On a rainy day in 2007, when Álvaro Santana-Acuña was studying for his doctorate in sociology at Harvard University, he carried his umbrella through the streets of Cambridge and thought, "It rains here like it does in Macondo." Macondo is the fictional Colombian town at the center of Gabriel García Márquez's novel "One Hundred Years of Solitude." But Santana-Acuña had never been to Latin America and hadn't read the novel in years. Why did he make that connection? He held onto that mystifying and meaningful moment for another year, when he began working on an article exploring "this idea that classics are classics because they have the power to enter our lives in the most unexpected ways, and to relate to our life experiences."

More than a decade later, Santana-Acuña—now an assistant professor of sociology at Whitman College—has turned a fleeting thought during a storm into sweeping and award-winning interdisciplinary scholarship.