

## Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Sarah C. Byrd

**JVN** [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I am Jonathan Van Ness and every week, you guessed it, 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 Sarah C. Byrd, where I ask her: what's the history of the fashion of cults?! Welcome to Getting Curious. This is Jonathan Van Ness and my oh my, do we have quite the show for you. So you may remember in 2018, we recorded an episode with Dr. Natalie Feinblatt about the psychology of cults. Today, we're going to talk about the fashion and style within American cults, communes, utopian societies, religious sects, and spiritual communities. And to talk to us about that, we have no one better in the world, than Sarah C. Byrd, who is a fashion archivist, historian, and educator. One of her areas of expertise is fashion within "alternative communities." And what we're asking today is: Why are clothes so major in cults? / How are you? What's happening and how's your day going so far?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:01:04] Hi, I'm great. I'm super psyched to talk about this. I think it's a really important subject and it relates to all kinds of important things about fashion and clothing and our identities, too.

**JVN** [00:01:15] So picture it. You're walking down the street minding your own business. You pass a group of people. They're dressed the same. Can you tell if they're: a) following a trend, b) wearing uniforms or c) are they all in a cult?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:01:30] I mean, who's to say that they're not all the same thing? You know, it's all about context, right? What's the context in which you're seeing these people? What's the context of their individual expression? Like, you know, this is where I love doing research and thinking about these things because I don't know, maybe they're all in this, like, cult of fashion or they're in FLDS.

**JVN** [00:01:50] So if that were you and that did happen, do you jump in front of all of them with your arms stretched as far as they can go and say, like, "Excuse me, I am a research scientist. I need to ask all of you about these outfit choices right now." Or do we, like, do something more subtle?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:01:51] Way more subtle – I'm very subtle.

**JVN** [00:02:08] Yeah. Yeah, we're more subtle. I was guessing. One thing that I was really fascinated with back in our episode from 2018 with Dr. Feinblatt, is that, like, there was basically, like, four things that, like, qualified you as a cult: control, manipulation, confession, and unquestioning belief. And one thing that she said was most religions, like, qualify for at least two. And then we learned in our episode about, faith-led activism, we learned that like 80% of people in the United States identify with some religion. So, like, we are all, like, all up

in, like, culty psychology, like culty-esque things even when we don't necessarily think so. And one thing I'm curious about just before we even get going: how do you define cults in your work?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:02:55] Well, one of the things that that episode also talked about are, like, the different scholars who have published about this. And one of the books that was mentioned, Margaret Singer's book, *The Cults in Our Midst*, talks about those two types of, like, cultic groups. And one of them is about a lot of focus on control, which I think is a really important aspect. And something when you're looking at fashion, you want to look at, like, who's in control and what expression of control is coming out of it. So that's a criteria. But the other thing that I thought was super interesting in that book is that she talks about this other type of group, like, the self-improvement type, where it's about not necessarily having, like, a super tight, small inner circle or a committed following, but having, like, a growing, expanding more like a consumer following where they're buying the classes, they're buying the books. And my brain immediately was, like, "Oh, my gosh, are we talking about fashion?" Right? It's all about, like, our self improvement and, like, finding the space where we feel good and like a lot of times that's tied to the consumer model of, like, we buy the thing to feel good.

**JVN** [00:04:04] When I was reading about your work it's, like, "the expertise in fashion within 'alternative communities.'" Can you tell us, like, what "alternative communities" means?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:04:11] Sure. So I started using this term more often than just "cults." I mean, cults are so hard to define and so hard to identify, and they change over times. And so I started using this term "alternative communities" because I wanted to look at the widest possible grouped pool of candidates possible. So I could look at people who aren't necessarily meeting all the criteria for a traditional cult, depending upon whose definition I'm using or looking towards at that time.

**JVN** [00:04:40] Yes, okay. I love that.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:04:42] And one of the reasons why I use "cults," but I also don't use "cults" in my language is because of all the judgment that is imposed on that. So a lot of times we see that associated with someone who's doing an act of transgression or it's used by law enforcement or the media, and it becomes a little loose. And so I think it's really important for me to think about how I can be presenting this in a way that's not imposing my judgment or bias onto these people as the first layer of starting out.

**JVN** [00:05:15] Well, I think that's really important, like, going in with an open mind and, like, really checking what your, like, perceived biases are before you start to research. So, like, yay for you for having, like, ethics and stuff. That's amazing. We love. And that kind of answers my next question, which is like what other types of alternative communities are there? But there's, like, the cult of fashion. I think you could say the same for, like, when you were talking about

that, it made me think, like, Kylie lip kits. It made me think, like, how I need Skims. So, am I a cult member of fashion? I am!

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:05:42] You are!

**JVN** [00:05:45] Oh, my God. No, no, no, no, Sarah, no!

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:05:49] This is so kind of, like, one of those fun things when we, like, start to remove this "cult fashion" from, like, these alternative communities and talk about it in our own, like, fashion consumption space. Because there are these interesting overlaps and connections of, like, maybe for some people, like, they identify with Kim K and, like, how she presents herself to the world and they want to align themselves with that. Or maybe they're, like, you know, "I just dig this product that she makes."

**JVN** [00:06:17] Sister knows how to make an undergarment. And that's not my fault that she is a genius at undergarments.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:06:26] And she is working with people who are really good because it's not just her. She's not back there sewing these things together.

**JVN** [00:06:34] So is this, like, a case study in how cults start for the last 10 minutes? You get someone in, and then they just go 0 to 100 on your ass?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:06:45] Ah, I don't know. But what I love about what this tangent took us down is this thing that I'm a little bit obsessed with and I think is really important in understanding how to approach fashion studies. And it always begins with the body. So you're talking about the body and you're talking about how you're controlling your body through this external garment, right. And that changes your internal relationship to this thing. Right? So that's the beginning of fashion. Like, any time we put anything on our bodies, that's fashion in my definition of it, right? You do your hair, you do your makeup, you get a tattoo, whatever—, you put on, like, Skims, you are participating in this fashion. And that's really important to think about when you're looking at, like, why people are wearing what they're wearing, right? What's their relationship to the body? Is it an ideal that you're looking for? Is it someone else's ideal that you're working towards? And you can see, like, hints of that and just interesting spaces to theorize about things in these groups as well as in, like, everyday life about why people are modifying their bodies in fashion.

**JVN** [00:07:54] Ah! Obsessed. So what's particular about American alternative communities versus, like, international or, like, other ones?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:08:05] Well, I didn't necessarily, like, start out thinking about this as just an American-based project. The whole idea kind of came to me at first when I was in LA for an extended visit. And was just, like, "What's up with all of this? Like mysticism vibes and all this,

like, alternative energy that exists out there, right?" And then I started looking into, like, stereotypes of cults and using fashion and, like, why do we think about these things? And then I realized through the research, there's this huge kind of American path of these, like, alternative religious groups that began back in the 18th century when it's still settler colonialism happening in a big way. So I think that's part of why I was, like, "You know what, actually, let's be intentional about this." There's this idea that the United States is founded with freedom of religion and freedom of expression both allegedly covered under the First Amendment. And then I was like, "So that makes a good case for there should be this individualistic expression allowed, right? No matter what you're choosing to identify or practice in your faith, you are supposed to have that freedom." But we know that's not the case. So it made me really think about, like, how does America enforce control through your clothing? If they do, right, or if our culture does.

**JVN** [00:09:27] The word modesty came up in my head and, like, how important the idea of, like, modesty is in fashion for so many religions, specifically so many, like, Abrahamic religions, like, it's really important in a lot of sects of Christianity. It's really important in a lot of sects of Judaism. It's also really important in a lot of sects of Islam. Like, covering your fucking body. It's a big deal. And that settler colonial aspect, especially, like, I think about, like, insert all of those, like, colonial, like derogatory terms for people that, like, aren't "civilized." So that's really interesting. So what did you find? What I hear you saying is that like that idea that we were built on freedom of expression and freedom of speech and freedom of religion is kind of, like, dogma, propaganda that we get told when we were little, but it doesn't, like, equate to, like, what we actually were free to do?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:10:20] Right. Yeah. Well, I think you know, that clothing has this potential to speak for you, even if you're not speaking. So the way that you're presenting yourself is really important to recognize. So that's one part about these groups that I was really interested in seeing how the clothing might speak to their identity, that they were choosing to express through their clothing. Not even just related to modesty, but, like, what if you're wearing the wrong color, right? What if you're wearing, like, a thing that aligns you with the kind of, like, wrong side of the party? So there's that social kind of, like, cultural conformity as well, not just about religious and the body, but also I think it's really important for me to find ways to expand our history of fashion and reframe how we think about the history of fashion and what it is, right? So not everybody is kind of taught that this crazy idea that I have, that fashion is everything that you do, right? We think about it as, like, the wealthy, the white, the European-American, like, luxury designers. That's fashion, right? But everything everybody's doing throughout history is fashion. So let's find more ways to promote research that says, "This is the fashion of this. This is the fashion of this."

**JVN** [00:11:36] One thing that that reminds me of is, like, listening to The 1619 Project and understanding the role that the cotton industry played in, like, the formation of the United States, and that, like, so much of our economy and all of, like, transatlantic, like, chattel slavery and, like, the enslavement of millions of people was, like, all built on cotton. And I think that's

one thing that we have learned on Getting Curious that, like, there's really no subject, zero subjects, that, like, colonialism, racism, sexism, misogyny, patriarchy, homophobia, transphobia, ableist, all of those things, like, it touches, like, every subject. Like there's no subject that's just, like, cut off from that reality because that reality has shaped the last, like, 400 years of, like, our existence.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:12:23] It's all part of it.

**JVN** [00:12:24] What are some of the groups that you have spent your time, like, researching?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:12:29] So like I said, I try and get this kind of, like, big, open-armed grab of as many groups as possible. But the ones that I was thinking about most often lately are The United Society of Believers, which we know as the Shakers, who got their start in the United States in the 1770s and are still in operation today. There's two surviving members left, I believe, at this point. There's the Oneida community which operated in the mid to late 19th century, the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, which we know as FLDS. And then I also love Heaven's Gate and the Source Family.

**JVN** [00:13:08] I need to know everything about them that, you know, like, not, like, a threatening way, but, like, I'm just a little obsessed with your work. Okay! So how do the groups that you study use fashion to express themselves? Like, what values or beliefs do each of these communities express through their style? Because weren't, like, Shakers, for instance, like, all about, like, "We are not fighting. We do not get down with fighting. Ever!" Right?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:13:33] There is some pacifism in their belief system. Right. So they're not engaging in any kind of, like, military conflict. And that was a problem in the lead up to the Revolutionary War. But they have such a, like, beautiful design aesthetic. That's why we see them kind of enshrined in museums with their, like, furniture and goods. And they were really dedicated to, like, kind of finding the purest forms and celebrating, like, the function of form. And I think that's something that we see even in their clothing. Like I sent over some images of—

**JVN** [00:14:09] Yes.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:14:10] Things that are in some Shaker museum online collections. So if you look at those, right, so there's this range of colors and, like, maybe not everybody is going to think these are, like, super beautiful dresses. There's a lot of, like, muted tones and like long sleeves, higher neckline, collarless, like, natural waist or, like, a higher, empire waist.

**JVN** [00:14:34] Oh, my God. They're fucking chic! These capes and these robes.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:14:40] Right?! And they had patent on those cloaks.

**JVN** [00:14:42] The overcoat on page 22 is so *Handmaid's Tale*. Like the overcoats. Like the red overcoats. But it's, like, pink here. But that's so interesting.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:14:54] Yeah. I mean, those styles have, like, a long history in what everyday people are wearing, like, you can find people that are in, like, the artisan class in like the 18th century wearing styles just like that. So I think when we're looking at costumes and things like *The Handmaid's Tale* that are promoting these sort of like cultic ideas of a different alternative reality. Those costume designers are doing that research and they're probably looking to things like this.

**JVN** [00:15:24] Yes. That's so cool! We will put the links to those images, you guys, so you can, like, pause and look at them. How often can a group's style be traced back to their leader's style? Does the leader of a cult or an alternative group, like, always say, like, "You must do this"? Or does it ever come from, like, a collective idea?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:15:41] Both. Obviously, it's really hard to generalize. But like the Shakers, there was a time period in the mid 19th century where there's a pair of shoes that I threw in that.

**JVN** [00:15:53] Yes!

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:15:54] Dear god, I love their shoes. They're so amazing. But the—, a visitor is talking about how they look like they're worn in the style of the founder. A good fashion historian goes back and is like, "But wait," you know, "is this shoe appropriate to the time?" So it is reminiscent of the style. But because we don't have any of the material culture or the artifacts from Mother Anne herself, we can't say for sure that she wore those shoes, but it does create this connection. But then other groups, you know, start to just gel together. Right? Maybe they have a communal kind of, like, clothing pile. And so everybody's style starts to, like, kind of mesh together just like, you know, if you think about, like, college situations, when you find a new group of friends and then you all start sort of, like, "Oh my gosh, I love that outfit. I want to go buy that thing." And you develop that communal identity without having rules spoken or written about it.

**JVN** [00:16:50] So it might be that, like, things are prescribed from a certain, like, leader or elder and then, like, more people within the community might take those prescriptions or those kind of, like, rules and, like, create, like, what the fashion of that group is?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:17:06] Kind of, or their leader will be really kind of strong in their dictates about that. You know, like, the FLDS is a good example of how that changes over time because I look at that community, especially focusing on Short Creek and this raid that started, I think in 1953 and how there's a lot of documentation, photographs of the members, and they're wearing these clothes that are like full of prints. They're still somewhat modest, but they're not really out of fashion per se. And then we fast forward to the nineties and the early

2000s, there's that, like, pastel color palette, like one dress pattern that's allowed to be used and it sort of just continually gets, like, focused. And everybody in that community that is presenting as a woman is wearing that style of clothing, right? So it doesn't matter if you're a baby or a grandmother. You're all dressed alike.

**JVN** [00:18:04] Was that inspiration in that community to, like, show that they were trying to, like, hearken to an earlier, like, better time or something for them? Like, what was the inspiration for that direction from...

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:18:17] Warren Jeffs.

**JVN** [00:18:18] Yeah, Warren Jeffs. Was that something that was like his thing or he was like, "We've got to, like, get these people looking the same. Like, they got too much freedom out here. Like we need to make them look like..." What? What was it?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:18:28] From all of the accounts that I've read and seen and the documentaries, the members who have left, all the former members talk about this change that happens from the time that his father had been in charge to when he takes power. And there is a change. But there's an account in one of the former member's book about the process of leaving and all of this that talks about how that 1953 raid sort of became this, like, moment of like, kind of fixation and, like, there's a lot of attention paid to it. So we see some elements of the styles carrying over from that. But I think that even if Jeffs wasn't intentionally setting out to make a connection, I think what my suspicion is, he has created this connection to this earlier, like, initial settlement of Mormons in the West by sticking with this idea of the prairie dress. Right. And we see that language used to describe those clothes. So it's, like, you're part of this long history and that's your identity, but it's so much about control.

**JVN** [00:19:37] Right. So in the case of, like, well, really everyone that you've studied, how do these groups use fashion to set themselves apart from non-members?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:19:50] Well, in a lot of groups—the Shakers, the Oneida—they have a really clear, like, difference that emerges. WThe Shakers kind of retain more elements of an older style for a longer period of time. So they start to look more kind of different as the years go by decades, centuries. Oneida set out and they were like, "We want to be different. We want our women to wear this style of clothing—they, like, referred to it as a short dress. Other people will see it as a bloomer costume," which is basically, like, one of those 19th century styles where you have a giant skirt and then it's cut below the knees and then you have a pair of trousers underneath. So it's like you're wearing pants and it's so radical. And so they look really different, but they're not necessarily going out and about and parading outside of their community in this outfit. So it's the people coming in—like, journalists, visitors—saying, like, "These people look really different and weird." And there's really harsh language that they use to describe these folks. Other groups, like, the Source Family, I mean, they were living in

Hollywood, in Los Angeles. So they're, like, very much of the styles of the time, even when they're making their own clothing. It still looked editorial.

**JVN** [00:21:09] So the United Society believers, darling, the Shakers, the 1770 through the present, although only two practicing members today. The fuck? What's happening with the Shakers, honey? They got, like, a whole population problem?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:21:22] Well, I mean, one of the key beliefs of the Shakers was... is...

**JVN** [00:21:29] No fucking?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:21:30] Yeah... they restructured how they envisioned families, so it's coed communal living. Like, there's a separate house and rooms for the brothers and sisters and, like, they refer to "Mother Anne," right, the elders kind of take on that role, but they're not having sex to procreate. So their numbers are not growing from, like, being born into it. So they're bringing in new people, basically converts, to the religion to grow. And we see that big expansion happening in the 19th century, especially as, like, all these other new religious movements sort of, like, implode on themselves.

**JVN** [00:22:11] So they come to America, and they're English and it's, like, the 17...?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:22:16] I think it was like 1771, maybe? 1770s is definitely the time when they arrived.

**JVN** [00:22:21] And the Revolution, like, happens, like, not that far afterwards. So they're kind of, like, really they're, like, "Ew." They're not down for the cause. "You're just going to, like, come over here to these colonies and, like, not fight for us?" And then they were, like, "Yeah, that's exactly what we're going to do." And so their rules were, like, "No fighting. We love furniture, we love clothes." Who was Mother Anne, what was her deal? She was, like, the founder?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:22:45] She was the founder. She grew up in Manchester, England, she converted to this Shaker-like group that happened there. They're a branch of the Quakers and all these folks would get into a lot of persecution because their religious practice was so fully embodied. The Shaker name comes from, like, the way they would move their bodies in whatever free form initially they wanted to. So she was kind of getting a lot of prominence in this English sect. And then moved, after a lot of persecution, to the colonies, sets up camp in upstate New York, outside of Albany. With, just, like, a handful of folks.

**JVN** [00:23:28] And then basically, like, they were, like, discouraged from doing it. So then as everyone, like, started to die. They were, like, just trying to convert people. And now there's only two?



**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:23:37] Yeah. So I mean, think about it like, do you want to join a community that's regulating your sexual activity?

**JVN** [00:23:44] Well, fuck no. But that feels so sad that they've been around since the 1770s. There's only two left. What are their deals? They're just. What are their names? They're just up there in New York State just, makin' outfits?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:23:54] They're, they're actually in Maine. There's a lot of these, like, Shaker historical sites that you can visit and learn about them. And so the two surviving members live at this Sabbathday Lake in Maine, which I've been to. And it's a beautiful space and everything. And so they definitely do a lot to educate people at those museums about culture, life and style. But a lot of these religious movements, you know, they evolve, right? And the Shakers kind of kept to a certain set of principles. And I think over time, their numbers grew and decreased to the point where your past guest citing research about 80% of people having, like, a religious identity or following how many of those people necessarily, like, go to church every day?

**JVN** [00:24:45] Right.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:24:46] Our would join a group that sort of, like, is a really drastic change of lifestyle, right, you're living a very radical change in that.

**JVN** [00:24:55] Were they really about, like, enforcing, like, gender guidelines? Like, did women have to wear kind of more skirt-y things and men had to wear more, like, pant-y things? How did they enforce and express fashion within their alternative community?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:25:08] So with the Shakers, what I think is so interesting is that they didn't have strict rules that were written down or necessarily even spoken to my understanding about what people could or couldn't wear. So initially, while Mother Ann's alive, it's a you do you situation. Right. And you have to think like there's a time when you can't go to a department store and get your clothes. So you're wearing what you can make or the fabric that you can purchase from another, like, maker, essentially. So as we get into the 19th century, we start to see those laws after her death, like they become the millennial laws, all of these beliefs get put into writing. And there was some debate among the community about whether or not to keep it an oral tradition or to put it in writing, and once they put it in writing that it gets revised and revised and revised. And so we start to see changes.

There's a page from one of those materials, I think from 1845 within the Shaker Museum that talks about the clothing. And it's not very specific in that moment. You know, it's kind of, like, "Don't wear a colored ribbon on this day." Once you were in the meeting house, which is where they would practice their public rituals, that they had to take on more of this uniform appearance. And it's happening when they're growing in numbers, too. And we start to see in letters between kind of, like, communities and between members, the elders saying, like,

“Well, there's a lot of improper dress going on. There's a little bit too much of a fullness in the skirts. The pleats are supposed to be this many, this number of inches apart. So, you know, let's make sure that we all keep this uniform aesthetic going.” Because the idea is they have to worship as one body. Right? So that's an important guiding understanding of that belief.

**JVN** [00:27:06] So when Mother Ann is alive it's, like, a little bit more loosey goosey but strict. And then she passes away. Then the Shakers start, like, really to, like, write down what the things are and that works for a while. And then, like, does the rigidness of the fashion, do you think that that had anything to do with, like, its, like, dwindling in numbers? Why did it go from being kind of powerful to, like, not so powerful? Do you think fashion played a role in that?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:27:34] I think that's a great question. And I don't I don't know if I can say for sure, but I think it's really important to kind of note, too, that that strict kind of uniform-like style was really more for when you're worshipping, right, than what you were wearing when you were, like, working on whatever your tasks and your day to day. There's a lot more individuality and you can see that in, like, the photos and documentation. So you're not necessarily, like, signing up to wear, like, the same dress every day of your life.

**JVN** [00:28:06] Right.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:28:07] So I think my guess is that it would be more about the structure and less about the clothing, because that would be secondary, because it does change and adapt as we go through the years.

**JVN** [00:28:19] Right. So then the Oneida community, I had, like, never heard of them. Do they have, like, a more, like, unique perspective on gender in fashion? Like, what's their deal?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:28:30] So they're part of an interesting community. Essentially, they practiced a form of religion called perfectionism.

**JVN** [00:28:36] Mm, sounds fun.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:28:38] Yeah. Don't get misled by what we think of perfectionism. And I may oversimplify these things to an embarrassing degree, but for the sake of conversation, essentially the idea was that you could kind of go through confession and, like, basically find a way to live your life free of sin and therefore perfect on Earth. And you don't have to wait till you get to heaven to experience that. And they emerged out of this, like, big wave of religious groups that were coming up in New York State. So they set up this intentional community. It was all about communal kind of, like, assets. They were very self-sustaining. They were very successful. Some people might be familiar with Oneida, like, Silverware. At some point in time in the 19th century Oneida collapsed.

They were, like, "We can't do this anymore," in large part because their founder fled to Canada because of statutory rape claims and legal issues. So you can understand what might be happening in that group. And so they disbanded and they turned their shared assets into this company where they all got stocks and holdings. But in their belief about, like, dressing and fashion, wear [John Humphrey] Noyes, the founder thought, you know, what women were wearing in the 19th century was really like an exaggerated difference between these two gender presentations, right? So we have the male side of it where you're wearing, like, suits, bifurcated garments, like pants, right? And then you have the women in these very, very big skirts with that hourglass shape.

**JVN** [00:30:09] Because this is, like, mid-1800s-ish, right?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:30:12] Correct. So think like a giant circle around your waist then just a tent around your legs.

**JVN** [00:30:20] And then essentially kind of like tight on the top for women very like rigid, corseted, and men had more, like, tailcoat, kind of like pants, like, a vest, like, a button-up shirt, like, my nightmare. Because I'd want to wear the girls' outfit. I would not want to wear that hideous men's outfit, like, hate it.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:30:36] And that's what I think is what we see Noyes's kind of, like, inspiration. And there are other groups that adopted this like combo garment of, like, trousers under the dress.

**JVN** [00:30:44] So that's what Oneida do, don't they? They're, like, "Fuck this, we're going to like blend it a little bit."

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:30:50] Exactly. So they looked at these other alternate new groups that are like, "Oh, yeah, that's a good idea. Let's take this on." And, like, the history of the style, mostly we think it comes out of, like, the style of garments worn in Turkey, voluminous bottom trouser-like pants and then wraps on top and tunics and things like that. So it becomes this, like, hybrid and that's what they adopt for the women in the community. And so it's very practical. You know, you don't have the skirts kind of, like, dragging through the dirt. You can have a little bit more mobility of movement, and they're working in things like agriculture, or they're working in things like the women doing like work inside: accounting and like business practices in addition to like these, you know, communal child care rearing situations, because they also practice, like, an extreme communal commitment to each other. So when you marry into that group, you don't marry a person, you marry the group. So they called it "complex marriage." And there was this idea that individual commitments were kind of, like, too big of a sin. So you had to really, like, be a communal practitioner. So individual relationships had to be, like, approved by the committees and everything was done by committee. So if you want to buy a new watch, you have to get it approved by the committee. If you want to have a child, it has to be approved by the committee, you know, and so they're really managing

resources in this. And so that's where this dress also, like, shows up. It's, like, maybe it's more economical.

**JVN** [00:32:27] When does the founder have to go to Canada? Like, when does that Oneida group kind of, like, hit the skids?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:32:34] Towards the end of the 1800s, I want to say, like, 1870s, eighties.

**JVN** [00:32:40] How did, like, outsiders perceive them and how much did they use their kind of, like, fusion of gender norms at the time? How did that, like, play out for them and how people, like, viewed them? Like, did people think they were, like, just crazier than a shithouse rat for, like, the women wearing pants? Like, did it make them seem, like, really dangerous and, like, radical? Like, how did fashion, like, make their reputation?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:33:04] So I love that question. One of the reasons why I like studying the Oneida so much is because they had their own newspaper that they published. And so there's so much information in there to dig into. And they talk about things like this, clothing and identity all the time. And I found one article was, like, more of a kind of response to a letter that had been sent in. Some visitor had come and written an article about them. So they just, like, enter their community as an outsider, make all these observations and notes, write it up, and publish it in the mainstream press. And that person was really harsh about the appearance of the women. And we see that often in a lot of these conversations about people in these alternative groups. You know, the women being, like, frumpy. The Oneida women have their hair cut short into, like, a bob. And talking about how awful that was, it was hideous to look at. And these ugly dresses that they're wearing and they're just, like, an admonishment that's, like, "You should not look like this. This is a problem." And a woman, there's a woman, allegedly, that wrote her response in this article. I don't know who wrote it for real, who's saying like, "This person came into our group. We didn't come out and seek their approval or their feedback, like, you're coming into our space and you're really judging us on this and no one in our community is seeking your opinion or your kind of approval. So what right do you have to accuse our women of having an ugly appearance?"

**JVN** [00:34:41] So she basically said, like, "Get fucked" in, like, 1850 speak.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:34:46] Basically, yeah. It was one of the best research discoveries I've had. I was like, "Yeah, tell it! Tell it."

**JVN** [00:34:54] You can tell it, fucking, Oneida sister. Don't ever let them fucking talk to us like that.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:34:59] Yeah. And they were, like, "We're not trying to push this outfit on anybody else either."

**JVN** [00:35:04] "And I'll shove the scissors that cut my fucking ugly bob up your taint. If you ever talk to me like that again."

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:35:09] You know, but they still let people come in, you know.

**JVN** [00:35:12] Oh, that's nice.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:35:13] No banning of the outside world.

**JVN** [00:35:15] So then basically they're, like, "Let's start a silverware company and get out of Dodge?"

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:35:20] Well, they already had all these successful things, like, they were really successful in their agricultural practice and, like, they had started out making, like, metal traps, I think, for animals?

**JVN** [00:35:29] But they were like, "We just got to cash out, basically."

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:35:31] "We're not going to live communally anymore. We're not going to do this. We're just going to take the capitalist money route and go."

**JVN** [00:35:37] Maybe that's what the GOP will do. Or maybe like they'll take the MAGA off the red hats and just become like a hat company. Like, just like a really great, like, hat company that just does, like, really great hats. Like, when Trump goes to jail for, like, keeping nuclear codes in the basement or something?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:36:56] I love this manifesting.

**JVN** [00:36:01] Obviously you saw Wild Wild Country. Right?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:36:04] Yes.

**JVN** [00:36:05] And as a fashion historian and archivist, I just turned into Moira from—, I do, it just happens to be sometimes, but the fuck? Like were you just obsessed with that documentary it was so good, like, we're just gonna be, like, maroon, orange. Like, just there couldn't be a more fashion-y cult. Right?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:36:25] I know, I know. And that was one of the things that, like, when I first kind of, like, stumbled into this research and I was reading about that group, I was, like, "Whoa, I think they're, like, too loaded for me to, like, go deep on yet." And then of course, the documentary series comes out and I'm, like, "Oh my gosh, there's so much visual content in here." And, like, obviously every time one of these new series comes out, everybody's, like, "Did you see this? I want to, like, dress like this and I want to, like, know everything about

this." And I think, like, the boutique obviously is a big, like, space to dig into there: where were the clothes coming from? Were they buying, like, "Ummm, we just want this colorway from this company's line" and like custom ordering it?

**JVN** [00:37:12] Yeah, cause it's already in the eighties or the seventies and eighties. So they probably did have, like, access to ordering, like, specific company was like catalogs. There wasn't internet yet, but you could do, like, a lot of custom ordering. I'm sure.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:37:23] Anytime you open a store, you can have, like, that relationship with like New York Seventh Avenue or whatever.

**JVN** [00:37:29] Yes.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:37:30] And, like, order, like, "I want all the red, give me all the red."

**JVN** [00:37:33] So we're about to get into, like, the FLDS. Oneida sounds like they had some sexual abuse. The Wild Wild country group, they had some sexual stuff because I feel like that leader was, like, he was accused of raping some of the people that went to that. But the point of my question is this. It seems like there is confession and manipulation and control. If that's three of the goals of cults or alternative communities. It seems like it makes it rife for sexual abuse to, like, be probable or, like, makes it probable for it to take place.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:38:10] Yeah. I mean, you have a power dynamic happening, right? And we see this even in, like, workplace situations, in relationship situations, where, like, when you have an imbalance of power or an abuse of power, bad things happen. And it's not just limited to like, I don't know, what clothes you get to wear, but, like, actually what choices you make in life and whether or not, you know, you have relationships with somebody or you have sex with somebody. This is where the research for me always gets really difficult and where I, like, dip in and out of some of these groups more often than others, or why I haven't touched other communities because it's really, like, for me, definitely as a non-member of the groups, it's extremely emotional just to hear or read about what people are going through. So I can't imagine, like, as somebody who is part of those communities, what that is.

**JVN** [00:39:06] Right.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:39:07] So it's something that it's, like, so delicate for me to even talk about. Like I don't want a trigger for anybody or, like, inflict more harm because I'm looking at what clothing they're wearing and why they're wearing it.

**JVN** [00:39:16] Yeah, it's like there's a lot of compassion. I feel like we are so quick to judge when we hear about things like this, but it's, like, a lot of people, whether it's religious, alternate community, culty, whatever and, and that and this is where it is weird for me personally is, like, when I start at the beginning, like all of us had had some relationship to

something that has tenets of an alternative community or a cult because it's, like, deference to your leader, like, not asking questions, like, these are all things that are part of all religions. Like, you don't question your leader and you don't ask, you know, like, the wrong questions, like, it's just, like, kind of a part of it. But it's, like, there's a gaslighting there too, when you're a part of something and we've all been gaslit by someone in our lives, like, at some point, like, just had someone looking square in the face and lie.

And that's what's so scary about, like, a cult because if you're, especially if you're a young person or if you're, you know, just going through something that makes your judgment not as clear, like as it normally would be, it can be very easy for someone to, like, find themselves ingrained in this or embroiled in, like, an alternative community and, like, not even realize until it's way too late. And I think that if you've ever seen any of these documentaries or known anyone who's, like, escaped from a cult, which I have, it's very intense. I can absolutely see how someone could end up in an alternative community and just be completely confounded as, like, to how to get out. It isn't as simple as, like, just leaving or, like, you know, there's just a lot that goes on there.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:40:46] Yeah. Yeah. And, like, I mean, in especially that Keep Sweet series they talk about, like, how hard it is for the folks who've left, you know, their experiences of this. And what's also amazing now is, like, we have TikTok and there are people on TikTok sharing their stories and, like, it's really—, I love that kind of, like, opportunity to see how people are starting to learn how to fashion themselves again and, like, reclaim their identity and these spaces and like build up a new community, a new identity, and share. They're generously sharing that, you know, at this moment.

**JVN** [00:41:23] So as we move into FLDS, did you see Under the Banner of Heaven with Andrew Garfield? It's based on a true story from the eighties where these two brothers felt like their Mormon church got too modern and they wanted to go back more to an FLDS thing. And then one of the wives was, like, "You're crazy, like, we should stop this." And she told the church elders. But then the church elders, like, sided with the husband, basically, and were like "Like, yes, he is crazy. And yes, he should not be trying to do FLDS stuff. But as his wife, like, you can't leave this marriage and you need to tell him that like Jesus or whatever, like isn't down with this FLDS thing and that he needs to come back to like our contemporary Mormon church." So then they pushed her back to him. Spoiler alert. Fast forward if you want to watch this, but. And it's based on a true story. And you already know this based off of the beginning because like they say this in the first 5 minutes and then it's like the story of why. But he ends up murdering her brutally and her two year old child, like, fucking just. And it's, like, in 1985, like, it's, like, it was so chilling and so fucked up.

But they do all these, like, historical reenactments of, like, the inception of the FLDS Church. Fashion is, like, all up in that story, like fashion is all up in that story! But the emergence of the strict dress code from, like, the 1950s to the 2000s, prairie dresses to plain dress. Uniformity of appearance across ages and women. But men relatively like are less regulated and they get to

kind of, like, wear whatever, like, farm ugly ass outfit they want to wear. And then the girls had to wear like these bumpits and braids just, like, what the fuck? What happened with them in the fifties? Oh, the raid!

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:42:58] Yeah, there was the raid.

**JVN** [00:43:00] So it's kind of Waco? Like, the, like, the government raids them?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:43:04] It's more like, you know, polygamy is not legal. So it was essentially just sort of, like, "Communicate that message." And that's what it was all like, so covered in the press, like a very visual way of, like, "We are breaking this up, essentially." I start there because that's like the earliest clear-cut documentation I have of that community. And then it gives me the opportunity then to look at, like, "Well, how do they dress in the eighties?" "How do they dress in the nineties?" "How do they dress in the 2000s?" Right. And you can see there's differences and you can see this emergence of uniformity. Right. You can see that hairstyle's starting to like come into play. And there are, like, former members who talk about how, like, these things initially started as just, like, "part of the style." And if you go back into like seventies editorials in fashion magazines, you can see that kind of, like, swoopy banging happening, right? Like the elements are there from mainstream fashion that kind of get brought in to, like, "This is just how I make myself feel beautiful." Right. And then it becomes like, "Well, everybody has to have that same hairstyle and it has to be the way that your face looks oval." Right? In the series, they have like the training video of like, here's how you make all the hairstyles work for your face. And, you know, we start to see, like, less prints, less lace, less any kind of, like, trimming, longer lengths, right? So it's all just, like, getting more and more strict as the leadership is changing, right? So that's the, I think that's the condensed version of that.

**JVN** [00:44:42] What do these styles mean for not only the people within the community, but, like, the people outside of the community, like, a lot of these styles were made so that they could easily identify their members. Right? Like, to keep people closer because if you make them look super fucking different than everyone else, it's easier to keep track of them because they only wear like one type of dress. So it's like, harder for them to like, leave. Is that part of it?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:45:08] I wouldn't be surprised. You know, there's definitely, like, it does make you harder and it does, like, cement your fashion identity as this.

**JVN** [00:45:17] And it seems kind of innocuous until, like, "Oh, okay, like I'll wear this dress," but then it's, like, it does it kind of seal it off. And especially if it's, like, not because you wanted to or it's because, like, someone told you that you had to.



**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:45:28] Right. And one of the members said in the Keep Sweet about how, like, when they were like, "You can't wear red anymore," that that was their signal. It's like, "Wait a minute, what is what? What's wrong with red? Why are we not wearing red now?"

**JVN** [00:45:44] Was it, like, too sexy or something? Like, it was, like, too lusty or something?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:45:47] If I remember correctly, in some material, I think it said that, like, that's what Jesus was going to be wearing when he returned. So like, you didn't want to, you don't want to get mixed up, right?

**JVN** [00:45:56] Oh, not lusty. You just don't want to be a fake Jesus. That makes sense.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:45:59] Yeah. So don't, don't psych us out. So the men aren't getting that same regulation because they're going out in the world, they're doing all that construction work. They're doing, like, their business works.

**JVN** [00:46:09] And they don't want them to stick out too much, like, they want them to have more autonomy and power. So it's really a way of, like, controlling women.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:46:16] Mhmm.

**JVN** [00:46:17] Yeah, I hate people. So The Source Family, they're like the shortest lived cult that you study because they're only like five years. What was their deal?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:46:24] Yeah, I think you probably would have seen maybe a documentary that was really fantastic that came out a few years back. They're really, like, an interesting group because they centered around this leader Jim Baker, Father Yod as he later transitions his name into. So it was a communal living experiment. They had their own sort of, like, spiritual religious practices that they came up with. They had started out in L.A. the founder, Jim Baker, had this very successful restaurant called The Source. It shows up in, like, a Woody Allen movie.

**JVN** [00:46:58] Yeah.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:46:59] Very, like, big kind of scenic spot. So they had money, but then they closed that down. They wound up moving to like Hawai'i and they were encountering a lot of discrimination.

**JVN** [00:47:09] And this is in the era of Helter Skelter, isn't it?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:47:13] Yeah. So I had, like, an interview email exchange with one of the members, Isis Aquarian, who is the group kind of, like, documentarian and archivist. And she was talking about how, like, you know, the relationship of, like, what happened with the

Mansons really, like, left this lingering image about, like, "Well, if you have long hair and you're a group of people together, you're a threat. You're dangerous." So then that becomes, like, that imagery, right? That cult imagery that we have of, like, "You're bad if you're wearing, like, robes, if you have long hair and long beards, if you're living as a group. You're danger."

**JVN** [00:47:49] Another thing I think is interesting is that, like, if you look through history, queer history, we learned with Professor Jen Manion about, like, the masquerade laws, like female husbands and about how like originally the masquerade laws, like, weren't used against like people who are transing gender. Because first it was, like, to identify British spies, but then it got made to like, "Oh, you're living outside of a gender norm. And that's a, you know, that's just improper so we got to put you in jail." But in talking about the FLDS, it's anything outside the margins. I just think that it's interesting that, like, we can see regulation in people, like from a queer perspective and a cishet perspective. Which leads me to our closing cult that you study: Heaven's Gate, honey. I was ten years old when Heaven's Gate happened. Like, I remember Tom Brokaw breaking that story. I remember Katie Couric, honey, I think it was Bryant Gumbel. It was, like, pre-Matt Lauer, honey, like Ann Curry, like give me, like, I fucking love Ann Curry from the Today Show, like, they did her so wrong. Like, but I remember, like, "Let's go over to the news desk and see what, you know, Ann Curry's brewing up this morning." And that fucking face, like, that scary fucking face. And those eyes, those purple diamonds and the applesauce. Not the applesauce! So why is that? Hales bopp? Hale-Bopp? What, what, what? And the sneakers are worth millions?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:49:14] Thousands or they're trying to sell them for thousands, according to at least some sources.

**JVN** [00:49:19] But it wasn't on the dead bodies themselves. It was just, like, extra sneakers?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:49:22] Well, I mean, that's the thing, because I read somewhere that the sheriff's office maybe sold, auctioned off some things.

**JVN** [00:49:33] That is the most morbid shit I've ever heard.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:49:39] I don't want to say that's definitely what happened, because I do not have the full source on that. But one text I read suggested that was the case.

**JVN** [00:49:47] That the sheriff took the fucking shoes off the dead—

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:49:50] The sheriff's office, sheriff's office, you know, like, there was a car, auctions of like, you know, property that collect.

**JVN** [00:49:57] But off a dead body? That is, like, so intense.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:49:59] So I can't say if that's really where those shoes were necessarily in an auction, but property does get auctioned off. And so it's something I want to try and find out is like where those goods put back into the market. But also remember this we're talking about Nike, even though the shoes were discontinued.

**JVN** [00:50:20] There was other pairs of them that are, like, somewhere.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:50:22] Yeah, it's not like there were four made.

**JVN** [00:50:24] Right, right, right. Because I saw this one documentary on them, I can't remember which channel, but it was not that long ago and it was fascinating. But one thing that was really underscored to me from that documentary was, like, just how normal, like all of these people were. Like, these are not people who are born on the fringes. They were not born on the edges. They all came from, like, very, like, normal range families like or at least it seemed as such. But the fashion was really important there. They all had like that same short haircut. And at the beginning they didn't have that short of a haircut. What else did they do?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:50:55] There's some other scholars out there who also have, like, really done deep dives into Heaven's Gate. And I really love the way they've approached that subject of, like, clothing in this. Cause they started in, like, '74 and, like, their origin story is really fascinating and, like, identity is a big part of it. And, you know, part of the fun thing about being a fashion historian and reading through other approaches—like a sociology text, where you're like, "Why is this person talking about the clothing? But they're not saying that this is really important," you know, like saying these people showed up and they look like in the first meeting where they start to meet some new followers, they're wearing, like, navy blue slacks and, like, windbreakers. And they look like a middle aged couple going into, like, California on a vacation. So we go from this very normal kind of, like, generic, if you will, looking aesthetic in the seventies to kind of partnering up with this group that had, like, a long history. I'm going to get derailed, so I'm not going to talk about it anymore. But as Bonnie's [*Marshall Applewhite's co-founder*] partner dies, I'm like that really questions a lot of their belief structure. And then we start to see as we get into the nineties more of this, like, body uniformity, appearance uniformity elements start to show up until the point at the very end, when you exit the body, you have a uniform. Everybody's the same.

**JVN** [00:52:20] Because they thought the founder, like, was going to be immortal. And then didn't he, like, die? And they kept his dead body in the house for a long time or something?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:52:26] One of the founders. So there was, like, Ti and Do—because they're kind of one of their names—like, all the names they tried to go by, like, Bo and Peep and Nincom and Poop, what was going on. So the female Bonnie dies and that's when, like, the structure goes, but the group continues on and they reframe all their thinking. And so that's where, like, uniforms and sort of, like, baggier clothes, the shorter hairstyles come in.

**JVN** [00:52:56] Yes.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:52:57] And some people talk about it, like, there's repressed feelings of, like, sexual identity that are playing into that from the leader.

**JVN** [00:53:05] Yes. Because he was gay, they thought, maybe. And so he, like, didn't want to see all those, like, physiques.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:53:10] Maybe, or like, the, the thing that I that was so interesting and this other scholar writes about, like, the body is basically, like, another type of clothing. So if you think about, like, whatever your body is and it's just like another garment that you're putting on and then you're putting on another layer over it. So it doesn't really matter what your body looks like. And that's where, like, a lot of that thought control comes into play. Right. So if you're not even, like, acknowledging that you're part of a body and responding to your body in that very intimate way.

**JVN** [00:53:44] That is so cool. At the very beginning you were, like, "Well, I'm, like, a fashion historian and archivist." In your research and everything that you're reading about and doing, like, you're going to be reading about social things, you're going to be reading about social interactions, like, fashion is, like, how we express ourselves, why we express ourselves, like, and especially when it comes to alternative communities and stuff, like, it's just huge. So I'm curious about, like, if someone's interacting with your work, and if they are, like, "Well, God, like, maybe it's not alternative communities in fashion that speak to me but, like, history of fashion or..." What is a fashion archivist? What is a fashion historian? And how can people, like, get into, like, your work?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:54:22] Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah totally. The thing about fashion studies is that you have to be interdisciplinary, you have to be able to, like, understand how this approach works and how this person or field looks at things. I really liked organizing stuff and I really liked old things. So I was working in supporting, like, small designers to organize their inspiration materials, whether that was, like, jewelry or clothing or, like, textile scraps. And then I figured out through, like, the assistance of one of my bosses, this is an actual job that people do, they do it in, like, museums. They do it in design houses. And I was like, "Well, how do I do that?" And so I Googled and this was a while ago. And so there was only, like, a couple of programs in the New York area. And so I went to FIT, did my masters in their Museum Studies like Fashion & Textile Program and came out of it and was, like, "Whoa, my brain has just exploded.

I am so obsessed with how important this work is and how meaningful it is to contribute to culture in this way and, like, make it seem valuable to folks." That's my way that I got into it. Now I think there's a lot more programs that exist, there's more and more starting out in undergrad where you can get sort of, like, fashion history classes and, like, museums studies. But you can also do masters' programs where you get really deep into it. Or you could pursue

a path where you're really, like, trying to learn as much as you can on your own and then go into these spaces for, like, specialized training if you need to. And I think there's some debate about what's best for what person, but I think that's really important. And so our job in this field is really to promote the study of fashion, see it as a valuable contribution to culture, and take care of it.

**JVN** [00:56:20] Yes. Okay. I love that. So you're working to expand the history of fashion beyond what we see in magazines or on runways. So what archives and sources do you rely on when you're studying all of these things? I know you mentioned earlier we loved the Oneida because they had, like, their own newspapers. There's a lot of, like, archival newspapers?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:56:37] So I definitely pull into, like, every kind of, like, digitized archive that exists and thank you to every museum and collection that has decided to put money into that process. So, like, the Shaker Museum's collection is online, the Internet Archive has all of these digitized books. If you can't find them in your library, you can read them there. There's images in the Library of Congress that are so valuable. But also, you know, I really want to, like, start digging into, like, the small historical societies and these various towns to see what, like, physical paper trails exist for this. So that's all really important. And every museum exhibition that opens up and shows all these new pieces that maybe come out of the closet.

**JVN** [00:57:20] And then, like, what other topics in fashion history do you research?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:57:23] Just about anything. I am interested in, like, how we train designers using, like, museums and exhibitions and other cultural materials. I'm also interested in how we teach people generally about fashion and the social structure of, like, institutionalized learning. What else do I look at? Everyday clothing. Sort of like what people like you and I would be wearing in any moment in time.

**JVN** [00:57:52] I was wondering about like when I was asking about the Gilded Age, like do you ever wonder, like where shit came from that they would use to make stuff. Like, was there like whale bones in corsets or something?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:58:03] That kind of, like, tooth-y, hair, like nail, fingernail material [*baleen*] is in there. They also used wood and steel. But yeah, it's kind of like this investigative process when you actually look at a garment from the past and you're, like, "What is this? What's this material? How was it made? Did somebody, like, buy this material from a factory, you know, or did they, like, grow the plant and harvest it and, like, transform that into thread and, like, weave this thing themselves?" Like, you can trace all the way back. And there's just so much.

**JVN** [00:58:39] When I was at the Smithsonian with *Queer Eye* a few years ago, we got to see this, like, I think it was, like, a lock of hair from, like, Washington or Martha Washington or Benjamin Franklin or something, it was, like, pearls that were, like, old as fuck. And then there was these, like, garments that were in a museum, and they were talking about, like, how, like,

the way that the garment was, like, folded over a hook would have, like, damaged it too much over time. So they had to, like, you know, display it in a different way. So, like, what's it like to handle clothing and accessories from history? Like, is there like a standard of, like, you always got to wear, like, a kind of glove or like be in, like, a darker, like, non-sunlight room or, like, so it doesn't fade. Like, what are the rules for, like, handling old stuff?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [00:59:18] Yeah. Well, I mean, not that many people get to do it, one. So you limit the handling of these things, especially when you're talking about, like, things that are in museums. Most of the time when I make a research visit to see those things, it's literally just to see that I'm like, I don't get to touch it. I don't get to, like, even smell it. I'm not getting that close, you know, like, someone else is wearing the gloves or not wearing the gloves, depending on what it is, and doing all of the moving of it for you. But if I'm the person that's handling it, you really have to treat it like it's this, like, body, right? You think about it as, like, you really have to be delicate with this baby and like you don't want to like have its head fall off and things like that so really paying attention to it and you're storing it and all those like lowlight, no light situations, you're displaying it like that, but you're being as careful as possible and touching it as little as possible.

**JVN** [01:00:11] Last question. What's next for you in your work?

**SARAH C. BYRD** [01:00:14] I'm just trying to rethink everything, you know, like, how do I, how do I do this research in a way that I can share it, but I also can get compensated for? Because we do a lot of intellectual labor for free when you're working in academics and research. But also, how can I use that as a momentum to like teach people in different places

**JVN** [01:00:35] Well people are obsessed with cults. You need to write a book about fashion cult stuff.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [01:00:39] I know, that's one of the schemes.

**JVN** [01:00:40] Like, I need you to, like, write the proposal yesterday, okay? Come on! You got this, Sarah! Which, actually, I lied, I do have... this is my final question, but we cannot make it if it's, like, too controversial. But, like, I'm going to ask, I'm going to with my—, I'm going to say, okay, you know what this question is? Think about it. Okay. We talked about Kim K.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [01:01:00] Mhm.

**JVN** [01:01:03] And you're a fashion archivist.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [01:01:05] Yeah. Yeah.

**JVN** [01:01:07] So....

**SARAH C. BYRD** [01:01:08] We're going to ask about that dress?

**JVN** [01:01:09] Yeah. Were you, like, when you were reading that stuff were you like "This bitch destroyed fucking American history?" Or were you, like, "Wear the fucking dress, lady. I love it!"

**SARAH C. BYRD** [01:01:19] I'm going to be on my little island of this and I'm fine with that in my life. But I saw it and I thought to myself, "You know what? Where is that dress coming from? It's not coming from a museum like a public institution, this is a private collector, essentially. And a private collector can do whatever they want with things, for better or for worse." And I know they did make an effort to, like, be delicate with it. And there's a lot of, like, gray area about what this communicates to the public.

**JVN** [01:01:49] No, I love this, though. Basically, you're saying because a lot of people that did that were passed were like, "This is American history, you shouldn't be fucking with this. Duh duh duh duh." But what you're saying is, like, "It's not like it came from the Smithsonian."

**SARAH C. BYRD** [01:01:59] I think the other thing that you mentioned there and, like, part of that like chaos of conversation about like "You're ruining American history, like a piece of American history." But like, why are you saying that Marilyn Monroe's the only person who can be part of that history? Like Kim K can also be part of that history. And now she's added more history to this dress through this process. So, like, in that sense of storytelling and like what our history is about, let's be a little bit more open to, like, who is on the stage and whose artifacts are being preserved.

**JVN** [01:02:31] I mean, Sarah Byrd, thank you so much for your time, for your research for like, coming on, Getting Curious, we appreciate you so much and this is so fascinating, and thank you so much for coming on.

**SARAH C. BYRD** [01:02:40] Thank you so much for being curious about this and letting me share it.

**JVN** [01:02:47] You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. Our guest this week was Sarah C. Byrd. You'll find links to her work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on.. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thank you so much to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend, honey puh-lease. Show them how to subscribe! S'il vous plaît? You can follow us on Instagram and Twitter @CuriousWithJVN. Our editor is Andrew Carson. He's a gem. Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, and Zahra Crim. Thanks for coming and we'll see you next time!