

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Kathryn Olivarius

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. This is Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. Today, to mark the new season of *Queer Eye*, yay! It's finally happening, y'all been asking us a lot. We're exploring the history of New Orleans. If you're new to Getting Curious podcasts, consider this your orientation, honey. I'm going to be referring to some of our favorite episodes throughout this discussion. Then we link them in the episode description so you can listen to those later on, if you're into that. We have more than 300 conversations about science, history, politics and beyond. Waiting for you in the archives. "Get into it, yuh," as Doja Cat would say. And if you want to keep up with our guests and topics and see behind the scenes of the show, even just follow other news stories that we're kind of keeping up with. You can follow us on Instagram @CuriouswithJVN. Let's dive in. This week we have Kathryn Olivarius, who is a prize-winning historian of slavery, medicine, and disease. She is the assistant professor of history at Stanford University. Okay. Love a title. She was also just awarded the 2023 Frederick Jackson Turner Award for her book *Necropolis: Disease, Power, and Capitalism in the Cotton Kingdom*, published by Harvard University Press. Okay, first of all, Kathryn, your resume is giving me, like, America's Next Top Prestigious University. It is so good. You're, you're doing so good. We got the Harvard. We got the Stanford. I'm very impressed, queen. Kathryn, how are you? How's your morning?

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:01:30] It's great. How is your morning?

JVN [00:01:32] It's good. In real life, this was the day after the Met Gala. So I am thriving. I am always impressed by my morning person-ness. I slept til, like, 8:30, which is the latest I've ever slept, like, in years. And also you can't see, but Kathryn is giving us a deep side part. She's giving us fresh-faced skin fucking model. We're both glowing and doing our best today. Except for you really look gorgeous. So I'm doing my best.

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:01:59] For someone who was at the Met Gala yesterday, I feel like you look gorgeous, too. This is, this is, like, you know, another world.

JVN [00:02:05] Kathryn! Queen! But what we want to learn about today is how did New Orleans become what it is today? I had never gotten to go there before I filmed *Queer Eye*. That was, like, my first introduction was, like, living there for four months. What a beautiful city. It's such an interesting culture that is unique unto itself. I feel like no other city really looks like New Orleans. In *Necropolis*, you write about New Orleans as a city of swamps, heat, and humidity, which I can vouch for, because when I was there, it was—I sweat in cracks and crevasses I didn't know existed. It was, like, my shoulder blades even sweat and, like, between—it was a really interesting river situation that—it was like the Mississippi on my back. It was interesting. But what was it like to live in New Orleans in the early 1800s? Like, take us way back.

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:02:54] In short, living in New Orleans in the 1800s, in days before air conditioning or modern sanitation was, I would say, on the whole, pretty miserable. So for those of you who are unfamiliar, New Orleans sits at about one foot above sea level. Parts of the city at least, do, though, the levee fronts about 15 feet above sea level. So this really is a city in a swamp. In fact, it's not really a place that a city should have ever been built in some respects, but one was built there through a confluence of factors to do with sort of the geographic necessities of this region. So New Orleans is situated very, very low down on the Mississippi River, very close to the Gulf of Mexico. And it was designed basically as a supply depot. This is back in the 18th century when it was a French outpost, La Nouvelle-Orléans. So New Orleans is founded in 1718 by the French. Of course, people had lived there for thousands of years already, Indigenous people.

JVN [00:03:47] Okay. Actually, I wanted to ask about that really quick, Kathryn. Whipping out my fucking notebook to take notes now. 1718. France. And did they call it New Orleans or you said it was, like, *Nouveau Orleans*—

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:03:58] La Nouvelle-Orléans. Yeah.

JVN [00:04:00] Ah!

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:04:01] New Orleans. New Orléans. Which is from France, of course.

JVN [00:04:05] So it was Nouvelle-Orléans?

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:04:07] Exactly. Exactly.

JVN [00:04:08] Oh, my God. Oui, oui, je m'appelle Jonathan, honey! Oh, okay. So, so, like, do you know what, what tribe was there beforehand or, like, what was the deal with, like, what is present day New Orleans, like, pre-Nouvelle-Orléans.

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:04:21] So for tens of thousands of years, people have lived in the American South, and in and around New Orleans. And so the portage that connected the Mississippi River to Lake Pontchartrain, which is sort of to the north of New Orleans, this has been used for thousands and thousands of years by people. And there is, you know, plenty of evidence of people living in the area that became New Orleans and its surroundings for literally tens of thousands of years. And again, makes a lot of sense because this area is, you know, strategically very rich and because, you know, navigation on the Mississippi River to Lake Pontchartrain along the bayous and lower Louisiana and the Deltas, you know, there were a lot of people living here and not just the, the Choctaw, but also the Houma, there are many, many different Indigenous groups.

JVN [00:05:06] Fascinating. Also, interestingly, not to make everything about me, but if you've ever seen the episode of *Queer Eye* with my, like, high school music teacher, Kathi Dooley, like my hometown is on the Mississippi River and it's a really small, like, you know, 40,000 people-ish, like, rural town on, like, the West, like, border of Illinois. And it was actually bigger than Chicago until some point in the 1800s because of its location to the river, its proximity to shipping on the Mississippi. So it's, like, before, like, trains and, you know, automobiles, rivers were really a huge source of, like, wealth—and proximity to rivers were a big deal for capitalism, gaining wealth, gaining trade, gaining resources, like, just being on a river was, like, a big deal, right?

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:05:52] Totally. And the cost of shipping goods downriver was exponentially less than doing this overland because roads were so bad and it would take months and months and months to ship tons of goods overland. But it was much cheaper and much faster, of course, to ship things along the river; and the Mississippi, you know, this is the great American sort of artery draining an area slightly larger than the West—than Western Europe. This is really the American superhighway. In the 19th century and before.

JVN [00:06:18] Did Native Americans, like, have, like, displacement in New Orleans specifically? Obviously, there was, like, *around* or was, like, present-day New Orleans, kind of, like, a little empty. And then the French were, like, “Great, love it. It's humid, it's hot, and it's right on the river,” like, “Nouvelle-Orléans, it is!”

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:06:35] So the French were sort of searching around for an outpost somewhere low down on the Mississippi, someplace that would be sort of most advantageous to them. And they literally picked the best spot available to them, which is what is New Orleans now, because all of the silt that had built up along this bend in the river, this allowed them to sort of have some protection from the rising water. But again, this is the best spot available, but it's still not a great spot for a city.

JVN [00:07:00] Okay. So these French settlers settle there in 1718. They establish the outpost. And is that that, like, Brick City in downtown, like, New Orleans? Is that, like, that original, like, 28 or whatever that they were talking about? One of my friends was on a tour and was telling me about it, but I didn't get to go on the tour because I was working so much. It was, like, 20 something.

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:07:22] The French Quarter, which is, you know, where if you go to New Orleans now, that's where everyone is, you know, drinking and having a great time and where, you know, the sort of smell of urine and alcohol melds into a potent combination of something, but that was the original city. And it was walled, actually. And this grew over time from 1718, over the course of the 18th century to accommodate the larger population and to accommodate more goods from the American interior that are being shipped through New Orleans. So the city is growing and eventually grows into what is now the French Quarter. This

is the sort of walled, original area of the city, fully formed by the late 18th century. You know, it's sort of recognizable to today by then.

JVN [00:08:01] It's just giving hot ass mosquitoes. Is the transatlantic slave trade, like, a thing there? Like, is, like—what's, what's the T before 1800, like, in those 80 years.

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:08:13] So during the 18th century, New Orleans is variously claimed by the French, but also by the Spanish, who take control of the city in 1763.

JVN [00:08:23] Ooooh! Was that, like, a bloody take over? Or were they, like, "Okay, okay. Like, you can have it. Like, we're not trying to fight!" Or was it, like, a big fight?

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:08:30] There was no fighting in New Orleans. France and Spain are at war in Europe. They're at war in the Greater Caribbean. In the Atlantic world, they're fighting. And this is just a part of the settlement of the peace.

JVN [00:08:42] Got it.

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:08:43] Yeah. So the Spanish take control in the 1760s and you see the city growing, both with people who are coming from Europe. So French and Spanish colonists. And I should say, during this time, people speak Spanish, people speak French. It's a very sort of polyglot city. There's a lot, there's a lot of cultural mixing here. This is also a slave society. From the very beginning, New Orleans had always relied on African labor. So when I say African labor, I mean they are importing people directly from Africa through the Atlantic slave trade. This is much like basically every other city in the greater Caribbean, but also in the northern United States. And so New Orleans had always—and Louisiana writ large had always—relied on slave labor. And many of the enslaved people who were working in Louisiana were not born there. They were born in Africa or they had been born in the Caribbean and were shipped to Louisiana. And they spoke a variety of African languages. There's a variety of African ethnicities that were present in New Orleans. And at this time, also, you see a sort of growing and quite vibrant population of free people of color as well. These are people who are Black. They might have been enslaved, but also these are the children born generally to white men—white European colonists—and Black women, many of whom were enslaved as well. So you have this sort of growing population of enslaved people, free white people—generally European colonists, and also free Black people.

JVN [00:10:10] There's a lot to unpack there. So not to take a hard right, but, like, you know, the movie 12 Years a Slave, where that man gets, like, kidnaped in D.C. and then he gets to, like—

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:10:18] Yes.

JVN [00:10:19] So would that sort of thing be happening in New Orleans, like, would free people be getting like, kidnaped or something? Or was it safe for free, like, people of color?

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:10:29] So 12 Years a Slave and the story of Solomon Northup, that's very much a 19th century story. Once the Americans had taken control, it's very much a sort of late antebellum story. But it's a really good question, actually, about, like, "What is life like here for free people of color and is this precarious? Are you going to potentially be enslaved? You know, what are your legal rights in this place?" So you had rights. If you are a free person of color in the 18th century, under French and Spanish law, you had various rights. This is not just in New Orleans. This is in imperial possessions across Central America, across South America, across the Caribbean, too, and all of these sort of French and Spanish colonies. So you had certain rights, and also, I should say, enslaved people also had certain rights. The way that the French and Spanish practiced slavery was markedly different than the way that the Americans and the British. But the Americans would later practice slavery. All enslavement, of course, is horrible. And there's this sort of perverse thing about trying to create a hierarchy in slave experiences. They're all bad. However, the way in which slavery sort of operated did look and feel somewhat different in French and Spanish societies than it did in Anglo-American societies.

JVN [00:11:39] So as the Americans take over more of what is now, like, you know, the continental United States and the, the states in the South that practiced slavery, like, it gets worse and worse, like, it's bad from the beginning, but it gets, like, worse and worse until, like, the end of slavery, like, as far as enslavement goes.

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:12:00] There's an entire sort of subfield of historical work in slave studies that sort of compares slave systems. I'm not sure that I'd necessarily use the word "worse" or "better" because I feel like these are sort of, like, it just because it's—

JVN [00:12:14] It's just all so fucked up.

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:12:15] Yeah, it's it's all it's actually that's the perfect way to put it. It's all so fucked up. But you have many people on the ground, in fact, enslaved people. These sort of few voices that we do have of enslaved people around 1803 in the early decades of the 19th century, who do describe their experience of slavery as becoming worse, harder, more pernicious under American rule. And this only sort of compounds, of course, as the behemoth of the domestic slave trade takes off in the antebellum period and New Orleans becomes the largest slave trading port in the nation.

JVN [00:12:44] So those people that had those accounts, like, either they or their, like, parents, like, or their community would have experienced, like, French or Spanish, like, rule. So, you know, one thing that I really took away from my time in New Orleans was kind of, like, the physical, clear remnants of this time in New Orleans. Like, you can just tell that there's like a huge economic disparity and a historic economic disparity in the way that, like, homes are

built and the way schools are built and just the way that things are situated. It's very clear, like, how that city was run. And so that's just, I'm sure you can see that in other cities as well. But at least for me, I felt like that was something that I was really, like, "Whoa."

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:13:33] Totally. It's, I feel like, you know, you walk around New Orleans and you can see this both, like, historic and present inequalities that have been etched into the architecture, etched into the way that the city is built, in the sort of shape of the city, where people live. This all, of course, you know, has deep historical roots back well into the 18th century.

JVN [00:13:56] So 1760s, the Spaniards take it over. Then when does the Louisiana Purchase happen? What's that whole deal?

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:14:04] That happens in 1803. So the Louisiana Purchase is a huge and deeply consequential event, not just in American or U.S. history, but also in the history of the Atlantic world. So this treaty, for those of you who need a recap in sort of AP U.S. History or, you know, are taking it soon, this literally doubled the territory of the United States, or at least it doubled what the United States claimed to control. And so this vast land area, this is west of the Appalachian Mountains, stretches west all the way to the Rockies, up the Mississippi River. This is a huge land area that the United States now has I say, you know, quote unquote, "peacefully" taken from the French. And I should say the French took back New Orleans from the Spanish in 1802. Then the Americans take this in 1803.

JVN [00:14:55] Oh, so that's a quick little transfer. There was, like, a lot of changing hands there.

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:15:00] A very, very quick little transfer. It's a busy time in New Orleans, especially in 1802, 1803. Lots of different diplomats are there working, working in New Orleans, but also in Paris and Madrid also.

JVN [00:15:11] Oh, how fucking interesting is that? Madrid and Paris, in 1803!

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:15:18] Yeah, all these officials over there are trying to sort of work out the contours of this deal. Thomas Jefferson really could not—who was president at the time—could not believe his luck with this, that for \$15 million, America gained control or at least control on paper to this vast territory of land. But he was most excited about controlling a New Orleans in his mind, this sort of linchpin of this quote unquote, "empire for liberty," this place somewhere in the West where, you know, white yeoman farmers would go out and they would till the land in agrarian harmony and everyone would have this great time. He had this vision that this would be the sort of making of Republicanism. And Louisiana was his crucible for this. And he saw New Orleans as intrinsic to all of this. So the 1803 Louisiana Purchase fundamentally changed the course of American history because now New Orleans, which is situated at the base of the Mississippi River and drained this huge land area, is now under

American control. And most importantly for, you know, sort of this story, too, what all diplomats, Thomas Jefferson included, were also very, very secretly excited about—not, not even so secretly—was the fact that control over New Orleans now gave the United States control over two incredibly lucrative and growing markets, and that is sugar and cotton. And these are two revolutions that are sweeping across the American South, especially the sort of Gulf South, these commodity revolutions. And these have exploded in the 1790s, generally as a result of the Haitian Revolution, which is ongoing. And America—and Louisiana—is filling this market gap.

JVN [00:16:51] Oh, fuck. Say that again. I got distracted because I was Googling the Louisiana Purchase map, you guys, which I feel like I need to tell people because I—will you tell me if this is right or wrong, Kathryn?

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:17:00] Sure.

JVN [00:17:00] So the Louisiana Purchase, basically it's giving, like, diamond shaped, and it goes down in New Orleans, but it encompasses parts of what is presently day, like, Louisiana, Arkansas, types of northern Texas, Oklahoma, Nebraska, like, Montana, South Dakota, parts of North Dakota. I guess Illinois was already part of it. It's got Missouri, Illinois, the southern bit of Minnesota, Montana. So it's huge.

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:17:26] Yeah, and Saskatchewan and Alberta, too, parts of it. It's a huge, you know, section of land.

JVN [00:17:31] When does Canada get in—okay, focus, Jonathan? Is that the War of 1812? Oh, my God. It is, isn't it?

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:17:37] It is—the, the Alberta, Saskatchewan stuff, that is not a part of the War of 1812—but you are totally right that the War of 1812 did determine the boundaries of the United States and Canada, in the East.

JVN [00:17:48] Interfucking-resting. Oh my God, I can't. This is exactly what I wanted. This is what I needed. This is what I wanted. Oh, my God. Okay, so 1803. And now for Jefferson, the transatlantic slave trade and, like, chattel slavery is, like, intrinsic to his vision of what this, you know, American expansion looks like, right? Like, he's not thinking about, like, "Oh, we're going to phase this out, right." Or was he?

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:18:13] This is a really important question. And it gets to the root of Jefferson's psychology. 1700 billion books have been written about the mind of Thomas Jefferson at this point. But very briefly here, Thomas Jefferson, of course, was a slave holder. He owned hundreds of people over the course of his life. He had—this sort of terminology of how we describe Sally Hemings—is still being debated. But he had, you know, sex with Sally

Hemings, who was an enslaved woman, his wife's half-sister, in fact, too. Had many children with her, she was enslaved. She was much younger than him.

JVN [00:18:44] Wait, wait? He fucked his wife's half-sister?

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:18:47] Martha Jefferson was half-sister with Sally Hemings.

JVN [00:18:51] Ooooooh.

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:18:53] Yeah. So, so after Martha died, when Thomas Jefferson was off in Paris, being a diplomat during the Revolution, that's when he slept with a much, much, much younger Sally Hemings for the first time—in what I, you know, believe, at least initially, was obviously rape. You know, they had a long relationship over the course of their lives. It could have changed, potentially, but it's—and it's complicated, and many, many historians have covered this relationship. You know, it's tricky. So Thomas Jefferson is a, you know, is a slave holder. Of course, he's also the third president. And when he contemplated Louisiana, it's interesting because he, on the one hand, he's an enslaver. This is a violent job, vocation, whatever it is. A lot of his wealth was tied up in enslaved people. But, he said, at least publicly, when he sort of considered slavery and its future, it made him nervous. He was sort of uneasy about the role that slavery would play in the nation's future going forward. And so when he thought of the West, he thought of this as a white space. This was generally not a space, in fact, that he at least personally thought would be populated by enslaved people.

He thought about this as basically a place that white people in their little wagons, they would, you know, go from Virginia, they would go over the Appalachian Mountains. They would head into the west. And from there they would sort of set up these little homesteads and set up these farms that would be very far away from the sort of creditors and bankers of the east. They would become Republican farmers over there. They would, they would enact this kind of American liberty. Black people very much complicated his vision of what freedom and this empire of liberty would look like. But he also, of course, was a pragmatist and recognized that no matter what people said about slavery, publicly, there was already slavery in the West. You know, you have sort of East Coast politicians in 1803, 1804 debating the terms of the Louisiana Purchase and the sort of incorporation of this area into the United States. And you see this strange mix of congressmen who are saying, "You know, we'll just ban slavery outright in the West." And you have other senators who say, "Wait a minute. Back up for a minute. There's already actually substantial slavery in the West. You know, New Orleans and Louisiana already has, you know, centuries worth of slavery. So how are we going to remove slavery from a place that already has it?" This becomes a major aspect of the debates of 1804 when people are trying to figure out, actually: "So we have the Louisiana Purchase. This has happened. This is great. What do we do with this land and how do we make this quote unquote 'American'?"

JVN [00:21:14] Is that, like, the Mason-Dixon Line thing where they were, like, "South of this, you can, but north of that you can't," or something?

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:21:20] Not quite. One more thing that's tied into this. So a lot of states in the north by the 19th century have sort of made steps to either abolish or gradually abolish slavery. So most states above Virginia and Maryland have already sort of enacted policies to either abolish slavery outright or slowly phase it out over time. New York, for example, gradually abolished slavery in the late 1790s, said that basically an enslaved person born, you know, before a certain date still owed 25 or 28 years of service to their enslaver. This is, you know, quote unquote, "philanthropy at bargain prices." You know, this is not exactly hard on enslavers. You know, they can feel good about doing something ostensibly abolitionist or anti-slavery and not really do anything at all for the experience of people on the ground. But, you know, there's no, there's no sort of official hard line, you know, about, like, where slavery can spread. Just individual states are electing either to adopt slavery or in many cases, increasingly curtail it.

JVN [00:22:17] And Jefferson was a two-term president or a one-term president?

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:22:20] Two-term.

JVN [00:22:21] So, and Washington was, like, famously a one-term president, like, doesn't run for reelection. And then was Adams, like, a one-termer, too...

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:22:28] No, No, so, Washington. Washington is two terms, and Adams is one term.

JVN [00:22:34] Okay, fierce. I only—I was just, like, trying to remember Hamilton!

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:22:38] But he—Washington famously, you know, probably the most consequential act of his presidency was that he stepped down and didn't continue being president.

JVN [00:22:44] Oh, yeah. Because, like, they didn't have the two-term limit yet. So he did that, like, on his own volition.

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:22:48] Yes.

JVN [00:22:49] Fierce. Okay. So okay, so the Louisiana Purchase happens. 1803. 1804, they're debating about, like, how things are going to go off or, you know, how things are going to continue. Then, into the 1800s. You had mentioned earlier that, like, does New Orleans start to look like present-day, at least the French Quarter?

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:23:09] By the, by the late 18th century. I would say that sort of New Orleans is beginning to look and sort of feel a lot like the sort of city that we know and recognize, that you can sort of see that French Quarter outline. It has, you know, the

architecture is this kind of Spanish colonial style, a lot of it classic buildings of downtown New Orleans, the French Quarter or Vieux Carré, as it was called then. You know, this is sort of when it comes to look and feel like itself, the modern version of it.

JVN [00:23:35] Got it. Okay. And so then ultimately, Louisiana Purchase. People are, like, excited that, like, they're growing?

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:23:47] Very much so. I mean, there are some naysayers about this who question the constitutionality of the Louisiana Purchase and whether the president can authorize such a huge acquisition of land. There are Federalists in the north who are not as excited as, you know, most people. But I would say that the overwhelming majority, you know, overwhelming majority of Americans are just absolutely delighted at the prospect of acquiring Louisiana and New Orleans.

JVN [00:24:12] So just two short Olympic cycles later, from 1804 to 1812, like, the, like, Louisiana becomes, like, a U.S. state. So what's the deal with, like, 1812 and, like, I remember from the 1619 Project and I also think in my notes it says: transatlantic slave trade is banned in the U.S. in 1808. And also the United Kingdom, I think, bans it at the same time, or a similar time, or—

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:24:38] 1807. Yeah, same time, basically.

JVN [00:24:40] So what happens between, like, 1804, 1808, 1812? Like how does life in New Orleans change? Because this is, like, a very dynamic time from 1804 to 1812. Right?

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:24:52] So hugely dynamic. You absolutely have that right. So between the Louisiana Purchase and 1812, when Louisiana became a state—and to become a state at this time means that you have to meet a minimum sort of population threshold, and then also you have to draw up a constitution and it has to be ratified by the other states. So then one of the sort of interesting parts about the way that new states are admitted to the union in the United States is that, you know, if you meet these sort of actually quite simple criteria. But, you know, it's hard because you need to have the population. But once you meet these criteria, you become a state on an equal footing with the other original states. So during the first decade of the 19th century, people are pouring into Louisiana. So these are Americans from northern states, from states to the east, from Georgia and South Carolina. They're coming to New Orleans in huge numbers, mostly because this is considered to be a kind of place of economic opportunity. But also this is a place that if you, you know, sort of want to get in on the ground floor of government, this is where you come. There are jobs aplenty: in the Customs house, in the Land Bureau, in all sorts of these sort of administrative capacities in the city. This is where you come.

So people are flooding in and you see sort of massive changes taking place. In 1808, as you said, the African slave trade was banned federally. Crucially, it has not ended slavery. It has

ended the African slave trade. This is a distinction that people at the time, you know, we might not think it means very much and obviously see that there, you know, this is deeply problematic, of course, too. But at the time, many, many people heralded this as this, you know, incredible anti-slavery act. And it was. I'm not, I'm not that cynical. This is an amazing thing, you know, sort of for world history on the face of it. But as we'll talk about, I think, you know, this ended up leading to some other problems to do with the growth of the domestic slave trade and the internal American slave market. So you have this growing population of free white people coming in from the north, some from Europe. You have an increasing population of enslaved people who are increasingly coming in not from Africa or from the Caribbean, because the African slave trade actually was banned going to Louisiana in 1804. This is ahead of the federal ban in 1808.

So these enslaved people are coming not from Africa or from the West Indies, but instead from Kentucky and from Virginia and from eastern states, states that have a so-called, I say, quote unquote, "surplus" of enslaved people. This is how politicians in those states talked about these people at the time. And they're being sold at a premium to Louisiana, to New Orleans, from Virginia and from Maryland and from the Eastern—North Carolina and the Eastern seaboard states. So you have this growing population of enslaved people, most of whom had been born in the United States. And then, you know, by 1811, in fact, Louisiana had met the threshold for—the sort of minimum population threshold. And then a bunch of massive planters and enslavers met in a bar in New Orleans, and they drove a constitution. And this was accepted by the U.S. Senate. And Louisiana became a state in 1812.

JVN [00:27:56] So a few follow up questions on that. Did their constitution allow them to count for enslaved people to be a part of the population that they were claiming to become a state?

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:28:06] Enslaved people do not count as a part of the population. We're talking about free white people.

JVN [00:28:11] Okay, got it.

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:28:12] A part of the contention, actually, during this entire sort of this entire statehood process, the territorial process, was Americans were concerned about the loyalty of Creoles in New Orleans. And Creole has a different meaning today than it did then. Then, Creole—it meant basically anybody who had been born in Louisiana or in the sort of tropics and subtropics in the Caribbean. But generally, these are people who sort of affiliated themselves with France and Spain, their culture, their language. This also could include African-born people or African-descended people, too. It's a very sort of fluid term, Creole. But what the Americans were concerned about—Thomas Jefferson in particular was concerned about—in 1803 and 1804 was America has taken control on paper of Louisiana and New Orleans. But what about all these people who are already living there? People who have loyalty to France and to Spain, who don't speak English, who are Catholic? People who, you

know, have sort of a different sensibility about how they should be relating to any kind of government? Who also practiced slavery somewhat differently than did East Coast Americans? And so, you know, there's a whole maelstrom of inter-ethnic and cultural wars that are going on in New Orleans as the Americans or the Creoles are vying for political, cultural, and social power during the first decades of the 19th century.

JVN [00:29:36] I learned in the 1619 Project, but I don't think I have the numbers right. But basically, like, when they outlawed the transatlantic slave trade federally, it essentially caused, like, just an explosion of population of enslaved people in United States, because all these people just, like, forced people to give birth all the time; like, were forcing enslaved people to, like, have more babies and babies because they were, like, trying to supply it from lay people that were already here. So did the population go from, like, wasn't it, like, 700,000 to, like, 7 million or something from, like, 1808 to 1868?

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:30:05] So by 1860 or 1863, when emancipation happened, the population, the slave population was 4 million people. But you're totally right. You're 100% correct that the population, the enslaved population of the United States exploded following the 1808 African slave trade ban. So we talk about this, you know, historians. We talk about both, you know, the work that enslaved people did. It's not just labor, i.e. sort of picking cotton or cooking or building houses, but also reproductive labor. So women, especially, bore this absolute huge burden of having to also bear children. You know, these are children, of course, that literally propagated a system of slavery, but massively added to the wealth of enslavers. And the United States, unlike a great many other slave societies in the Greater Caribbean, except for in, you know, certain areas of the coastal plains of Carolina, for example, the model that Caribbean planters had always relied on, and it's incredibly brutal, basically was replacement. They very cruelly and very coldly calculated just how much labor a person had to do to cover their worth, essentially. And they were not interested in basically keeping people, you know, alive so that they could reproduce. They would literally work people to death in the Caribbean. And that was not, you know—the, the United States saw great potential in growth of riches in enslaved women. Having children and propagating the slave system in this way is a subtle but actually very large difference in the way that American slavery would look going forward in the 19th century, that it would be based very much on the sort of, quote unquote, “natural growth” of the slave population within the United States, and not through importation.

JVN [00:31:46] Fuck me. That is just dark, like, it is just a dark ass history. Okay, so now we're getting into your book, and this is just so fascinating. I feel like I got—that was, like, a long meandering, like New Orleans, like, 10th grade, you know, history, A.P. History class, as you said, but, like, not in Florida, because we were allowed to talk about stuff, which is fierce. Your book explores how yellow fever affected the city's class and racial structures. Honey, I never even knew about yellow fever. I mean, I guess I had heard randomly about it, but it just I filed it away in like, “scarlet, other fevers, other things,” you know, just filed away in, like, things I

don't want to get and I'm not trying to get curious about. But it's actually really interesting and your book proves that. So what was the deal with yellow fever in New Orleans?

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:32:34] So I should say I'm just like you, actually, in that when I went into this project, this is, like, over a decade ago, I knew that yellow fever existed, but I knew nothing else about it. That was basically the sort of long and short of what I knew. I didn't actually intend to write this book at all, in fact. So I wanted to write about how the slave experience changed after the Louisiana Purchase in New Orleans. And I had this sort of vision of what I was gonna do and this research plan. But then when I actually got into the archives in New Orleans for the first time, I was on Tulane's campus and I was just looking at these diaries and these letters and these sort of ledger books and was, like, "All anybody's talking about is disease. And one disease in particular, yellow fever." And, you know, after like a week, I remember calling my dad and being, like, "Dad, do you think I should start doing something with this?" And I could hear him basically uncorking the bottle of wine in the background. He was in London at the time and saying, like, you know, "Honey, you know, we always thought that you were a historical hypochondriac. Like, you always were going to write about disease somehow."

So when I got back from this trip, I did a bunch of reading, and you know, there had been many books, great books that have been written about yellow fever in New Orleans. But what I learned essentially, was that in the 19th century and before that, too, in fact, this was considered to be the most terrifying disease in the Atlantic world. This was a disease feared by literally everybody who was in the tropics and subtropics. So in New Orleans, yellow fever caused periodic and pretty staggering problems. So as the city is growing, we have people who are pouring in from Europe, also from eastern states. Again, these are people who I would say are the sort of term of art is "immunologically naive." These are people who have no previous exposure to tropical disease. You also have increased commerce. So you have ships docking on the levee in New Orleans, you know, all the time. And in these ships are both people, but also mosquitoes that are being brought from West Africa, but also from the Caribbean. And then in the summer, in this very, very, very hot environment, anybody who's been to New Orleans can attest to this—where, you know, you're just dripping in sweat. And so these three factors, a densely packed human population, a large population of the mosquito vector, some of whom have been sort of infected with or harboring the yellow fever virus. And this climate that is hot enough to allow these mosquitoes to breed, this is going to spell disaster. So every second or third summer in the 19th century, yellow fever became epidemic in New Orleans. And this could kill between 8 and 10% of the population each summer.

JVN [00:35:00] Fuck off! Every 2 to 3 years. I'm sorry, I yelled so much, you guys, Kathryn just had to adjust her fucking earpods. That was—I did not, I didn't see that statistic before we started. So, wait. So every 2 to 3 years—

KATHRYN OLIVARIUS [00:35:14] 8 to 10% of people and in certain immigrant neighborhoods, very crowded neighborhoods of people who are malnourished, generally, who've just, you know, come to New Orleans after a long sea voyage, probably escaping the Irish potato famine or political upheaval in Germany. In those neighborhoods, between 20 and 30% of people could die. It's huge, huge numbers of people.

JVN [00:35:35] Well what the fuck was going on in Germany? Jonathan, don't do it. You better focus. That's a different Getting Curious. We aren't doing it! Okay, focus! You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week is Kathryn Olivarius. We'll be releasing part two of our conversation tomorrow, all about yellow fever in New Orleans—and what this disease can tell us about the city's history and politics. In the meantime, you'll find links to Kathryn's work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thank you so much to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend - show them how to subscribe. Follow us on Instagram @CuriousWithJVN. Our editor is Andrew Carson. Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, and Chris McClure—with production support from Emily Bossak and Julie Carrillo.