Making Tracks: Franklin Ginn

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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 **Franklin Ginn**

Failure lies behind the trappings of academic success: words unwritten, words sunk without trace, applications rejected, snubs both subtle and large.

The tracks I have left: my biography. Like many a small child, a small boy, I killed a lot of bugs. Warm afternoons swatting flies against windows; damp afternoons hunting for slugs, snails, whatever, doused in salt or crushed with bricks. Spiders, centipedes, or— my favorite—millipedes, trapped in empty plastic containers; let’s see who outlives who? I had a graveyard where I buried these dead. Twigs or sticks as memorials. I never killed birds or mammals. But I longed to find dead birds so I could bury them and mark their graves with lollipop sticks.

Perfectionist tendencies: holding oneself to impossible standards; inability to accept external validation; comforting loop of self-critique.

My pathway into the environmental humanities came through a roundtable hosted at Edinburgh’s Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities. My colleagues and I went on to run a **series of events on deep time**, and on teaching, writing, and collaborating in the environmental humanities. Since I had never really felt at home in any sub-disciplinary niche, the chance to broaden conversation was welcome. The accidental path was only a happy one because of the people: environmental humanities scholars tend to be most excellently nice folk.

I arrived at the Rachel Carson Center after a long period of profound depression. And I don’t mean the kind of ambient gloom caused by cascading eco-disaster.

My PhD research and first book aimed to rescue the suburban gardeners of greater London from the condescension of progressive environmentalism. To understand the hopes and dreams, the knots of life and death, in small parcels of the world—in unsung places like Romford, High Barnet, or Motspur Park. I hope I did them justice.

I mean a kind of longing for the Earth to open underneath you, so you can fall into it without even trying.

One book primed me for the environmental humanities: Donna Haraway's *Primate Visions*. I carried this book the whole way round Europe as I inter-railed my way through summer vacation in 2000. I was an annoying geography undergraduate at the time, but Haraway's relentless troping, her eye for knotty detail, her passion and humor: who could resist? The story of HAM, a chimpanzee born in Cameroon, purchased by the US Air Force and the first hominid blasted into near earth orbit, still bobbles to the surface of my mind at odd moments.

Characterized by anhedonia: inability to feel pleasure in normally pleasurable activities.

I can point to other shifts in my perspective. During my master's in Aotearoa New Zealand, I was researching one of the last remaining fragments of lowland swamp forest in the South Island. This forest was slowly dying, despite being the subject of intensive conservation and care. I was also researching, by comparison, a botanic garden, emblem of empire and incubator of planetary transformation. But it was in cycling around New Zealand after my studies, two months living from bicycle panniers, that the life force of New Zealand shifted my perspective. I remember hiking in from the West Coast for seven hours to lie alone in a hot spring, no one around for tens of miles. It should have been stunning, unique, amazing, but for me it was undercut by fear: don't inhale the water, lest those microbes kill you… I remember wondering around then why I'd killed bugs as a young child.

I could elaborate, but biography is cheap. It is a poor explanatory device.

I'm in the environmental humanities through luck, people met, serendipity, chance: above all, privilege.

Fashioning self-narratives from the shards of our misremembered past says more about our need to subsist into the future than it does about where we came from. We crave CVs of ourselves.

Depression, potent as it may be, doesn't last forever. Not much does.

I am at the Rachel Carson Centre to write stories of the Anthroposcene. My protagonists are steam engines, rhododendrons, gannets, ageing professors, pipelines, industrial provocateurs, gannets, mystics, waves, pandas that won't have enough sex—and others.