Making Tracks: Robert Wilson

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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**.

“Scholar Activist?”

By **Robert Wilson**

My journey to the Rachel Carson Center began five years ago in a hot, stifling Washington, DC jail cell. I had been arrested earlier that day at the White House with sixty-nine other people demonstrating against the Keystone XL, a proposed pipeline that would carry oil derived from tar sands in Alberta to refineries on the Texas Gulf Coast. In recent years, similar fossil-fuel projects have come under increasing scrutiny by environmentalists who claimed further development of these carbon-rich tar sands would exacerbate global warming. Climatologist James Hansen went even further, saying the full exploitation of the tar sands would mean “game over for the climate.” In the wake of failed climate negotiations at the 2009 Copenhagen climate conference, and with the US Congress unwilling to pass cap and trade legislation, it seemed environmentalists had little to lose by launching a civil disobedience campaign aimed at pressuring President Barack Obama to deny TransCanada, the pipeline builder, the permit to construct the pipeline. So, when the call came via email for people to assemble at the White House in the summer of 2011 to commit civil disobedience and risk arrest, I was ready to join them.

Lying on the metal bunk in my cell, I had a lot of time to think. I thought about the people who were arrested with me—mostly white, liberal, middle-aged, well-educated, and middle- to upper-middle class Americans—in short, stereotypical environmentalists. But I knew on later days, different sorts of people planned to commit civil disobedience and risk arrest: climatologists, millennials, farmers and ranchers from Nebraska and Texas, and indigenous peoples who lived along the proposed pipeline’s route. The group

comprised an unusual coalition to oppose the pipeline and advocate for action on climate change.

This seemed odd. Years of scholarly reading about environmentalism had shown me that such diverse coalitions were rare and fleeting. The standard history of American environmentalism went something like this: In the 1960s, middle-class Americans grew increasingly ambivalent about the cost of postwar progress and affluence as they learned how pesticides such as DDT poisoned the land and people's bodies; they lamented the loss of green space by bulldozer blades and suburban housing; and, perhaps most of all, they feared "The Bomb" and radioactive fallout. This concern erupted publicly on Earth Day in 1970 when twenty million Americans participated in teach-ins, demonstrations, and cleanup campaigns. In the wake of Earth Day, the US Congress and the President signed into law a suite of legislation aimed at safeguarding the environment and human health: the Clean Water Act and the Endangered Species Act to name a few. Other aspects of American life became "greener": universities developed environmental studies programs, newspapers created environmental beats, and publishers flooded bookstores with environmentally focused books. The age of ecology had arrived.

But there was a darker side to the history, too. The early 1970s was the high tide of the white middle class and, at the time of the first Earth Day, the American environmental movement was hardly diverse. In later decades, inequality rose sharply and the middle class dwindled. Partly in response, the environmental justice movement emerged in the 1980s. Made-up largely of people of color and impoverished communities, proponents of this new movement tended to focus on issues often overlooked by mainstream environmental groups—lead poisoning and toxic-waste sites in poor neighborhoods. They criticized such groups for their mostly white, rather elite membership and leadership. At the same time, rural white Americans were outright hostile to environmentalism, seeing the movement as an attack on private property and workers such a loggers, miners, and ranchers. In short, there were numerous obstacles to building a broad, diverse coalition advocating sustainability, and addressing the dire threat of climate change.

Yet lying in my cell, and even more so after I was released, I witnessed a new sort of environmental movement—or more specifically, a climate movement—emerging. Mainstream environmentalists, millennials, and African-American social justice advocates, among others, had found common cause, managing to surmount some of the obstacles that had bedeviled the environmental movement for thirty years. So I wondered, how had the activists and organizations managed to do this? Why did the Keystone XL issue lend

itself to this sort of broad coalition building? And was the anti-Keystone XL pipeline coalition representative of the American climate movement that had blossomed over the past half-decade?

Researching this topic is scholarly departure for me in two ways. First, the struggle against the Keystone XL pipeline and the development of the climate movement is a contemporary topic. My training is as a historical geographer and environmental historian, but this project has required me to venture into new places and adopt new methods, such as ethnography and the semi-structured interviews of activists. Since I am most comfortable studying people, events, and processes located safely in the past, I've found it somewhat daunting to leave the security of the archives for the unpredictability of the field.

Second, I had a political commitment to this subject that I didn't have with earlier projects. A few years earlier, I wrote a dissertation and later a book about the efforts of birders and hunters to conserve migratory birds in North America and establish refuges to protect their habitat. But I am neither a hunter nor much of a bird lover. (I put the "amateur" in amateur birder.) Therefore, I was able to distance myself from my project and the passions that drove hunters and birders to fight for the survival of these birds.

With this project on the climate movement, however, my emotional and political affinities were far greater. Could I maintain any sort of scholarly detachment, having not only supported but participated in a climate movement action? Whether this is a problem depends on which academic hat I wear. My field of environmental history is a child, in part, of the 1970s environmental movement. Early environmental historians participated in and supported the movement but over time, many developed a critical distance between their scholarly practice and the movement that helped birth the field. For environmental historians trained in history this was particularly important; their fellow historians sometimes regarded environmental history as simply "activist history" and therefore insufficiently rigorous. Gaining disciplinary legitimacy partly entailed establishing some distance between the practice of environmental history and the social movement of environmentalism. Like environmental humanities scholars, some environmental historians are comfortable wedding their commitment to scholarship and environmentalism. (After all, the Rachel Carson Center is named after a famous environmentalist, not a scholar.) But others felt it was essential to maintain their critical distance from environmentalism—a decision I thought wise. But my current project has made me question that commitment.

However, fellow scholars in geography, my home discipline, share few of the qualms environmental historians have about broaching the scholarship/activism boundary. In the sectors of critical geography and political ecology particularly, geographers are almost expected to show fierce political commitment to their subjects and find common cause with the groups they study. It is de rigueur for such geographers to announce their political commitments and critical-radical practice in their work, something that has always made me skeptical. Shouldn't whether one is radical or critical be evident in the quality of one's work, rather than though provocative or sensationalist statements?

Despite these qualms, I have become a reluctant scholar activist. I am still not sure I have found a way to balance my commitment to objective scholarship and support for the climate movement. Many years ago, historian Patricia Nelson Limerick was asked about the relationship between environmental history and environmentalism. In essence, she said that it's fine for environmental historians to have affinities for environmentalism, but they shouldn't purr in the movement's lap like a kitten. A witty answer. Yet it revealed a deeper truth: all social movements, including the climate movement, need critics as much as supporters. My project, while born in a jail with other activists, is ultimately a sympathetic critique by an occasional supporter of the climate movement. A serious movement deserves serious critique. And that, in a nutshell, is what my RCC project endeavors to do.