A Political Ecology of Food Security in La Guajira, Colombia

Reece McKee

Department of Geography, Macalester College

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Professor William Moseley

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Abstract

Inspired by my experiences while studying abroad in Colombia, in this paper I seek to explain the environmental, social, and political causes of widespread food insecurity in the Colombian department of La Guajira, a rural, isolated desert region with a high percentage of indigenous peoples. I first perform a literature review of geographic research on food security in peripheral regions, followed by a comprehensive case study analysis of La Guajira, drawing together sources from a variety of disciplines, in English and Spanish, in order to provide a new perspective on the region's crisis through a multiscalar political ecology lens specifically focused on human-environment interactions, marginalization, social difference, and discourses. I find that from racialized frontier capitalism in the early 1900s to contemporary neoliberal extractivism, decades of attempts to integrate the region into national and global economic markets have weakened traditional food systems and substantially increased food insecurity. More broadly, I explore how food security, local agency in food systems, and environmental sustainability can be increased by rethinking our conventional ideas of "development," "progress," and "isolation."

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The term “food desert” brings to mind rugged explorers and camel herders navigating dusty, blinding sandstorms in search of some edenic oasis where livestock can be watered, dates and olives feasted upon and grains purchased from mysterious veiled traders. In reality, this concept does not refer to actual deserts, but rather geographic areas without sufficient access to grocery stores, primarily in the urban Global North. This can be a useful visualization method, but by measuring food security solely through grocery stores, the food desert model suggests a private, market-based solution, building more grocery stores, to problems mainly caused by the structural inequalities of capitalism (Agyeman and McEntee, 2014; Del Casino 2015). While this paper is not focused on food deserts, the crude logic underlying the food desert model extends far beyond mapping and exemplifies the limitations of overly simplistic solutions to food insecurity that fail to take into account anything other than economic profitability and agricultural productivity. There is no better place to see the shortcomings of this productionist model of food security than in an actual desert where sandstorms and mysterious traders are a reality: the peninsular department of La Guajira, Colombia.

In Colombia, La Guajira is rarely discussed and usually grouped together with other isolated, impoverished, majority-minority regions, such as the Pacific Coast (Chocó) and Amazonia. Out of the way, out of mind, and out of place as a desert region in a generally wet country, it is sometimes easier to forget about La Guajira, and to look at it as just another impoverished “problem” area. When I was a study abroad student in Cartagena, Colombia, I did not visit La Guajira, but had the opportunity to live with a host family from the region. They by no means denied that life was hard there; while watching a news report on child malnutrition in

the region on my very first night, my host mother decried the lack of government action (*"falta de acción"*) in solving the issue. Her 9-year old son then poignantly expanded this critique to declare that there was a lack of *everything* (*"falta de todo"*) in La Guajira. Living with them for a month exposed me to a very different perspective on the region. Listening to the region's traditional *vallenato* music that my host mom would play at night, or browsing Google Street View of a rural desert road with her son to look for his grandmother's house, it became clear how the region was so much more than a dark-red blotch on a poverty map.

In this paper I will employ a primarily qualitative approach to integrate my personal experience with academic literature, popular media and local activism on food security in general and in La Guajira specifically, to answer the following questions: How can a political ecology approach explain the various factors inhibiting food security in the Department of La Guajira, Colombia? What local, national, and global-scale solutions does this approach suggest in order to create a more secure, resilient, and sustainable local food system?

My analysis concluded that the food insecurity crisis in La Guajira is the inevitable result of the introduction of racialized, extractive capitalism to the region, which led to widespread environmental degradation and the marginalization of indigenous relationships with nature, exacerbated by its location on the border between two ineffective and unstable states: Colombia and Venezuela. As the main causes of food insecurity primarily stem from an unequal and exploitative global capitalist system, not from the desert climate or "backwardness" of the region, I propose that rather than the typically suggested market-based solutions to food insecurity in La Guajira, we look instead to locally-based solutions such as neglected edible

plants, common property-based land reform and redistribution, and programs to revitalize indigenous agricultural, herding, and fishing systems.

To support this claim, I will begin with an overview of major themes and debates in the literature on food security and systems in "peripheral" regions, and will connect this to my methodology and frameworks of analysis. I will then provide a brief overview of La Guajira's geography, history, and contemporary crisis. Subsequently, I will explore the failures of conventional explanations for food insecurity in La Guajira, and then provide my own multi-factor explanation, analyzing, in order, Colombia's racialized immigration policies, ineffective government institutions, extractive industries, shifting geopolitical dynamics, and the role of hegemonic discourses. I will end my analysis with an overview of social movements in the region, reasons for hope, potential community-based solutions, and policy recommendations. Finally, I will conclude this paper by reviewing my findings and connecting them to broader debates in the literature.

Context in the Literature

In this section I will cover two major debates in the literature on food security. Firstly, I will compare *productionist* perspectives that view food insecurity as primarily the result of a lack of food and generally suggest yield-increasing technologies as solutions and *multi-factor* perspectives that view food insecurity as the result of a set of interacting structural factors and generally suggest political and economic changes as solutions. Secondly, I will cover a debate mainly contained within the critical multi-factor perspective: between *structuralists* who focus

on multiscalar, generally material, causes of food insecurity and *post-structuralists* who add a focus on discursive causes of food insecurity and examine local agency as a potential solution.

Productionist vs. Multi-Factor Approaches

If people do not have enough to eat, we must produce more food. A statement so seemingly logical and ingrained in our societal consciousness that few people even bother to find evidence to support it. This view, commonly termed productionism, in many ways originates from the work of neo-Malthusian authors such as Paul Erlich (1968), who drew from the ideas of 18th century thinker Thomas Malthus and warned of a massive hunger crisis unless booming populations in the Global South were controlled or technological advances allowed for increased food production. Erlich was more focused on fear-mongering and birth control than actually solving global hunger, yet his book is a seminal text in a school of thought that, seeing overpopulation as the problem, proposes increased production as the solution. This perspective is particularly influential in the policy sphere, and has been spread by agribusiness corporations, crop scientists such as Norman Borlaug, father of the Green Revolution, and policymakers such as Earl Butz, who in the 1970s, dismantled New Deal soil conservation subsidies in favor of a cheap food policy focused on overproduction (Pollan, 2006).

Analyzing this productionist discourse, McDonagh (2014) notes that “it is worrying to see the ease with which ‘wrong’ statistics take centre-stage and ultimately skew our understanding of food security by excluding from the conversation such things as nutrition transition, climate change, [and] food waste” (p. 840). He argues that as the term “hunger” carries such moral weight, it is difficult to move past the simplistic conclusion that if people are

going hungry we must produce more food. Additionally, it is important to recognize that agribusiness is naturally interested in promoting overproduction, as it results in more food for distributors to buy up at a cheap price and because growing more food than is ecologically sustainable generally requires artificial fertilizers and pesticides, which are of course controlled and sold by large corporations.

Other multidimensional scholars expand this critique to argue that we must expand our definition of food security beyond the simple availability of food. Perhaps the most discussed additional dimension is people's access to sufficient, nutritious food, exemplified by Amartya Sen's entitlement theory. Sen argues that people have three main "entitlements" to obtain food: buying it on the market, receiving it through social or political relationships, or growing it themselves (Dréze and Sen, 1989). Food security policy must consider these entitlements, either by increasing incomes of the food insecure (for market access), protecting traditional social relationships, or promoting subsistence production. Additionally, Clapp et al. (2022) argue that a comprehensive understanding of food security must also take into account people's ability to utilize food through cooking knowledge and facilities, the stability of prices and production, the long-term environmental and economic sustainability of food systems, and people's agency to choose what foods they eat and how they obtain them. To connect this to broader political economy, these structuralist and multidimensional food scholars suggest that perhaps the problem is not underproduction or overpopulation by the poor, but global inequality and overconsumption by the wealthy (Lohmann, 2003).

The majority of critical social scientists agree that at a global scale, enough food is being produced, at least in terms of basic caloric volume. This may seem like a preposterous or even

callous statement in the face of rampant food insecurity across the world, especially in the Global South, but the piles of corn rotting in Iowa corn silos and farmers forced to slaughter their hogs during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic tell a different story (Pollan, 2006). Across the world, an oligopsony (too few buyers) of agribusiness distributors forces down prices for farmers, flooding the market with commodity crops as producing large quantities is the only way for farmers to make a profit at low price levels. All of this over-production is in the name of producing so much cheap food that no one could ever not have enough, and yet, somehow, there is still hunger (Chappell, 2018). Clearly, the problem runs deeper than simply not producing enough food.

Despite this reality, productionist points of view still hold significant sway, even in academia. Soft productionist perspectives argue that even though we may have enough food globally, more production is necessary either in specific regions or to lower food prices. For example, Azadi et al. (2023) claim that small-scale farmers should cultivate "high-value" products using "improved seeds and chemical fertilizers," to increase their incomes (p. 2724). While the problem is framed as a lack of access to food, rather than a lack of availability, the suggested solution is still focused on market integration and increased yields. Focusing on agriculturally marginal lands, Ahmadzai et al. (2021) provides a more nuanced view of productionism, arguing that instead of using technology to promote agricultural intensification in already fragile environments, we should attempt to open up new areas for production through water-saving technologies and research and development into neglected crops suitable for cultivation in marginal regions. Finally, Chapell (2018) summarizes a tendency in the literature which he terms "neo-productionism," that acknowledges that we have enough food in the world,

but nevertheless argues for increased production to lower food prices through the law of supply and demand, especially in urban areas. However, this idea ignores the major environmental externalities that accompany increased food production and complicate simplistic supply and demand analyses, as well as the negative impacts of low prices on small-scale farmers (Headey, 2014, as cited in Chappell, 2018, p. 48).

Premanandh (2011) attempts to find a middle-ground between the productionist and multidimensional approaches, arguing that while the proximate cause of food insecurity is a declining arable land to population ratio, "industrial expansion" and over-irrigation are major causes of this (p. 2708). While he does suggest some yield-increasing technologies such as GMOs as potential solutions, Premanandh also calls for traditional sustainability techniques such as agroforestry, the mixing of nitrogen-fixing or shade-providing trees with crops, in order to conserve water and soil fertility. The work of scholars such as Clapp et al., McDonagh, Chappell, and Headey clearly illustrates the shortcomings of the productionist model. Additionally, these authors call attention to structural inequalities and the potential of socio-political solutions such as unionization, co-ops, and land reform to fight food insecurity. However, it is nevertheless important to consider more nuanced technological perspectives such as Ahmadzai et al. in order to direct scientific research towards the development of marginal crops and soil and water conservation, which provides a useful complement to more structural and indigenous knowledge-focused solutions.

Structuralist vs. Post-Structuralist Perspectives

If we consider scholarship and policy on food security in relation to scholarship and policy on development in general, the productionist paradigm of the early and mid-20th century neatly parallels modernization theory that sought to develop newly independent nations in the Global South along the path followed by the industrialized Global North. In this context, the Green Revolution goes hand-in-hand with Walt Rostow's Stages of Economic Growth (1960), a seminal text of modernization theory, specifically stages 2 and 3 that describe investment in technology to modernize and commercialize agriculture through increased yields as essential, and inevitable, for economic growth. While the narratives of productionism and modernization remain incredibly influential, by the 1970s, these paradigms came up against numerous economic, political, cultural, and ecological barriers, both in theory and practice. As a result, structuralist theories such as Wallerstein's World-Systems Theory were developed to explain why countries in the Global South failed to develop as promised: they remained dependent on the Global North to extract their natural resources and add value which was then sold back to them at higher prices. In food security scholarship, the structuralist perspective led to the development of political ecology and a related focus on social, economic, and environmental marginality as a cause of food security. Employing Clapp et al.'s six-dimensional framework, structuralist political ecology describes food insecurity not as the result of insufficient production, but a lack of income and access, due to economic marginalization, often through failed market integration policies, as well as insufficient utilization and *agency,* for example through the social marginalization of the traditional cooking techniques of a racial or ethnic

minority, and a lack of long-term economic stability and environmental sustainability, as a result of environmental marginalization through corporate land grabbing and so on.

The classic example of this political ecology focus on marginality is Michael Watts's (1983) case study of Northern Nigeria. Watts describes how colonial and neo-colonial export-oriented, high-tax policies forced Hausa farmers to intensify production when global commodity prices fell and to sell surpluses on the market rather than saving them in traditional grain storage systems. These respectively increased ecological vulnerability to droughts and decreased traditional resilience methods, leading to increased famine and food insecurity. Today, this marginality focus continues, as evidenced by Ahmadzai et al. (2021), who argue that "the poor in fragile and high-risk production environments are inclined to devise short-term strategies … to cope with risks triggered by climatic shocks and imperfect or failing market conditions, instead of investing in long-term solutions" (p. 11). While structuralist perspectives do a great job describing how marginality is created and the human effects of this marginality, they generally fail to offer policy recommendations or solutions beyond some vague dismantling of all of global capitalism. For example, Ahmadzai et al.'s claim logically implies that because the poor do not have the ability to develop long-term solutions, they will remain stuck in a cycle of poverty forever. Just as in World-Systems Theory, you have a place in the world and there is no real way to change it, a rather hopeless thought if the winds of history just happen to land you in the periphery.

As development studies took a post-structural and postmodern turn in the 1990s and 2000s, food security scholarship acknowledged the marginality of many food insecure communities, but also began to focus on agency, social movements, and non-capitalist forms of

food access as methods for resistance and creating positive change (Peet and Watts, 1996). For example, in the context of marginal regions, Sayre et al. (2015) argue that policies which increase the mobility of semi-nomadic groups and ensure flexible land access can decrease agricultural marginality. Moragues-Faus and Marsden (2017) take an even more radical and directly political approach, arguing that place-based food sovereignty and food production systems based in indigenous knowledge and diverse cosmovisions can provide an real alternative to global capitalism; a future revealed as possible by the Great Recession and local resistance across the globe (pp. 4-5). Studying CSAs in the Global North, Vincent and Feola (2020) take a more discourse-focused approach to non-capitalist food systems, emphasizing that "neither the conventional nor alternative food systems are monolithic or hegemonic" (p. 304). In summary, it is only hopeless if we fail to see reasons for hope.

Methodologically, it is hard to challenge structuralist political ecology and its excellent analyses of how marginality is created; it is on the philosophical and moral fronts where the flaws of this framework are clearly exposed. After all, food insecurity is not just something that can be scientifically studied in a lab; it is a very real phenomenon with dire human consequences. To study food security without highlighting potential solutions, local agency, and the fact that no one accepts hunger lying down is to endorse a callously self-defeating prophecy that reproduces dehumanizing narratives of poor and marginalized people. Additionally, structuralist political ecology often fails to recognize how marginality is actively and continually created, and risks converting "marginality" into an innate state of a people, disconnected from broader structures. For example, McDonagh (2014) describes how marginalization is actively occurring through corporate land grabs for export agriculture (p. 842). Reframing the issue from

marginality as a state to marginalization as an active process is necessary to view agency acting in real time, because as Yapa (1996) argues, for every point of power there is a potential point of resistance (p. 722). Finally, on this semantic note, it is important to acknowledge that just as "modernization" and later "marginality" became non-specific buzzwords, a focus on "local agency" risks falling into the same trap. MacGinty (2015) notes that development policymakers frequently "gift" control of welfare programs back to "local people" where "community responses are supposed to take over and utilise local knowledge and resources," even if the same structural barriers remain firmly in place (p. 847). Agency is important, but it is not magical, and some post-structuralist approaches risk over-romanticization of local people as "paragons of ecological virtue" (Mac Ginty, 2015, p. 847). To conclude and somewhat reconcile these two perspectives, complex political-economic networks and power imbalances exist and have the ability to create compounding marginalization and food insecurity, but it is important to recognize that these networks are not stable or unchanging, and are occupied by real people with the agency and desire to change their situations.

Frameworks and Methodology

As hinted at above, I will make use of a political ecology framework, which focuses on multi-scalar analysis of problems, differential impacts on people of marginalized identities, the relationships between environmental, social, and economic marginality, and the importance of hegemonic narratives and power discourses. This framework will allow me to move past the hardships of food production in a desert as an explanation for food insecurity, and focus on the role of national and international actors in weakening traditional food systems. Additionally, in

accordance with the post-structural turn in food security studies, I will include a special focus on the agency, resistance and social movements of the Wayuu people, as well as a critical analysis of hegemonic discourses and narratives of "modernization", "market integration", "isolation" and so on. In terms of food security, I will define it in terms of Clapp et al.'s (2022) six-dimensional framework described above.

Additionally, I am purposefully choosing to study food insecurity instead of poverty, for multiple reasons, and not just those of scope. Firstly, food security is a much more concrete and definable concept, for which it is much easier to come up with specific solutions. Secondly, poverty is often seen as an innate condition of a people, or in other words, as "their problem," preventing adequate focus on structural factors that lead to poverty's more measurable components, such as food insecurity (Yapa, 1996, pp. 712-713). In other words, poverty is not innate, but relational (Yapa, 1996). Finally, poverty is often measured in simple economic terms, which leads to productionist, market-based solutions intended to stimulate economic development, which often end up exacerbating social, cultural, political, and environmental inequalities and injustices (Carr, 2011).

To analyze food security in La Guajira I primarily employed an extensive review of primary and secondary scholarly sources on food security in La Guajira and the historical, political, economic, and ecological conditions more generally. While there is a decent amount of scholarship on food security in the region, there is much less from a geographical or overtly political ecology perspective. As a result, I leaned heavily into sources from historians, political scientists, ecologists, and others, and political ecology became more of a lens which I applied myself. Additionally, I used some newspaper articles from around the world and a

comprehensive policy brief on food security in the region (Bonet-Morón and Hahn-De-Castro, 2017). Finally, I spent seven weeks in the summer of 2023 on a study abroad program based in Cartagena, Colombia, also in the Caribbean region. My research is augmented by this personal experience, which included lectures from a variety of local academics, living with a Guajiran host family in Cartagena, visiting numerous urban and rural community-based organizations across the region, and living in the nearby village of Sincerín, where our program worked with the local Community Council on a financing plan for a water treatment plant.

Geographical and Historical Background

The Department of La Guajira is located on a peninsula jutting into the Caribbean Sea in the far northeast of Colombia, along the border with Venezuela, separated from the rest of the country by the isolated Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, the second highest coastal mountain range in the world, whose foothills reach into the southwestern regions of the department (Baja Guajira) (Figure 1). The vernacular region of Baja Guajira (lower Guajira) is roughly separated from Alta Guajira (upper Guajira) by the Ranchería River and includes the port city and departmental capital of Riohacha, whose population of nearly 200,000 at the mouth of the Ranchería makes it the largest city in the department, with well over a quarter of the department's total population (880,000) (de la Hoz, 2014, p. 188). In contrast, Alta Guajira, on the northeastern tip of the peninsula, is more isolated and disconnected from the rest of the country, with a more arid climate, and a higher proportion of indigenous Wayuu people.

Figure 1

La Guajira's Location Within Colombia

Note. From *La Guajira in Colombia (mainland)*, by TUBS (2011), Wikimedia Commons.

Like the rest of Caribbean Colombia, La Guajira has a uniformly hot and humid climate and distinct wet (May-November) and dry (December-April) seasons (WeatherSpark, 2023). As in the rest of the region, the vast majority of La Guajira's precipitation falls in dramatic storms during the rainy season, however, the region receives significantly less rain overall, with rainfall decreasing progressively towards the tip of the peninsula. Cartagena, a major city in the Caribbean region, receives 32.3 inches of rain annually, while Uribia, in Alta Guajira, receives roughly half that amount (17.2 in) (WeatherSpark, 2023). While most of Caribbean Colombia is

classified as a tropical savanna climate (*Aw*), the majority of La Guajira is classified as a hot desert (*BWh*), other some of the southern foothills grouped as hot semi-arid (*BSh*) (Jerue, n.d). Climate-wise, the transition which occurs in La Guajira is similar to traveling from the northern Sahel into the southern Sahara, say from Central Senegal into Mauritania. However, La Guajira receives significantly more absolute rainfall than the Sahara; it is the extremely high temperatures, evapotranspiration rate, solar radiation, and desiccating easterly winds that create the desert climate which has defined Wayuu life in the region for centuries (Ospina-Noreña et al. 2017).

While there is limited scholarship on Wayuu life in the pre-Columbian era, Forero et al. (2023) note that as there were no domesticated animals before the arrival of Europeans, they "relied mainly on fishing and hunting in the littoral zone" (p. 627). The uniquely matrilineal Wayuu consider their culture and society to be "embedded" with the natural world, and traditionally follow a detailed ecological calendar that pairs agricultural practices with rainfall patterns. During the short rains, water fills small pools known as jagueys that are the only major natural source of water for the entire year for the growing of crops and the watering of livestock. While the Wayuu people hope for and depend on these rains, at the same time they are fearful of too much rainfall at one time, which frequently leads to large-scale flooding. To manage this, Wayuu people watch for a series of natural signals of rain, from the obvious dark clouds over the sea, to more nuanced signs such as disturbed ants. As climate change increases temperatures and decreases rainfall in the region, preserving these traditional adaptation techniques becomes even more important (Gutíerrez Álvarez et al., 2022, p. 899).

De la Hoz (2014) notes that unlike in North America where colonization generally proceeded east to west from the accessible Atlantic Coast, in Colombia, Spanish colonizers approached from multiple directions, were highly focused on extractive resources, and had more hierarchical colonial administrations averse to the lawlessness of the "frontier." (p. 186). This resulted in the creation of internal "frontiers" and "peripheries" in already ecologically marginal regions. When the Spanish came face to face with Wayuu resistance and environmental hardships in La Guajira, they largely abandoned organized colonization efforts in the region, a pattern which continued with the independence of Colombia. As a result, the Wayuu population survived in greater numbers than most of Colombia's other indigenous groups, and is today the largest indigenous group in the country, with La Guajira having the highest percentage of indigenous peoples of any department, at about 45%, almost all Wayuu (Salamanca Villamizar, 2021)

The lack of state control in the region led to the development of a complex contraband economy centered around Riohacha which had existed since the pre-Columbian era and included both direct local trade and the transit of goods through the nearby city of Valledupar for distribution to the Andean region (Trejos and Cediel, 2014). Commodities such as pearls were traded from La Guajira in exchange for daily essentials such as rice and fabric. Traders mostly came from the nearby Dutch Caribbean islands of Aruba and Curaçao and most importantly, from neighboring Venezuela (de la Hoz, 2014, pp. 208-209). Because of these connections with Venezuelan, the Wayuu still consider themselves a *transfronteriza* ("trans-border") people, and despite their resistance to Spanish colonization nevertheless adopted a key cultural and economic symbol from them: domesticated livestock, particularly the goat, whose *criollo* breeds gradually

adapted to the desert climate of the region (Puerta Silva, 2020). The goat forms the basis of the pastoralism that now defines Wayuu livelihoods; a symbol of both resistance to the outside world and integration with it (Forero et al., 2023, pp. 636-637).

When the Colombian conflict escalated in the mid-1970s with the end of the bipartisan National Front government, La Guajira became a hotbed of left-wing guerilla groups and later on, the brutal right-wing paramilitaries that opposed them. Paramilitaries, guerillas, and American businessmen all saw the lawless frontier of La Guajira as a perfect region in which to grow and transport the marijuana and cocaine that financed their violent adventures (Trejos and Cediel, 2014). As the region gradually became more integrated with the global economy in the mid to late 20th century, multinational corporations moved in to extract the region's coal, decimating Wayuu livelihoods (Forero Lloreda et al., 2017). Today, while state control has become more firmly established and violence has somewhat decreased, La Guajira still remains in many ways more closely tied to Northwestern Venezuela than it does to tropical and Andean regions of Colombia.

While the aridity and agricultural marginality of the region has threatened food security for centuries, the present crisis took off roughly a decade ago and has intensified since COVID-19 (Bonet-Morón and Hahn-De-Castro, 2017, p. 1; Gutiérrez Álvarez et al., 2022, p. 894; Puerta Silva, 2020). Barney (2021) noted that nearly 40% of the population of La Guajira is malnourished, with the number significantly higher among Wayuu communities, children, and in Alta Guajira. The crisis is compounded by utilization difficulties stemming from a lack of potable water for cooking and drinking and a decrease in the supply of cooking oil as a result of the Venezuelan crisis (Bonet-Morón and Hahn-De-Castro, 2017, pp. 30-32). Micronutrient

deficiencies have led to diseases such as anemia, and La Guajira now has the highest rates of child mortality from absolute hunger, rivaled only by the much smaller (pop: 41,000) Amazonian department of Vaupés. Most concerningly, while child mortality from malnutrition declined substantially in the rest of Colombia between 2005 and 2015, in La Guajira, the rate rose dramatically, from 40 children per 1,000 in 2005 to over 60 in 2015 (Bonet-Morón and Hahn-De-Castro, 2017, pp. 8-10). While I could not find any equally comprehensive studies post-COVID, all available reports and news articles suggest the crisis has only grown.

Findings, Analysis, and Discussion

Conventional Explanations for Food Insecurity in La Guajira

In 1970, a report by the International Labor Organization (ILO) of the United Nations studying poverty and food insecurity in La Guajira confidently declared that "as long as the Guajiros continue their nomadic life, little improvement can be expected" (Nieto Roa, 1970, p. 6). For neo-colonial development practitioners, it was really a shame that the Guajirans were poor and starving, but that was to be expected for a people married to a "primitive" lifestyle, averse to improvement, and living on a water-scarce and peripheral land. "Progress" could only be achieved through finding your place in the market. There are a myriad of practical and ethical issues with this prognosis, from the assumption that capitalist profits are distributed equally through trickle-down economics to a dismissal of the cultural and ecological importance of nomadic lifestyles, but the most remarkable part of this narrative is its staying power.

This love affair with markets remains ever-present today, only couched in more politically correct language. For example, studying a lack of state capacity in the region, Zuñiga Hernández (2015) claims that poverty results from multiple interrelated factors, including culture, customs, and climate (p. 39). This is presented as a non-controversial statement, and yes, climate and culture both need to be considered when analyzing food insecurity. It is even true that aridity and water scarcity make La Guajira particularly vulnerable to agricultural marginality, however, to blame internal factors such as climate and culture naturally suggests further market integration as the (external) solution, and Zuñiga Hernández indeed calls for the commercialization of herding and fishing. Time and time again, the commercialization of subsistence agriculture has been shown to primarily benefit wealthier farmers with enough land, road access, and capital to buy the additional inputs required for agricultural intensification, leading to increased inequality and the decimation of traditional risk mitigation structures (Watts, 1983; Fehr and Moseley, 2019). When food insecurity has increased dramatically in La Guajira while Colombia has supposedly been "modernizing" post-2016 peace accords it is worth asking whether the modern market is really a more sustainable source of prosperity and security than the cultures, climates, and ecosystems that have been sustaining marginal regions for centuries.

Colombia's Racialized State and the Arrival of Modern Capitalism

In many ways, the informal colonial era contraband-subsistence economy in La Guajira, characterized by local governance, illegality, and Wayuu resistance to Spanish hegemony is antithetical to these market integrationist theories of progress. Nevertheless, as basic supply-demand theories suggest, when an industry or economic system is prospering, more

producers will want to get in the action, and La Guajira was no exception; in the late-1800s, entrepreneurial foreign capitalists began moving to La Guajira to take over and expand the contraband industry. These foreigners were no longer just regional merchants from Aruba and Curaçao; between 1870 and 1930 immigrants moved to La Guajira from all across the globe. Traders came from France, Norway, Palestine, Cuba, the Sephardic Jewish diaspora, the United States and numerous other areas across the Americas, Europe, and the Middle East, all lured in by the prospective profits in exporting salt, pearls, dyewoods, leather, and even the indigenous people themselves (de la Hoz, 2014). As evidenced by this rampant human trafficking, the newly commercialized contraband economy in early 20th century La Guajira primarily benefited wealthy foreign and immigrant businessmen while severely marginalizing the local Wayuu population.

De la Hoz (2014) finds that while the contraband industries created enormous profits for their owners, the primarily indigenous labor force received practically no compensation, keeping them in extreme poverty. This inequality was of course accompanied by the loss and degradation of indigenous land and traditional agricultural practices, as well as the exploitation of indigenous labor, especially in dangerous industries such as pearl diving (pp. 198, 208-209). It is a classic example of a colonial extractive economy, although of a uniquely exploitative, multinational, and unregulated frontier variety. It is almost as if these businessmen had a giant straw from which they indiscriminately sucked all possible resources out of La Guajira and its people, who were treated only to the backwash. Some businessmen established banks, constructed railroads and invested in electrification, but these were relatively few and far between, generally located in Baja Guajira or Riohacha, and primarily constructed for the convenience of the businessmen

themselves, not the region as a whole. With these businesses barely taxed or regulated, there was practically no reinvestment in infrastructure for the community. Additionally, many of the more prosperous industries, such as dyewoods, were concentrated in the wetter and more connected Baja Guajira, converting long-existing ecological differences into ecological and economic inequality (de la Hoz, 2014, pp. 209-213).

Eventually, as with many booming extractive economies, there came a time of bust; around 1930, the straw hit the bottom of the cup and there was nothing left to extract. Indiscriminate logging for dyewood production in the southern regions had created major erosion problems and the global economic downturn of the great depression led to a flight of capital from the region. Additionally, efforts to establish cocoa and coffee plantations in the region had largely failed due to climatic constraints and capital quickly moved to the Andean region, whose wetter climate and rich volcanic soils were ideal for the cultivation of these booming cash crops (de la Hoz, 2014, pp. 201-202). Most importantly, the lack of infrastructure proved increasingly problematic for industry in the region, and exploitation of indigenous labor had become so extreme that profits were declining due to the decreasing productivity of an increasingly hungry labor force (de la Hoz, 2014, p. 209). The first major seed of the contemporary food insecurity crisis had been sown and by the mid-20th century La Guajira was left with a degraded environment and its traditional contraband subsistence economy severely weakened.

But if a multiscalar political ecology analysis teaches us anything, it is that things do not just happen; foreign and immigrant businessmen did not just all randomly flock to La Guajira around the turn of the 20th century and just happen to monopolize the indigenous contraband economy - these occurrences were the direct result of national and international policies and

discourses. Throughout the 1800s and early 1900s, Colombian intellectuals orbited in American and European pseudoscientific circles developing theories of biological-racial hierarchies, polygenesis, and eugenics, the same theories used to justify chattel slavery, colonialism in Africa, and the sterilization of racial minorities (Gómez, 2009, p. 10). In Colombia, these theories had similar effects in terms of the oppression of Afro and Indigenous Colombians, their effects on immigration policies and discourses was markedly distinct from the United States. In the US, anti-immigrant nativists and racists gradually and begrudgingly expanded their definition of "white" from Anglo-Saxon to include the Germans, then the Irish, then the Italians, then Eastern Europeans. On the other hand, in Latin America, possibly due to larger indigenous populations, "white" and "black" have never been defined categories. This is not to say that racism did not exist, rather, as Orlando Higuera (2023) argues, countries such as Colombia are governed by a "pigmentocracy," where race is not a set of defined groups but a spectrum of skin colors. In Colombia, the lighter a person's skin, the more opportunities and less oppression they face in life, regardless of their actual ethnoracial background.

In the 1800s, most Latin American countries, including Colombia, built national identities based on *mestizaje*, or the mixing of race. While this may seem like a progressive, non-racial narrative, in terms of immigration, it actually led to the Colombian government pursuing a decades-long policy of *blanqueamiento* (whitening) and *mejoramiento* (betterment), in order to attempt to literally and figuratively shift the average skin tone of the symbolic "mestizo" Colombian. In accordance with the circulating pseudo-scientific discourses, as early as 1823, Colombia's immigration laws actively encouraged immigration from majority-white countries, especially in Europe, to bring racial, agricultural, and economic "progress" and

"civilization" to the country through their "capitalist work ethic." (Gómez, 2009). Many policies even rewarded these immigrants with various economic benefits. For example, an 1843 law provided 15.9 acres and $50 to every immigrant and in the context of La Guajira, in the 1920s, the government of Pedro Nel Ospina auctioned off commercial pearl fishing licenses to the highest bidder, who were of course immigrant businessmen, not small-scale Wayuu divers (Gómez, 2009, p. 9; de la Hoz, 2014, pp. 210-211). Market integrationists might argue that the failures of the La Guajira contraband economy around 1930 are the result of illegality, informality, and a lack of government policy to fully bring the region into the global market, but this ignores the fact that capitalism, especially in Colombia, was inherently racialized from the start. Foreign traders did not just happen to monopolize the contraband economy due to some innate advantage in the absence of policy and regulation; there was policy, and it was this racialized policy that ultimately led to inequality, poverty, and food insecurity in La Guajira.

An Ineffective and Illegitimate State

The integration of La Guajira into global markets in the early 20th century, albeit informal markets, did not correspond with an increase in state military, political, and security control, as might be expected. In many ways, disorder and lawlessness actually rose substantially as the traditional clan-based social order of Wayuu society broke down when pearl traders, pirates, and other foreign merchants formed alliances with various clans, leading to intra-ethnic warfare. This utter chaos across the region was only exacerbated by the human trafficking networks and an influx of fugitives and criminals from across Colombia, the Caribbean, and northern South America, including escapees from the infamous French Guianan prison on Isla

del Diablo, all of whom were attracted to the lawless Wild West society in La Guajira (de la Hoz, 2014, p. 204). As de la Hoz notes, a vicious cycle formed as a lack of investment in infrastructure and Wayuu society led to poverty, which led to hunger, which forced people to resort to illegal and violent activities to survive, which then created a chaotic and dangerous atmosphere that scared off private and public investment in the region once more (p. 207).

Eventually, the modernizing 20th century Colombian state was no longer content with the lawlessness and violence on one of its geopolitically crucial borders, and began militarizing the region after 1900. In fact, two of the department's largest cities: Maicao and Uribia, were both initially established as military bases during this era (de la Hoz, 2014). Nevertheless, especially in rural areas, violence continued in the form of roving armed groups intent on extracting some form of profit from the contraband economy, as the national government failed to address its root causes: inequality, poverty, and hunger. As is expected and justified, the Spanish colonial government did not start with any kind of political legitimacy or acceptance among the Wayuu people it attempted to brutally colonize, and the Wayuu saw the independent Colombian government as merely an extension of the Spanish crown, and an unnecessary intermediary in their attempts to engage with regional markets. As the Colombian state started with little respect among the Wayuu and has largely failed to provide any form of income or food aid, it has naturally garnered little additional legitimacy (Zuñiga Hernández, 2015). Trejos and Cediel (2014) argue that this lack of state legitimacy among the inhabitants of La Guajira as a result of a lack of infrastructure and welfare investment is just as important a cause of violence in the region as a lack of state capability, a symptom of this lack of investment. Using an economic analogy, as politics and economics are intimately connected, the authors argue that by failing provide

sufficient infrastructure and welfare, the Colombian state failed to monopolize the "violence market," leaving the door open for paramilitaries, guerillas, and other extrajudicial armed actors (p. 139).

Indeed, as Colombia descended into a national state of chaos in the mid to late 20th century, La Guajira saw a disproportionate amount of the horrific violence committed by various paramilitary and guerilla groups, fueled by an illegal drug trade that was perfectly suited to the ungoverned Guajira frontier. Of course, someone had to be purchasing these drugs, and American businessmen filled this role, buying up first marijuana, a crop well suited to drier climates, and by the 1980s, cocaine, and selling it to eager consumers. The minimal police and military forces that remained in the area tended to be underpaid and easily neutralized by a simple bribe. With its population desperate for any kind of economic stimulus on their degraded landscape, flat deserts that proved to be excellent landing strips for small American aircraft, and a border with Venezuela that was strategically important and fought over by numerous extrajudicial groups, it is no surprise that La Guajira bore the brunt of the decades-long Colombian armed conflict (Trejos and Cediel, 2014, p. 135). War tends to decrease food security in very direct ways, through the destruction of land, loss of labor power, and decreased international trade, but it should also be emphasized that marijuana and cocaine are export-oriented monocultures that use up labor, land, and soil fertility just like legal monocultures of corn or cotton. Even now, 7 years after the Colombian government signed a landmark peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the largest guerilla group, various armed groups still operate across the region, especially notorious right-wing paramilitaries such as the Gulf Clan (formerly Los Urabeños) and the Pachenca gang

(Colombia Reports, 2021). Unfortunately, while wealthier, whiter areas of the country have been able to somewhat move past the armed conflict, in poorer, rural, and Afro/Indigenous communities like La Guajira, it is very much still a fact of life and a major driver of food insecurity.

These cascading failures of state capacity and legitimacy have compounded the food insecurity crisis in Colombia, to the point that even well-intentioned and non-market-based government food security programs focused on *autosostenibilidad* (self-sufficiency) have largely failed, due to a general distrust of the government and an inability to reach communities and disseminate information about these programs as a result of a lack of communications and transport infrastructure in the region. In other words, many food security programs have failed due to continual economic and political mismanagement that have resulted in widespread illegitimacy and incapacity of the national government (Zuñiga Hernández, p. 50). These continual failures do not mean that it would be better for the national government to simply abandon the region, as while almost all previous involvement has been ineffective, the national government has nevertheless been too involved to allow an independent and self-sustaining contraband-subsistence economy to fully develop. For example, a set of neoliberal tariff reductions in 1992 decimated the contraband economy in La Guajira, as legally imported goods were no longer as expensive in the population centers of Colombia (Haven, 1996). Food insecurity in La Guajira is the result of centuries of national and international exploitation, and only a similarly committed national and international effort, although hopefully in far less time, can reverse this trend.

Neoliberal Extractivism, Environmental Degradation and Land Loss

Unfortunately, just like the seemingly endless armed conflict, extractive industry still persists in La Guajira today, focused less on natural products like dyewoods and instead on mining of valuable metals such as gold and hydrocarbon extraction, particularly coal mining. Although there are numerous mines across the region, by far the largest and most infamous is the Cerrejón coal mine located in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, amidst the tributaries and headwaters of the Ranchería River (Forero Lloreda et al., 2017; Ulloa, 2020, pp. 9-10). The mine was initially created in 1983, at the height of the armed conflict, a time when it seemed almost impossible to build any infrastructure. Clearly, it is all about what you prioritize. And for decades, successive Colombian development plans have focused solely on hydrocarbon exploitation without even much lip service to indigenous rights or environmental protection. The Cerrejón mine has been continually expanding into and taking over indigenous-owned land and is now the 10th largest open-pit mine in the world (Ulloa, 2020). Yet somehow, it still has almost no Wayuu people in its 3,000-person workforce and provides practically no economic benefit to the community (Hollander, 2023). Even worse, taxation rates on salt mining, an indigenous-dominated activity, are significantly higher than for all other forms of mining, dominated by multinational corporations (Forero Lloreda et al., 2017, p. 322). From this lens, the aggressive, pro-paramilitary, law-bending administration of Álvaro Uribe (president, 2002-2010) and the dialogue-focused, pro-treaty policies of Juan Manuel Santos (president, 2010-2018) do not seem that different considering their failure to create "positive peace" and socioeconomic and environmental justice (Forero Lloreda et al., 2017, p. 318; Montalvo, 2023).

A lack of community investment and direct land loss are not the only negative consequences of mining in La Guajira. Not only does it contribute to global climate change and the continued dominance of exploitative fossil fuel companies, it has also led to intense environmental degradation on a local scale. For example, careless deforestation in the foothills to facilitate mining and drug cultivation has led to habitat loss for animals traditionally hunted by the Wayuu. Nevertheless, the most severe effects have to do with water loss. With little regulation in their way, Cerrejón dumps highly toxic heavy metals such as cadmium, lead, and zinc, byproducts from mining, into the tributaries of the Ranchería, which then contaminates the water that downstream residents use for drinking, cooking, agriculture, and which sustains fish, such as the bocachico that are a crucial part of the Wayuu diet and cultural heritage (Lopez-Rios et al., 2021, p. 15). Even when the water is not directly contaminated, there is simply less of it, as Cerrejón has repeatedly diverted tributaries to continue mining without risk of floods. This has exacerbated water shortages in a river system already threatened by upstream dams such as El Cercado, leading to not just to a lack of water but a loss of biodiversity and devegetation of the landscape, which in turn increases the erosion of agricultural lands and makes it harder to adequately feed livestock (Ulloa, 2020, p. 10).

Water shortages are compounded by global climate change as well, which has decreased total rainfall in the region, increased temperatures, creating faster evaporation, and increased the number of severe droughts. Many Wayuu people have noticed this shift, observing that it “does not rain like before” (*“ya no llueve como antes”*), and that it is now much more difficult to survive through pastoralism and agriculture (Gutiérrez Álvarez et al., 2022, p. 899). Employing traditional mythologies and worldviews, many Wayuu people explain that the multinational

corporations that fund Cerrejón use their airplanes to interfere with the clouds in the sky to decrease rainfall, in order to prevent their pipelines and mining operations from flooding (Lopez-Rios et al., 2021, p. 10). This explanation of the process may seem ridiculous, and it is indeed not strictly "true" in the conventional, positivist sense of the word, but it is not entirely wrong either. These corporations are part of the global power structures that deserve the lion's share of the blame for climate change, and in turn decreased rainfall, and are actively causing it through the extraction of coal at Cerrejón. It is a more effective conclusion than simply describing the cause of climate change as "carbon emissions" and decoupling this from the political and economic structures that create these emissions.

However, what this anecdote truly reveals is the negative impact of extractive industries and food insecurity can not fully be understood through the lens of Western positivist science that quantifies the "water balance" (Ospina-Noreñá et al., 2017). As Ulloa (2020) notes, the Wayuu people, culture, and territory are in an "embedded relationship" with water "which is not possible to fragment or separate" (p. 6). In other words, the Wayuu, like many indigenous groups around the world, have a relationship to water that is antithetical to all "notions of water as an economic good or commodity" (p. 8). For example, when there is insufficient water, women lose a source of interaction with other women: water collection. Women are also the ones who then have to travel further to find a new water source, which they often do not have an equivalent spiritual relationship with (p. 10). Additionally, when mothers are malnourished, they are unable to lactate as much, depriving their children not just of vital nutrients, but the culturally vital mother-child relationship as well (Lopez-Rios et al. 2021). Yet attempting to reduce the Wayuu relationship with water to the cliche of "water is their lifeblood" is to miss the point and fall back

into the entrapping narratives of linear progress that have fueled countless neoliberal extractive projects like Cerrejón and converted indigenous homelands across the world into "*espacios de basura*" (trash spaces) ill-suited for any kind of local food production (Forero Lloreda et al. 2017, p. 317). Ultimately, water cannot be defined by its utility to the Wayuu; water is water, a force of its own, water is the Wayuu, and the Wayuu are water, fundamentally inseparable.

Shifting International Contexts and Relations

As neoliberalism is an inherently global construction, intent on eliminating both all barriers to accessing global markets and any place-specific cultures, worldviews, or economic systems that might get in the way, its nature cannot by fully understood without considering broader international contexts, as any good political ecology analysis demands. In the Guajiran context, the neoliberal school of economic thought that encouraged the expansion of mines such as Cerrejón was developed by American academics such as Milton Friedman and enacted by policymakers at the Global North-dominated World Bank and International Monetary Funds. Cerrejón was initially established by Intercor, a subsidiary of Exxon, and in 2007, its management was taken over by "a consortium of transnational mining companies" from Australia, South Africa and Switzerland (Ulloa, 2020, p. 10). The president during this ceding of state control was the right-wing Álvaro Uribe, an adherent to the neoliberal model, who was actively supported by the Bush administration, despite evidence that he was a former collaborator with Pablo Escobar and the Medellín cartel, as well as Fidel Castaño, the leader of Colombia's once-largest paramilitary organization: the notorious United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) (Evans, 2004). Additionally, during his aggressive, anti-guerrilla presidency,

the national army was revealed to be killing civilians and falsely listing them as guerillas to meet quotas established by Uribe’s administration. Did the United States actually cared about eliminating drugs and violence, or just protecting its own economic interests and preventing left-wing revolution?

Furthermore, from pearls and dyewoods in the contraband era to coal and gold today, La Guajira’s fate has always been tied to global demand. Yet as coal importation to the Global North declines due to natural gas discoveries in the United States and increasing demands for renewable sources of energy, why does extraction continue as strong as ever in La Guajira? Firstly, new demand for coal in industrializing middle-income countries like Turkey has opened new markets for Guajira coal (Turhan and Cardoso, 2018). Even though Cerrejón is theoretically scheduled to close in 2034, the Turkish Best Coal Company “have accelerated another new coal mine proposal in the Afro-Guajiro territory of Cañaverales” (Ulloa, 2023, p. 2). Secondly, national and international actors have recognized La Guajira’s natural suitability for the development of a wind power industry, due to its relatively flat landscape and consistently windy climate. However, Ulloa (2023) cautions that wind power is still a primarily extractive industry that commodifies what the Wayuu see as a living being and at the moment, takes over Wayuu land traditionally used for food production with little compensation or benefits for these inhabitants. For example, Uribe’s protege Ivan Duque (president 2018-2022) “overrode [indigenous] territorial rights” for wind farms not out of some personal environmentalism but to receive “tariff and investment benefits” from various international treaties. Even offshore wind farms disrupt the “dynamic ecosystems of fish” that are a crucial part of traditional food systems (p. 15). Finally, Ulloa notes that this “green extractivism” aestheticizes the extractive model and

makes it seem inevitable (p. 19). While wind farms are undoubtedly less destructive than coal mines, they are not inherently beneficial to food security, and need to be developed and sited by and for Wayuu communities in order to achieve environmental and socioeconomic sustainability.

While all of these older factors are crucial in explaining food insecurity, there is one specific international dynamic that has exacerbated the crisis to its present extremes: the political and economic crisis in neighboring Venezuela, which was kicked off by the death of Hugo Chavez in 2013, roughly the same time that food insecurity levels began rising dramatically. Subsequent political instability and falling oil prices and production led to massive fiscal deficits, inflation, and a lack of access to basic products and necessities (Bonet-Morón and Hahn-De-Castro, 2017, p. 32). Famously, at some points, a gallon of oil cost less than a gallon of water, and this was far from ideal for the already water-scarce region of La Guajira whose economy and society had been intertwined with neighboring areas of Venezuela for centuries. Transhumant Wayuu pastoralists had historically grazed animals on both sides of the border, and many families were split between both countries. Traditional bartering systems naturally extended across the division and provided a crucial risk pooling strategy for a pastoral-subsistence society. After all, before the disintegration of Simón Bolívar's Gran Colombia in 1831, this had been but a subnational border. This long history of trans-border interaction was challenged by political differences and securitization during the 20th century, but nevertheless continued, especially with Hugo Chavez and Álvaro Uribe's open border policy during the 2000s, that despite their obvious political differences, allowed for direct shipment of food and water to La Guajira (Puerta Silva, 2020, pp. 95-96).

In 2015, Nicolas Maduro, worried about emigration and illegal trade increasing instability in Venezuela, decided to shut the border for a year and a half, decimating this *contrabando bueno* ("good contraband") and traditional pastoral mobility (Forero et al., 2023). Closing the border did not actually fully stop trade, it just provided an opportunity for armed criminal groups such as Los Urabeños to take over, increasing violence and *contrabando malo* ("bad contraband"), leading to major food shortages on the Colombian side as well. When the border reopened in 2016, the Venezuelan crisis had only intensified and shipments never restarted. Even worse, before 2013, Venezuela, specifically the bordering state of Zulia, was significantly wealthier than La Guajira and Wayuu people were more integrated with the "political and intellectual class," Many Colombian Wayuu migrated to work in the port city and oil industry center of Maracaibo, the capital of Zulia and second largest city in all of Venezuela (Puerta Silva et al., 2020). This migration also allowed Wayuu people to escape the armed conflict in Colombia, and most importantly, created a reverse flow of remittances from Venezuela to Colombia that was a substantial source of income for many families. In 2013, this migration/remittance flow not only stopped; it reversed, and millions of Venezuelan migrants have since moved to Colombia, especially La Guajira (Puerta Silva, 2020). It is as if the Wayuu have suddenly lost half their territory while simultaneously gaining population, which naturally has disastrous consequences for food security that should worry even the staunchest anti-Malthusian. This is not to say that the Wayuu are not overpopulated, but rather that they simply rely on an expansive territory that spans across a border to survive in a fragile ecosystem. You could do a whole political ecology analysis of the Venezuelan crisis as well but it is crucial to remember that this crisis ultimately stems from an economy over-reliant on producing oil for

the global market, the same market that has been marginalizing the people of La Guajira for over a century, and this marginalization will continue until strategies for development and food security in La Guajira are decoupled from this globalization and market hegemony.

Deterministic Discourses

It all seems pretty bleak. Almost hopeless. Especially when all of these factors interact and compound the crisis. A socially marginalized indigenous group has been continually economically marginalized by centuries of attempts at market integration through a fully extractive model, and this extraction in turn environmentally marginalizes the people of La Guajira and weakens traditional subsistence systems, increasing poverty and food insecurity, and threatening a ecologically grounded culture, leading only to further social marginalization. Add decades of physical violence that is only exacerbated by poverty, illegal drug trade, and the Venezuelan crisis and it is hard to see how La Guajira can ever escape from this vicious cycle. But we can not consider this hopeless, because hope is an integral resource in creating social change. After all, multinational corporations thrive on a lack of hope and an assumption that there is no real resistance as they continue extracting resources from La Guajira and exploiting its peoples and ecosystems.

While hunger, food insecurity, land loss, and water scarcity are all very material things, the current crisis has been severely exacerbated by prevailing narratives that view Wayuu culture, rurality, and non-productionist agriculture as antithetical to a sustainable, prosperous life. Ferrero Botero (2015) describes how, drawing from the racialized conceptions of class in the colonial era that painted Indians as “savages,” in 1886, a new Colombian constitution “entitled

[Indians] to be civilized and saved," through integration with Western political, economic, social institutions (p. 291). This narrative that equated urbanization with progress spread throughout La Guajira at the same time that the racialized capitalist takeover of the contraband economy and corresponding environmental degradation was taking off, leading to labor migration to cities such as Cartagena, Barranquilla, and Maracaibo, Venezuela (Lopez-Rios et al., 2021, p. 15). These 19th-century narratives of progress saw Indian "savagery" and "underdevelopment" as intrinsic, if alterable, traits, but today, the narrative has shifted again to what what Emma Kowal terms "remedialism," which directly acknowledges that "underdevelopment" has been caused by the evils of colonialism, but argues that this inequality can be remedied through paternalistic Western intervention (quoted in Ferrero Botero, 2015, p. 299).

For example, since the 1980s, the Colombian government has established "ethno-education" programs in La Guajira in which non-indigenous teachers come to boarding schools in the region to teach Western positivist sciences such as biology and economics to a selection of promising young Wayuu students. These schools also employ indigenous teachers, but their curriculums are limited to teaching "cultural" traditions, such as handicrafts. The clear distinction between Western and indigenous teaching reduces Wayuu culture to what is commodifiable; Wayuu handicrafts are not at all threatening to the capitalist economic system. On the other hand, Wayuu culture is also deeply intertwined with traditional economic and agricultural practices that prioritize risk aversion through bartering and pastoral mobility over profit maximization, but this is antithetical to the capitalist logic, and therefore not taught at these schools. As a result these ethno-education programs are reduced to a "neoliberal multiculturalism" that fails to fully escape from the "noble savages" discourse (Ferrero Botero,

2015, pp. 291-299). It is parallel to, and not entirely independent from, the transition from turn-of-the-century American Indian boarding schools to well-intentioned modern programs like Teach for America that still often fail to escape from structural power inequalities.

Unfortunately, these narratives have infiltrated into Wayuu culture in line with the predictions of thinkers from Antonio Gramsci to Paulo Freire, exacerbating the lack of structural change in the region. In other words, as Freire (1985) argued, "objectified knowledge … can 'kill our curiosity, our inquisitive mind, and our creativity,' keeping people from developing … awareness and maintaining the existent structure of power and domination" (quoted in Ferrero Botero, 2015, p. 310). For example, Ceasar (2004) quotes one Wayuu migrant to Maracaibo who argued that "he who dies of hunger here [and does not move to Maracaibo to work] wants to [do so]," while Ferrero Botero (2015) quotes a principal of an ethno-education school in La Guajira who does not want to hire "untrained" indigenous teachers (p. 34; p. 298). From this perspective, the best "work" and "training" are by definition Western, even in the minds of some Wayuu.

It is important to remember that it has not always been this way. Yes, La Guajira is a fragile and marginal ecosystem, and food security and hunger have always been major risks. However, before the marginalization brought about by unequal (neo-)colonial institutions, this risk was mitigated and distributed through mobility, bartering, and a diversity of agro-pastoral activities (Forero et al., 2023). Life was hard, but food insecurity was not a constant crisis as it is today. On this note, the most destructive hegemony in La Guajira today is not economic, but religious. Not only has pre-colonial local history been neglected in "ethno-education" schools, since the introduction of Christianity into the region, the Wayuu have been encouraged to believe that their suffering, hunger, and poverty is punishment both for the original sin of humanity in

the Garden of Eden, and "their" specific "sins" of violence and political instability in the 1900s, of course neglecting the fact that these sins were largely brought on by the same Western and capitalist power structures actively spreading Christianity (Ferrero Botero, 2015, p. 305). In other words, Christianity dismisses food insecurity as a normal part of life in the "earthly realm" and encourages the Wayuu to simply wait for salvation by the divine (Lopez-Rios et al, 2021, p. 10). This assumption that it has always been like this obscures both the active causes of food insecurity and the strategies that were traditionally used to mitigate it.

Reasons for Hope and Policy Recommendations

The Wayuu are one of very few nomadic groups in the Americas, and one of very few indigenous groups in Colombia able to largely resist Spanish colonization. You could see them as a historical relic, or as a group that has managed, despite all odds, to sustain its culture and livelihoods for centuries, and is today actually growing in population (CityPopulation, 2023). Unlike most of the world's emblematic nomadic populations in landlocked Central Asia and the African Sahel, the Wayuu have historically dabbled in both land- (mainly goats) and sea-based (fishing) pastoralism, as well as limited agricultural activities, growing crops such as beans and yucca and organized regional bartering networks. But all four of these pillars are severely threatened today, by environmental degradation, land loss and fragmentation, and climate change. In the face of economic challenges, a lack of government support, and even targeted paramilitary violence, numerous indigenous social movements such as the Fuerza de Mujeres Wayuu (FMW), often led by women, are actively fighting to preserve their ancestral land and these traditional agro-pastoral practices (Ulloa, 2020). Active government policy is necessary to

support these efforts, especially because regenerative agro-pastoralism has been shown to be crucial in climate change adaptation (Forero et al., 2023, p. 638).

Firstly, national and departmental governments could directly fund roundtable sessions to coordinate strategy among various movements and could provide large scale cash transfers to these organizations, which has been proven to work at the level of individual female farmers in the region (Gomez, 2019). Perhaps the Colombian government could increase taxes on Cerrejón and other multinational corporations to fund a payments for ecosystem services scheme in which Wayuu herders are compensated monetarily for implementing rotational grazing systems that reduce pressure on desert plants. Governmental institutions could partner with non-governmental organizations to start pilot projects for establishing common property regimes in the region. The possibilities are multi-faceted and endless.

Additionally, the Colombian government should support participatory and community-led research efforts on the neglected edible plants in the region. Colombia has one of the highest levels of botanical biodiversity in the world, and as Gori et al. (2022) show, academic "agricultural studies have been carried out on less than 20% of Colombian wild fruits," with almost none in the Caribbean region due to security concerns. There are 3,805 edible species of plants in Colombia, but only 117 are registered by the FAO (pp. 1-6). Granted, Colombia is a climatically diverse country as well, and many of these species are highly endemic and not suited to dry climates, but far more research is necessary to determine which specific plants are suitable to grow in certain regions. For example, multiple pilot projects in La Guajira and neighboring departments are seeking to reintroduce the guáimaro, a nut-like tree fruit that is high in protein and antioxidants and can be made into a nutritious, storable flour (Gori et al., 2022, p. 10;

Medea, 2018). After all, because of the ingenuity of traditional Wayuu techniques, La Guajira has agricultural productivity rates per hectare similar to those of other, wetter Caribbean departments. However, total production is lower as less land is devoted to agriculture, both because Green Revolution efforts focused on biofortification instead of exploring naturally high-nutrient crops led to "progressive land abandonment" and because so much land is devoted to extractive industry (Bonet-Morón, 2017, p. 15; Gori et al., 2022, p. 1).

National and international policy to help the Wayuu and Guajiro people cannot simply support existing local movements, it must also actively stand up to the interests of extractive industry in the region. Firstly, heeding the advice of multiple UN human rights advisors, the Cerrejón mine, and a number of other smaller operations, should be closed immediately on indigenous and environmental rights grounds (Hollander, 2023). Additionally, any future extractive industry proposals on Wayuu land should first be approved by a community-wide referendum, and should go through stringent environmental impact studies, not just in Colombia, but in every country whose corporations are funding it. Any extractive industries that do continue should be required to contribute at least 50% of their profits to a community-managed trust fund that is used to invest in physical and social infrastructure such as roads, rural healthcare clinics, traditional educational centers, and the agricultural revitalization programs detailed below. When these mines are closed, their corporate owners should be held accountable for clean up through an international equivalent of the EPA's Superfund program, with the Global North countries that harbor these corporations paying for any non-recuperated damages. When sufficiently decontaminated, recuperated land should be given to the Wayuu community for use as a common grazing area or the home of a *ranchería*, a traditional Wayuu agricultural education

center. On this note, the Colombian government should actively pursue a policy of land redistribution focused on decreasing fragmentation to facilitate pastoral mobility and ensure river or *jaguey* access for the Wayuu as well as redistributing fishing licenses from industrial fisheries to small-scale Wayuu subsistence fishers. Finally, the Colombian and Venezuelan governments should ensure safe, easy, and uninterrupted cross-border transit for all Wayuu people.

Luckily, there is real hope for these policies to be implemented. Not only are distrust of the capitalist hegemony and support for indigenous rights and worldviews increasing internationally, in 2022, Colombia elected its first ever leftist president, Gustavo Petro. While his tenure has been far from smooth, Petro recently reopened diplomatic ties with Venezuela. Although this relationship should be approached with caution given Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro's authoritarianism, it marks a potential first step in revitalizing the cross-border economy and social networks that the Wayuu rely on. Most importantly, he has committed to a green energy transition, although as shown above, green energy must be community- managed, supported, and approved to be truly sustainable. In La Guajira, perhaps solar panels would be an equally effective energy source to windmills without killing culturally integral birds. Finally, Petro's "Pact for a Fair Energy Transition [prioritizes] water for human consumption … over that used for crop irrigation or mining," although it is imperative that this is backed up by specific policies and does not just become a catchphrase (Hollander, 2023). This transition has not and will not be easy, as evidenced by my very first night in Cartagena, when my ride from the airport was stopped for over an hour by a large brush fire in the middle of the road set by a protest against a lack of electricity in a small town on the outskirts of the city, that our guide claimed was because of changing energy policies. However, when people are starving, you do not give

up, you simply work harder to create effective solutions at the local, national, and international scales.

Conclusions

In summary, food insecurity in La Guajira is the result of multiple, interwoven factors: the takeover of the traditional economy by government-subsidized racialized capitalism, violent armed groups filling a vacuum left by an incapable and illegitimate neo-colonial state, a neoliberal intensification of environmentally destructive mining for global markets, the oil-driven Venezuelan economic crisis, and a host of hegemonic narratives that reinforce the idea that integration into Western cultures and economic systems is the main solution, not the main problem. All of these factors have led to a decimation of the traditional, multi-pronged Wayuu system for procuring food, which is deeply intertwined with culture and worldview. It is in this local system and the social movements that support it in which we find potential solutions, from land redistribution to the research into neglected edible plants, but given the structural causes of this issue, policy solutions at the national and international level will also be necessary.

Relating to the existing literature, the crisis in La Guajira once again demonstrates the limits of the productionist paradigm, as the real issue is not productivity rates but a lack of land from which to procure food due to extractive industry and disconnection from Venezuela. On the other hand, the 6-dimensional framework fits quite well. While more food needs to be made available, it also needs to be accessible through local production or an open border with Venezuela. Additionally, this framework explains the need for water access to facilitate utilization, local production from agriculture, pastoralism, and fishing to increase price stability

and environmental sustainability, as well as the need for Wayuu agency to create a culturally appropriate food system. In terms of the second debate between structuralists and post-structuralists, the bulk of my analysis is admittedly quite structural, focusing on national, international, and historical factors as well as multiple types of marginalization. However, I have also added a specific focus on narratives, solutions, and agency to accommodate the post-structuralist critique, as I believe that it would be ineffective, even immoral, to analyze a problem and not suggest any solutions. By far the greatest limitation to my research is that I was unable to visit the region; to remedy this future studies on this topic should focus on participatory ethnographic interviews with Wayuu leaders and community members about their ecological knowledge and conflicts with extractive industries.

What we might realize in these interviews is that for the Wayuu, La Guajira is the center of the world. Is your life not the center of your world too? It is not as if La Guajira could just drop off the map. In Colombia, La Guajira is forgotten and brushed off as a cesspool of poverty and food insecurity. Around the world, it is practically unknown. Yet the region is crucial for global extractive markets, located on a border constantly fought over and deeply intertwined with hegemonic narratives. In the end, La Guajira is not peripheral at all, but actively being squeezed on all sides by hydrocarbon demands and shifting geopolitics. It is time we transformed La Guajira from a chokepoint into a nexus of resistance.

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