**Mark:** [00:00:00] Welcome to the Endless Knot Podcast,

**Aven:** where the more we know,

**Mark:** the more we want to find out.

**Aven:** Tracing serendipitous connections through our lives

**Mark:** and across disciplines.

**Aven:** Hi, I'm Aven.

**Mark:** And I'm Mark.

**Aven:** And today we're going to talk about swimming, a very appropriate topic for the middle of February. We are going to be speaking with Dr. Karen Carr today.

**Mark:** Dr. Karen Carr is Associate Professor Emerita in the Department of History at Portland State University. She holds a doctorate in classical art and archaeology from the University of Michigan.

Her research, making use of both archaeology and texts, employs anarchist and feminist theory to reconsider the ancient Mediterranean economy as a series of interlocking systems rather than a government driven enterprise. She's considering what changes when we recast Europe as [00:01:00] 'strange', taking the older cultures of Africa and Asia as the default.

**Aven:** Dr. Carr is also in her second decade as a Roman pottery specialist for the Leptiminus Archaeological Project. Working in the modern village of Lamta in Tunisia. Leptiminus was an important Roman port and the excavation is one of very few from the Roman Empire to have excavated the kilns where Roman pottery and amphorae were made, soon to be filled with fish sauce-- garum-- wine or olive oil, and shipped all over the Roman Empire and beyond.

**Mark:** Dr. Carr's first book in 2002 was Vandals to *Visigoths, Rural Settlement Patterns in Early Medieval Spain*. But today we're mostly talking to her about her recent book, *Shifting Currents, A World History of Swimming*.

**Aven:** So let's get to the interview now!

**Mark:** Hello.

**Aven:** And welcome to the show.

**Karen:** Hi, Mark. Hi, Aven.

**Aven:** So we'll start as we always do with our sort of beginning question for our guests before we can get into the work you've been doing and are planning on in the future.

**Mark:** [00:02:00] So, can you tell us about an interesting connection of link between your work and the rest of your life or different areas of your work, something that maybe unexpectedly led you in a a different way of thinking about things?

**Karen:** Yeah. I've, been thinking about your podcast and its connection to connections. Right. And and then I was thinking about the morning that I decided to write the swimming book, which basically what happened was that I, have. I had at that time, but I still have a big history website that I run at Quatrus, Q U A T R dot U S, and every day at that time, I would pretty much sit down and write a new article for the website.

These articles, sometimes they took me a week or two to write, but every day that I didn't have one in progress, I had to think of a new one that I wanted to do. And so, one July, I thought, you know, I'm taking the kids swimming this [00:03:00] afternoon. Maybe I'll write an article about the history of swimming for the website.

**Karen:** And when, then usually I started by, reading What there was to read, reading a recent book or recent article on the subject. But when I went to do that, I realized there really wasn't anything. There was nothing respectable to read that had been written, like, in the last 100 years. And so I started to think, well, maybe that's an area that, you know, could could stand to be looked into more.

So, in that sense, it's a connection. But as I thought that I realized that it's actually a much larger connection, that Working on the website in general changed the way I thought about history in a way that has I'm just kind of realizing now, has, bled over into my book, writing my articles, my more academic work, because the website forced me to hyperlink everything to everything else.

I mean, it didn't force me to, but I did as in, you know, Wikipedia articles now [00:04:00] although we actually started before Wikipedia right. If they mentioned somebody else, then they linked to the article on somebody else. So I was doing that. And one thing I was doing was very, very carefully, if I linked from one article to another, I always put a link the other direction.

Oh, right. And, this kind of, it really changed the way I thought about history in the end, because for example, if you're writing about, Say the Native American group and what happens to that Native American group is that Louis the 14th sends out a bunch of soldiers that end up killing a bunch of them and taking their land In say, Louisiana or Detroit or something.

It's common then to link from the page about the Native American back to Louis XIV, but it's pretty unusual to link from Louis XIV back to the Native Americans. Right. To list that as one of the things Louis XIV did, kill a bunch of Native Americans. Right.

**Aven:** Right. So the [00:05:00] direction of influence or the direction of, priority.

**Karen:** Right. I mean, we, we have a tendency to think, well, Louis XIV did a bunch of important things, but we don't notice that he also killed a bunch of Native Americans. And when you start putting all of those things, not just what he did in North America, but also his effect on India or his effect on Iran.

And vice versa. So that if you say Iran influenced Louis the 14th in an article on Iran, you also say that in the article on Louis the 14th. Then you start to see a lot of connections that you hadn't seen before. And I think that's kind of what led me to write the swimming book as a world history, rather than, you know, focusing on the Mediterranean where my training was, that over the years, first of all, I had become very familiar with a lot of the world from doing the website.

And, and also I had seen that there were all these [00:06:00] connections. So I was thinking like, how do people in the Mediterranean learn to swim? Who do they learn to swim from? Where did those people learn to swim? And it made the book much less Eurocentric or Mediterranean centric than it might have been. And, the same thing is true for the work I'm doing now.

Right.

**Mark:** that was actually something that I was going to ask you about is that although your training is in the field of classics ,not only is the website, but the book is a world history of swimming. So that's a very broad net to cast. And how did you sort of go about doing that kind of research?

Because I imagine, it's an unusual topic before the existence of your work on it. I can't imagine even searching for something about swimming in the ancient world was easy to find a lot of stuff on that topic, right? And then to open that up to all kinds of different cultures and in all kinds of different periods.

So how did you [00:07:00] go about that?

**Karen:** Well, it took a long time. I mean, the book was about 10 years between that morning when I started to think about it and publication. So, you know, it's not something that happened immediately. One thing I would say is that I had the benefit of having already been working on the website for like

15

**Karen:** years.

And so things like when is the Song Dynasty, were already pretty familiar to me.

**Aven:** So you get the sort of large timelines kind of in place and the global perspective. Right.

**Karen:** You know, I, knew more world history than most classicists already because I had expanded the website to cover the whole world.

And now I say, ashamed of myself, that there's really very little on Australia, which I never really got to, but whatever, most of the world.

and at the same time, I think the internet and the increasing digitization of texts had made this possible in a way that it wouldn't have been possible 10 years earlier. Because I [00:08:00] could open something like a Chinese novel and search for the word swim. And, eventually I learned to also search for words like dive and river.

And people don't always call it swimming. They say he entered the water or something, So I would, I would search for those terms and gradually collect information. And I did that with ancient. Mediterranean texts also. So, I mean, it's really primary research, mostly. you know, I read collections of folktales, and, the Rig Veda, and just whatever I could think of that might be a fairly long text.

A lot of sort of regulations and rules, law codes regulations of how priests are supposed to behave turned out to be very fertile you know, local law codes and stuff saying that people can or can't swim in the local pond, lawsuits,

**Aven:** and [00:09:00] some, were there particular, could you look for particular occupations, occupational, not sailor necessarily, because I know we can talk about that later, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they swim, but, pearl diver, or, there's going to be a few areas.

**Karen:** I mean, pearl diving, actually, there has been enough interest in that there is a secondary literature. And so I was able to mostly rely on secondary literature for that. but I tried to stay away from pearl diving and professional swimming as much as I could, because I think That's different if you're swimming for work.

**Aven:** Right. So you were more interested in the

**Karen:** book is really more about social swimming. Okay. Swimming as a pastime. So I tried to stay away from both swimming as sport, as a competition where people are doing it for like money prizes or something like that.

and also swimming as. a job, often a coerced job where people have to swim. I don't think Pearl divers are really such great swimmers anyway.

**Aven:** It's a very specific thing they're doing. Yeah. They're not like, they're [00:10:00] not going to be able to do laps in a pool for very long or anything.

Yeah.

**Karen:** Right. Mostly they hold onto the rope and they have weights and they go down to the bottom and then they're kind of walking around on the bottom and then they pull the cord and go back up and

**Aven:** they can hold their breath. And that's the

**Karen:** big thing. They have to swim a little like over to the boat or whatever, but that.

Very little.

**Mark:** So lots of different kinds of texts as you say, like laws and, and, and different types of textual sources that you can work with there. What about non textual sources like artistic representation of swimming or, or I don't know what kind of archeology there might be associated with swimming, but what other sources were you able to tap on?

**Karen:** Right. I mean, my training is as an archeologist originally. So I. I definitely thought about that. There's not a lot of archaeology of swimming, though. To some extent, I looked at the, imperial baths and that kind of thing. Like, one of the arguments I make that the Romans were not particularly good swimmers is that most of the big [00:11:00] natatoriums are only about three feet deep, a meter deep.

You know, that's a depth that is good for cooling off and standing around talking to your friends. But if you've ever tried to swim in the kiddie side of the pool, it's actually a really irritating depth for swimming. it's not impossible to swim in a meter of water, but it's hard,

**Aven:** definitely not optimized wouldn't choose it.

**Karen:** yeah, there are deeper pools, but there are not very many deeper pools. Most of the things that are represented as natatoriums, like you're going to swim in them are actually only about a meter deep.

so that, that's one aspect of archeology that, And then images, I think I just collected sort of gradually over time.

Well, no, again, right. Searching museum catalogs. Now I remember how I did it. I would go to, like, the British Museum catalog of images, and search for swim, dive, whatever, and see what came up. and similarly the Louvre, and, the Metropolitan Museum. And that, gave me a lot of [00:12:00] images, but also over a decade of being interested in it, just every time someone had an image of someone swimming in something that I saw.

I took note of it, so you sort of gradually accumulate them. And people started sending them to me, too. Yeah,

**Aven:** that's always the thing, right? Become known as the person with that particular obsession, and then people start finding it for you.

**Karen:** yeah. I mean, a lot of times, obviously, people send me the same image over and over again, and I would be like, obviously, I've seen that one.

But they did sometimes come up with new ones. I think eventually I searched Flickr for images of swimming too. and if I knew that there were images of swimming on a particular temple or something, I could search for images of that temple and find the images of swimming.

**Aven:** So again, the digitization of all of this makes this a

**Karen:** Right.

I mean, this is a book which really would have been impossible to write even 20 years ago.

**Aven:** Would have had a very large travel budget.

**Karen:** Yeah, it just would have taken me a lifetime to, you know, people who wrote books like [00:13:00] this 50 years ago, it was like a whole career of trying to collect this information.

And I was able to do it in like 10 years because I could search everything pretty quickly. And I mean, It's a long day of going through a novel and looking at everything that might have to do with the water and determining whether it helps your argument or, you know, how it affects your argument, but

**Aven:** at least it's doable.

**Karen:** It's doable, right? I searched for drown.

**Aven:** Oh wow. Yeah. That was . and I'm thinking of all the metaphorical uses that must have come up all the time. Things swimming in things and Oh yeah, sure. And diving into, and just must have driven you.

**Karen:** And then it's particularly annoying that the past tense of swim is swam, right.

So you have to search for that separately. . and

**Aven:** dive and dove, which is also a dove, which doesn't help and which

**Karen:** is also dove and like the number of times I've had to like, skip past people talking about [00:14:00] is just incredible. So, yeah, I mean, basically that's sort of the primary method that I used was just looking through them and finding.

Like millions of references to it,

**Aven:** and then try to get sort of some patterns out of that

**Karen:** sorting them. Yeah. Looking for patterns. I, you know, I actually learned how to recognize the Chinese character for swim. So that I could look at the Chinese text and see. if the translation said bathed or, something else splashed, like, does the original set use the character for swim?

So I don't really read Chinese, but I can read that character in Chinese, so I can, tell whether this verse of the, poem or whatever actually uses the word swim.

**Aven:** Can I ask, we sort of dove in. I mean, I'm just going to use the puns. We kind of dove into the meat of this quite quickly, but maybe we can just back up for just a moment and you can give a little bit of a capsule description of the book.

So we're talking now about your, not your first book, which was about Visigoths and [00:15:00] Vandals, but your more recent book, The Shifting Currents, A World History of Swimming. So maybe you could just, you've sort of talked a little bit already about. What your focus was, but if you could just give a little capsule summary, so people can, know what they're.

Yeah.

**Karen:** I always say it's called Shifting Currents for a reason, and it's because it catalogs the changing places that people have swum or not swum over time. And so it shows that in probably during the last ice age, sorta, it's hard to say, people in cold Northern places forgot how to swim. The last ice age was the first one that people toughed it out in the North instead of just moving South.

And you know, it was just unattractive, I think, to swim for like 30, 000 years. Unattractive or fatal.

**Aven:** Yeah, those were your options.

**Karen:** Well, I mean, it was warmer in the summer, right? It wasn't like. Ice bound all year round, but it never really got warm enough to be attractive to go in the water. And a lot of the water is also tied up being [00:16:00] ice.

And so there aren't as many ponds and things as there are now. and people forgot how to swim. And then in after the ice age, when they encountered people in the South. they were like, wow, that is weird. You guys are swimming . And they made up a lot of reasons why they themselves did not swim other than they, they were afraid of the water, well, it wasn't cold anymore, so they didn't know why they weren't swimming. Right. so they said like the gods didn't like it and like it was immodest and like It was dangerous. It would make you sick. They came up with a lot of reasons.

And then gradually they did learn to swim. The Europeans in particular learned to swim, I think, from the Egyptians, along with learning a lot of other things from the Egyptians. And then gradually that gets turned around so that Europeans, as they're colonizing the world, first, they approach it by saying that all of the Indigenous people they meet who are really good swimmers.

It's because they're like [00:17:00] animals. They're not really people, like, horses can swim and like black people can swim in the same way naturally. And 19th century, they developed this idea that white people can swim. But like scientifically, not naturally like indigenous people, right? Of course.

And so you got like the Olympics and people trying to refine strokes and make them as powerful as possible and have competitions with timers and, and they're trying to show that they're very scientific swimmers and not like those natural swimmers and then eventually they push all the natural swimmers out of the water.

And swimming becomes something that we now think of as primarily done by white people. Right. And

**Aven:** when swimming as leisure, because leisure activities are restricted and all the rest of it. Yeah. A little bit I imagine there's some parallels, especially in the 19th century, what you're talking about with people running, for instance, running becomes a scientific and a gentleman's sport where you run specific timed races [00:18:00] and all of those things. And that's different than people who are just good at running. You have to run the right way in the right, right. And you have to

**Karen:** wear

**Aven:** special clothes, the right kind of strides, do it in special places.

**Karen:** Exactly. Right. You have to do it on a track and you have to be wearing shorts and a little number on you and special shoes, right.

**Aven:** And so if you're just good at running barefoot, then that's just like, that doesn't count. Exactly. Right. Okay.

**Karen:** So that's, that's kind of to show how white people first can't swim and then gradually take over swimming.

**Aven:** Well, that doesn't sound like a terribly predictable and depressing narrative that I've heard before in other contexts at all.

**Karen:** Everybody laughs at me because they say I'm incapable of writing books that anybody wants to read. All my books are always, like, very depressing. What

**Aven:** I meant, but nonetheless, it is a sort of overarching truth about the world.

no, I mean, I think it's a fascinating topic. And I think it's fascinating that I mean, [00:19:00] on the one hand, sort of not surprising that other people hadn't done it just because it is a very kind of niche specific thing. On the other hand, it's not like swimming is weird and unusual and people don't do it now.

So it's interesting that it hadn't been talked about in this kind of context. I think it's, Really cool, personally, even if

**Karen:** slightly depressing. Yeah, I mean, what you got was a lot of sort of Julius Caesar was a great swimmer and also Byron.

**Aven:** But that, of course, is just part of the extraordinary man narrative, right?

Because he's extraordinary, he can do extraordinary things.

**Karen:** Exactly. And that's what you get a lot of in Europe in the ancient world and also later on is that ordinary people can't be expected to swim, but heroes can swim. So like Odysseus can swim, but nobody else in his crew knows how.

**Mark:** And of course, you know, since my background is, middle ages, the, classic medieval example of the swimming hero is Beowulf, who, achieves these impossible [00:20:00] feats of swimming, like swimming for, many days while carrying weapons. Yeah, right, right, exactly. But his. The other people that he's like king of, they can't swim either.

**Aven:** Because he's special, and he can dive to the bottom of a pool.

Right. It's a

**Karen:** mark of being special. Right. It's not something everybody can do.

**Aven:** Yeah. And then as you say, Julius Caesar, and it's not made clear. And so if people don't know that story, that's him he...

**Karen:** has to cross the bay and he has to swim across the bay, holding the important papers that have to be saved.

And so he can only use one arm and he's like 52 when he does it. but there are also other episodes in his own account, of himself in the Gallic Wars where he sends out scouts to figure out where they're going to set up camp and stuff.

And then he beats them to the location because they have to figure out how Get across the river, but he can just swim.

**Aven:** Right. So even in his own account, he's making himself out to know something they [00:21:00] don't know how to do. I guess. Yeah, exactly.

**Karen:** But then you can see that in the, 19th century school children who are reading Caesar's Gallic Wars are like, Oh yeah, swimming.

That's a really upper class activity. Right. So that's why Byron wants to do it because. He wants to mark himself as a very upper class person.

**Aven:** And then the other famous, I mean, there are many, and I'm going to ask you to talk about some of the ones I don't know, because the only ones I really know are mostly European and classical examples.

But the other romantic one that I imagine is in Byron's head is the Hero and Leander story as well. Yeah, yeah, yeah, absolutely. Crossing the Hellespont.

**Karen:** Yeah, I mean, that's why he chooses the spot, but Leander again is, well, first of all, the story of Hero and Leander is super interesting because there are other similar stories from around the world.

There's one that the Maori people tell in New Zealand, for example. And in the end of that story, first of all, it's the girl who swims across to the boy. And second, she makes it. [00:22:00] Like the end of the story is, they get married, live happily ever after.

**Aven:** But the Greeks, they don't like happy endings.

They're against happy endings.

**Karen:** Yeah, and I think they find it particularly appropriate to take this swimming story and give it a sad ending because they actually still think swimming is kind of dangerous and weird. and so when they hear a story in which people heroically swim across water out of love, They turn it into a tragedy.

**Aven:** It sort of has an element of hubris to it in that like, but at bottom, should we really be swimming? That isn't really a sensible thing to be doing. It shows the madness of love that he would do such a thing

**Karen:** And actually the Islamic story of Zal and Rudava, which we know from a medieval version is the origin of our story of Rapunzel. Ah! Okay. And the water has just been elided out of the story completely, and her name, Rudabba, means river girl. Okay. And her hair kind of replaces the [00:23:00] river

**Aven:** as a sort of a strange medium to be conquered.

Right.

**Karen:** As it sort of ripples. Right. But it, because Islamic people in West Asia also were not swimmers. And, so they just eliminate, they're telling basically the same story. The hero has to save the girl you know, he has to reach her even though she's been shut up in a tower.

It's the same story again, but the water is taken out of it, which allows him to survive and, reach her, not get killed.

**Aven:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Mark:** So I guess, from these kinds of stories, then swimming must appear as a kind of folktale motif or a number of different folktale motifs, I suppose, you find the same story pattern in lots of different cultures.

**Karen:** Right. But often with different endings, depending on people's attitude towards swimming.

**Aven:** Right. So it's like a mechanism in the story, but not necessarily the same plot every time. Right.

**Karen:** Right, right. in places where people swim as sort of a regular part of their everyday life. Mm-Hmm. , they swim and then they get across the river.[00:24:00]

and live happily ever after. it's European and West Asian stories where people try to swim across the river and then drown. Right.

**Aven:** Yeah. I imagine Polynesian stories are filled with people who are perfectly capable of swimming because people swim.

**Karen:** Like, there's a, East African story, I think maybe Ethiopian where In order to win the girl, the boy has to swim out to an island and spend the night there and get the special plant and then swim home, which, you know, he does. And then he marries her.

**Aven:** Cause he's not lost at sea.

**Karen:** Cause he's not. And then there's an Indian version of that story where it's told in terms of a goat because it's from something kind of like Aesop's fables.

Where the goat mom tells the boyfriend that he has to swim out to the island to get the whatever. And he's like, there are lots of girls out there. I'm not going to swim out to the island to get it! Because India is also not a swimming place. And he just gives up the girl completely rather than swim out to the island.

**Aven:** I [00:25:00] just like that in general as a story type, that's entertaining. Right. Oh, well that sounds hard. Okay, forget it. Be a lot fewer great hero narratives, if we had that, but on the other hand, it might be more sensible for us all.

**Karen:** Yeah, it's kind of like, an Aesop's Fables thing about the fox and the grapes

**Aven:** or whatever.

A different decision. Yeah. As soon as you talk about all these, who makes it across or not, I'm suddenly thinking about how very many stories there are about bridges in European folklore. bridges and boats going across. Rivers. Because the basic assumption is there's no other way.

To get across the river and I've never really sort of thought about that. Oh

**Karen:** Yeah, there's a story in Boccaccio where the boy has to rescue the girl from the tower, but Boccaccio just gives him a boat. He goes over in a boat and rescues her, which works better.

**Aven:** I mean, perfectly sensible, the big point there is that you need the bridge or the [00:26:00] boat, because if you don't have it, it's unthinkable that you would just cross by swimming.

Which, in fact, it's not necessarily an unthinkable thing, we've just been trained to assume it's unthinkable, but, you know, lots of people cross rivers by swimming all the time. Yeah, Horatio at the bridge. Yeah. Interesting.

**Mark:** So I imagine, a lot of these stories It's probably the majority of them, I don't know, focus on swimming in rivers and lakes.

But what about ocean swimming? Does that appear very much?

**Karen:** Oh, yeah. There are some great stories by early like conquistador type people, people who are, going to the Native Americans, I think Columbus himself says when they get within about a mile of shore and they can see the boat.

People swim out to them, just to kind of see what's going on, right? So even though the Spanish feel like this is an impossible amount of distance. Like, no sane person would swim out that far away from shore. But a lot of them do. It's not like they send their best swimmer.

It's like, everybody's like, Hey, let's [00:27:00] swim out there and see what's up.

**Aven:** So yeah. Island nations, one imagines islands in the southern areas where it's warm, it's gonna be in normal Right. Part of life. Yeah.

**Karen:** So in, in the Caribbean in Hawaii. Mm-Hmm. In Brazil, there's a similar story in Brazil where the, Spanish, see some people, maybe the Portuguese, I guess, see some people bobbing around in the water way offshore and they send a lifeboat to like go pick them up. And when the lifeboat arrives, the Brazilians laugh at them and are like, we're just like hanging out, like having a good time. This is just what we do for fun.

we don't need rescuing.

**Aven:** I'm feeling very February suddenly and imagining, feeling very Northern European in the cold.

**Karen:** Right. They're in warm places where it's, warm most of the time and they're like, we don't get tired hanging out in the water. We can float if we get tired. We don't need rescuing.

**Aven:** Well, that's yeah, cause the heroes, when you think about [00:28:00] those European hero narratives too, they're always about. The hero is the swimmer who can battle the elements, who can conquer, right? Beowulf has this feat of endurance. And so does Odysseus after his raft breaks, it's a feat of endurance that he only manages through divine aid.

**Karen:** I mean, he actually has a magic veil. So like, in case you thought it was even possible to swim without a magic veil.

**Aven:** No, he was going to give up until that happened. And yeah, it's a feat of manliness and proof of their heroism or whatever.

Not just a thing you do for fun

**Karen:** for fun. Yeah, right. Yeah. Europeans almost never have stories where people swim for fun or if they do, then the story ends in somebody drowning.

**Aven:** So the one thing I can think of that. It's not quite counter to that, but the one place that I do think of Romans swimming, but I don't know, maybe they're not actually swimming, is the Bay of Naples.

We get that sort of pleasure villas with the swimming there, right? [00:29:00] I'm thinking of the Cicero story of Lesbia, or sorry. Claudia and you can tell I read too much Catullus. And she's she watched the men. She goes down and likes to watch the men swimming, her young men's friends swimming.

And there's another, there's a Horace poem about the young boy, the young man that he likes and how beautiful he is when he's swimming or something like that. There's a sort of, so it seems to be a trope that it's a way of showing off anyway. I

**Karen:** think it's a way of showing that you're upper class, and so these people at these very upper class villas on the Bay of Naples, they probably do do some swimming, like Plato says, an ignorant person can't read or swim,

**Aven:** right.

**Karen:** The way we would say they can't read or write. He says they can't read or swim. And, you know, so I think there is like Agrippina can swim. Right.

**Aven:** Which is why she doesn't die in immediately in

**Karen:** Right. When, Nero tries to kill her in the lake, she swims to shore.

**Aven:** I don't think you know that story, Mark,.

Or she swims to the boat or something. Yeah. That's,

**Karen:** Oh, yeah. Nero, the Emperor [00:30:00] Nero is trying to kill his mother. As you do when you're an Emperor. He tries a bunch of things. and it's actually a hysterical series of stories, because, like, first he, like, cuts a hole in the ceiling of her bedroom to make the bedroom fall on her, like he was a Looney Tunes cartoon.

And it fails. And that fails. She notices. And then and then he invites her to a party on the other side of the lake from her house. And then when she goes back, he like, Sabotages the boat. I don't know how. He makes holes. Somehow the boat becomes defunct in the middle of the lake and sinks. And, she's supposed to drown, but instead she swims to shore.

And, and then he just sends people to stab her. Yeah.

She dies.

But she clearly knows how to swim. I mean, or at least, or at least Suetonius thinks we're going to believe that she knows how to

**Aven:** swim, but yet at the same time was clearly expected not to know how to swim because he thought it would Kill her for her boat to sink in the middle of a [00:31:00] lake.

**Karen:** It's a little mysterious. Nero doesn't know whether his mother knows how to swim or not , but clearly at least Suetonius' audience didn't think it was incredible that she would know how to swim. Right.

**Aven:** But also not a given. It was sort of a possible either way.

**Karen:** But to take a really interesting different example of the lower classes, not swimming, think of the Battle of Lake Trasimene.

Right, right. Hannibal surrounds the Roman army, which has gotten itself into a really stupid position. It's like 30, 000 men or something. I forget exactly at least 10, 000, like a lot of people. And he traps them on the shores of Lake Trasimene in Northern Italy in April, I think. And they go into the water as far as they can go without having to swim, As far as they could stand right up to their shoulders in water.

And then they can't escape any further. And he sends the cavalry into the water on horses and they kill all of them. And so Livy and [00:32:00] Polybius both say that it was impossible for any of them to save themselves by swimming in that enormous lake, but. Like these are, this is the flower of the Roman army, right?

These are not like 50 year olds, right? These are a bunch of 22 year olds, 25 year olds in excellent condition, right? And the nearest island in the lake is about a mile away. if you look at the lake Is it really credible that none of them out of whatever it is to several tens of thousands of guys could make it to the island?

None of them even tried?

**Aven:** I think that's the key, right? It's that they're portrayed as not even making the effort because it's just so incredible and impossible that they could. I mean, you could say, okay, they've been fighting and they're tired and they're in armor, sure. But like, surely, if you thought you could swim, you would try.

**Karen:** Yeah, I mean, they're in armor, but like it takes a while to kill 30, 000 guys in the water. You're like, surely you have time to take off your armor. At least some of them do. And, and if you compare [00:33:00] that to the Brazilian guys that we just saw bobbing around in the water being like, well, yeah, we could just swim for days.

Like nobody even thought they would try it. I think most ordinary Romans couldn't swim.

**Aven:** Yeah. So that it was not even like, it wouldn't even cross their mind. It's like standing on the edge of a cliff and being told, well, why don't you just try flying? Right. You might be able to make it, you know, exactly.

It seems entirely impossible to you. Then you wouldn't even, it just wouldn't occur to you to try.

**Karen:** Like, even if they just swam out, like. 40 feet further. So it was over the horse's

**Aven:** heads. And then, you know, maybe Hannibal's maybe that would be enough, but yeah, it's just, it's not even discussed as a possibility.

Yeah.

**Karen:** When I was on my first ever excavation in Cyprus, we used to go to the beach and, you know, Cypriot guys would come and harass us on the beach and we used to go into the water and just swim out of our depth. And they would [00:34:00] stop where they could stand and sort of yell at us that it wasn't fair. And we were like, well, but, you know, if you, if you picture the guys at Lake Trasimene, like, you know, why didn't they at least do that?

They don't have to swim a mile. They could just swim like out of reach. You know, these are guys who are about to have their heads cut off. Yeah, you'd

**Mark:** think, Out of desperation, they'd try

**Aven:** anything, right? Yeah, you'd think, right. But they don't. But they don't. Yeah. And it just shows it as a, as a complete non starter for them.

**Karen:** And there, there I sort of did feel like, you know, how many gallons of ink have been spilled on the Battle of Lake Trasimene without anybody pointing out that it's kind of weird that none of them try to save themselves. Mm

**Aven:** Well, and I guess it just because enough, a lot of the people reading it probably also don't swim.

Yeah.

**Mark:** Thinking back to that, story about Nero's mother, it occurs to me, like, how is swimming gendered? Is it, [00:35:00] is it unusual for women to also swim or?

**Aven:** That must differ surely across

**Mark:** different cultures. Yeah.

**Karen:** People want me to gender it maybe because I'm gendered in their minds, people are always asking me that question.

And the answer I think is no, it's not very gendered. It's, race and class are far more important to swimming than gender. in places where everybody can swim, women can also swim. And in places where only very elite people can swim, elite women also swim. I mean, maybe guys have more opportunity, they're, less supervised, right?

So they're more able to sort of go to the local quarry and take their clothes off and swim where girls typically have to stay closer to home and are, more occupied in their day. Right? They have to take care of their little brothers and sisters and stuff, but they know how at approximately

**Aven:** equal rates.

Right. And I guess, in the ones we were talking about, where it's only heroes who swim there, you're going to [00:36:00] see it gendered, but only because. heroism is also gendered. if swimming is a marker of your extraordinary hero and your super manly man in Greek myth, then sure, you're going to see it only in the men, but that's because you're only going to see men as heroes.

So

**Karen:** yeah, if you're only using it to demonstrate that someone is a hero, obviously you're going to see women swimming less, but in terms of practical. Practical situations where we actually see real people swimming. It's just as likely to be women as men.

**Mark:** What about age? Are people typically learning to swim in childhood or is it something that you can come to later in

**Karen:** life?

Well, in places where everybody swims, everybody swims. If you can walk, you can swim. You know, people are like, tossing their,

**Aven:** toddlers into the water,

**Karen:** six month old into the water and, you know, encouraging them to paddle a little before they pick them up again. because it's important if everybody is socializing down by the water all the time, you want them to know how to swim.

Yeah, it's a [00:37:00] safety issue. And they want to know

**Aven:** how to swim. Cause they want to be out there with their parents and their friends and their siblings. Or they want

**Karen:** to be out there with their friends, right? They want to be able to do the things their friends are doing. Romans seem to have taught their kids to swim more or less at the age that they learn to read. So like six, seven. Okay. As we do.

**Aven:** Right, So it's an acquired skill rather than one you grow up knowing Exactly.

**Karen:** So it's a foreign thing, right? Not something that is a natural part of growing up, like running or learning to walk

**Aven:** or whatever.

Yeah.

**Karen:** And then in the renaissance, there's a whole thing of like young men learning to swim, you know, who've grown up in a non swimming culture, but are now like, oh, it would be really hip to learn how to swim. And they're all like, 15 to 20 or something learning how to swim.

And then there's actually a whole series of, sarcastic cartoons in the 19th century as swimming spreads to the middle [00:38:00] class and there's all these middle class grown up people who are like, Oh, I have to be in the swim, right? And they're trying to learn to swim suspended from ropes on land and, and using all these sort of gimmicky flotation devices and stuff because

**Aven:** it's become a fad.

Right. Yeah. Yeah. And of course, then you get all that, all the bathing costumes and all of that, because that's the piece that probably is one of the things that leads people to think it must be gendered is the, the intersection of modesty and nudity with swimming because I assume most people swim naked for a long time or in, very little clothing, if any.

Yeah,

**Karen:** I mean, historically, yeah, swimming is one of the things that Europeans have against it is that you take off all your clothes to do it. And then, yeah, Europeans, basically, in order for it to spread to the middle class, they have to invent the bathing costume.

**Aven:** Yeah, so that you can do it and still be respectable.

**Karen:** [00:39:00] But women are, you know, right out there in the front of it. I mean, people are always like, well, women couldn't really, but if you think about the bathing carriages that, bring women out into the water in these like sort of covered wagon things. So that they can be in the water without having to walk across the beach.

It's all women. That's all women. It's not men who are doing

**Aven:** that. Yeah. No, the Victorians You definitely like yeah there are men in their funny bathing costumes, too. We all can all immediately imagine remember what those pictures look like But they're all women too and then certainly in the 20th century the most of the famous

**Karen:** A big feminist thing to swim.

Mm-Hmm.

**Mark:** I imagine it sort of follows also the, growing trend for women getting more exercise. Mm-Hmm. Once you get into the 20th century. Into the, the late 19th century and into the 20th century. Mm-Hmm. .

**Aven:** Right. Yeah, yeah. one of my favorite intersections of swimming culture and the classics is, [00:40:00] of course, those extremely historically accurate swimming centered movies about the ancient world, like the one about Hannibal that has a, who's the, swimming sensation that's in all of those movies?

Esther Williams. That's right. Esther Williams. Esther Williams. Yes, that's it. There's, she's Neptune's daughter. Neptune's daughter. That's right. And there's, there's a couple of them, actually, there's at least two or three where, where there's all these big underwater swimming sequences and stuff.

And they're with classical themes. It's, it's, they're astonishing.

**Karen:** Well, I think that is, I mean, that's how people preferred to see the Greeks and Romans as good swimmers. Right, because they wanted to see themselves as swimmers and they wanted to see themselves as. Greeks and Romans. And so they just kind of mashed that together

**Aven:** so could probably keep talking about swimming forever, but I want to ask you, that was the book that came out already. So of course it's in your work life, I'm sure, a thing of the distant past. And I know you've been working on [00:41:00] another project. And I think I'd like to ask you about that. And I think I also want to tie that back to your earlier, the way you started off with, talking about the connections, And I just wanted to mention something that crossed my mind when you were talking about, you know, linking back to that we have this tendency to think of this sort of web of connections as always having a center, right?

Like you're talking about Louis XIV might be the center and everything goes out from him. And I think, if I understand correctly, that some of what you're trying to, you were trying to do with the swimming book and are trying to do again now with your new work, which I'd like to talk about in a moment, is sort of say, well, what if it's not actually like one node and a bunch of stuff circling around it, but these connections are reciprocal?

And like, what if we start with a different thing as our center node that isn't the people we always start with as the center? Is that a fair representation?

**Karen:** Yeah, yeah, that, that is absolutely and, and absolutely this, this new work also grows out of this sense that Europe [00:42:00] is overly likely to be the center node that we grow everything out of.

I always think of the 19th century geography books where you had to memorize the principal products of each place that were exported to Europe, right? Like, so the only important thing about Kenya is what it exports to Europe. And the only important thing about Iran is what it exports to Europe. And I'm trying to overcome that.

I'm trying to say, what if we saw the people of Kenya as people and not people who just export to Europe? And, similarly in Iran. And so the book I'm writing now is about what if the sort of rich, important cities of antiquity are in Asia and not in Europe, which they are: Alexandria, Antioch, Babylon.

You know, the cities of India and stuff. It's, just much wealthier than Europe. Right. And so what if they're [00:43:00] actually the ones that are kind of driving decision making and Europe is responding to that? And so in particular, I'm looking at silver exports where. we sort of see, it's accepted, it's generally accepted that Europe becomes a lot richer when they start exploiting their silver mines first at Laurion and then in Spain.

Right. Right. Laurion outside Athens and then when the first the Carthaginians and then the Romans start getting silver from the huge silver mines in Spain. And that Rome and Europe in general becomes poorer again when those silver mines run out of silver, right?

why would digging up all this silver make Europe richer? And typically people have said things like, well they, develop coinage and then monetizing the economy makes the economy a lot more efficient and so they're able to be more productive and that's how they get richer. And I think that's [00:44:00] just wrong.

I think it's too centered on Europe. It's blind to what's going on anywhere else. I think instead what Europe is doing is digging up all their silver and selling it to Asia. And it's Asia that needs all this coinage to make their economy more productive and more efficient and whatnot.

Europe isn't really a monetized economy. They don't need that. they're not producing anything. All they're really producing is silver. It's like Saudi Arabia selling oil to the U. S.

**Aven:** They don't really need it for themselves beyond a certain base. Right. I mean, maybe they

**Karen:** use some of it. But the reason oil made the Saudis rich isn't that they're using it to develop their economy, it's that they're selling it to us.

**Aven:** Right. It's not that they became a sudden industrial powerhouse, right? Saudi Arabia is not a , they didn't use it to

**Karen:** build factories, right? They used it to sell oil to us. It's a commodity. And I think the Romans similarly Become rich by selling silver to [00:45:00] Egypt and Syria and Iran and whatnot, India for goods and And they get goods in return.

So the reason suddenly they have tons of papyrus and linen clothing and glass and all kinds of steel is that they're importing them in exchange for the silver. And the reason they become poor when they run out of silver is that they can't buy those things anymore. Right.

**Aven:** They don't have something that anybody wants because the rest of the rest of what Europe is producing is basically subsistence economy stuff, right?

Like producing enough grain for themselves and they're producing enough wood for themselves, but not really in surplus. Exactly. Yeah.

**Karen:** And, they make pottery and stuff too, but basically for themselves, they're not exporting, they're not making it in quantities that would support the lifestyle that they would like to have.

really the only thing that they have other than, they export a little bit of, timber, right? Because they have [00:46:00] tall trees that have all been cut down in Asia by that time. Right. But the only other thing they have to export is women. And I think there's a lively slave trade in women from Europe to Asia, particularly that really gets going in the early middle ages.

Michael McCormick has a book showing that there's a lively slave trade of women in the early middle ages. And I think that's an attempt to make up for the loss of income from silver.

**Aven:** A commodity they still have. Yeah, I mean, kind of. Well, yeah, no, sorry, I mean, sorry, that probably came out more brutal than I meant it to, but I mean, like, when you think about the ancient world, you do, unfortunately, get used to thinking about humans as commodities, because they, I mean, they are treated that way, obviously, in case anyone didn't know, I disapprove of that, but in case it didn't come across.

But yeah, no, I mean, I can see the logic there, yeah.

**Karen:** Yeah, and then Europe really doesn't recover from that until they discover silver in South [00:47:00] America and Mexico a thousand years later. And then they do the same thing, they basically become rich again.

**Aven:** Yeah. And they do the same thing, right? I mean, they're basically selling it to the East.

That's, that's what they're doing in exchange for the commodities from China, mostly, basically. Yeah. Right.

**Karen:** Right. And you see the same arguments being made that, oh, then they're able to monetize the early modern economy and that's, but you also see people saying, no, they're just selling it to China. That's really the reason they're getting riches.

**Aven:** Interesting. and we

**Karen:** still do it today. The, the end of the book is we don't do it with silver anymore, but we have miraculously managed to convince the world that the. Paper dollars or now electronic dollars that we sell are just as good as the silver. Yeah, and that's a lot of what we export is, currency.

**Aven:** Yeah, from the U. S. in particular, yeah.

**Karen:** We still have nothing, you know, it's not like we really export manufacturing or anything. We still mostly export dollars and mostly to Asia.

**Aven:** [00:48:00] So what is, what's the title of the book?

**Karen:** Yeah, it doesn't really have a title yet.

I don't get to decide the title. So what I call it is Women, Clothing and Money.

**Aven:** Right.

**Karen:** But they've already told me that probably won't be it. I think it'll be something like " money and gender in the ancient world."

**Aven:** Okay. It might be something like that. Right. So, because when I saw the, saw that title on, on your website I was thinking about textiles as money. Is that, part of what you're talking about? Or is that a, yes.

**Karen:** Yeah, because I start from what is Asia using for money before they start getting Europe's silver. And I think a lot of that is trade cloth, beads and cowries and trade cloth. and so. There's kind of a change in the way people think about women that goes along with them changing the way they think about money. When we start thinking of money as silver, rather than say trade cloth or beads at the same time, we start thinking of women.

[00:49:00] Not as valuable commodities who produce trade cloth, the source of all trade cloth but instead we start thinking of them the way the Greeks and Romans do as parasites, as consumers. Right. which will sound familiar to anyone today that men make money and women spend it.

**Aven:** Right.

Whereas they literally made money. When money is textiles, women literally make money. Right.

**Karen:** But when money is silver, people start to think of women as consumers rather than producers.

**Aven:** Right. Interesting. I just happened to like three days ago, read an old backdated issue well, I mean, like it's from last year or something, of Scientific American that had a whole article, I'm sure you read it, I imagine, because this is something that must be of interest to you, but a whole article about reconstructing and learning more about Icelandic trade cloth.

If you didn't, I will send it to you, but it was at least a year ago, maybe two years ago, so I'm very slowly working through a backlog of magazines. [00:50:00] it was about archaeological findings, it was reminding us of how important in this case in Iceland, which is European where cloth was the main unit of exchange.

Even when they started to have coinage, they still used, it was like measured in cloth and, it also made that argument about the political importance of women and how that changed once they stopped using the cloth and how they stopped being able to do business.

**Karen:** Yeah, no, I think I have seen that.

Right. I mean, one of the things the book emphasizes is that the other currencies don't go out of use. You know, European ships are still carrying trade cloth and cowries. to deal with Native Americans and Africans into the early 1900s.

Well, you know, as long as people are using silver, they're still using trade cloth and cowries, right? It's the same, roughly the same time that we stopped using silver coins that we also stopped using cowries and trade cloth,

**Aven:** right? We start using dollar bills that are made out of [00:51:00] cloth. They're actually made out of cloth,

**Karen:** technically.

And even though we call that paper money, it's actually cloth

**Aven:** money. In Canada, we now have plastic money that's not like credit cards. I mean, the actual bills are now plastic, but that's fairly recent.

**Karen:** Yeah, but American dollars are still made out of cloth. And I think that's important. I think it's part of why they're acceptable as money is that they're actually cloth.

**Aven:** Well, that sounds very fascinating and again, like I like very much your approach of sort of saying, well, but what if we just take this back to first principles and don't take the assumptions that we have about how, power and, things flow, say,

what's the proof of any of that? how do we know that?

**Karen:** If we don't assume that the Greeks and Romans are the leaders in anything that happens, but might be more sort of the victims or the, you know. Or the

**Aven:** auxiliaries sort of that kind of like. The auxiliaries.

**Karen:** [00:52:00] Right. How do things look different?

And I, do think that grows out of having worked on the website for so long. Yeah.

**Aven:** Sorry. I'm just thinking about it. It's all very interesting, but I also don't want to like, ask you to tell me the whole story of your book when you are still working on the book. The book

**Karen:** mostly exists. even though it's probably going to be another couple of years before it's actually on anybody's shelf. Right. You know, writing these books takes forever and there, there's actually been a complete draft of it since last summer.

Right. And what I've done since last summer is cut it down to less than half as long as it was.

**Aven:** Yeah, that's a big topic.

**Karen:** Again, it's a big topic and I wasn't sure what I really needed to include in the beginning. So now I'm kind of Okay, I don't absolutely have to say this. So I'm taking it out. I'm trying to make it as short as I can so it'll be easier for people to read it then the next stage is I'm going to go through and [00:53:00] like check all the footnotes and make sure everything is right and then it goes off to readers and, then there's like copy editing and printing and, you know, it's going to be a couple of years, but that doesn't mean I haven't written it. I actually, it exists in more or less, almost its final form already.

**Mark:** But nevertheless, when the book does come out. You have to come on the podcast again to talk about it.

**Karen:** I will be very happy to.

**Aven:** I should say, by the way, for people, people reading that. So the first book was with Reaktion Press and this is with is it Liverpool? Liverpool. and I, bring that up because I think it's important to point out that that's not, it's not that these aren't academic books, but they're not academic books quite either, right? Like the, these are books that are not aimed solely at graduate students working in the field or anything like that. So I want people to know that, that these are books that are, are meant to be readable. Yeah. I don't know if [00:54:00] you can always take that for granted. Yeah.

**Karen:** I mean, I think the swimming one in particular is very readable. they're both readable. They're not. Yeah, I mean, I've written other things that were like, you know, the Roman pottery of Leptiminus, where like, yeah, unless you're a Roman pottery specialist, like, don't try. There is nothing here for you.

**Aven:** Even the pictures aren't going to make any sense to you. Yeah, no, I mean, it's all

**Karen:** like

**Aven:** cross sections. Literature person. Trust me on that.

**Karen:** You, you don't want to read the details of whether there's a. Subset of this kind of amphora that was produced in this decade. You know, that's not for you. but both of these books are books, which really anybody who knew a little bit about.

History could pick up and, and read. Yeah. I'm not making any assumptions about what you know.

**Aven:** Yeah. No, I wanted to bring that out because I, you know, we obviously talk to people who write all sorts of different books and sometimes [00:55:00] they are very much for specialists, but, but I don't think you're, you're writing on

**Karen:** these ones.

These are not, there's no jargon in them that's only available to people who write about ancient coinage or anything like that.

Yeah, I hope people will buy it. In fact, that's why I'm working so hard to make it as short as possible in the hopes that, that

**Aven:** people will read it. That's an approachable and sort of manageable book for people. Yeah, for sure. Now, so the, the swimming book is available for those who want to read it. We'll of course have a link, of course.

And then as you say, who knows what exactly the timeline is going to be for the, for the other one, but it will be, within the next year or two, shall we say? Yes. Yeah.

**Karen:** Yeah. Probably.

**Aven:** Yeah, I know. We don't want to make any promises about anything, especially in publishing right now. It can be quite a.

There's a lot of bottlenecks to that process.

**Mark:** karen and I both take part in the same writing group.

So, you know, I'm in there every week encouraging her as she does all the rest of us to you [00:56:00] know, get the writing work

**Aven:** done. Yeah. And you can keep us updated as to the progress too, yeah.

**Karen:** I will, I will. Thank you so much for having me. This has been great.

**Aven:** Oh, no, it's been tons of fun. And in the meantime, as you say, you do have the blog the, the website.

And I know you're on various social media. I know social media is in such a flux right now. Nobody wants to sort of say where, you know, who knows where we all are.

**Karen:** I'm mostly on Blue Sky right now. And I am. very slightly still on Twitter.

**Aven:** Well, I'll put your handles and people can find you.

And, Quatrus is, is how to find you in various places. Yeah, and there's also the website. So if you, if anyone is, you know, wanting to read more from you, but waiting for the next book. You can go to the website in the meantime, right?

**Karen:** Yeah, absolutely. Go ahead. Read the website. There's a lot, there are like 2, 500 articles on

**Aven:** the website. Yeah. No, there's enough to keep you going for a long time. We never [00:57:00] even got to, I had down as, things to talk about was, you know, how did you get into classics? And what was, what were you doing before you wrote these books?

But we'll just have to save that for the next time you come on to talk about your next book, because swimming is Yeah, I'm sorry. No, no, it's I'm really

**Karen:** so much more interested in talking about the books than in talking about myself.

**Aven:** Well, and the topics are really fascinating. So, you know, it's not a problem to talk about them.

That's, that's fine. The conversation went where we wanted it to. It followed its own currents.

**Karen:** I will say, if you're ever tempted to write a book about swimming, the metaphors write themselves.

**Aven:** Well, I imagine to a certain extent clothing and coins do that for you too. We'll do that as well. We, we have a They do. They do, yeah. Fairly rich metaphorical language of those two realms. Yeah. Thank you so much, and we'll point people to all the places that can find you [00:58:00] online, and we will have you back when the next book comes out. And it was a real delight talking to you, so thank you.

**Karen:** Yeah, thank you very much.

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It helps us a lot.

We'll be back soon with more musings about the connections around us. Thanks for listening.

**Mark:** [00:59:00] Bye.