

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 Marj'ayoun, 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

This sameness hinges on certain normative ways of being that are predicated on class, sexuality, gender, and proximity to whiteness and Christianity. When we look at materials that have been collected in that spirit of positive contribution, we need instead to interrogate and make visible those disciplinary mechanisms of respectability. Yet limiting ourselves to exposing these mechanisms is not enough. *Possible Histories* works in the traditions of scholars of queer history, particularly those who chronicle the lives of queers of color, as well as scholars who think about the records of histories of systemic violence and the lives obscured by such records. In this book I assert that we must imagine possible desires, intimacies, and pleasures that Arab Americans have experienced other than those evidenced by archival records—including those that were not constrained or disciplined by either American white supremacist heteronormativity or Syrian sexual normativity.

In the rare cases when sexuality is a central analytic in relation to Arabs and Arab Americans, it typically appears with a contemporary focus.²³ But this book shows that sexuality has always been a central question framing what happens to Arabs in a US context, even when the terms of sexuality have changed in relation to the human.²⁴ Arab Americans have been racialized through Orientalist concepts of culture that cast Arabs as the opposite of Americans and American culture.²⁵ In the contemporary moment, the supposed backwardness of Arab culture is often articulated by narrating the oppression of Arab women, queers, and transgender people, as though this kind of oppression is endemic to Southwest Asia and North Africa and is an exceptional feature of Islam. Viewed through this Orientalist lens, Arab sexuality appears repressed and oppressive. Before the Cold War, however, Americans and Europeans articulated this backwardness differently. Namely, they perceived Arab and Muslim societies as being oppressive to women mainly because of men's licentious behavior.²⁶ The idea of the harem looms large in representations of women in Arab societies, as an "imaginative space through which to project masculinist and heteronormative fantasies of erotic desire and male power, as organized around male access to and possession of women."²⁷ The Euro-American fantasy of the Orient as a sexual paradise for white men continues to reverberate, even amid contemporary representations of the Middle East as being sexually repressed and repressive. Today's echoes of earlier representations function as "nostalgic foils for US progress and as imaginative figures through which to grapple with shifting power relations between the United States and the Middle East."²⁸ This analysis further emphasizes the necessity for everyone to take up questions of sexual normativity in relation to whiteness and white supremacy, because these questions have affected people regardless of their actual desires, behaviors, or identifications.

The history of Syrian American peddling effectively shows how race is imbricated with sexuality, gender, class, religion, and other forms of power and difference. Primarily, the material and discursive history of what peddlers experienced and how they were understood by others reveals the suturing of race to sexuality, gender, and class. *Possible Histories* relies on a range of source materials to explore

this central topic, including Syrian American periodicals, mainstream American newspapers, census data, social welfare case studies, literature, and the collections of Arab American families and organizations. In addition, I challenge the historiography of Arabs in the United States, which indicates that the profession of peddling and the figure of the Arab peddler have been recuperated precisely through logics of whiteness, upward class mobility, and heteronormativity.

ARAB MIGRATION AND THE LOGISTICS OF PEDDLING

Arabs began to migrate voluntarily to the United States in the 1870s.²⁹ This migration was officially curtailed with the passage of the 1924 National Origins Act, which restricted southern European and eastern European, as well as non-European, immigration by means of a quota system. These limitations stemmed the flow of Arab immigrants through Ellis Island. However, both Louise Cainkar and Sarah Gualtieri have documented numbers of Arab migrants entering the United States from Latin America even after the 1924 limits were imposed.³⁰ The majority of these Arab migrants came from the Ottoman region of Greater Syria, and they were predominantly Christian (of Maronite, Melkite, and Eastern Orthodox denominations). A small number of Druze, Muslims, and Jews were also among this migrant community. The number of Syrians living in the United States throughout this period is unclear; estimates range from as few as 46,727 (in the 1910 census) to as many as 200,000 (in the estimation of Philip Hitti in his 1924 book, *The Syrians in America*). This uncertainty is partly attributable to the fact that Syrians were initially recorded by immigration officials as coming from “Turkey in Asia” and were counted with all Ottoman subjects. After 1899, Syrian migrants were recorded separately under the label “Syrian,” but Syrians were still often misidentified as Turks, Assyrians, Greeks, or Armenians.³¹ Interestingly, Syrian migrants began to adopt the use of the term “Syrian” for themselves, in English, once the official US classification changed.³²

This Syrian movement to and through the United States took place in the context of various types of migration. First, a history of internal migration within the Ottoman Empire predated transatlantic migration.³³ Ottoman subjects, including but not limited to Syrians, migrated for seasonal labor, for upward career moves to urban centers, and as a result of war and conflict. War also contributed to an influx of refugees into Syria from outside the Ottoman Empire; as a result of the Ottoman-Russian Wars of 1853–56 and 1877–78, more than one million Muslims from the Caucasus left the region as refugees. Tens of thousands died during the process of resettlement, and those who survived settled eventually in Bulgaria and Syria.³⁴ The international Syrian migration that began toward the end of the nineteenth century largely resulted from a changing global economy and its effects on the local silk industry.³⁵ This migration included significant numbers of Syrians

who resettled in and moved through Central and South America, greatly surpassing the number of Syrian migrants in the United States.

From the beginning of Syrian migration to the United States in the late 1870s, pack peddling was a popular form of employment for Syrians. Peddling did not require much capital to begin and was open to anyone, regardless of one's knowledge of the English language. City peddlers might have carts and stay in one place, or they might travel door to door for the day and return home at night. Long-distance peddlers traveled in groups or alone and left for days, weeks, or even months at a time to travel the surrounding countryside or over longer distances. Just as Syrians themselves were found throughout the Americas, the routes of peddlers were likewise not confined to the United States, particularly for those peddling near the more porous US-Canadian border.³⁶

Syrian peddlers sold an array of household dry goods and notions (small household items) as well as commodities that they marketed as being from the Middle East. Some of these goods may have been imported, while others were made more locally. The money that peddling brought in ran the gamut: some peddlers struggled and were always poor (or found different work), whereas others made money more easily. For many Syrian migrants, peddling allowed them to amass wealth quickly, which they often sent home to family members in Syria, used to return to Syria to live, or used to purchase land, a house, or a business in the diaspora. For others, peddling was not the lucrative career they had hoped for (or had been told to expect by their compatriots), and they moved on to other pursuits.

Syrians were not the most numerous in the peddling profession. Ashkenazi Jews predominated, especially German Jews, continuing a common profession in the Jewish diaspora. The linkage of European Jews with peddling is also the most recognizable association when it comes to immigrant peddling in US history. Other immigrant groups also peddled. For instance, Bengali Muslims who were rooted in Black and Creole communities of the US South were peddlers during the same time period as Syrians.³⁷ Syrian peddlers shared similarities with both Ashkenazi Jewish and Bengali Muslim peddlers. Stereotypes of Syrian peddlers often used the same anti-Semitic language that described Ashkenazi ones, most notably that they were greedy and manipulative. Like Bengali Muslim peddlers, Syrians capitalized on the increasing popularity of items from the "Orient" by selling things like lace and silk alongside the household staples buyers would expect. But what differed was the prominence of Syrian women in the peddling population and the ways that Syrian peddlers, regardless of gender, were viewed and discussed in sexualized terms.

Although they were not the only immigrant group to peddle in the United States, Arab migrant peddlers in the United States were unique in several ways. First, Syrian Americans, both individually and as a community, had a "deep and broad" identification with peddling—whether they themselves were peddlers or not.³⁸ Syrians knew that many of their kin peddled, and they knew that Americans

associated them with peddling. Peddling has had a central place in Arab American historical narratives as being the key to the success of Syrian migrants' integration into US society, because it enabled the dispersal of Syrians beyond ethnic enclaves, because it was often an easy way to earn money, and because it allowed for contact between Syrians and other US residents.³⁹ Second, a significant number of Syrian women peddled, including young girls and women who were single, married, divorced, or widowed. As a result of her extensive research with second-generation Arab Americans, historian Alixa Naff estimated that up to 80 percent of Syrian migrant women peddled at some point in the United States.⁴⁰ Syrian peddling was already a form of gendered labor and attracted scrutiny as such; it has been described as an occupation whose effects on family structures produced nontraditional living arrangements between women.⁴¹ Such arrangements of support usually happened when long-distance peddlers, often men, were away from home for long periods of time. Because of women's significant role within the ecology of the peddling economy, including working as peddlers themselves, peddling was thus a contested topic in early Syrian American communities and among American commentators, and it provoked great disagreement about the place of Syrians in the United States and the effects of migration on Syrian communities.

Jacob Rama Berman writes, "The narrative of the Syrian pack-peddler is so central to the way in which the pioneer generation has been historicized that no scholarly account of the years between 1880 and 1924 exists in which the figure does not appear prominently."⁴² Indeed, the peddler has appeared so frequently in chronicles of early Arab American life that by the 1980s, some scholars began to note that stories of Arab American peddlers had long suffered from blatant romanticization. Indeed, from folkloric tales to obituaries, Arab American communities recirculated tropes that fit neatly into an American Dream narrative. An immigrant ancestor arrives on US shores with little to his name (the gender here is intentional). A wealthier Syrian compatriot running an import business or a dry goods store supplies him with a pack and goods to sell. He sets off to make his way, quickly earning beyond what he could have imagined, and soon he has enough money to send to his family overseas, perhaps to marry or bring over a wife, and to start his own business. In archives and written histories about Arab American communities, peddling is often imbued with these positive characterizations: how hard peddlers worked, how ingenious they were in finding a way to earn money despite their lack of means, and how much peddling demonstrated their entrepreneurial and capitalist compatibility with American society. Still, as far as many Americans were concerned, peddlers were transients; Americans "looked down on peddling as an activity to be followed by the destitute rather than as a first step in the economic success of an immigrant group."⁴³ Peddlers were untethered and lacked a known rootedness of place and reputation. As transients, peddlers could be threats to US settler or other colonial structures of heteronormative family, propriety, responsibility, and property ownership. Through the Second World

War, transience and the anxieties transferred onto unattached men were also heavily associated with nonnormative sexuality.⁴⁴

The glorified tales of the peddler pioneer have been tempered by historical research that shows the life of a peddler to have been much more precarious. Many peddlers indeed acquired wealth quickly through this work, but they also experienced hardships from the physical elements, the skepticism of strangers, and the burdens of white supremacy and nativism. Others found no luck in peddling or were too discouraged by its physical demands, and they moved on to other pursuits. Although peddling has had a prominent place in the narration of Arab American life, Syrian workers were actually more numerous in textile mills throughout this migration period, particularly younger and unmarried women and girls in the northeastern United States.⁴⁵ Syrians also worked as miners, farmers, bankers, and autoworkers and in many other professions. Despite this statistical evidence, however, the figure of the peddler and the economic network of peddling emerge as central features of the early Arab immigrant success story.

Migration and peddling had tremendous effects on the practice of endogamous marriage in the Syrian community. Those men who migrated on their own in the early years frequently left behind wives and fiancées in Syria. Even if they did not, they may have been promised to someone back home as a future spouse. But migration and peddling work brought possibilities for different kinds of lives than were possible in Syria, particularly where family and intimate relationships were concerned. In the Arab diasporic press, community leaders raised concerns that male peddlers would abandon their familial obligations by breaking engagements, abandoning wives and children, or maintaining multiple families in separate locales.⁴⁶ These fears were not paranoid worries; they were founded on reports of such transgressions that made it back to those families who expected migrating men to adhere to typical community practices. Some returning single men were even asked to provide proof that they had not married while in the United States.⁴⁷ Naff acknowledged the heterosexual infractions of some male peddlers and reassured her readers that “the majority of single peddlers remained well within cultural bounds.” Those who did not, she suggested, succumbed to “nontraditional marital solutions,” such as marrying outside the community, taking common-law wives, or engaging in “temporary marriages” with American women.⁴⁸

Although these deviations from heterosexual norms were widely discussed, the prospect of homoerotic or homosexual encounters was unsurprisingly absent from community accounts and scholarship. However, Syrian peddlers were migratory laborers in a time of frequent same-sex encounters among migratory men in the United States and of the public outcry surrounding such encounters. Regardless of whether this prospect was explicit in the minds of Arab Americanist scholars, the expectation that transient peddlers should become settled business owners was particularly related to paradigms of a heteronormative settler economy—a paradigm of US national culture that permeated the Arab immigrant community

as it sought to survive in a new home. These connotations arose in the context of the period during which Syrians migrated, and during which public worries about tramps, hobos, and migrant workers mirrored the same concerns about the abandonment of heterosexual marriage and the nuclear family.⁴⁹ Some of the anecdotes of cultural misunderstandings that Naff provided were also rife with unease about gendered boundaries and sexual roles. For instance, one of Naff's interlocutors recounted a story of a Muslim peddler who employed an Arab method to implore a local farmer to house him for the night: he kissed the man's beard. In response, the farmer beat the peddler until his peddling partner saw the beating and intervened.⁵⁰ The possibility of an accidental and homoerotic act is the silent character in this anecdote and is the reason for the violence wrought upon the peddler. This cultural misunderstanding was, of course, laden with the normative mechanisms of sexuality and gender.

Despite all the anxieties they embodied at the time, peddlers eventually came to represent the compatibility of Syrianness with Americanness. Despite the efforts even of discerning scholars who were critical of such intellectual revisionism, ideologies interweaving class, gender, sexuality, religion, and race have often undergirded the available scholarly narratives in the service of a normative rendering of Arab American subjectivity.

ARAB AMERICANS, QUEER (AMERICANIST) STUDIES, AND HISTORICIST METHODS

Possible Histories is guided by a number of methodological traditions: discursive and material historicist inquiry using traditional historical methods, cultural studies analysis informed particularly by feminist studies and queer of color critique approaches, and historical-grounded imagining, which seeks to destabilize and broaden what we know about the past. These methods allow me to address a wide range of implications from this history and to respond to both the uses and limitations of historical methods for examining race and sexuality in Arab American history. The task of historicizing a minoritized community brings the necessary exclusionary choices of the research process (that is, deciding what is important and what is peripheral) into collision with the wider political lens through which that history will be understood: specifically, the frameworks of power that led to the community's marginalization in the first place. I engage with the published scholarship and archival collection of Arab American historian Alixa Naff among many other sources. Although others have researched and continue to research this history of Arab migrants from the Levant, Naff's legacy—both in constructing a narrative about peddling in this early community and in leaving future generations a wealth of archival materials—is unparalleled. As I depend on her scholarly legacy, I simultaneously contend with the normativizing implications of her curatorial choices, in both the community-based scholarship she produced and the community-based archive she constructed.

Historicist methods can produce a kind of trap in which we rely on only those records that can be corroborated as the ones that produce meaningful knowledge about the past. Because these records are often produced by the state or reflect the unit of the family, they can reinforce the respectability politics of sameness. Alternately, when they are state institutional records, they can reinforce the criminalization or pathologization of a population. Finding untold histories and reclaiming them is thus, in the present, a powerful tool for responding to delegitimizing structures of power: structures that position minoritized communities as being inferior to or outside hegemonic society. While understanding that usefulness, we must also interrogate the sexual, racial, gendered, classed, and religious foundations of sameness upon which that strategy rests.

So much precludes historical certainty regarding basic (yet significant) details of peoples' lives, as well as the contours of many peoples' thoughts, desires, and senses of self. For Arab Americans, the details include names and birthdates. Immigration and census officials have demonstrated great difficulty in understanding Arab names and naming conventions. Historically, Arab immigrants may have used varying transliterated spellings of their name; they may have changed their own name to a more Americanized version; or their name may have been changed upon entry into the United States. The ubiquity of certain Arab names can also make it difficult to distinguish some individuals from one another in the historical record, and birthdates were not always recorded in Ottoman Syria. Immigration, census, and other state records might show approximations that vary across several documents for a single individual. These variations also make it difficult to know whether separate documents refer to the same person or to more than one person.⁵¹

Historical records often privilege the view of the state, and collected materials have often been individually curated and therefore represent specific viewpoints of what is historically significant and appropriate for inclusion. What, then, would it look like for Arab American history to account for what was possible, rather than only the documented and the conclusive? What is deemed out of reach or irresponsible to imagine when we face a lack of documentation that is considered historically legitimate? This lack is where sexuality can remain elusive as a historicist analytic in communities minoritized by white supremacy and its regimes of sexual normativity. Historical-grounded imagining allows for the complexity and epistemological mess of historical knowledge. It also creates space for the differences in community opinions about various relationships and intimacies, for the wide variation in participants' experiences of those relationships and intimacies, and for the reality of sexual violence and abuse that was also present in these experiences.

Historical-grounded imagining centers on the possible rather than on the conclusive as a way to avoid exclusionary knowledge production about early Arab American communities—knowledge production that often relegates women, gender-nonconforming and nonbinary people, sexual outsiders, and working-class and working-poor people to the margins of history.⁵² Both historians and

historicist scholars of other disciplines have employed speculation and imagining in thinking about the past. Often these more experimental and polarizing methods are adopted at a time when feminist and queer histories have already been produced in a particular field, often as projects of historical recovery. They build upon, push forward, and sometimes rupture some of those feminist and queer foundations. I am indebted to these scholars, yet I also consider what it means to employ such a method when a project of queer recovery has not first been started.

I use the phrase “historical-grounded imagining” not to stake a claim to a new and distinct methodological practice but to signal my embrace of several methodological approaches working in different historical contexts. Pérez has employed a method she calls the “decolonial imaginary” that she envisions as an interstitial rupturing space, “the alternative to that which is written in history.”⁵³ Pérez’s method intervenes specifically in the tendency of ethnic histories to prioritize sameness and similarities with white Americans. Contending with the consequences of what Pérez terms the “history of the same” is urgently needed for Arab Americans, who have unevenly been both beneficiaries and targets of white supremacy. Historical-grounded imagining also builds upon the work of Anjali Arondekar, who urges scholars of sexuality, particularly those working in contexts of colonial domination, to see historical abundance rather than always or only historical lack. Arondekar especially cautions against the recovery model of histories of sexuality and the “privileged lexicon of erasures, silences, and subjects.”⁵⁴ Historical-grounded imagining foregrounds possibility. Possibility is a rubric of abundance and of endless permutations of historical experience that do not merely fill in the silences but rather give them form, texture, and life beyond scarcity.

I also rely on historiographies of racialized violence (particularly anti-Blackness and anti-Asianness) in this research. This reliance does not presume commensurability between these histories and that of Arabs in the United States but rather incorporates the history of anti-Arab racialization into a larger history of “differentially situated, not equivalent, genealogies of liberalism.”⁵⁵ In particular, Black studies has produced important critiques of archival methods, as by considering the possibility and consequences of archival research into transatlantic chattel slavery and its afterlife. My use of historical-grounded imagining has also been shaped by Saidiya Hartman’s work on the legacies of transatlantic slavery and the Black diaspora. Hartman’s work uses “critical fabulation” to consider the lives of those who have been rendered “an asterisk in the grand narrative of history” by anti-Black and misogynist violence. Her method leans on the “capacities of the subjunctive”—doubts, wishes, and possibilities.⁵⁶ While Hartman concedes that a historical narrative cannot redress the violence of chattel slavery, she uses the possibilities inherent in critical fabulation to come closer to this redress—an approximation—but also to highlight the impossibility of telling these stories. In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* she takes this mode of historicist inquiry further, pressing even more on the generative capacities of imagining by amplifying and

expanding on “moments when the vision and dreams of the wayward seemed possible.”⁵⁷ In this “unthought” history, young Black girls and women “imagined other ways to live and never failed to consider how the world might be otherwise.”⁵⁸ In *Possible Histories* I lean on these speculative methods to highlight the role of sexuality in the uneven formation of Arab immigrants and Arab Americans as racial subjects, and to produce an imagining of the kinds of desires and intimacies that Arab immigrants and their descendants experienced in the face of white supremacist norms of sexuality.

For decades, scholars of queer sexual cultures have been engaged in questions regarding the necessary methods for historical inquiry into nonnormative sexualities and the utility and power of historical narratives. For US-based scholars, the study of the history of sexuality and queerness was borne of explicitly political projects that sought to recover “histories of lesbian and gay identity formation, community life, and social movement activism” in the midst of the AIDS crisis, ongoing structural heterosexism, and an academy beginning to be shaped by neoliberal multiculturalism.⁵⁹ Increasingly, and with the emergence of trans studies, the focus of this scholarship has moved from one of recovering community and individual histories to that of mobilizing “queer” and “trans” as analytical categories that help us understand how sexuality and gender have been contingently shaped—and how these have shaped other categories of difference across time and space.⁶⁰ Historians of sexuality and other historicist queer studies scholars have also had to contend with the extent to which “‘queer’ should remain secured to sexuality as its central object.”⁶¹

This book is situated within these traditions. It concerns the power of historical narratives that implicate sexuality, the question of recovering (albeit with hesitation) queer pasts, the erasure of sexually nonnormative Arab American subjects, and the use of “queer” as a category of analysis. It does so not with the promise of finding queer Arab American subjects that can be recuperated for contemporary purposes, but rather with the knowledge that “queer” itself is both a useful and imperfect category for understanding the imbrications of race with sexuality in this history.

Queer studies scholars have a rich tradition of thinking about what queer methods might be and about the implications of searching for, finding (or not finding), and analyzing nonheteronormativity and queerness. These considerations have been particularly generative with regard to archival formations and approaches to archival methods, ranging from theorizing the quotidian mess of queer lives as an archival practice to the “scavenger methodology” of searching in unexpected places for evidence of queer cultures.⁶² I depend especially on these creative and interdisciplinary approaches to method.

At times, a queer method is an accidental one—something unexpected or unintended. Ann Cvetkovich writes that “the accidental encounter is, of course, a form of queer archival method.”⁶³ One such accidental archival encounter—coming

across the editorial against Michael Shadid's congressional run—is what prompted my own study of the Arab American peddling economy. The accidental prompts a cascade of questioning and, if one is lucky, a reorienting of foundational assumptions. In this case, the editorial that cast the peddler as a “queer” figure forced me to revisit and revise my understanding of how Syrians were received in the United States and how the peddler functioned in Arab American historical narratives as a response to that reception. Like other queer studies scholars, I embrace the unexpected and the accidental in my work, asking what conditions have produced certain archival appearances. I employ “queer” not as a particular subject that I am looking for but as an analytic for thinking about which practices and encounters may have threatened the racial regimes of heteronormativity at a given moment. As a reading practice, queer functions through hesitation, “through a caution to name or decide in advance what an archive of absences or a rhetorical entanglement will yield up.”⁶⁴ This queer method is not divorced from the sexual, however; on the contrary, it is open to desire, “always partial, only a potentiality, an opening onto other worlds yet to come.”⁶⁵ To achieve this sensibility, when I encounter archival materials, I look for things that are “off,” for moments of hesitation, for things that appear strange. I look for the possibilities of ambiguity, excess, and multiple interpretations in the ways that Arab Americans have been constituted and have constituted themselves. In other words, I intentionally use my own affective responses to archival materials in the research process.

I draw, too, from the rich body of work known as queer of color critique. Grounded in a genealogy of women of color feminist critique and engaging with queer theory, ethnic studies, and migration studies, this scholarship examines “how intersecting racial, gender, and sexual practices antagonize and/or conspire with the normative investments of nation-states and capital.”⁶⁶ Queer of color critique is a methodology, a theoretical position, and a political stance.⁶⁷ As a body of scholarship, it has focused largely on queer Black, Asian American, Native, and Latinx cultural production, political economies, and movement. The colonial encounters among Europeans, Africans, and indigenous peoples of the Americas form one originary point for the material and discursive violence that marked some as normative and others as deviant, animalistic, and other—primarily through racial, gendered, and sexual logics.⁶⁸ Queer of color critique scholars have articulated how nonconforming and nonnormative sexualities and genders have been racialized through this historical process and how this gendered and sexual racialization has contributed to the reproduction of social science, policy, and the state's regulation of its inhabitants. Nayan Shah names this historical phenomenon queer of color “estrangement.”⁶⁹ Scholars who engage in queer of color critique have also intervened in the racial dimensions of queer theory and the normative formations of queerness, noting that queer theory has tended to presume whiteness in queer subjects and that its authors' whiteness has shaped the theory they have produced.

This presumption has meant not only that queers of color have been overlooked but also that how queerness itself has been theorized has been defined by whiteness and white supremacy without tacit acknowledgment. This epistemological perspective presumes a severing of sexuality from race and other forms of difference, a severing that is not possible. *Possible Histories* proceeds from the assumption that different regimes of sexual normativity exist globally and that those regimes collide and contend with one another through forms of racialized imperial and colonial dominance. I focus on that collision and trace how normative and nonnormative forms of Syrian sexuality became nonnormative in the US context. In this light, queerness, as a conceptual frame, potentially implicates a range of desires and practices that affect all racially minoritized subjects under white supremacy, not just those who appear to be “gay,” “lesbian,” or “queer.”⁷⁰ In addition, the Eurocentric origins of the heterosexual-homosexual binary and what we have come to understand as “queer” can obscure the multiplicity of normativizing sexual structures.⁷¹

Possible Histories continues in the generative tradition of queer of color critique by intervening in conversations about the appropriate, expected, or normative subjects of queer theory. The Middle East and North Africa and its diasporas are belated geopolitical arenas for queer studies, as described by Keguro Macharia. Scholarship that only recently has paired Arab (or Arab American) studies with queer theory marks a delayed or undeveloped arrival in “queer modernity.”⁷² Studying queerness and Arab subjects at this moment confronts one with the feeling of catching up with the rest of queer theory. It also means that, because the field has already done so much theorizing of the category “queer” and of sexual non-normativity, the sites of this research may feel “uninteresting to mainstream queer studies.”⁷³ These impressions of belatedness also speak to the Orientalism within queer studies, which perceives queer Middle Eastern and North African lives as developmentally in the past. Middle Eastern and North African queers (and our attendant political concerns) are thus positioned as needing to “catch up” with the modern, Eurocentric queer subject. Indeed, like much of the Global South and its subjects, Arabs are expected at best to provide examples of queer theory concepts but not to generate more theory or to challenge the models that the field has constructed. Arabs provide “the exemplars, but rarely the epistemologies.”⁷⁴ Yet, as Kadji Amin tells us, it is precisely because the queer in Arab and Arab diasporic sites functions differently than canonical queer theory that scholarship on the Global South and its subjects has been marginalized in queer studies.⁷⁵

I am cognizant of the fact that a project which centers Arab diasporic subjects residing in the United States still risks a recentering of the Global North as the site(s) of theory production, the sites that “matter” to queer studies. My own position as an Arab American and as a tenure-track faculty member in the US academy reinforces that tendency. Still, these subjects and many of the sources they left behind were transnational ones in affiliation, in affect, and in physical

circulation. They were and remain deeply rooted in the Levant itself, as well as in other parts of the Syrian diaspora, such as the Caribbean and Latin America. The Middle East itself is a “historically, politically, and economically deeply transnational region.”⁷⁶ Arab American studies, too, is fundamentally a transnational intellectual and political project. This stems from the transnational affinities of Arab Americans themselves, as well as the intellectual necessity of drawing on Arab and Middle East studies scholarship in conceptualizing Arabness and Arab communities in diaspora. This intellectual necessity loops back to those transnational affiliations and also stems from a lack of engagement with and legibility of Arab Americans from within US ethnic studies. This relationship between Arab and Arab American studies, however, is not one of neat, reciprocal exchange and power. While Arab American studies must depend on Middle East area studies to a certain extent for its legibility as a field, Middle East studies has not historically been concerned with its diasporas and their intellectual, cultural, political, and economic trajectories. Arab American studies also risks recentering diasporic Arab American concerns and positionalities and situating them as equivalent to those in the Middle East and North Africa itself.

The region of the Levant from which these migrants came, as well as the framing of the regional, also serves as a queer site in this project. Although some scholars have imposed a Lebanese national frame on this history, given that the majority came from an area that became part of the nation-state of Lebanon, this imposition erases other, minor subjects of this migration. In addition, at the time of their departure, these emigrants had affinities and networks that traversed the region of Ottoman Syria and beyond, to other parts of the Ottoman Empire and still other Syrian diasporas in the world.⁷⁷ This population also held a range of political perspectives that included loyalty to or acceptance of the Ottoman sultan, anticolonial sectarian nationalisms, and anticolonial pan-Arab nationalism.⁷⁸ Much of the scholarship that documents these views examines the perspectives of elite and literate men. We do not have an accounting of the possibilities of nonnational and nonimperial perspectives on home, belonging, affiliation, and governing among these migrants.

As a formation outside a nation, the regional itself stands in as a queer model in contrast to the modernity of the nation-state and national consciousness.⁷⁹ A queer conceptualization of extra- and supranational spaces, like diaspora and region, allows for a decentering of national affiliation and nationalism.⁸⁰ Gayatri Gopinath posits that the regional is “a spatial category [that] simultaneously animates notions of linear temporality and modernity, where the region is often figured as premodern and atavistic in relation to the modern nation.”⁸¹ Despite the ideological claim to nationhood espoused in Arab nationalism, the category of Arab is multiple and contested, one that contains hierarchy and difference. Rather than allowing for a latent or presumed nationalism of “Arab” or “Lebanese” to reassert itself in this analysis, I press on other forms of affinity and use

the term “Syrian” as a nonnationalist, diasporic identity. This usage does not discount the presence of nationalisms among Syrians but rather provides space for nonnationalist affiliations as well. Using this nonnationalist framing also moves the conversation about diasporic communities beyond a dichotomy of authentic versus assimilated, wherein notions of retention or loss of culture map neatly onto a distinction between Arabness and Americanness. Disrupting such notions of authenticity also “troubles the Orientalist representation of an explicitly homophobic ‘traditional’ or authentic [Arab] culture.”⁸²

As with the conceptualization of region itself, Eurocentric discourses of modernity have positioned Syrians, as well as other Middle Easterners and North Africans, as if they are located in another time.⁸³ If Middle Easterners and North Africans are out of (modern) time, then their diasporas are out of time and place. We can then understand that queer (Americanist) studies’ continued indifference to queer Arab American scholarly and political projects is, in and of itself, an endeavor of queer modernity. Reconceptualizing Arab American histories and cultural production as part of queer critique fundamentally alters the terms of time, space, and entry into a queer modernity upon which queer studies is built.

The Syrian migrants this book focuses on may be mundane or even undesirable subjects of queer theory. They may not resemble what we typically understand to be queer. They may have been complicit with white supremacy in their efforts to survive in the United States. If they were alive today, some would assert that they were heterosexual. Some may be reluctant, recalcitrant, or unheroic subjects.⁸⁴ They are not idealized or necessarily subversive.⁸⁵ Their positioning as being potentially undesirable is the result of racial and geopolitical normativities that have developed within queer theory. To address this problematic result, Amin proposes that we allow “queer” to “come not only to *mean* but also to *feel* differently than it does now.”⁸⁶ This project *feels for* queer in eclectic ways, working against paradigms that posit the impossibility of queer Arab histories.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

Possible Histories argues for the centrality of sexuality to understanding early Arab American racialization through four chapters. Chapter 1 outlines how the figure of the male Syrian peddler must be understood as a queer figure of Arab American and American history, by tracing the slippages and dissonances between Syrian peddlers’ popular representations and their own accounts of peddling experiences. In literature, popular music, and news media, Syrian peddlers—particularly men—have been depicted as the bearers of exotic excitement, a source of seductive danger, and the manufacturers of deceit. The encounter between a swarthy Syrian man and a naive white woman at her doorstep has played out repeatedly in these representations. The threat of this racial and sexual encounter was ever present. The use of Orientalism in defining the sexual difference of peddlers reveals

the anxieties that Syrian peddlers evoked about white racial purity, masculinity, and sexual normalcy. The experiences of peddlers bore out these anxieties, as can be seen through an examination of archival legacies of long-distance peddlers. These sources also demand that we reckon with the opportunities peddling opened for a variety of sexual experiences outside heterosexual monogamous marriage. I use the occasion of tracking down one of my own peddler ancestors and considering his possible deviations from heterosexual monogamy to demonstrate a queer affective method. Chapter 1 focuses on one representation of Syrian peddlers, which continues to reverberate decades after its debut and holds a significant place in the cultural imaginary of the United States: the musical *Oklahoma!* and its peddler character, Ali Hakim. I explore three iterations of this cultural work: the 1931 antecedent to the musical, *Green Grow the Lilacs*, written by the queer Cherokee playwright R. Lynn Riggs; the 1943 stage musical *Oklahoma!* by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II; and the eponymous 1955 film version of *Oklahoma!* Mirroring the trajectory of many Syrian Americans over time, the iterations of these cultural works demonstrate how peddlers were encouraged to assimilate by ceasing their movement and marrying white settlers. However, based on the representations of peddlers in news media and from their own recounting, they remained threatening as racial and sexual outsiders.

Whereas chapter 1 focuses on the effects that popular culture representations of Syrian peddlers have had on actual Syrians, chapter 2 shows how the economy of Syrian peddling was scrutinized through women's participation in it. Syrian women contributed to the sustainability of peddling as a profession by making things at home for peddlers to sell, by operating boardinghouses where peddlers could stay, by caring for children and family elders while peddlers were away, and by working as peddlers themselves. To investigate women's participation in the peddling economy, this chapter relies primarily on social welfare records in which Syrians were both aid recipients and social reformers themselves. This analysis shows how Syrian women's peddling practices were at odds with norms of white, middle-class femininity and threatened some Syrians' claims of whiteness, thus revealing the contours of a sexual economy of the Syrian migrant family. By this, I mean that the measures taken to discourage women from participating in the peddling economy emphasized that women's labor in the Syrian immigrant family should be essentially reproductive. At critical moments, I use the practice of historical-grounded imagining to counter the omissions and characterizations of official records. Chapter 2 also illuminates internal Syrian dynamics of class and its intersections with sexuality and gender by examining Syrian women both as clients of social welfare and as social reformers themselves.

Chapter 3 continues the thread of Syrians' internal debate about peddling and traces it through the pages of the Syrian American press. Whereas the first two chapters illuminate marginalizing discourses about Syrian peddlers and begin to shed light on responses internal to the Syrian community, the third chapter shows

how Syrians produced self-normativizing discourses about women, marriage, and sexuality in Syrian migrant communities to make sense of and resist how they were perceived in the United States. Over a period of roughly thirty years, the Syrian press focused on Syrian women peddlers, always imagined as unsupervised and unaccompanied by men in public spaces and as thus threatening the idealized Syrian American identity that these elite Syrian migrants (the editors and readers of the Syrian American press) were crafting. By reiterating several arguments about the dangers that peddling posed to women, to the Syrian community, and to the community's reputation, writers claimed a link between peddling and an aberrant female sexuality. These debates index an elite migrant community's concerns about the parameters of normative Syrian sexuality as refracted through white and middle-class American ideals.

Finally, chapter 4 examines Arab American sexuality, gender, and race—not from the perspective of threat, violence, and policing but rather from the perspective of pleasure, particularly those homosocial and homoerotic pleasures enabled by the very work of peddling. This chapter asks, How can we account for these pleasures historically, when little evidence of Arab American homosexuality exists in our historical records? Using photographic materials from the Faris and Yamna Naff Arab American Collection, I ask what historical traces remain of sexual non-normativity in Syrian peddler communities, given that most collected materials have been assembled to present a “respectable” image of Arab immigrants. In response, I conceptualize homosocial and homoerotic pleasure within the realm of what was possible—a more expansive view of pleasure than searching for an Arab American homosexual subject. I examine a series of gender-segregated photographs of peddlers from the 1920s that foreground multiple connections of pleasure between men or between women in Syrian American communities. I imagine the pleasurable possibilities of Arab American history that peddling enabled and consider the ways that some Syrians may have resisted the self-normalization of their elite counterparts in the press.