Making Tracks: Politicizing Water Inequalities

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In the “Making Tracks” series, RCC fellows and alumni present their experiences in environmental humanities, retracing the paths that led them to the Rachel Carson Center. For more information, please click **here**.

By **Marcela López**

Since I was a child, I have had the opportunity to travel around Colombia with my family and friends and explore a wide variety of ecosystems ranging from tropical rainforests to deserts, savannas, and páramos. By traveling through these remote landscapes, I became fascinated not only by nature’s “pristine” character, but also by the large-scale infrastructure projects that were crossing, dissecting and (dis)connecting these landscapes. Dams, highways, water reservoirs, canals, and power lines captured my attention both for their scale and for the capacity of humans to control and dominate nature.

Whilst traveling around the country, I was confronted with a great challenge. What should I study if I was interested in nature and technology? Environmental engineering seemed to be the perfect fit. In technical disciplines, we were always taught that technical solutions were the best way to approach environmental and social problems. Engineering was always presented as a neutral discipline, attentive to natural dynamics and devoted to mathematical calculations, while engineers possessed the best moral values to dominate nature and to drive the process of urban modernization.

However, I was constantly confronted with a very different reality. I had grown up in Medellín, Colombia’s second-largest and most unequal city. In my everyday routine, I encountered people living in extreme poverty, deprived of access to the most basic services—and yet Medellín was proud of having one of the best public utility companies in Latin America. How could I make sense of these contradictions? Why were public services

such as water unevenly distributed in a city whose utility company was making substantial profits? Why was water at the center of social struggles? I could not simply ignore this situation and my studies in engineering were too limited to help me find explanations about persisting inequalities when it came to water access.

Thus, the need to understand the complex social realities in cities and the uneven and unjust distribution of water became my main interests, and I decided to pursue studies in geography. What I found interesting, although extremely challenging, was that geography introduced me to often difficult questions about engineering as a discipline, putting me in a position to critically interrogate my work. This was not an easy task, particularly when we engineers were always being told that our work does not have anything to do with politics. So, how to start politicizing a discipline that has always been framed as apolitical? By situating my work in the field of urban political ecology, I began an exciting journey of discovering new analytical tools, building alternative arguments, and learning from other disciplines—particularly from history—to explain contemporary environmental problems.

Who controls water in a city? How are water tariffs set up? Who makes decisions about the implementation of particular technologies? What does the right to water mean and how is it put into practice? These questions formed the basis of my efforts to start challenging dominant assumptions that explain water inequalities as the inevitable outcome of water scarcity, technical deficiencies, or financial restrictions.

The time I spent at the RCC as a research fellow contributed significantly to this exciting journey. While working on a book manuscript, I benefited significantly from the exchange with an interdisciplinary network of research fellows, students, and practitioners, and from conversations that pushed me to think more towards alternatives to improve water supply provision. I will be always grateful to the RCC community for encouraging us to go beyond our narrow disciplines, for offering an intellectual platform to develop new ways for thinking about our relations with nature, and for inspiring and supporting us in exploring different formats to present and discuss our work. Engaging in a productive dialogue at the RCC allowed us to rethink about the importance of our academic work in framing past, present, and future environmental problems. This is not only an intellectual project, but also a political endeavor.