

This week at Mediático [Dr Niamh Thornton](#) (Senior Lecturer in Latin American Studies at the University of Liverpool) reflects on Irish comedians, Dara O'Briain and Ed Byrne's journey from Arizona to Panama City recently broadcast on Irish and British terrestrial television. Thornton's key area of research is Mexico and the war story. Her recent publications are [Revolution and Rebellion in Mexican Cinema](#) (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013) and an edited volume with Catherine Leen [International Perspectives on Chicana/o Studies: This World is My Place](#) (New York & London: Routledge, 2013). She has also published on literature, digital cultures, Star studies and fan videos. Her research website is [here](#).

Dara and Ed's (Not So) Great Big Adventure

A travel programme, *Dara and Ed's Great Big Adventure*, by the Irish comedians, Dara O'Briain and Ed Byrne, was aired in February and March 2015 in Ireland on RTÉ and in March and April 2015 in the UK on BBC Two. It is about their journey from Arizona to Panama City following a [similar trail made in the 1940s](#) by Sullivan C. Richardson and two of his friends.

It got brief and underwhelming reviews. Sam Wollaston in [The Guardian](#) described it as, "jolly, and pleasant (especially for Dara and Ed) but standard comedians-on-the-road travelogue fayre". Gerard Gilbert in the [Independent](#) dismissed it as "the latest in the growing and presumably cheap genre of blokey travelogue" lamenting that comedians and not travel journalists are making these programmes. Finally, Bernice Harrison in [The Irish Times](#) dismissed it as merely another "celebrity travelogue". None of these reviews fully

engage in what is most troubling about this programme: its repetition of tired tropes about these countries without contributing to any greater understanding and framing the journey using a deeply troubling model.

In many ways it is a light-hearted jaunt through Mexico and Central America by two comedians who have a great deal of self-awareness about what it means to be travellers in countries that have received considerable negative press. In this way, there were some reflective moments, often with a humorous inflection. For example, when Dara and Ed are in Mexico City they jokingly ask a wealthy businessman and son of a former president whether they can fly in his private helicopter, they comment in voiceover that, unsurprisingly, he did not let them. This incident appeared to be a way of showing us that they may have access to this man via their privileged status as performers, but that his lifestyle is far from theirs. Later, in southern Mexico whilst overlooking a cloudy coffee plantation Ed starts to make a statement about the value of travel as a way of understanding fellow feeling with others in the world, Dara teases him for being 'banal'. This is gentle, self-effacing fun and reveals something of their longstanding friendship and easy chemistry as well as showing a measure of self-awareness.

The programme was aired in three parts and each episode lasted an hour. This meant that each country was reduced to a series of superficial snapshots comprised of a mixture of the travellers' experiences (for example, eating Iguana in Juchitán, going to pyramids in Monte Alban, sledding down a volcano in Guatemala, experiencing a Mayan ritual) and dark tourism (for example, engaging with immigrants in Mexico, pausing to watch a dead body being removed in El Salvador, talking to commuters about the risks of travelling by bus in Guatemala City). This was an awkward mix and one with which Ed and Dara were evidently uncomfortable, at times. This was evident when they came out of the Mayan ritual, that they acknowledged was performed for them, wondering at its authenticity and what it meant to attend something that had spiritual resonance for others, but not for them. At other times, this was obviously a pleasurable trip, most particularly in their interactions in the car, and

they were most comfortable when discussing parallels between their trip and the Sullivan expedition.

The Sullivan expedition is a curious framing. It was a US government-funded journey down through Latin America and was first conceived as part of the 'Good Neighbour' policy. This soon morphed into an exploration of the means of controlling safe passage for trade during World War II, and post-World War II fed into the Cold War. To an extent, this is acknowledged by Dara and Ed in their voiceover, and they do reflect on some of the more heinous foreign policy activities by the US, for example, in supporting dictatorships in Guatemala. But, rather than really trouble this with any complicated reflection on what it means to emulate what was potentially a neo-imperialist trip, they revel in stories of the eccentricities of the despots and focus primarily on their predecessors' adventurous spirit in overcoming the physical difficulties of their travel.

Dark Tourism

Looking for the exotic in the Americas has a long and troubling history, and would require a separate blog post. Instead, there were two incidents of dark tourism that I want to explore by way of example as to why what this programme presented is troubling: the engagement with the migrants on *La Bestia* and the dead body in El Salvador.

First, it is necessary to nuance this label of dark tourism. According to the University of Central Lancashire's Institute for [Dark Tourism Research](#), it is "travel to sites of death, disaster, or the seemingly macabre". Given that the intention of the trip was to follow the path of the Sullivan trip and not, primarily, to seek out death, this might seem like a shift in the use of the term. But, these programmes have fixers, can carefully edit what is shown, and if, the Sullivan trip is the focus, then why not fully engage with that rather than provide glimpses into the violence of Mexico and Central America as part of the travellers' experiences?

La Bestia and migration

In southern Mexico, Dara and Ed pause to observe migrants on the large goods train that crosses through Mexico known as *La Bestia*. The migrants, mostly fleeing violence in Central America, illegally travel aboard the train risking being robbed, raped or killed by gangs or their fellow travellers, or being raided by migrant police, or face many of the other dangers involved in travelling aboard a fast-moving vehicle in sometimes extreme weather conditions with few resources. Dara spoke to camera about how, as a migrant to the UK and as an Irish person, he identified with their plight, found it tragic and recognised their evident desperation. This is laudable, and I hesitate to criticise Dara for this moment of solidarity. However, travel for Irish migrants via ferry and plane bears little resemblance to the trans-national trek of Central American migrants. Dara spoke to a Guatemalan man who explained why he was making the crossing, and Ed and Dara visited the refuge centre set up by the renowned migrant campaigner, Father Solalinde (although he was not acknowledged as such). No doubt, there are some who still are not aware of this train journey. But, there have been several documentaries, including, most recently, *Who is Dayani Cristal?* (Marc Silver, 2013) with Gael García Bernal following the journey of a migrant, and the fiction film, *La jaula de oro* (Diego Quemada-Díez, 2013). Both of these have explored this journey in great detail. Of course, the fact that it is well-explored terrain does not prevent Dara and Ed from re-visiting it, but it's not clear what yet another brief glimpse at *La Bestia* and migration as spectacle contributes to any deep understanding of Mexico or Central America.

The problem with this surface look at migration as spectacle was ably parodied by the online news site Narco News TV. In April 2015, they posted a video, "[Danger! Journalists Crossing!](#)". It is told from the migrants' point of view. Fed up at being objects of journalists' news features, photos or blog posts about the infamous train journey, the migrants set up a recovery centre for journalists in order to get them to consider migration at a deeper level and to comprehend the structural problems which lead to it. This short film challenges the well intentioned, but superficial look that is typical of those such as *Dara and Ed's Great Big*

Adventure.

Death in El Salvador

In advance of its airing in Ireland (it didn't get the same pre-viewing attention in the UK), the national press covered the experience for Ed and Dara of [seeing the dead body](#) in El Salvador. Their evident shock is displayed and expressed on screen and can only be understood to be genuine. The banality of it taking place when they are making a stop for refreshment troubles them, and in the newspaper report, Dara states, "That was a sharp reminder why we were travelling under armed guard, having been told by our local fixer in San Salvador not to mention we had family in London or where we were staying or anything like that." The accompanying armed guard is not mentioned in the programme at any point, nor do they reflect on the fact that the very thing they find most disturbing, how a body is dumped in a public and well-traversed place, is integral to gang warfare. Bodies are frequently placed in public places, sometimes mutilated or displayed in gory ways, as part of the expression of might or punishment. In the programme, we are just faced with their response as travellers. Shortly after this incident, Ed and Dara bring up the example of their awareness of how Northern Ireland has been represented in the past, reflect on whether they have an ethical obligation to shift the focus from the violence to avoid a sense that countries, such as El Salvador, are more than this single story. They conclude that it is so much part of everyday life that they cannot ignore it. They may have a point. But, if they do, they have a responsibility to consider it in more depth than focusing on their shocked response to seeing a dead body.

Conclusion

Their brief crossing through Honduras is not explained, but could be understood by the [high murder rate](#). As with the need to explicitly address the requirement for security, this is another moment where reflection on the production process would have been illuminating.

It is this mix of the flattening out of significant detail, glimpses of dark tourism, pleasurable friendly banter set amidst exotic incidents, and the framing of the great derring-do of the 1940s travellers, that makes this an uncomfortable and unsatisfactory watch. The “Great Big Adventure” of the title is indicative of how old-fashioned Dara and Ed’s trip is. What value is there in making a travel programme that is framed in terms of a time gone past as if both past and present enterprises are benign undertakings? With so little attention paid to Central America on mainstream television, it is an opportunity lost. Is there not greater honesty and power in laying bare the infrastructure required for two men to travel safely through these nation spaces? It might, in some way, convey a real sense of the dangers involved, and also allow the possibility of reflecting on how and why many of these states are failing. We do not need more stories of dark tourism or more tired portrayals of exotic others. If the violence in places such as El Salvador cannot be ignored, then let’s not ignore it. Instead, let’s demand that programme makers do it honestly and fully.

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