



VENEZUELA

**Early Solar Materialism:
*Labour, Energy, and the Political
Ecology of Salt in Venezuela***

by Gianfranco Selgas

The period between 1890 to 1980 marked Venezuela's rapid insertion into the vortex of oil extraction. A burgeoning oil industry boosted by international events fuelled the country's swift urban, economic, and socio-political transformations, particularly visible in its capital city, Caracas. Venezuela's political and cultural discourses built around oil rendered invisible other cultures nurtured around the extraction and commodification of nature, particularly agricultural, hydrological, and mineral hubs located in the Guayana-Amazon region and the country's Caribbean coast. These regional environments were highly attractive because of their potential to satisfy domestic and foreign economic interests as well as cultural representations focused on material and energy consumption. As I will put forward, during most of the twentieth century, these environments unfolded a political ecology that challenged and intermingled with the underlying logic of a fossil-fueled future.

One of these regional environments was the Araya Peninsula. Araya is located in the west of Sucre State, a historically impoverished region in northeast Venezuela known for its rich fisheries and canning industry. The Peninsula, however, secreted a 500 year-history of solar salt production. Araya is a continuous ravine of orange, red, and yellow soil

facing the Caribbean Sea. It has no freshwater rivers, and due to its barren geography, it barely manages to support the life of a few indigenous cacti. The *salina* of Araya (*salina* is Spanish for the site where salt is harvested and exploited) was once considered one of the world's most important, high-quality solar salt lagoons. Solar salt means that salt is produced by an evaporation process. This process makes solar salt lagoons different from salt mines, where rock salt is extracted from underground and used with little processing. In solar salt lagoons, brine (water rich in salt) comes directly from the sea into the lagoon. The lagoon is exposed to sunlight, which warms the water before it evaporates and leaves behind salt crystals that can be harvested. Bulk salt was traditionally extracted manually in Araya before the arrival of Spanish conquistadors. During colonial times, Dutch and Spanish ships fought over territorial control due to the high value of salt in the European markets. Due to its multiple uses – for example, preserving food and seasoning – salt rapidly became a key commodity for the Spanish crown. From the nineteenth century on, postcolonial-Venezuela adopted the system of leasing the salt lagoon to private individuals, until the National Government by Executive Decree of 1915 and the Organic Law on Revenue from Salt Mines of 1918 organized the direct administration and exploitation by the Nation.



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In Araya, salt workers, the sun, and seawater coexisted in a relational dynamic, historically transformed by the capitalist commodification of salt. The extraction and commodification of salt highlight a set of embodied practices, mediations, and infrastructures entangled in labour, place, climate, natural rhythms, and community surfaced by the elemental and somatic influxes between humans put-to-work and the conjunction of two vital elements for planetary life: water and sunlight. This relation was bounded by labour and survival: Arayeros needed salt to live and work. They used it to preserve their food and to trade with fellow citizens and merchants in Araya and Cumaná, Sucre's economic hub. In the salt lagoon, the cycles of living and extraction were synced, and traditional small-scale artisanal solar salt production coalesced with technology and infrastructure developed to

enhance productivity – for example, dykes, pumps, and crystallization ponds.

I identify the latter as an early account of solar materialism; that is, a state, condition, or quality developed in relation to the sun that aids thinking about energy otherwise.^[1 (#cmfSimpleFootnoteLink1)] Unlike oil – a raw material that only seems tangible when stored as energy or transmuted into money – , twentieth-century solar salt production in Araya signalled a range of alternative possibilities that (re)organized the relations between humans and the environment. Although the irruption of petroleum extraction in Venezuela was paired with a modern extractive industry and generalized cosmopolitan desires for prosperity, freedom, and progress; salt extraction in peripheral Araya remained somewhat locally situated, grounded in an Indigenous ecology, and displaced from the imagined community of the Venezuelan petrostate. The case of Araya puts forward a substantially different approach to energy – at least in comparison to how our relationship with fossil fuels has been arranged. This early account of solar materialism highlights energy as a metabolic process where material and symbolic exchanges happened as an entanglement of elemental – that means, solar radiation and seawater – and cultural – that means, intensive human labour to extract salt – forces.



Salt workers in the Araya Peninsula. *Araya* (1959), directed by Margot Benacerraf. Film still © 2009 Milestone Films

By the 1940s, the relevance of salt in facilitating the extraction of oil and natural gas drove the transformation of Araya into an industrial solar salt production facility. To produce industrial solar salt, however, not only implied the physicality of the commodity, but the social, spatial, and ecological environment where salt was contained.

[2 ([#cmfSimpleFootnoteLink2](#)) Official documents published by Venezuela's Ministry of Finance and the National Salt Mine Enterprise (ENSAL) indicate that between 1940 and 1980 the industrialisation of solar salt was partly linked to the expansion and modernization of the petrochemical industry in Venezuela. The salt industry's transformation brought a new political ecology to Araya. A unique visual register of this transformation is Margot Benacerraf's *Araya* (1959). The film, supported by the Royal Dutch Shell's Film Unit in Venezuela, follows the life of three families

living as salt workers, fishers, and potters in the peninsula. Fueled by oil revenues, industrialization and technology reshaped the working conditions and the landscape, eroding the life of the Arayeros and modifying the environment of the peninsula to enhance production for petrochemical and agricultural purposes.



Extracting salt and wage labor. *Araya* (1959), directed by Margot Benacerraf. Film still © 2009 Milestone Films

By paying attention to the blind spots of Venezuelan petromodernity, the cultural and environmental history of the country's under-examined regional extractive zones can tell us more about territorial transformation and socioecological relations between humans, the natural and built environment, and the elements. The case of Araya and its early solar materialism highlights other ways of thinking about energy during the ebb of oil extraction and

petroleum-fuelled modernity, both at a local and planetary scale.

1↑ (#cmfSimpleFootnoteLink1-0) After Oil Collective, Ayesha Vermuri, and Darin Barney, eds., *Solarities: Seeking Energy Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), 1. [0](#)

2↑ (#cmfSimpleFootnoteLink2-0) Elvin Delgado. "From Wetland to Saltland: Natural Obstacles and Socioecological Consequences in the Production of Solar Salt in Venezuela," *Society and Natural Resources: An International Journal* 30, 7 (2017): 797-811.
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Lead image: Salt workers in the Araya Peninsula. Araya (1959), directed by Margot Benacerraf. Film still © 2009 Milestone Films