Making Tracks: Gregg Mitman

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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 **Gregg Mitman**

My journey to the Rachel Carson Center began in 1967 in the backseat of a blue Dodge sedan, packed with my father’s engineering precision, headed west on the American interstate highway system. It was a momentous trip in the eyes of my six-year old self, who had spent the better part of his early childhood in doctors’ offices and hospital oxygen tents struggling to breathe. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in America, many an asthmatic had left the East coast and headed West in search of health. But this was not what drove our family to the painted deserts of Arizona, to the giant sequoias of Yosemite, and to the geysers of Yellowstone. We had come from Pennsylvania across the Continental Divide to see the splendor of America’s national parks. For the next six weeks, home was a car, canvas tent, Coleman cook stove, and campgrounds on and off the beaten path. I didn’t know it then, but we were living a textbook chapter in American environmental history, one focused on the history of leisure, a growing middle-class, and the consumption of nature in postwar America.

That 1967 trip began a series of annual family camping adventures that continued well into my teenage years. My parents were second- and third-generation immigrants. Their parents and grandparents hailed from Scotland, Poland, and Hungary, and found work in the steel mills of eastern Pennsylvania, stoking the blast furnaces and forging the steel that built the infrastructure of America. Thirty thousand people, including many of my relatives, went to work at Bethlehem Steel each day. How my parents became avid campers was a mystery to me. Gymnastics and diving, bowling and bean bags, clam bakes and beer: these all made sense in the immigrant, working-class neighborhoods that defined much of life on the south side of Bethlehem. Camping, not so much. Only years later did I learn that it was cost that drove my parents to nature. Camping was a cheap

summer holiday for a family of five. But an appreciation for the wild grew out of those camping vacations. And nature, not machines, awakened my intellectual curiosity.

As a teen, I found my independence and freedom backpacking. The Appalachian trail, a hiking route that extends from Georgia to Maine, passed near our home. Hiking sections of it made for an easy weekend adventure. Farther away, in Shenandoah National Park, where my sister took up a position as a park naturalist, I took delight in exploring the mountain ridges, canyons and streams, and remnant homesteads, the only visible traces left of a once populated landscape being reclaimed by nature. One of my high school English teachers fostered in me an intellectual rebelliousness, dispensed with the standard curriculum, and allowed me to pursue my passion in learning about the arts and craft traditions of Appalachia. I immersed myself in the series of *Foxfire* books, which recaptured the stories and traditions of those who had lived off the land. And a biology teacher similarly turned a blind eye to lesson plans and school regulations to nurture my desire to know more about the ecology and life histories of other creatures in the forests and streams nearby my home and school. History and biology, the humanities and sciences, had equally captured my attention.

Wanderlust and an interest in the sea, inspired no doubt by childhood years spent watching television shows including *Flipper*, *Sea Hunt*, and *The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau*, drew me to pursue an undergraduate degree in marine biology. I was fortunate to be welcomed into a marine ecology lab in my first year of college at Dalhousie University, where I worked as a research assistant studying the ecology of marine plankton communities and their response to disturbance. It was my first experience coming to know an organism on more intimate terms. I came to understand phytoplankton's rhythms, their energy and nutrient needs, the creatures that feed upon them, and their basis of life in the ocean. Nothing was more thrilling than going out in the field, where we worked around the clock, sometimes in churning seas, taking light readings, sampling oxygen and nutrient levels, and collecting phytoplankton and zooplankton at different ocean depths off the coast of Nova Scotia. Back in the lab, I spent countless hours over a microscope counting species of diatoms and dinoflagellates, and punching machine-readable cards, in an effort to model and simulate nature.

But the biology department at Dalhousie was incredibly open to the humanities. My biology advisor had little qualm allowing me to pursue courses in medieval studies, philosophy, and political science, reading medieval philosophers like Eriugena, pondering the mysticism of the Trinity, or engaging with the historical materialism of Karl Marx. A

course taught by a plant morphologist in the biology department on “Man and Nature” was remarkably prescient of the multispecies turn that has come to occupy the environmental humanities. How remarkable it was, in hindsight, to be introduced to the likes of biologists such as Jacob von Uexküll, German expressionist painters like Franz Marc, and invited to entertain the possibility of exploring other lifeworlds through biology, philosophy, and art. The department was also home to parasitologist and historian of biology, John Farley, whose courses on the history of biology and Darwinian evolution captivated me. It was here, in this remarkable intellectual ferment, where biological science and humanistic inquiry were encouraged and supported, that I found my home and calling. It was but a short step from there to a graduate program in the history of science at the University of Wisconsin where a graduate seminar on the history of the trade association movement in the United States would lead me to pursue a dissertation on the history of biological theories of cooperation in ecology in the first half of the twentieth century.

Microorganisms and history, Marxism and ecology, epistemology and ontology: these were the subjects that drew me into the history of science and eventually into the field of environmental history. What a pleasure it has been to find my way to the Rachel Carson Center, where such topics are of interest to so many international scholars that gather there. In *The World that Firestone Built: Capitalism, American Empire, and the Forgotten Promise of Liberia*, a book project that occupied my time as a Rachel Carson Fellow, a story of ecology and disease, commerce and science, racial politics and political maneuvering has begun to unfold. By turning a bright light on the intimate ties between American science, medicine, and business, *The World that Firestone Built* reveals the story of a corporate empire whose tentacles reached far and wide and forever changed the fate of a nation. Who knew that a road trip when I was six-years old would eventually bring me around to thinking about not only tires but also the ecological, economic, and social impact of a corporation’s quest to build a rubber empire in the West African republic of Liberia.