Making Tracks: Jenny Price

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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**.

“And you ask yourself, well . . . How did I get here?” —*Talking Heads, *Once in a Lifetime

by **Jenny Price**

When my nephews or my students talk about their future careers, I can only marvel. Theirs seems to be a well-directed generation, with clearly-laid plans for the whats, whens, and whys. Yet I always wonder, could the financial advisor eventually decide to be a dancer? My own career has been a series of stumbles, accidents, three steps back, and advances to Go. It feels a bit more like a Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup commercial: “You got peanut butter in my chocolate!! What the hell were you thin . . . ooohhhh.” All of which led me to the Rachel Carson Center, and to my current major project, in which I am trying to persuade people—especially educated and well-meaning Americans—to stop saving the planet NOW.

I was always headed inevitably to this point. I always wanted to be a writer, and I have always been a nature-lover. I grew up in Missouri—the “Show-Me State”—and a born skeptic’s reluctance to take anything at face value I think can translate naturally into an appreciation of historical context and cultural analysis.

Yet I was never headed inevitably to this point. My parents took me and my brothers to the Rocky Mountains for our summer vacations—where I embraced Nature as what is real and true, and as a sacred refuge from cities and modern life. As a wilderness-worshiping environmentalist, I vowed to live an authentic life in Nature. Maybe in Alaska. Eventually. I went off to college at Princeton University—with no idea that the wonderful writer John McPhee taught there. I was a biology major and still a wannabe writer, and I

learned two key things in McPhee's nonfiction writing course: that I wasn't a writer yet, and that writing is very hard.

Where I would lose my religion. And realize there's no such thing as an untouched wilderness, and become very confused for a while. The powerful, broadly Western, and deeply American definition of nature as a timeless world apart helps many of us to articulate our troubles with modern life. Yet how does it also blind us to thinking about, and taking responsibility for, how we use and inhabit nature to build our cities and very literally create our modern lives?

One trips again. A new nephew drew me inexorably to Los Angeles. I had always hated LA, not because I had actually ever been there but because it was an evil, nature-destroying megalopolis. I loved it immediately, and then would move to LA about two hours after I finished graduate school. LA, I eventually realized, is the extreme American embodiment of the consequences of loving nature as a non-modern world apart while inhabiting it dramatically unsustainably and inequitably. Accordingly, it is also the site of bold, cutting-edge, megalopolis-sized environmental initiatives. It is a Valhalla for a lapsed nature worshiper who remains a nature lover and environmentalist. It is also the American city with the most extreme inequities—and in LA I began to ask the essential "who" questions that the dominant environmentalist "Man destroying Nature" narrative tends to make invisible. Who creates environmental messes? Who benefits most? Who suffers the worst consequences? Who benefits most and least from the solutions?

One accidentally co-founds something. LA is also the sort of place where you can write a really good poem the day after you move there and get appointed poet laureate the following year. My friend Emily Scott, then a graduate student in art history at UCLA, invited me to join a one-off project, the Los Angeles Urban Rangers. The idea was to deploy the well-known park ranger persona—friendly, knowledgeable, and a tad gee-whiz—to explore the everyday places we take for granted, and to give others the interpretive tools to do the same. Within a couple of years, we realized we had accidentally created a public art collective—and we began to do residencies at LA-area art museums. We designed a "trail system" to explore the past, present, and future of redevelopment in downtown LA, and "beach safaris" with skill-enhancing activities for how to find and use a public beach in Malibu. And I had stumbled through a portal into a new and more experiential world of storytelling and communication.

And so on. My current project, *Stop Saving the Planet!*, is a cultural critique of contemporary American environmentalist culture—and will be deeply informed by my time, colleagues, and conversations at the RCC. What is environmentalism *for*? The book tracks the dominant and often well-intentioned "save the planet" answer through greenwashing, and through a resource-gobbling greener-than-thou consumerism. Above all, I want to help explain why so many lower-income Americans, who breathe the worst air and drink the worst water, see climate change as an elitist invention and environment generally as a dirty word. I track the "save the planet" approach to the heart of the troubling class divide that has always haunted American environmentalism. The book will also offer helpful suggestions for ways to stop saving the planet—and to start using and inhabiting it more sustainably and equitably.

I think I have been doing this work forever. It's really entirely new. I would like to write about gun violence for my next large project. As un-American as this will sound, not all futures are possible. Well, at least after you fall out of a palm tree and destroy your knee. I'll never be a dancer.