

Introduction

In 1940, a Syrian American medical doctor ran for Oklahoma's seventh district seat in the US House of Representatives. The candidate, Dr. Michael Shadid, had been born in 1882 in Marjayoun, a town in the southern part of what is known today as Lebanon. At the time of Shadid's birth, it was part of Ottoman Syria, a large province in southwestern Asia. When Shadid came to the United States in 1898, he worked as a peddler, like many other Syrian migrants at the time. Peddlers traveled either in groups or alone. Some peddlers remained within a city's limits, while others spent days, weeks, or even months traveling the surrounding countryside. Syrian peddlers sold everyday items, such as needles, thread, linens, belts, and soap. They also sold what Americans thought of as exotic commodities, such as silks, perfumes, rugs, and rosaries from the Holy Land.

Years later, after using the money he earned from peddling to attend medical school, Shadid had his own private practice in Elk City, Oklahoma, and was active in local socialist politics.¹ In 1940, for his first of two runs for Congress, he ran as a socialist. The following editorial was published during that campaign in a newspaper based about fifty miles north of where he lived. At that point, Shadid had lived in Oklahoma for almost thirty years, and his medical practice tended the health needs particularly of farmers.

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 scarfs [*sic*], 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. Nor are the political rugs exemplified by the candidacy of Dr. M. Shadid of any better quality. These rugs too glisten in the light of hard times; they are smooth, but what lies under the surface?—Will they, like the peddler's rug, fade, will they become a thing forsaken, dirty, unfit to have around? After the first washing, what will we

have? . . . No American parentage glorifies this 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 make-up.²

By using the figure of the peddler as a metaphor for empty campaign promises, this editorial cast Shadid as an untrustworthy and unqualified candidate. The figure of the peddler was an easy image with which to express fears of socialism and the foreign and to discredit Shadid. Many years had passed since the brief period when Shadid worked as a peddler, but linking him to the peddler figure also diminished his career as an accomplished medical doctor. Consider the threat that he posed to the incumbent of five years to warrant this vitriol. Shadid was defeated both times he ran for Congress, but he enjoyed a base of support that earned him the second highest vote count in each election. In fact, in the second election, Shadid was so close behind the winner that he called for an official recount, a request that was denied.³

The strategy of highlighting Shadid's foreignness was predicated on a genealogy of Orientalism that cast the Syrian or Arab peddler (and the "Oriental" more broadly) as someone deceptive and manipulative, as someone with no roots in any community and with no loyalty to the United States. The "glistening," "gleaming," and even "gaudy display" of the peddler's rugs and scarves was part of the allure of Syrian and other foreign peddlers; the peddler brought "exotic" items to the doorsteps of working- and middle-class Americans, particularly women.⁴ Customers were both excited and repelled by the commodified cultural and racial difference that peddlers sold. Invoking the strong associations of peddling with Ashkenazi Jews, this editorial also embedded Arab difference within anti-Semitism. The editorial called Shadid an "off-color Jew" as a way to differentiate him from Americans, in both racial and ethnoreligious terms; the hooked nose was a common anti-Semitic representation that circulated widely in print depictions of Jews.⁵

The editorial also described the peddler as "queer." Dress and mannerisms (both marked here as "queer") widely index a gendered personhood: our historically and socioculturally specific understandings of femininity, masculinity, and other gendered embodiments. The common usage of the term "queer" at this time was synonymous with "odd." However, by the 1940s, "queer" was also associated more broadly with sexuality—particularly connoting male effeminacy and sexual deviance.⁶ The queerness in this editorial was a strangeness that highlighted the Syrian peddler's cultural and racial inferiority to the communities in which he peddled, and the editorial looped that difference back to the flamboyance of the peddler's display. Each of these indices of difference relies on the others for meaning and power. They cannot be disaggregated; they produce one another. Arab peddlers in the United States were rendered knowable to Americans through such discursive practices, which emphasized their cultural and racial deviations from whiteness. But these cultural and racial differences were replete with sexual

and gendered embodiments. Arabs were thus sensationalized because of the perception that Arab sexuality and gender was fundamentally different from white American heteropatriarchy, which reinscribed them as racially different.

The experiences of Shadid and the accusations leveled against him are indicative of the complexities of early Arab American racial histories. Shadid was both successful and ostracized. He had access to many opportunities afforded only to white Americans, and he was a naturalized US citizen. Syrians were able to naturalize without legal contest after they successfully litigated their racial position among “free white persons” in 1915.⁷ That case, *Dow v. United States*, asserted Syrians’ right to naturalize as US citizens, a right based on a “racial prerequisite” of whiteness. In a series of naturalization cases in the early twentieth century, the boundaries of whiteness were policed and expanded to reinforce excluding Asian immigrants from claiming US citizenship.⁸ Syrian petitioners experienced different outcomes: some were able to naturalize and others had their petitions contested by the state. Ultimately, Syrians were one of the few groups of non-European petitioners to be granted naturalization rights and to have those rulings upheld in appellate courts.⁹ Thus, *Dow* ended the question of whether Syrians were eligible for naturalization and ruled them to be legally white. Due not only to the varying outcomes of the Syrian naturalization cases throughout this period but also to the often contradictory reasoning judges employed to reach those decisions, Syrians have been called “the courts’ ultimate poltergeist.”¹⁰

Despite the legal victory in *Dow v. United States*, Syrian Americans’ whiteness remained provisional long after 1915.¹¹ Borrowing Robert Orsi’s concept, Sarah Gualtieri suggests that this provisional whiteness is more accurately characterized as a racial “inbetweenness.” This inbetweenness is evident in the life of Dr. Shadid and others like him, which shows how Arab Americans could be subject to racialized violence even as they enjoyed a whitened access to wealth and privilege. For instance, for some time, Shadid advocated for a return to his native country because of his experience with racial discrimination. After he was targeted by the Ku Klux Klan in his town in 1927, he wrote to the Syrian American magazine the *Syrian World* to discuss racial discrimination against Syrians and to advocate returning to Syria. Shadid’s letter spurred a debate about racism and Syrians’ belonging in the United States that continued for several months in the magazine’s pages.¹²

Shadid, like many other Arab immigrants of his time, was a racially liminal subject. He experienced legal classification as both nonwhite and white at different moments in his life in the United States, and the records of his life show that he enjoyed some of the material privileges that whiteness afforded while also experiencing racial marginalization. Shadid was married and had biological children, and both statuses (as a married man and a father) were integral to conceptions of idealized US citizenship. Still, his racial liminality called into question his compatibility with white Americanness, regardless of the presumption about any sexual practices based on his marital and parental status, which resembled normative

American heterosexuality. But when Shadid was maligned as a “queer” peddler of rugs, this foregrounded his threatening foreignness through an Orientalist understanding of sexual and gender difference. Syrian racial liminality—and specifically the uncertainty regarding “Arab” and “Syrian” as racial categories in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century United States—hinged on a complex and fluid entanglement of both Syrian and white American sexual norms.

The main intervention of this book, *Possible Histories*, is to examine both the discursive and material histories of what I call the *queer ecology of the Syrian peddling economy* in order to unravel this entanglement. The queer ecology of peddling is a descriptor that names the peddling economy as broader and more interconnected than has traditionally been defined (as explained below). It is also a conceptual framework, specifically a queer analytic, that allows me to address the sexual, racial, and gendered implications of the Syrian peddling economy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and in the production of knowledge about the Arab American past. This conceptual framework attends to the contingent and curated nature of historical narratives. It asks, in other words, what was possible in these histories and what has been occluded from them. These are *possible histories* and I use a practice I call *historical-grounded imagining* to explore them. In the pages that follow, I map and analyze the figure of the Syrian migrant peddler and the scrutiny this profession received in order to show how dominant ideas about sexuality are imbricated in Arab American racial histories. As this book shows, the policing of Arab American labor practices—which existed at times in tension and at other times in alignment with white norms of sexuality, gender, and class—produced the figure of the Syrian peddler. This polarizing figure, I argue, was a target of white supremacist heteronormative anxieties. Later, Arab Americans recuperated this figure as a heroic pioneer of early Arab American history, a discursive move that obscures this troubled history and the central role of heteronormativity within it. Historical-grounded imagining is a method for reclaiming and reexamining this queer past.

Peddling was an ecology of laboring practices, interdependence, and intimacies that buoyed the Syrian American migrant community in its earliest years. Contrary to dominant narratives, peddling did not consist only of a traveling salesperson or only of a network of peddlers and those who supplied them with goods. The laboring practices of peddling also included stationary work that many Syrian women undertook, such as operating boardinghouses where peddlers would stay and crafting handmade items for peddlers to sell. In my view, broadening the scope of peddling labor practices is crucial because the true scope reveals the extent to which peddling relied upon Syrian women not only as peddlers but also as those who labored in multiple ways to make peddling a profitable occupation. The array of laboring practices also included those family members, again often women, who stayed home while peddlers left to sell. They took care of children, did other unpaid domestic work, and prepared community meals of celebration when long-distance peddlers returned. A subargument of this book is that peddling was a

system of interdependent labor and care that produced new kinship structures and economies, not all of which fit into heterosexual family structures. I also show how peddling enabled forms of intimacy that were specific to peddling (chapter 4). Through my specific theorization of the *intimacies of peddling*, I have developed another major intervention of this book: integrating an analysis of embodiment and erotics into Arab American history. This analysis of embodiment and erotics also provides the basis for considering the possible histories that have been occluded from community historical narratives.

The American¹³ and Syrian responses to this queer ecology revolved around racial difference, sexual and gendered propriety, and the ways that peddling work blurred the idealized boundary between public and private life. In turn, both Syrians and white Americans used these assessments of difference and propriety to index the capacity of Arabs to be modern. Were peddlers pioneers who ushered Arab immigrants into a modern, capitalist, and (white) American life, as some Arab American scholars and activists would later have us believe? Or were they anachronistic vernacular capitalists, after Ritu Birla, who threatened the structural position of white Americans?¹⁴ Or were they both? These largely critical discourses have positioned Syrian peddlers as, at worst, lawless creatures who would disregard moral frameworks to make money or, at best, wayward individuals whose actions threatened the reputation of the entire community.

The queer ecology of peddling is an important site for illuminating the relationship between sexuality and race in Arab American history because of the temporary and transitory nature of peddling work and because of its dependence on interactions between Syrian migrants and non-Syrians that took place away from large Syrian communities, where scrutiny regarding social norms was certain. Looking at this early history of Syrian Americans also reveals the deep entrenchment of Orientalist conceptions of Arabs in the American psyche and the extent to which these ideas are tied to sexual normativity. In addition, the sexual dimensions of Arab American racialization in this period are visible not only through Orientalist tropes but also more broadly through discourses of modernity. Amira Jarmakani calls these discourses the “metanarrative of modernity,” as they explored “the universalizing, Eurocentric assumptions that are often smuggled into the notion of modernity.”¹⁵ In other words, racialization in this context also scrutinized the extent to which Syrians were capable of embodying the characteristics of US citizenship in particular and had the capacity for self-governance in general.

QUEERING ARAB AMERICAN RACIAL HISTORIES

Possible Histories intervenes both thematically and methodologically in the production of Arab American racial histories. Sarah Gualtieri’s groundbreaking work has explored how this population was positioned dynamically between the racial categories of white, Black, and Asian during this time.¹⁶ Indeed, when Arabs from Ottoman Syria first came to the United States in the late nineteenth century, they

found themselves in a new place in which the racial logics of white supremacy and settler colonialism were among the most central organizing features of society. This book expands this understanding by analyzing how they also brought with them ways of enacting intimacy, desire, and sexuality that frequently did not align with the framework of normalcy outlined by white, middle-class, and Christian American modernity. Although gender and women have increasingly been a focus of scholarship on Arab Americans, sexuality remains not just an underexplored topic but an absent analytic; discussions of gender are limited to cisgender women and often remain embedded within the logic of compulsory heterosexuality.¹⁷

Possible Histories brings Arab American subjects to queer studies by conceptualizing the ecology of peddling as a queer analytic. The queer ecology of peddling operates along multiple epistemic registers throughout this book. I contend that peddling was an economic network; a transitive sexual, gendered, and racialized system; and a historical reading practice that asks after the uses of historical narrative making. As an economic system, peddling was the transactional exchange of goods for money. It revolved around transitory labor practices that were supported by stationary work, such as operating boardinghouses and making things at home for peddlers to sell. It was also supported by a transnational network of suppliers, and it generated money that supported families separated by transatlantic migration. As I explore in chapters 2 and 3, some Syrians also associated peddling with sex work, and rumors circulated that Syrian women were not offering merely physical goods for sale. Syrians peddled the fantasy of their racial difference in the transactional nature of their work. The encounters between Syrian peddlers and their customers often crossed differences of race and gender. Peddling is fundamentally transactional, as an exchange that depends on and activates sensibilities of trust. American commentators (and some elite Syrians, as chapter 3 demonstrates) frequently questioned the reliability and authenticity not only of goods but also of the peddler. Was this lace actually made in Syria? Did this rosary truly come from Palestine? Did this peddler really lose her husband, leaving her with four children to feed on her own? From these questions of origins, reliability, and truth, we get also the derisive definition of “peddling,” meaning to sell goods that are questionable in quality.

Finally, the queer ecology of peddling is also about a transient relationality that opens up analytical registers of the sexual and the erotic. The relations between peddler and customer were often fleeting, and the work of peddling was expected to be temporary. Historical narratives have relied on that time-limited expectation to imbue peddling with more respectable meanings as an occupation. Ironically, this transient relationality also foregrounds Arab migrant erotic embodiment and intimacy in the relations among peddlers on the road, between peddlers and their customers, and among those who tended to the home and community while peddlers were away (discussed in chapter 4).

I conceptualize peddling as a queer analytic to explain its slippery and transient nature. Peddling operates with multiple purposes, being neither strictly a form of labor nor a metaphor. Much like the term “queer” itself, peddling defies singular or stable categorization. As a queer analytic, the queer ecology of peddling offers a lens for mapping and analyzing the complex and transitive nature of peddling work, as well as the shifting, contradictory discourses that interrogate, praise, or deride it. Using peddling in this way allows me to ask, What is unstable, unexpected, or unruly about peddling? What possibilities of encounter and intimacy did peddling open up? This concept is not just specific to Arab American history; it extends beyond the realm of what those outside the field of Arab American studies may view as a parochial ethnic history. For instance, in queer studies, we might ask how particular methods and theories are peddled, how those knowledges are validated, and what other knowledges are occluded in that process.

The queer ecology of peddling effectively opens onto questions of method through its emphasis on the slipperiness of historical narratives and knowledge production. I depend particularly on historical-grounded imagining (which term I use to refer to a body of methodological interventions by queer studies, post-colonial studies, and Black studies scholars) and on a tradition of queer affective method. (I discuss these methods in more detail below.) Peddling also functions as a framework for analyzing the historical narratives placed on peddling and peddlers in order to ask what those narratives have obscured and what power they have accrued. A particular kind of recuperative and respectable history of early Arab Americans has often been peddled in which women appear as the spousal extensions of peddlers, men play the lead roles in the migration story, and Syrian immigrants effectively become white. I am peddling a different history here, leaning on the rubric of possibility, to center sexuality and gender without the assumption or expectation of heteronormativity. The analytic guiding this book—the queer ecology of peddling—uncovers a history of Arab American engagements with and investments in whiteness that are simultaneously engagements with and investments in heteronormative sexual politics. Mobilizing this queer analytic brings Arab American subjects and erotics to queer studies, something that remains at best infrequent at the time of this publication.

Some of the greatest differences between Syrian and American (usually white) ideas of sexuality were most visible in hegemonic American representations of Syrian peddlers. For instance, as late as 1981, Roget’s Thesaurus included in its listing for “Arab” the following terms: vagabond, hobo, tramp, vagrant, hawker, huckster, vendor, and peddler.¹⁸ These synonyms form an example of the mark that peddling made on the ontology of Arabness in the United States and the English-speaking world more broadly; but they also associate Arabs with a sexually debased transience synonymous with “hobo” and “tramp.”¹⁹ In addition, unlike other immigrant communities in which peddling was a common profession among men, Syrian women peddled in significant numbers. This reality, along

with migration itself, began to shift the typical family structures and norms in Syrian diaspora communities. Peddling thus became a site of controversy regarding women's reproductive labor in the family. It also allowed Syrians the possibilities of living differently as they gained physical distance from their diasporic communities. Norms regarding sexuality—particularly sexual activity, sexual relationships, and marriage—became especially fraught in the diaspora as the sustainability of Syrian marriage traditions dwindled. Away from the disciplining mechanisms of Syrian American communities, long-distance peddling in particular opened up possibilities for people to live out and express their desires in different ways.

The racial position of Middle Eastern immigrants and their US-born descendants has been described in different but overlapping conceptual frames, such as “in between” white and nonwhite, “not quite white,” “racial hinges” and “racial loopholes,” and “white before the law but not on the street.”²⁰ This lack of fixity indicates that race is a fundamentally unsettled concept in relation to Southwest Asian and North African diasporas in the United States. These diasporas include a range of racial experiences; they include those who predominantly experience the privileges of whiteness and those who predominantly experience anti-Blackness. Yet this difficulty of categorization, as well as the unstable nature of race, is an additional reason why the history of Arab Americans is such a rich site for exploring how sexuality (in conjunction with gender, class, and religion) interjects in and modifies that racial vicissitude.

Because this migrant community has navigated white supremacy and Orientalism, we cannot rely on traditional historical methods alone to know things about sexuality in this history. To attempt to do so risks reinscribing the community and its experiences in a heteronormative framework produced through both elite Syrian and hegemonic American ideals. This framework is sedimented by normativity and is therefore perceivable in archival collections. Many collections chronicling Arab American lives have been donated and curated within the context of depicting a certain kind of legible, normative existence—a sameness—that demonstrates their positive contributions in the United States. For Arab Americans, social histories of early Arab America can signify that “we’ve been here, we’ve survived, we existed and exist still” in the face of violent rhetoric and criminalization that denies our place in the United States—and, for some, in our ancestral homelands as well. Sometimes these histories can answer the claim that Arabs are essentially different from and incompatible with Americans. To this claim these histories can respond: “We were (we are still) just like you.” This dual outcome of representational politics simultaneously affirms and assimilates. Emma Pérez traces this dual tendency as specific to ethnic history writing, in which documenting the existence and contributions of minoritized communities builds armor against institutional oppression. At the same time, the constant comparison of ethnic groups to whiteness prompts Pérez to ask, “Can we salvage history from sameness?”²¹ This dilemma arises from a specific problem: projects of historical recovery are embedded and implicated in liberal forms of personhood that rely on a racialized universal of the human.²²