Making Tracks: Paul Sutter

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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 Paul Sutter

There was nothing about my childhood that inclined me towards the environmental humanities—except, perhaps, the entire context in which I grew up. As a product of the Long Island suburbs in the 1960s and 1970s, I came of age in the sweet spot of an American environmentalist upswing, among people who had escaped the city for the environmental amenities of the suburbs—or at least among those whose wealth and skin color had afforded them that ability. I did not experience the violent cutting edge of suburbanization, the large-scale mass grading that erased the rural past of so much of the nation’s urban fringe. My hometown—Garden City, New York—was one of the oldest suburban developments built in the United States, the post-Civil War vision of a wealthy New York dry goods merchant named Alexander Turney Stewart, whose choice of name for his new town anticipated Ebenezer Howard’s Garden City Movement by several decades. Levittown, a bit further out on the island and the epitome of a mass-produced postwar suburb, was the product of a later age.

Uncharacteristically for the suburbs, we lived in a small stucco townhouse with a tiny yard, part of a planned community once known as the Mews that was originally built for the employees of Doubleday, Page & Company, the publishing house that relocated to a major suburban facility in Garden City in 1910. The company named its new facility the Country Life Press, after one of its major magazine assets, *Country Life in America*, whose invocations of the rural good life in an urbanizing America found an avid readership in the suburban in-between. Most of this was lost to me as a child and young adult.

My first true exposure to the environmental humanities was as an undergraduate at Hamilton College, where I decided to major in American Studies. A lot has been written

about the origins of environmental history as a field in the United States, but not enough attention has been given to the formative influence of the old myth-and-symbol school of American Studies. The works of Leo Marx, Henry Nash Smith, R.W. B. Lewis, Alan Trachtenberg, and even F. O. Matthiesson particularly influenced me, as did the guiding notion that nature was perhaps *the* central theme in shaping a distinctively American culture.

During my junior year, I took some time away from Hamilton to attend the University of California at Santa Cruz as a visiting student, where I took a two-quarter course on American environmental policy. For the first time, I read (and reread) Roderick Nash's **Wilderness and the American Mind**, a book that captured my inchoate sense of a possible scholarly future more than any other. It's no mistake that my dissertation and first book, **Driven Wild**, was a history of the origins of modern American wilderness advocacy, even if I ultimately departed from Nash's approach in several important ways.

Returning to Hamilton, I wrote a senior thesis—long on passion and short on insight—about the lives and careers of Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder, two environmental thinkers who combined poetry and essays with deliberate living. I left my undergraduate years fascinated by the environmental themes of American literature, furtively hoping I might become a poet, and a bit too willing to accept the idea that there was such a thing as a singular American mind.

After a bit of a walkabout in Australia and New Zealand, I took a job teaching history—I was *the* history teacher—at a small, alternative high school in Providence, Rhode Island. During that time, several serendipities deflected my interests in a more historical direction. One was exposure to the New Western History then taking shape and roiling American popular culture. I particularly recall reading a 1990 article in the *New York Times Magazine* ("**Unsettling the Old West**," by Richard Bernstein) that first triggered my interest in graduate study. The article profiled several important revisionist western historians and their most important scholarly interventions, but I homed in on how the New Western History made what the article called "the history of the environment" central to new ways of thinking about the West and its place in American history. About a month after Bernstein's article appeared, on the twentieth anniversary of the original Earth Day, I bought a copy of Patricia Nelson Limerick's ***The Legacy of Conquest*** (Patty is now my colleague at the University of Colorado, Boulder). Then a friend, an undergraduate at Brown University, gave me her copy of Donald Worster's **Dust Bowl**, which I devoured, and she let me know that one of the giants of Brown's history department at the time, Jack

Thomas, would be teaching Brown's first environmental history course. I asked Professor Thomas, who was nearing the end of his career and had distinguished himself as a historian of American reform, if I could sit in on the class. He gladly acceded. Jack Thomas's course set the hook, and I decided I would apply to graduate school to study western and environmental history.

I applied mostly to American Studies graduate programs in 1990, with one or two history programs thrown in. To my great good fortune, the only place that accepted me was the history department at the University of Kansas (KU) in Lawrence, where I went to work with **Donald Worster**. I still remember, during my first semester of graduate school, taking Don's American environmental history lecture course and leaving the classroom three days a week humming with new dissertation ideas. In fact, the project I worked on at the Rachel Carson Center during my recent fellowship—an environmental and public health history of the construction of the Panama Canal—had its genesis during that very semester. But, beyond how excited he made me about environmental history, there are two other aspects of Don's graduate mentorship that stick with me to this day. The first was that, at a moment when the major works in environmental history barely spanned a single bookshelf, Don insisted we read well beyond history, in fields such as anthropology, geography, art history, historical ecology, and environmental ethics. One of the hazards of environmental history's success in the last several decades has been that opportunities to read and have conversations across these environmental disciplines are increasingly constrained by the sheer weight of superb environmental history scholarship, by its very disciplinary success.

The other virtue of Don's approach to environmental history was (and is) his commitment to the international. Early in my graduate studies, Don started KU's famous Nature & Culture Seminar at the Hall Center for the Humanities in conjunction with a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, which allowed him to bring in two postdoctoral fellows per year for three years. Don insisted that one fellow each year come from outside of the United States. The seminar also hosted a steady stream of visitors from all over the globe, the results of Don's own travels and his gracious academic diplomacy.

There is a lot more I could say about the last two decades of my career, but in many ways, my path to the Rachel Carson Center was set as a graduate student, where my various interests found a frame in environmental history. More than that, spending the second half of 2016 at the Rachel Carson Center brought me back into a rich space of

interdisciplinarity and internationalism that reminded me most of all of my graduate school years at the University of Kansas.