# Making Tracks: Teresa Spezio

22 March 2018
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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**.

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by **Teresa Spezio**

As a child, I had first-hand experience with air and water pollution. I grew up in the city of Pittsburgh, which was once the steel making capital of the United States. I remember trips on the Parkway East with my family driving past the Jones & Laughlin primary steel mill where men (and very few women) worked with colossal ovens and furnaces to make steel for every kind of industry. The smell could be oppressive. On a daily basis, I watched the dirty Monongahela River mix with the cleaner Allegheny River to create the Ohio River. Perhaps it was fated then, that much of my life would become centered on the history of the pollution generated from the expanded manufacturing activities after the Second World War.

My journey began in the offices of the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency in Twinsburg, Ohio. I had graduated from Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland as a chemical engineer about two years before. As a hazardous waste inspector, I was immersed in the complex and invigorating world of hazardous waste regulations and their enforcement. I visited every kind of manufacturing facility including automobile assembly, hazardous waste incineration, primary and secondary steel making, and chemical manufacturing. On a professional level, I executed search warrants, investigated illegal dumping, and inspected garbage trucks, which allowed me to understand the everyday relationship people have with chemicals and pollution. I found purpose in attempting to understand how the hazardous waste regulations in the United States had become so complicated, so that I could explain it to the people I met during my inspections.

But I wasn’t just interested in understanding the laws and regulations—I wanted to understand the political and economic power of each of the industries and the processes

that created air, water, and waste pollution.

My career progressed and I joined an environmental consultancy firm, during which time I worked for multinational corporations that had polluted lands throughout the United States. My perspectives changed, along with my growing insights into the industry. I became involved with a site in Plainville, Connecticut, which manufactured small steel parts for industrial and consumer machinery. My team was working on removing oil and other organic compounds from the soil and water; however, to do so, we needed to determine when, where, and how the contamination occurred on the site, as well as what types of chemicals had been used. The exercise sent us on a journey into the past, searching for company records, interviewing former employees, and taking samples of soil and groundwater. The project also exposed me to the intricacies, and history, of "cleaning-up" contaminated sites.

It was the location of my next job that sealed my future: Ithaca College, where I ran their environmental and safety programs. One of the benefits of the position was that it allowed me to take one undergraduate college course per term for free and during work hours. For one of the terms, the History Department offered a course entitled "Environmental History." I had never heard of this type of history. The class immersed me in readings and authors that I had never encountered. Aldo Leopold. William Cronon. Sam Hayes. Roderick Nash. After spending years dealing with contaminated sites, I was finally exposed to literature on wilderness, landscape, and conservation—the counterpoint to my earlier experience working with polluted sites. In addition, Ithaca—with its sweeping gorges, natural beauty, and ornithology courses—awakened me to the natural world. While living in Central New York, I saw the Milky Way and a bald eagle, and went camping for the first time. By the time I left Ithaca, I knew I wanted to be a US environmental historian. Now I just needed a path to get there.

I would take a circuitous journey through Pittsburgh, Wisconsin, Oregon, and California to reach my goal. As an engineering student, I had never written a formal research paper. As an engineer, I wrote countless technical documents and memos. I knew I needed some additional training before I could enter a PhD history program. So, I enrolled in the master's program in environmental studies at the University of Oregon. My training opened my eyes to the interdisciplinary nature of environmental history. As a city person in beautiful western Oregon, I explored the Coast Range and the Cascade Mountains—regions that gave me a chance to experience large areas with little human

impact. The quiet. The peace. The darkness. This city girl never imagined she would be able to experience such places.

My thesis on the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness Area allowed me to temporarily step away from polluted sites and research an area with little to no human impacts, but I continued to work as an environmental consultant. In my subconscious, the spectrum of human land use and human relationships with the land became part of my everyday activities. These endeavors helped me to understand that our relationship with the land is nuanced and complicated.

When I entered the PhD program at the University of California, Davis, it was clear to me that I needed to return to my roots of environmental contamination and its impact. I began researching an oil spill that occurred in Santa Barbara, California in 1969. My research showed that its aftermath transformed how the US government created environmental policy. While researching the spill, I came across a question that brought me back to my early years as an engineer: “How Clean is Clean?” Scientists working on oil spills were asking the same question I had asked hundreds of times in my engineering career—a question that governmental and corporate decision makers had also asked countless times while addressing contaminated sites. I knew I needed to look at the history behind the question and examine the idea of “clean.” My time at the RCC connected me with researchers throughout the world (Israel, the Netherlands, Germany, Portugal, Colombia, India and Chile), allowing me to sharpen and expand my understanding of this seemingly simple question. My journey continues...