Making Tracks: Unsettling Landscapes and Imaginations

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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 **Tony Weis**

I come from the settler-colonial nation of Canada, in a part of southwestern Ontario that sits upon the traditional territories of the Attawandaron, Anishnaabee, Haudenosaunee, and Leni-Lunaape Peoples. Today, nine First Nations reserves together control just over one percent of all land in southwestern Ontario. The landscape must have been beautiful, and still is in small patches, especially along river valleys and lake shores.

The one hundred kilometers between where I grew up, in Waterloo, and where I now live, in London, lies mostly in the Carolinian ecozone, which is severely threatened and home to a disproportionate share of Canada’s endangered species. Most of the large animal species were extirpated long ago with European conquest and farming, and the landscape is now dominated by suburban sprawl, highways, factories, strip-malls, and, most of all, large grain and oilseed monocultures and sheds full of intensively produced pigs, chickens, turkeys, and cows, which people rarely see alive—unless its in the backs of transport trucks, when these animals are on their way to slaughter. Growing up in middle-class suburbia, I thought little of the environment that surrounded me, the history of dispossession it was built on, or the social, ecological, and interspecies relations it concealed. Suburbia is an intensely alienating place in many ways.

In my youth, I largely thought of “nature” as something that was beyond the city and its surrounding farmland, like the parks where my family went camping and wilder areas further north, and gave little thought to the interspecies relations in my life, apart from adoring our cats (though from a fairly young age I remember struggling to reconcile “why we cuddle some animals and put a fork in others,” as the famous animal advocate Henry Spira put it). In high school, I came to think about environmental problems through a seemingly distant problem gaining a lot of attention at the time: the destruction of tropical rain forests and the crisis of biodiversity loss, which was often presented in simplified tropes of overpopulation and poor farmers slashing and burning on the forest frontier. I bought into the call to “think globally and act locally” in naive terms, with little sense of what acting locally meant other than that I should try to consume less, recycle, and turn down the thermostat.

Throughout my undergraduate degree (in history and geography) I began to take small steps as an activist and knew I wanted to find some sort of work where I could make a contribution to environmental and social justice struggles—but I struggled to imagine where this might lead. I did have a few epiphanies though. First, I was exposed to Peter Singer’s Animal Liberation (1975), which challenged me to stop consuming animals and to start continually thinking about interspecies relations as part of environmental change and everyday life. Second, I encountered Rachel Carson’s **Silent Spring** (1962), which helped me begin to see the “permanent war” on nature unfolding in the agricultural landscapes around me, as well as the importance of compelling narratives in moving people to action. Still, as I began my master’s degree in environmental studies, I did not foresee a future in academia and had little sense of where I was heading, other than

wanting to get more involved in activism and maintaining a vague hope that I might someday find work that involved fighting good fights.

My master's research drew me back to the subject of tropical deforestation with fresh eyes. Having found guidance and inspiration from some classic works of political ecology like **Blaikie and Brookfield** (1987), **Watts** (1983), and **Hecht and Cockburn** (1989), I set off for the rugged terrain of eastern Jamaica on the edge of the Blue Mountains. My interest in Jamaica was sparked by high rates of deforestation and the blame being heaped on small farmers as the primary agents, and was further stoked by reading **Small Garden, Bitter Weed: Struggle and Change in Jamaica** (Beckford and Witter 1982). This book convinced me that the problems facing small farmers could only become legible by considering long periods of time, like the enduring legacies of colonialism and slavery, and wide spatial scales, like Jamaica's position in an uneven world system.

The more I worked with small farmers on their steep hillside plots, overlooking the plantations that dominated the coastal lowlands and river valleys below, the more convinced I became that inequality was at the heart of the story of tropical deforestation. This grounding directly flowed into my interests in land reform, cooperatives, neoliberal policy restructuring, and the competitive pressures associated with global market integration. It also indirectly challenged me to reflect upon my own settler-colonial inheritance in Canada. Why did I feel the legacy of slavery seething in the plantation landscape, when I had for so long failed to sense the legacy of indigenous dispossession at home? Why could I envision land reform for plantations yet struggle to imagine what it might mean to unsettle the industrial monocultures and livestock operations surrounding me in southwestern Ontario?