# Making Tracks: Mike Hulme

21 August 2014
Making Tracks

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**.

**Weather and Culture as a Teenage Boy in Scotland: The Early Days and Development of My Interest in the Environmental Humanities**

by **Mike Hulme**

It is difficult today to talk about the weather without the conversation jumping a few tracks to find oneself somehow engaged in a discussion about global warming or climate change. But it was not always so. I first became interested in the weather in the 1970s as a teenager living on the east coast of Scotland. My passion for the game of cricket meant that I avidly followed the daily summer weather forecasts to find out the chances of my school’s cricket match the following day being interrupted by rain—or in eastern Scotland occasionally by fog (locally termed €˜haar’), or even snow! I wasn’t interested in climate change or even in climate. I was interested in how the condition of the atmosphere where I lived was going to affect the cultural activity with which I was obsessed—the sport of cricket.

I took this interest in weather into my academic study of geography at university where I first learned about theories of climatic change, including the scares of the late 1970s that a premature ice age might be heading our way. Geographers are well trained to study the mutual shaping of human and physical worlds and I became sensitized to an idea of climate that recognized both its physical and cultural manifestations. Geographers should be able to make sense of the statistics of weather as well as understand the bio-social implications of weather. But a unifying theory of climate’s material and symbolic dimensions is harder to construct.

I continued my study of climate with a PhD that investigated fluctuations in rainfall in central semi-arid Sudan and how traditional rural water technologies are adapted to multi-scale variations in drought patterns. Spending extended amounts of fieldwork in northern Sudan exposed me to a very different climate and a very different culture to that of the UK. My research focused on archival work in the Sudan Met Office and on field surveys of rural water technologies and I would say that my awareness of the interactions between climate and culture remained largely latent.

It was around this time—the mid-1980s—that climate change emerged as an idea that slowly began to gain public and political traction, framed as it was then in the context of newly-recognized global environmental problems and politics. After an early career lecturing position, I left the discipline of geography and became a research scientist in the UK's leading climate change research center at the time—the Climatic Research Unit at the University of East Anglia. I rapidly absorbed the Earth System science mode of framing the study of climate change—physics, systems, model, and statistics. In this epistemic culture, generating the predictive knowledge favored by environmental advocates and politicians, I lost sight even further of any unifying theory of climate and society. There was little incentive to recognize the deeper historical and cultural roots of the idea of climate that all human societies have attended to in various ways.

Climate change, now decidedly anthropogenic, was the rising environmental political issue of the 1990s, and in 2000 I was successful in leading a large multidisciplinary UK team in winning, and then establishing, the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research. While directing the Centre I was able to observe at close quarters how science, politics and values interacted in the many-sided arguments and discussions about climate change, in media, business, governmental and citizen settings. Climate change was not a neutral idea, climate itself was not something that humans could control and, in any case, climate science was not an adequate guide to policy.

These new insights brought me back to my geographical heritage, but now enlivened by an awareness of the theories, methods and stories of environmental history. This came about through taking graduate diplomas in memoir writing and intellectual history in my sabbatical year after finishing with the Tyndall Centre and also by becoming engaged with a series of workshops around the theme of €˜expertise for the future,' organized by Warde, Sörlin and Robin. My 2009 book, *Why We Disagree About Climate Change*, laid out my new thinking about the nature of climate change—as an idea that revealed how human

cultures think as much as being a term describing a physical phenomenon of the atmosphere.

This book found a widespread positive reaction across many social science and humanities disciplines and amongst a variety of civic, governmental and business organizations. It became increasingly clear to me that the notion of climate control was an ideology and therefore something that needed a deeper analysis and critique.

It is this conviction that set me on the path to the Rachel Carson Center. In 2012 I had set up a new MA in Environmental Sciences and Humanities at the University of East Anglia and in 2013 I published a short monograph critical of the idea of climate control, *Can Science Fix Climate Change? A Case against Climate Engineering*. By now, 2013, I had moved to King's College London as a professor of climate and culture in a department of geography. So when a colleague of mine suggested I took a look at the Rachel Carson Center and its Fellowship Program, I quickly realized that this was a place where I could further develop my thinking around the interactions between climates and cultures. This has brought me back to my early career interest in the mutual shaping of the material and the symbolism around the idea of climate.

At the RCC my project has been to prepare a proposal for a monograph on climates and cultures, *Cultured Weather: A Brief History of Climate*, backed up by a SAGE Major Reference Work that I have been commissioned to edit. This latter collection of about 90 published articles will serve as a core reference work for scholars and practitioners in a wide range of fields. They will capture and organize some of the most important writings on climate and culture that have appeared since the 1980s and provide a structure within which the recently growing body of work in human geography, anthropology, sociology and religious studies can be placed.

*Cultured Weather: A Brief History of Climate* opens up the many ways in which the idea of climate is given shape and meaning in different human cultures—how climates are historicized, known, changed, lived with, blamed, feared, predicted, represented, politicized and, at least putatively, designed. These human actions performed on the idea of climate emerge from diverse cultural engagements humans have with their primary sensory experience of the atmosphere's restless weather. *Cultured Weather: A Brief History of Climate* therefore develops the case for understanding climate as an enduring, yet malleable, idea that humans use to stabilize cultural relationships with their weather.

My cultural relationship with the weather was what first engaged my interest in the notion of climate as a teenage boy in Scotland. Studying changes in the way in which the idea of climate—its physical and imaginative dimensions—performs its stabilizing work is what my subsequent research career has been devoted to.