Ep09_BetweenAcrossThrough_ZeidermanColombia

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00:03 Yena Romero: You're listening to Between, Across, and Through.

[music]

00:21 YR: In one of the places with the longest history of armed conflict in the world, giant rigs have always tugged along to push commodities from the interior of the country to external ports. It is a microcosm ruled by hierarchies and where work has always been racialized. It is a world where peace and conflict flow with the ease or the sharpness of a river. Today, Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neill, Director of the Center for Diaspora and Transnational Studies, sits down with Professor Austin Zeiderman from the London School of Economics and Political Science. We will discuss how life and work aboard a riverboat in the Magdalena River is changing to pave the way for a post-conflict future in Colombia. Please join us as we travel Between, Across, and Through.

01:15 Kevin Lewis O'Neill: Welcome, I am Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neill and I'm joined by Professor Austin Zeiderman. Thank you for being on the show. Austin, you recently got back from a trip to Colombia. Tell me, how did you find yourself aboard a tugboat in the Magdalena River?

01:30 Austin Zeiderman: Well, I've been interested in doing work along the Magdalena River for a while now, and it was a difficult process of actually getting permission to get on board one of the boats. So I started off just asking for permission to a number of the shipping companies that run along the river, and I had a research assistant, Lina Quiñones, and the two of us work together, basically calling, sending emails, making contact with everyone we could think of or find email addresses for, until one of the oldest shipping lines currently operating along the river, the Naviera Fluvial Colombiana, responded to us and gave us a green light.

02:09 KO: Why do you think you didn't have much luck with the other companies?

02:12 AZ: Well, that's a complicated question. I haven't asked them that question, maybe I should. But I think it has something to do with the fact that on the one hand, Colombia, as I'm sure everyone knows, has had an ongoing armed conflict for over half a century. So issues of security and access and kind of who knows who and how you can get sort of permission to do things is often... It's a little more of a sticky subject than perhaps in other parts of the world.

02:46 AZ: So the flip side of that is that this is an industry, the logistics industry, which is very concerned with disruptions to its operations. And a lot of the kinda governing logic that the logistics industry follows is how to protect itself from any kind of interruption. Now, I don't think my presence would necessarily suggest that being there is going to disrupt the flow of goods between the interior of Colombia and the sea, but nevertheless, there are a lot of security protocols that are in place to make sure that anything that happens can go kind of according to plan.

03:27 KO: And what's daily life like on the boat?

03:31 AZ: Well, the routines are quite variable depending on what's happening on the river at any particular moment. So if the river is at a high level, that means there's a lot of water, which means that the boats can operate 24 hours a day. When they operate 24 hours a day, that means that people

are working 24 hours a day and working in shifts. When there's less water in the river, that means the shipping line navigates from sunrise to sunset and they don't navigate at night. So it depends a lot on the river conditions.

04:03 KO: Because when the water is lower, they can't navigate the river safely?

04:08 AZ: That's right. They can't navigate it safely, but it's more that they can't ensure that they're not gonna run aground. So the river is an extremely changing environmental system and there's a ton of sedimentation in the river and it's constantly creating these things called playitas, like little beaches or little islands in the river, which are sandbars, and that's the main impediment to commercial navigation along the river. So, the concern of the captains and the pilots and the crews is how to avoid running aground and getting stuck for any extended period of time. So if there's higher water levels, that means that they can navigate fluidly, and if there's not, that means they have to take a lot more care. So navigating by day is a way of avoiding getting stuck.

05:00 KO: And so when the water is high, people are working 24 hours a day.

05:04 AZ: Right. So people are working 24 hours a day, they're working in shifts. If you work in the engine room, that means there's somebody on a shift on standby at all times. If you're in the wheelhouse, either the pilot or the helmsman or the captain, that means that you're also taking shifts. And if you're one of the deckhands or the marineros as they're called, you're possibly on call any time that there is what's called a maneuver, a maniobra, something that needs to happen in terms of the reconfiguration of the whole barge and towboat or push boat convoy.

05:42 KO: Can you take us through a mental tour of the boat?

05:45 AZ: Sure. The boat is separated into two larger parts or the barges, which is in some sense, a kind of, when put together, it looks like a really long aircraft carrier. They're barges that are lashed together by wire cables and they kinda stretch on infinitely, they're a bit like a set of dominoes or a sort of Tetris kind of setup. And so they're sort of 10 barges lashed together all in a long row. Now, the boat in which I spent most of my time and on which the captain and the crew spend most of their time is a smaller vessel, and it has three levels. On the ground level, there's a kitchen, there's a dining area, there's a sort of washing area where the crew does their own laundry and then hangs it up to dry. There's also the engine room, so it's a incredibly hot, incredibly loud room with two massive diesel marine engines that are rumbling and kind of making tons of noise. On the second level is a series of cabins where the captain and the pilots and where I lived on board. And then above that, is the wheelhouse from which the captain and the pilots maneuver the boat.

07:07 KO: What was your cabin like?

07:09 AZ: So my cabin was relatively luxurious. I, again, expected kind of more of a sort of difficult environment to be spending the time on, and then they, of course, gave me the nicest space on board, so that was a form of generosity to begin with. It's a small room, it has a cot over on one side of it, and there's about maybe a two-foot space between the edge of the cot and the other wall in which I hung a rope where I hung most of my stuff from in order to have access to it. But it's a

small space, you have a little window looking out onto the side of the boat, and there's a air conditioning kind of vent coming down straight over the bed.

07:57 KO: Did you find it unusual that they would set aside a cabin for you?

08:01 AZ: I did, I thought I would be living more of the sort of typical... In the typical conditions that most of the workers on board and the crew were living in. And I think kind of predictably, they saw me as somebody who deserved some special treatment. Now, I didn't wanna argue with that, I was happy to have a slightly nicer room than some of the crew, but at the same time, I felt the inequality of me being given preferential treatment.

08:32 KO: Before you went on this research, before you boarded these boats, how did you prepare yourself, or what did you pack for these trips?

08:40 AZ: Well, there's the packing preparation, and then there's the sort of mental preparation. Now, the packing, I packed badly. I thought, "This is the hottest region of Colombia, it's really high, temperature's high, humidity... "

09:00 KO: What's that, what's the high temp?

09:00 AZ: Well, we're talking 90s in Fahrenheit or 30s in Celsius, really hot pretty much year-round. Not much breeze, this is not the actual coastline, this is generally considered to be the kinda Caribbean coastal region of Colombia. But there's no breeze whatsoever, because it's interior, it's extremely humid. So I thought I'd be sweating and uncomfortable from the heat the whole time.

09:28 KO: And the boats themselves are quite flat, is there any break from the sun in that sense?

09:32 AZ: On the barges?

09:34 KO: Yeah.

09:34 AZ: No. On the boat itself, the push boat, there is shade, so there's interior spaces, and those interior spaces are air-conditioned. And for anyone who's ridden long-distance buses in Colombia through really hot regions, "Tierra Caliente," as it's usually called; the buses are freezing. So the boat is the same thing. And so I packed things for really light-weight and realized that in order to even sleep, I should have brought weather for Toronto, or clothes for Toronto weather.

10:08 KO: Sure. So the air conditioning is at full blast?

10:11 AZ: It's at full blast, and it's not kind of individually controllable by different rooms. So you can imagine trying to... Everybody who lives and works on board knows that, so they bring a couple blankets, they're prepared. I had no idea that that was gonna be a problem. The other flip side of that is how to prepare mentally, and I knew that this is kinda a new area for me, for research, and as you may have already picked up on, there are a lot of sort of specific terms, like what is a... And these are, of course, in Spanish. So "una barcaza" is a barge, not necessarily a lexicon that I know in

English or Spanish. So I started trying to learn as much as I could of the sort of riverboat lexicon, all the terms that are used to refer to this kind of equipment, or that side of the boat, this side of the boat, river words and boat words. And so that, I tried to prepare myself for, but perhaps equally difficult.

11:15 KO: You were otherwise completely prepared for boat life on the Magdalena River?

11:20 AZ: No. So in preparing to go on board the boat, I was curious what we would be drinking or what we'd be eating. And I thought, "This is a riverboat journey, I probably need to bring my own water." So I asked that question, and I was told, "No, there's filtered water on board, you'll be fine."

11:41 KO: How would you have brought your own water?

11:42 AZ: Well, I could have bought bags of water. In Colombia, bags of water are often sold in areas where there's not a whole lot of potable water available. So you get these packets of many bags of water, which ultimately, I ended up having to get on board. But initially, it didn't really occur to me that I would need these, and so I went on board without any drinking water and ended up drinking the water that's on board.

12:12 KO: Oh no.

12:13 AZ: Yeah, that I thought was totally fine, I didn't wanna make a big deal of the fact that I might need special water. And so I was drinking the water, it tasted delicious, it was cold, and it was clear.

12:26 KO: It seemed fine.

12:27 AZ: It smelled good.

12:28 KO: Everything seemed fine.

12:28 AZ: It seemed fine. And a couple days in, two-three days in, I started to not feel great and started to think, "Well, maybe it was the water." And at that point, I started speaking to the captain and the crew about it, and they were really shocked that I had been drinking the same water that they drink.

12:46 KO: Oh shit. So they were surprised that you were drinking, but they drink this water?

12:51 AZ: They do, indeed. Initially, I was bit concerned that me telling them that I wasn't feeling well would lead to, "Deal with it, why you're complaining about the stuff that we consume on every day basis." Instead it actually opened up a lot of conversations about the kind of life condition and working conditions that they live on board the river boat, and how my body is not prepared to deal with some of those challenges.

13:26 KO: And so how does the reaction to you drinking the same water they were, speak to an

assumption of how they were different from you?

13:35 AZ: So on the one hand, there are a lot assumptions that we have about men who work on boats, right? I mean, just think of the kind of classic sailor trope, right? Somebody who's very macho, goes from town to town or port to port drinking, and living like a hard and fast life. A lot of assumptions that we have about men who work on river boats tend to follow along that script. So I may have had some of those kind of assumptions myself, and which is why I was a bit hesitant to say, "I'm really not well right now and I'm not feeling good." So when I did communicate that to the guys on board, I was surprised what I got instead was incredible care and generosity and concern, and sort of reaching out and giving lots of forms of help, arranging for that big bags of water, or package of bags of water to be delivered to me on board, all kinds of oral re-hydration salts, whatever I needed. So it kind of opened up that aspect of riverboat life, which is something that I didn't expect, the kind of relations of care and intimacy, and in some sense of solidarity that people feel, and then I was sort of invited into just by being invited into, or onto the boat.

14:58 AZ: Now, the other aspect of that is something that I think is a bit more subtle and a bit more complicated, and then it has to do with how bodies are understood in the world, and how bodies are understood to have different vulnerabilities or different capabilities. And river boat workers, I think, saw me as a gringo that I am, originally from the US, but living in London, teacher at a university there, and as somebody who physically, physiologically is not capable of doing what they're doing. The flip side of that is, of course, that they understand themselves to be physically constituted in such a way that makes that kind of hard labor and those conditions possible. Now, I think for me, and this is a kind of conversation that I wanna continue to have with the people who I've come to know on the river boat, is how these sorts of differences in some sense, reflect our long-standing ideas about race and about racial difference, and human biological difference. And the different human bodies according to the way that they look, have different kinds of biological capabilities, and there's a long, long history of that, that we know that certain racialized categories are attached to certain occupations, right?

16:16 AZ: So the idea that Jews are good at business, things like that, and here we have the idea that riverboat workers and primarily of African descent are biologically constituted for this kind of labor. And that has a long history, these kinds of racial categorization systems that attach certain bodies to certain kinds of livelihood practices, and that was a topic of conversation, but it's something that I found myself thinking about a lot in relationship, in some sense, in relationship to this water drinking kind of crisis, and the differences that are assumed to separate my body from theirs.

17:02 KO: It seems like on the ship, there is a certain degree of certainly intimacy and also hospitality, and that takes place. And your reflections on the water as suggesting differences in people. I wonder this North American from London, coming from this to board the ship, if that also suggests a certain kind of perceived difference?

17:27 AZ: Yeah, absolutely. And part of it has to do with the approach that I think took to what I was doing, a lot of my interest in joining the boat for the journey that I did was to learn from the people who really know the river best, and the knowledge and the experience and the kind of intimacy that the people on board have with a lifetime of working a long complex kind of land

water scape is really profound. And so my interest, I have a huge amount of respect for the work that they do and also for the kind of knowledge that they have of, not just the equipment, but the water, the way in which the river works as a kind of ecological system is quite fascinating, not to mention the ways in which they navigate this really complex vessel and piece of machinery through a very, as I was saying, complex ecological system is quite astounding. So my perspective was often to understand how they do the work that they do, and how they come to know the amount that they know about the river and about the region. So a lot of that, I think, influenced the kind of, in some ways, the relationship that we had.

18:52 KO: And the boat is the side of work, but also of living and were you able to share meals together, what was that like?

19:01 AZ: So the amount of time that people spend on board is more usually than they spend anywhere else, and what is home, I think is important question to ask for people who are employed in this kind of form of labor, right? Is home the boat where they spend 21 days or is home the place they go to afterwards and spend seven days? So the boat is very much considered home by a lot of the people who live on board, even if they are missing their families, missing their friends, missing the comfort of their own bed. They nevertheless, because of the amount of time they spend on it, feel like this is another home. So yes, it's a very, in some sense, domestic world, it's a social world, it's a familiar world, there's a lot of kinship relations among the crew. So a lot of them come from the same town, they're relations by marriage, there were biological kinship relations among the crew. And even among those who are not from the same town, who are not related, nevertheless they, I think consider themselves as some kind of extensive family. Now that's not to say things are always... Families are complicated things. It's not to sort of romanticize it in any way, but it felt much more like that kind of set of relations than it did some sort of impersonal kind of office-like or factory-like kind of space.

20:33 KO: Did you feel like you could strike a rapport with anyone in particular in the setting?

20:39 AZ: Well, the first person, I guess... It's a very hierarchical space. The first person you meet is the captain, of course, so it's the captain whose role it is to even give me permission to come aboard, and so he was the first person I met. He's a very authoritative, very serious man, very thoughtful. And immediately, I felt intimidated, I felt like I was meeting somebody who controlled a really big and complex kind of vessel, and who certainly commanded authority. And yeah, fairly quickly I found kind of rapport with the captain that made me feel welcome. Now that then sort of overflowed to rapport with other members of the crew, again, there were some linguistic and terminological break downs occasionally. Again, the boat language is a new language for me, I'm trying to learn the term for the engine room and the term for starboard and port sides of the boat, all these kinds of things are relatively new to me. So it's a learning curve, and those things often led to sort of confusions, but people were really generous in terms of trying to create a sort of space of communication, and the space of understanding and actually teach me what it means to live aboard a boat, what it means to understand the river and how to just live the life of somebody working in the commercial shipping industry along the Magdalena River.

22:10 KO: It sounds like this captain was practically good at his job. What makes him so successful?

22:16 AZ: The role of the captain seems to me, and this is a relatively new project. So my plan is to return to the riverboat, return to this work in the future and to get to know it more deeply, but after this first journey, it seems to me that the captain is somebody who, of course, has authority and the hierarchies of the boat are real. And the captain is, of course, somebody who needs to exercise that authority, give people commands and orders and coordinate fairly complex, both technological and human sort of assemblage of things to make the boat work. But at the same time, obviously, there are the human kinds of interactions and communications that have to take place in order for something like this to function. And so, I think what this captain seemed to do really well is to not just command through orders, but to command a certain kind of respect and a certain kind of camaraderie and solidarity among the crew that I think is partly what makes these infrastructures of shipping and of global logistics function.

23:34 KO: You mentioned earlier that a lot of the crew members were of African descent, is there a racialized component to that respect?

23:41 AZ: I think so. I think there's the way in which riverboat workers in the history of Colombia have been heavily discriminated against from the colonial period, they were initially indigenous and African slaves. Then the occupation of riverboat worker then transitioned to being primarily people of African descent, but who had been freed. So there's this long-standing association between riverboat work and people of African descent. So they've been on the receiving end of forms of discrimination, at the same time that their work has been incredibly important to the Spanish empire and the colonial economy, and then subsequently to independent Colombia's national economy. So there's often been this kind of parallel between discrimination being levied against the workers and their work being incredibly important to the ability of riverboat companies, but also the Colombian economy more generally to be successful and profitable.

24:47 AZ: Now, I think the that sense of discrimination has changed, and the racial component of riverboat work has also changed over time, but primarily people who work along the river are what in Colombia called Costeños, people from the coastal region. And for anyone who knows Colombia, there are a lot of different identities in Colombia, Costeño is one of them, but many of them have a combination between regional and racial connotations, and there's a whole complex set of assumptions and hierarchies that exist. And riverboat workers are certainly positioned within that kind of larger landscape of hierarchy and of social structure within Colombian society.

25:36 KO: And these workers are able to work themselves through the ranks to the captain class?

25:41 AZ: Not necessarily, some do and others don't. It depends on the ability to move through that hierarchy of occupation, some remain deck hands or marineros for their entire careers, whereas others who show a specific aptitude for navigation and for actually manoeuvring the boat from the wheel house, they will move up through the ranks.

26:11 KO: And one of those is the first pilot, which is a different kind of role than the captain. What was the first pilot like as a person, but also in terms of the first pilot's responsibilities?

26:22 AZ: Well, he often takes over and mans the boat when the captain is doing other things. Again, the person behind the wheel for most of the time is one of either the captain, pilot or helmsman, so there's a group of people who can do that work at any particular time. The first pilot was somebody, who immediately I came to have a kind of rapport with. He's somebody who is always making jokes. If the captain is sort of serious and always sort of trustworthy and inspires respect, the first pilot is somebody who's always making everybody laugh. So he took a liking to having me on board, I think, for whatever reason, somebody who was interested in his stories, and he had fantastic stories to tell, some of them very funny, some of them more tragic. He's been working on the river for a long time as have most of the crew. And going on board, I thought I should probably be pretty careful about asking for actual stories of the violent stories of the armed conflict in Colombia, knowing that a lot of the crew probably had had experiences that they may not wanna talk about.

27:38 AZ: I was surprised at actually how much those stories came out anyway. And the first pilot also took it upon himself to narrate some pretty gruesome stories, which the boats that he was on and other people who he knows were under attack from groups that were trying to stop the flow of oil or stop the flow of shipping along the river. So he would tell me those stories and often narrate the river according to different moments or different spots of conflict. He would tell me that this is, "We called this spot Punto Plomo, which is like Lead Point, basically to refer to the fact that violence would often take place there. He would talk about streams that run into the river where river boats would be held hostage for a period of time or held ransom. And so everyone had stories. Now the river has become a lot safer these days. There haven't been too many actual attacks on commercial river boats in quite a while.

28:42 AZ: There're still active conflict going on not far from the river. There are paramilitary groups. There are guerrilla groups. There are military installations up and down the river. So it's still a conflict zone to a certain extent. But for the most part, the crew members are not worried on an everyday basis that a grenade is gonna come flying from the river bank and land in the middle of the kitchen. And so some of their stories aren't quite as funny, but he always had a sort of lightness to everything that he would say. And there was a kind of banter. There was a jokiness. There was a sense of humor and a sense of camaraderie that exists there among the crew, and he is the one who sort of would always foster that.

29:32 KO: Well, and I can imagine that if the boat itself is this set ecology with the familiar characters working 24 hours a day, that maybe you as a new kind of audience would be of interest.

29:45 AZ: I think it was. I think they are not used to people taking an interest in the work that they do or at least being able to come on board and take an interest. So I felt really lucky to be able to do that and was fascinated by the work that they do and their knowledge of the river and just sort of what it means to move this incredibly complex kind of combination of equipment through a long 650 kilometers of river. And so I had lots of questions. I wanted to know how things worked. I wanted to know what was gonna happen next. I wanted to know why it was done this way and not that way. And those questions, of course, are usually taken for granted and not asked. And I think people on board were surprised, but also responded to the fact that somebody was interested and somebody who was quite in some ways new to this world was interested in learning more.

30:43 KO: Can you think of an example of one kind of question?

30:47 AZ: Well, often I was trying to understand how they could read the river, so the actual navigation practices that people on board used. And those are of course the ones primarily who like the captain and the pilots and the helmsman, who are responsible for steering the boat. So a lot of my questions had to do with, "How did you know to go on the right side of the river and not the left side of the river? How did you know that there was gonna be a sand bank there? Are you using maps or charts? Are you using sonar? Are you using technologies of navigation or navigational aids?" And often the response is that, "We know this river like the back of our hand. We know the landmarks along the river. We know that at this particular point, usually the deeper channel is on this side. But we've also talked to a captain who went through this stretch last night, and he told us that the navigable channel had shifted to the other side of the river." So it's a very complex and subtle way of navigating the system that is very much done through experience. It's done by sight. It's being able to read the river, actually look at it and see the ways in which the water is moving.

32:05 YR: 'Cause I imagine unlike the back of your hand, a river is constantly changing.

32:09 AZ: It is absolutely changing. This river in particular is a really vast hydrological system, and the river is constantly moving. It's overflowing. It's creating new branches that didn't exist. It's creating islands. There's a phrase that I've heard quite a number of times, which is.

[foreign language]

32:31 AZ: Which means that the river kind of gives and takes away. And I think that there's a material dimension to that. The river gives sediment. It creates land where land didn't used used to be. It erodes the bank. It collapses part of the land, but there's a sense that the river is constantly changing people's lives. So it's a very changing landscape and water scape. So the kind of navigation that is required is one that is very sensitive to these kinds of changes. Of course, issues of global climate change and environmental change on a planetary scale are also very much affecting the world of riverboat navigation along the Magdalena River. The droughts and the rainy seasons are getting more intensified, and of course that complicates the lives of the captain and the crew, tremendously.

32:31 KO: So how is the job of the captain and the first pilot different than the rest of the crew?

33:28 AZ: They're directly responsible to the head office. So the head office is in Barranquilla, the office of the company, the shipping company. And the captain and first pilot are in direct communication and are the ones responsible for getting the goods from, in this case, from the interior to the coast. And I should say that the main thing that they're moving is oil, which fills the tanks of the barges all the way to the coast where there's an oil refinery also owned by Ecopetrol, the state oil company on a specific schedule. So it's stressful. They've got time constraints. They have environmental considerations. They have demands from the client who is the state oil company, and there are all sorts of challenges and obstacles that present themselves. So I think, in some sense, the captain is the one most directly thinking about that. But of course, the deck hands, the people who are working, doing more of the manual labor on board are feeling that same kind of

pressure. They're feeling those time pressures, and the requirement to get things from point A to point B in the time that the company has promised it.

34:44 KO: How has climate change made the work of the crew more difficult?

34:47 AZ: The main thing that the crew and the captain really needs to think about is disruptions. If they get stuck on a sand bar or the water level of the river is too low in a particular stretch of river, they need to stop and move really slowly through that stretch of river. Now, these are the kinds of conditions that climate change is making more pronounced and more frequent. So what happens when they get to a point in the river that they can't pass through or can't pass through with the convoy in its current configuration? They stop the whole thing, and stopping this whole thing takes some time. It's heavy. So they then disassemble the entire convoy.

35:31 KO: So when they come across a sand bar, then they have to disassemble the entire barge?

35:37 AZ: Yes. So they have to disassemble the whole convoy. So it's eight or 10 barges, connected together with a series of wire cables. That then is connected to the push boat or the tow boat that maneuvers and powers that whole system up and down river. So at particularly difficult stretches of river, either because it's a combination of sandbars, low water levels or a particularly tight bend in a river, the solution is that you stop and do something called.

[foreign language]

36:13 AZ: Or break up the whole convoy. So you disassemble it, and you often take one of those barges through that difficult stretch of river, one at a time.

36:22 KO: Oh my gosh.

36:22 AZ: So you can imagine how long that takes, to move and to disassemble this massive thing, and then to move each barge through this segment of river one by one. You could spend a day moving three kilometers.

36:38 KO: Is that becoming more frequent because of climate change?

36:41 AZ: These sorts of things, for those who work on climate change-related stuff, is always hard to identify what exactly climate change is causing, what specific kinds of environmental change is part of a short-term kind of more oscillation, and what's attributable to what we call global climate change. So it's always hard to pinpoint. But certainly, the ways in which the sort of large scale oscillations and swings between drought conditions and rainy season conditions is the kind of thing that's becoming more and more challenging from the perspective of riverboat workers. There've been some significant drought periods recently, where river navigation, commercial river navigation has had to grind to a complete halt, and there are other periods where there's so much water in the system that it's causing flooding throughout the whole lower Magdalena Region.

37:38 KO: It's a beautiful example of how climate change and global logistics get manifested in

this very physical moment of stopping and rearranging this convoy.

37:50 AZ: Which of course is done on the backs of people, right? And on the backs of human labor. So part of my interest in this project is to understand the sort of human face of this very, in some sense, kind of, depersonalized space of global logistics, of moving commodities, of moving containers, of moving oil from point A to point B around the world and of basically powering kind of global capitalism as we know it.

38:21 KO: And so these people working on the ships, when they're fraccionando or breaking up the convoy, tell me about the wires that they're unhooking. How do you physically break up the convoy?

38:35 AZ: So, a combination of physical strength and mechanical winches, which increase the leverage and increase the ability to actually tighten these connections. So a lot of it is under high pressure, right? It's under an extremely hot sun. You're exposed, you're lifting heavy cables. You're moving them around. It's a fairly dangerous job. Now, all this is done on a river that is maybe moving slowly from the perspective of the boat or from the perspective of the eye, but for those who fall in the river, the fate is, fairly certain.

39:17 KO: It's such a dynamic project. So many things going on at once. For you at this moment, what's the most important part of it?

39:25 AZ: There are two pieces of this research that, for me, seem important and they're connected, in fact. One is more local and it has to do with the peace process in Colombia. So I imagine that you know, and your listeners will know, that Colombia is the site of one of the longest running armed conflicts in the world. Now, since 2012, there's been peace negotiation going on between the Colombian state and one of the armed rebel groups, the FARC, and since in 2016, a peace accord was signed. Now, I started getting interested in this project around 2016, around the time the peace accord was signed. And the former president, Juan Manuel Santos, who was the sort of architect of that deal, came to visit the UK. He had won the Nobel Prize the month before. He made an official state visit to the United Kingdom. He was welcomed by the Queen, he met with the Prime Minister. He came to my university. He's an, actually, alum of LSE, so he came and gave a talk there. He also met with a number of business and finance people in the city of London. The City of London is the center of the business world of London.

40:42 AZ: And he came to talk to them about what he was calling La Construcción del Posconflicto, the construction of the post-conflict. So on the one hand, a lot of that discussion is about building the kind of legal and political institutions that are required for any kind of conflict resolution scenario to take place. But there's another side of that too, which is more directly connected to what I'm working on here, which is that construction also has a very concrete kind of material, infrastructural meaning. And that's not just a metaphor here. He was there to encourage investment in infrastructure projects, encourage private investment to match a lot of the public investment that's currently going in, to building what's called the post-conflict future of Colombia, and particularly into transport infrastructure projects.

41:36 AZ: So a lot of what people are thinking about when they're thinking about the conflict and this kind of elusive future called the post-conflict, which we certainly haven't arrived at yet, is to think about what are the sort of legal and political questions that that implies. Less attention is being paid to the Construcción, the construction of the conflict in this kind of concrete material physical sense. So that is connected to this project that's going on along the river to dredge and channel the river, and turn it into a logistics corridor. To make it more amenable to commercial shipping, from the Caribbean coast and the ports of Cartagena and Barranquilla, all the way up to the interior, past where the current kind of limits to commercial shipping go, and to make the river flow more consistently, right? To keep water in the river and to keep it more consistently in the river, and to guarantee a permanently navigable channel 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

42:37 AZ: So that, of course, connects into the global logistics industry, and which is at the heart of the kind of world economy. Now, that industry we know a lot about at a fairly macro level. There are some great geographers and historians and others who've done work to show us a lot about the kind of logic that the logistics industry operates with, the financial instruments that are active there, the kinds of security practices or the kind of security logics in play, the relationship between military expansion and imperial or colonial rule, and global infrastructures. These kinds of things that are quite in a sense large scale. Now, I'm trying to get at this world in a sort of micro scale to think about, what is the sort of social and cultural world of riverboat and how do we understand the world of global logistics from a place like the Pediha, like the boat that I spent time on.

43:44 KO: 'Cause I know from my own research in a different post-war context of Guatemala, that post-war or post-conflict is sometimes the celebration of peace, but it's also the beginning of a campaign for international investment. And so what would it mean to read global capitalism from the deck of this boat?

44:06 AZ: One thing it means is that there's a lot of speculation that's going on and that a lot happens on the back of that speculation. So creating an idea of the post-conflict is, in some sense, what's at stake here. Of course, there are real existing initiatives to try to resolve the conflict and to make this the demobilization of the FARC kind of real. And that is an uncertain process and it's a contested process, especially these days as a new President has come into office who has been less supportive of the peace process. So that process is a complex one, but the idea of the post-conflict, nevertheless, is an idea that is a powerful idea.

44:55 AZ: We live in a world with conflicts and war and violence taking place in quite a number of different regions. Colombia is one of the few places that is proposing that there's some kind of peace on the horizon, right? It's fairly, fairly unique. Now, when you have the transition from war to peace, you have incredible opportunities, right? You have opportunities for investment, you have opportunities to move into areas that were previously off limits, and you have the opportunity, to a sense, capitalize on this shifting understanding of the future.

45:34 AZ: Now, the post-conflict in Colombia, whether it ever arrives or not, is a question that is at the heart of many people's concerns these days. But whether it does or it doesn't, it is motivating a tremendous amount of investment in things like transport infrastructure or commercial shipping. So you have, seen from the perspective of a boat like this, you see the ways in which the kind of investment in post-conflict Colombia and the opportunities that the companies around the world are

seeing there materializing.

46:14 KO: And part of that process is physically manipulating the river with something that I've heard you say called dredging. How does that effort at creating the future draw up the past?

46:25 AZ: So, part of the navigability plan, as it's called, which hasn't yet begun, but probably will, in the next year or two, that plan involves a tremendous amount of dredging. Now, it also involves channelling the river, but the dredging part of it is removing sediment from areas of the river where there is significant build-up of sediment. A lot of that is in the river mouth around Barranquilla and the kind of access channel that ships pass through, coming into the port of Barranquilla, but there are also many upriver points in which dredging has to take place. Now, dredging, of course, is a material process. It's about digging out and removing tremendous amounts of sand or sediment, but it's also a symbolic process, right?

47:17 AZ: And so, when we think about processes of dredging, or... Immediately, we think about dredging up the past, right? Dredging up things that are unwanted. Now, that is metaphorical, in the sense that that's where our mind goes when we talk about dredging and history, but it's also, again, quite material and quite real, in the sense that in the armed conflict in Colombia, rivers were often mass graves. Bodies were dumped in rivers, and this is not just the case on the Magdalena river, but also in the Rio Cauca, and other rivers. They have this kind of violent past. And so, for many people who live and have worked along the river, sort of dredging and dredging up what is at the bottom of the river is digging up bodies, digging up a mass grave, in an area that has been at the center of conflict for a long time. The Magdalena Medio is a region, the Middle Magdalena region has been a heavily contested and extremely violent region of the conflict, and the river has been right at the center of that.

48:28 KO: You're hoping to go back and do more research aboard one of these boats again. What are you hoping to gain from the future research?

48:35 AZ: First of all, I'm just looking forward to seeing many of the people who I came to know on this earlier journey that I did. So, reconnecting and kind of establishing those relations again. Getting to know in more depth some of the things that I feel like I've just begun to start to understand. This is an ongoing project, that I plan to do over the next few years. And I feel like, in some sense, I've only scratched the surface. Rivers are complex places. The kind of work that people are doing along rivers, both in the logistics industry or in the commercial river route shipping industry is a world that I feel like I've only begun to to know. But I'm also really interested in the towns that many of the people who I came to know have come from. So, river boat towns that specifically are tied to the work on board. Those are places where a lot of the crew members come from. I wanna understand, not just from the deck of a riverboat, but also really from these towns, as well, to understand kind of what this kind of labor, what this profession and this occupation looks like, from the place that the people have come from.

49:51 KO: So, what will you do differently to prepare this time, before heading back to the boat?

49:56 AZ: Not much. I mean, what I really wanna do is just have the opportunity to do what I've

done again. To see it at another moment of the year, to perhaps meet some new crew members who'd be coming on board this time. But really to do the same thing that I've done again. To have this opportunity to kind of get to know that world in more depth, and probably I would do things mainly the same. I might bring my own water this time, but.

[chuckle]

50:23 KO: It sounds like a good idea. Thanks so much, Austin.

[music]

50:34 YR: That was Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neill, in conversation with Professor Austin Zeiderman, from the Department of Geography and Environment at the London School of Economics. On our next episode, we'll talk to Professor Denise Crews, to delve into the slow intricate work that ties fashion and power. Please, subscribe on your favorite app, so you won't miss it. This monthly podcast was brought to you by the Center for Diaspora and Transnational Studies at the University of Toronto. I am Yena Romero. Thank you for listening and joining the conversation.