

Introduction

A FORGOTTEN HISTORY

FROM JUAN VALDEZ TO PABLO ESCOBAR, for the past half century at least, a *mestizo* man with a thick mustache has represented Colombia on the world stage. Valdez was a fictional character who during the 1960s and early 1970s promoted Colombian coffee to the international market. Escobar was a cocaine kingpin who in the 1980s and early 1990s led a war against his extradition to the United States. The inspiration for the Valdez character was the typical male farmer of the Andean interior. He wore a straw hat, a poncho, and *alpargatas* (rope-soled sandals), carried a machete, and was always accompanied by Conchita, a mule loaded with jute sacks of the precious bean. Escobar, in contrast, established his own visual referent. His curly hair, protruding belly, colorful shirts, dispassionate expression, and fleet of aircraft filled with tons of the profitable alkaloid have inspired so many telenovelas and movies that at this point he is as fictional as Valdez. And between the two icons extends the history of a country that in two decades transitioned from a coffee republic to a narcotics nation.

But before the bucolic Valdez yielded to the warmongering Escobar, marijuana traffickers partnered with US buyers in the early 1970s to flood North American cities and suburbs with the drug, thereby capitalizing on growing countercultural demand, and at the end of the decade these traffickers resisted the frontal attack of the state. Popularly known as *marimberos*, these pioneers of the drug trade came from the Guajira peninsula and the neighboring Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, two areas in the northernmost section of the country's Caribbean coast that were considered as barely belonging to the nation-state. Although *marimberos* made Colombia the main supplier of US drug markets, and later became the first targets of the US-led "war on drugs" in South America, the boom they brought to life is a forgotten chapter

of the innocent era before the cocaine industry car-bombed the country. After them other peoples in poor and isolated territories became involved in the cultivation, commercialization, and exportation of drugs, making Colombia one of the principal producers in the world and a problem for hemispheric security.

How did a peripheral region become the birthplace of the illicit drug trade that turned Colombia's coffee republic into a narcotics nation? And why did this first boom in illicit drugs not only decline but also fall into oblivion? These unanswered questions form this book's points of departure. For the past three decades, scholars, journalists, and artists have focused on untangling the ins and outs of the hydra of cocaine processing, trafficking, diplomacy, and war. Academic literature on the popularly known *bonanza marimbera*, however, is scant. Most existing works were produced at the time of the boom, when social scientists, politicians, and diplomats sought to explain a novelty for which there were no precedents and they had no framework. Between academic debates and ideological controversies, experts and stakeholders forged a consensus according to which this boom was a regional anecdote of the absence of the state in a frontier society and the result of the moral degeneration that US consumers and smugglers brought with them in their search for new sources of marijuana. Its decline, on the other hand, was interpreted as the logical outcome of boom-and-bust dynamics and of the takeover of the country by the cocaine cartels.¹

In this book, I take a different approach and instead argue that the marijuana boom was as dramatic a turning point in the history of Colombia as the one that took place with coffee. Moreover, I find that the marijuana boom was also a critical component of hemispheric relations to the extent that it served as a training ground for the "war on drugs" in South America. Without denying the weakness of central governments in the marijuana region, or the crucial role US buyers played in stimulating this illicit export economy, I contend that the causes of the boom cannot be found in "the myth of the absence of the state," much less in external factors.² Instead, I examine and analyze the process of integration of the broader region that includes the Guajira peninsula and the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta into national and international political, commercial, and cultural networks centered in the Andean interior and oriented toward the United States. I assert that the marijuana boom was the product of unintended consequences stemming from a series of state interventions that the Colombian government carried out in pursuit of agrarian development and nation-state formation.

From the early twentieth century into the late 1960s, these state-led reforms were implemented with support from US federal governments and private investors. The contradictory ways in which local, regional, national, and international interest groups coalesced in response to these state interventions created a new arena of contestation and accommodation that materialized in the marijuana boom of the 1970s.

Without disregarding boom-and-bust dynamics and the rapid expansion of the cocaine business as factors for the subsequent collapse in the marijuana export economy, I call attention to more important causes. In particular, the political and diplomatic struggles to define the state response to the growing drug traffic between Colombia and the United States better explain the decline. The criminalization of producers and traffickers and the militarization of the region between 1978 and 1980—a concerted initiative on the part of the Colombian and US governments—were deliberate strategies to sort out deep domestic crises unfolding in both countries in a context of increasing militarism as the Cold War escalated at the end of the 1970s. The marijuana region served as a laboratory for the US and Colombian governments to experiment with a novel approach to statecraft and international cooperation, an approach that assumed drug production and traffic to be security threats that warranted bilateral military interventions in peripheral areas where national sovereignty and US hemispheric hegemony were challenged. On the ground, the campaign of crop eradication and traffic interdiction prompted marijuana traffickers to develop mechanisms of survival that led to ferocious competition among them, so that their business practices morphed from reciprocity and solidarity to indiscriminate violence in the form of killings, robberies, and betrayals, making marijuana cultivation, commercialization, and exportation an expensive and less viable practice.

This book's publication happens to coincide with a sweeping change to marijuana policy throughout the world, from decriminalization to legalization. In Colombia, medical marijuana is legal (albeit not yet completely regulated), but recreational consumption is still prohibited and is a contentious matter. After years of toleration following the 1994 Constitutional Court order allowing individuals to possess a personal dosage, a presidential decree came into force on October 1, 2018, that prompted the National Police to conduct raids against recreational users. Months later, the Constitutional Court reversed the decision. In the meantime, excessive police activity and even brutality have not prevented activists and enthusiasts from regularly protesting through social media and direct action, including calling for

fumatones—marathons of public marijuana smoking in designated parks. In the United States, at this writing twenty-six states and the District of Columbia have fully legalized marijuana. News about increasing tax revenues, growing incomes for small entrepreneurs and farmers, and even employment for veterans of the “war on terror” conflict with reports on the difficulties and challenges that producers, merchants, and consumers face in dealing with the gap between state and federal laws. But long before marijuana came in from the cold, an agrarian country in South America traveling a rugged road to industrialization and urbanization supplied the largest market in the world with tons of weed at a moment when youth challenged the US government’s forms of domination and hegemonic projects at home and abroad one joint at a time.

Using a multiscale perspective on local, regional, national, and international developments; a commodity studies approach; and methods of political, cultural, and diplomatic history, this book addresses Colombia’s forgotten history of its marijuana boom in the hope of decoding one of the greatest conundrums of our times: how and why illicit drug economies and cultures emerged in the Americas in the last quarter of the twentieth century, and how massive drug trafficking, and the violent structures that sustain it, was born.³

REGION AND NATION

In the national imaginary, the Guajira and Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta occupy a singular place. Precariously connected to the rest of the littoral and the Andean interior through overland trails, the peninsula and the mountain range became objects of inquiry, exploration, and inspiration for thinkers, entrepreneurs, and artists in search of spaces and peoples not yet fully integrated with the modern nation-state. It is not a coincidence that the first Colombian modernist novel, *Four Years Abroad Myself*, and the most famous work on the “magical realism” of Latin American modernity, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, take place in the Guajira and the Sierra Nevada.

While much has been written about the landmark novel of Colombia’s Nobel Prize winner, little has been said about the work of one of his mentors. Before there was Gabriel García Márquez, Colombia had Eduardo Zalamea Borda. It was Zalamea Borda who overcame Colombian literature’s “sad provincial condition” to find the “authentically universal.”⁴ In *Cuatro años a bordo de mí mismo: Diario de los cinco sentidos* (Four Years Abroad

Myself: Diary of the Five Senses), Zalamea Borda tells the story of a young aspiring writer who, finding Bogotá “narrow, cold, disastrously built, with pretensions of a big city,” travels to its antipode, the Guajira, where rumor has it that anyone can make “marvelous business” and get rich.⁵ In search of women to love and pearls to buy, he finds a cosmopolitan world of contraband, sexual pleasure, and violence that transforms him forever. Published in 1934, almost a decade after Zalamea Borda left the Guajira, the book came out at the same time that Liberal president Alfonso López Pumarejo came to power with an ambitious modernization plan. In tune with its times, the novel was “a romantic wandering” that criticized development, and it became an instant classic and a best seller.⁶ Two decades later, the first generation of nationally trained anthropologists began to study the peoples of the Guajira through a lens similar to what Zalamea Borda had used—that is, as an archaic human group confronting modernity.⁷

By then, Zalamea Borda was a successful diplomat, and he returned to the Guajira to advocate for its modernization. Under his leadership, a governmental commission attended an international meeting of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (Unesco) in Paris in May 1960 to promote the Guajira as the setting of the pilot project in Latin America for Unesco’s Desertification and Arid Zones program. Zalamea Borda and his team presented the Guajira as “a zone that should be treated as of high national interest” and requested the “scientific, technical, and financial assistance” of Unesco to pursue “the organization of a live economic and cultural frontier of DEEP PATRIOTIC SENSE” (capitals in the original). During the next few months, Bogotá, with the help of Washington, Unesco, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Fulbright Commission, created the institutes that administered the program that would make the Guajira an “active coast in terms of the exploitation of maritime resources, tourism, international trade, and a future great export industry.”⁸ But no bureaucracy could compete with neighboring Venezuela’s oil economy, and these international efforts to create a productive sector in the peninsula proved insufficient. For the rest of the 1960s the Guajira’s indigenous people continued living in precariousness, depending on rich Venezuela for survival.⁹

Much like the Guajira, the Sierra Nevada exists as a liminal place in Colombia’s imagination. Since the mid-nineteenth century, its unique ecosystems have enchanted visionaries who wished to colonize areas with abundant natural resources. In 1855, a young French anarchist named Élisée Reclus published the first modern account of the mountain range, a book that recounts

the adventurous two years Reclus spent working on a tropical agriculture project he described as a “great whirlwind of work and commerce” involving a “brave people who live without preoccupation for the future.”¹⁰ Although Reclus’s project failed and he returned to Europe empty-handed—to become the father of comparative geography—others followed his example and wrote about the socioeconomic potential of the Sierra Nevada.¹¹ Through governmental reports, chorographic commissions, and travelers’ accounts, men of letters and science invented a “savage frontier” to which the state had to bring progress by supporting investors in agricultural enterprises.¹² This “otherness” had made the Sierra Nevada the cradle of modern anthropology and archaeology in Colombia by 1941, when another Frenchman, renowned ethnologist Paul Rivet, who lived in exile in Bogotá under the official auspices of the Liberal government, sent his Austrian mentee Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff and the latter’s Colombian wife, Alicia Dussán, to found there a local branch of the National Institute of Ethnology (IEN).¹³ During the next five years, the couple studied the four indigenous groups that lived in the Sierra Nevada’s three watersheds, and concluded that they were on the verge of cultural extinction.¹⁴ The ethnologists’ *indigenismo* aimed to foster a more inclusive national culture by counteracting the beliefs of racial superiority that prevailed in Colombia’s coffee republic.¹⁵ However, their works represented the Sierra Nevada as a world that stood in opposition to the modern nation-state though it was swept by external forces out of its peoples’ control.¹⁶

This nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century academic and artistic literature set the foundation for the official discourse that cast the Guajira and the Sierra Nevada as one of the nation’s primitive alterities, its shadow, its other. It is no surprise that Macondo, the fictional town of García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and paragon of premodern isolation and endogamy, was located somewhere in the Sierra Nevada after the Buendía family migrated from the Guajira. But contrary to these discourses, the peninsula and the mountain range have been historically integrated into, and dependent on, linkages to national and international webs of trade, investment, and politics.¹⁷ The prevalent idea of the Guajira and the Sierra Nevada as places and peoples without history is one more case of “Occidentalism,” that is, a series of representational operations that separates the capitalist world into bounded units, disaggregates their relational histories, turns differences into hierarchies, and naturalizes these representations as factual realities.¹⁸

Once we widen our gaze to consider the larger region, this vision does not hold. Located in the most septentrional area of South America, with the

islands and the isthmus to the north and west, respectively; the Venezuelan Gulf and Lake Maracaibo to the east; and the Magdalena River to the south, the area was known until the late 1960s as the Greater Magdalena. A bridge between the Caribbean and Andean basins, the Greater Magdalena and its contours corresponded to the colonial Gobernación de Santa Marta, the first area of Spanish exploration and settlement on the South American continent. With the pyramidal Sierra Nevada at the center, expeditionaries founded Santa Marta (1525) on the bay area near the western watershed; Riohacha (1545) on the long coast facing the sea and the peninsula and bordering the northern watershed; and Valledupar (1550) in the great valley between the Sierra Nevada and the Perijá cordillera, next to the southeastern watershed. Through trade with and war against native peoples, each settlement generated its area of influence along its respective watershed.¹⁹ But because climatic and soil conditions, chronic labor scarcity, and demographic dispersion doomed large-scale agriculture in the Gobernación de Santa Marta, raising and trading cattle became the area's only viable economic activity. English, French, and Dutch merchants arrived regularly at various bays and inlets, especially in the upper Guajira peninsula, looking for livestock and hides to exchange for goods and African slaves. For centuries, the socioeconomic life of this "Caribbean without plantation" consisted of contraband commerce, cattle ranching, and an intimate connection with the maritime circuits of the Atlantic world.²⁰

By the end of the nineteenth century, when what had been the Gobernación de Santa Marta became the Department of Magdalena—popularly known as Greater Magdalena to differentiate it from the smaller and contemporary department of the same name—a new export economy emerged in the Andean interior. The prosperity from several coffee booms allowed the existing Liberal and Conservative parties to consolidate. In the process, a new ideology of whiteness as *mestizaje* developed in Colombia.²¹ Although the discourse of *mestizaje* celebrated cultural and racial mixture, it also inscribed racialized regional differences "in the spatial ordering" of the nation-state, placed whiteness at the top of the hierarchy, and justified the marginalization of territories and peoples that did not conform to this vision.²² Building upon Enlightenment conceptions of the voluptuous nature of the New World and nineteenth-century European racial theories, poets, artists, intellectuals, lawyers, diplomats, and politicians imagined a temperate center of the nation located in the Andean region and inhabited by whites and *mestizos* as being the seat of civilization. In contrast, the darker races living in the periphery of

tropical lowlands and agricultural frontiers were predestined to barbarism.²³ Although lowlands and frontiers were not excluded from the nation, their peoples did not exercise citizenship in meaningful ways or benefit from state resources.²⁴ In contrast to what happened in other Latin American countries, Colombia's coffee booms helped to both fragment the nation along racialized regional differences and exacerbate difficulties in economic, political, and cultural relations between the central state and the peripheries (both tropical lowlands and agricultural frontiers).²⁵

Paradoxically, this long-term process of transforming the Greater Magdalena from a corner of the transnational Caribbean world into a frontier of the Colombian nation-state played in its favor during the first half of the twentieth century. The United States was increasingly interested in Colombia because of its strategic location at the gateway of South America and adjacent to the recently completed Panama Canal. This interest contributed to turning the tropical lowlands of the Greater Magdalena into a setting where national governments experimented with various approaches to agrarian modernization.²⁶ In search of raw materials—and enticed by Colombia's favorable policies for attracting foreign capital—Boston-based United Fruit Company began to invest financial and technological resources into its large-scale agriculture projects located in the most fertile areas of the Sierra Nevada's western watershed. During the following decades, US foreign aid and international development agencies joined the efforts to transform other sections around the mountain range in order to produce tropical crops. In a country that was centered in the Andean region and depended on coffee exports, these foreign interventions helped integrate the national territory, modernize the economy, and consolidate the state. The cultivation, commercialization, and export of coffee, bananas, cotton, and other commodities restructured natural and social landscapes, set up circuits of production and exchange, and created opportunities for Colombians to accumulate capital and become upwardly mobile. As a contact zone where “ideologies, technologies, capital flows, state forms, social identities and material cultures meet,” twentieth-century Greater Magdalena was an important site for the encounter and mutual constitution of the “local” and the “global.”²⁷

The marijuana boom of the 1970s was a pit stop in this long history of formation and transformation of region and nation passing through world markets, particularly that of the United States. Indeed, the *bonanza marimbera* was an eruption of layers of socioeconomic contradictions—some of which had colonial origins—that twentieth-century modernizing reforms in

pursuit of agrarian development and nation-state formation revitalized. The marijuana boom of the 1970s spurred a vertical integration of territories—from highlands and foothills to lowlands and littoral—and facilitated the formation of competing social groups and synergies among them—from local elites to peasants, settlers, and urban working and middle classes—all of which made commercial export agriculture feasible and profitable. Fulfilling the promises (albeit temporarily) that modernizing state reforms made but failed to deliver, the marijuana boom succeeded in boosting the region's agricultural productivity, entrepreneurial innovation, capital accumulation, urbanization, and cultural projection.

MARIJUANA AND COCAINE

Experts have failed to see the *bonanza marimbera* as a chapter in Colombia's history of agrarian modernization, nation-state formation, and integration with the United States. This failure is due to a combination of disciplinary methods with political urgencies marinating in the *mestizo* ideology of the coffee republic, which prevented these analysts from recognizing capitalist dynamism and historical agency in areas that nationalist discourses defined as premodern. When the study of the illicit drug trade consolidated as an academic field in the late 1980s, the marijuana boom had already occurred. Economists, political scientists, and sociologists—invariably white and *mestizo* men from the Andean interior—focused their research on the current war between cocaine drug lords and the state. These scholars typically analyzed either the role of the state or that of the cocaine elites—whose members were also white and *mestizo* men from the Andean interior. Scholars examined structural factors such as rural poverty and Colombia's geostrategic position in relation to consumption markets, or they analyzed the macroeconomic and foreign policy ramifications (in the latter case, especially with regard to the United States) of the new illicit business.²⁸ The *bonanza marimbera* fell through the cracks.

After Pablo Escobar was killed in late 1993, a revisionist scholarship emerged. Following the death of *El Patrón* (the Boss), the cocaine exportation and wholesale distribution monopolies underwent a reorganization that de-escalated the war between traffickers and governments, thereby eliminating the urgency to study the cartels. Understanding how the long-running conflict and the production and traffic of drugs interacted with each other

became the most pressing need. Economic and social historians, international relations scholars, sociologists, and anthropologists examined the interactions between governments, traffickers, guerrillas, paramilitaries, and the rural and urban working classes that participated in the illicit economies. This literature concluded that the internal conflict contributed to the loss of the state's legitimacy and tenuous territorial presence, which led to a political culture that relied on weak control of individual behavior and high levels of competition and individualism.²⁹ The recession of the 1970s helped trigger the mutation of these old dynamics and traditions into a new, illicit economy, because it opened a vital social and moral space for private actors to develop alternatives to the economic slump (including drug trafficking).³⁰ In the process, illicit entrepreneurs displaced traditional elites, assumed state functions, built extensive social bases, and took over entire regions.³¹ Despite their valuable contributions, scholars continued to focus on cocaine, the commodity that fueled the country's war.³²

Anthropologists, cultural critics, educational scholars, and public intellectuals from the former marijuana region, or with personal connections to it, were the only ones looking back. By examining continuities among various cycles of contraband trade in general merchandise and agricultural commodities, these interdisciplinary studies demonstrated that the marijuana boom built upon these patterns, some of which had colonial origins dating back to the eighteenth century.³³ As contraband commerce depended on interethnic relations between smugglers from diverse racial and national origins and the Wayuu people of the upper Guajira peninsula, where the natural seaports are located, indigenous practices and norms became relevant cultural codes according to which smugglers organized procedures and established hierarchies.³⁴ This long history of contraband generated a value system that celebrated smuggling as a legitimate strategy for both individuals and groups to attain social recognition.³⁵ The *bonanza marimbera* was part of the evolution of contraband commerce, and it was also a crucial phase in the "Colombianization" of the Guajira, the region's integration into the nation.³⁶ However, this insightful literature did not call into question the underlying premise of the absence of the state, and more often than not, the marijuana boom got lost in either *longue-durée* perspectives or cultural analyses of identity that focused exclusively on the local and regional levels, leaving national and international causes and implications of the boom unexamined.

Building upon the revisionist scholarship and interdisciplinary literature, this book presents the *bonanza marimbera* as a history of nation-state

formation and interstate relations in the Americas. But to frame Colombia's first drug boom in this way forces me "to bring the state back in," taking me into muddy waters.³⁷ Lamenting the weakness or absence of the state is an old tradition in Latin America.³⁸ In the case of Colombia, the debate on the absence of the state is even more relevant, given that integration into world markets through coffee exports intensified the fragility of the state by strengthening the two political parties through which "geographically fragmented, landed oligarchies maintained regional and local supremacy in the face of challenges from below."³⁹ In this "nation in spite of itself," sovereignty was increasingly fragmented into regions; thus the *patria chica*—understood as the regional world of commerce, politics, and culture—was a more powerful binder and source of meaning than the nation-state.⁴⁰ As a result, questions of hegemony are apropos of what I examine in this book. By observing how political projects "from above" entered into conflict with visions "from below," I understand the state as "a series of decentralized sites of struggles through which hegemony is both contested and reproduced"; in other words, I view the state not as a "centralized institution of sovereign authority" but as an arena of evolving social and cultural relations of power in which public life is regulated.⁴¹ And acknowledging the centrality of regional dynamics, I widen the unit of analysis from the Guajira and Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta to the Greater Magdalena. By studying this broader region, I analyze the various and interlocking scales in which Colombia's first drug boom brought to completion a long-term process of mutual constitution of region and nation.⁴²

In placing marijuana at center stage in the story, I discovered new avenues for linking the history of twentieth-century Colombia with the history of the US hemispheric project. The transient marijuana boom was a bridge that not only connected the coffee republic and the narcotics nation, in terms of political economy, but also ushered in the transition toward a new national culture and identity, which came to fruition when cocaine linked the destinies of Colombia and the United States in various social and cultural ways. By exploring this particular case, I aim to contribute to a new historiography that recognizes the centrality of values and culture in the process of integration between Latin America and the United States, and the role that apparently remote and isolated areas in Latin America and their peoples played in shaping this integration.⁴³

Focusing the story of the origins of Colombia's drug trade business on marijuana also invites us to introduce a gender perspective in order to understand the critical role that masculinity played in the business. Women in