Making Tracks: Andrea Gaynor

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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**.

“The Long Path to the Ever-present”

by **Andrea Gaynor**

In a more romantic life, my love of nature would have begun in early childhood, fostered by hours spent in bushland on the family farm finding delicate flowers, collecting outlandish seed pods, and watching the intricate manoeuvrings of drab caterpillars seeking places to pupate. In fact I grew up in a middle-ring suburb, in a modest, modern house near the edge of a swamp—not so close that we ever saw a tiger snake on the back lawn, but near enough that an old paperbark tree flourished down the bottom of the yard. I would peel its bark into delicate sheets and write secret messages on them. We had ducks with names derived from suburban industrial food culture (Coco and Kellog), and a vegetable patch where I attempted to grow oddities like loofah gourds and okra. Some of my earliest memories of the bush are from a summer walk in the hills east of Perth. It was hot, and it seemed as if everything was trying to prickle or bite me—spiny wattles and hakeas, ants, sticks. I much preferred the familiar and comfortable domestic nature of my back yard.

Later, we moved to a new house built on recently-cleared bushland. Remnants of the previous ecosystem were all around us, from the scorpions in the basement and frogs in the swimming pool, to the bobtail lizards that turned up on our front lawn and the big old jarrah tree framed by my bedroom window. We fed the bobtails snails with strawberry jam, and made cubby houses with grasstree leaf flooring in the bush on the vacant block next door. Here was the bush as domestic nature and I was captivated, even as I was implicated in its suburban destruction.

Over time, the bobtails disappeared. One was run over by a car in front of our house; the others met less conspicuous ends. We heard frogs shriek as they were taken by cats in the night. One morning I woke to the sound of a chainsaw and watched from my bedroom window as the mighty jarrah was taken, limb by limb, and put into a bin. A bulldozer cleared the block next door and a modern two-storey house, not unlike our own, was built on it. At this time, second-wave environmentalism was nearing its peak in Australia and "environmental issues" were headline stories. Connecting the local changes I had observed (and, though I denied it at the time, had been complicit in) with global events such as the ozone hole, the greenhouse effect, pollution, drought, and famine, I became committed to the environmentalist cause.

I had never been especially interested in history, but my parents gave me a copy of Clive Ponting's *A Green History of the World* for Christmas one year, and I later fell into history at university. I had wanted to study science but was deterred by a summer job in physiology; I had also realised that "environmental problems" were not caused by nature but by people, so their solution lay in understanding society. And history, as the study of causes and outcomes, continuity and change wrapped up in potentially powerful prose, struck me as an especially powerful tool for understanding society.

By this time I had come to love the bush—its ingenious adaptations, its delicate and erratic beauty. I had also become acutely aware of the way in which my comfortable suburban existence was underwritten by the destruction of bushland, as well as many other forms of environmental exploitation. At this time I was deeply affected by images of salinized land in the Western Australian wheatbelt—tortured skeletal trees rising from shimmering deadly salt pans. This was staple-producing country where my bread came from, and it was predicted that half of the state's central and eastern wheatbelt regions would eventually yield to the inexorably rising saline groundwater. Thousands of hectares of remnant bushland—full of bobtails, unique and beautiful wildflowers, and the otherworldly domes of mallee eucalypts—would be collateral damage. My honors dissertation found that back in the 1920s, the state government had, for political reasons, ignored warnings about the likelihood of rising salt.

While studying for my BA, I had also completed a Permaculture Design Certificate and Diploma and was living in a house where we kept poultry and bees, and grew fruit and vegetables, as well as herbs that we used for cooking, teas, medicine, and dyeing. We composted, recycled, and made our own beer and art; later, we bred poultry at the East Perth City Farm. I wondered at the connection between suburban self-sufficiency and

sustainable cities, and explored this from an historical perspective in my PhD thesis on suburban food production in Perth and Melbourne, 1880–2000.

Having taken up a lectureship at The University of Western Australia, my interest in relationships between people and nature led me in diverse directions and I explored environmental histories of landscape art, fish and fishing, tree decline, urban animals, desert gardens, “native” animals, and more. I’ve never been disciplined enough to stick to one area of inquiry, seeing exciting questions and productive collaborations everywhere. When I was invited to join a project on the environmental history of the mallee lands of southern Australia, I jumped at the chance. These are low-rainfall lands bordering the pastoral interior, (previously) characterized by the multi-stemmed eucalypt form from which their name is drawn. Now the mallee lands are home to big skies and even bigger farms. There, many of the themes shaping human-environment relations in modernity are cast into stark relief.

At the Rachel Carson Center I worked on a history of the Stirling Ranges National Park in southwest Western Australia. Part of one of the world’s biodiversity hotspots, it includes mallee-heath as a dominant vegetation type. My history presented the park as a hybrid entity: a creation in which society and nature were thoroughly entangled and connected to local and global flows of capital, ideas, commodities, and bodies. This research served as a testing ground for formulating an approach to a new history of nature and modernity in Australia. In this work, I seek to understand the ways in which humans and nonhumans have coexisted in particular places and over time—in ways co-modified by knowledge, power, and conflict—while also acknowledging humans as a powerful force for environmental change. A key project of modernity was to achieve separation from and control over nature; in my comfortable childhood I was a beneficiary of this impetus, while also experiencing the dismal outcomes of its contradictions. Revolving around themes of materiality, proximity, power, and control, this new history will, I hope, be a history for the Anthropocene.