

PREFACE

I first heard about my great-grandfather Nicholas Karem as a young adult in my early twenties. My mother told me about him a few months after I came out to my parents. Living in Kentucky in the early twentieth century, he had married another young Syrian immigrant, named Mary, and the two went on to have nine children together. He was known for being a demanding employer, a strict father, and a sweetheart to his grandchildren. All of his boys worked in the family's twenty-four-hour restaurant, with the oldest son running the night shift on his own.

My great-grandfather, working alongside his wife and sister, owned and operated this business in Louisville, a racially segregated southern city. Their customers consisted largely of white truck drivers and Black laborers from Louisville's Haymarket area, where the restaurant was situated. The eatery, named Trucker's Restaurant, was specifically marketed toward a white clientele. While white customers ate inside the restaurant, Black customers could order inside—but, by the Karems' mandate, and in accordance with white supremacist norms, Black customers were then required to leave the restaurant to eat their food. This restaurant remained financially successful for my family until the construction of a freeway closed the original site of the Haymarket in 1962.

But my great-grandfather was also up to things that made people talk, according to my mother. His sexual encounters were not confined to his marriage. The evidence that my family—and the larger Syrian community in Louisville—offered to back up this claim was that he was assaulted on more than one occasion related to his sexual behavior. I have no way of knowing what was actually said or speculated during his lifetime; but by the time the rumor got to my generation, after I came out to my mother, I was told that he was bisexual and that he had been

“beaten up for cruising.” How these assaults that my great-grandfather experienced happened is unclear. Did rumor of his sexual desire incur such attacks, or did his attempts at sexual encounters with men result in violence? Was it, perhaps, the race of the men he might have engaged with sexually that led to this violence? Or was it his own liminal racial status? Did he have sexual encounters with other men in the Syrian community? Did he frequent a particular locale that may have been associated with nonnormative sexuality or that was heavily policed?

I have attempted to find arrest records to corroborate this story but to no avail. My mother suggested that there are no records because her own mother (Nicholas’s daughter-in-law) was friends with the wife of a police officer who intervened on her behalf and prevented my great-grandfather’s arrest. White supremacy structures a critical juncture in my family’s history through this possible protection from police arrest. Just as our family-owned restaurant abided by southern racist customs, white supremacy provided my family with a layer of protection, insulating it from the racist and heteropatriarchal purview of law enforcement.

While my great-grandfather’s potential encounter with the police is not archived, whatever did happen to spur this rumor had lasting consequences for him and our family among other Syrian (and later, Lebanese) locals. I have been told that sometime in the past two decades, a younger family member approached someone at a Louisville gathering whom he recognized as a Lebanese elder. He identified himself and told the man that my great-grandfather was his relative. The elder replied sharply, “Nick Kareem? Nick Kareem was a queer.” And several years ago, an undergraduate student of a colleague contacted me after having read my dissertation, which formed the early research for this book. They described themselves as a young queer Arab American who was also descended from early Syrian immigrants. As it turned out, we were related through marriage, and both our ancestors had settled in Louisville. This young student’s maternal relatives knew all about the rumors surrounding Nick Kareem’s life.

The rumor of his sexuality continued long after one imagines it would have. It functioned to ostracize my ancestor and his family from the local Syrian community. The gossip presumed that Nick and his family should feel shame for his desire, his actions, and the violence done to him. The rumor continues to circulate as a source of shame, communicating that his violation of sexual and gendered norms points to an intractable difference that ought to be minimized. Compounded by the already racialized difference of being Arab in the United States, the rumor teaches lessons about sexual and gendered expectations for Lebanese Americans in my family. Despite this legacy of shame, the rumor about my great-grandfather has taken on a second life, as it seems also to provide evidence to queer family members that our existence as queer Lebanese Americans is nothing new.

I have been told by family members that to continue circulating this rumor, as I am doing now, is unfair to my ancestor, as he is not able to defend himself against the accusation. This concern assumes, of course, that his deviation from

heterosexuality and the punishing assaults he experienced possibly as a result are blights upon his memory. To either circulate or deny the rumor would inscribe his life and memory within forms of violence. Circulating the rumor relegates his desires to their outcome, that is, violent physical punishment; denying it disciplines his sexual desires into a heteronormativity forged through white supremacy. But can we imagine other ways in which he may have experienced desire and pleasure in his life, outside this evidence of his sexual existence? This rumor, with its focus on violence as evidence of sexuality-as-shame, leaves no room to imagine desire and pleasure as part of Arab American history and existence. It obscures the fuller dimensions of how my great-grandfather (and other queer Arab ancestors) loved, desired, and experienced a range of erotic intimacies during their lives.

I share this story because it was one of the early sites of inquiry that framed my entry into the historicist study of Arab Americans, sexuality, and race. This story was compelling for multiple reasons. It circulated as a kind of evidence of queerness in the Arab American past (especially among members of my family who were not heterosexual). It suggested the power of sexuality as a lasting rubric for self-policing in Arab American communities. And it called into question how we produce knowledge about the Arab American past. If the only evidence of historical queerness in a particular community comes through rumor, what can we say we truly know about sexuality and its imbrication with race in the early Syrian American diaspora? In the pages that follow, these questions of method unfold alongside an examination of the inextricability of sexuality from race in Arab American history.

