Jim Thomas' perspectives are truly insightful and thought-provoking. They challenge conventional thinking about international assistance in an enlightening way. He adopts a self-reflective approach to his earlier actions to improve the health and wellbeing of African populations, exuding an awareness of his own cultural biases. He makes a compelling argument that all of us intending to "make the world a better place" need to reexamine and unlearn many of the narratives that compel our actions. *But I Meant Well* will change how you see the world – it is an absolute must for everyone working in public health and sustainable development.

***Anastasia J. Gage**, Professor of International Health and Sustainable Development, Celia Scott Weatherhead School of Public Health & Tropical Medicine, Tulane University*

New Orleans, Louisiana, USA.

But I Meant Well is a remarkable, must read testimony of a courageous, reflective and above all, fair scholar. The book is a successful attempt to wake up comfortable Westerners to the errors of a worldview and desired order things that has been portrayed as the only way forward. The book delves into questions many readers have wondered about but had no time to consider. With this book, Jim Thomas has prepared a path for us to follow. We no longer need to put off the questions, we can face them now!

***Katarzyna (Kasia) Czabanowska,** Professor of Public Health Leadership and Workforce Development, Head of Department of International Health, University of Maastricht. President Emeritus of the Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region.*

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But I Meant Well

Unlearning Colonial Ways of Doing Good

By

James C. Thomas

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Preface
Start Here

I start with my belief in you, your desire for good, and your recognition that more people need it. This book is for people who want to do good, who recognize they have come out on top in life and want to share from their abundance and privilege with those forgotten by or under the crushing weight of oppressive systems. Although the following pages contain critiques of those systems, my principal interest is in enabling meaningful good, not cataloging the evils of the world.

Shared language

Still, we must begin by naming some systems and movements so we can proceed with a shared language.[1] Colonialism is the systemic subjugation of a people for the extraction of benefits. *Subjugation* is forceful and violent denial of a people's humanity. It includes erasure of a culture's identity and freedoms. In the worst cases, it becomes genocide. It is *systemic*, because interlocking forces arrange themselves in an adaptive and self-perpetuating system of domination. The *benefits extracted* are as varied as human desires. A common one is land for livelihoods through family farms, cash crops, or mining. Extraction is the outgrowth of entitlement and an insatiable hunger for ever more goods and power.

Coloniality is not new: It is as at least as old as imperialism, a term for a large society that grows larger through force. Some draw a distinction between imperialism and colonialism and claim that only

[1] See the glossary at the back of the book for a complete list of terms.

Western modernity qualifies as colonial. However, Palestinian-American professor of post-colonial studies, Edward Said reminded us that, "Every single empire in its official discourse has said that it is not like all the others, that its mission is not to plunder and control but to educate and liberate"(Said 1978). I find that setting Western coloniality apart obscures human characteristics that span the ages. I prefer to think of modern Western colonialism as the dominant contemporary form. Because it is the most relevant today, I will principally address contemporary colonialism.

Today's colonialism and Western modernity are two sides of the same coin. When you get one, the other comes with it. Modernity is a set of narratives and beliefs that emerged in Europe after its Middle Ages. There is no definitive start date, but 1500 is often used as a convenient marker because that is roughly when Western exploration and conquest – Western colonialism – really took off. To oversimplify, we can say that modernity is a belief system that depends on colonialism to be realized.

Decolonization is an impulse to surface colonialism in its many forms, condemn it, and realize alternatives. The term was first used when the colonies of the Global South rebelled against the colonizers of the Global North in the 20th century. Although there remain few countries that fly their colonizer's flag, colonial subjugation as a system has adapted to new times and remains pervasive. There is more to decolonization than unlearning, but unlearning is an essential first step. I will describe it in more detail in the next chapter, and chapter 10 is devoted to the subject.

My background

My experience with coloniality has been predominantly in the field of global health where I have worked as a nutritionist, epidemiologist, and ethicist. Global health is the child of international health, which meant the health of people "over there." In contrast to international health, global health is attentive to interdependence and mutual vulnerabilities between people no matter how far apart. In this there is hope for greater cooperation and cohesion between all peoples. However, global health runs in parallel with systems of economic globalization, which are founded on principles of self-interest, competition, growth, and consumption. These, in turn, depend on subjugation and extraction. Global aspirations can thus convey hope, but they can also conceal insidious coloniality.

I have been troubled throughout my career by the colonial tendencies and practices I have witnessed or participated in. Many of my colleagues in global health have felt the same, even those in the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), one of the best-known arrows in the neocolonial quiver.[2] We have yearned for decolonization but feel trapped in immense and unyielding systems. Entrapment occurs in part through the demands of work. We are often on our computers or telephones all hours of the day and night as we collaborate with colleagues in every time zone. There is little time or energy left for reflection or reading beyond the immediate needs of the project, grant application, or publication at hand.

[2] As I write, USAID is being dismantled by the newly elected US president. I am not prepared to fully analyze that decision in this book. I will say, however, that I have the utmost respect for the people I worked with on projects funded by USAID. My feelings about the Agency itself, however, are more mixed. Although they made some important work possible, their political motivations were always just beneath the surface.

When I retired from the University of North Carolina in 2021, I finally had time to read extensively and to reflect deeply. I had conversations with former colleagues that were no longer driven by project deliverables, and I developed some new cross-cultural friendships as I sought alternative perspectives. I began to see more clearly the traces of coloniality in my career and to understand the language of decolonization. Moreover, I began to see how acting colonially has affected me, making me less compassionate and less human than I wish to be.

I would have benefited from having these insights at the beginning of my career instead of waiting until the end. I am in touch with the generation at the beginning, however. Although retired from UNC, I continue to teach global health in a French school of public health that draws students from all over the world. They were at the front of my mind as I wrote this book. I wrote also for students everywhere aspiring to work in global health, for those in the work of development wanting a fuller perspective, and for those who want to support organizations that do good.

I am a person for whom modernity and colonialism were designed: a White[3] heterosexual male. Although privileged, I now seek to distance myself from that privilege because it has stunted my growth, and the systems that privilege me work against the good I want to do. Latinx[4] professor of Race, Inequalities, and Global Change, Vanessa Machado de Oliveira Andreotti, distinguishes between low- and high-intensity struggles (Machado de Oliveira 2021). Mine are low because I still

[3] I capitalize White and Black to indicate racialized cultural groups. I am not inferring ethnicity (traditionally indicated with capitalization) or importance relative to others. However, they are social constructs with significant meanings that have often been weaponized in American history and society.
[4] The term she chooses.

enjoy the benefits that modernity provides, even as I choose to resist it. Those in high-intensity struggles seldom have the option to choose. They are marginalized by colonial worldviews and caught in the gears of colonial systems. Since my struggles have been low-intensity, I write principally for fellow low-intensity strugglers who seek to unlearn colonial ways. In *Living in Indigenous Sovereignty*, writer and educator Rick Wallace affirms the importance of discussions about unlearning among low-intensity strugglers. He says that one of the most transformative and hopeful decolonization processes is for settlers to critique with other settlers their history and relationships (Carlson-Manathara and Rowe 2021).

Book structure

The book is structured around four questions: (1) How are our intentions and actions shaped by the narratives we adopt? (2) Where did those narratives come from? (3) How is coloniality manifested in our common ways of doing good? (4) How can we do better? In answering these questions, I will explain how:

- In 1300, Europe was the undeveloped world. Its contemporaries – the Kmer, Mongolian, Ottoman, Ethiopian and other empires around the Indian Ocean – were advanced civilizations who were trading among each other with no one empire dominant over the others.
- By 1500, Europe had flipped the script, barging into and dominating the global trade network, aided by its unique experience with ships, gunpowder, and violence.
- The idea of progress is a Western invention that has been used to rank populations on a scale from savage to civilized, and to justify subjugation.

- Colonialism as a practice is more pervasive today than it was during the British Empire.
- Colonization dehumanizes everything it touches, including those who impose it.
- Decolonization is not the reform of colonial ways, but abandonment of them.

Unlearning is an early stage of abandonment. It includes learning from others engaged in the struggle to unlearn. I have invited four people who are actively unlearning colonial ways and helping others to do the same to converse with me about the process of unlearning. Our conversations, edited for length and clarity and mutually approved, are at the end of each of the book's four sections.

I begin the book on a personal note. I describe the contemporary rise of decolonization discussions in academic settings, my place in the discussions, and my journey to that place. The journey includes privileges I inherited and my mixed results in seeking change in colonial systems (Chapter 1). Next, I scrutinize intensions – mine as I first worked in global health in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and how they ran up against the intentions of others (Chapter 2). Intentions are shaped by narratives. We use them to construct identities and to place people in categories of "other," "stranger,'" "savage," and "poor" (Chapter 3). The West developed a unique set of justifying narratives that I trace to their origins in European history (Chapters 4 and 5). That we may learn to see coloniality, I describe its manifestations in three settings: global health programs (Chapter 6), charities (Chapter 7), and the market (Chapter 8). To learn to live differently, I explore the dehumanization experienced by those who implement colonial systems (Chapter 9), what we need to unlearn and four practices for unlearning (Chapter 10) and learning to see systems (Chapter 11). In the closing chapter (Chapter 12), I return to the

personal and to where I started in global health. I describe my recent return to the DRC and assess whether I have unlearned colonial ways of doing good.

Part One

Intentions

Chapter One
Who am I to Write Such a Book?

Decolonization has entered the academic mainstream. Courses with decolonization in the title or content are offered across campuses in a wide variety of departments. At the time of my writing, one university press had published 49 books with some form of the word in the title. Decolonization has a place of prominence in global health curricula. The Consortium of Universities for Global Health includes "Decolonizing Global Health" as one of its 14 education competency domains (Moore 2018).

Even so, colonization continues unabated. As I write, Russia has invaded Ukraine in part for its geostrategic location, Israel has turned the Gaza Strip into rubble, China is posturing for a takeover of Taiwan, and America's new president has proposed annexing Canada and Greenland, taking back the Panama Canal, and making the Gaza Strip into a new Riviera.

The current groundswell of interest in decolonization is appropriate in light of current, violent coloniality and the undiminished legacies of an earlier colonial era. However, some of the steps commonly taken to bring decolonization to the foreground risk its trivialization. At the beginning of a conference, for example, someone may announce that it is taking place on the ancestral and unceded lands of local Indigenous people. Although the practice may have begun as a sincere attempt to acknowledge a debt, when not followed by the actual return of land but instead by plenary speakers and coffee breaks, the statements can appear performative. Says one author, "These statements relieve the speaker and the audience of the

responsibility to think about Indigenous peoples, at least until the next public event"(Wood 2021). Professor of Critical Race and Indigenous Studies, Eve Tuck and Professor of Ethnic Studies, K. Wayne Yang protest the trivialization of decolonization in their article "Decolonization is not a metaphor"(Tuck and Yang 2012). They assert that decolonization is fundamentally about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life, and "The metaphorization of decolonization makes possible a set of evasions, or 'settler moves to innocence', that problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity."

Perhaps you should then question why I, a White male academic and descendant of settler colonists, am writing a book about decolonization or unlearning colonial ways. Am I trivializing it by turning it into an academic discussion? Am I confronting my coloniality or am I evading it with a move to innocence? Am I just climbing on the bandwagon so I am not left behind? Or, like a prison guard who sheds his uniform when faced by a prisoner rebellion, am I changing my clothes to avoid retribution? As an academic, I could be attempting to remain at the podium by rebranding myself as a decolonization expert. But even if I am sincere about bringing change, am I equipped to do it? African American academic and activist Audre Lorde said, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 2007). Are my aims to dismantle or to pretend to be doing so? Whose tools do I carry?

Replacing the tools

What I hope to explain in this book is that colonial ways are the master's tools. My fingerprints are on those tools, but I am trying to loosen my grip with the intent of dropping them. To unlearn colonial ways is to see those tools in our hands and decide against them.

Unlearning requires personal work. Some call it "doing the work" of examining oneself and the world one lives in. Unlearning is harder than learning because it entails questioning the assumptions and beliefs that one has pieced together to make sense of the world. Removing one brick from the foundation puts the whole structure at risk. We are threatened by this potential collapse because our meaning, personal peace, and purposes derive from that structure. But if we are to enjoy our full humanity and live peaceably with our fellow humans and all of nature, we must unlearn the assumptions and beliefs that lead us away from them.

My unlearning has entailed questioning, imagining, confessing, and resisting. I have examined my view of the world and questioned the narratives I've adopted. I have imagined alternatives by being in dialog with people who see the world differently. Confession has been hard, but it has proven to be liberating. African American author James Baldwin wrote in his essay, *The White Man's Guilt*, "… [Whites] can scarcely dare to open a dialogue which must, if it is honest, become a personal confession – a cry for help and healing, which is, really, I think, the basis of all dialogues…" (Baldwin 1998). Confession has opened the door to learning new ways and forming new relationships. It has given me resolve to resist colonial narratives and systems. In resistance, I have experienced a new way of living, moving me from the intellectual to the practical.

Evasion

Unlearning is intellectual, emotional, spiritual (as it relates to meaning), and relational work. Confession requires transparency and vulnerability. It is often a scary process that many people avoid. Addicts in rehabilitation are familiar with the challenge. Most rehabilitation programs coach participants to a point of confession,

which then opens the way to constructing a new way of living. They recite their confession often: "I am [name] and I am an alcoholic." But many addicts avoid rehab. Ways to avoid confession and sobriety are endless and slippery. When one of them is outed, another arises. They include denial, rationalizing, hiding, deflecting with humor, postponement with promises, creating diversions, compensation with gifts, paralyzing self-loathing, and token change. Addiction to colonial ways is no different. Two of the most common evasion tactics are intellectualization and paralyzing guilt.

By intellectualizing colonization, we can keep it at arm's length, describing and analyzing it in detail, but not engaging in the needed personal change it points to. Some may come to feel that becoming conversant in the language of decolonization means they are informed (or "woke") and thus reformed or beyond participating in colonial ways. Some might invoke terms like settler colonialism, hetero-patriarchy, and self-determination, as a way of virtue signaling, but without meaningful resistance to them. Knowledge without experience can become a naïve confidence in the ability to bring change. Meaningful action, in contrast, often bruises a person with failed attempts. Such a person becomes both humbler and wiser about what they can achieve. In his essay, "*Perceptions and Maturity*," Lakota theologian Vine Deloria Jr. says that "Maturity, in the American Indian context, is the ability to reflect on the ordinary things of life and discover both their real meaning and the proper way to understand them when they appear in our lives" (Deloria, Jr. 1999). The Western preoccupations with information and theory as opposed to wisdom, he says, produces immaturity.

Academics are pros at intellectualization. They (we) can embrace decolonization in their research, teaching, and writing, but avoid acts of resistance, politics or affiliation with causes that might tarnish their

place in the academy. Instead, they add decolonization signals to their curriculum vitae and garner speaking engagements on the topic. This type of scholarship is referred to by some as "elite capture." It allows the powerful to maintain their power by remaining in control of the narrative (Krugman 2023).

Guilt paralysis is another way that some avoid change. In learning how Western people have perpetrated abuses, some recognize their complicity and conclude that their position as members of a White dominant culture negates the value of any contribution they might make toward change. Deeming themselves guilty by virtue of being White, they retreat from the arena of global need and injustice. But who, other than the independently resourced, can choose to disengage into self-centered independence? Disengagement only amplifies one's place of privilege.

Liberation

Checking out is not an option for many Indigenous people who see all of creation as interdependent. What affects one affects all, directly or indirectly. In *Becoming Kin: An Indigenous Call to Unforgetting the Past and Reimagining Our Future*, Anishinaabe author Patty Krawec explores how we might become better kin or relatives to one another and to the land (Krawec 2022). As most anyone can attest, a healthy relationship entails apologies, forgiveness, changed behaviors, and at times counseling by someone outside of the relationship. Denial, pretending, or checking out do not engender trust and right relationships. All must actively engage in the work of repair.

The ways of avoiding unlearning are many, but so are the reasons to pursue it. Colonialism is a red-hot sword that burns those who wield it. The dehumanization inherent to dominating others stifles human instincts for kindness and gives free rein to impulses that should be

suppressed. In the words of Martinican poet and politician Aimé Césaire, "…the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform himself into an animal"(Césaire 2000)**.** James Baldwin saw it as being trapped in a false narrative. In his essay, *The Dungeon Shoo*k, he said **"**[well-meaning people] are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it" (Baldwin 1998).

In *Hospicing Modernity*, Vanessa Machado de Oliveira says that in enacting modern Western colonial systems, we become addicted to modernity's promises and comforts; it limits the ways we can see, feel, relate, desire, heal and imagine; it has led us to deny the violence and unsustainability required for it to exist; it encourages narcissistic delusions about our importance, leaving us immature and unequipped to face the challenges of our times; and it untethers us from the realities of the planet (Machado de Oliveira 2021).

The colonizer is a fellow prisoner of the colonized. The subjugator and the subjugated become entangled in a Gordian Knot from which both need liberation. In a speech at the 1985 United Nations Decade for Women Conference in Nairobi, Australian Aboriginal academic and activist Lilla Watson underscored the mutuality of liberation. She said, **"**If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if your liberation is bound up with mine, then let's work together." Most demands for decolonization point to the injustices and oppression suffered by the colonized. They are indeed egregious and many. But those with the dominant power also have an urgent personal interest in being freed from oppressive systems. They, too, need to be rehumanized. The work begins with unlearning – examining oneself and one's worldview, and delinking from colonial systems.

I begin that personal work here. In the remainder of this chapter, I confess to my participation in colonial narratives and systems, I describe how I began to question them, some alternatives I have imagined, and instances in which I have attempted to resist prevailing systems. Each of these steps has been incomplete: even my intentions to change have met with numerous failures. My aim here, though, is not for your sympathy but my honesty.

Swimming in narratives

I am a descendant of the original European settler colonists in America. My mother's ancestors from Austria, and my father's from Denmark both immigrated to the United States in 1800s. I have benefited from wealth accumulated over generations that began with my paternal grandfather's farm on land seized from the Shoshone Nation in Idaho's Malad Valley in the 1880s. My grandparents were not wealthy in the way we often think of wealth today. They lived in a log cabin without electricity or running water. Wealth, though, is any asset one has beyond their debts. Since they were debt-free my grandparents' wealth was their log cabin and the 80 acres of land it was on. With it, they farmed and they raised my father so he was also free of debt. He worked his way through college and eventually acquired a job as a real estate appraiser. His income allowed my parents to buy a house. Although they did not pay for my college education, I did not inherit a debt that would keep me from college. When my mother passed away at age 98, I inherited some of the value of my parents' house, which I shared with my children. The wealth passes on from generation to generation, opening doors to opportunities for income, investment, and more wealth. I wonder what wealth and opportunities the Shoshone two to three generations down would have today if their ancestors' land had not been taken from them.

Figure 1.1. Shoshone teepees near Malad Valley, Idaho, 1882.

I was a compliant adopter of colonial values in my childhood in part because colonial systems were invisible to me. In a commencement speech at Kenyon College in 2005, author David Foster Wallace began with a parable.

"There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says 'Morning, boys. How's the water?' And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks at the other and goes 'What the hell is water?'"

Components of colonialism – White supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, extraction and violence – were my water.

Figure 1.2. Stanford cheerleaders dressed as Indians in the 1971 Rose Bowl. Stanford Special Collections.

My childhood home in Los Altos, California was built on land that was home for millennia to the Ohlone Indians. In the late 1700s, Catholic missionaries of the Franciscan order joined forces with the Spanish Empire to civilize the Ohlone; that is, to make them more Western. During one of my elementary school field trips, my class visited the Santa Clara Mission, 12 miles away. We learned about Mission architecture and saw their vegetable garden and orchards. But we were not told that the Mission economy depended on enslaved Indigenous laborers.

The narrative we were told was preserved in place names, statues, and rituals. The Bay Area was populated with structures honoring the missionaries, like the Junipero Serra Freeway connecting San Jose and San Franciso and the 26-foot-tall cement statue of Father Serra along

his namesake freeway. Spanish street names were ubiquitous, but the Ohlone were invisible. That is, unless you count Stanford University's mascot, the Indian.[1] Before a football game, an Indigenous Indian would appear on the field to perform a "war dance" in full ceremonial regalia, and cheer leaders would perform dances in Indian costumes. Naïve boy that I was, I thought these were symbols of fierceness, like my high school mascot the Spartans, not the colonial appropriation of an identity.

In my high school classes on American history, we settlers were portrayed as the victims of English colonial laws who bravely freed ourselves from the shackles of colonialism. I had the impression that we White Americans were the colonized. I did not learn about settler colonist genocide of American Indians in my White suburban public school system. (In the American Thanksgiving narrative, the settlers were friends with the native Americans.) My elementary school class photos have no African Americans or Asians, and only one or two Latinos.

I was also oblivious to my community's economic dependence on systems of international violence. The modern San Francisco Bay Area is largely a product of the American defense industry. The Golden Gate Bridge stretches from one military installment to another: cement cannon batteries on the east end, and to the West, Fort Mason, from which warships departed for the Pacific in World War II. In the center of the bay, one can see the remains of a decommissioned Nike missile launching site on Angel Island. Further south, in Santa Clara County, where I was raised, is Moffet Field, a former Navy airbase where my mother worked as a librarian during World War II. In the 1950s, P-3

[1] Stanford dropped the Indian as its mascot in 1972 following protests by American Indian students.

Orion "submarine chaser" airplanes flew out of Moffet Field over my elementary school playground every 15 minutes.

Dozens of Bay Area companies grew rich in a symbiotic relationship with the defense industry. The Department of Defense (DOD) farmed out projects to the aerospace companies, then incorporated their products into defensive and offensive systems. The P-3 Orion submarine chasers were designed and built by Lockheed, the company my uncle worked for as an engineer. Moffet Field is now a center for research collaboration between NASA and the private company, Ames. Google also leased some of the land. The information technology (IT) industry, which transformed my childhood home into

Figure 1.3. Nike missiles on Angel Island, California, c.1950s. US National Park Service.

Silicon Valley, grew out of the defense industry. (Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, was raised in a modest suburban home a short bicycle ride away from mine.) Development of the now publicly available internet was initially funded as a defense industry project for wartime coordination of forces.

Unaware of this state history at the time, I believed the farms of California's Central Valley were evidence of American ingenuity to grow food in abundance for the world, not the result of stolen land, conscripted labor, and immigrant farmworkers without rights. I regarded as normal the upward mobility that was underwritten by DOD partnerships with private companies to advance weapons of war. When combined with the Christian mandate to care for others, America's sharing of its abundant crops and technologies was to me the epitome of generosity and good will; it fueled a confidence that American know-how held the answers to the world's problems.

My ignorance continued into college. The University of California (UC) system I attended was created at the time of the Civil War to support settler agriculture on lands taken from American Indians. The know-how I gained at UC Davis was in nutrition science. For this major I memorized the molecular structure and physiological purpose of each vitamin and how to add thickness to a processed food drink with seaweed. I attended UC Davis during in the late 1970s and the "Get Big or Get Out" phase of US agriculture in which federal incentives were given to large corporate enterprises to buy out family farms. Having spent summers on my father's childhood farm, I was against the transition from family to corporate farms. Even so, I participated in it to see firsthand what our food systems looked like. Since Davis was the UC system's primary agricultural campus, I was able to take a course in tractor driving. One summer I used those skills for an agricultural cooperative – a group of farms that shared

equipment – in California's Central Valley, driving machinery to plow fields, harvest tomatoes, shake almond trees, and spray insecticides. The tomato harvester I drove was the size of a studio apartment and carried a crew of 4-6 people, all of them Latino. The machine mechanically cut tomato plants off at ground level, conveyed them by belt to a mechanism that separated the tomatoes from the vine, then dropped them onto a second belt where the workers sorted out the unripe ones as the tomatoes passed by. A third belt carried the ripe tomatoes upward, then dropped them into bins pulled by a tractor driving through the field next to the harvester. Tomatoes had been bred tough in UC Davis's food science labs so they could endure this process.

This was the nutrition expertise that I carried to the DRC (then called Zaire) one year after graduation – where I intended to benefit African villagers. I worked on a Christian mission station that had received from USAID funding for a nutritionist. But in the villages, tilling was done by hand with a hoe, and roots were separated from the stems with a machete, then walked home in a basket balanced on the top of one's head. I knew nothing of the slash and burn agriculture that was causing the forest and its animals to disappear. I had not been taught how to measure a child's upper arm circumference to assess nutrition status. I learned all of this after I arrived. The confidence I had to transplant myself into this setting and bring useful solutions was born out of Western narratives of progress and my unconscious White male paternalism. I am embarrassed to recall today the nutrition knowledge I initially tried to impart to my Congolese colleagues, which was more appropriate for a US college course than for people struggling to subsist on a narrow range of available foods.

Conviction and transformation

It didn't take long for me to realize my error. Awakened to the inappropriateness of my UC Davis knowledge for this setting, I grew in my appreciation of local knowledge. I asked the local Congolese about their diets, their farming techniques, their beliefs about the healing or harmful powers of various foods, and I sat with them at their open fires, watching how they prepared and cooked meals. The USAID grant that paid my way allowed me to visit a well-established nutrition rehabilitation program in another region of the DRC. Gradually, the country and its people trained me to be more useful.

When my two-year contract was over, I took several months to travel home through Asia, visiting nutrition programs to see what I could learn. In Pakistan, I spoke with USAID employees managing the transport of food staples to rebels on the western border fighting the Russian army in Afghanistan. In Kolkata India, I visited one of Mother Teresa's homes for abandoned children. I spent a month in Thailand volunteering with an organization running a food program for Cambodian refugees fleeing Pol Pot's genocide. I also visited a military camp in Cambodia (then called Kampuchea) just over the Thai border where soldiers retaking their homeland were seeking food aid because they were surrounded by land mines and could not plant crops or herd animals.

These sights and stories imprinted on me images of the human costs of dehumanizing systems of war, genocide, and economies that incur destitution. Even so, when I returned to California for my PhD studies at UCLA, I stepped into an academic system that spoke against colonialism while also behaving colonially. I experienced this in my doctoral research. With an interest in mixed research methods – using both quantitative and qualitative data – I majored in epidemiology