Making Tracks: Jenny Carlson

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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 **Jennifer Carlson**

My journey to the Rachel Carson Center began in the 1980s on Texas’s blackland prairie, where my family spent weekends on an old farm that my father’s parents owned east of Austin. While my father, mother, and grandfather cared for our cows, fixed fences, or bought supplies in town, my grandmother swept and scrubbed the old house she and my grandfather had built before work led them elsewhere. Too small to feed cows or drive fence posts, I was her “helper,” but I lived for the moment she’d take off her apron and lead me to the tank, a large pond where the cows drank water. Clad in a blue cotton shirtdress and black leather pumps—the same shoes she wore while teaching second grade—she’d guide me on cattle-worn paths between hackberry, huisache (sweet acacia), and cottonwood trees, pointing out all the birds, bushes, and insects there were to be seen. We kept our eyes open for deadly rattlesnakes and water moccasins, but also for gentler things she could take back to her students: a fallen bird’s nest and a piece of Spanish moss made perfect additions to her classroom “nature table.”

My grandmother taught me about the things that thrived on the pitch-dark prairie soil, but through her, too, I came to perceive nature as a particular kind of thing—something with cultures of its own, accessible to humans through relationships as well as the magic of science. The infrastructure projects of the 1930s enabled my grandparents to build up the capital that allowed many white folks to become middle class after the vagaries of the Great Depression—he as a construction worker on the dams built across Central Texas’s Colorado River, and she as a schoolteacher in the time of WPA reform.

They lived in a social system predicated on the idea that humanity was distinct from nature, but at the same time, their domestic life blurred those boundaries. For most of their 53-year marriage, their household was a space where species met: a motley crew of dogs, cats, farm animals, and wildlife that had been wounded or abandoned. Through their example, and also through the love of dogs that they and my parents shared, I gained a sense that critters were people too.

But critters were under threat in Texas. On our summer drives to the coast, for example, my mother railed at the industrial facilities across Lavaca Bay, an inner bay of the Gulf of Mexico. One of these was metals manufacturer Alcoa Corp, which operated a massive complex on Lavaca Bay from 1948 until 2016. From 1966 to 1970, when the Texas state legislature intervened, Alcoa dumped effluvia from a chlor-alkali plant into a nearby lagoon, releasing **a daily average of 67 pounds of mercury into the surrounding waterway** until state authorities intervened to stop the pollution. Lavaca Bay's teeming population of oysters, fish, crabs, and shrimp were mired in mercury, and while shrimp were considered safe from contamination, oyster farming, fishing, and crabbing were banned in the area, crippling commercial fishing in the region for decades. Perhaps these economic losses were what motivated local officials to embrace the 1983 arrival of Taiwan-based Formosa Plastics, which installed a plastics plant across the road from Alcoa. Formosa began dumping wastewater from its facility into the bay and **continues dumping to this day,** despite signing a zero-discharge agreement with grassroots campaigners and federal and state environmental agencies in the 1990s. Today, the bay is a Superfund site, its mercury cleanup administered by the EPA. "NO FISHING" signs still line the water near dumpsites used by Formosa and, previously, Alcoa. Today, too, red dust from open waste pits at Alcoa's shuttered facility still swirls across Calhoun County.

Driving past these facilities in the 1980s, my mother would tell me of other, nonmonetary losses that she had perceived over her then-40 years of visits to the area: the overfishing of neighboring, non-contaminated bays; the retreat of the porpoises that once played near the coast; and the fading of the bioluminescent creatures that once lit up the waters lapping the shore. My mother's grief at the degradation of the marine ecosystem and anger at policymakers' quiescence about the pollution of the Gulf made me understand that the natural world that my family privately valued was also something publicly negotiated. Even as we were free to care for nature in private ways, in private places, public institutions held sway over how the natural world was defined and defended.

My Texan childhood might seem worlds away from my work now, which engages everyday life in Germany's *Energiewende* (or "energy turn") to renewables. And indeed, my path to the environmental humanities was a winding one. During college at Southwestern University, I gravitated towards European politics, history, and literature. SU didn't implement an environmental studies major until after I graduated, but likeminded students and I carried out extracurricular environmental actions on campus. Meanwhile, my love of history took me to Germany where, as a Fulbright scholar at the Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster, I carried out research on the beguines, a loose assemblage of religious women that emerged in the High Middle Ages.

Yet my attention was continually pulled back to the present—and to the environment. As my time in Germany stretched beyond that Fulbright year, I became attuned to life on the East Frisian peninsula or Ostfriesland, where I frequently visited friends who became family. And I was intrigued by the *Energiewende*, which was transforming the peninsula—and many other areas of Germany—into a renewable energy frontier. Mindful of how economic interests had shaped environmental politics in Texas during my youth, I perceived that in Germany, too, historical legacies of inequality sidelined women and working-class people from efforts to transform their communities into an "energy democracy." I also saw how rural dwellers fashioned their own, idiosyncratic relationships to nature—relationships that didn't always square with the model of environmental citizenship advanced by the *Energiewende's* planners. In this way, my childhood experience had shaped my ethnographic understanding—and my research orientations.

And so after graduate training at the University of Chicago and the University of Texas, I returned to Ostfriesland as an anthropologist, studying how Germans' ordinary sense of nature shaped their relationship to the sustainable development projects in their midst. This work led me to the Rachel Carson Center, where colleagues' insights and kindness lit my way forward as I wrote my book manuscript. Munich is a long way from the North Sea, and an even longer way from Texas. But perhaps my grandmother would agree that the RCC fellows' table is a "nature table" not unlike hers: another opportunity to learn about the environment through diverse objects; another place where curiosity and kinship midwife an ethic of ecological care.