

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Professor Kaysha Corinealdi

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by Professor Kaysha Corinealdi, where I ask her: what's the story of the Panama Canal? Welcome to Getting Curious, this is Jonathan Van Ness. I'm so excited for this week's episode. I'm so excited for this week's guest. So without any further ado, welcome to the show Kaysha Corinealdi, who is an assistant professor at Emerson College and an interdisciplinary historian of modern empires, migration, gender, and activism in the Americas.

And before we dive in, I realized I live really close to a dam and then I was like, "What is going on with dams?" Like, what's going on with, like, water stuff? So we just had our first kind of learning experience with, like, dams and kind of, like, the economic, the environmental, the displacement, all of the different factors that kind of go into what we know as dams. And then I was like, "What about the Panama Canal?" And so here we are. Welcome. How are you?

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:01:11] I'm good. Thanks for having me. And I'm excited that you got excited to learn about the Panama Canal. That's, you know, all that I hope to be able to engender in my own students. So, yay!

JVN [00:01:25] You got me, and I'm not even like, I'm like, I'm one of your students of life now. So, so, that's fun.

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:01:30] There we go. I love it.

JVN [00:01:33] So let's start with the big, heavy hitting questions: Where is the Panama Canal?

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:01:38] Love it! So it is in Panama, the Panamanian Isthmus. And it was selected for its very unique geography, right, which was something that going back to the 16th century from those sort of traveling at that point in time. There was this realization that this strip of land connected two major land masses and two huge bodies of ocean, the Pacific and the Atlantic and then the north and the south. So kind of, like, the trifecta of, like, where can you build something that could connect more of the world? And it sort of began at that moment, right, in sort of similarly connected to European expansion, right? Trying to, like, get everywhere, et cetera. But even within the region,

there was a lot of fascination by those that were there in terms of Indigenous populations, the movements that they were making throughout the isthmus.

But then what happens as we get to the 19th century is that the technologies become more available for this kind of connection. The Gold Rush happens in the 1850s. And then, following that, there was a push to sort of build a railroad, because there's a realization that this is the closest way to get from the Atlantic to the Pacific. And so all of that sort of energy that went into those that were making that track, you know, from the East to the Atlantic then to the Pacific, then back up to California, there was then an interest in, "Let's actually invest to create a railway." And that becomes available, and operational by the 50s or so. And that sort of becomes the pattern for imagining a canal that would also similarly connect these two parts of the sort of oceans and sort of the isthmus to the oceans.

JVN [00:03:34] Okay. So this is, like, a really, like, sidebar question that I didn't totally prep you for. So it's totally fine for you to be, like, "Girl!" But, ok, so, like, because, this really is off the wall. But I just wrote down, like, when did we when did, like, people discover that it was, like, different oceans? Like, was it the Indigenous people in Panama? You know, they were, like, "Oh, that's one ocean, and that's the other one." Or, like, because, like, people were still talking about the world was, like, flat or curved or whatever.

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:04:05] This is true, this is true. I mean, I don't know the exact point in which people even, like, named it as such, right? Like, when it got the named Pacific and Atlantic. I mean, we know that in terms of maritime travel, you have sort of the Portuguese doing some of these sort of expeditions, you know, followed by sort of the Dutch, and others in various parts. And so there is the sense of bodies of oceans that are in different places. And so by the time you have these travels and eventually what is called "the Americas," like, there is an understanding of huge bodies of water. As for the Indigenous population, in terms of whether or not they would have named these as such, it's unlikely the case, it's more so kind of realizing the trajectory that you wouldn't be able to make it from one end to the other for things like trade and the like that were happening around that time.

JVN [00:04:58] So that's really interesting. I mean, I just was wondering about if if, just what the deal was that I feel, like, that's, but you answered it ingeniously. And so that railroad, you said, was functional by, like, the 1870s-ish?

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:05:11] Exactly. And it was inspired precisely because of that gold rush, right? This idea of people wanting to make that trek and realizing that once you got to Panama, it was very treacherous, right? You have to go through boat, through jungle, through, sort of, mules, and a lot of people died, right, making that trajectory. And

so the idea became, "Well, how can we continue to make this certainly faster, right?" And cut out thousands of miles from sort of going around Cape Horn. It was, like, sort of direct. And that inspired actually it was the US sort of US businessmen that were involved in constructing and actually financing it. And workers were brought in from China, from Jamaica to really build this railroad. It was very sort of difficult to put together. You know, many died because of things like yellow fever, which was also the reason why, among other things, that the French attempts to build a canal failed as well.

And it's not really until we get to 1904 with the start of the US kind of engineering, and deciding to use a locks-based system, where you actually water leveling out rather than Sea Canal, which was the Suez Canal model that you had this happening in conjunction with many inroads made at the medical level with treating yellow fever. So it kind of, like, all these things came together to make something like that possible because it involves, you know, hundreds of thousands of people in one way or another connected to the economy of the building of it, you know, around at least 50,000 directly contracted by the Isthmian Canal Commission that builds the canal and many, many more coming from other economies surrounding it, right, from people, imagine people who are doing the cooking, the laundry, all the sort of economies are on the way. So a lot of people find their way to Panama for that building. But it's a huge moment that will connect the Atlantic and the Pacific in a way that people indeed have imagined. But now it would mean so much trade for commerce, for just distance, right? Because casual travel would also pick up as well, right? So it really would make those connections a lot faster.

JVN [00:07:43] Because a railroad can only do so many, like, can only move so much, like, volume of people and stuff, so, like, a river or a canal or whatever would make, like, a bigger volume. So what's, like, the understood time for, like, so is 1904 when they started construction then?

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:08:01] That's right. So 1904 is when the construction begins sort of the US efforts, and it ends in 1914. It took about 10 years of sort of building all the different stages of the process. And it was, you know, something that comprised thousands of people. It meant that a lot of people ended up maimed through some of the dynamite that was being used to excavate. And it really transformed the country in terms of now, you had this major transportation sector that united the world, right? One of the things that's in the Panamanian coat of arms is "for the benefit of the world." There was this consciousness of that country being that way, but it also meant that this canal, which would not be owned by Panama, would also be right in the middle of the country. So benefiting the world, but really messing up the geography because now the two parts of that country would be separated from one another, with the canal zone basically being in the middle. So it does a lot for the world, but it also creates this really interesting, very tense situation

regarding what does it mean to have this in your country where you don't control it or have access to the space?

JVN [00:09:26] What was the approval process for, like, lobbying the Panamanian government to approve of doing this? And was there, like, local input? Like, were Panamanian people, like, "That's right, my fucking backyard! My family had, like, a fucking cabin on that lake or whatever! I don't want to sell my land to be part of this Panama Canal."

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:09:45] It's a great question because it wasn't just like, "Hey, it's happening." In fact, the United States first tried to negotiate with Colombia, Panama was part of Colombia until 1903, and they came up with a treaty that essentially was along the lines of what the national force really would be. This would be around the 1880s, and Colombia said no. Right, that they thought the terms were good enough that the financing just wouldn't work. They were really concerned about this idea that the US would have control of the area for a very long period of time. So what then happens is you have, you know, the collapse of the French attempts right by the sort of end of the eighties beginning sort of end of that '90s. And you have a realization that there is a great deal of land and work that already had begun. But the French company has gone bankrupt. They cannot continue with the endeavors.

But there is a particular integral person Philippe Bunau-Varilla of France, who gets information and gets the contacts for those who had been working on the French canal, those that still held control over the capital for it, and decides to present himself as the person who will represent Panama before the United States, so that starts to happen. You know, again, the late 80s 1890s, what really becomes a contentious topic is that Bunau-Varilla is not a Panamanian. He is a French guy who, because of his connections with the attempt by the French to build that reaches this sort of weird agreement with those that are seeking independence and Panama because there was an independence movement away from Colombia prior to the United States coming along.

But what the United States presence and their interests in the canal does the US is that they're saying, "Well, if you back our desire to build a canal here, we will also help back your independence effort." So with this in mind, they talk to Bunau-Varilla, "Represent us, or at least try to get a sense of what the United States is willing to agree on." And the idea was that the Panamanians would then go and actually sit down with the United States and discuss it. It never happens. And that's why the treaty that emerges that is connected to Panama's independence and the canal and they knew they had no Panamanian signatories. Right. So there were no Panamanians involved in the actual final terms for the canal.

JVN [00:12:33] How did that go over my head? So because you said the thing about so-and-so is supposed to talk to so-and-so?

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:12:42] So you had in the heart of the United States government, you had Hay, who was the representative for the sort of US government. And then you had the part of, sort of, the French, who for a while again had an alliance that he had created with some of the elites in Panama, like Guerrero, who were part of the independence movement to talk to the United States. This particular individual was Philippe Bunau-Varilla, the Frenchman. And so the idea was for him to kind of act more so as an intermediary than to take over. And sort of the latter happens, right? He sort of ends up being the only one who signs off and that sort of treaty, which is only originally written in English and then later translated into Spanish, becomes the basis for how long the sort of hold that the United States would have of the canal zone area. Because that's where the idea of, you know, 99 years, possible perpetuity of the United States having control of that region is mapped out for the purposes of building the canal.

JVN [00:14:06] So, alright, so basically up until 1904, this French man, he kind of got the whole thing, like, he got, like, the country of Panama that was just a brand new country to, like, sign on to this thing. But the Panamanians didn't get to, like, offer their consensus and, like, the government didn't really get to be a part of it because he accidentally well, he just didn't. He just took it over and then he kind of signed it. And that was it?

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:14:31] That's right. So he effectively, you know, this particular treaty is directly linked with both the United States saying that they're going to back Panamanian independence efforts *and* an agreement to sort of have the canal built. So it sort of allows for both. It attaches the desire for independence that had been there and US interests, but without really consulting more fully what the people in what would be a brand new nation would actually want in more detail.

JVN [00:15:08] And then I kept trading down who stood to benefit, like, who stood to benefit from this creation of a, of a Panama Canal owned by the United States. I think I already know the answer: to create more volume and more tourism and, like, an easier way to ship goods.

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:15:26] So yes, the United States government has a lot to gain from this endeavor. One, certainly connected to shipping and economies, right? Because you already had, even prior to this, the sort of boom of the banana industry, right? That also is centered around Central America. But this idea of again, to your point, what can we now get in these ships, right and transport them from the Atlantic, the Pacific? So that's one important thing. But another one is the Panama Canal is a key military strategic site.

So by 1904, the United States has pretty much emerged as the newest empire. It has acquired more than half of Mexico, it has engaged in wars with Spain that has led to it having controlled the Philippines, Puerto Rico, having a protectorate of Cuba.

It is expansive and then what takes place in Panama is sort of, like, the cap to these endeavors because with control of this central area, the idea is that the United States can effectively keep watch over the entire hemisphere. Right. That this is now going to be an important way to sort of see what's happening, both in terms of economics, but also militarily and the military bases [in Panama] of kind of like what would take place in terms of a number of military bases there, including what southern command later on would be indicative of that importance that it would hold. So economics and military. And I would say geopolitically, it really was symbolically very important for the United States to sort of stake this claim.

And that isn't to say that there weren't actual Panamanians who were very invested in a canal. There was, right. There was a sense of like, "This could be an emporium right for the world. We can be in the middle of it all. And it's just a matter of, you know, we might not have the resources financially or even in labor to make it happen. But if we can partner with someone, this can be a great way for our country to really now have a global presence." It came with a lot of concessions that had to be made. And I often, you know, as an exercise, like, having my students look over this treaty, I'm like, "Would you sign it?" Alright, like, if you were that person, right, and they were, like, "OK, c'mon, just, real quick sign this," would you? And many are, like, "No, this is actually not an equitable treaty." But that's simply the, the way that it was understood at that time that the canal would be built that this was the necessity.

JVN [00:18:19] This French man who became, like, an honorary appointee of the Panamanian people or whatever that sign on the dotted line for this treaty, what gave him the legal authority to, like, sign on this new country? Oh, is it because Panama couldn't have broken away from Colombia without the treaty or something? So was he just, like, "Well, if you want this to happen, you better give me power of attorney to go sign this thing or you're never going to break free of Colombia." Is that what it was like?

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:18:46] Well, it wasn't so much so a kind of, like, a hostage, like, "You do this or you're not going to be able to break away from it." It was more so, "OK. You have wanted to have this canal and I have the connections. Like, I have to know all of what happened with the French who were here building..."

JVN [00:19:03] Because the French broke it down. Yes.

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:19:05] Yes, yes, right. So, like, "The French had already been involved. I have connections in the United States with the proper officials who can expedite the process. And so there's really no reason for you to not, you know, work with me and kind of having this done and ensuring that this treaty is one that will get you that key economy," right, like, the idea of the canal is one that it would also benefit the nation. The idea would be because now you're having all of these new ships right from world coming through jobs in constructing it, jobs in maintaining it. So that was certainly a key factor in motivating so many of the people who are the elites deciding this on, "OK, let's have him go ahead and do some of these conversations," without really realizing like, "Oh, like, he would also finalize the conversations." But the need for the canal and what and kind of having that stability post-independence was really important.

JVN [00:20:05] Was that, like, the, like, like, the, like, the Independence Party, like, within Panama that wanted to break away from Colombia that was also, like, an elected position, like, the Panamanian elite to be able to say to that guy, like, "Go do it," or whatever?

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:20:20] Right. So I mean, you have the election, the sort of independence movement happening, right, November 1903, right? And this, it happens in, the United States at that point in time can send ships that are used to sort of intimidate Colombia to maintain their sort of room and not interfere in Panama's position to gain independence, right? So that happens. And then by sort of as you're thinking about what comes next, the canal can be a key component of, you know, the nation is something that connected the Liberal Party, which was the strongest party at this point in time in Panama. It was the party that had called for independence from Colombia. There had been, like, a federalist status.

So to a large extent, Panama had kind of operated on its own terms, but it always felt like it was being ignored by the larger Columbia nation. Right. And part of it is like its location, right? It wasn't right in South America. It's kind of, like, an outlier. And for those who sought independence from this Labor Party, there was this idea that they could effectively use this location that they had to connect them to other parts of the world in a way that sort of Colombia hadn't been able to appreciate. So that coincides in terms of you have an elite, a political elected body that's really invested in it and someone who had the connections connecting the friends and connecting the US and connecting the Panamanians for how to begin negotiating that process.

JVN [00:20:55] OK, I hope that this didn't click for, like, all the listeners, like, 20 minutes ago, but it really clicked for me now. Like, I feel like I get it, though, like, I am, I am obsessed. OK, so now what does the treaty say? So it's just, like, we get to, "Well, like, we

paid for it," but what did the treaty say because I don't even have an idea. So like when you say to your students, what do you say was the highlight exactly?

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:22:17] So basically, one of the things that it says is that the sort of right that the US would sort of have its presence in the canal zone be as if it were a sovereign state, right? And so the idea is that it is not one, but asked if it were one, and that creates a lot of contention because it's very different, right? Kind of having complete sovereignty versus a kind of contract based temporary thing. So sort of that's one thing. The other is sort of gives the United States the right to interfere outside of the canal zone and says that to protect the building of the canal and the canal itself, we have the right to have control over the surrounding major areas for anything from political instability to medical concerns, sanitation, all of this right is included there. And then there's sort of a cap of annuity, right, of how much is going to be transferred to Panama per year from the canal. So it begins at around two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. And what becomes quite clear is that that's very little in comparison to what the canal will produce over time. And the idea of this particular treaty is that these conditions would remain as they were for 99 years. And that in that sort of point in time, you would not negotiate it. So for 99 years, you would agree to these terms.

JVN [00:23:49] That's a long time.

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:23:53] Yes, it's, that is a long time.

JVN [00:23:55] So the 250 a year, like, was there any, like, raises in the treaty? Do you get, like, it's, like, a 10 percent raise every year something?

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:24:03] No, no, not every year. But there are attempts at going back and getting additional payments added, so, like, a sort of big shift, well, not too sort of big, but at least an increase happens in the fifties. Then, by the time we get to sort of later treaty, there's been negotiations about the amounts that are being paid not being quite fair, but the first big one comes in the 50s.

JVN [00:24:30] So is this OK? OK? So I think I understand the canal, I think, so, like, is this when we or when do we when does the term get coined, like, "the US-controlled Panama Canal Zone"?

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:24:46] Right, so the canal zone refers to the area surrounding the canal itself, so it's about a 10 mile wide area, and the idea was that this zone was necessary for the building because you needed somewhere to house workers. You needed somewhere, you know, for the machines that would be used. You needed places for the

hospitals that would need to be built, sort of, in some cases, for mini schools that would also have to be built for workers who came with children, et cetera. So that initially, right, is this idea. And you also have a lot of sort of businesses popping up around the area, all surrounding this idea that for this period of construction, you are going to need to have a kind of mini town.

So a company town, if you want to think about it the way that you'd have mining towns throughout the US, and that this is sort of how it would be. It grows astronomically right by sort of the 20s into the 40s, and it becomes less so of a town and more of a country. So you have, like, by the 1940s already like 30,000 US citizens living in this space, right? And they also create their own system of governance that is completely separated from Panama, so they have their own system of laws. Education, English is the official language within this particular space, a number of military bases. And what they decide to also bring from the United States is Jim Crow segregation. So the zone is separated by sort of "gold," whites-only towns and "silver," non-white towns, right? Or "colored-zones" towns.

JVN [00:26:43] So a bunch of, like, white people from the South, like, came down to Panama to help the construction, to, like do the...

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:26:48] No! Like, what is fascinating is that there were some people from the South, but it was just people from all over the United States.

JVN [00:26:56] Oh yeah, I forgot what everyone was racist as fuck. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah. OK. I didn't mean to get caught up.

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:27:01] No no, you're not the first one to be like, "Oh, these like white southerners go down there," and I'm like, "No, there was this decision that was made that this was going to be the way that they negotiated this space." That was certainly, like, *south of* all the United States, but it did not comprise only people from the US South. It was people from all over who were part of the military, who were sort of part of the construction that were brought in. And what becomes quite key is that, you know, you have within the canal zone develop a paradise for white US citizens. I mean, they have amazing schools, amazing spaces of entertainment. For a very long time, it's, it's free housing, right? They do not pay for this housing. It is all provided by the United States.

And then you have in these sort of segregated towns, communities, right, that are, for the most part, Black workers, Afro-Caribbean migrants, and their descendants in Panama are the majority of the workers in the canal zone area. And they are restricted to these housing units and education facilities. And the idea was to maintain the segregation right on the

basis of white US citizenship on one side and then sort of Black workers, many of whom by the time you get to the forties and fifties are Panamanians, either born in the canal zone or in the republic itself and who are very much reminded on a daily basis that they are not citizens of the space. And do not have the same rights as white US citizens.

JVN [00:28:40] So, OK, so what year is the treaty signed?

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:28:45] So the treaty itself was signed in November 1903.

JVN [00:28:48] And it's done by 1914.

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:28:51] Yes. But remember the treaty [CROSSTALK] for ninety nine years?

JVN [00:29:57] Okay, so it's done by, so it's done by 1914. But the zone did they create got to operate and did it literally operate till 2004 or 2003?

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:29:10] So it operated until December 31, 1999. That was the sort of terms of the 1977 Torrijos-Carter Treaty, where you finally had a handover, but it was a 20 year period of handing over. So handover started from 1979, and then they progressed all the way to 1999. So different parts of the canal zone were handed back to Panama during that period of time. And we're talking about, you know, hospitals, you know, restaurants, thousands of homes, over 3000 homes, military bases, forts that were created on the Pacific and Atlantic side. So that area remains, expands, and grows from 19, you know, 14 till 1979. It sort of, like, has its own, as I said, system of governance, you have courts, police.

JVN [00:30:17] Did they elect someone to the con- to Congress? Like, did they get to stay home?

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:30:22] No, no, because technically right, this is not a colony, right? It's not even a state. It's actually in another country. And so this is what made understanding what the canal zone was for people really strange because they're, like, "Is this, like, is this, like, Puerto Rico? Like, Is this like Hawai'i?" And it's like, "No, it is actually not a US territory," but it was very much treated like that by the United States government.

JVN [00:30:49] So Panamanians were born in the zone. Did they still get to be citizens of Panama?

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:30:56] Yes. So that was the only citizenship that they had. Citizenship in the canal zone was also restricted, at least US citizenship in the canal zone was restricted by race, right? If your parents were white US citizens, there were a handful of African-Americans who also worked in the canal zone, as well as Puerto Ricans of various racial backgrounds. They were a very, very small number, and the canal zone purposefully kept it that way because it would get confusing, right? Supposedly, all the non-white people were in one area. But what happens if they're US citizens? So to not have to deal with that, they sort of kept that group at bay. So if you were actually born in the canal zone and your parents were not US citizens, you were automatically given Panama citizenship. Interestingly enough, for those who were also the children of US citizens, they had the option to also apply for Panamanian citizenship. It's just that it wasn't then the other way. Right? If you were not already someone with a lineage based connection to US citizenship, you could not become a citizen of the United States because you were born in that space.

JVN [00:32:08] So then one more off the wall question, but as I learn about these things. So the Voting Rights Act, but it's not even so. But so when the Supreme Court does away with Jim Crow in the 60s, does that apply to the Panama Canal zone?

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:32:25] Yes, it does, right. It does. The military officials there are there, the government, because the canal zone government, which is what operates and rules the area right beginning in that sort of from the teens onwards, you have a government system that's set up.

JVN [00:32:41] And that was their name and there wasn't a sexier name. It was just, like, "the canal zone government."

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:32:46] Yeah, exactly, the canal zone government. Not so sexy. And they had a governor right of a canal zone who was often a military official in one way or another. And one of the realizations is that this space is essentially run like a US space. And more importantly, it's run like a military US space. And the desegregation policies that happen, the military becomes one of the places where they're, like, "We have to set the example, we have to desegregate." So the zone is sort of in the minds of those who are governing it, a large military area. And as a result, they have to adhere to the desegregation mandates of the sort of military desegregation and then Brown v. Board. Another big thing to remember is that, you know, that segregation that I explained in the canal zone. It also meant segregation of schools.

So there were schools that were just for white students and schools that were for Black and all of the non-white US students. And that was explicitly race-based. So after these calls for segregation and actual Supreme Court cases come into effect in the US, what you have is a

shift from the language. So now one school is called the Latin American schools, and the other school is called US schools as a way to sort of say, "We're not being racist anymore." But they sort of still get to keep some of the breakdown that they had prior to that. So it is really fascinating because you're like, if you're not a US space, do you have to comply by these rules? And largely because it was led and coordinated by a military space, as a militarized US space. That's where the laws were being applied in that particular way.

JVN [00:34:48] So one thing we learned about dam displacement is that obviously dams, like, displace a lot of people. So who was, like, just placed by the zone and then was there, like, violence in the displacement of that were, like, Indigenous communities affected? Like, what happened with, with that part?

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:35:04] Remember that I mentioned there was sort of a series of towns that were created. Company-style towns. Well, they actually inundate some of them. So that entire towns are lost as a result of the decision that, "This is going to now be a lake. This is now going to be another particular body of water that's going to be used to maintain the canal." And so that kind of displacement happens of the communities that were initially created beyond the specific main US headquarter ones along the way. So that takes place. When it comes to beyond sort of the canal construction and the presence of the canal zone, the displacement there is more one of, as I mentioned, not having access to your full country, right? You kind of have the canal zone in the middle. And so if you are sort of trying to go from one area to the other, that's the only way that you can. And so that disconnects the country in a particular way.

JVN [00:36:12] Could citizens, like, freely go through this zone, like, if they had family on the south side or family on the north side? Were you allowed to travel back and forth okay?

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:36:21] Right? Well, depending on, because there were two entry points, one in Panama City and the other in Colón. And up until the late 50s, there was no fencing or anything like that. So you could theoretically kind of make your way through. A fence is erected after that period of time. But what would happen is that you could be stopped at any moment by Canal Zone police, who were their own police. They didn't have anything to do with the police in Panama. They could question why you were there, right? What was your business there? Were you working there? Were you a resident? Were you going to school? And they could jail you. There was also a jail system in the canal zone. There are jails built, and many of those who ended up in these jails were actually Panamanian citizens, and they could not actually advocate to have their cases tried by Panama. They had to all be tried by the US canal zone system of courts.

So it was a tense situation depending on, you know, who was precisely involved with the checking of people making their way through and also depending on whether there were tensions happening. And these begin to increase, especially in the 50s, where you have a lot more student led peaceful protests demanding that the Canal area be freely open, right, that it not just be so selectively open to very few who would be scrutinized in terms of paperwork required, et cetera, that it should be a space that also flew the Panamanian flag, that it should be treated as part of Panama. That leads to a lot of tensions from the white US citizens born in the zone called "Zonians," who see this as their country, essentially as an extension of the United States, it just happens to be in Panama.

JVN [00:38:27] Ooh, so what happened in those fuckers when, like, Carter gave it back? Were they, like, pissed and stuff, like, did they get...

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:38:33] Oh my gosh, so, so upset. You know, Carter was lambasted, they were like, "How dare you? You are a coward. How can you give up what is ours?" You had, also, a sense of deep sadness and understandable for those who only knew Panama as their home for all of their lives, but have not really been taught the history, right. Had not been taught that this was not supposed to have transpired. They were not supposed to create a mini United States in another country, that this was specifically supposed to be to facilitate the building and operation of the canal. And so for some, they had relationships outside of the zone and they remained, and, or, in Panama City, Bocas del Toro, other provinces, others, you know, began making their way back to the United States, especially as more and more of those protests that I was talking about from the 50s and onwards were taking place, right?

They were like, "Oh, it's becoming clear that there is a very nationally minded, you know, Panamanian generation that wants us out." And so some just sort of started making the move even before '77, but '77, for many with this sort of the feeling of anger and sadness all mixed into one because, as I said, they lived a really remarkably golden life in this area. They had access to, you know, a wide array of entertainment spaces that were created for them. Schooling, housing, those that worked in the canal zone for a long time were paid extra as a tropical differential. And so in that regard, they got a bit more pay than those that were to be in the mainland US. So, yeah, a lot of shock, like, shock was more the case because some never imagined that they would not have this be theirs.

JVN [00:40:50] So I've also learned a little bit on the podcast and we've interviewed some experts in the ways in which in the 80s that the United States government, because communism was, like, the fierce thing to be terrified of in the 80s. So they were really scared that, like a lot of different governments in Central America and South America were going to become communist, which is why, like, Reagan, like, flooded, like Nicaragua and

all these other countries, like, full of guns. And then that's also why in Central America, there was such a widespread violence problem because there's literally still a lot of American guns and, like, American money that, like, causes instability. So how does Panama fit in to that, like, imperialist practice? How does that fit into that wider story of what the US was doing in Central and South America in the 60s and 70s and 80s?

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:41:33] You know, that all fits into Red Scare Communism that you actually have to take back to the 50s, right? Right after World War II, the United States was just deeply concerned about what it would mean to have this growing sort of non-capitalist, right, alternative out there, right, known as communism. And very much presenting the need to protect democracy as the number one platform that the sort of US would uphold. And I would say it would be democracy and capitalism together. But that wouldn't be what they would say, they would say democracy. And so Panama plays a central role because it is, it's presented as, "We have to keep all communist infiltration out." Cuba, you know, becomes a communist country and there is fear, right? Intense fear that it's going to spread to Central America. And so what this does mean?

You have massive militarization that is happening in Panama. You have the School of the Americas, which is based in Panama, right? That is training many of the military leaders in the south, in South America, in Central America, who would go on to become these anti-communist dictators. Right. With the explicit backing of the United States. And so it plays sort of being this site of the School of the Americas, being a site of Southern Command places Panama at the very middle, right at the very heart of these discussions of how we're going to keep communists outside of the area. And it is from there that you have strategizing on, well, what are going to be the nations that we need to invade if they are in fact in any way apparently looking like they're going to lean in any communist way. And so when you have what's happening in Nicaragua, right, as you referenced later on, a lot of the conversation is to how to maintain that contained, right, how to not have it spread to Panama, how to not have that spread to other parts of the Caribbean and Panama becomes this symbol and the canal zone in particular right of the urgency to maintain communism at bay.

So it sort of plays this interesting role because then within Panama, there's an obsession with figuring out whether people are communists, directly aligned with wanting to appease the United States that has made it very clear that if you are in any way affiliated with communism, that funding is going to be taken aside, that you are going to find yourself in a difficult situation. And for Central America, dependency on the United States is extreme, right, for a number of the major economies. If the United States sort of says, "OK, we're backing out because you have decided to pursue, you know, a communist government or intent," then there goes a great deal of some of the financing they have been, they might

have provided and left behind was all of the financing that was given to these National Guards and militaries that have US arms, right, to your point, because they were being trained starting from the 50s and onwards to combat communism.

So you have, sometimes, police and National Guard that have more financial resources than most other departments in these countries. And it is all done right with this focus on, "We've got to win this war against communism." And by the time you get to Reagan, he's just building off the wave of many other anti-communist administrations that have come before him, right? And who have enacted policies to keep dictators present to topple anyone who said anything connected to socialism or democracy, to fund the Contras to go in right and try to topple the government from without. So all of these things are layered in such a way that you have to go back right to that late 40s period, the end of World War Two, and just see how even Panama becomes the site for training future anti-communist military officials throughout the region.

JVN [00:46:22] So it's, like, this treaty, in 1903, by the time the 40s and 50s have come around, has gone so far off the fucking rails like we are training other, like, we're training soldiers, there's, like, a whole separate sub kind of country thing going on. So, and also that would mean that by 1904 to the 40s and 50s, that's, like, at least two generations. It's like, that's like your parents and potentially, you know, grandparents. So did all of that kind of help to create a sense of, like, activism, protest, and anti-militarization campaign and more of an emphasis on community? And then also: here Panama had signed this 99 year lease or whatever. But then they get this new treaty renegotiation in the 70s with Carter, which hastened it to at least 1999. So how did they, how did they leverage that ending that earlier ending and getting more autonomy throughout that last 20 years of that transition?

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:47:18] Yeah, so, you know, that last part connected to the treaty leads directly to the students that I mentioned in that those protests that start happening with greater intensity from the late 50s and onwards are in fact people who this is their second generation, third generation that has sort of lived with the canal this really sort of intense neighbor at its door. And it also coincides, right, with that post-40s period of intense anti-communist hysteria in the canal zone that also led to more constructions of white-only spaces, more explicit maintenance of that segregation. And for those who found themselves having to in any way interact with those officials in the canal zone that made them feel that they were in the wrong country, all of this started coalescing into, "Why exactly is the canal zone here and operating as though it is a nation, like, this is not a nation. This is part of our territory."

So you have students doing the attempt at sort of peacefully having the Panamanian flag flown in the canal zone, right? As a symbol that this is Panama. You have high school

students, white high school students, in the canal zone kind of push back and actually call for the US flag to be flown solely. There is concessions that are made, like, "Oh, we'll just fly both flags," but by that point in time, by the early 60s, there's just that frustration that all of these talks to just even symbolically emphasize that the canal zone is not just a US territory are flawed. And so this leads to, in '64, actually, students being killed by the part of the US military and some US military and civilians also being harmed because of immense protests that start to generate in '64, in particular, the Flag Riots they're called. And that leads to a recognition by the governments of Panama and the governments of the United States that the status quo cannot continue.

For the first time, you have Panama become the first nation in Latin America to cut ties with the United States. It only does so for, you know, a couple of months right after the 1964 Flag Riots. But it's symbolic, right? It gets a lot of attention because it was never done before, and internationally, there's suddenly now attention on, like, "Well what's the United States doing there again?" Right, like, "What is the canal zone again? Why would the US military be attacking students of another country?" Right? So all of these questions start to get asked internationally. And for those in the United States who are reflecting on the civil rights movement, right, on the things that are also happening in the 60s, they're saying, "This looks incredibly bad." And already starting from the 50s and beyond, you had members of the Black congressional caucus and African-American leaders who were very interested in learning more about the segregation that was happening in the canal zone because they saw it explicitly as a continuation of the racism that they had been fighting against in the United States.

And so here you have this trifecta of great interests taking place there, students in Panama who are definitely realizing that they have been treated like second-class citizens in their country. You also have conversations that are happening across by young people in the sixties moment, right where there is a combination of, you know, anti-militarism, decolonization movements, civil rights, right? Sort of all of this is happening simultaneously, and it leads to this environment of needing a change and needing a change sooner rather than later. But it is not until we get to the sort of dictatorship, really, because Torrijos enters Panamanian government as a military leader and, in 68, and it's a coup that pushes out the elected officials at that point in time. One of the things that he emphasizes is the need to reclaim the canal, so he taps into that energy that the students and select members of government were now channeling across. He taps into the fact that there have been deep disappointment internationally on the United States for what had transpired in '64 with the deaths of innocent students, Panamanian students, and has the opportunity to start going before the United Nations to make a case for why the canals should be handed back to Panama.

And so there is immense international interest in equity at this point in time. They're, like, "We just don't understand what has happened in terms of this maintaining." And remember, at this point in time, the Suez Canal has also now also been handed over back to the people of Egypt. So there is an example already historically that this can happen, that it can happen and life goes on. Right. But there is just intense resistance, you know, largely on the part of entrenched militarist interests in the United States who just don't want to see this area, this area go. And so Carter is actually asked about this question about the canal zone during the presidential elections, right, like, a very explicit one, like, "What stance are you going to take? Are you going to give it back?" And he initially says, no, right? He's like, "No, like, you know, we're going to maintain the status quo as it is," but is convinced once he enters into power, that is the best course of action. That there just doesn't seem to be a way to maintain the canal zone and not receive continued criticism of this being a colony, of this being a case of the United States abusing its power against a smaller nation.

And, combined with the huge support that Torrijos managed to amass, it leads to that moment of, "OK, let's sit down and sign this." But as you noted, it is a kind of, like, protracted departure, right? It isn't just, "And then you go." Because there was this concern of, "Well, how will the canal be operated? Will there be enough of a sense of, you know, how things have been done before and how it's been learned?" And that was a bit kind of tongue in cheek because a lot of the people maintaining the operations were already Panamanians. There were the descendants of people who have been doing this work from the 40s from, you know, the 20s onwards, many of whom we had expertise but never have been able to be promoted because of the racialised system where all of the bosses had to be white US citizens. So all of this sort of is coming into play by the 70s to say, "We have this information," however, to appease the United States and those that are still just wary of the departure, is to say, "Well, let's just revert back key things throughout this 20 year period, and we will also keep vigilance in case anything becomes unstable in Panama."

So there was a concern, for example, that when the United States invaded Panama, in 89, right, to get Noriega, that this would be used as, "Well, Panama can't maintain its stability." Right? What will happen with the canal? That was not the case. But what it revealed was that there was this constant concern that the US might somehow change its mind because of the gradual nature in which this handing-over took place. But it did, right. Various things were handed over during that 20 year period, and by the time it was reverted, there was almost, there was almost a feeling of, "It finally happened." But it had taken so long, and some of the key actors were by then, you know, dead, were people who then wondered, "Well, who is going to now control this major economy? What is it going to mean for the rest of us?" So that starts to transpire during this point in time.

JVN [00:56:37] So who does oversee the land now? And so, it gets handed back? Everyone here is talking about Y2K, which, get out of here. So, then, meanwhile, Panama comes into its full own, you know, for 2000 because you said it was December 31st, 99, right?

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:56:54] That's right. That's right.

JVN [00:56:56] So Michelle Kwan earns her third world title. Panama is, like, fully autonomous, right at that point?

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:57:01] In terms of the canal zone, right, now it is fully a Panamanian space.

JVN [00:57:08] And then who oversees the canal zone now? Is it just, like, the Panamanian government?

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:57:13] So right now, there's an actual commission that is largely Panamanian citizens that oversee the general management of the canal.

JVN [00:57:26] So does the canal still make money? And now does Panama just get to enjoy the money that the canal makes?

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [00:57:31] So, yes, Panama gets to enjoy that money of the all the transit. It has even expanded a bit of the locks, right, which, it's sort of, to, to make room for the greater, you know, the bigger ships that can make their way solely through the canal. Some of the areas that were turned over, there's now a commission that also tries to decide what to do with it. Because of course, then the issue is going to be, like, "What do you do with all of this property and land, right? That's handed over? Who is how are you going to equitably distribute this?" And so it has certainly led to a lot of discussions within Panama like, "Well, are we using these spaces effectively? Can we find ways of making of, maintaining green spaces to not have everything sort of be a new mall?" Like, because one of the former air bases has been turned into a mall, right. And so there is the sense of like, "What? How can you equitably use this space in a way that can be really of use?"

So there's Ciudad del Saber or City of Knowledge, that is one way that another one of these, like, big areas was taken in. That's, like, a collection of academic and technology-based industries that are operating out of that area. But the idea of, you know, what to do with a lot of the land still remains, and this commission is the one that decides, right? It's sort of like what to do with these returned areas. What will it mean to sell it to particular industries or sell it to people? And so the concern is, you know, might the sales now of

these lands be going to commercial interests more so than, you know, creating new residences? And what will that mean in terms of, you know, the huge, huge populations that could benefit from some of those spaces considering just how big, even in Panama City, which is sort of now there's, you know, Panama Oeste and Panama City because it's so large, divided into two provinces like how can you use that space to also accommodate for this growing body of people?

JVN [00:59:45] What do you think that people miss in the, in the overall conversation of the Panama Canal and the US-controlled Panama Canal? And also, how do you hope that the conversation about the zone continues to evolve? Or how do you think it may evolve?

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [01:00:00] Yes. So to touch on that first question about, you know, what's missed, and kind of understanding what's missed, just, like, what people don't necessarily see right away is kind of the lives of those sort of people of color, right, the Black people who actually lived in the canal zone, who actually forged families who are born there, right, but were kind of often relegated to the sidelines. So there's this imaginary of this, you know, white US citizens' space and that itself is connected to US imperial imaginings. This is how the United States wanted to think of this space. And so when we only talk about those communities and we neglect to mention that their enjoyment was based on segregation and that they were in fact, people who operated and managed to make their communities thrive in unequal conditions, but who proved vital for even the treaties.

Right, to understand the fact that Panama is able to make a claim for the canal, you have to talk about those Black Panamanians, right, who were working there, who were connecting the labor, unionizing, who made it possible. They're often written out of this story of how even Panama was able to reclaim the canal so that it becomes the figureheads, right, Carter and Torrijos, but those that worked and those that had to experience and lived through discrimination in the canal zone and also Panama, right, but looking at the canal zone at this moment in time that they were navigating was intense. What they had to endure. So what I want for people to sort of think about in terms of what comes next, right as it pertains to the canal zone is to sort of really think of this as an important opportunity to deal with the fact that the United States is an empire that the canal zone for a very long time was a space that the United States tried to control as this sort of, like, colony and that that's what made that empire so powerful.

And that when we think about who was critiquing and challenging US control, we have to center, right, those Panamanians, those Black Panamanians of Afro-Caribbean ancestry who first-hand felt so much of the sort of Jim Crow systems set up, but also who were so vital for informing the remainder of their citizenry and doing some of the day to day work

of creating this conversation of a treaty. So sort of really placing their labor, their activism, alongside these discussions of the political figures is for me, what I want for those of us who are really thinking about what does it mean to decolonize ongoing empires? Well, how can we learn from the past in terms of who tried, what were the challenges, and what it might mean to continue to have those discussions if we want more peace and equity in the world around us.

JVN [01:03:41] Kaysha you, like, literally stuck this landing so hard, I can't even stand it. Like literally, I feel like I've learned so much. You do have a forthcoming book, that's coming out in 2022, right?

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [01:03:53] That's right. That's right. Panama In Black: Afro-Caribbean Worldmaking In The 20th Century. And yes, It's coming out in September of next year. And it is my attempt at, like, having a conversation that connects people who are fascinated with the history of the United States as an empire with the history of Panama as a country and more precisely with the people who we often don't imagine at the center of it. So the book is about teachers and labor union organizers and community members, and I am so fascinated in what we can learn about activism when we look at what those who are at the heart of it left behind, right from yearbooks to thinking about, you know, oral testimonies to things that were scribbled by government officials about particular people that don't get the center attention.

I'm fascinated about what it means to place them at the center to place them at the center of what we consider to be Panama, to what we consider to be, like, modern nation-making. And it's yeah, my attempt to sort of like making that connection. The, you know, we started by talking about that gold rush attempt at going from the east coast of the United States to Panama. And my book, to an extent, it kind of goes the other way and I want to start from the Atlantic, off Panama and go back to the east. So I begin in Panama and end in New York to sort of twist a little bit the conversation of how we understand empire. How do we understand the people that have to navigate those systems? And what does it mean to place their dreams and aspirations at the very heart of creating a nation.

JVN [01:05:47] Cannot wait to read that. And in the meantime, for people that are obsessed with you after spending this time with you and your mind, are you most active on the Twitter? You got a website? Where we can follow you. You got a 'Gram?. Where are you talking about these things on the regular when you're not teaching?

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [01:06:03] So I am on Twitter, my handles's @KCorinealdi. So I am always happy to have people, you know, share their thoughts.

JVN [01:06:12] I'm literally following you on Twitter right now. I hope you use your account. I just got to say thank you so much. I feel like that was so much fun to learn about, and I really enjoyed spending that time with you and, just, thank you so much for coming on Getting Curious. We really appreciate you.

KAYSHA CORINEALDI [01:06:25] Well, thank you so much, Jonathan. It was a pleasure to be invited and to chat with you. And I am, yeah, I'm going to let you know when the book is out, and all my other endeavors. And I look forward to following you as well.

JVN [01:06:40] You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was Professor Kaysha Corinealdi.

You'll find links to her work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on.

Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thanks to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend - show them how to subscribe.

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