Making Tracks: Sarah Strauss

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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**.

“Hither and Yon—All roads lead to Munich?”

by **Sarah Strauss**

It’s really all about the stories. I started my academic career thinking I would be a biomedical researcher, perhaps also a physician, and spend my life in a lab. While taking the necessary science courses, I sought distraction and pleasure (two good warning signs for a need to switch paths) through courses in literature, philosophy, and comparative religion; big ideas like truth and beauty were exciting, but to me, the most interesting parts of these courses focused on the stories people tell. How do people in different cultures make sense of the universe in meaningful ways? During the same period, I spent most of my non-academic time hiking or climbing in the mountains, or on the back of a horse. Ultimately, I discovered the field of medical anthropology, and realized that it could allow me to focus on the stories that people tell about health, well-being, and the good life. As a medical anthropologist, I could work to understand what it means to be healthy or ill, not only in biomedical terms, but also from the perspective of the narratives that guide people toward beliefs and practices that they expect will give them a good life.

I went for a Master’s degree in public health, and then a PhD in cultural anthropology, traveling to India for my dissertation research, continually seeking stories. In my first book, I explored how yoga became a transnational phenomenon practiced by people around the world, as part of their search for personal health, yes, but also—as it turned out—as part of their quest for a more transcendent kind of health: that of the planet as a whole. That is, they saw yoga as a method that would allow them to follow E.F. Schumacher’s advice to “get your own house in order, and the rest will follow.” In this way, I began the turn toward environmental studies.

While based in Switzerland in 1993–4, I was fortunate to work with an exciting interdisciplinary group of scholars at the **Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology** (a section of the ETH); they were just beginning to think about how social scientists could effectively tackle the problem of climate change: what theoretical and methodological tools might we use to bring the human dimensions of this problem into focus? I decided then to make water in the Alps the focus of my next project, and identified a thermal spa whose waters had long been sought for their health-promoting qualities; equally important were the many other kinds of fresh water that existed in that community, from glaciers to wastewater flowing back into the Rhône. In water, I found the perfect topic to explore the intersection of health and environment. Climate change, of course, would come to have significant impacts on these various waters as the decades unfolded.

But at the end of my funded research project in 2004, I was stumped. Yes, I had a lot of stories, and yes, the waters were interesting and people appreciated them, for both their health-related properties as well as their value for recreation, agriculture, and other purposes. And indeed, people saw that climate change was happening in their valley, and that it could affect their lives and the lives of their children. But their response to this recognition was to say, “oh, well”—and if the problems became too serious, then they would just have to move. Downstream. Where the water supply was very clearly not going to be better than it was in their home at the top of the watershed. If the water resources became insufficient or problematic in some other way there, then how might moving to a lower altitude make that problem better? It did not make sense to me. This was not about lack of “belief” in climate change, or about failure to recognize potential problems in their own lives. No, it was sheer paralysis. The leap to action at home was too much to contemplate.

After spending a sabbatical year learning how to be a climate modeler, and trying to understand whether this gap in understanding related to the information that was produced by modelers of climate and environment and disseminated through the media, I concluded that the only way forward was to start at the other end—with the goal of transforming our energy systems, one of the key drivers of climate change. By developing strategies for creating a lower carbon society, we could focus attention on the nexus of climate, water, and energy, and get away from the polarizing discourse of climate change in the twenty-first century, especially in the USA and my own energy-colony state of Wyoming. Could rationales related to health, food, and economic benefits compel more people to act in ways that would reduce greenhouse gasses in the end? More than just stories are needed now, but stories continue to be a very important resource for the toolbox. Along with powerful narratives, we need dynamic models, data, images, artistic representations, and every other sensorial mode of communication we can imagine.

I returned to India in 2013, this time to look at energy transitions and paths to a sustainable future. How can we reimagine the possibilities? Following six months in Auroville, an intentional community with a commitment to sustainability, I began to work

on the problem of energy transitions at home in Wyoming, the main coal-producing state (40 percent of national production originates there), exploring options related to novel biomass-based energy systems. Issues of siting and scale are central to identifying strategies that will be effective in specific local, social-ecological systems, and these can only be developed in consultation with local communities.

So here I am, in Munich at the Rachel Carson Center, collaborating with my husband, environmental geochemist **Carrick Eggleston**, to explore the nexus of energy, water, and climate change (among other things!) through the use of dynamic models and engaging narratives. We hope to assemble a kit for twenty-first century integration of social-ecological systems across disciplines, a template for helping people from different communities—in the USA, India, Switzerland, and beyond—think through the environmental and sociocultural changes they are experiencing in their local communities, and make plans for the future they desire. The opportunity to interact with scholars from around the world, who are working on similar problems across time and space, is a great privilege. New possibilities for action will only come from the kind of interdisciplinary cross-fertilization that the Carson Center encourages; reproducing our old silos will only give the same old results.