Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Charlotte Karem Albrecht

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I get to 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 Charlotte Karem Albrecht, where I ask her: What's the story of America, as told by Syrian peddlers? If the late 1800s had a phone, we'd have her on speed dial. We keep coming back to this era on the podcast. It's central to our episodes on: racialized fatphobia with Sabrina Strings, abortion and eugenics with Jacki Antonovich, the Oregon Trail with Margaret Huettl and cheese, trash, banking, and beyond! You know what it is? I think a lot of shit went down in the 1700s and the 1800s. So today we are revisiting this pivotal moment in U.S. history with all new fare. Charlotte Karem Albrecht is an Assistant Professor of American Culture and Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor. Her new book, *Possible Histories: Arab Americans and the Queer Ecology of Peddling*—it's the coolest fucking title of all time—examines the experiences of Syrian peddlers starting in the late 1800s. Through these portraits, she makes the case that we cannot understand U.S. racial systems without centering sexuality and gender. So today we're asking: what's the story of America, as told by Syrian peddlers? First of all, how are you, Charlotte?

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:01:26] Ah! Thank you, Jonathan. It's so great to be here. I'm great. It's totally wild to be doing this, and I really appreciate it. I'm just, like, thrilled to get the chance to talk about this with you.

JVN [00:01:38] Oh my god, this entire book and your, like, whole academic, like, career is like, so fucking fascinating. I'm obsessed with what you study. We're obsessed with you. And thank you for coming on the show. Okay so before we dive in, I want to linger a little bit on our guiding question. So the story of America, it's a huge story. It's got lots of angles. Why are we understanding it through the lens of Syrian peddlers?

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:02:00] So first I just want to note that when I'm talking about Syrians on here and in the book, I'm referring to a group of people who migrated from the Ottoman province of Syria in the late 19th and early 20th century. So not all of those people today would be considered Syrian. Most of this group of people would call themselves Lebanese, some Syrian, and some Palestinian. Most people don't know about the history of Syrians in the United States or Arabs in the United States or Syrian peddlers in particular. But for those who do, they may know this kind of romanticized story about Syrian immigrants who made money from peddling and then became entrepreneurs after moving from peddling to a brick and mortar business. So this story is a story of the so-called "good immigrant." It's a story of respectability. It's a story about accessing whiteness. And it usually revolves around men. And we have that story because it was largely recuperated by descendants of this history and by Arab-American activists in the 1980s who were trying to establish, like, the presence and contributions of Arab Americans in the face of increasing racist attacks against the

community. And in the face of the rise of U.S. imperialism in the Middle East and North Africa. But what the story of Syrian peddling actually tells us when we look at the history is that it's a story about racial, sexual, and gender trouble, and it's about trying to access the terms of legibility and normativity in the United States and learning what practices and ways of being, like, had to be abandoned in order to access those things. So it's essentially about acclimating to the sexual, racial, and gender machinery of American society.

JVN [00:03:47] I'm fucking obsessed, okay! So, let me get this—I hate saying *straight*—but let me get this *forward*. Let me get this all going in the direction where we need it to go, which is more just, like, me wrapping my head around this. So basically what I hear you saying is, this is a story of, "We want to sort out what our roots are so that we can figure out what our contributions are so we can, like, tell the people to stop being fucks."

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:04:09] Yes.

JVN [00:04:10] I'm paraphrasing here, but essentially that's….

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:05:11] Yes.

JVN [00:05:12] In some of the research that I've gotten to do, whether it was, like, for *Love That Story* or through interviewing folks on this podcast, a similar thing has also happened with queer history in the U.S., and in other places. And I just think that that moment in time when like "what *is*" goes to, like, "what *was*" and then has to get unearthed again. I'm really interested in that period of, like, why it doesn't seem to be, like, "the thing" anymore. And I think that an interesting thing—and, and we haven't gotten there yet, but I think what I could guess is—is that the thing that links them is that, like, you were trying to, like, lose certain aspects of what you were to assimilate.

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:04:52] I think that totally connects. Many people don't know about this history because first of all, it's a small group of people, you know, in comparison to something, like, I don't know, German immigrants or something like that. And the way people were categorized varied. So there's not clear numbers of how many people came. And because of the intense pressure around anti-Blackness and white supremacy, like, a lot of people eventually married white people and non-Syrian people. You know, especially when you get to, like, the forties and fifties, there's just an intense kind of impetus to not be different in any way. So these things sort of fade out of even some of the, like, cultural knowledge within the descendants, right? And then some people go searching for that later on.

JVN [00:05:45] So what initially drew you to this group of people?

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:05:49] For me, it originally started in terms of thinking about my own family history because I'm a descendant of this history from people who would

now call themselves Lebanese, and some of them were peddlers in the United States. So I grew up in Louisville, Kentucky, and Louisville is a very racially segregated city. And so as I was coming to learn more about my own ancestors in Louisville in the early 1900s, I wondered how they navigated white supremacy and anti-Blackness. And as a queer Arab American I also, you know, had examples of family members, Lebanese family members, who transgressed some norms related to gender and sexuality. And so I was really curious about how differences relating to gender and sexuality affected their racial positioning. So I, even before graduate school, would plague—usually my poor mother—with questions about what it was like growing up, you know, in the fifties and sixties and so on in Louisville.

So I began looking into this community, and I knew that I was interested in sexuality and gender. But initially I was just so focused on race. And I think that also came from my own positionality as someone, you know, who also has—like my father was white and I look very white to people—and also had sort of, like, questions about navigating whiteness and my own privilege and things like that. So I was really interested in the racial positioning initially and I, I saw some of these historical artifacts that really piqued my interest in peddling, and they were newspaper items that sensationalized peddlers or described them in really derogatory ways. And what I noticed is that they did this through terms of queerness, sometimes explicitly. And this stood in contrast to the narratives of peddling that were created from Syrian-Americans and in these community archives that, like, this was this, you know, really pioneering form of labor that Syrians did. And I was, like, "Well, how are these two things coexisting?"

JVN [00:07:56] So when you first started getting into this, you were, like, looking up, like, old newspaper articles about…?

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:08:02] Well, one of the first places I started was actually in an Arab American archive at the University of Minnesota, where I was a grad student. So it was the Immigration History Research Center. And they had old Master's theses and dissertations and things like that. And so I saw some things that were cited in there, and then from there I would just search in historical newspaper collections. So I can share my screen and show you a couple of things. So the picture on the left is from 1904 of a Syrian man. He's wearing a fine jacket and he's wearing a tarboosh, or a fez, which is the brimless hat that's common to a certain class. It actually signals being, like, of a higher class. Right. And he's got all of these rugs draped over his shoulder and they're very fine rugs. So this is a peddler that would attempt to sell to, like, a higher socioeconomic clientele. And it says, "Syrian Quarters Gaudy Merchants." This is 1904, the Saint Paul Globe.

JVN [00:09:10] I literally was thinking, like, "Man, you'd probably pay, like, a good 2500 for these today." These rugs today are, like, expensive. I should know, I'm, like, obsessed with gorgeous… like, the rugs that he has on his shoulder, honey, like, I want every single one.

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:09:22] Yeah.

JVN [00:09:23] He's hot, too.

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:09:24] Yeah! I mean, he's fine. Not my type, but fine.

JVN [00:09:27] He is my type and yes, fine. [BOTH LAUGH] That makes me so sad when I see, like, really old pictures, though, of hot people because I'm, like, [GASPS]. You know?

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:09:37] You didn't know what you had before you! So on the right was the first thing that I really came across. And it's an editorial from 1940 out of a small town called Vici in Oklahoma, and it's an editorial against the political candidacy of a Syrian-American doctor, Michael Shadid, who was a socialist and was running for U.S. Congress. And he did this twice. The editorial uses the figure of the peddler in order to malign him. So I'll just read, like, a quick excerpt from it, if that works. So it just starts, "Down the street he comes, a man apart. Knowing no friend, his queer dress, his hooked nose, his broken speech and queer mannerisms set him aside from the rest, the peddler of rugs. On his arm, a gaudy display of rugs and scarves gleaming like jewels in the sunlight, sparkling tinsel and glistening silk. Yet, alas, they bear no blessing of a known manufacturer, a thing made only to sell through the picturing of the faults of others, bearing a guarantee of a foreigner who you will perhaps never see again." And so they're using the same kind of language of, like, gaudiness and excess.

JVN [00:10:47] Fuck them!

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:10:48] Yeah. It's pretty clear in here, but it's a super anti-Semitic editorial. A lot of the sort of anti-Syrian, anti-peddler tropes that circulated invoked anti-Jewish, but specifically anti-Ashkenazi Jewish ideas when they also maligned peddlers. So there's, there's a link and an intertwining between early anti-Arab racialization and anti-Semitism.

JVN [00:11:15] Oh shit, there is! Oh my god, that last paragraph! You guys! Don't we have to read that last paragraph? It's pretty fucking crazy and damning.

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:11:24] Yeah, yeah, I will read it. So the last paragraph says, "No American parentage glorifies his person and no American philosophy blesses his doctrine. We need no off-color Jews as congressmen, nor do we need off-color capital baiting lines of thought in our national makeup." He was a socialist. He did a ton of work in Oklahoma with, like, poor farmers and socialized medicine and health care. He created the first cooperatively run hospital in the United States in the 1930s and had all these people fighting against him, like, he was harassed by the Klan. You know…

JVN [00:12:03] It's just so interesting how, like, we've gotten so scared of, like, centering, like, community or, like, society needs, like, above, like, individual needs or, like, at least incorporating it. But it's, like…

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:12:13] And then in the 1940 editorial, when they invoke a “queer dress” and “queer mannerisms,” like, at this point in the 20th century, we don't have queer just as odd or strange. We also have queer as explicitly thinking about sexual deviance.

JVN [00:12:34] All of those, like, feelings and mistrust of queer people were rampant in, like, the decades preceding that.

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:12:38] Yes. Yes.

JVN [00:12:40] So that's, that's really fascinating that, like, so any time we're wanting to, like, be derogatory or, like, malign someone or create, like, a general mistrust, like, we're using the word "queer," we're using, like, these sorts of, like, words to like, make people scared of people. That’s fascinating. So, you track the movement of Syrians to and through the U.S. starting in the 1870s. So, like, who were these Syrian immigrants?

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:13:05] These immigrants were mainly peasants. They came today from the area that's largely known as Lebanon. Most of them were Christian of a number of different denominations, but there were also Syrian migrants who were Muslim, who were Druze, and who were Jewish. To some extent, there was, you know, interaction and connection across those religious lines. And to others, there weren't. So particularly Syrian Jews, more of them were coming from cities. And a lot of the other Syrian migrants who were coming were more rural. Syrian Jews were mainly in New York and were coming a little bit later, and were—, ended up becoming more connected to other Jewish communities in New York City.

JVN [00:13:53] So then what prompted those folks to move to the U.S.? Like, what was happening, like, in those locations that was, like, "Let me try something else."

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:14:02] Throughout the 1800s, the Levant, this region, really developed its economic stronghold in silk production and silk farming. And after the opening of the Suez Canal, this altered that economic landscape because there was all of this increased competition in Silk from China. So they had been depending on that, and on farming, and a lot of them moved for economic opportunity. There were people in New York, there were people in Boston, Detroit, Los Angeles, but especially because of peddling, people spread to other parts of the country, to smaller towns, some of them were in more rural areas. There were Syrians who were homesteaders and claimed Native land in the Dakotas. There were Syrians that moved to, like, mining towns. So they, you know, they were moving to, to where there were economic opportunities, but there were larger concentrations in major cities.

JVN [00:15:02] In terms of peddling, like, what made peddling, like, popular in this era and time?

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:15:07] Yeah, it was really popular as a form of work early on because you didn't need to know English in order to, to do it. You could be taught, like, just a few words in English in order to communicate with your customers. You didn't need any money to start. So there were wealthier and more connected Syrians in the United States who would set newcomers up with a, a pack and the goods they need to sell and help them with their routes or connect them with other Syrians that they could travel with. And, you know, they basically were giving them instructions on how to peddle and how to start out. So it was, it was physically demanding work, but it made it relatively accessible for new immigrants. And people could make money really quickly from it. Not everyone was successful in it. So then, you know, through just networks of family, especially kin, the word of mouth about doing this would travel. And one of the most important texts that talks about this—if people are really interested in, like, the social history of peddling—is a book by Alixa Naff and it's called *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience*. And she did tons and tons of oral histories in the 1960s to the 1980s, with usually children of peddlers, to talk about how this worked.

JVN [00:16:26] Did, did that ever, like, end up being, like, exploitative? Like, would anything bad ever happen to, like, the people if they didn't sell the pack good enough? Or, like, was it kind of, like, just, like, families helping families because, like, it was, like, all people from, like, the same town? So they were, like, "Oh come over, like, I'll just give you this little pack and then you can get your feet on the ground!" Or was it kind of all over the gamut?

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:16:45] Well, I mean, these were mostly family members connecting with other family members. So my sense is that mainly, and especially from the oral histories that were done, mainly people treated each other pretty fairly. There's plenty of other evidence, though, of people, like, getting in all kinds of squabbles with each other and using influence. There is a scholar named Randa Tawil at Texas Christian University. Some of the work that she's doing is on these Syrian interpreters and how they were using their positions of power and influence to basically, you know, get one over on people that they didn't like.

JVN [00:17:21] Mmmm!

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:17:22] So I mean, there was a possibility for exploitation and actually the, like, the white American press was really concerned about this. They kept referring to peddlers as, like, a padrone system, referring to, like, Italian systems of sort of, of labor and people sort of exploiting that coming over. And this is also on the heels of all of this freaking out in the United States about so-called "coolie" laborers and Chinese labor and ideas that if someone was being exploited, that it actually reflected badly on the character of that person. These were usually really racialized ideas as well. So there was probably more panic about that from white people than there actually was happening among Syrians.

JVN [00:18:08] So who made up this Syrian peddling economy? Like, was it just the peddlers or was there, like, obviously the consumers? Like, who was buying it? And, like, supplying the stuff to sell?

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:18:18] Yeah, it's a great question. So one of the things that I try to emphasize in the book is that the actual peddlers are just one sliver of the peddling economy. Syrian peddlers were dependent on suppliers for their packs and their goods, especially when they first started out. And there were other Syrians who made the goods that peddlers sold. And some of them were in the United States making these items. Some of them were making items in their homes. For instance, like, lace and embroidered items, especially. There were a lot of women who would be doing those at home. There were Syrians that operated boarding houses where peddlers would lodge while they were out on their routes. And there were the Syrians who stayed at home and cared for children and elders of the community while peddlers were away. And in these last three instances, people who were making goods to sell, boarding house operators and people caring for children and elders, these were largely women. So if you take into account this plus the, the number of Syrian peddlers who were women themselves, then a substantial portion of the labor that made up the Syrian peddling economy was done by women.

JVN [00:19:24] Mm. Okay, that's fascinating. Was it ever, like, cute? Because I feel like growing up, like, there was, like, door-to-door vacuum salespeople and stuff like that and that wasn't bad or, like, naughty.

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:19:35] No!

JVN [00:19:35] Did everyone think the peddling was bad or did they think it was cute or was there, like, anybody else who was known to peddle?

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:19:40] So peddling is, at least in this time period, most associated with European Jews, European Jewish immigrants. They were much more numerous in terms of the number of peddlers. And there were peddlers in other groups, too. There were Bengali Muslims who were peddlers throughout the, you know, Southeast United States and up along the coast into the northeast. And Vivek Bald does really interesting work on that. What sets Syrian peddlers apart is that so many women peddled. There's no other group of peddlers in which women were peddling and peddling in the numbers that Syrian women were. There were a lot of Syrian women doing it at the height of Syrian peddling.

JVN [00:20:24] Okay. So walk us through a day in the life of a Syrian peddler, if you will. It can be a made up person or someone actually featured in *Possible Histories*. Like where would they wake up?

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:20:34] Yeah. So it depends on what kind of peddler they were. If they were a day peddler they probably lived in a city, would set out early in the

morning. In Boston there were groups of peddlers and a lot of women who would set out early together and they'd take a streetcar to the outskirts of the city, and then they'd peddle in these sort of areas that were less connected to services. And then they'd return home in the evening for dinner and to sleep. For longer distance peddlers, they'd usually have a hub that they'd return to every weekend. So, for instance, there's one peddler who recounted that he and a group of men would leave from Fort Wayne, Indiana, which was a peddling hub, and they would walk about 65 miles over the course of the week, and then they'd sleep in farmhouses every night. They'd ask people, you know, "Can we just sleep in your barn?" And then every weekend they'd get to a town and sleep in a boarding house. And on Saturdays they would write their supplier with a list of the goods that they needed and where they would be the following Saturday in order to receive those goods. So this particular individual worked like this for about two and a half years. And he said that he sent home about $100 a month.

JVN [00:21:45] That's so much work.

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:21:48] Yeah.

JVN [00:21:49] So where would they spend, like, their working hours? And then, like, who all would they interact with? Like, in a day-to-day situation?

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:21:55] Yeah. So they would interact with each other. Some of them would be on routes with each other, some of them would split up and then they'd be interacting with customers. They'd be going to people's doorsteps to sell their wares. And then, you know, when they're recreating, that's together or that's in these boarding houses where other transients are moving through. There's stories about a particular house in [Spring Valley] Illinois, where Syrian peddlers would sleep and that there are stories of, like, 15 of them in a room together. And it was, you know, men and women and young people and older people and people who are married and people who are single. Like, it was just everyone in the room, right? Sleeping on a floor together and then boarding houses would operate a little bit differently than that. So most of their interaction was going to be with customers. It really varied in how they were received. So some people were really excited about the arrival of Syrian peddlers because they brought things that, you know, really felt exotic to them. And then some of them were also bringing, like, necessities that, that were just, it was easier for people to access that way.

A lot of people had just, like, regular household items, like a sewing materials and soap. Maybe belts and shoes or dresses or linens and things like that. And then some people, like the guy we talked about earlier, would be carting around, like, huge rugs or they'd be bringing, like, fine linens and laces or things marketed as coming from the Holy Land, like, prayer beads and or holy water or things like that. Some of those things might have been imported. Some of them might actually have been imported from Syria. And many of them were, were made in the United States by other Syrians. Those were the main things that people were selling. So dry goods that were nonperishable, that they could cart around things

that were both, you know, household staples and things that felt like finer goods as well, depending on who they were peddling to. Most of their customers were going to be women, who were coming to the door. There were women peddlers who peddled to women in brothels. There's one in Montana. You know, she recounted that she liked going to peddle to the women who were sex workers there because they were so kind to her. And they just wanted to buy really fancy things. They wanted to buy nice things. And so she kept going back there.

JVN [00:24:22] Oh, I love them.

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:24:23] Yeah.

JVN [00:24:24] So because we were talking about, like, how what really set Syrian peddlers apart was, like, that so many women did it and that was just not the case in, like, other communities who, like, did peddling. So were men and women, like, treated differently in terms of, like, how they were received by customers? Or, like, within these Syrian communities?

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:24:43] I should say that I use these categories of men and women and gender categories that were being used really provisionally. Like they can only tell us so much about who people were, what their experiences were like, and how they saw themselves. And a lot of things were really both in these communities and how other Americans saw them were really organized around the gender binary. So I just sort of take that provisionally, right? But if we're talking about those categories of men and women, they were often treated really differently. Women overall were better received than men as peddlers. So there's a story of a woman who—she recounted this later on as an adult—she peddled with her father as a young child. She'd accompany him on his peddling routes, and it might sound really odd or even dangerous, but he took her because it made him appear less threatening to his customers, and it especially helped him find a place to sleep at night, because that is where a lot of men had difficulty.

There's a lot of stories about men recounting, being turned away at night, trying to find a place to sleep. So it's pretty well-established in the historical record that women were better received. And so this contributed to more of them doing that. And there were actually a ton of debates about this in the Syrian community. But what we have a record of is really more, like, upper class, middle and upper class Syrians debating it, and they weren't even the women doing it themselves. But in Syrian-American periodicals they were talking about, like, this "problem" that they saw of Syrian women peddlers and trying to get Syrian women to stop. And one of the things that crept into the debate seemed to be a certain amount of, like, discontent and maybe even resentment among men that they were not able to be as successful at peddling as women. There's even a short story that talks about this immigrant family, Syrian immigrant family and the man is forlorn about how he was once a prince in his homeland, and he's not here anymore because his wife goes out peddling every day and

becomes, like, the head of the household. And he's looking out forlorn at the Statue of Liberty and, like, lamenting the loss of his, his masculinity, essentially. Like there's some real, like, it was real dramatic!

JVN [00:27:58] It's fascinating. We talked a little bit earlier about, like, the concept of queerness and how the word queer was used in that newspaper article to describe that, like, cutie pie. So when we're talking about queerness in this history, are we, are we talking about in the same way in the contemporary sense, or, like, how would the concept of queerness be used in this time for Syrian peddlers?

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:27:21] Yeah! So it, it depends on, on the particular time period. The later into the 20th century we go, the more likely it is that the word "queer" signifies something related to sexuality and sort of, you know, deviating from norms related to sexuality. And the kinds of concerns there were about this were really inflected by class and race. So norms of gender and sexuality are really set around whiteness in the United States in this time period. And so figuring out—or the discourses of—straying from that, you know, are different for white people than for those who are not white. So what I mean by this is, like, that there's different levels of expectation and panic around adhering to norms or not. I mean, there were discourses relating to Syrian and Arabs that they were "sexually excessive," right. That there was, there was a culture of sexual access and freedom in the Middle East and North Africa that "needed to be disciplined," that's rooted in histories of European imperialism. Right. So this affected the ways that they were seen in the United States. And it would affect people regardless of what their actual desires and attraction and sexual behavior was. So these are also, like, different centers that exist, right? Different, competing sets of norms around what it means to be Syrian and what it means to be American. And in the sense of this research, right, I think about the hegemonic way of thinking about Americanness, which is whiteness, right?

So when queerness comes into the book, I think about that in terms of my method, as well as in terms of thinking about sexuality as a structural force of power and how that interacts with other forms of power. Like, how is sexual expression, sexual behavior, sexual ways of being, and the ideas about these things, how are they disrupting social and economic and political power? And that's a cue to me to think about, like, "Is this a queer moment?" And the other thing for me is thinking about queerness as part of my method. I try to approach research from an embodied and affective position. So rather than thinking that I can, I can achieve some sort of objectivity if I distance myself from my subject matter, which, which isn't even possible, I sort of make my own position more visible. I explicitly take into account my own desire to find certain things and think about what it means to have a desire. Like, what does it mean to hope to find a queer Syrian peddler or a queer Arab subject, even if that's not possible or productive?

JVN [00:30:27] So what does it mean?

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:30:29] I think if you set out to do that and you're not transparent with yourself about that intention. I think it really, it traps you. Right. If you're only going to be looking for a queer subject in the way that we understand queerness and sexuality today, and by that I mean that we understand queerness as a construction of self, that fuses sexual desire and sexual behavior with identity. If that's what we're looking for, we're going to miss all of these other ways that intimacy, desire, sexual activity was, you know, happening at the time and colliding with norms of white supremacy. It's a wider way of thinking about "queer" and thinking about disrupting heteronormativity.

JVN [00:31:21] I love that. So what does queerness have to do with race in this context? You said earlier that, like, there is different levels of, like, "offense" for violating, like, that heteronormative, like, standpoint that was, like, kind of built around, like, whiteness. So like, how did these peddlers have to navigate whiteness?

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:31:43] Yeah. So first I want to just sort of lay the foundation of what race meant for Syrians meant in the United States. So Syrians were really in this in-between racial position in this moment. And for those who came to the United States and wanted to stay and wanted to have the, the privileges of citizenship in order to naturalize, they had to be considered either a "free white person" or "a person of African nativity or African descent." And because of anti-Blackness, the vast majority of non-European immigrants argued that they were white. And many of these petitions for naturalization went through the courts. So we have records of, like, the, the actual arguments that people use to say that they should be able to naturalize as U.S. citizens. So Syrians were one of the only groups to eventually be allowed to naturalize in these cases, or given these outcomes in these cases. And that ruled them to be legally white at the federal level. But in their day-to-day lives, they actually experienced race in ways that varied a ton. And there is—, the work that has been done on this—that's really interesting—is Sarah Gualtieri's first book that's called *Between Arab and White*. It's like the ultimate reference for this.

But they basically found themselves between whiteness, Blackness, Asianness, and these things could vary depending on, like, the entity or arena that was considering them in the United States, the region they lived in, their religion and, of course, their skin color. So beyond that, though, broadly speaking, Arabs were understood by most Americans at this time through this prism of racial, cultural, and religious difference, this kind of fusion of these three things. A lot of this was about Orientalism and ideas about the East and about Islam. And so even though most of these folks were not Muslim, they were understood either erroneously as Muslim or they were understood as culturally Muslim because of the dominance of Islam in the region, which is not not really incorrect. Right. But it was used as a way to racialize them and think about them as different. And those forms of difference really relied on ideas about sexuality and gender.

So essentially people in the United States saw Arabs' sexuality and gender as fundamentally different from white American heteropatriarchy. And this reinscribed them as racially different.

So that meant that anything that transgressed norms of gender or sexuality, like, if a peddler did something out in public, witnessed by other Americans that transgressed these norms, whether it was homoerotic or queer or not, it affected where Syrians found themselves in the US racial web, right? So it was this really kind of moveable position. And gender and sexuality really moved things a lot, right? So the more you could conform to "white norms" of gender and sexuality, the more you had the chance of potentially being considered white by other people.

JVN [00:34:52] Mid-1800s, we come into these ordinances known as "ugly laws," which, like, I had never heard of those before. So what are these ugly laws and how are gender and sexuality central to perceived "ugliness"?

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:35:04] Yeah. So I first just want to say that the work on ugly laws has been done by a scholar named Susan Schweik, and her book is called *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public*. So all of this that I'm about to say comes from her work. Ugly Laws were local ordinances that date to the mid-1800s, and they were created in order to keep physically disabled people and poor people from being in the public sphere. So essentially abled and wealthier folks didn't want to see them, didn't want to be confronted with their existence and their difference, like, out in the world. So some of the ways that sexuality and gender came into the ordinances is that some of them prohibited distribution of so-called lewd material, some of the ordinances prohibited cross-dressing. For men, the laws were really concerned with displaying the injured or disabled body. But for women, the laws focus more broadly on appearance, a lack of "beauty," and this category of "unsightliness" that was really broad.

So for me, the laws really highlight that proper femininity was not compatible with being in public view, and unsightliness was a category that included non-white women, you know, just from the get go. So this is regulating the public sphere in which working class and poor women had to access that right in order to make a living. And those women were predominantly going to be non-white women. So it really encapsulates how femininity and womanhood was regulated through class, race, and ability. So for a Syrian woman peddler, simply moving through public space, accessing public transportation, all of that, it could implicate her in this arena of ugly laws. And it also affected Syrian peddlers, because there were a number of people who accused peddlers of being beggars. There was an Orientalist discourse that circulated that claimed that begging was, like, second nature to Syrians, that it was, like, a part of Syrian culture to beg. And there were some Syrians who played on people's sympathies and tried to entice them to buy something that way. But they were working and they were actually selling products. But the association was still really strong. So begging and peddling were really linked in the imagination of a lot of people.

JVN [00:37:21] Yes. Okay. Okay. So then the way that you write about Syrian mothers reminded me of our convo with Dorothy Roberts about the family policing system and its ties to white supremacy. In the book, you say, "When Syrian women put their children in someone

else's care in order to peddle, they were accused of neglect. When they allowed strangers that often other peddlers to board inside their homes, their own living spaces and parenting practices were scrutinized." Who was making these associations?

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:37:48] Yeah. So I should say that, you know, since so many Syrian women were peddling at a particular time, some of them had to put their children in the care of other people or in care homes in order to do that. And so these kinds of things were making these associations. They were being made by social welfare reformers and public health officials in the late 19th and early 20th century. And then the further you get into the 20th century, it's social workers, this sort of professionalized category that comes into being. And most of these reformers and officials were not Syrians. Most of them were white. And when it came to social welfare, many of them were white women. There were some organizations where Syrian women were also doing social work.

Some of these were called "international institutes" that were created specifically to offer services to immigrant populations. And they had these positions called nationality secretaries, which was an immigrant, someone from that community, who was a social worker and who would basically liaise between the organization and the community. So, for instance, in Boston, there's an international institute there, and there was a Syrian secretary who was a social worker. She was an immigrant herself and she was someone who was educated and wealthier. She had a different kind of class access, and she acted as a translator for Syrian families and also a cultural, cultural translator. And she was advocating for assistance toward them, but also imposing a kind of particular middle class perspective on what was right for them. And in some cases, families weren't even necessarily asking for help. Some just attracted the attention of social workers because they were already concerned with certain populations and communities.

One of the things that, that you can see when you start to look at these social welfare records is that Syrians were really concerned about what other Syrians thought of them. And so I write in the book about what we might call "gossip" as a form of community self-policing among Syrians, because it was especially prevalent in relation to women's behaviors and bodies and in relation to sexual behavior. And you can also see that it adapts to the racial proscriptions that existed about gender and sexuality in the United States. And the concern appears a lot in social work case files. So here is an example. There was a file concerning one woman, a Syrian woman, and she had been raped and she had a child out of wedlock. And the Syrian caseworker goes to the hospital to see her. And the Syrian woman freaks out when she sees a Syrian social worker show up to offer her assistance. She basically says that she, you know, she knew that she was ruined now that a Syrian knew about her because she expected the Syrian social worker to tell everyone else. And so she was going to give her baby up for adoption. And on top of this, in the notes, the Syrian social worker remarks that the child was so dark skinned that she was worried that it would not get adopted.

And the language there is explicitly anti-Black. And what you see in the example is this indexing of sexuality, gender, and race and how the community self-policing operated. And, and I call it self-policing because the gossip didn't even have to happen, although it did. There's also just the fear of it happening, the fear of it circulating, was enough to shape how people acted and thought. But there were also Syrian organizations that formed specifically to aid other Syrians in need. So the Syrian Ladies Aid Society was one of them, and they were able to work within the cultural norms that existed and often did really discreet outreach to people in need to get them assistance. But I, you know, I think about this because when we're trying to understand, you know, what histories we have in relation to sexuality, why we might not have certain records, why we might not even have certain stories. In this time of such intense scrutiny on the community, you know, people are going to self-censor. And I think that there is a lot of that that probably happened in what records that we have left.

JVN [00:42:14] But did you find any stories of—, did you ever find any stories of any, like, queer Arab peddlers in your, in your work in the way that we would understand it or, like, a little bit gay? Like a tiny, little bit gay?

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:42:24] I know. It sounds so hopeful. You sound so hopeful. I was so hopeful, too. I mean, in all honesty, Jonathan.

JVN [00:42:30] Not super gay, not really, though. Not super duper gay.

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:42:31] Not really, no. *[CKA NOTE: One of the things that I do in the book, because of this issue, is that I explicitly imagine what the homosocial and homoerotic intimacies would have been between peddlers. You know, just because we may not have a smoking gun in the archive doesn't mean we can't write about queerness or know anything about queerness historically in this community. So in the last chapter of the book I look at a series of photographs of peddlers and I do this kind of critical imagining about desire and intimacy.]* The records that I look at, a lot of them come from Alixa Naff, who's this, like, you know, pioneering Arab American historian and did all of these oral histories. And she does an interview with her half-sister and her half-sister talks about their time back in Indiana and how their father loved to be there in his older age, because he would sit with a bunch of these other peddlers and they would just, like, laugh and reminisce about their time as peddlers. And then she says in the notes that there was a woman who was, like, the group's leader, and in her handwritten notes in English about the recording, she puts in parentheses, Lesbian with a capital L. In the recording, like, there's like some mumbling but you can't hear anything like that. They don't actually say it in the recording. And so there's this, like, weird archival moment that, like, "How does Naff know that this woman was a lesbian?" Like, why does she call her that? Why does she write Lesbian in English? Lesbian with a capital L, you know. So there was clearly knowledge circulating about this person. I don't know who she is. I could not trace her. Right. But to me, as unsatisfying as that is, that's not enough to say that she didn't exist, right? That there was not this, like, you know, queer woman peddler that existed then. I

mean it's unsatisfying for me, you know, as a researcher, but ultimately, like, not enough to make me say, like, "Oh, there's nothing here."

JVN [00:44:06] Yeah, for sure! So, I mean, because you grew up in Kentucky.

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:44:10] Yeah.

JVN [00:44:11] It's just, it's a very fascinating place from where you have come and your ancestry just, like, all of it. And then, and then you kind of going back and exploring a lot of this history. What did it reinforce for you, and how you have understood American history? So not really for everybody else but I'm really curious about, like, what you learned and what your experience in doing all this research was for someone coming from Kentucky, who is a woman of color, but also could pass for a white woman. Both things, you know. Like, what did you learn about American history and how you view it?

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:44:42] Yeah, I mean, I think on sort of a like meta level, what it reinforced for me is that the history of the United States has always been a history of, like, really messy collision around racial categories, sexual categories, and also people trying to live their lives. Like, people trying to just express and, you know, experience the full spectrum of their humanity and then constantly coming up against these kind of, you know, violent limitations from the state, from other people, etc.. Right. I mean, you can see that in all sorts of ways. So, like, this idea that, like, "Oh, we've become more diverse" or things like that. Or that, like, to think about Arabs or to think about queer people, let alone to think about queer Arabs is a contemporary issue or is something that we can only really, you know, talk about or look at if we look in the last 20 years. It reinforced for me that that is a fallacy and it misrepresents the, the kind of, the dynamics of things happening in this period and the shifts in demographics and the anxieties that people had and the ways that people had to sort of navigate things that often people take as, like, very contemporary ideas and norms, like, terminology changes for sure, right? But the structures have been there for a very long time.

JVN [00:46:17] Another thing that we talked about in our early China episode was that, like, often history has been written by the, quote, "winners." And I think that the winners in American history have always been straight white men and, like, the patriarchy. And so, like, so much of the history that is even available, has to be in this lens of, like, conforming to that. And so I just, I don't know if you, if that resonates with you, in as far as, like, why maybe you didn't find like the smoking gun of like queer, you know, queer stuff and Syrian peddlers in the early 1800s. But it's, like, does that resonate? What I was saying?

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:46:54] It definitely does. I mean, you know, on the one hand, like, if you're doing a history—and maybe this is controversial—and, like, your history is just a history of white people and straight people but you're not explicitly examining, like, white heteropatriarchy. Like, you're just missing huge parts of the history. You don't have to study and explore everything. But, like, that is a very small, you know, censored sliver of what

was going on. But the other thing that I would say is that, like, even though I'm not finding the smoking gun, like, I know that this was gratifying for me, personally, and sort of understanding where I come from, and who I am, and things about assimilation—

JVN [00:47:38] And it's an incredible work. Like, it's incredible.

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:49:40] Thank you. But I also, you know, I've always thought about it as, like, "Well, maybe this is just helpful for other people who come from this history or, like, fourth generation and like nobody speaks Arabic anymore or things like that." And what I've learned is that, like, for my students, it resonates for them. Like some people who are like second generation, whose parents came in the, you know, like, early 2000s or in the nineties or things like that, and who are also queer and who are also searching for and figuring out, like, "How do I think about my queerness," like, "How do I fight these messages that to be queer is not part of our communities," right? And, "How do I also fight all of the racism that tells me that where I come from and my communities are homophobic and transphobic in ways that white communities are not," that it's, like, exceptional. Right. And what surprised me is that it, it spoke to people who have much different experiences than I do, come from a different history. But there's still these, like, connections and similarities around, you know, internalizing shame related to sexuality and gender. And this is related to white supremacy and it's related to histories of Orientalism and imperialism, even though the time periods are very different.

JVN [00:49:02] Yes! Okay, Charlotte. So, if you are able to: you mentioned about your great grandfather earlier. In *Possible Histories*, you share a personal story about him. Folks, you got to read this. You gotta read this book but what—, what happened with your great grandfather.

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:49:14] With my great grandfather. Okay. All right. So I first heard about my great grandfather, like, in my early twenties, right? He came to the United States by 1910, he married another young Syrian immigrant woman, they had nine kids together. They're in Louisville, Kentucky. They end up running this business. They've got a bakery and a restaurant. And it's in, like, you know, center of segregation. Black folks came to their restaurant and had to order and eat outside. White folks came to the restaurant and ate inside. Like, they, you know, reinforced the, the apartheid norms of Louisville, Kentucky. And what I learned after I came out, over 20 years ago, is that there were rumors circulating about him that he was bisexual. And the way that people in the family—and as I learned beyond the family in the wider community—knew that he was queer, was because he was supposedly beat up for cruising.

And I tried to sort of verify this. I couldn't find arrest records. I heard that his daughter-in-law, my grandmother, was friends with someone who was married to a cop and that that protected him. And so I thought about, like, the ways that white supremacy might have been protecting my family at that time. But it made me wonder, you know, like, how did people know this? Where did he go? Was it the race of the people, someone he was trying to have sex with, you

know, and this rumor continued to circulate. I mean, I even had contact from someone whose student across the country, totally different generation from me, but, like, maternal relatives came from Louisville who all knew about the rumor. Right. And the rumor now circulates to other queer people in my family as, like, evidence that this isn't anything new. Right? But it also circulates simultaneously for other people as, like, a source of shame. So it's really wild to me that, you know, this has continued for so many generations. But it made me think about, like, how we know what we know, you know. Is it through histories of violence? What did he desire? You know, the evidence about him. If we just look at the historical record is, "Well, he was married, he had kids." So we shouldn't presume to know things about his sexual desire and his sexual self and his sexual life. Right. But rumor and this kind of gossip that circulates in the community, even if it is disciplining, and also has its own kind of knowledge, that can help us reclaim some of these things.

JVN [00:51:44] That is such a throughline. I'm obsessed with that. That's beautiful. Thank you for sharing that with us. Final question, what do you hope readers take away from *Possible Histories* and your work in Arab American studies more generally?

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:52:56] Okay, so there's a few things I really hope that people take away that sexuality is central to the story of how Arabs are seen and they've come to see themselves racially in the United States. I hope people can take away that possibility is a rubric that can help us think expansively about sexuality in the past, beyond the confines of archival collections. And when it comes to thinking about Arab American studies more broadly, I want people to understand that feminist critiques and more recently queer critiques are at the center of Arab American studies. It is a field that has been forced to deal with racialization and empire simultaneously, and it has a lot to offer people. It's often understood, I think, by people outside the field as something that's, like, highly specific. But provincializing these histories and the scholarship only serves to reinforce the idea that there's this kind of intractable difference between the United States and Americans and the Middle East and North Africa and Arabs, on the other hand. So it's really something that has, like, a lot to offer people. And I want to highlight one text that's coming out in February as well. If you're interested in Queer Critique in Arab American Studies, a book by Mejdulene Shomali called *Between Banat: Queer Arab Critique and Transnational Arab Archives.* It's coming out with Duke Press, and I think your listeners would really enjoy it.

JVN [00:53:24] Thank you so much for sharing that with us, Charlotte! This is an amazing episode. Thank you so much for your work. We appreciate you so much and thank you so much for coming on Getting Curious.

CHARLOTTE KAREM ALBRECHT [00:53:41] Thank you!

JVN [00:53:35] You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was Charlotte Karem Albrecht. 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 you, Quiñ, for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, honey, you know what to do: introduce a friend, tell your grandma, tell everybody about it! And then show them how to subscribe. Cause, you know, you gotta find it on there. You can follow us on Instagram & Twitter @CuriousWithJVN. Our editor is Andrew Carson. We love you, Andrew! Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, and Zahra Crim.