

## The Present of the Past of the Nicaragua Canal

### Part 1: Fieldwork Perspective: Kendra Jewell, The University of British Columbia

In 2016, graduate student Kendra Jewell traveled to Nicaragua to conduct fieldwork on the Nicaragua Canal. She focused on the impacts of infrastructures that have been approved but not yet constructed, showing how the canal “haunts resident peoples in both its non-present presence, and in its propensity to exhume a painful social past.” Jewell’s research highlights the temporal and social complexities of such projects: the canal is simultaneously a future plan, a site of historical memory, and a source of local anxiety.

Here are two selections from her work that illustrate these dynamics:

1. During discussions about HKND’s plan to construct a canal, Geraldo, a council member for the city of Granada, described the importance of the Río San Juan to the Nicaragua Canal idea:

“The Spanish founded Granada next to Lake Nicaragua in order to look for a communication route from the lake to the Caribbean. And they succeeded. They discovered the San Juan River. That’s why the San Juan River has historically been an emblem [for Nicaragua], why over the last 500 years it has meant so much for Nicaragua. Surely indigenous peoples, before the arrival of the Spanish, also used the San Juan River as a communication route through the country. Surely. But, under the direction of Francisco Hernández de Córdoba, the Spanish discovered the river and began to use it as a route. Later, many years later, when the gold rush in California began, it was the first time in history that the San Juan River was used intensively [as part of an interoceanic corridor]...If we say that a canal once operated in Nicaragua, it was that route, the ruta del tránsito. Which had several components: river, lake, land. And it worked. And that’s where people moved, and merchandise moved...and that’s where the [canal’s] remains are.”

2. Elena then walked with me along the Río San Juan to the ruins of the fortress, which were quite stunning. Dozens of stone archways connected its outer curtain walls to the main fortress structure, while cannons stood ready in many embrasures. Rusting gates groaned to permit us entry into various courtyards, marked by iron emblems that were tinged with green. Narrow rock staircases, long since softened with moss, ran haphazardly between the fortress’s many levels.[...]

Encased within ruins, the Nicaragua Canal became heritage, something to be cherished and preserved as part of a collective history but not something that lives on today. In these ways, and as Geraldo articulated, El Castillo houses the remains (los restos) of the Nicaragua Canal, for it acts not only as a museum, but also and

simultaneously as a mausoleum. This understanding of the ruin – as something that remains of the past and that therefore demands deference as a past-object – has held a privileged position in modern conceptions of the ruin. Gastón Gordillo writes that the heritage industry conceives of ruins as, ‘objects without afterlife: dead things from a dead past, whose value originates far in time,’ and discusses how his work with and within ruins in Northeastern Argentina challenged, ‘the alleged pastness of [ruins]...as well as the boundedness [he] inadvertently projected onto their materiality.’ For him, conceiving of the ruin as simply in the past misses the multiple temporalities that characterize the ruin – it misses the many ways the materiality of the ruin is produced, destroyed and remade by the people who interact with ruins in the present. He argues that thinking of ruins instead as rubble, that is, as disintegrated matter and not as a fetishized, timeless whole, ‘can help us understand the ruptured multiplicity that is constitutive of all geographies.

## **Part 2: Contemporary Developments**

The story of the Nicaragua Canal is not just historical. In January 2025, international attention returned as geopolitical tensions prompted Nicaragua to revive the interoceanic canal:

With Donald Trump threatening to “take back” the Panama Canal from China, Nicaragua amended its constitution to allow President Daniel Ortega’s government to grant a concession to a company or consortium to build an interoceanic canal. This move, approved by Nicaragua’s National Assembly, revived a plan first proposed in 2013 but never realized.

China has expressed interest in the canal in the past, though a previous concession was canceled in May 2024. The possibility of an American takeover of the Panama Canal may increase Beijing’s interest, as the canal would cost roughly \$50 billion to construct.

The new proposed route would pass through Lake Xolotlán, north of Managua, rather than the larger Lake Cocibolca. The 445km canal would begin at a port in Bluefields on the South Caribbean Autonomous Region, traverse Lake Xolotlán, and join the Pacific at Corinto. It would feature a depth of 27 meters, locks at either end, and an artificial lake, designed to accommodate the largest modern container ships.

**Source:** <https://open.library.ubc.ca/soa/cIRcle/collections/ubctheses/24/items/1.0354390>

<https://www.globalconstructionreview.com/nicaragua-revives-interoceanic-canal-as-trump-eyes-panama/>