Making Tracks: Tom Griffiths

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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**.

“Meditations of a Sputnik”

by **Tom Griffiths**

I am a “Sputnik,” born in the year the Soviet satellite launched the Cold War into space. Sixty years ago, the launch by the Russians of the first artificial Earth satellite on 4 October 1957 seemed to many in the West a threatening symbol of escalating superpower rivalry. And it did unleash extreme military anxiety and triggered what became known as the Space Race. Twelve years later, in the midwinter of 1969, I remember waking up just before midnight to watch on TV a Saturn V US rocket wreathed in smoke and flame inch its way off the ground at Cape Canaveral. It powered mightily against the pull of gravity and triumphed. Apollo 11 was beginning its journey out of Earth’s atmosphere towards the moon.

I saw this spectacle from a suburban home in the outer suburbs of Melbourne, Australia. The house was built by my father on a gentle hill of vacant paddocks in the year 1950—a key turning point in the history of the world, as it turned out. My parents were among those who, after the war, built with earnest commitment the homes that signified their return to family and security. Building materials were scarce and skilled labour was in demand. At the weekend, across Melbourne’s burgeoning outer suburbs, people busied themselves around trenches, timber frames and humble small-roomed dwellings. The first photographs in our family album show the timber frame rising alone against the sky from amidst the grass on the hill, awaiting its brick veneer. Dad queued up each week at the hardware store for a pound of nails—his building ration in hard times—and sometimes enlisted workmates to collect a quota of nails on his behalf so that work on the house could proceed at the weekend.

I grew up on this frontier, in Balwyn, an eastern, middle-class suburb of Melbourne. My experience of Balwyn as a child was of a raw, new suburb privatised into houses on blocks behind hedges and fences, inhabited by nuclear families in the nuclear age. The public spaces were desolate. An overgrown easement (and it was called just that: "The Easement") provided my only casual access to "wild nature," which meant a linear paddock of untamed grass. This was clearly different from the "Nature Strip"—the common lawn at the front of each home. At first, there were daily deliveries of milk and bread by horse and cart. Public transport was poor. The key to freedom was petroleum and the private car, and the yawning double garage soon began to take pride of place over the front door of newly-built homes. The car shaped the suburb—Melbourne's first traffic roundabout was built near us, and it was such an innovation in a linear, rectangular streetscape that the whole neighbourhood became known simply as "The Roundabout."

The local library was a bus that came once a week. I keenly remember evening visits in my dressing gown to the crowded aisle of the book bus, and then reading the borrowed books during the next week by our open fire. To fuel that fire, "the Nature Strip" fulfilled its destiny every winter when it received a delivery of a tonne of mallee eucalyptus roots that had been grubbed out of Victoria's northwestern plains to convert them to wheat lands. In summer, "the mallee" (as that distant region was known) visited us in another form: red dust blew hundreds of kilometres from those exposed and eroding paddocks, rusting our drying clothes on the backyard Hills Hoist (washing line).

Eventually the open fire in our lounge was replaced by an oil heater, as we moved from wood to fossil fuel and progressed further into the industrial revolution. It was no ordinary heater. It was a *spac*e heater. It had a blue flame. The Vulcan Hydra-flame oil heater had a twin heat exchanger and advertised that its "short-term and long-term developmental goals [were] part of a rapidly growing nation on the threshold of unprecedented expansion." It was by the dying embers of our doomed open fire that I watched the Saturn V explode out of the stratosphere that winter night in 1969.

When, much later, I read **The Cream Brick Frontier** (1995), written by urban historians Graeme Davison, Tony Dingle, and Seamus O'Hanlon, it was with a shock of recognition that I learned that in places like Balwyn, perhaps the last fitful expression of the Australian "pioneer legend" was to be found: "On the fringes of the great cities…," wrote Barbara and Graeme Davison, "in the years after the depression and the Second World War, a new generation of suburban pioneers did battle with the elements, subduing

the land, creating little oases of domestic safety and comfort in a dangerous world." I hadn't realised how adventurous and exciting my unremarkable childhood had been.

But something even more astonishing was going on. The point of telling this ordinary story is to reflect on how extraordinary it really was. Often, in history, we don't recognise the most significant events or movements until after they have happened, or until their long-term effects have become manifest. There in quiet, suburban Melbourne in the 1950s and 1960s, I was growing up in a favoured corner of a first-world nation, a "lucky country" living off its wool cheques from stolen pastoral lands and busy converting paddocks to suburbs as it became one of the most urban countries in the world.

I was also being hurtled into space. I should have felt vertiginous, for I was being propelled into the future at high speed on the apex of a demographic explosion and an energy revolution. I was coming of age in perhaps the most rapidly transforming years in human history. We now call this "The Great Acceleration," a sudden and dramatic growth of the human enterprise after the Second World War, when population, petrol consumption, species loss, atmospheric greenhouse gases, fertilizer, and water use all skyrocketed.

The American environmental historian, John McNeill, in his history of the twentieth century called **Something New Under the Sun** (2000), writes about "the screeching acceleration" of so many things in that prodigal century that brought about ecological change—and most of those changes happened in the second half of the century. The world's population quadrupled in the twentieth century, energy use increased sixteen 16 times, carbon dioxide emissions went up 13-fold, water use rose nine times. McNeill argues that "humankind has begun to play dice with the planet, without knowing all the rules of the game."

Sputnik and the launch of the Saturn V are potent symbols of "The Great Acceleration." Powered by the burning of fossil fuels, they exploded out of our biosphere. Sitting at the tip of the military-industrial complex, they erupted beyond the planetary boundaries. We are now exceeding many of those biophysical measures of sustainable planetary boundaries, such as the loss of biodiversity and the increasing level of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. The link between my suburban home and the launch pad at Cape Canaveral was not just the TV in my lounge. The two were mobilised by the same unsustainable energy systems. I can't even say it's not rocket science.

In the early twenty-first century, we are standing on the brink of a precipice, but at least we know that we are. We surely don't understand all the dangers and opportunities ahead of us, but we are now roughly aware of our predicament. That at least is an achievement.

During my recent time as a Rachel Carson fellow, I was working on a book about the origins of Australia's distinctive traditions of nature writing. Australians (unlike Americans and Britons) have been slow to recognise a popular canon of home-grown environmental writing, a literary lineage of ideas about local ecology and landscape that wrestles with environmental legacies and futures. Academic definitions of environmental history in Australia (which emerged from the 1970s) have tended to overlook this popular stream of writing. Yet our public debates about nature and land management are shaped by this literature and its evolving politics, often unconsciously. My aim is to evoke and reclaim these forgotten sources of ideas because environmental history has become an essential intellectual and practical instrument of understanding and survival. It has alerted us to the sensitivity of humanity's relationship to nature; it also connects the domestic and the global and is thus crucial to our capacity to act. The era launched by Sputnik has propelled us well beyond the planetary boundaries. The question now is, can we return safely to Earth?