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ICE MAGNET

The story of a thousand stories

Angela Posada-Swofford

Angela Posada-Swofford is a Miami-based Colombian-American science and environment journalist with 30 years of experience as a storyteller in Spanish and English in all platforms. She was the first Hispanic MIT Knight Fellow in Science Journalism. She is the author of a collection of eight science and adventure books for young adults read in schools in China and Latin America. She is the winner of Premio Simón Bolívar, Colombia's top journalism award. Her other accolades include an Emmy nomination for script writing and the Society of Professional Journalists' First Prize for Investigative Environmental Journalism. She works with several international Antarctic programs and is a recipient of the United States Antarctic Service Medal. Her 2019 book Hielo (Ice) is an illustrated Antarctica travelogue depicting her expeditions to that continent. She lectures on science diplomacy at several Colombian embassies throughout the world.

Stepping on the Geographic South Pole for the first time in 2005 unleashed a cascade of physical, intellectual, and emotional responses in my tired traveling bones. I had been here so many times before in my dreams! Looking at the ocean of blinding ice stretching to infinity, I tried wrapping my mind around the idea of fantastic isolation and meaning of a place that defies all conventionalisms. The heart of Antarctica, held together by one solitary mineral, can be a sensory deprivation chamber, as most times it is devoid of color, sound, texture, aroma, life. There is nothing here to inform an explorer; no Indigenous population, no native technology to guide him or her. Instead, the gelid continent becomes a mirror of the civilizations that come to it, allowing them to discover themselves in the process of trying to discover the Ice.

Beyond the altitude, beyond the cold and the lovely diamond dust covering my clothes, what I remember most while walking down the LC-130 aircraft ramp was a powerful sensation of accomplishment. It had taken a decade and a good dose of proposals to convince the Office of Polar Programs at the National Science Foundation that it was a good idea to take a US Hispanic science and environment writer down to Antarctica for the first time.

I am a child of the high Andes and the green hot tropics of South America. I chitchat with macaws and Amazon parakeets, swim with river dolphins, and play with leaf-cutter ants. But when young, my eyes inexplicably turned south to the great white patch of Antarctica, as much

a void then on my school maps as in my hungry mind. Along with photos of my favorite movie stars, I kept a manila envelope stuffed with polar wonders secretly pilfered from my dad's LIFE encyclopedia. I would spend entire afternoons examining photos of roly-poly penguin chicks and harlequined orcas spyhopping though the ice. There were also images of explorers such as Ernest Shackleton, Robert Scott, and Douglas Mawson – bearded men in torn clothes whose sad eyes spoke in silence of unbearable suffering.

But the landscapes in those photographs! The ramparts and monoliths of ice circling the continent seemed to me such an incomprehensible perfection. I believe this is when an abstract idea of Antarctica was first burrowed in my mind's eye.

I began the quest for the Ice in the '90s, while working as a food editor at *El Nuevo Herald*, the Spanish language sister of *The Miami Herald*. I had just arrived from Colombia with my husband, a writer I had met during my master's in journalism at the University of Kansas. Back then I knew I wanted to be an environmental reporter. The position did not exist at *El Nuevo Herald*, so I accepted the food editing job instead. I quickly filled my 18 weekly pages with tons of environmental stories related to meals and crops and GMOs, even sea-level rise and salt-tolerant spinach. I added recipes of artichokes and chicken almost as an afterthought, and pretty photos and interviews with famous chefs in an attempt to disguise my shameless thematic subjectivity. (Whoever said journalism is objective?)

At the same time, I created a niche by selling opinion columns about Miami to my own newspaper. Soon I had Miamians asking me what to do with their pet snakes and exotic unwanted fish, and how to keep wild alligators at bay. Then came a raging thirst for deep knowledge about the science behind the environment, which finally collided with my job, which I quit to become a freelance translator and researcher for Discovery Channel Latin America, which I abandoned to accept the Knight Fellowship in Science Journalism in 2000 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

All the while, I kept vying for the NSF media opportunity to visit Antarctica, which takes a severely limited number of applicants every year. Competition was always stiff. *National Geographic*, *The New York Times*, National Public Radio, and the like, they all presented beguiling projects, far reaching and lovingly narrated in beautiful English and multimedia formats. I, on the other hand, didn't have but a couple of clients, outside the United States, in Spanish, in print. OK, I *had* managed to sell a small bite to *WIRED*, granted I got a certain access to the new Amundsen-Scott Station. But aside from that, my reporting ideas were nothing new. The same worn out, somewhat boring, over-reported accounts of the Antarctic. No wonder they didn't make it.

It finally dawned on me that the thing to do was to find a way to link climate change, the Antarctic continent, Hispanics in the US, Hispanics in Mexico and Central and South America, and their connection back to Antarctica through the Drake Passage and the Peninsula: An ambitious narrative arc with environmental, geographic, scientific, geopolitical, historic, and social undertones.

It was the story of a thousand stories.

My proposal would target newspapers in US Hispanic cities, along with main dailies in South America, a giant magazine in Mexico – I even threw in Spain as a bonus. I would write a science and adventure novel for young adults. I would produce a documentary for Colombian TV, which would also be scavenged to be used as complementary material for the book's companion DVD. The compelling reason for me to cover Antarctica through Hispanic eyes, I told NSF in my letter, was staring at us back from the map of South America: both continents

are almost touching each other. I wanted to explore whether that geographic proximity also extended to the psyche and culture of South Americans and, by extension, to that of Hispanics in the United States. Did Antarctica even register in their minds? Were they aware of the silver thread connecting and directly influencing their own weather systems and crops and fisheries and rain patterns?

Perhaps overwhelmed by the sheer lunacy of the project, or perhaps fed up with my tiring insistence, the NSF this time said yes and offered me to take a second person along to help out with the task. It took me about three years to accomplish everything I had set out to do, including the book, plus 46 newspaper and magazine articles in five countries.

The one-hour TV documentary produced by my videographer friend and written by me with stunning b-roll from NSF was really pretty, if I say so myself. But go figure: the national TV network in Colombia, which had paid well for it, ended up launching it at 7:00 a.m. on a New Year's Day. I had to use all my diplomacy and powers of persuasion to sweetly make them understand that this could indeed be a good way for them to increase audience if only they would replay the program in primetime. They did. And it was a blast. It was a blast because for the first time Colombians got a glimpse, especially targeted to them, of how Antarctica can influence their weather, their crops, and, especially, their wallet.

I doubt any journalist has squeezed their Antarctica for a living the way I have squeezed mine – and continue to do so. Every time the smallest piece of news about the frozen land emerged, I went on full-attack mode to find angles and threads to accommodate what I had learned on the Ice with whatever was happening in it.

At first, this “attack mode” was targeted towards print and online media. It was the classic freelancing ploy: “Dear Editor, I was in the South Pole and now that researchers have determined this or that, I can write a piece about this or that.” I did not know most of these Hispanic papers’ editors in Texas or California or Washington, or the ones in other countries. I just crafted irresistible hooks to call their attention in the subject line of the emails. I dug into my old bag of tricks from my days post *El Nuevo Herald*: How can I sell this piece in ways that this editor can use? How can I make it relatable to their audiences, their national days, their national heroes, and the latest films or books?

Throughout the process I intuitively developed a taste for narrative journalism. Storytelling by using the tools of good literature to involve the emotions of the readers, take them to a place, and immerse them in a state of mind. Environment can be too polarizing and science can be too dry, so they both had to be tamed and explained. I disliked writing hard news and believed features were, are, the vehicle to the heart and the intellect.

At some point, though, it became obvious that selling articles like ornamented muffins was not going to pay the mortgage, even if I had occasionally netted the *New Scientist* or the *Boston Globe*. I had and still have a couple of small monthly contracts with visible publications in Latin America, but clearly, something had to be done. Having the benefit of two languages, I had always done translations on the side. But even that became old and competitive, and the great sources, like Discovery Channel, were changing their business models so that translations either were done in-house or outsourced to their own Latin American markets – I live in Miami Beach and became too expensive for everybody.

“Follow the money,” I kept telling myself late at night before falling asleep. But in our industry, written journalism, these words read hollow to me. How can one follow the money when publications are closing doors and most pay a pittance? When you have been trained to do one thing for decades, how do you change your chip?

But change it we must.

Surviving as a science and environment journalist these days is like attacking climate change: one has to use all weapons and go at it from all angles. Specializing in one platform, in one audience, in one kind of media, is financial suicide. One must become a jack of all trades.

Slowly I began to discover that I could get paid by talking inspirationally to live audiences. Spain and Latin America were awakening to the TEDx concept, and through acquaintances I got invited to talk in events in Costa Rica, Mexico, and Madrid. My topic of choice was Antarctica, but not the only one: I also talked about the deep oceans, space, and underground caves, still-mysterious realms where environmental issues abound and inspiration never runs out.

Then, in 2010, Antarctica called again. This time I was offered a monthlong fellowship at Palmer Station on the Antarctic Peninsula. Palmer is point zero for global warming research in the polar seas. All attention there is focused on that issue. I wasted no time in convincing NSF to let me broadcast a live wireless videoconference from a penguin rookery to 400 children in five science museums throughout Latin America. Palmer IT engineers had never done that kind of thing, and they had to move the microwave antenna, leaving everybody on station without Internet for the afternoon so I could chat away with the children and the penguins behind me. Soon, 8-year-olds in a remote Amazon village were making their own astonishing climatic connections regarding snow and their own rainy forest.

This episode attracted the attention of the Colombian Navy, which was preparing its own historic first Antarctic science expedition. They quickly hired me to be their blogger throughout the three-month-long journey sailing down the coast of South America. This gave way to a second and a third contract during the expeditions of the following years. Part of my job was to explain to Colombians – again – what justified spending millions of pesos in a trip “down there” instead of investing in hospitals or schools.

Tacitly, the other part of my job was to connect the nascent Colombian Antarctic Program with the US Antarctic Program, through drafting and editing and translating documents and also serving as the go-between lady, even asking my old Palmer friends what it would take to anchor a Navy ship in their harbor. Throughout this process I discovered the whole thing about diplomacy of science, and I just fell in love with it. There, in the field, I saw the Antarctic Treaty in action. I witnessed Latin American polar nations such as Ecuador and Peru and Uruguay – which not only have been working in Antarctica for decades but have wonderful ships and stations – become the godfathers of Colombia in Antarctica. Along with the old masters of the Ice, Argentina and Chile, those sister nations held our program by the hand, gave us every imaginable support, advice, hardware, intelligence, science. And Colombia is now returning the favor, so my role is reversed, as I am now connecting foreign scientists with the Colombian program. Bottom line, I found a new ocean of knowledge and created freelance opportunities along with it.

Nothing stays quiet for too long inside a government. A year passed and I got a call from Colciencias, which is the agency in charge of supporting fundamental and applied research in Colombia. They wanted me to train their communications office personnel and to also write environment and science stories for their website. Since Colciencias works with National Parks and several other environmental organizations, I found myself training those other people as well.

The government had also opened the door for me to go along in a few expeditions to rediscover Colombia’s environment and visit unimaginably beautiful and fragile places that had been forbidden for 50 years because of the guerrilla wars. And here is another thing: it is amazing how much of Latin America’s environment is still a black void to international (and even local) journalists. People there don’t speak English. It lacks the easiness of approach Africa does.

Getting around can be complicated. This is still an untamed land. Venture there with curiosity, good journalism, and better investigative reporting, and you might hit a mother lode.

The latest link in the freelancing chain in Colombia for me is Los Andes University, the nation's top private college. They wanted me to train doctorate students in communicating their science to lay audiences. But then I took a step beyond and offered a somewhat daring counterproposal: why not also use the university's considerable weight and credibility to start inviting policy makers to come to the labs or to the field with researchers? Bringing in a senator to roll up his or her sleeves and edit a gene or pick up the trail of a spectacled bear? I bet they don't often get those kinds of opportunities, and these moments can easily influence the birth of a new bill down the road. We are all keen to see where that road leads us in the future.

Here is one more solution for the cash-strapped freelancer: advertise yourself as a panel moderator at scientific organizations that might need an outsider to organize and introduce their presentations before an audience at congresses. The International Seabed Authority, for example, called me a few months ago, thanks to a fellow Antarctic expedition member: they wanted to hire me to moderate in Houston an important panel on deep seabed mining, an extraction method beyond 4,000 meters that is about to become the next Big Environmental Topic. All those panelists were industry leaders, and that session gave me the tools to sell three features on seabed mining.

Sometimes, though, we do things for free. And they are just wonderful. Along with three other Antarctic researchers, I am creating "Las Chicas Antárticas" (Antarctic gals), an effort to take a piece of the white continent to children in forgotten regions of Colombia (and hopefully other countries in the future). We become the storytellers of this alien world, and for a little while we fill their minds with wonder, and who knows what can happen in the future. It is when you give without expecting anything in return that things begin to happen. All we did was to vent this desire, and soon we got offers from companies to finance our visit to the little schools lost in the middle of nowhere, or to transport the children to nearby cities and buy them their lunch.

Education is a sector where I know we environmental journalists can really make a difference. I am starting to make three-minute videos on all sorts of environmental science topics for seventh- and eighth-graders. The videos are part of the educational offer of a large international publishing company specialized in school texts. I love this because it opens yet another way to entertain and educate and communicate about environment, to one of my favorite audiences of all times: young adults.

Young adults are great because they are not toddlers anymore, but they still live in a world where dreams are possible and wonders are around the corner. For them I have written and published eight science and adventure novels based on cross-sections of my own reporting along the past 30 years. *Juntos en la Aventura* (together in adventure) follows science journalist Aunt Abigail and her four nephews and nieces as they become the hero detectives of action-packed cases. I have tried not to underestimate my readers, and the 240-page novels present the science and the scientific process as it really is out there: an interdisciplinary, uncertain, and thrilling endeavor.

It's been 15 years since the first one was published and taken to schools in Colombia, Costa Rica, and Mexico. Recently I received a copy of the first translation into Mandarin, for schools in mainland China who have just adopted them. The English translation still eludes me. But in these past 15 years I have received letters from readers whose schools I once visited. "I went on to study biology, or oceanography, or astronomy," they write. "I am working with manatees in Australia, with insects in Colombia, with trees in Ecuador." I would be hard pressed to put a monetary value on that. At the same time, I am waiting to get a letter from Antarctica!

Art and environment; politics and environment; opera and theater and environment. Poetry and the science of environment. These are all areas where we environmental journalists can try to explore along with the literature. Because there are as many ways to communicate something as there are kinds of ice. My own cold dream is to one day be able to produce and write a fictional movie totally filmed in Antarctica. Some sort of psychological thriller that confronts characters with Antarctica's reductionism, stripping them of all vanities; a film to inspire audiences to understand and care for this mythical place. It is not impossible.

My evolution and financial needs have taken me from navigating the waters of classical freelancing, to finding new audiences in industry, academia, government, and education. In this new media environment, we journalists should be thinking beyond just the act of reporting on the environment and giving workshops to our peers. Instead, we should put our journalistic skills to serve other, more specialized and potentially powerful audiences. By joining forces with academia and government, we can educate policy makers regarding the science behind the bills they create about environmental issues. We can introduce children and people in general to science in novel ways, through the help of important institutions who themselves need to be visible.

We need people to care about the environment, now more than ever, and we must move beyond the repetitive nightly newscast that nobody seems to be consciously watching anymore. We need to do this by appealing to people's emotions and by involving them with what is important to them.

In the end, the course corrections I have been making in my career (out of sheer need) are taking me to discover ways in which environment and science journalism (for me they are both one and the same) can have a brighter new future.

One thing I am certain of is that my journey would have been so much poorer were it not for the opportunities I have had to visit the Antarctic continent. In time, Antarctica became a metaphor; a white void where things are yet to be written. The world of ice is for me a powerful magnet and symbol of how the unattainable, after years of relentless and creative efforts, becomes real – just as performing the art of environmental journalism these days should be.

No one could have said it better than the great Sir Ernest Shackleton: "By endurance we conquer" (Smith, 2015).

References

Smith, M. (2015). *Shackleton: By endurance we conquer*. London, UK: Oneworld Publications.