

Why me, why here, why now?

The Magdalena River, the backbone of my home country, Colombia, is born deep in the Andes Mountains above 3,000 m.a.s.l and flows for ~1,500 km until it reaches its river mouth in the Caribbean Sea. In the last year of my undergraduate studies, I had the humbling experience of paddling for 40 days, the entire river extension. It was the perfect closure after spending months in front of a computer mapping layer after layer of multiple social and environmental variables of the river's basin for my undergraduate dissertation. Throughout the expedition, my mind kept zooming in and out into the multiple maps that supported my research. Trying to connect all those layers of information with my experience of each meter of the river that we paddled consolidated the years of intense internal dialogue emerging from my studies in environmental engineering and anthropology. The tension between these two careers was not only epistemological but also rooted in, sometimes, rival communities of practice that held contrasting cultural, social and political values. Moreover, these disciplines' assumptions and identities seemed irreconcilable: anthropology is passionate about finding the uniqueness at the margins, engineering the norm across contexts. But as I progressed in my career, I found more and more connections and bridges between these worldviews. Searching for these connections became part of my identity as a researcher.

During my expedition across the Magdalena River, I learned much from allowing my thoughts to wander across scales while I tried to ease the effort that came with each stroke. However, the moment I remember the most was disembarking in a small village named Todos No Van (No One Goes). This was an unplanned stop in a village that was not on the official maps I knew in detail, as is the case for many communities displaced by violence in Colombia. Such a disheartening name resonated with my initial feelings about the place. I was shocked by the apparent child malnutrition, the smell of the sewage water streaming next to the houses, and the plastic containers of pesticides used to store food and water. At first, I could only see misery. But listening to the words of Amparo, an elder woman leader, opened my heart to look beyond that. She kindly listened to my questions about the community's struggles and patiently guided the

conversation toward how they have collectively progressed and coped with several challenges. There where I only saw damage, pain, and hazards, she saw desire, pride, hope, resistance, and family. I was outraged and wanted to fix things. My heart might have been in the right place, but I was clearly replicating the white saviour complex that much damage has caused to communities worldwide.

Navigating the fine line between the importance of documenting damage, and fixating on it, is an ongoing struggle in my career. The unfortunate role that the fields of anthropology and engineering have also played in disfranchising and pathologizing communities partly stems from this fixation on damage. My fieldwork in Perú, México, Colombia, and South Africa offered new opportunities to learn and unlearn how to work in solidarity with historically oppressed populations. I come from a privileged family with a deep appreciation and history of involvement in academia and research. Despite living in one of the world's most unequal countries, I was privileged to receive a world-class education and hold all the identities that paved my way around the number of racial, gender, cultural, social and economic barriers that proliferate in Colombia. Many of my family members and ancestors have sought to serve the common good. This has made my commitment to collective well-being an intergenerational journey to unlearn paternalistic patterns while avoiding falling into inaction out of fear of causing more damage. This path has been supported by active choices aligned to build spaces for collective sharing founded in openness to broad and diverse academic disciplines and knowledge systems.

Based on a blend between privilege, choice, luck, stubbornness, and some vision, I pursued a Master of Public Health in South Africa (University of Cape Town). This decision contrasted with my peers following an academic career, who often chose to continue their studies in high-income countries, that may offer a more traditional path into academia. The similarities between South Africa and Colombia are remarkable, and the lack of so-called "South-South" collaborations is staggering. Concerned about the potential narrow focus of occupational health, I was initially unconvinced to conduct research in solidarity with workers spraying herbicides.

However, the genuinely interdisciplinary and system-aware research process was inspiring. The connection of study results with theory and a deep understanding of the context were key to informing national-level policies beyond individual exposure controls. Although I was offered a position as a PhD student, I felt at the time that pursuing doctoral studies was not the right path for me. Instead, I joined a collaboration between researchers in South Africa and Colombia under the umbrella of the Healthy Cities movement, where I learned the potential for action that comes from multi-country communities of practice inspired by holistic framings of human health. Ten years later, I am typing this dissertation from The University of British Columbia (Vancouver, Canada), which occupies the traditional, ancestral, and never ceded territory of the xwməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam) People. In 2015, my new interest in studying at a prestigious research-oriented university in North America felt unexpected. This idea was born simultaneously with my friendship with Dr. Trevor Hancock (University of Victoria), following long conversations on healthy cities and human ecology at a conference in Colombia. Moreover, I was increasingly interested in understanding the role of high-income countries in global sustainability and health equity issues.

British Columbia became the perfect home for many of my scholarly and personal values to converge. Territory under the stewardship of diverse Indigenous Peoples, breathtaking ecosystems, exciting environmental movements, and a vibrant and established academic community of practice moving forward integrative approaches to human health. Along with this encouraging environment, the health disparities in the province mirror the "Global North vs South" inequities, deeply affecting historically oppressed populations, such as Indigenous Peoples. Indeed, the majority of the world's gold mining companies' headquarters are located in Downtown Vancouver, a few blocks away from one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Canada. Moreover, the colonial Province was built on unsustainable natural resource extraction, which remains a crucial sector of the economy. This is truly a place where there is a notorious convergence of the multi-level factors and scales driving the planetary health challenge of global pollution. I hope to honour my path and the context that supported me by helping to elucidate the

need for interdisciplinary and system-based approaches to tackle the daunting threats to planetary health. However, above all, I see my scholarship as a tool to build bridges between knowledge systems and amplify the loud calls from communities worldwide to look beyond damage, listen, learn, and walk together in solidarity toward collective well-being.