

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Alex Espinoza

JVN: Hey, curious people. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and welcome back to Getting Curious. It's October. It's spooky season. It's full fall. It's autumnal. No, it's foliage but it's also Queer History Month. We love that about October and today we are going to get super pumpkin spicy with it when it comes to queer history. And that is the history of cruising. On Getting Curious, we've gotten to cover so much of history, whether that was like animal kingdom, really anything like we are history girls around this house. But we've learned so much about queer history, specifically our episode on female husbands, which talked about folks who are transgender back in the 1800s and 1900s. Um, we refer to it more as like a trans man now, but that's not what they were called back then with Jen Manion. Um Jake Newsome, the history of what happened to all the queer folks and we really like the gay men and queer people uh in Nazi Germany. Um, and what, but that wasn't only leading up that started in 1875 and went all the way through 1975. The history of paragraph 175. So we've covered extensive queer history here. But what I really wanted to learn was, is the history of gay cruising. How were people cruising in the 1700s and the 1800s and the 1900s. Did anyone write that stuff down? Does any of that history survive? Um, and because there's hundreds of years of uh, men wanting to have sex with men, what happened when things like AOL chat rooms and the internet and Grinder and Sniffies came on the scene, like what happened to our culture? Uh, what happened to the people that were experiencing these changes? Um gay cruising, what's the history there? And there is no one better to talk about that with than Alex Espinoza. Alex Espinoza is a queer writer born in Tijuana, Mexico and raised in Southern California. He is the author of Cruising, an intimate history of a radical pastime and has written essays, reviews and stories for the New York Times, Sunday Magazine, Virginia Quarterly review, the Los Angeles Times Lit Hub and NPR. He's also the recipient of awards and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the mcdowell Foundation. Alex is the chair of the Creative Writing Department at the University of California. And his latest novel, The Sons of El Rey came out earlier this year. Today, we're asking what's the history of gay cruising and make sure to stick around for the end of the episode where we will find out what I learned, we're gonna do a little debrief and see what I'm curious about now. Alex, welcome to Getting Curious. How are you?

ALEX ESPINOZA: I'm good, good. I'm good. Um, you know, have my coffee so um it's bright and early here. So I'm, I'm and I'm excited to talk to you about this.

JVN: Um I am so excited to talk about it too because this is like a really random uh first question. But like what? Well, yeah, like, what, what year did Grinder even get invented? Like invented Grinder is not, these people have not been just modern day cruising, whether it's like Grinder or your Sniffies, whatever it is. They didn't even barely have like there was like, it was the Yellow Pages, honey. You couldn't get dick off the Yellow Pages. You had to go to like a park in the sixties and seventies. Plus there was a lavender scare and also I guess to start. OK. So Grinder was founded in 2009. That is just –

ALEX ESPINOZA: Oh wow!

JVN: Yes, 2009. So, what does cruising? What is this? I mean, to me, it seems so organic like you're cruising for dick. But where did, where did the word? The idea of cruising come from?

ALEX ESPINOZA: Well, actually, you know, I mean, you know, you, you could look at, you know, antiquity and you can look at, you know, um, um, you know, past civilizations and, and, and cultures, they certainly were cruising. But they weren't calling it that right. Um the first instance of the use of the word linking cruising to sex is actually found in a novel that was written in 1903 by a writer named. And the book is called the Autobiography of a Thief. And the book is basically hello, just like the title says, it's about a thief, right? Who uses various techniques like pickpocket, scamming, breaking, entering to steal and rob people. And it, she mentions it in the, in the line is, it's, it's, it was in the days when every woman had to possess a fine silk handkerchief, even the bowery cruisers or street walkers carry them. So that's the first instance that where we see the word cruising being linked to sex, right? But, you know, ancient cultures didn't call it that. So, so that's, that's one of the first instances of it written and linking it to sex.

JVN: The idea of, I guess biblically, I mean, I just come from like a corn field in the middle of America, right?

ALEX ESPINOZA: Mmmhmm, right.

ALEX ESPINOZA: So I, I definitely remember hearing about like Sodom and Gomorrah. I remember and, and just this association of gay things being associated with hedonism or like all out, you know, in like social, you know, insanity. What do we see about gay sex from ancient cultures? What evidence do we have? What? Um and was there ever just like, was there ever just like a sweet Brokeback Mountain from, like the Roman times where they were just like, you know, I don't want to get married to girl, then they, like, ran away and they just, like, got married to each other and, like, built a garden and we heard about it or no?

ALEX ESPINOZA: Actually, I'll give you something from Ancient Egypt. Actually. That's really interesting. So, you know, there is evidence of homosexuality and same sex activity in Ancient Egypt, but it's tricky to support for various reasons, including, you know, there's the misrepresentation of the little evidence that there is, um also the discipline, um is very, very white, very male and very heteronormative. So it's a lens that tended to suppress any or explain anything away that wasn't heterosexual, right? In, in Ancient Egypt. So that's kind of tricky. There isn't that much evidence and the evidence that there is, it's sort of interpreted through a very white male heteronormative –

JVN: Alex, can we, can we dig in on this for one second? Because I think this is really interesting. I can almost feel my grandmother or my father, like my grandma's dad, my dad's alive, but like, you know, kind of rolling their eyes or being like, oh, get off it. But let's think about the people who are discovering the pyramids.

ALEX ESPINOZA: Mmmhmm.

JVN: It's giving 1896, it's giving 1903. It's giving Colonel Mustard –

ALEX ESPINOZA: Right.

JVN: It's giving what was going on in England at this time. Francis Walton has already like, run away with eugenics, like queer men have like Yankee doodle dandy, honey.

ALEX ESPINOZA: Mmmhmm.

JVN: It's already all started like the v the vilification of gay people and seeing that, you know, gayness is some sort of like evolution, like a malevolution or like a maladaptive trait –

ALEX ESPINOZA: Right.

JVN: Or some sort of deformity that needed to be cured by Christianity has already started to sink in.

ALEX ESPINOZA: Mmmhmm.

JVN: So when you think about this time of like the late 1800s or early 1900s that started to happen. So these explorers that were uncovering all of these, you know, things in Egypt and you know, mess like you, I almost said Mesopotamia, I'm trying to be a historian, lol.

ALEX ESPINOZA: **Laughs**

JVN: But all these people who are like exploring Egypt and doing a lot of this like, you know, digging this archaeology, honey, they are like Colonel mustard ass straight white dudes and you couldn't say like, oh we see evidence of gay shit. You just couldn't say back then.

ALEX ESPINOZA: No. Yeah. No, you just couldn't. And then also it's, you know, it's, it's a, it's a perfect example of the way in which uh how history is a narrative that's built um around this sort of interpretation that, you know, straight white men who are out there like conquering the world. You know, they get to tell the story that they, that they, that they wanna see, right? And shut everybody else up –

JVN: And for our curious people, Alex, for our people, I'm so sorry. Um but we got to interview this incredible historian on early Chinese history. I think for a lot of our listeners, they can already feel it and their bones like, oh the early China episode references coming with Dr. Jue Guo. But she said something to me that has stuck with me for years, which is that history was often written by the winners –

ALEX ESPINOZA: Exactly.

JVN: The people who got to control the narrative. And so that really is we, we do have to um what's that word? You just have to like, oh, you have to interrogate some of the history that we are, if not all the history because of the time and with which it, you know, was revealed, you just have to kind of look at it through that lens.

ALEX ESPINOZA: Exactly. Exactly. And, and for example, going back to ancient ancient Egypt, we do know about gender fluidity and same sex, sex, same sex activity among the pantheon of Egyptian gods, right? Many of the Egyptian gods were gender fluid, right? So, you know, that's never talked about and I'm gonna tell you there is the curious case and I'm gonna totally butcher these names. So please forgive me the curious case of Khnumhotep and Niankhkhnum who many consider the first recorded gay couple, right? These were two and you're gonna love this. They were two male Egyptian royal servants who worked as manicurists and wardrobe stylists for the palace of King Nusser Ini, who is the sixth pharaoh of the fifth dynasty. Hello! We were manicurists and wardrobe stylists even back then? Right? Don't you love it?

JVN: Ah! Yes! So, what happened?

ALEX ESPINOZA: So, OK, they were discovered buried together, right?

JVN: Uh!

ALEX ESPINOZA: And, and many paintings depict them in what's called a nose to nose pose. And you've probably seen it –

JVN: Yes.

ALEX ESPINOZA: Um, where they're touching their noses and which is a sign of intimacy among same sex couples of the era. So a lot of the, the, the images depict them posing nose to nose, right? Um, you know, and usually, and, and the that was that was for heterosexual couples, right? To show intimacy. It's, it's, it's meant to mean that they're kissing, right? So a lot of those, a lot of the images depict them that way, right? So, but some critics argue that the two men were merely brothers because they're also depicted with their respective wives and Children. So if they were brothers, then they were very close brothers. And also the society's expectation for men to bear offspring could have meant that they got married for that, right? So maybe actually my argument is that they had these wives or actually the first recorded beards, perhaps of these of these of this couple, right?

JVN: OK. So one thing that um is I kind of grew out of in hosting this pod, but I'm now regressing. I used to go through this phase for years, I would say like through like 2020 through 2022 where I was like what's the order of the eras that I learned that like, Greece and Rome were kind of happening, like, at the same time, right? But then it, that's true right?

ALEX ESPINOZA: Yeah.

JVN: And happening at the same time then like Rome kind of like continues to evolve longer than Greece does because like, it kind of takes over everything, right?

ALEX ESPINOZA: Mmmhmm. Huge Republic, yeah.

JVN: So then when, so then is it the dark ages after that?

ALEX ESPINOZA: Right. Yeah. And that's when we really start seeing criminal, homosexuality and homosexual acts criminalized, right? This is, it's right after the collapse of the Roman Empire, we have the middle ages, right? And everything just goes to shit.

JVN: Oh, wait, what about the dark ages or the dark ages of the middle ages? The same thing?

ALEX ESPINOZA: Yeah. The middle, middle slash dark ages, right?

JVN: Because then we learned that they weren't even that dark. There was like shit going on. I feel like we learned about that. Like, then we learned about like the middle ages slash dark ages, like a year ago at some point. And I was like, oh, they, they just, like, don't have, like, as much. Actually, I can't even remember like, why they are, do you know why they are or why do they, why are they, what was it called that for again? My brain –

ALEX ESPINOZA: What the middle, why was it called? The?

JVN: Yeah, like the dark ages. They just got like a bad rap, honey.

ALEX ESPINOZA: Yeah.

JVN: Oh, because it is the plague. Was it the plague?

ALEX ESPINOZA: The plague. I mean, it was the collapse of the Roman Empire. So everything just went to shit. And then on top of that, there was this horrible plague that

decimated everyone, right? So, you know, at it, so everything just crumbles and falls apart. So attitudes regarding homosexual acts back then varied from region to region. But what happens is something rise up, rises up to sort of dominate everything. And that is the Catholic church.

JVN: Uh, now can I also just give you a really quick theory really quick, just really quick and then we're gonna go?

ALEX ESPINOZA: Sure.

JVN: Here's my theory, the plague comes, right? And before that people were just fucking people. But then like, if you think about 2020 honey, it's like we had to have our pod because like, and if you only if you don't like really under understand if you don't have like science and all you have is like religion, faith, like, you know, gods and like all the things and like, you know, the plague time, it's like if a guy went and fucked another guy at the truck stop and then came home with the plague because you got, you know, pustules all over your dick and you made out with someone, you just had to go into your pod.

ALEX ESPINOZA: Yeah, right.

JVN: So then like anything that got you sick, you were probably like, oh fuck, it's the gay shit.

ALEX ESPINOZA: Right!

JVN: Oh fuck. It's the orgy shit. Oh, shit. It's going to the bar. It's like, and then all these people die. So then, like, what happens when people die? You try to explain it, honey. So then like all the faith and all the religion and they're like XYZ, that's my theory. I feel like the plague made everybody homophobic honey. But really it was that bacterium. It wasn't the gay shit.

ALEX ESPINOZA: Correct. Yeah. And those activities are sort of then become taboo, right? Um, they become a source of, um, you know, of, of deviance and, and illness and, and punishment from God –

JVN: Because why would you risk your shit for that? But really you could have gotten it from having sex with a –

ALEX ESPINOZA: Anywhere else.

JVN: Yeah! Yeah.

ALEX ESPINOZA: Anywhere else exactly. Eating, you know, eating a pig that wasn't, you know, cooked properly or, you know –

JVN: Not Babe! **Fake cries**

ALEX ESPINOZA: Right?

JVN: Not 1600s, babe. So take us into it. So then Catholicism, honey –

ALEX ESPINOZA: Right.

JVN: You have like the crusades and like fucking like the Jesus takes over, honey.

ALEX ESPINOZA: Right? God takes over, right? Because in the, in the vacuum, that sort of the, the Roman Empire left something sort of has to, you know, um uh you know, take it over

and something has to step in and it's the Catholic church. And so that's where we start to see a marked change in attitudes about, about homosexuality and, and gay sex. And that's when we start to see sodomy becoming a crime, right? While the middle ages were, you know, uh a time of significant, you know, repression and, and criminalization of same sex relationships in Europe, the historical record, the historical records that we do have are complex and they're kind of multifaceted and they're subject to ongoing investigations still with no like central dominant narrative emerging, right? So there isn't a clear succinct, you know, um uh like uh interpretation of what, you know, same sex attitudes during this period were, right? Because we still don't know that much and people are still uncovering things, right? So at this time, there isn't much documented regarding cruising itself and sex, right? Men sort of hooking up. But there, there is a lot of documentation about the criminalization of, of, of homosexuality and sexual acts.

JVN: They were very anti bottom.

ALEX ESPINOZA: Correct.

JVN: So in the shadow of the newly like the Catholic church, which is growing, that's where we start to see the first homosexual acts criminalized like sodomy get on the books.

ALEX ESPINOZA: Yes.

JVN: Is that in like Italy and Europe or?

ALEX ESPINOZA: Yeah, it's in Europe. I mean, it's, it's there's no definitive, you know, um uh answer to that, but it's just kind of happening in Europe, right? Where we start to see it criminal, it varies from region to region, but we start to see homosexuality, sodomy, right? Being um criminalized around that time around the middle ages. And then we have the Renaissance, right?

JVN: The Renaissance honey and Beyonce wasn't even there yet. So what do we see about? Do we see gay sex mentioned throughout the Renaissance or like 1600s, 1700s. What do we see about it there?

ALEX ESPINOZA: Well, you know, one of the things that cruising relies on is people, right? It relies on a, um, you know, a, a, an urban center which is what makes the middle ages kind of hard because there was no real, it was very sort of peasants. People were living, you know, um were, were farming, right? So there was no real center, right? Um, in Renaissance, uh uh the Florence um homosexuality back then was, was just like it was in Rome. Men could engage in sex as long as they followed certain rules. Um it was outlawed and criminalized yet still allowed to exist. This is where we start to see um the emergence of specific like almost like vice squads. So during Renaissance um during the Renaissance, you, you, you see the emergence of what's called the Office of the Night, which is a sort of vice squad that would crack down on sodomites, right?

JVN: Fuck.

ALEX ESPINOZA: And again, yeah, you start to see it getting police, right? Because of this policing, we we we we then start to see the act go deeper underground, right? And we start to see the emergence of an act that relies on men congregating in certain locals and offering up signs and subtle cues, right? So it starts to emerge and and and evolve into something that we're, we're starting to recognize now. Right. As cruising, right? Because it's

criminalized, men have to resort to certain tricks to certain cues to indicate that they want what.

JVN: That was in Florence you said, right? Was that in Italy?

ALEX ESPINOZA: Yeah. In Florence Italy. Yeah, you start and then the office of the night comes and then they start sort of, they're like this vice squad. They go around cracking down on –

JVN: Did office of the night spread? Did like that become more of a thing?

ALEX ESPINOZA: Um, well, not really. I mean, you see iterations of it in, um, later on in, in London, for example. Um, there, there is another sort of, um, you know, a, a group of, of um, of, of uh like police officers, right? Who, who also go around, um, you know, uh um you know, uh criminalizing, you know, uh uh men and sort of ex, you know, and going around and making sure that like nobody is misbehaving, right? But the office of the night was really big, um around uh the Renaissance, right? And a curious thing to happen in Paris in the 18th century. Um, Paris becomes the epicenter of cruising. What happens there is we have the first ever public park. The Jardin de Tuileries, and then –

JVN: Oh I've been over there! I've been over. No, I'm just kidding. I was just,

ALEX ESPINOZA: I was gonna say, jealous!

JVN: But what, what, what year was this again?

ALEX ESPINOZA: This is in the 18th century in Paris.

JVN: He said the 1700s. That only took me six years of this podcast to really get that together. OK. So 1700s.

ALEX ESPINOZA: So police in this park, police start finding men congregating and they begin, begin arresting them for lewd and lascivious acts. Now, here's the interesting thing about arrests, right? That sometimes are made very public and were printed in the newspapers. Those actually became, like, almost like free advertising for closeted gay men at the time, right?

JVN: Oh my god. **Giggles**

ALEX ESPINOZA: Because they'd be like, hey, if they're arresting men, something's going on there, you better believe I'm gonna go there. Right. So it actually worked, you know, it was like, it was sort of, it worked against what they were trying to stamp out –

JVN: What was the punishment though? What was the punishment in 1700s France?

ALEX ESPINOZA: A lot of these times it was jail, it was, you know, a public humiliation. It was, you know, like –

JVN: Like flogging, like, like you got like rocks thrown at you or something? Or like –

ALEX ESPINOZA: There, there are some references to, to, you know, to, to flogging or to, you know, to public, like public humiliation where basically everybody would know your name, they would print your name in the newspaper. Um, so it was kind of a really, really bad embarrassing thing to be caught doing, you know, stuff like this.

JVN: Alex I read in, I, I was reading about your research and you do a lot on Victorian era Times London 1800s. So we see, because we see a lot of gay stuff start to be written about this around this time. So what is the cruising culture like in London in the 1800s?

ALEX ESPINOZA: Well, it starts to look a little more familiar once urbanized centers are, are established, right? We see brothels appear along with public parks and public toilets, right? The latter, especially the public toilet offering men opportunities to cruise, right? So when we also have what are called Molly Houses, right? Do you know what a Molly House is?

JVN: You go, you pop a couple pills, it makes you feel like you're in Ibiza and then you –

ALEX ESPINOZA: **Laughs**

JVN: No, I'm just kidding. What, what was a molly? Was that like a Yankee doodle dandy house or something?

ALEX ESPINOZA: You're, you're close, you're close to it. Um, Molly Houses were usually inside coffee houses or taverns or inns, right? And these were places where men congregated to meet up for sex and even stage drag marriage ceremonies, right? So again, due to the criminalization and, and social stigma associated with homosexual behavior. Molly Houses were usually clandestine, right? And operated under a veil of secrecy, right? So you start to see the emergence of a sort of subculture, right? So patrons and operators would use coded language and euphemisms to discuss their activities at Molly Houses, right? These spaces were important um for the gay community at this time because they offered support and freedom of expression during the time when homosexuality was vehemently opposed by the larger society, right? These locations became again targets for police raids, right? The most famous raid of these was on Mother Claps Molly House in 1726, right?

JVN: Mother Claps?

ALEX ESPINOZA: Mmmhmm. It's called Mother Claps Molly House. And it was run by a woman known as um Mother Clap, whose real name was Elizabeth or Betsy Clap, which I love.

JVN: Ah, I love her.

ALEX ESPINOZA: That's a really good drag name. It really is.

JVN: Someone needs to bring that back. She was one of our original allies.

ALEX ESPINOZA: That's right. She was described as a procures or madam and her role involved managing the house and facilitating the gatherings and activities that took place there. Right? So in 1726 Mother Clap Molly House was raided by authorities. The raid was part of a wider crackdown on such as such establishments driven by increasing moral and legal pressures against same sex activities. So at this raid, nearly 40 men were arrested, right? The trials were highly publicized and the men involved were arrested for sodomy and other related sexual act.

JVN: Did they find drugs?

ALEX ESPINOZA: No, they didn't find drugs.

JVN: Did they even have drugs?

ALEX ESPINOZA: There was no molly at the Molly House.

JVN: I can't believe they didn't have no opium to chew on or something cute.

ALEX ESPINOZA: I know, right? It's important to note, you know, um that again that the crackdowns of the time might have curtailed public sex and cruising, but they didn't stop it. Right? If anything we see that with, when someone or something is framed as taboo or an acceptable, unacceptable by the mainstream society, something that something just goes deeper underground, right? And it even flourishes, right? So when you deem something taboo or criminalize it, you're not stamping it out, you're just adding fuel to the fire, right? Um, all the press that these arrests made, offered free advertising for men looking for cruising spots, in fact, right? Ho, how's that for irony?

JVN: Honey.

ALEX ESPINOZA: Right?! I mean, they're like, hello?!

JVN: What were like, the things that people would have to do back then to, like, because, like, you might hear about it from a friend of a friend. Was it like a special handshake? Was it a password? Like, how did you get into the Molly House?

ALEX ESPINOZA: Yeah, I mean, you had to know someone, right? And, and, you know, you have to know someone who knew someone and, and you had to completely trust that person, right? And a lot of times, you know, the reasons, the, the reasons and the ways in which these places were, were infiltrated and raided was they would, they would, um, use spies, right? Uh, officers would go, um, you know, undercover, right? They would masquerade as, as gay men and they would infiltrate and, you know, there are plenty of instances of police officers, you know, going undercover, right? And, and getting the lay of the land and then, you know, going around and, and, and um arresting people, right? Once they found out where it was the location, right? Um, OK. So also one of the important things that happens during the Victorian era is the first we get the first recorded glory hole –

JVN: Alex! We haven't even told these moms about what that is. Yeah. OK, guys, if you don't know what a glory hole is, honey, it's this thing where and, and can I just tell you as someone who is like very like, not that glory hole can't be intimate but like I'm just one of those people, like you gotta tell me I'm pretty, I need you to like look in my fucking eyes like I, I'm just not that glory hole type of girl because I need facial intimacy but not everyone does. In fact, some people don't like that shit. Sometimes people just want to go stick there. Uh I was about to say dangling but I'll just say penis because I'm 37. Some people go to these places and they stick their dick through this hole and then someone else is on the other side of the hole so that, you know, you can either like do like oral or some sort of penetrative action and then you don't have to see the other person which some people really like. And is that, that is what a glory hole is, right? Alex? I nailed it didn't I?

ALEX ESPINOZA: Yeah, yeah, exactly.

JVN: I just back then you could probably get a splinter and stuff because I bet in like the 17 hundreds it was probably just like a fucking wood like a wooded as can.

ALEX ESPINOZA: Very crude, right? And you get tetanus.

JVN: Now they're more like plastic. Oh my God full tetanus. And I was like, before the vaccine not in my dick. I do not want tetanus. Anywhere around my dick or, or anywhere

around my privates. How does someone write about the first glory hole where they like this fella was very **both laugh** well, what'd they say?

ALEX ESPINOZA: And, and again, like let, let's just remember I we mentioned earlier the the um the office of the night –

JVN: Oh!

ALEX ESPINOZA: Um in Renaissance um Europe, right? In 1691 we get the Society for the Reformation of Manners is founded, right? And that's sort of a vice squad that sought to suppress lewd acts in general. Uh, and we see them targeting these places in Victorian uh uh you know, uh England um of the time, but the world's first recorded glory hole arrived in London as soon as there was pretty much a space that was created for it, which was Europe's first ever public toilet, right? So, you know –

JVN: Oh yeah, they did used to be in toilets, huh? That is where, yes!

ALEX ESPINOZA: So you see the arrival of the first ever public toilet in, in, in uh London, right? These were known as Bog Houses, right? It was the first recorded incident involving glory hole comes to us from a 1707 court case known as the trials of Thomas Vaughn and Thomas Davies where a hole was made in the stall between two partitions and one man accused the other man of sticking his privy through the hole, right? Um, and uh you know, and it was um you know, uh uh recorded that this man, you know, stuck his private through this hole and was trying to entice this other man into participating in a sexual act, right? The other man refused and stormed off and then the man, I guess zipped this pretty up and ran after him, right? And was accosting him and basically, um it was an extortion scheme. He was trying to get him to participate in this act and then he told him that if he didn't, then he would out him as gay.

JVN: That is so dark. So –

ALEX ESPINOZA: Right, isn't that crazy?

JVN: Do we think that the first Thomas who was sticking his privy through the thing? Was he like a night? Was he like a person of the night office in disguise where he was like a rap, a gay rapist, like a gay person, rapist?

ALEX ESPINOZA: He was just like, yeah, he was just like a criminal, right who was trying to extort –

JVN: What a cunt! And you got all these people in trouble like go find someone who wants to suck your fucking dick, man. What the fuck?

ALEX ESPINOZA: Right. Exactly.

JVN: That is the,

ALEX ESPINOZA: So that's the first recorded incident of um –

JVN: Did they both get in trouble? Thomas's?

ALEX ESPINOZA: No. No, um, there was a trial and, and, the, the, the one who was sticking his privy through the hole was, was arrested and, you know, served time in jail.

JVN: But the other one that he was trying to extort, there was just like, I don't want to suck your dick was, didn't get in trouble?

ALEX ESPINOZA: Yeah, I don't want to, because he was, he was straight, right?

JVN: Oh, what did we know, good for him.

ALEX ESPINOZA: Yeah, he was just peeing, right? He was just using the bod house to do his business and then this criminal, you know, stuck his privy through the hole and was trying to entice him and like, hey, let's, let's play. And when the man refused, um he, you know, left the bog house and then this other man zipped himself up and chased after him and said, you know, you better have sex with me otherwise I'm gonna, you know, tell everyone that you're gay and you know, and, and give you better give me money and then the other man just refused and flagged down an officer and then they arrested him.

JVN: Men have always disappointed me. 1700s, 1800s whenever –

ALEX ESPINOZA: 1980s.

JVN: Oh yeah, these, these hoes are just OK. So is there any other like interesting. Did uh I just, I'll have to write that down for later. We have to write – did people get sent to **Australian accent** Australia for being gay?

ALEX ESPINOZA: **Laughs** No a, a lot, a lot of time it was um it was, they were sent to, you know, in like uh asylums, right?

JVN: **Gasps**

ALEX ESPINOZA: They were sent to you know these –

JVN: I'd much rather go to Perth than an asylum!

ALEX ESPINOZA: Yeah. Yeah, they were, you know, they were seen, you know, they were, they were seen as, as, you know, morally deviant and, you know, sick and, you know, twisted and they would have to be sent away either to jail or to these, you know, these institutions where they were, you know, considered crazy and locked up

JVN: for us not to go from wait, I'm wait because Trump doesn't know the difference between seeking asylum –

ALEX ESPINOZA: Asylum!

JVN: And then which one is it again?

ALEX ESPINOZA: An insane asylum.

JVN: Yeah, I didn't say that. Yeah, so not to go from an insane asylum to erotic fiction. But do we have any erotic – like does any, is there any surviving like diarrhea or like anything of someone who is like, I yearn for the touch of his girthy penis because like we have some stuff from like Lincoln and and, and Jason and, and Jo Josh Steel or Mr Steele about like, oh, I quivered when I found out that you married your wife and that you consummated the marriage. I'm still shaking 10 hours later. Like we have some stuff that you could infer but like is there. But I guess what I also learned about from that time is that like, it was just so you just didn't write about like sexual acts because it was so like frowned upon –

ALEX ESPINOZA: Right.

JVN: Like whether you were straight or whatever you just didn't write about that, which I just think is such a letdown. Like, I just want to know about 1800s lube and like 1700s lube and stuff.

ALEX ESPINOZA: **Laughs** Yeah, there, there wasn't much sort of talk about reference, you know, um, to those things, but we do have people like Oscar Wilde, right. Who, who was gay and, and wrote, you know, when, when he was in jail, wrote letters to his lover and, um, but you know, those don't, those don't go into too much explicit detail because I think the manners at the time dictated what could be revealed or not in, in writing or, or, you know, when you're talking to someone. So that's why, you know, it makes recording like that. There's no real recorded history of, of stuff like that because it's the manners at the time didn't see it proper to write about or discuss those things.

JVN: Oh, and he was definitely born in 1854 and I lived till 1900. So that was so he's like living in this cruisy gay garden moment, Oscar Wilde is.

ALEX ESPINOZA: Yeah. And you know, he was, he was arrested for, you know, for sodomy, right? He was arrested for, you know, being gay.

JVN: He had a great center part, honey, I gotta do an episode of Oscar Wilde. I mean, he's giving, he's giving 1800s me, he's got layers, he's got a center part that's kind of curly.

ALEX ESPINOZA: Yeah.

JVN: Oscar!

ALEX ESPINOZA: He's got a lot of style.

JVN: What is he? We got, I think we're going to go. I wanna. OK. OK. Focus Jonathan.

ALEX ESPINOZA: **Laughs**

JVN: OK. So 1800s. Um, these spaces are getting actively policed. We have the office of the night. Is, it, is a thing still or? It's like the, it's kind of like, like, uh, the American family, traditional family values thing –

ALEX ESPINOZA: Right, yeah.

JVN: But of the time, like the British version and like the European version.

ALEX ESPINOZA: Yeah, it's the society for the reformation of manners. That's, what a terrible name.

JVN: Awful name. We're hating it. So then it's like 1900s. It's the 20th century. Like the girls from the gilded age are like 25 years older –

ALEX ESPINOZA: Mmmhmm.

JVN: And um you know, like Mrs Astor hasn't gone in the Titanic yet –

ALEX ESPINOZA: Not yet.

JVN: Because it's like only 1900. So like, what's the gay shit or what's the gay stuff – focus Jonathan. What are the gay, what's the, what's the cruising culture of the 1900s start to be?

ALEX ESPINOZA: Well, I mean, again, it's, it sort of follows the same trajectory where, you know, you, you as urban centers grow, you start to see more and more locations emerge where, you know, men begin to engage in these, these public sexual acts, um you know, all across Europe and, and the rest of the world, the US as well. Um, you know, the roaring twenties I think were, were a moment of great sexual freedom and, and you know, that was the time when actually homosexuality was seen as something like kind of bougie and bohemian, right? Same sex attraction was actually kind of very cool and like, um you know, gender fluidity was, was very cool during the, the early 1900s and, and you know, up until the, the the depression, right? So, you know, you start to see these urban centers evolve and thriving and developing and you know, more public toilets, more public parks, more public spaces for docks, right? Um, spaces for for men to meet up and congregate and again, what you, what cruising relies on is a large population and movement, right? Transition, you know, uh that's why you see like public bathrooms, truck stops, you know, train stations and like there needs to be movement. So as population and urban centers develop, you start to see more of these places pop up. Therefore, you start to see more opportunities for another cruise, right? And so you start to see that evolving really much a lot during the ni the the the 1900s, right? The early 1900s, the the early 20th century.

JVN: What is like the code? I, we were reading it in some of your research about the Hayes Codes. What are the codes?

ALEX ESPINOZA: Well, one of the things that, that start, that's, that's really, really, really significant that happens culturally uh in the United States that spreads to the rest of the world is the film industry, right? Movies, you know, first you have silent films and then you have uh talkies and those become really important ways in which people start to understand the world, right? They're accessible, it's cheap, you know, anyone can go see a movie um you know, uh anywhere at this point. So film starts to become a, it's like the first social media platform, right, that people use to sort of communicate and understand the world. So the Hayes Codes um were a set of industry, moral guidelines that governed the production of movies in Hollywood from 1934 to 1966. They were named after William H Hayes, the president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, right? These codes were designed to ensure that films adhere to certain standards of, of decency and morality, right? The Haze Codes were a very strict guidelines that, you know, uh there was a very strict set of guidelines that prohibited the explicit depiction of sex, violence, nudity and suggestive dancing in films, right? This led to many Hollywood Studios, um requiring their actors and actresses to behave in morally just ways and avoid deviant lifestyles, including homosexuality, right? It's important here to know, um, Jonathan also that I think one of the things that connects this activity and, and um you know, this sort of quote lifestyle throughout history is the notion of like codes and enforcement, right that, you know, um that there are certain behaviors that are tolerated and others that aren't, right. So, you know, it's, it's following a, a very similar narrative, right? From Ancient Egypt all the way you know, to now, right? This idea that these behaviors need to be policed, they need to be curtailed and you're fine. As long as you're participating, you know, as long as you don't break the rules, right? As long as you don't, you follow the hierarchy, right? Um, these strict standards that then create the subculture that relies on subtle cues and language, right, to communicate. Um, but going back a little bit I want to mention and sort of point out the, the, curious case of the actor William Haines, right? Do you know who William Haynes is?

JVN: Uh uh

ALEX ESPINOZA: OK, so I'm gonna tell you who, who William Haines is and he's not to be confused with the aforementioned William Hayes, who, who gives us the Hayes codes, right? William Haines was a popular film star during the silent era and into the early talkies, he was actually one of the first actors, one of the few actors who successfully made the transition from silent films to talkies, right? Because silent film actors, you know, once they opened a lot of them when once they opened their mouth and started speaking and delivering lines, their, their careers ended, right? Because they couldn't act –

JVN: Like the blonde lady from Downton Abbey when Lady Mary had to voice her!

ALEX ESPINOZA: Exactly. Right. So they, they disconnect. So William, William Haines was actually one of the few actors who made the successful transition from silent films to talkies. He was considered by many film scholars to be the first leading man. He was very handsome, you know, very charming and you know, played like kind of a lot of comedic roles. He was just very, very talented and wonderful actor. He was also openly gay at a time when with such a lifestyle was not publicly accepted, especially by someone with such a high profile, right? He was a famous actor. He was, he was an MGM contracted actor. So his sexuality became a point of contention. Um and he refused to conform to the Hollywood norms of the time, right? He, he was like, I, I'm absolutely not gonna go in the closet or pretend to be straight. I'm gay. I have a lover. Everybody knows it. I don't care, right? So they, they kind of tolerated it. They're like, OK, whatever, you're a successful actor. So we're gonna let it go. However, something important happens in 1933 Haines is arrested in a YMCA uh with a sailor that he picked up near Percy Square, right? He picks up the sailor, takes him back to the YMCA and they have some fun, right? Um, his boss at MGM Louis B Mayer um at this time tells him that either he concedes to a sham, you know, or lavender marriage to a woman uh and leaves his longtime boyfriend, Jimmy Shields, uh and his gay lifestyle or uh be blacklisted. Well, Haines chose to live openly and proudly and that pretty much ended his film career, right. He ended up having an incredibly successful career though as an interior designer to um the stars, right? Including some of his clients were Joan Crawford, who was his good friend, Marion Davies and, and even George Cukor, right? Uh he and, and his boyfriend, Jimmy Shields were together for 47 years and in fact, Joan Ca uh Joan Crawford, uh once called them the happiest married couple in Hollywood.

JVN: Oh, and did death do them part?

ALEX ESPINOZA: Yes. Yeah.

JVN: Sad. But what a cool Trailblazer.

ALEX ESPINOZA: Right. Exactly. Because he refused, he was arrested and, and, you know, was, was caught doing this, this thing and, and, you know, the ultimatum was either you, you know, you go in the closet and pretend to be straight or, or, or we fire you and, and he, he chose to, to live his life however he wanted and, you know, he wore it as a badge of honor, right? Just like, I mean, and, you know, and skipping forward, we see the same thing happening with someone like Mi uh George Michael who gets arrested in, you know, Will Rogers Park and instead of cowering and, and hiding, he turns that opportunity into, you know, a song right Outside which is a, you know, becomes one of his big hits and he pokes fun of the whole thing in a video.

JVN: That was really fucking iconic and major of him.

ALEX ESPINOZA: Um, right!

JVN: So in your most recent book, it's Sons of El Rey. And you in this book, you are interviewing so many different people or you're interviewing folks about cruising, right?

ALEX ESPINOZA: Yeah. Yeah. And that was, I mean that, you know, we, we talked earlier about like the, the lack of, of, of historical documentation in, in the queer community. And that was one of the biggest challenges of writing cruising was that I, there was no definitive book that I could or text that I could turn to. I had to basically invent all of this. And I looked at, you know, um I looked at architecture, I looked at, you know, sociology history, you know, interviews, right, to gather all of this information to write cruising. But I was writing, I was writing another book which featured a character who was gay and was hooking up. It was, I was writing a novel, my, my new novel that was just published –

JVN :Sons Of El Rey!

ALEX ESPINOZA: Right, The Sons of El Rey by Simon and Schuster. And, and then the opportunity to write Cruising presented itself and I couldn't pass it up. I had to, I had to put the novel away and then write Cruising. And the two books kind of had an interesting conversation with each other because my main character, one of my main characters in the novel is queer and he finds himself having to hook up with guys for money. Right? And, and so the two books kind of had an interesting conversation with each other. And once cruising came out, I picked up the novel again and started working on it and, you know, just had it published.

JVN: I love an interdisciplinary author, honey!

ALEX ESPINOZA: Right!

JVN: She's published and all the verticals. I love. So, in Cruising, what was your, what was your experience of researching? Um, who did you interview? Who did you, who did you study? Was it old, young? Like what, what did the older folks say? What, what did you take away from researching without doing spoiler alerts? Because I think everyone needs to buy or – needs to buy spoiler alerts, Jonathan get it together, everyone needs to buy Cruising and read it and get into it. Um, but what did you take from your research?

ALEX ESPINOZA: You know, one of the things I took was uh the, you know, when I was interviewing, um these men that I talked to about their cruising experiences, it almost was validating for them because I was giving them permission to share a very intimate brief, erotic moment that, you know, they never told anybody about, right? Because it's one of those things where, you know, everybody's doing it, but nobody's talking about it because it's so secretive. And suddenly I, you know, I was having this very deep intimate, lovely conversations with men who, you know, would tell me stories about when they were young and you know, the the the bathroom, you know, at the bookstore in their college, they could remember the color of the tiles, you know, in the bathroom, they could remember the smell. They could remember those, those brief moments of intimacy that were very sexually charged and beautiful and I was giving them permission to share it with the world, right? And I think that was very validating for a lot of men. They just kind of felt like finally I get to, I get to share this with someone and, and then other men would say, oh yeah, I felt the same way. I felt the same way. So all, all that, that's what connected us and that's what connects us, I think to this practice and this idea that I think it's, it's not taboo, right? It's not taboo to want to

connect with someone, to want to have an intimate moment if you're in the closet or if you're not, you know, living in a society, you're in a country where being gay is criminalized, right? Um, this is your only opportunity for intimacy and you're gonna take it. So I think, you know, taking an a subject like this and demystifying it and, and treating it as a very important cultural touchstone, right? For the gay community was I think a very important thing for me to do. And, you know, I, I feel very proud of that.

JVN: That's just, just giving me chill. So you guys, if you want the historical uh nonfiction, it's Cruising by Alex Espinoza. If you want the gorgeous fiction novel, Sons of El Rey, Alex Espinoza does it all! Where are you the most active Alex? Where can people find you if they have just fallen in love with you over this last hour and change? Is it? Are you more on Instagram? Are you more on TT are you on X or you? I still like to call it Twitter just to piss off you. Um but where, where can people find you?

ALEX ESPINOZA: Uh Instagram, I'm usually posting pictures of my dogs and my huge landscape, you know, backyard renovation that's going on right now, so –

JVN: Oh girl, that's a good series!

ALEX ESPINOZA: Right? Yeah, you're gonna have, we're gonna have to come over, you're gonna have to come over. We're gonna have to have a what they call it? A Kiki?

JVN: Yes! A Kiki and my husband would love to see my husband's a landscape architect. So he would like love to contribute.

ALEX ESPINOZA: Really?

JVN: Yes, he is. He loves it. That's his thing.

ALEX ESPINOZA: Oh my God. So yeah, you can find me on Instagram A E underscore Espinoza.

JVN: We're gonna do debrief with yours truly. But Alex, thank you so much for coming on Getting Curious. We love you so much. Thank you so much for your work and I just love setting this time with you.

ALEX ESPINOZA: Thank you so much, Jonathan. And again, thank you so much for everything that you do. You're one of our, our biggest uh you know, most wonderful uh queer icons out there and you know, we're, we're all just so lucky to have you in our community.

JVN: Oh, Alex! Leaving us on such a high note, honey! I love you so much. You guys stick around for a debrief. Thank you, Alex!

ALEX ESPINOZA: OK. Bye!

JVN: Here are some of the takeaways like my, just the things I thought were really interesting. Uh that raid on Mother Claps Molly House 1726 interesting. Um and we had like uh Betsy Claps and I just think that was such a good uh such a good drag name. But what I took from this episode is that like the the legitimate human need of sex, of touch of intimacy has always been there and no matter who tried to stamp it out, no matter how much it was systemically tried to just be removed. Gay people have persisted. Um, and I think that's one of the most important takeaways that we have here. I also thought that the Hayes Codes or, or William Haines um not to be confused with the Hayes Codes, but the story of William

Haines who lived out loud, who refused to uh change or hide who he was a famous actor turned into interior designer. And I'm dying to know what my friend Alok would think about that because Alok is very passionate about the ways in which queer people are like ostracized and pushed into certain jobs because we aren't seen as being like able to do other certain jobs. And I just thought that that was like, I mean, I love doing hair and I know that folks love interior design. But what would happen if queer kids weren't shown that there was only like such a limited thing that they could do successfully. Now, I love being a part of Queer Eye and I love getting to do hair on Queer Eye and I love my art and I love what I get to do, but I do think that so many people are not and that's not only a queer thing, it's a woman thing, it's a big thing. Um OK. Also also the office of the night, the crackdowns on sodomites that happened through um Italy. That was a really interesting thing. Oh Os Oscar Wilde, honey. I need to know more about Oscar Wilde. How come I, I don't know who my cousin from a different. He's not really my cousin, but he had a center part. He had waves. He loved dick. I need to know more about Oscar Wilde. He was a Trailblazer. He was very brave. Um, things that I'm curious about now, uh Oscar Wilde, I wanna know more about him. Um oh, and just the, the pendulum of conservatism and progressiveness. Is that something that I'm accurately seeing is that, is that real? And then the other thing that I wanted to say is Getting Curious contests for our historians out there if you're still listening to your real one and I love you. Um, but what was the first gay public arrest? And when were the first anti sodomy things? And, and what is the earliest gay like thing that we can find? Like, was there some, we, we need more gay historians and I think we gotta go get more grants and make like, you know, gay history. We just gotta do more gay history. You guys, it's important that I think the answers are there. Um, so I love you and thanks for Getting Curious. We'll see you next week and we love you. OK, bye.

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