Corporate security technologies: managing life and death along a Colombian coal railway

Abstract. This article demonstrates how the security of an extractive corporation is related to the governance of the lives and deaths of local inhabitants living in the area around a large coalmine and its railway in Colombia. Making legible the corporate security technologies that manage railway mortality and work along a spectrum from “hard” to “soft”, this article explores the productivity of corporate security in relation to the lives and deaths of local populations. Offering a specific lens on corporate railway security, it shows how corporate security technologies influence not only the lives of local residents but also their deaths. The findings also suggest that deaths and/or suicides be understood as both a product of and a productive force for corporate territorialization. Drawing on conceptualizations of ‘social death’ from genocide studies and Foucauldian ideas about death and technologies of power, I discuss the implications of corporate sovereignty (deciding over lives and deaths) as a technology of the corporate protection of mining infrastructure that normalizes corporate territorialization and justifies corporate social control.

Keywords: corporate security; Colombia; extractive infrastructure; managing mortality; ecocide-genocide nexus

INTRODUCTION

In 2009 the corporate foundation of La Mina,¹ a transnational coal mining consortium operating in La Guajira, Colombia, released a report documenting the negative impact of the mine’s railway. The report, entitled “The train of the devils”,² documented the high mortality rate for humans and animals living along the railway line and reported a severe problem with suicides. The report explains:

“Although suicide among the Wayúu is not a recent phenomenon, in the last known cases, suicidal individuals have used the train as a means of killing themselves. These events cause discomfort in the mining operation, despite the fact that there are continuous campaigns by La Mina about the dangers and risks that both animals and human beings run because they do not take into account […] the safety regulations issued along the railway. […] The train continues to generate acute social and political tensions, fermenting new social configurations and new problems […] and changing standards of living [and] life expectancy.”

(Fundación La Mina 2009:4)

Despite several educational campaigns (e.g. “Protect Your Life” and “The Coal Route”, including brief movies, radio announcements, flyers etc.), signs, security guards and upgraded surveillance, the coal train still hits

¹ I have decided to call the company “La Mina” to reduce traceability. This means that I have changed the real name of the company in all places. I refer to it as either “the mine” or “La Mina,” which is also a common reference to the company locally. The corporate foundation of La Mina is the company’s charitable arm, which carries out social and environmental projects sponsored and directed by La Mina (McKenzie and Cohen 2018).
² All translations from Spanish to English are by the author.
and kills around one animal a day and one to two people every year.\(^3\) For rural residents in La Guajira, the majority of whom belong to Colombia’s largest indigenous population, the Wayúu, animals are of great significance, not only for food and income, but also for reasons of prestige (Guerra Curvelo, Harker, and Villegas Jiménez 1998). Their deaths have great negative impacts on local communities living in the area that are affected by La Mina.\(^4\)

La Mina extracts thermal coal in La Guajira, northern Colombia. It is owned by three of the world’s largest mining corporations, based respectively in Australia, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. The mine’s 150 km-long railway, running close to the border with Venezuela, crosses hundreds of indigenous Wayúu villages in a desert-like area with sparse vegetation and exposed sun. As the train passes ten times a day\(^5\) from one of the world’s largest open-pit coal mines to the industrial port, it leaves coal dust in the air and on every surface, as well as disturbing the ancient spirits of the Wayúu people living nearby. The latter describe the line as a “scar” splitting La Guajira in two and dividing families and communities. In the words of Eduardo Galeano (1997/1971), the line runs like an "open vein" across the landscape, representing a site of capital accumulation, modernity, conflict, and death for nearby Wayúu communities. For the company the line is a security concern, and managing railway deaths is a central issue for the company’s public affairs department and security personnel.

Making legible the corporate security technologies of managing railway mortality along a spectrum between “hard” and “soft” (Dunlap, 2019a, 2019b), this article seeks to improve understanding of the productivity of corporate security on the lives and deaths of local populations. Soft security is complimentary to what Dunlap (2019b:12) calls “soft approaches to engineering extraction”, which aim to persuade people to consent to mining through participation, empowerment and educational initiatives. Hard security refers to the use of physical security, such as military and police protection, private security and security infrastructure like surveillance technology and fences. The dichotomy derives from the concept of "corporate counterinsurgency" (see Brock and Dunlap, 2018), which sees violence not only as a product of direct corporate coercion, but also as inherently related to corporations’ social interventions. Offering a specific lens on corporate railway security, the article shows how corporate technologies of security influence not only the lives of local inhabitants, but also “forms of death” (Povinelli 2011:146) in indigenous communities near mining infrastructure. The article suggests that deaths and/or suicide should be understood as both produced by and productive of corporate territorialization (Rasmussen and Lund 2018). It is inspired by the concepts of “social death” (Card 2003), which derives from post-liberal genocide studies and describes the loss of social vitality, identity, community and meaning for one’s life, and “necropolitics” (Mbembe 2003, 2019) based on Foucauldian ideas about death and technologies of power. As such, the implications of corporate sovereignty (deciding matters of life and death) are explored as technologies whereby the corporate protection of mining infrastructure normalizes corporate territorialization and justifies corporate social control.

\(^3\) These figures represent an intermediate number calculated by myself based on information sent to me by the company in September 2019.

\(^4\) According to corporate managers, ‘the zone of influence’ covers around 30,000 people divided into more than 300 communities, as well as several towns and smaller villages.

\(^5\) Depending on sources, this figure varies between nine and fourteen times a day (Moran 2017; Semana 2018).
Literature drawing on political ecology, critical agrarian studies and the geography of extraction demonstrates the potential for extractive industries to cause severely negative socio-environmental impacts on local, often indigenous populations in Latin America and elsewhere. This has been documented by a broad range of scholars, including Humphreys et al. (2007), Bebbington and Bury (2013), Himley (2013), Borras and Franco (2013), Hall (2013), Göbel and Ulloa (2014) and Ulloa (2020), among many others. Peluso and Watts (2001), Dunlap (2019a), Coleman (2018), Rasch (2017), Middeldorp and Le Billon (2019) also highlight the violent and deadly practices of extractive industries, including extra-judicial killings, threats, disappearances, beatings and police brutality. Short (2016) and Dunlap (2018, 2020) link studies of extractive megaprojects with genocide studies, showing how the “genocide-ecocide nexus” covers different modalities of systemic killing (e.g. social death and deprivation) and how extractive technologies can be destructive of lands and eco-systems. This article contributes to the academic debate by exploring how, in their daily operations, including corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities and corporate risk management, extractive corporations enter the intimate sphere of everyday deaths and of imaginaries of deaths in the endeavor to ensure “socio-economic order” (Frederiksen and Himley 2019) and acquire the so-called corporate Social License to Operate (SLO) (Owen and Kemp 2017; Prno and Slocombe 2012). Researching railway mortality through the twin lenses of corporate security technologies and the genocide-ecocide nexus shows how deaths and the risk of death also allow sustained corporate control over local populations.

The article draws on insights and ideas from two fieldwork trips to La Guajira spanning ten months between 2018 and 2019 and was part of a larger project on the security practices of extractive companies in Colombia. The analysis also draws upon secondary resources that deal with the specific issues of railway deaths and corporate branding, such as corporate reports, newspaper articles, online blogs and social media posts. Employing participant observation, during fieldwork I conducted a total of 91 informal interviews and wrote field reports on ten different kinds of meetings. Informal interviews were conducted with 52 members of communities affected by coal extraction and transport: 11 corporate representatives, 2 local observers, 4 (former) security actors, 3 lawyers, 4 consultants and 17 interviews with NGOs. Participant observation was carried out at four meetings between the company and local communities, three community mobilization gatherings and other political events, and two national corporate mining conferences. Informed consent was obtained for all interviews, and the anonymity of research participants has been protected by using pseudonyms. I avoid explicitly mentioning any company or community names to protect those interviewed.

The article proceeds with a discussion of the state of the art in recent scholarship on corporate security technologies and theories of death. The subsequent section contextualizes the research and explains the central role played by the railway. Continuing to contextualize, the first analytical section explores the hard security technologies at play at La Mina’s extractive sites. This section also examines the ecocide-genocide nexus and types of social death empirically. The second part of the analysis focuses on railway mortality, the implications of corporate classifications of deaths as self-inflicted being discussed against the Wayúu perception of death. The last part of the analysis explores how deaths perceived as suicides are also considered acts of sabotage and disruption to the mining project, thus justifying further corporate population control and physical security. The conclusion sums up the research, arguing that the corporate management of both life and death in all their variety is closely linked to both the ecocide-genocide nexus and corporate technologies of security situated along a spectrum from hard to soft practices.
Corporate security technologies and death
Social and political technologies designed to maintain legitimacy and consent around extractive projects are deeply related to corporate security. Marina Welker (2009), among others, has shown how “corporate security” is inherently related to “community work” and how it even “starts in the community” by ensuring good relationships with nearby communities to avoid or minimize conflict. Other scholars examining conflictual relationships around land, resources and rights in extractive contexts have demonstrated the necessity of violence, domination and war in controlling natural resources (Bannon and Collier 2003; Le Billon 2001; Peluso and Watts 2001). This has renewed interest in community reactions to extractive projects “from below” (Bebbington et al. 2008; Borras and Franco 2013; Hall et al. 2015). Other scholarly attention then moved to consider corporate reactions to resistance “from above”, as Geenen and Verweijen (2017) call it (Brock and Dunlap 2018; Dunlap and Fairhead 2014; Frederiksen and Himley 2019; Hönke 2014; Rogers 2012), thus complementing the work of corporate ethnography (Dolan and Rajak 2016; Rajak 2011). In different ways this literature explores the social engineering of extractive subjects, the territorialization of resource control and the corporate management of ways of living. Building on this literature, this article contributes to the study of political reactions “from above” by examining how an extractive company manages death in its operations. Managing, whether directly or indirectly, deaths related to extractive operations becomes an essential component of engineering natural resource extraction, which entails questions of “death as agency”, “death-in-life” (Mbembe 2003, 2019) and extraction as contributing to processes of “social death” (Card 2003). More generally, the article contributes an alternative perspective on how hard corporate security works in the shadows and produces efficient, soft versions of security without ignoring the bloody dynamics in which extractive politics are still embedded.

“Corporate security technologies” are interlaced with corporate social technologies (Kirsch 2014; Rogers 2012) and corporate counterinsurgency (Dunlap and Fairhead 2014; Dunlap 2019a) and speak to similar dynamics. Corporate security technologies aim to capture companies’ efforts “to shape social and cultural life”, including their “participation in the global ‘corporate social responsibility’ movement” (Rogers 2012:294), as well as their overt and covert pacification and counterinsurgency strategies, or “social warfare” (Dunlap 2019b; Dunlap and Fairhead 2014). Counterinsurgency is closely linked to various civil-military security efforts to control land and ensure capital accumulation (Dunlap 2019b), as emerges from examining the police-security practices and protocol employed by military strategists to “seize and hold” territory and to manage conservation spaces and green and conventional extraction sites (Dunlap and Fairhead 2014; Dunlap 2018, 2019a). The political ecology of war, violence and territorialization (Peluso & Watts 2001; Peluso and Lund 2011; Rasmussen & Lund 2018) has given way to a political ecology of counterinsurgency (Peluso & Vandergeest 2011; Dunlap 2019a), where companies’ engagement with and management of death deserve greater attention. This article combines works on political reactions “from above” with theories of death and the "genocide-ecocide nexus", a concept that points to the relationship between people and their ecosystems and shows how attacks on an ecosystem are attacks on people and vice versa. This nexus entails a two-fold process of forcibly dispossessing a people (often but not always indigenous) of their lands and degrading their ecosystems, thus creating the conditions for “social death” and contributing to continuous and structural processes of genocide and ecocide (Crook and Short 2014). Combining these bodies of literature shows how we can understand railway deaths as the outcomes of a socially precarious reality, as well as being productive of further expressions of corporate technologies of security, normalizing corporate control over life and death.
On Killing: Social Death, Slow Violence and Extraction

Foucault made it clear that “killing”, for him, is not “murder as such”, but also “every form of indirect murder: the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on” (Foucault 1976a:256). Power over life and death (or simply “bodies”) is often called sovereign power, a notion that has developed into theorizations of biopower (Foucault 1976a, 1976b), geoontopower (Povinelli 2016) and necropower (Mbembe 2003, 2019). Biopower is power with a “positive influence on life”, a power to force living not just to happen but to endure and appear in particular ways through social formations that force self-regulation and aim at improving populations (Foucault 1976a:67). For Mbembe (2003, 2019) sovereignty is about the power to exercise control over mortality and to define (a worthy) life. In separating those worthy of living from “others” who are not worthy, “the murderous functions” of the sovereign are made possible and acceptable (Mbembe 2003:17). Mbembe’s “death-in-life” relates to his account of slavery and colonial territorialization (pp. 21-25) and is intimately intertwined with the concept of social death (Card 2003).

Social death, as Short shows (2010:842; 2016), “can occur without specific ‘intent to destroy’ as such, through sporadic and uncoordinated action or as a by-product of an incompatible expansionist economic system.” Dunlap (2018: 556) comments on Short’s (2010, 2016) perspective on genocide, ecocide and settler colonialism, explaining how social death does not necessarily kill people directly, “but instead disciplines and transforms them, instilling various degrees of helplessness, social fragmentation, extreme depressions and post-dramatic stresses among other existential crises”. This is intimately connected with Nixon’s (2011) “slow violence,” including environmentally dispersed destruction that often happens out of sight. The idea of social death examines the subjective impact of slow violence and extraction, as it is about the transformation of subjectivities and is intimately linked to state formation and sciences of population management that are emblematic of soft and hard counterinsurgency technologies (Dunlap 2018, 2019b).

This recognition of “social death” not only offers a critical yet accurate lens by which to view development, it also provides a dynamic, open and productive perception of the terms “death” and genocide as not being only about “body counts” (Card 2003:63), but also as harnessing political or vital existence. For Card, social death is what enables us “to distinguish the peculiar evil of genocide from the evils of other mass murders” (ibid.), as genocide is always both homicidal and cultural. As such, speaking about genocide as social death does not ignore the serious issue of the actual deaths of hundreds of Wayúu people over the last centuries, a situation that has several times been labeled an emerging genocide (El Nuevo Siglo 2012; Montero 2019). Instead, the concept assists in understanding how deaths, including suicides, are both a product of precariousness and discomfort, and productive "events" sustaining social control by the company or state, which perpetuates types of social death. As we shall see, the corporate imperative of improvement (Li 2007) is related to the biopolitical endeavor to force living and engineer consent and compliance among “unruly subjects” who disturb mining operations (Buur and Sumich 2019) – subjects who would rather risk their lives by being opposed to mining than become “a slave of the company”, as some activists put it.

Examining the La Guajira coal railway contributes to extraction and genocide studies in three ways. First, it holds up a lens to “railway security” as a specific context for studying the development of corporate technologies of population control. Instead of following events related to the geographical location of the extraction site and the surrounding area, like most ethnographic studies (e.g. Banks 2017; Kirsch 2014; Rajak 2011; Welker 2014), the article investigates how extractive infrastructure and its security influence people’s lives and deaths. Secondly, it focuses on the everyday aspects of these sites of extractive
infrastructure, in line with Povinelli’s (2011:153) “slow rhythms of lethal violence”, showing how it contributes to the ecocide-genocide nexus (Short 2016). The case of the Guajira coal railway is not one of dramatic active conflict or a violent clash between the parties. Rather, it deals with life and death as it occurs in everyday circumstances in La Guajira, which deserves attention in the ethnography of natural resource extraction.6 Finally, the article looks specifically at how extractive corporate management enters the intimate spheres of death and how deaths become triggers for further corporate technologies of security and population control.

The article proceeds by providing a brief background to coal extraction in Guajira. The contextualization that follows should assist in elaborating what is at stake for impacted communities and the coal company alike, and how this infrastructure has produced new multi-scalar social and spatial relations that are intrinsically related to the question of corporate security.

La Guajira and the coal railway
La Guajira (La Wajira in Wayúunaiki) is one of Colombia’s two most important coal-mining regions. Compared to Colombia’s various “gold territories” (Le Billon, Roa-García, and López-Granada 2020), which include a variety of social, cultural, economic and political dynamics, as well as different visions for a future of territorial peace (ibid.: 2), coal-mining in Colombia is relatively uniform, almost solely taking the form of large-scale industrial open-pit mining run by foreign companies. Having been a site of large-scale coal extraction since 1983, today La Guajira is also experiencing the continuous appearance of new energy-production projects such as wind farms and experiments with fracking (Lopez 2019). The department has a high turnover of institutional leadership, a low degree of political stability, and is among the poorest regions in the country, with 44% of the population categorized as indigenous (mainly Wayúu) and 14% as Afro-Colombian (Bonet-Morón and Hahn-De-Castro 2017; Jaramillo 2014). When mining “pioneers” arrived in La Guajira around 1980 to begin construction of the mine, they considered La Guajira to be “‘wild’, untamed, without law, without progress and without anything apart from “the ephemeral happiness of debauchery” (Acosta 2012:3). The pioneers’ mission was to “turn this into a legal and developed region based on coal” (Acosta 2012).

Besides the mine, which today covers 14,682 hectares (La Mina 2019), the 150 km railway may have represented the most drastic geographical transformation of La Guajira when it was built in 1983.

“The train is like the shadow of the Titanoboa⁸ that runs from the bottom to the top of La Wajira, stalking its victims.”

This description of the railway as the shadow of a huge ancient and extinct snake, the *Titanoboa*, comes from the novel *Palabrero* by the Colombian author Philippe Potdevin (2016), a former La Mina HR

---

6 I join the choir of Povinelli (2011:153) here, as she argues that the slow, chronic “uneventful” lethal violence in indigenous worlds should “conform to the spectacular event and ethical dictates of empathetic identification”

7 “La Línea Negra”, issued in 2018 by the then president, demarcates a ring of 348 sacred sites around the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, forming the boundary of the ancestral territory of four Indigenous Peoples: Kogui, Arhuaco, Wiwa and Kankumano.

8 *Titanoboa* is an extinct genus of a large snake that lived in northeastern Colombia. They could grow up to 12.8 m long and weigh up to 1,135 kg. Fossils of *Titanoboa* have been found by La Mina’s foundation and date to around 58 to 60 million years ago (Wikipedia).
employee. As he worked and lived in La Guajira, and as the book is explicitly about how the Wayúu are coping with having a large mine as their neighbor, the descriptions in his book reflect an insider’s reading of at least one version of reality, despite being categorized as fiction. The book reflects many of the paradoxes of large-scale mining, including the local population’s aspirations to “become part of the project” while at the same time portraying “the mine” as a foreign and hostile element that disrespects local customs (ibid.). La Mina’s operations cause severe pollution, especially coal dust, which leads to respiratory diseases and contaminates the few remaining natural water sources (Ulloa 2020). There are also issues with the unequal treatment of local communities and inconsistent compensation for the socio-ecological impacts, not least because this divides communities (Banks 2017; CENSAT 2015; Chomsky 2016; CINEP/PPP 2015; Contraloria 2013; Indepaz 2019; Gilbert, Gilbertson and Jakobsen forthcoming). The railway itself has also generated severe social and political tensions. In a study by La Mina’s corporate foundation, from which the initial epigraph is drawn, among the reasons for the tensions are the fact that the train disturbs the silence that the Wayuu have traditionally enjoyed and which they need to be able to dream, a fundamental aspect of Wayúu spiritual practice (CINEP/PPP 2015; Reverol 2017; Sheriff and Gilbert forthcoming). The study also highlights how the train has changed peoples’ life expectancy and “how the conflicts [...] for the Wayúu have caused a traumatic relationship with the train as one of the most significant manifestations of the interruptions of modernity in the ancestral Wayuú territory” (Fundación La Mina 2009:7). It was often noted how, for the railway communities, the train is an occupation both concretely and symbolically. For example, one elderly traditional authority in a Wayúu community along the railway complained that the company, with its train, “has taken over our territory; now it is not ours.”

The railway runs through a desert-like region, the vegetation becoming increasingly sparse as it runs north towards the port. Guerrilla groups have repeatedly attacked it, especially during the most intense period of violent conflict between 2002 and 2010, and the attacks persist. Indigenous peoples have often blocked the railway in order to protest against water scarcities, child malnutrition and corruption (Las2Orillas.co 2017). Corporate managers in particular tell stories of indigenous people walking unaware onto the tracks while drunk and being killed by the train. According to numbers revealed to me in an e-mail from the company’s outreach person, during the 34 years of the mine’s history, 57 deaths of human beings have been linked to the railway. According to the perception of a former employee who was responsible for recording railway “events”, at least 49 of these deaths were suicides (the next section deals with the implications of this classification). In order to respect local customs, the track is not fenced. This means that animals that had formally grazed freely in the territory are also often hit by the train in their search for food or water. Many Wayúu families along the railway have ended up without animals, especially goats, one of their main sources of income, and a symbol of prestige (Fundación La Mina 2009). According to former guards, these are the reasons why the company has security guards along the railway. “We have to maintain a permanent and ‘dynamic surveillance’ along the 150 km,” explained an individual close to La Mina’s security arrangements. As with many other regions in Colombia, people live in the shadows of a highly militarized past, and despite the 2016 peace agreement and FARC’s demobilization as an armed

---

9 According to anonymous sources close to the company, the book was not received well by the management.

10 According to the company, it has suffered 29 attacks on the railway in its history, the last known attack being by the ELN in February 2018.

11 The level of railway mortality should be seen in light of the low population density and the aridity of the landscape, which has very little vegetation, making the railway highly visible in the landscape.
guerilla group, the present is still militarized, and security for the population is not yet assured (Brilman 2017; Le Billon, Roa-García, and López-Granada 2020).

**La Mina, relacionamiento** and hard security technologies

There are many military bases in the region, both inside and outside the mining area. As with other extractive companies, the military and La Mina have a collaboration agreement for “protecting the community, people and the infrastructure” (La Liga contra el Silencio 2019; Ministerio de Defensa 2017). The company’s Department of Public Affairs oversees the daily coordination of all security actors, including military units, several contracted private security companies, the police and the company’s own security personnel. According to community members, “Public Affairs” (asuntos públicos) knows everything that happens in the communities. This public-private security partnership is similar to Dunlap's (2019a) account of how the Peruvian security forces collaborate with the extractive industries, which reveals the existence of mining companies’ own "internal affairs" (asuntos internos) departments specializing in counter-intelligence against other mining companies, as well as pacifying social opposition to the mine. Like the "internal affairs" department, La Mina’s Public Affairs Department also consists of ex-military and private security personnel employed to carry out different types of intelligence work. In interviews, however, managerial staff from Public Affairs were mostly restricted to discussing community relations and their analytical work, including organizing community dialogue to build bridges between communities and security actors on themes related to human rights and their “integrated bidirectional risk management system”. The “dirty work”, according to an NGO lawyer, is outsourced to private security contractors. Despite not being armed in the majority of cases, the private security guards do the most complicated, dangerous work, including the secret intelligence work. Echoing experiences around the Tía Maria mine with mercenaries and “infiltrators” (see Dunlap 2019a), La Mina’s use of the figure of “los caballeros” (horse-riders) is particularly relevant. Caballeros are private security guards dressed as farmers riding horses in the local area, observing, like secret police, “what is going on” in the surroundings and enacting a form of covert surveillance. As the “first ring of security” for the company, they check that all agreements are complied with and watch “suspicious elements”, a former private security guard explained. A former corporate manager familiar with La Mina’s security system explained how the caballeros “look like farmers for their own safety”, as they had been attacked (and a few killed) by guerrillas in the late 1990s and early 2000s when dressed in uniform and armed. Perhaps a convenient excuse for “dressing up in civilian clothing only with machetes and a walkie talky”, it made surveillance work easier, as the caballeros “fed me with information”. The armed private security guards deployed along the railway are also supposed to keep track of what is going on in the area surrounding the railway, including in nearby communities (ibid.). The surveillance and counter-intelligence network extends beyond the railway by charting and mapping the everyday risks to be managed by the company in forcing life, preventing deaths and continuing to extract coal. These security initiatives are all an aspect of managing risks through population governance strategies (Foucault 1976a; Power 2004). As we shall see below, the way the company manages risks simultaneously creates opportunities for corporate social control as it enters new realms, the intimate spheres of death. The next section will examine how the ecocide-genocide nexus plays itself out in La Guajira’s coal-mining sites.

**The ecocide-genocide nexus and forms of social death**

La Mina’s corporate biopolitical ambition is to save lives (Fundación La Mina 2009), “protect the integrity of life” (La Mina et al. 2018) and “assist in the realization of people’s dreams” (La Mina 2019). Nonetheless death is an ever-present part of the vocabulary and imagery in La Guajira. Slow death, deprivation of freedom, slavery and (cultural) genocide, and the death of non-humans (trees, rivers and species) are
frequent topics of conversation among community members living near the mine. At the same time, “the mine” also invokes hope, dreams and different imaginations of the future for local people. The multifaceted perception of La Mina was illustrated in a conversation at an indigenous Wayúu community meeting held to organize opposition to the company’s plans to divert a river. A young man stated that 90% of the young people in La Guajira dream about obtaining employment at the mine. He was corrected by a young woman from another community: “There are also some young people who are different, who resist, like me. Working in La Mina is a slow death, like signing your own death sentence.” “They are killing us slowly” was a common phrase used by local community members to indicate the slow brutality they experience from the mine. During fieldwork people repeatedly said to me that “you enter well, but leave ill.” According to local observers, however, the majority of the Guajiro population is not yet aware of this, as “much happens in silence” and “people walk around with blinders.” This reminds us of Nixon’s (2013:2) term “slow violence”, which “occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction ... dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all”. The statements of villagers I spoke to often referred to deaths as symbolic, cultural or social, associated with the “loss” of the indigenous culture and ecological practices, not least the ability to practice their spiritual customs, such as dreaming. Death is also related to the drought caused by the mine’s deforestation and diversion of rivers to expand coal production. Community representatives say that “the mine” has dried out, deviated or simply “killed” seventeen rivers and streams. As the mine has expanded, sacred sites and cemeteries have been destroyed (Social Capital Group 2010). In Wayúu culture, cemeteries and the funerary rituals that happen there are very important: not treating them with respect creates a “spiritual imbalance” and breaks connections with ancestors (Guerra Curvelo et al. 1998). Death is, at the same time, very physical for the Wayúu. Communities in the driest and northernmost part of La Guajira suffer from high child mortality due to under- or malnutrition, and changes to the climate and natural landscape have made it even more challenging for them to cultivate crops or keep cattle (Avilés 2019; Colombia Reports 2018). Mining, especially its “theft of water”, is often mentioned as part of the explanation for the high mortality rates (Colombia Reports 2018). In 2015 the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ordered the Colombian government to take precautionary measures to safeguard the Wayúu, whose “lives and personal integrity were at risk” (Comision Interamericana de Derechos Humanos 2015). Three years after this decision, the Colombian Supreme Court of Justice concluded that the Colombian state was still failing to address the humanitarian crisis in Guajira (Avilés 2019:1760).

The frequent references to death were likewise connected to murders and death threats by paramilitary groups against social leaders and environmental defenders (Indepaz and Reforma Agraria 2019; Le Billon et al. 2020). More than a handful of guajiro activists fighting for indigenous and environmental rights received death threats during my research. Nationally 282 social leaders were killed in 2018, a figure that has increased since the peace agreement in 2016 (ibid.). Some of the threats that occurred in La Guajira during my stay explicitly state that these so-called “guerrilla fighters will be killed for attacking the company with their stupid claims” (Aguilas Negras 2019; see also McKenzie and Cohen 2018). In true Mbembean style, Lara Coleman (2018), who has studied CSR practices in the Colombian oil industry, argues that “it is those conceived as obstacles to capitalist imperatives of development and growth who are prone to being targeted by exceptional measures” (p. 6), such as paramilitary threats. Paramilitaries, as Michael Taussig (2005) describes them, are like “ghosts flitting between bare life and order”. They arise, grow, and develop in the shadows, in a grey area where the boundaries between order and disorder are blurred and confused (Civico 2006). Paramilitary groups are known to have historic links to extractive companies (Ballvé 2013;
Ramírez Cuellar 2005; Vélez-Torres 2014), including some coal companies (PAX 2014). Whether there is or has been a direct financial link between paramilitary violence and La Mina has still not been documented, but many believe it exists.

A pertinent narrative among communities neighboring the mine is the experience of being criminalized, controlled and deprived of freedom. One indigenous leader explained how they used to go hunting around the territory, but now they are treated as criminals if they do so by what he called “the soldiers of La Mina”. A villager who lives around ninety meters from the railway said: “We are not free any longer. We can’t move around. Many have died, as they have been hit by the train. The security guards walk around and keep an eye on everything”. This type of disciplinary power and militarization recalls Mbembe’s suggestion that to “live under late modern occupation is to experience a permanent condition of ‘being in pain’” (Mbembe 2003:39). Indeed, many communities in “the area of influence” feel they are “in pain”. The current situation in La Guajira, which William Avilés (2019) has called the “Wayúu tragedy”, recalls ideas about the genocide-ecocide nexus (Crook and Short 2014). Among the existing ecological and socio-political factors that create morbid visions and forms of life in La Guajira, the railway emerges as an important symbol and apparatus in the larger continuum of the genocide-ecocide nexus, which we can say begins with colonialism12 and continues with the ecologically and socially repressive measures of coal-mining. The corporate management of death offers insights into the productive use of corporate security technologies, to which we now turn.

**Managing railway mortality**

The president of La Mina wants to show me something in response to my interview question about how the company reacts immediately after “a security event.” On his phone he shows me a video with a person lying on the railroad, just in front of a coal train coming towards him. In this case, which happened the day before our breakfast interview, the train did manage to stop in time, and the person survived. The president tells me, with some degree of pride in his voice, that through an already existing WhatsApp group the company’s management was informed about this incident quickly and were able to react accordingly, calling on the appropriate authorities to investigate the occurrence and getting in touch with the family of the individual concerned. Then he said, “It is actually a crime,” and a moment later, “but we won’t press charges.”

This event is based on field notes from an interview I conducted in May 2019 with the then president of La Mina. For the coal company such a “security event”13 is something that must be managed, as having a man lying on the railroad in front of an oncoming train is not only a crime but a threat to its operations. Concretely it caused an interruption to the production flows, which, according to the business management literature, is considered a serious reputational threat for a company, as it needs to deliver reliable and efficient energy (Prno and Slocombe 2012; Thomson and Boutilier 2011). The almost everyday event described in the vignette

---

12 This has parallels with Laura Bear’s *Lines of the Nation* (2007), an ethnohistorical study showing how the Indian railway is closely linked to colonial and post-colonial state-formation processes.

13 In the interview, the interest in “external” security (versus industrial safety) was clarified. The specific exemplification of “a security event” as a man on the tracks was provided by the president: I did not make any reference to suicides or deaths.
reflects a “quasi-event”, something which never “quite achieve[s] the status of having occurred or taken place” (Povinelli 2011:13). However, seen in the wider context of social death and corporate sovereignty, this (quasi-)event provides us with a unique exemplification of how such business interruptions activate various corporate security technologies. It also touches upon the more existential and dystopic question of whether (indigenous) populations, not even in death or when about to face death, can escape their occupation (Mbembe 2019). If one wishes to liberate oneself from the slow violence and social death the mine is causing by letting a coal train run over one’s body, the corporate management will in all cases intervene in order to manage the situation to avoid further disruption, loss of reputation and complaints. What this example indicates is that corporate power enters the intimate sphere of death and influences ways of dying, as well as the spiritual remnants of the dead bodies whenever Wayúu cemeteries are bulldozed or moved, as mentioned above.

The corporate management of the “vulnerability of the railway” works on both hard and soft forms of security. An example of how this works on the soft, discursive level is how the company has tried to give new meaning to the railway:

“We propose giving the railway we operate a Wayúu name and encouraging the Wayúu to see the train and railway land as part of their environment, as opposed to an alien and harmful element. This should also help reduce train-related accidents involving people and livestock. […] We are concluding a study of mental health, alcohol and drug use among the Wayúu to understand better and act against the possible causes of suicide connected to the railway. We propose a cultural project based on Wayúu rituals that can help re-establish a new meaning for the railway area” (La Mina 2008:19).

By trying to change the local connotations of the railway from “a scar that divides and kills us” to “something that is not harmful and is part of our environment”, the company is attempting to manage mortality along the railway by installing new imaginations in peoples’ minds. This is a central element of counterinsurgency operations according to RAND researchers, for whom counterinsurgency means seeing “The Mind as a Central Front” (Gompert 2007:7). Along with this initiative, it was proposed to run education and information campaigns with children, young people and adults living near the railway, warning them of its dangers in an effort to reduce accidents from crossing it (La Mina 2008; El Heraldo.co 2016), a practice still pursued today. This representational act to restore the company’s image and ultimately eliminate train disruptions and consequently secure profits is an example of “soft” security. The company’s use of language and categorizing as a social technology to pacify opposition and manage risks is also seen in the way deaths are considered either “suicides” or “accidents”.

**Corporate classification of deaths as self-inflicted vs. the dark forces, yolujas**

The company’s explanations for railway deaths suggest that, in one way or another, the deaths are either self-inflicted (related to mental health, alcohol, drug use, suicide) or simply “accidents” (El Heraldo.co 2016; Fundación La Mina 2009). This classification of deaths as either accidents or suicides should be seen as a way to manage the “discomfort” that the deaths create for the company. Opposed to Wayúu perception of deaths and suicides, the very definition of these deaths becomes a political question. In Wayúu tradition, there is no such thing as suicide. When someone dies the physical body dies, but the aa’in (the Wayúu vital energy) is still alive, becoming a yoluja (a wraith) while being changed into a non-human form. Then it goes to Jepira,
the place where dead Wayúu live. As a Wayúu is quoted saying in La Mina’s own study from 2009, when a person wants to commit suicide, it is the yoluja who makes the person think that way (Fundación La Mina 2009: 35). In Jepira the deceased will be reunited with his or her ancestors and deceased animals. In Wayúu mythology there are two transformations of death: the first happens when the body dies, the second after what they call “the second burial”, a very important event for the Wayúu. At this point, which is normally marked by a ritual that takes place at least three years after the death, the bones are gathered and cleaned and deposited in a communal urn. At this point, the deceased will lose his or her identify forever, and the spirit of the dead turns into either rain (highly blessed in La Guajira’s semidesert) or a wanulü (a spirit of disease and death). In both cases it returns to earth (Guerra Curvelo et al. 1998; Reverol 2017). When a Wayúu experiences a sudden suffering or death, he or she is “attacked by a yoluja” (Reverol 2017:280). Potdevin’s (2016:48) novel confirms that, instead of suicide, death is about the “dark forces” that come and lead a person to death. The company’s foundation called their 2009 fieldwork-based study of mental health, alcoholism, drug addiction and suicide among the Wayuu “The train of the yoluja”, yoluja here being translated as “the devil”, just like a Wayúu leader I often spoke to, who continued to call the coal train itself “el diablo”. Reminiscent of Michael Taussig’s (1980) work The Devil and Commodity Fetishism, this classification of death is thus about blame and cause. Whereas in Wayúu tradition there is no such thing as suicide, the company treats suicide as one of the two most probable explanations for the high level of railway deaths, the other being accidents (El Heraldo.co, 2016; Fundación La Mina, 2009). To classify a death as suicide, death must be regarded as “self-inflicted”, which places the blame on the person who has taken his or her own life. For the Wayúu, however, deaths that happen in this way are caused by devil-like spirits, trauma, discord or the slow social death described in previous sections. When death is considered to be self-inflicted, it is not possible to understand it as a result of precariousness, harm or marginalization. By calling the death a suicide or calling the person a drunkard—a way of blaming the individual proposed by corporate representatives—the company can push responsibility for it away from the precarious situation and socio-cultural vulnerability created by the mine. The slow, environmentally organized violence and killing is the main source of grievance for many, among a series of other conditions more indirectly related to the coal mine and its infrastructure, such as the feeling of abandonment by the state.

Hard and soft corporate security as establishing conviviencia

The mining president was, in our interview, not completely ignorant to the impacts mining is causing, but his point about the man on the tracks was that it was a security issue for the company, as well as being a crime. The crime this person committed in his likely attempt at suicide was that “he trespassed on my property”. The railway is fully owned by the coal company and only operates for the purpose of coal transport; trespassing is considered a serious legal violation by the company, not only in principle, but also for security reasons. The paradoxical duality of, on the one hand, a sudden and clear demarcation of property and, on the other hand, the lack of a fence out of respect for local customs illustrates the dynamic between hard and soft security that is ever-present at such extractive sites (Dunlap 2019b). Not having a fence can be seen as a “respectful”, tolerant and “inclusive” version of soft security, but talking about “my property” and “a crime” points to the existence of a harder form as well. And this oscillation continues. In the case of the potentially suicidal trespasser, the president said he would not bring charges against him for

---

14 This is closely related to the “myth of the drunken native American” (Duran 1995:95), which has persisted from colonial times to today, reflecting a larger history of colonial perceptions of “natives” being poor, badly educated and embedded in cultural conflicts, ignoring the possibility that state policies directly harm indigenous populations.
the crime, which he explained was because “we are regretful (nos da pena) about what we have done in these areas”. He discussed this a little with himself, first explaining his regret as “we entered into their territories, their zone, and made a railway, we interrupted their life.” On the other hand, he said animatedly: “These indigenous peoples also need to understand that they live in a country where everybody benefits from our operation; this is not only about them, we provide an income for the state. So they have to understand that we have to live together. This is about convivencia (coexistence).”

To establish and maintain this convivencia and protect the operation so that the mine can continue “providing income for the state” and “well-being for La Guajira”, the company undertakes specific practices and procedures, some of which are discursive. Others are more overt security actions such as surveillance practices and the increased presence of security guards. A tangible solution proposed by the company was exactly to intensify physical surveillance and private security along the length of the railway to the port. Besides installing a dynamic force of mobile private and public security guards to monitor the railway and its surroundings, another measure was to put a “bi-rail” in front of the coal train, that is, an empty single-wagon train to look out for movements of humans or livestock on or around the railway and to get people to keep their distance. The corporate ambition to force living, in this case by intensified surveillance practices, is also reflected in the corporate foundation’s statistical work. In the 2009 study, besides tables of statistics counting the deaths of humans and animals, “vidas salvadas” (saved lives) are also documented, which fell from 116 lives in 2006 to 100 in 2008 (p. 28). A more recent initiative to prevent train-related accidents, corporate managers told me, is to deploy (currently in a pilot program) guards with a more social profile called “vigias”. These are mostly people from local communities who are hired to do this kind of protection-cum-surveillance. This type of civil-military security effort can be linked to pacification and counterinsurgency strategies designed to control land and secure processes of capital accumulation (Dunlap 2019b). Trying to avoid harm and to “take the social approach”, the company aims to make people govern themselves according to corporate schemes of security and the protection of life. To show social concern is inherently linked with minimizing disruptions and maintaining profits. Viewing this in relation to theories of social death, Short (2010:842) states that social death can “even result from attempts to do good: to enlighten, to modernise, to evangelise”. Furthermore, it “can even aggravate physical death by making it indecent, removing all respectful and caring ritual, social connections, and social contexts that are capable of making dying bearable and even of making one’s death meaningful” (Card 2003:73). In a situation of “modern occupation”, the suicidal behavior discussed above can be seen as an effort to liberate oneself from the precarious situation of a slow and social death.

**Death as agency, suicides as vandalism?**

To use death as an escape from precarity can also be understood as a call for a moral reaction to (indigenous) misery and slow death, as Povinelli (2008, 2011) writes. Spectacular forms of death require that “we take sides” (Povinelli 2008:522) and react ethically, in contrast to the slow and quiet deaths of everyday (indigenous) misery that goes unnoticed, like Nixon’s (2013) slow violence. Mbembe speaks about death as an act of agency (Mbembe 2019). In his Hegelian reading, “the human being truly becomes a subject … in the struggle and the work through which he or she confronts death” (Mbembe 2003:14). Suicide, for Mbembe, can be understood as an emancipatory act, as he states how the body “in death,

---

15 According to sources close to the company, this did not have any noteworthy effect, and livestock and people continued to be run over by the train.
literally and metaphorically escapes the state of siege and occupation” (ibid.: 37). This intrinsic relationship between resistance and self-destruction—“death as agency” (ibid.: 39)—is also seen in nineteenth-century anti-slavery writing, where suicide was presented as direct resistance to the tyranny of slavery, according to the historian Richard Bell (2012). Foucault (1976b:44) writes that formerly, in the era of Hobbes’ sovereignty, suicide was a crime, as it was a way of seizing “the power of death” that only the sovereign had the right to exercise.

While I was not able to trace this particular person on the railway in the CEO’s story and ask him about his reasons for acting as he did, we can take him as representative of the Wayúu population, who feel marginalized and impoverished (see e.g. Fundación La Mina 2009; Las2Orillas.co 2017; Posada 2020). For the Wayúu the world of the dead, or Jepira, is also where one will be reunited with one’s ancestors, dead relatives and animals, and Jepira is even, in some writings, equated with paradise (Moya 2018). Wayúu mythology also indicates that the yolujá can return to earth from Jepira in order to confront a relative (the man on the tracks) with his own death (the coal train coming towards him). The potential to confront one’s death means being “cast into the incessant movement of history” and becoming a true subject (Mbembe 2003:14). At the same time it has the potential to force a moral reaction (Povinelli 2011) from those to whom one feels invisible or by whom one feels enslaved.16 But before we ignorantly celebrate a play featuring a death on the railway as a heroic act of resistance, it is important to understand how death is both socially produced and also, in this case, productive for a sustained corporate technology in that it creates an opportunity to normalize corporate social control. As these deaths cause severe “discomfort” for the mining operations due to the risk of disruption to the mining and the loss of reputation, they provoke and normalize increased population management, surveillance, and physical security. Moreover, not only are these deaths seen as (indirect) risks, the corporation views suicides as a form of sabotage of the infrastructure of the mine, in this case, the railway. According to La Mina Foundation’s 2008 study (p. 29), “vandalism is, according to our inquiries, totally related to […] the death of animals, accidents, and suicides. The indigenous people express their disagreement with La Mina’s non-payment policy, which leads them […] to make claims trying to paralyze the mining operation”. By considering suicides to be vandalism and “a threat to security” for the mining project, increased “soft” and “hard” corporate security technologies are justified. Backed by a complex security assemblage of military practices (Buur and Sumich 2019), formal and informal intelligence work and contracted private security companies in a context of the persecution of local community leaders, the company’s insistence on “preserving life” is maintained in their everyday management of railway deaths.

**CONCLUSION**

The corporate management of mortality is closely linked to the protection of the company’s investment in and transport of coal, and more generally its corporate security. This article has focused specifically on the corporate management of death as it occurs in everyday circumstances when it poses a risk to the company’s delivery of reliable and efficient energy. Making up for possible brutal acts and the violent appearance of the company, social work and preventive measures are needed for the company to maintain its social license to operate while also controlling the risk of sabotage and unrest, ultimately to secure its profits. The biopolitical ambition is to foster conduct whereby local people begin to govern themselves in a

---

16 The link with slavery was made by several Wayúu and Afro-Colombian inhabitants who were interviewed, and the feeling of being invisible is described by many communities along the railway.
way that ensures the security and well-being of the company in the tensions between everyday practices and exceptional measures. In this case it means internalizing suicidal conditions and the company’s perception of the railway as something that is “part of the environment”, but also dangerous and potentially fatal. The self-discipline to keep one’s distance from it in order to respect the “noble” corporate task of providing an income for the state means that corporate control has crept into the intimate sphere of peoples’ deaths, causing physical deaths, as well as creating conditions of social death for the Wayúu who live near La Mina and its railway. The article has demonstrated how individualizing the causes of death on the railway produces specific relationships and realities. Taking my point of departure in a deadly event reflecting the narrative of suicides in La Guajira that forced a coal train to brake and stop for a moment, thus disrupting its perfectly scheduled production flow, it was shown how the corporate management of life and death in respect of extractive infrastructure creates new opportunities for enhancing “soft” and “hard” forms of corporate security technologies. This article has found that the mining company’s strategies and practices often work in a productive tension between the corporation’s biopolitical attempts at soft security practices and the hard technologies of mining protection.

REFERENCES


CENSAT. 2015. ‘La Mina, Carbón para las potencias y miseria y probreza para Colombia y La Guajira’. *Extractivismo en Colombia - Meaminería, Conflicto y Alternativas.*


Colombia Reports. 2018. ‘11 Children Died of Starvation in Colombia Last Week Alone: Health Institute’.


El Heraldo.co. 2016. ‘Campaña Para Evitar Muertes En La Vía Férrea de La Mina’.


La Liga contra el Silencio. 2019. ‘Petroleras y mineras financian a la Fuerza Pública y a la Fiscalía’.


La Mina, Prodeco, Drummond, Gobierno Nacional, Gobernador del Cesar, Gobernadora de la Guajira, Fundacion Ideas para La Paz, and CREER. 2018. ‘Declaración Conjunta de Rechazo a Las Amenazas a La Vida e Integridad de Personas’.

Las2Orillas.co. 2017. ‘Katsaliamana, 210 Días de Resistencia Pacífica de La Etnia Wayuu En La Guajira’.


Lopez, Martin. 2019. ‘Fracking en La Guajira - qué Infamia!’ *Las2Orillas*.


Montero, Oscar David. 2019. ‘Colombia’s Indigenous Genocide: Times of Life and Death’. *Colombia Reports*.


Sheriff, Robin, and Jacqueline Gilbert. forthcoming. ‘Oneiric Ecologies: Wayúu Dreaming, Environmental Degradation and Culture Change in La Guajira, Colombia’.


