

Matt Bowles: My guest today is Dr. Javier Wallace, also known as *The Master Storyteller*. He is the founder of the award-winning [Black Austin Tours](#) and the co-founder of [Afro Latinx Travel](#). He is a scholar, entrepreneur, world traveler, and currently the Race and Sport Postdoctoral Associate at Duke University. He was a division one college football player at Florida A&M University. He completed his PhD at the University of Texas at Austin, and his research revolves around race, class, gender, labor migration and transnationalism of athletes from the U.S., Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa. He is of U.S. and Panamanian heritage, and in all of his work Javier seeks to amplify the themes of his lived experiences, work and academic research through narrative storytelling.

Javier, welcome to the show.

Javier Wallace: Thank you. Thank you so much for having me. I'm really happy to be here and ready to have this good talk, man.

Matt Bowles: I am such a fan of what you are all about and what you are up to. I'm super excited to dive into it, but let's just start off by setting the scene and talking about where we are recording from and what we are drinking tonight. You and I are actually in the same state in the U.S., but we are not in person, unfortunately.

I am on the western side of the state in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Asheville, North Carolina. I have just opened a bottle of Carménère wine from Chile, so I will be drinking through that this evening. But where are you, my friend, and what are you drinking tonight?

Javier Wallace: I am also in the state of North Carolina. I guess I'm in Piedmont. I've learned that terminology recently. I am in Durham, North Carolina, I guess the home of the Duke Blue devils. People might say, I don't know what side of that spectrum you fall on, but Duke pays me, so I'll be a Blue Devil today. And this evening, I am drinking the Equiano rum company, which is a fairly new spirit brand.

From what I understand now, I could be completely wrong, but I believe, if my research is correct, it is a particularly black owned British company that is producing this great rum with an amazing story that is mixing this rum from Mauritius and Barbados, which is thought to be the birthplace of rum. Some people might know Equiano, he was enslaved and trafficked between different places. He was in Barbados at one point in time. He was in what becomes the United States at another point in time.

And so, I love this rum brand (this is going to be my first time tasting it) because they are connecting these histories through this story, and I just love the story behind it. So, it could be absolutely not good. But for me, it's going to be great because I just love the story, and I love how they position Equiano as somebody who is transnational at a time where he's forced to be transnational. But really telling a story about rum that's a bit more accurate than just rum punches in the sun, that some people might just think of rum. So, I love the fact that they are reclaiming, disrupting, and hopefully producing a good drink, and now I have to taste.

Matt Bowles: Well, cheers, brother. You can give us your evaluation at the end of the interview once you've gone through a few glasses of it. I think that's a great lead into this conversation, and I think that ties into a lot of the themes in your work. I would love to start this off, though, just giving people some context on you. Your heritage is both Panamanian and U.S., and I would love for you to give a little bit of your family history, your family background, and maybe start with your mother's side and your connection with Texas.

Javier Wallace: Well, I'm born in Austin, Texas, raised in the city of Austin. My parents met in Austin, Texas. I tell people all the time that my mother's family is historically from Texas. And when I say historically from Texas, we've been there for literally over 200 years at this point, when Texas was a part of Mexico. And so, we were trafficked as enslaved people who were primarily in the United States in the 1820s that were moving into Mexico when they started to invite Anglo settlers to settle that northeastern part of their country, which is now a part of the United States, which was a part of the Republic of Texas.

And so, we have been there ever since. And we were trafficked there by a couple of different people. One of the families that trafficked us into Texas is the Hill family. My mother's maiden name is Hill. I'm Panamanian. So, we have to use both last names. And so, I carried this last name, Hill, and that Hill family is mostly like when I think of my origins of Texas. It's my mother's maiden name. As I mentioned, it's my grandfather's last name, who I tell a lot of stories about because of how much he means to me and is part of my origin story of being in Austin and being in Texas. And so, we've been there for quite a long time.

Matt Bowles: Can you share a little bit about your grandfather, Leonard Hill, and tell some of those stories and then how that connects with your journey?

Javier Wallace: Yes, of course. So, my grandfather, Leonard F. Hill, was born in 1922 he was born in a sharecropping family in Travis County, particularly in a cotton-picking sharecropping family, which is a remnant of enslavement in the United States and beyond, because this tenant system existed in different places. And he lived the life of many Black people at that time. He did come from a unique community of St. John Colony, which is a freedom colony in Texas. And Texas has the most freedom colonies in any state in the U.S.

And these are just established locations that formerly enslaved people in the 19th and 20th century established. They found access to land, resources to purchase land and create their own communities, both rural and urban. And he comes from, and my grandmother come from a very well-known freedom colony in central Texas in the state, St. John Colony. So that was very unique about that part of my family. Even though he's born into a sharecropper family, they have this unique community that they are a part of that are tied to enslavement and post emancipation movement and community building.

And he, in his youth, only goes to school until the 6th grade. He doesn't have the opportunity to continue his studies. He was drafted into World War II. He comes back to Austin. He meets my grandmother. He becomes a barber. He goes to Tyler, the first Black barber college in the United States. He used some of that GI Bill to become a barber. And he opens up a barber shop in 1948. And in addition to that, he also has eight kids. And so, he has to labor beyond what he's doing as a barber, which is extremely important for a Black man to own his own business at that time and have autonomy over his life. But he is also needs to earn extra income.

So, he becomes a janitor at the University of Texas at Austin, which is extremely important because although UT doesn't integrate until 1956 and Black students enter the university, there have always been Black people present at the university. We have labored in positions like my grandfather and all of his siblings who worked at UT, worked in custodial, worked in housekeeping, worked in the cafeteria. And it was always one of his desires to have one of his children go to the University of Texas. He always wanted that.

And my mother actually went to UT. She is the last girl, she's the second to last child. And she absolutely did not like her experience at UT. She says she went there only because her father wanted her to go there. But if it would have been up to her solely, she would have gone to probably a historically black college and university, namely Texas Southern University in Houston. And so, it was a very contentious relationship that I had with UT growing up in Austin. It's never somewhere that I thought about going, if you will, but when the opportunity presented itself for me to go get a PhD, that's when I started to really realize what it meant for me to go to UT, the legacy that I was inheriting at that university, and not through my mother, because, yes, I'm a legacy longhorn through my mother because she attended and graduated. But I like to think of my legacy to the university more tied to Leonard Hill, because he's somebody who didn't have an opportunity to go to the university, which is a flagship university of the state of Texas.

This would be different if it's a private university, but this is a state flagship. State dollars were appropriated to fund this institution, which at its onset, was supposed to be open to every person in the state of Texas. And at least if it was segregated, there would be a college of equal prestige value, if you will, for African Americans. And that didn't happen. It didn't happen until 1948, when they quickly invented what is now Texas Southern University.

And so, it has been my greatest honor, honestly, and pleasure, to be a descendant of Leonard Hill and know that I have the highest degree that the University of Texas at Austin confers. And I did it from the same place that they said that my grandfather was only good enough to sweep a room, sweep around podiums, sweep around lecture halls. In those same lecture halls, I have the opportunity to stand in and teach from behind those podiums today, create new knowledge, and challenge young people from all around the world, of all different races, all different backgrounds.

And so, he's important to me in that way, because I get to see things come full circle. And he gives me the energy to tell people, especially at UT, you going to pay me anything? I do? You going to pay me? I can work for free anywhere else in the world, but if you ask me to do anything, you going to pay me to do it? Cause we've already put in a lot. There are instances I do labor at UT out of my own heart for a lot of the causes that are very close to me, like making sure young Black students matriculate through the university, have opportunities, bust that out. But largely speaking, no.

Matt Bowles: Well, I definitely want to get into more of your academic research, but before we go there, can you share a little bit about your father's family history and his story and experience immigrating to the U.S. from Panama?

Javier Wallace: Yes, of course. My father, he is from the Republic of Panama, but more specifically, he's from the former United States Panama Canal zone. He grew up in Rainbow City, which was at his time, the largest segregated community in the former Panama Canal zone for local rate workers who were mostly Black people. Many people now don't know about the Panama Canal zone, but the United States operated this near sovereign territory while it had control of the Panama Canal, and they had communities in there, and they largely recruited Black people from the West Indies.

And when I say the West Indies, I'm largely referring to the Anglophone Caribbean, like Jamaica, Barbados, where my great grandparents migrated from to Panama to labor in around what becomes the Panama Canal. And these large capitalist projects that are stemming from the United States, primarily in Europe. And these people end up remaining in the Republic of Panama and have very challenging experiences, and they do build communities there primarily, like on my family are English speaking, speaking people, have

anglophone last names, have very, if you will, British like, Caribbean traditions and customs. And I say that intentionally because that was a part of my father's upbringing, which was a part of my understanding of being Panamanian, and particularly how he comes to Austin, because what these people build in Panama, because they are pushing aback against this anti-black Latino state that Panama is at that time, and arguably still is, if you ask me.

They create these opportunities with African Americans, particularly at HBCUs, because there's a black college in the Panama Canal zone. It belongs to the U.S. They go to segregated U.S. schools in Panama. And so, their coaches, their teachers are largely educated, are in communication with people in Jamaica. They're in communication with people at HBCUs in the south. And so, my dad has these people who are literally at Houston, Tillerson, already in Austin, Texas, in the 1950s, where my mother is from, my mother's family is from. And he plays tennis. He's a great tennis player. His brother is amazing. His older brother plays in the junior Olympics. He's the first Panamanian in the Davis cup to pass the first level on an international level. And so that leads him to Houston Tillerson University at that time, Houston Tillerson College in Austin, where he gets to be a young Black man from the Republic of Panama, Panama Canal zone, on a tennis scholarship, breaking down the barriers that largely society put in front of him, and he migrates to Austin.

He is then charged with helping the city of Austin do a tennis program for Black youth in East Austin, where my mother's family is from. And they meet each other on these tennis courts in East Austin, and literally the rest is history. You're listening to the history right now. And I always tell people, if it's not for the sport of tennis and racism. We wouldn't be here today. But I also think the power of sport and the power of these people in their communities and what they did in spite of and the things that they made the decisions to do in spite of, made the decisions to look for their own opportunities in spite of people trying to hold them back, made the decision to love in spite of people saying that that's y'all's thing over there to do.

And they're like, well, we'll make it ours, and we'll make our decisions, and we'll make ours that way. So that's how my dad gets to Austin, comes to play tennis at the HBCU that he's long connected to because of his experiences in the isthmus of Panama.

Matt Bowles: And can you talk about your experience as a kid coming up in Austin and also the role of sports in your life as you were coming up?

Javier Wallace: I am Austin Texan through and through, point blank and period. You ain't met nobody more Austin, Texas, than me, I can tell you that. So, I grew up in Austin. That's my home. That's where I'm from. I am bicultural or multicultural, if you will. So, for me, growing up in my house, my mom being African American and my dad being Black, Panamanian, it was nothing for me to know Al Green and Celia Cruz. Like, I've known that my entire life. There's never been anything that's weird to me. I've known *Collard Greens* and I've known *Arroz Con Pollo* my entire life.

Like, it's never been something that has stood out to me until I went beyond my community and understood what it was and beyond my community with my cousins on my mom forever, me and my brother. My name is Javier, and my brother's name is Ernesto because that's my father's name. And in Texas, in Austin, Javier and Ernesto don't come in this variety. Maybe you can imagine, if you're listening, what I look like or look at the program, you'll see what I look like that don't make sense to people. So, I've always been, even with my African American cousins, Black, Mexican. These are my Mexican cousins or

my Black Mexican cousins. And so, I literally grew up as African-American in a bicultural home, but in a largely African-American environment.

And it was never weird to me at all. And so, I did largely American things in the sport. I play football. Not football, not what you play with your feet. I play football, American football. And I was big. I still am a bit bigger. So, football literally came easy. When I tell you I did not try, because I did not want to try. I guess I was just kind of good at it. And I'll never forget, I wanted to graduate high school early. And I did. I finished high school in three years. And my high school coach shout out, coach David Seaborn, I'll never forget. After the season, I won all district awards. And again, I didn't try. I just played. Won all district awards.

And he told me, hey, you know, you can go to school for free playing football. And I had never considered an athletic scholarship before. I was familiar with it because my father came to the U.S. on one, but it wasn't something that I was like, yes, I want to have an athletic scholarship, but I knew I want to go to college. I knew that for a fact. I wanted to go to college. I knew my parents had no money to pay for me to go to college, so I knew I needed to go. I wanted to go to a black college. And so that was literally all I needed to hear was from that coach that, you know, you can get your school paid for if you play. And I'm like, for real? He was like, I tell you what, you bring me some tapes, you tell me the schools where you want to go, and I call them.

So back in those days, we didn't have DVD's. I went to Dollar general. I bought a stack of VHS tapes and cassette tapes, and I took him to coach C. Bourne, and he sat there, and he dubbed the tapes the highlight tape. And he sent them all to the colleges that I wanted to go to. All black colleges, all HBCUs. And one day I came back to school, and he said, come here. And I go in his office. He tells me, sit down. Sit down on the couch. I sit on the couch. He goes behind his desk to his office phone, and he pushes the voicemail button, and it says, hey, coach, how are you doing? This is coach such and such at Hampton University calling by Javier. Hey, coach, how are you doing? This is coach and such at Florida A & M University calling about Javier. Hey, coach, how are you doing... I'm like, wow, really? Oh, my God. So, this thing is real.

And then maybe a week later, I'm in the gym, now senior year, I will never forget this coach from Prairie View A&M walks in, Joe Arroyo. His last name is Arroyo. I don't know if his first name is Joe, but I know his last name was Arroyo. He walks in the gym. He liked it, called me in to talk to the coach, and the coach said, let him talk to me. And he's like, hey, how are you doing? I'm like, I'm all right. I want to offer you a scholarship to go to Prairie View A&M University. I'm like, what? I was like, hold on, I got to go talk to my mom first. Like, give me some minutes. Give me a minute now. They aren't going to be happy if I commit to you and I haven't consulted. Even though they don't have the money to pay for it, they still am not going to be happy.

So, I went home. I ended up not going to PV, but at that moment, I knew that this thing was real. I took official visits to a couple of places. They flew me out. My parents were with me, and I had the best time at Florida A&M, the best time, not the best time studying. I literally had the best club experience in Tallahassee, and I was like, I'm coming here, I'm coming here, I'm coming here. And so, I went to FAMU from high school in Austin, played football there, and sport has ended up literally directing my life ever since that happened. But initially, it's not something that I necessarily wanted to do. I was just had athletic talent, and I was able to utilize it to my advantage once I knew what it was and what it could do.

Matt Bowles: Well, I want to ask you about your experience at FAMU. I have many dear friends that have graduated from FAMU. I tend to just meet people around the world as I'm traveling. I just ran into FAMU

rattlers in various countries around the world. I have interviewed a number of FAMU grads on this podcast, and I'm curious if you can share a little bit about for you, what was the FAMU experience like in general, but also as student athlete

Javier Wallace: FAMU, for me, was everything that a 17-year-old Black boy from Austin, Texas needed. When I stepped foot on that campus at that time, it was everything that I needed. It was culturally affirming; it was a vibe. It was so experiential, like just meeting so many people from all over the world. It helped me understand me a bit better, because, as I mentioned, I grew up multicultural, but always racially. And I grew up in a largely African American environment. And so, I had my Panamanian cousins. Don't get me wrong, it's not new, but on a largeness, blackness in Austin is black American.

And if it's not Black American, we can understand it a little bit through, like, a Caribbean lens. Like, people know Jamaica, and because it's Texas, like we know Nigeria, because we have a large Nigerian community. So, we get that. Like, we get. African Americans aren't the only Black people. We're the predominant black. And you might be Nigerian, and you might be Jamaican, but other than that, you are just African American. And so FAMU was very black, but it was black in so many ways. It was black the way I was Black.

My mom's African American, my dad's Panama, and this person, their mom's Jamaican, and their dad is African American. That this person, their family is Bahamian, and their family is. Other family is from South Georgia. There are people who are from Georgia, people who are from Alabama, people whose family was from all these different places. Because of what Florida has attracted, South Florida specifically, it gave me opportunity to express these varieties of myself and still be a Texan, because we got a lot of Texans there, too. So, I got to express myself. At FAMU it was great. It was everything I needed.

I talked about this in class because this is an election year that we're in now. And many of my students at Duke, this is their first election that they can vote in. And at FAMU, my first election, I could vote in Washington. Barack Obama. And Barack Obama won. And Barack Obama came to our campus. We met Barack Obama because we were on the football team. The way that that city erupted, that part of town erupted when Barack Obama won, is something that is etched into my memory forever. And it could not have happened anywhere else. Well, maybe North Carolina A and T, but I don't get too much credit. We ain't going to do all that well, I mean, it couldn't happen. It couldn't happen anywhere else. Only going to happen at failure. And so, it was great. But as a student athlete, unfortunately, Florida A and M, it's like many other athletic programs around the country, I do think our coaches did care about us genuinely. In addition to that, they had jobs to do, which was to win our athletic advisors on the academic side. They had jobs to do in addition to caring about us, which was to keep us eligible. And so, a lot of what I experienced at FAMU as a football player, it fed a lot into that identity as a football player. And you mentioned, anywhere you go, you meet rattlers. That's just who we are. We are around the world.

Matt Bowles: You are around the world. I mean, FAMU Rattlers travel. That's what I have learned.

Javier Wallace: Yeah, that's right. We are going to do it. We rattlers around the world. And so, I meet a lot of FAMU rattlers as well around the world. And as we do in our typical fashion, like, we want to know what year you went to school, who you know, it, this, that and the third. And for me, that has been one of the biggest challenges that I've had as a football alum of fame, is because I spent so much time in football and so much time at the field house. There were so many people I did not get to meet at Florida A and M that was there when I was there.

There are so many great people, so many potential networking opportunities that I missed out on because I was very insulated in my football environment. And many of us had similar interests. Many of us were being corralled into similar degree programs and similar outcomes we were having. And so, a lot of our networks are within ourselves. And I love these men. This is one of the best groups of men that I know, and we can challenge ideas of masculinity, the best, because I've seen it experience all these things with this group of men and what people say, this toxic masculinity, toxic masculine environment.

But I've seen so many things to the contrary and experienced that with these men. In addition to that, that experience sometimes can be limited, especially since I have a PhD from UT, since I'm at Duke now, and I see the power, networking, and I see what it means to go to college. And it's not just going to class and getting good grades and moving on, it's meeting these people that are going to help you over the course of your lifetime. Having these experiences, like studying abroad, that's going to open up your mind. College sports just don't play well with those things. College sports want your time, want your attention, wants everything for the name of the university. So, fam was also that. I had great coaches. I had some amazing Black college coaches. One of the most winningest coaches in the United States, Joe Taylor, with some of the best coaching philosophies known to humankind. I mean, they propelled me to where I am now in the athletic field. But there is that part of it. It's football and it's college football, and that's what college football desires. Your time, you're everything to them.

Matt Bowles: Well, I know after you graduated FAMU, you did a master's degree and eventually ended up moving to Panama for six years. Can you talk a little bit about the path that led to that decision to move to Panama and what your experience was like after graduating from FAMU?

Javier Wallace: My path to going to Panama was a result of exactly what I just mentioned. Because I was so engulfed in football over my five years being at FAMU with no internship experience, no professional experience, coming out in the recession, I literally didn't have any job prospects at all and really didn't know how to go about them.

Luckily, I had people in my family, like my uncle in Austin who was in entertainment, and he gave me some opportunities, and I realized that wasn't what I wanted to do. So, I ended up going back to FAM because some great people, Coach Edwin Patterdeh, shout out to him. I think he's an O-line coach at the University of Miami right now. Well-deserved hope to see him in the head coaching role here soon. He helped me. He was like, just come back, man. Come back. I'm going to get you into grad school. I'm going to get you coaching. And that totally changed my life. And so, when I went back to fam as a coach, it was amazing.

I did my Master's in sport management, but then I had a great academic advisor in FAMU. I was like, I'm going to be a million-dollar coach. That's what we're going to do. And then I walked into this classroom with Doctor Don Norwood, and she started telling me about academic clustering and why Black people are concentrated in these sports. And I'm like, hold on a second. I'm like, wait, what you talking about? They are showing me all this research about athletes who are all pushed into these certain majors. And my whole experience, I was just blaming my academic advisor. I just thought that was what he wanted to do with us at Florida A&M. I didn't know it was a phenomenon.

Hell, I didn't know what that word meant at that time. I didn't know it was a phenomenon. And I was like, oh, this what? And then she's asked a question. Are Black people better at sports than white people? I'm the first person to put my hand up in the air. I'm like, yes, they are. We are. She said, how do you know that? I said, ma'am, all you have to do is turn on the tv and you want to see who's playing. And then, man, the

way she proceeded to tear me up, I said, oh, wow. And I haven't repeated that since. I teach on that now. But I was like, wow, there's so much I just don't know. I went to the NCAA coach's academy. Coach Joe Taylor, he was a guy. I'm telling you, he's the one to go in the game. He got me in with the NCAA. They flew me to Dallas. I was at the AFCA, the American Football Coach association, talked to all the big coaches, D-1, had offers to continue coaching, but the only thing in my mind when I get back to FAMU is running to doctor Norwood and telling her: They trying to get me into the good old boys' club. They are trying to groom me to be one of them!

Now I sit back, you know, that could have been me if I could have just sat there and shut it up and got pushed into this, got groomed. No, that could have been me. I could have been out there. Cause they wanted to put me on the pathway. They're like, we got a good one, we gon groom him. But no, I was like, no, I refused. I ain't doing this no more. I want to focus on this thing. PhD, wow. That's what led me to Panama. Cause I didn't have any job after doing all that. I didn't have any job after experiencing and learning so many new things about my experiences in life and everything was making sense.

Like, that's when I came up with, if it's not for the sport of tennis and racism, I'm not here. Because I never thought about my parents meeting like that. I never thought of it as being a product of these large societal things and barriers in their lives and the ways people push back that put them together on that tennis court in East Austin when they meth. And then we are the results of that. I never thought about it that way. And so, I wanted to know more. I literally just wanted to know more. They wanted me to do a PhD. I didn't get accepted. I moved to Panama. I didn't have a real plan. I said I was going to go down there, work in sport, but I just went.

Matt Bowles: What was your connection with the country of Panama prior to moving there? Had you traveled there with your dad as a kid and connected with relatives? How familiar were you with the country before this move?

Javier Wallace: I had only been to Panama two times before. One time in 1992 as a small child. My dad didn't go. I went with my mother and my aunt. They were there and I got very sick. I do remember that my mom talks about it all the time. I went to the hospital in Panama. The next time I went, I used some of my financial aid money in my master's and I went mow my cousin on the spirit flight. This is my first time going, a real recollection in Panama. So, this is 2011, 2010, maybe staying with my uncle, my grandmother, my cousins, and I was just like, wow, this is where my dad is from. I saw things in there that were super encouraging, and I saw things in there that were like, I see why you made that decision.

Like, I don't see how you could have achieved what you have achieved had you stayed in this place. But I was full of adventure, thankfully, because of what football didn't give me and did give me. I didn't have anything holding me back in the States because I didn't have it. I had degrees, but I didn't have any real job offers, no real experience that was saying anything other. So, when I visited there as an adult in my master's program, I was like, I need to know this place, because this thing is crazy. Like, what? This is where we are from. Like, for real. I know Austin, Texas, and Tallahassee. That's what it was like for me when I went back. I was like, wow.

Matt Bowles: And then when you moved there and you lived there for six years, can you talk about what you learned when you were able to be that deeply immersed in the culture and also how that impacted your Panamanian identity?

Javier Wallace: I learned so much when I moved and lived in Panama continuously for six years. I go back so often now; it seems like I haven't even left in many ways. But those six years just changed my life. I really learned who I am. I learned about who we are as a people, because Panamanians in the United States are mostly black and mostly of west Indian origin. Because in Panama, we delineate blackness to two ethnic categories. We have a category called Afro colonial, which are people who can largely tie their ancestry to being enslaved by primarily the Spanish traffic to the Isthmus of Panama during Spanish colonialism, have Spanish surnames or Africanized surnames, have their own set of traditions.

And there's this other group that we call Afrontiano or AfroAntillians. And these are mostly people who migrated to Panama as non-enslaved people post emancipation, primarily from the Anglophone Caribbean or the francophone Caribbean, Barbados, primarily Jamaica. Martinican places, came to Panama. We have anglophone last names, like Wallace, and have varying traditions. And so, I largely grew up in the US, around Panamanians that were Afroantianos. That's the majority of people that are Panamanians in the states, most of us. And this is a larger migration history. Most of the Panamanians who came here in the 1950s and through the eighties were of west Indian origin.

That's what they wanted to do. So, me growing up in Texas, going to these annual Panamanian picnics on Labor Day, was mostly that. Of course, we ate arroz con pollo. We ate what they call a Panama Comilla criolla, or traditional Panamanian food. But I always ate sauce. I always ate pati. I always ate these things. I just thought these were Panamanian things. I just. All Panama. Matter of fact, it was a nonblack Panamanian girl in my high school, and she was like, I never met a black Panama. And I'm like, I'm looking at her like, I ain't never met one of y'all. Like, you look like a Mexican. I ain't never met one of y'all either. When I moved to Panama, I realized how much I had been influenced by our experience in Panama and how much we were Panamanian, but we were Panamanian the way we created ourselves to be Panama and have been marked by our experiences on the Isthmus.

And I was a living representation of that. And people always let me know that, literally, they always let me know that that food, what you eat is more of Afrontilian. You know, I'd be like, oh, I like sao. They're like, I always liked that too, but I was never accustomed to eating those things. I was like, really? But we supposed to be Panamanian, right? So, I learned that about myself. I was like, wow. I'm a part of this very unique group of people, this ethnic group of people that's racialized in this country. And I think the biggest takeaway from my Panama experience was my blackness, because I realized that I didn't stop being black when I went to Panama. I confronted blackness in the U.S. as a Black person in a largely African American context. And I've never had to not think about that, even though my name is Javier. Like, that's the only thing that people look at me and say, are you really black?

But outside of that, I've never had that experience. But in Panama, I'm telling people my name is Javier. They're like, okay, there's, like, literally 300 of y'all in this half a mile square distance. Like, it's 300 of y'all name Javier. Like, what's your next point? And so, the thing that I couldn't escape was being black, and I started to just notice things. I was starting to notice people would get up from sitting next to me on the bus. I just started noticing a lot of things. But when I really knew what this thing was about was the interactions that I was having with Panamanian law enforcement. They were just very violent. They were very direct. And Panamanian police officers, they carried big automatic assault rifle. I mean, and the way they would point them in my face. It just told me a lot about what it meant to be a Black person, a big Black man in Panama.

And one example, me and my friends, most of us were from the United States, and half of us were like, Panamanian Americans. There was a couple of us that were living in Panama, like us, and we were going to Portobelo for this festival, and I'm with my homeboy, my homegirl, and we get stopped by the police, the whole bus. And I'm telling him, I'm like, bro, look here. They going to come on here, and they going to pull only Black men off this bus. Don't show your Panamanian id to nobody. Pull out your us driver's license. Act like you don't talk Spanish. And that's going to get us through this. I said, I'm going to do the same thing.

And so, we get off the bus, and we do exactly that. They look at us oddly, Americans. Oh, sorry, you can go back on the bus. And then my friend on the bus, a Black woman, she asked the people around, because she heard me tell, preparing Alex for what was going to happen, and she was asking some of the people on the bus, why are they doing this? And the people on the bus told her, for our safety, that's why they're doing that. Things just were reoccurring to me. I have so many horrible, violent experiences with Panama and law enforcement, which I actually started. If you see my old us passport before I renewed it, you can't see the front of it. You can't see any of the emblem of the United States on it, because I carried it around with me every day in Panama.

Once I realized that it was no benefit in being Panama in this whole thing. I had grown up to learn and love and was positioned in the U.S. as your Panamanian as well. Like, we do things a bit differently. You dis that. And the third, it meant nothing in Panama. It meant absolutely nothing in the country where everybody is Panama. It meant nothing. And the only way I could escape being Panamanian, after fighting so hard to become Panamanian, getting my citizenship, getting my license, all the things I had to do was not be Panamanian anymore, was to be American.

And it hurt because my friends used to talk about this. We used to be like, man, this shit sucks. And what about our cousins who don't have U.S. passports, who don't have us driver's license? Like, they got to deal with this every day. And it ain't no escape. You deal with it. And so, I learned in Panama that I was a black person. I'm a Black person who is from the US. And Panama has citizenship in both places. I recognize I have citizenship in both places. I honor the fight that all of my ancestors put in both countries for us to have citizenship, because in both places it was denied. And in both places, we had to agitate, fight, and protest to get citizenship. And it has given us a mobility to move around the world because of the value of the passports attached to our nationalities. Now, I recognize that, but I am still just a Black person living in this world. And Panama taught me that.

Matt Bowles: While you were living in Panama, the other thing that you did is you started [AfroLatinx Travel](#). And I want to ask you about the origin story of that. How did it come about initially? And what is [AfroLatinx Travel](#) today?

Javier Wallace: So, I co-founded Afro Latinx Travel. Dash Harris is the other co-founder of [AfroLatinx Travel](#). And so, for me, this side of the origin story was living in Panama. I was learning so much about myself, learning so much about Panamanian culture and specifically learning so much about Black Panamanian culture in history. But at the same time, this is 2012, this is 2013. This is the black travel movement, right? This is Nomadness is coming onto the scene. Like, these black travel groups are coming onto the scene, and people are sending out bat signals across the world where they're traveling, looking for places to link up and people to meet and things to do. And these flight deals, you know, people are getting all these flight deals, trying to get on a flight for a dollar.

Now, of course, you never going to get from Panama to the U.S. for a dollar. Panama ends up becoming the destination. But everybody and their mama is coming to the destination. And so little old me down there who speaks English now and Spanish is just being reached out to everybody in the world. Facebook going out. Hey, I'm calling power. Hey, hey, hey, hey. You know, it's cool you don't think about it when you're not living in the country. I'm going to visit. I want to hit people up there. But when you become the destination, oh, shit. They keep coming. It was cool the first five times. Person number six, come on. Like, I'm tired. I live here. I go to work. I cannot stay out with you till 07:00 this morning. Morning drinking and talking. I got to be to work eight.

And so, I'm actually enjoying it. But the same homegirl who I was talking about the bus, saying, the people said for our security, they pulled us off. Well, she was from Maryland, Montgomery County. I know they get sensitive about that. She's from Montgomery County, and she has her birthday party down in Panama, and she brings her friends, and she's like, do the tour. I'm like, what you mean, do the tour? She likes to stop playing. You know the history of every blade of grass in this country. You fittin to do this tour. I'm like, whatever, let's do it.

So we rent a car and we just drive the Caribbean coast of Cologne and Panama, and I give this tour, and they're like, oh, my God, this is dope, bro. How did you do this? How did you know this? What's up? And then I had some people reach out, Keena. Shout out Kena Williams. Keena Williams was big in this whole story. She was coming to Panama. And Jasmine Owens, too. Shout out Jasmine Owens. She came to shout out Tyra Douglas Hughley. She was the first person to buy from me, which ends up becoming [AfroLatinx Travel](#). And they were saying, man, you charged people for this? I never considered charging people before when they told me that, I just, like, went on word and just came up with this travel itinerary and threw it out there, and they bought it. But I met Dash around this time, too, and Dash had the name Afro Latino travel as it was at that time. She had the logo, she had the idea, she had created her documentary, had traveled around the Latin America, interviewing Black people around the diaspora, and had this idea for this travel company as well, too.

And so, we just combined our energies at that moment and started to just build things out as they were feeling good to us and right for us to do in those spaces. And the rest becomes what people now known as [AfroLatinx Travel](#). But at that moment, it's just these two young, Black Panamanian Americans who have spent the majority of their lives in the US going back to this place of ancestry, trying to make a life for ourselves in this new space. And you don't make the same money in Panama that you make in the U.S. And so, this also pushes at least me into this field of entrepreneurship, which I might not have done before. And history storytelling in this place becomes a place to practice and start learning and telling people.

Matt Bowles: So, if somebody were to come on the [AfroLatinx Travel](#) trip today for the Afro Panama tour, what is the experience like that you offered people today?

Javier Wallace: Honestly, it's very similar to when it started, which is under told, intentionally marginalized stories, people and experiences being put in front of people, disrupting traditional tourist industry markets, where we go dive deep into the history of the Panama Canal. It's not just one of the marvels of the world. We're like really thinking about it and telling people about how people of African descent from the Caribbean come to this space. We're retelling when we visit what is now Costco Viejo from a different lens, we're talking about this being a center of migration, forced migration for people. And some of these buildings that are being renovated into this cool, hip part of the city are also tied to this history that we're familiar with, with gentrification in the United States and people being displaced. And we're still having fun,

too, but we're being very mindful of how we're engaging with the country and engaging with the space. We're going to the Afro Caribbean Museum, and we're looking and we're centering the people in the customs and traditions that come from the people here. We're going to Puerto Elo, and we're engaging with the people that are descend from self-emancipated people. So, we're going to talk to Mama Ari en los Congos who are, for the context of this podcast, they're maroon people, but I'm going to say self-emancipated people. We're learning from them, and we don't just watch them dance. Many people like to see them dance. I'm not going to say dancing isn't important because it's a very important part of their cultural tradition of this people and people of African descent.

But it only becomes problematic when people reduce Black people to just being a spectacle, which is dancing. So, yes, we dance. Yes, we have fun, but we understand the history of why they dance and the way that they do and why they move and what they call their instruments and how they get down and understand we're going to support the beaches around here, but we're not going to go with the big company. We're going to go to the Fisher people who've been fishing for centuries, whose lives have been disrupted because of big industry coming in and commercial fishing, and they can't fish as much as they used to.

This tourism thing is something that can hopefully, maybe disrupt and provide some level of resources for them and their family. We're going to go with them and they're going to give us a tour of the island. Like, that's what we're going to do. And so, people come, they're going to have fun. Like, you going to do your turn up. Like everything that's on your top ten list on Tripadvisor, when you come to Panama. You're going to see all those things. You're going to do all those things, but you're going to see them and engage with them from a different lens and perspective. They hopefully make you more mindful of who made it possible for you to come down here and have fun, and who's making it possible for you to come down here right now, and who doesn't get to leave when this thing is over. And how do we treat these people when we're here before we go home?

Matt Bowles: Well, I know [AfroLatinx Travel](#) has now expanded, and you're also running Afro-Cuba Tours and Afro-Colombian Tours and Afro-Costa Rican tours. Can you talk about the experiences in some of those countries and also the way that you have been very intentional about ensuring that all of these trips are specifically designed to benefit local communities?

Javier Wallace: Yeah. So, of course, I definitely have to bring up Dash again, because Dash has really pioneered a lot of these additional offerings and leads these additional offerings for [AfroLatinx Travel](#). And Cuba has been there for quite a while as well, too. Cuba has been there from the beginning. I mean, Cuba just offers so much, right? You get to really think about the African derived spiritualities that remain in Cuba and what they have manifested into now, thinking about orishas and different spiritual practices as they exist.

You get to really challenge the ideas of this idyllic place stuck in the 1950s and these cool classic car rides...Which you're still going to do, we're going to let you stunt for Instagram. Don't get it wrong. Like, you're going to get your whole TikTok thing going on, but we want you to understand that's not the extent of the realities in this space and that this is what you're enjoying. But there's also other people who we can support that can disrupt some of these markets and the people who hoard a lot of those experiences put them in the hands of people who also want to tell their stories. And so, we do that in multiple ways. Costa Rica, again, Costa Rica offers a very unique experience similar to Panama because of the history of

blackness in Costa Rica, with it largely being thought of as people from the Caribbean that come there in the 1870s and on that are living along the Caribbean coast.

But, yes, we do that, and it's great. So you go to Limon, Porto Limon. But you also engage with old harbor, which people now call Puerto Viejo, which are cool experiences, just to see how these communities, some of their traditions that they hold, that have now become synonymous with the nation, like rice and beans. You get to understand, try rice and beans. And, like, why is that such an important thing? Learn about the history of Calypso in Costa Rica, which is extremely important. Learn about La Negreta. La Negrete, which is the patron saint of Costa Rica, and how it's been disconnected from its origins of this black community in Cortado, who was venerating this black Madonna that has some way, weirdly, even though they call it la Negrita, which means the little black one, she's not black anymore.

And so, you hear from scholars that are doing that research and work. So, there's just a variety of experiences, again, repeating, people are going to do most of what they see on the top ten lists. When you go to Costa Rica, right? You're going to go to the beach, you're going to see nature. I like what some people say in Costa Rica. They're like, this country cares more about the dolphins than the people because dolphins sell tickets to bring people here. We necessarily don't. Now we're in this interesting time where a lot of Latin American countries are now commodifying these unique black histories, and we are now props for these national marketing campaigns. Yes, come to Costa Rica, where you can now go to the volcano and see these people playing little ukuleles and singing calypso and have some traditional rice habits. That's what we have become now in certain spaces. So, we disrupt all those things.

Matt Bowles: For people that are interested in learning more about [AfroLatinx Travel](#) and potentially joining one of these trips and signing up for an upcoming trip to experience these countries in this way. How can people learn more and jump on a trip?

Javier Wallace: Yes, of course. So, people can definitely go to afrolatinxztravel.com for more information, follow [@AfroLatinoTravel](#) on [Instagram](#) because that's the name that it started with way before we started being more gender inclusive in the naming. And so, the handle is still [@AfroLatinoTravel](#). And there's loads of resources, information, and ways that people can join the trip. If they need more visuals, they need testimonials about people who've gone. You can see all that on the Instagram channel. And, yeah, go to the website. There's an interest form for people to fill out about the different trips. And we'll get back with you.

Matt Bowles: All right, we're going to pause here and call that the end of part one for direct links for everything we have discussed in this episode, including how you can learn more about [AfroLatinx Travel](#) and sign up for an upcoming tour. Just go to [the show notes](#) for this episode at themaverickshow.com. There you will find links to everything we have discussed and if you would like to hang out in person with me and Javier, we are going to be at the upcoming [Black Travel Summit](#) which is in Fort Lauderdale, Florida October 10 to 13th 2024 and there's a special discount for you to join us. You can just go to themaverickshow.com/BTS and then enter the code maverick at checkout and that will get you 10% off your ticket and then you can hang out with me and Javier and a bunch of other maverick show guests in person. So again, all of that and everything else that we have discussed in this episode, including all the ways to find, follow and connect with Javier is going to be linked up in one place. Just go to [the show notes](#) at themaverickshow.com and go to the show notes for this episode and remember to tune in to the next episode to hear part two of my interview with Dr. Javier Wallace. Good night, everybody.