Making Tracks: Paula Ungar

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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**.

“Walking the Line between Worlds”

By **Paula Ungar**

The first thing I wrote of which I have clear memory is a short verse from when I was nine years old. It was dedicated to a bird that got caught in my grandmother’s tenth-floor apartment in Bogotá, to which we had recently moved from the countryside. After several minutes of distressed wings flapping between armchairs and porcelain figurines, the pigeon managed to escape through a window, leaving a solitary feather behind. I stuck it next to my inspired writing—for some reason, I felt the need to attach proof to the volatile words.

We used to live in the countryside, in a small village near Bogotá. If I close my eyes I can still see the silhouette of *El Majuy*, the mountain that watched over us from behind our house, and the water falling in silver threads out of the watering can when I tended to the garden, changing the color of the earth around the coriander plants from dry grey to rich black. The smell of that black earth often comes back to me, along with the distant barking of the neighbors’ dogs and the awkward feeling on my hands of the legs of scarabs, which visited our porch on cold, rainy afternoons.

I studied biology. I spent five years enjoying the stories of how water moves through plants and how, along that magic path, it produces energy; of black moths that outlived England’s Industrial Revolution; of the long trips that seeds need to make to survive their parents’ shadows; of slim, fragile shrubs, the pioneers of pastures that old forests would later colonize. I had the fortune to walk at dawn among dripping, moss-covered trees in cloud forests and to go to sleep in hammocks beside roaring Amazonian rivers.

However, those were also five years I spent feeling slightly out of place. I attended lectures in the Departments of Anthropology, History, and Literature; I participated in drawing lessons; I expected that, at some point, I would just be dragged away from science to a different place from which I could better convey what I was discovering. Yet I loved graphs and charts and diagrams—their effect on my mind and their ability to synthesize and connect people´s thoughts—as much as I loved landscapes and critical narratives and drawings. I stayed in the field of biology, but a part of me continued to watch skeptically from without.

I graduated with a dissertation on the pollination ecology of two genres of understory palms in the Amazon. I spent five months living with an Indigenous community, where the Dutch NGO that funded my work had a station. The data I collected, after countless (or rather, very precisely counted) hours of observing flowers and insects, allowed me to present statistically solid analyses that showed the correlation between flowers' characteristics and their visitors' taxonomy and suggested possible coevolution. I graduated with honors and was offered work with my prestigious tutor.

But an odd feeling accompanied that success. I felt that the essence of what I had experienced in the forest was missing: the intense buzz surrounding the large, flowering *Attalea* palm with its oversweet smell that flooded the air; the timid, elusive *Geonoma* flowers; and most importantly, my endless conversations with Elias and Virgelina, the Indigenous couple at whose house I spent every afternoon, sitting on the floor, subjected to their polite mockery because of my ignorance about plants and animals—and pretty much everything in the world. I listened to their stories of slavery during the Amazon Rubber Boom and how their parents hid seeds for future generations; of their kinship with certain families of plants; of their duty to manage the world through the sweet words that chewing coca leaves gave them. I just couldn't go on with postgraduate studies in the natural sciences.

A few years later, I found myself in Barcelona reading about environmental justice and social studies of science and post-normal science. I discovered that history and stories were as fundamental to Elias and Virgelina's accounts of the world as to my job of counting species and making statistical analyses. I learned that those stories needed to be told side by side—that justice was related to telling both of them.

While doing the field work for my PhD in environmental sciences on scientific research in national parks in Colombia, I was hired first by an NGO dedicated to

multicultural conservation projects and then by the National Parks service itself (*Parques Nacionales Naturales de Colombia*). I wore the rangers' uniform and had the privilege of walking with them through Colombian mountains, deserts, and beaches. I met rangers who, though surrounded by civil war, defended trees with their lives as if they were their children; Indigenous young men who translated ideas of environmental management in their elders' meetings; biologists looking for bears' DNA on the bark of trees, accompanied by expert and silent local guides. I wrote policy papers and organized workshops aimed at promoting the coproduction of knowledge for protected area management.

My dissertation-in-progress was stored at the back of a drawer for a few years, my research question having been eclipsed and transformed by the practical complexities of real-life conservation. Years later, and with the help of a philosopher, I was able to cross back into academia to finish my PhD after the considerable—and very enjoyable—effort of transforming colleagues, forests, and orchards into characters performing in an analytical framework.

Shortly afterwards, I started working in a policy-oriented research institute. The project I was involved in for the last three years focused on *páramos*: cold megadiverse tropical ecosystems that are key for the provision of water for most of the Colombian population. *Páramos* are disputed by conservationists, corporate miners, agroindustry, *campesinos* (peasant farmers), and Indigenous peoples. Our team was in charge, among other things, of generating very precise maps of *páramos* limits, with significant political implications. During those three years, I traversed the unstable and fertile lands shared by science and politics.

I arrived at the RCC with a proposal for telling the story of this last project. Until next summer, I will be writing about the delimitation of *páramos*. I will relate how, through our work, *páramos* emerged as facts from the complex and dynamic interactions between adjacent ecosystems, between nature and society, between scientists and politicians, between "the local" and "the global," between the past and the present.

When I look back to the steps that brought me to the RCC, it seems almost predictable that I would at some point be working on boundaries. After all, I have always been walking between worlds that, just like *páramos* and cloud forests, are tightly interwoven: the worlds of the sciences and the humanities; the worlds of distant academic analyses and of personal involvement; the worlds of tales and of facts.

I am certainly lucky and grateful to have arrived at the right place for dealing with this challenge.