they be saying, “We don't want that to be, to be criminal.” Well, the reason is this: these statutes, how to have very, very precise language about what kinds of acts were forbidden. And so what they were doing is they were taking a general definition for sexual contact and they were applying it in an inter-species context, which meant that not only were you forbidding, like, human genitals for making contact with animal bodies, but typically for sexual contact, you also forbid the wielding of, like, a foreign object or instrument and it's use to penetrate, like, another person.

It turns out that at this point in American history, certainly more than 80% and now it's more than 90% and reaching about 95% of all pigs in the United States are conceived through artificial insemination. In other words, they couldn't come up with, like, a statute that would pass sort of like the legal test of criminalizing the human behavior they wanted to criminalize without also accidentally criminalizing a bunch of agricultural acts that they wanted to keep legal. And I don't want to, like, suggest that people who artificially inseminate pigs are, like, like, have a desire or a sexual desire to do so; for the most part, they're very, very, like, low paid workers. Like, that's actually, like, the reality of that, of that kind of labor. But I think it's really, really revealing and quite interesting that the way that this gets resolved is that when the laws eventually do get passed and now bestiality is illegal, I think in 49, if not, yeah, 48 or 49 states, I don't know the legal status of it in the the final couple of states to do this. But in virtually all the laws that have been passed, since 1990, they categorically exempt animal husbandry and agriculture.

So to sort of pivot back to what I was saying before about like, what does it mean to live in a world in which we're responsible for which we collectively, as, as the people of the United States are responsible for reproducing 10 billion sentient creatures every year, and organizing that sort of reproduction, is that it really begins to blur the boundaries of, like, our own contact and intertwining with those animals where it suddenly becomes difficult to sort of, like, distinguish between these things. And that's, that's really the, the, the sort of shock of that moment in the law, where if you read your state's anti-bestiality statutes, sometimes called, “animal sexual assault statute,” “interspecies sexual assault statute,” you will probably find a categorical exemption for agriculture. And another way of putting this is that the farm lobby is actively rewriting your beastiality laws.

JVN [00:46:23] So, because this is all so complicated and you know, for me, I'm always, I think context is obviously always important in trying to understand, like, what the intent was, what the impact was, but it feels like the more I learn, the more I realize that, like, the intent of the impact, even if they thought their intent was good, it was super bad. And the impact was, like, even worse, like, just really fucking bad, like, just so many bad decisions, just more bad decisions. So what can we learn from farming about what it means to be human and non-human? And what can we learn about what it means for, like, who should be in charge of reproduction, for instance.

GABE ROSENBERG [00:47:18] I want to probably address the last part of the question first. Which is that I think the most important sort of lesson that I can draw from this, is that controlling reproduction is a way of exercising power. And agriculture is one of the ways in which humans have exercised power over the non-human world. That's what it means to

subjugate the interests of, of animals or plants and to put them to our interests. That's an exercise of power. When I think about that question, so, like, "Who should be in charge of reproduction?" Well, if you're uncomfortable with that subjugation and you think that, like, subjugating non-human animals to human sort of whims is a bad thing, then you ought to be concerned with how we control the reproduction. That's where, that's one of the key places that we exercise power. But then it also sort of leads us into some interesting directions because the category of, like, "human versus non-human" isn't necessarily like always a stable category. Like, not everyone has always been recognized within that category of human. Not all humans have gotten to be human, right. That, that we know from sort of, like, not only American history, but world history as well, that there've been numerous times in which people have said, "Well, we're going to treat this, this group of people worse because they're not fully human, they're subhuman in some way."

And so, like, if we take it from that sort of perspective, then I guess what I would say is that, like, it's incredibly important that we think about how we exercise reproduction. Not, not just because we want to serve the interests of animals, but also because, like, we need to have a more sort of, like, comprehensive understanding of how precarious that status of being human really is. That, that the real danger of the thing that we ought to, we ought to kind of, like, keep in the back of our mind is that we don't know that we will always be regarded as human, right? That these, that these. These categories are not always so self-evident and so transparent that like, it's, this long-term kind of engagement with the non-human world tells us just how porous these things are. And so to, you know, to, like, gender queer people and to sexually non-normative people into like, like people like you and me who have, like, experienced homophobia, like, one of the things that we're experiencing there is in a very deep sense, people questioning our full humanity, right.

And when I said before, you know, about how, like, "What is the premise for questioning my full humanity?" Well, it's saying that, like, how I desire or what I desire is wrong because it doesn't, doesn't contribute to reproduction. I see that by and large, it's sort of like pretty interwoven with the same kind of, like, instrumental view that, that, like, I get to control your reproduction, that I get to judge your worth on the basis of, like, how I think your reproduction is valuable. I don't take the stance that, that means that all farming is wrong. That's not, that's not all my, my political sensibility about this site. I obviously, like, we need to generate, we need to grow food, like, farming does that as well. But I would be sensitive to the fact that, like, we should be very careful and very mindful of, of how we use reproduction as an instrument of power. And I, and I think that that's something that everyone can sort of think about that, that, like, that's part of the story of the food system. If you're not, if you're not accounting for those problems, and if you're not accounting for those exercises of power, then you're not giving it your full thought.

JVN [00:51:17] One thing we haven't got to talk about so much that honestly Gabe, would love to have you back for another whole episode on, and I'm dead serious about this. If we could find some, like, queer rural farmers from like the 1800s or 1700s, and like do little deep dives into, like, who they were, what their stories were like, what their political ideas were at the time, like what they like, why they went to the farm. Like, I think that would be so interesting to dive, like, to do our own Gilded Age of queer farming and like what was

going on at the time? [CROSSTALK] Right. So if you can, so that's, that's a pitch right there. So let's have you back for a second episode. We used to do some night researching and we'll, ga, ga, ga! I'm obsessed. That means, like, the beginning, middle end ended up like either one person's story or three different people's story. It depends on what your bias of sets. Let me know if you need help researching, cause mommy, will. Okay, back to this interview: contemporary farming, farming of today, how do we see, like, people within the LGBTQIA+ community pursuing farming? And what's, like, on the forefront of, of equality and equity and farming for people and non-humans?

GABE ROSENBERG [00:52:32] Yeah. Well, so just for starters, the overwhelming majority of farmers in the United States, are. And I, I, I don't, I don't say this as, as, like, a judgment or anything, like, this is just descriptively accurate, relatively old, like, 50+ actually 60+ is the, is the median age, white and well above median household wealth. The median farm household has a, has a wealth about, I believe, roughly seven times the national median. So farmers tend to be relatively wealthy, according to USDA statistics. If we were to, like, parse that and try to, like, figure out how many LGBTQ people are also farmers, it would be pretty tricky. And I don't know if there are really good, reliable statistics on it. One of the things that I do know is that compared to that general population, new cohorts of farmers are somewhat more likely to identify as LGBTQ. So there is a growing cohort of people who, who do so identify and want to be farmers. It's likely that they're struggling. Like, this is a, it's, it's a hard business to break into, which is one of the reasons why those people tend to be disproportionately wealthy. But, but they are there, they do exist. And I think it's, it's an interesting question to ask kind of, like, why, like, like, why, why are we seeing a growing number of people who are invested in that?

And there's really good sociological research on this and it suggests that rural America, as a social space, is a lot more complicated than we've been led to believe. [CROSSTALK] That patterns, patterns of family life and gender performance are much more complicated. That there's a long history, for example, of acceptance, of, of gender variance, particularly amongst women. And so that's like that has a long, deep history in rural America. There's also the fact that, like, although we think of rural America as being this holdfast of traditional values, it's actually the case that, like, if you look for example, at comparative rates of, like, children, born outside of marriage, that the rates are actually higher in rural America in comparison to urban America. And when corrected for, like, age it's, it's really, really significant. In other words, this idea that, like, there's a nuclear family and that that's how rural America is actually organized doesn't have a tremendous amount of sociological reality. To the extent that those families exist, they exist as proportionately in suburban America first and foremost, and then to a lesser degree in urban America. So, so, there's a lot more going on in rural America, as far as family life is concerned than we've been led to believe it's, it's not this sort of, like, you know, plain and boring vanilla space. It's a much more complicated social fabric that really needs, I think, kind of, like, serious thought and attention. And that's part of the, part of the reason why I study it to be quite honest with you, because I think it's badly understudied.

JVN [00:56:01] It really does need it! And we're seeing, like, the divisions and like the lack of understanding for rural America come up in so many different ways. I mean, I think that

that's part of, like, this huge resentment of, like, these anti-trans bills that are happening, so much that, like, the "Don't Say Gay" bill there's, there's a lot of, like, underestimating and just under reaching out to rural people who are being fed so much vitriolic garbage about gender and, and, and all sorts of things. And there's really no, like, reparative work that's well, not enough reparative work that's being done. Okay. So as we start to come to an end, how has this work impacted your understanding of gender and sexuality as a whole?

GABE ROSENBERG [00:56:45] So I guess I would just say that I think that, it's, it's drawn my attention away from what I would say are kind of, like, the predictable logics, the assumption that the, that how we think gender and sexuality is organized in this particular moment in history must be the way it always was. And honestly, that's the story of my research is that, like, I found that when I turned to the question of, like, "What does sexuality look like? Or what does the organization of gender look like?" And I took it to a place that I thought, didn't have a, you know, like that, that history didn't apply there, you know, like, "Rural America, what's, what's there to say about that. You know, that's, that's just the way things used to be. That's, that's the natural organization of, of a, of a family of gender and sexuality. There are no gay people there." When, when I actually bothered to ask the question and I moved myself outside of that, of my familiar frame of reference, I found that I was, I was learning, like, really, really profound things about not only how much difference there can be, depending on the sort of, like, social context. But that also it, like, it sort of resonated back and then made me think differently about how sexuality and gender work in the more familiar environments or more familiar places. So in other words, I thought differently about it. Which is to say that I thought a lot about, like, "What about the environment of cities? And what about like, what about thinking about the non-human world in cities? We tend to think there is no kind of like non-human in the city, that that's the space of industry, but in fact it's all around us. How does that, how does that fit into, and sort of like, make us think differently about the world?" And I, and I don't know that I'm done with those thoughts, but, but that's the direction I'm headed in.

JVN [00:58:44] So I think I read something that said that, like, in the seventies, wasn't there, like, 1 billion, like, cows or something. And now it's, like, like, the amount of animals that we make and consume has skyrocketed from, like, the seventies to now. It's, like, and it's not proportionate to the amount of new people that there are, like, we eat way more meat than we have previously. So what do you think needs to happen to change, to make a more just food system? Is it, is it the USDA? Is it…

GABE ROSENBERG [00:59:16] Yeah, so I, I, I wrote an article in the New Republic a couple of months back with one of my regular coauthors Jan Dutkiewicz, called "Abolish the USDA." So the short answer to you is that the USDA does not pose much of a solution because it's, it's largely been subject of pretty intense regulatory capture by a lot of the worst players in agriculture. What needs to happen as far as, like, a more just food system. First and foremost, we need to pay workers. And we need to expect less taxing labor from them. So less work for better pay. That's the first thing. The second thing is we need to recognize that, that those crucial workers are often people who are selling their labor to farmers, right? So farmers may own farms, but they frequently hire agricultural workers.

Those workers are some of the worst compensated and most difficult forms of labor in the food system. It also includes the people who work at fast food chains. It also includes the people who work at your local Kroger, right?

These are the people who we kind of need to center in our analysis to get better food justice, but beyond the people, this is what I will tell you. Like, no matter how you may feel about it as like something that you do or do not want to eat no matter what your appetite for meat is. I can tell you right now that the meat that you're eating almost certainly does not reflect its cost to society as a whole. Most meat that is consumed in the United States is produced. And priced very, very cheaply because it doesn't reflect the environmental harm, the public health harm and the harm in terms of the suffering of the actual sentient beings who wind up as meat. And if we priced for those things, meat would be a lot more expensive. And you would probably, I don't know if you would eat less of it. I mean, I wouldn't, I, I don't, I don't need it now, so I wouldn't eat any more of it, but like most people would probably eat a lot less of it. And my sense about that is that it would be a much better for the world as a whole.

JVN [01:01:24] So you don't do no crabs on it. You don't do no fishes. They're just all too sentient? Like what about an egg, honey?

GABE ROSENBERG [01:01:31] I don't want to get too deep into my dietetics, cause that's not what it's about. I don't, I'm, I'm not about telling people what they should or should not eat.

JVN [01:01:38] You have to to tell [CROSSTALK] I just want to know what smart people do.

GABE ROSENBERG [01:01:43] Jonathan, I will eat an oyster. [CROSSTALK] And I have no problem saying I will eat an oyster. You give me, you set me down with, like, a plate of oysters.

JVN [01:01:49] I just had three last night!

GABE ROSENBERG [01:01:50] Oh my God. Oh no, no. I, I I'll eat like, like, a Gilded Age, like, robber baron! Honey, oysters and martini is all the dinner I need.

JVN [01:02:00] So, Gabe, if people have listened to this and they are just like, "I am infatuated. I am obsessed. I need to learn more. I want to go research with Gabe." What do people need to study? What do people, especially if you're thinking about going back into school, if you're not in school yet you're fascinated with these issues or you are not going into school. You just want to learn more about it. How can people follow in the footsteps of people that are researching these fascinating connections like you are?

GABE ROSENBERG [01:02:27] First and foremost, I would not encourage people probably to get a PhD in my field of study. I don't think that's actually a good way of doing it. What I would tell you is that there are a lot of incredible public intellectual resources that would give you a lot of texts. And, and that would provide you with a lot of things to read. There

are a lot of magnificent books out there just really, really interesting stuff that's already available. And I'll be quite honest with you. Obviously, like, some level of expertise is, is really good and you can only get it by getting a university degree, but there's just like a lot of really phenomenal scholarship already out there and already written on this topic. And so if you, if you want to, if you want to follow me on Twitter.

JVN [01:03:12] Your Twitter's popping though. I love your Twitter. It's so good. It's fascinating.

GABE ROSENBERG [01:03:15] People also have to be warned. I post a lot of my workout videos on there to have like a, like pushing, like, a lifting kettlebells, so I don't know.

JVN [01:03:24] My queens, you won't regret it. He's serving, he's serving muscles. He's serving modern gay historian realness. It's hot. Follow him. You'll love it, but you do post a lot of fascinating stuff too. It's like, I literally read your Twitter, I love it.

GABE ROSENBERG [01:03:39] And there is like, there are just a ton of really, really excellent other Twitter accounts out there that, that I retweet as much as I can. And then I would, I would encourage people to look at it. The other thing I would say though, is that like, you know, like there's two ways to go about it. Like you can try to, like, hang out with farmers, but you can do that. Like, I mean, a lot of my research starts from that sort of space. It's just like going and meeting people and asking, "Can I come hang out on your farm and see how things work?" I don't know. I, I mean, I think people should be hungry for those kinds of social interactions. I think it's actually really important. You're not gonna have access to some of the spaces that I'm talking about, which are the most industrialized, right? So you're not going to get to go to like an industrial slaughterhouse, like just by being, like, "Hey, can I come hang out here?" They're not gonna let you in.

But it is to say that like, you should look for opportunities in your community to create relationships that can support the kinds of people who are fighting for the interests of people who work in the food systems industry right now. Like, so, so like there are union organizers, there are, there are food, autonomy, activists, and those are the people like, like go, go talk to them and go find out what you can do to support what they're up to so that you can support, like, the people who are picketing for better wages, right? Those are the kinds of people that you want to get, you want to get connected to. And when you start doing that, what you find out of course is that like there's all kinds, there's all kinds of people. There's, there's, there's all kinds of LGBTQ people who are involved in this struggle. And they're going to start to tell you their stories. They're going to start to talk about, about why, in some ways, like, you know, sexuality and gender are also integral parts of that, that broader sort of movement and struggle. But that's what I would say, I would say, like, there's great, there's great activism happening right now. That is about, you know, like, getting better conditions for the people who feed us, the workers, like the people who do the work of feeding us and you got to learn about it and you gotta, you gotta get out there and you gotta help those people. That's, that's what it's gotta be about.

JVN [01:05:47] Dr. Gabriel Rosenberg. That was a fucking amazing way to end up that podcast. That was so fascinating. You just got us through, like, thousands and thousands of years of food, history and intersectionality, in, like, literally an hour and 20 minutes. That was major. I am so appreciative of you, your time, your scholarship, your work. Thank you for sharing with us. We have our assignment for episode two. We're obsessed and we love Dr. Gabriel Rosenberg. Thank you so much for coming on the show.

GABE ROSENBERG [01:06:12] Thank you, Jonathan! It was great to be here.

JVN [01:06:16] You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was Professor Gabe Rosenberg. You'll find links to his work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thanks to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend - show them how to subscribe. Follow us on Instagram & Twitter @CuriousWithJVN. Our socials are run and curated by Middle Seat Digital. We're always working on things over there to let you know what's going on with past guests, news stories we're following up on, other things we're curious about. We're having a lot of fun over there. Our editor is Andrew Carson. Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, and Zahra Crim.