

Book Review

– *Artery: Racial ecologies on Colombia's Magdalena River*, by Austin Zeiderman, Duke University Press, 2025

While territorial disputes in Latin America have been extensively studied, increasing attention is now being paid to their fluvial and liquid dimensions. Scholars have documented how riverine communities – particularly artisanal fishers – confront intertwined crises of environmental degradation, livelihood dispossession, and institutional neglect. Together, these contributions conceptualise the Magdalena River not merely as a natural resource or a hydraulic object, but as a contested socio-natural territory shaped by enduring struggles over knowledge, governance, and life.

With *Artery*, Zeiderman contributes to the fluvial-racial dimensions of territorial struggles. Zeiderman demonstrates excellent, in-depth, personal, and grounded work in the Middle and Lower Magdalena River, elucidating how racialised ecologies sustain dominant river imaginaries. The central question is: when, why, and how does a river become a racial formation? Zeiderman states to “seek a prose whose theoretical baggage is light, empirical details are privileged, disciplinary jargon is minimal and contextual specificity is paramount.” (p. 18). The book's argument begins in Chapter 1 by depicting Colombia's racial geographies, in which the Andean interior is historically associated with Whiteness, and the Caribbean and Pacific coasts with Blackness. In Chapter 2, Zeiderman describes how the promise of infrastructure as a vehicle for prosperity is entangled with Colombia's 2012-2017 navigability project, which ultimately collapsed due to corruption scandals. In Chapter 3, Zeiderman describes the racialised ecology of *navegantes* (boatworkers) and its entwining with the legacy of *costeños* (inhabitants from the Caribbean coast) and the historical figure of the *boga* (rower). Zeiderman draws from literature on the logistics of the slave trade, which conceptualised Black bodies as commodities – expendable once their utility diminished. The issue of obsolescence and civilizational hierarchy is further examined in Chapter 4 through securitisation efforts that seek to safeguard supply chains and quantify risk, rather than securitising workers' bodies, raising the question: who and what is deemed worthy of protection? Chapter 5 continues by describing how navigating the Magdalena is inherently

unpredictable and requires intuitive, embodied knowledge embedded in local, gendered, social and spatial orders. In the conclusion of Chapter 6, Zeiderman brings all findings together by showing how the racialised category of *boga* was constructed around notions of biological fitness for arduous labour but received little reward – a dynamic still visible today in the disparity between corporate profits, the low wages of river workers, and the unequal risk distribution.

The main point of the book is that race and nature are two of the most powerful organising principles of both human societies and non-human environments. Focusing on the Colombian mega-project to make the Magdalena navigable as a logistics corridor – an artery of production, movement, and modern capitalist development – Zeiderman describes deeply racialised practices of planning, securitisation, labour, and care. In planning, through the assumption that *ribereños* are trapped in the past and need a prosperous future through a tamed and planned river; in securitisation through the privileging of supply risk over bodily risks of workers; in labour through the assumed racialised and gendered knowledge/bodies that is needed to do the work; and in care through the day to day practices of navigation. In addition, large-scale infrastructural interventions necessary for taming the river and its subjects are articulated and structured by racial and naturalising logics, socio-technical imaginaries, geographical orders, and civilizational hierarchies.

Artery provides rich empirical material for examining the organisation of race and nature along the Magdalena. Racialised typologies, such as *navegantes*, *costeños* and *ribereños*, are linked to spatial ordering and labour dispositions. Zeiderman's extensive historical analysis situates these typologies not only spatially but also temporally. The most interesting part of the book is the author's compelling connection between past, present, and future temporalities and the temporal-spatial and racial ordering of Colombia. While regionalism, rather than racism, is often cited as the main explanatory factor for inequality in Colombia, Zeiderman convincingly argues that spatial and temporal orders are deeply rooted in racialised spatial divisions, naturalised labour, and unequal distributions of capital, profit, and risk. Herewith, the author sheds light on the enduring colonial and racial logics embedded in infrastructure and logistics.

The book offers a profound examination of the dominant (navigation) river imaginary. It presents nuanced discrepancies and positionalities that sustain it, without resorting to a simplistic blame narrative or general concepts, which is refreshing and incredibly insightful. At the same time, some arguments could have been developed more profoundly. Zeiderman notes, for example, that although Colombian rivers are increasingly being recognised as subjects with rights, those who live and work with the rivers are “rarely recognised, even by critical voices advocating for equality and justice.” (p. 206) Yet his own engagement with notions of equality and justice remains limited. For instance, he describes how *pescadores* (fisherfolk) are battling for inclusion in planning the river's future, out of fear of obsolescence. Still, their specific contributions to logistics and the racial ordering of ecologies remain underrepresented, which

limits broader contextual insights into the day-to-day practices of justice and inclusion in the Magdalena.

The book thus stops short of fundamentally challenging the power structures and socio-natural hierarchies that underpin this dominant imaginary; instead, it primarily describes them. The in-depth empirical approach could have served as an excellent source for illustrating instances of (subtle and/or historical) resistance among riverboat workers, thereby contributing to the broader literature on socio-natural resistance in the Middle and Lower Magdalena.

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