Making Tracks: Diana Mincyte

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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**.

By **Diana Mincyte**

My earliest encounters with "non-human" nature were those of gardening. Like many others in the socialist world, my parents had acquired a patch of land located a few kilometers outside of the city where they spent long hours cultivating beds and growing a wide variety of vegetables, berries, and fruits. It is the harvests from the garden—*sodas* in Lithuanian—that filled the shelves in the cellar of our apartment building with jars of jams, juices, preserves, compotes, and pickled vegetables. For my parents, the garden was the center of their lives, the sources of pride, and the method for ensuring sustenance.

But not for me. In my memories, gardening always meant grueling work. I vividly remember weeding endless rows of vegetables, spending hours picking currents and cherries, and shuttling between the well and the garden with buckets in my hands for watering wilting plants. Worse than that, after finishing with gardening, we would have to carry the produce home and try to board overcrowded buses heading into the city. The bags were heavy, bulky and ugly, and, as far as my over-sensitized teenage identity was concerned, they broadcast to the entire world that my parents did not own a car or have better ways to secure subsistence.

These subjectivities of insecurity, lower social caste, poverty, and not-belonging are certainly neither new nor unique. As numerous social theorists—from Max Weber to Charles Taylor—have argued, alienation is inseparable from the modern experience in societies unleashed from the bounds of tradition, religion, and social immobility. Yet, what seems slightly different in this case was the centrality of land, work, and concerns with subsistence that created tensions between the expectations of modern life and the habitus of the "urban peasant".

These tensions and experiences have shaped my scholarly interests in profound ways. Not only have I been drawn to studying questions of poverty, sustenance, and self-reliance in the context of environmental issues, but environmental humanities gave me the language to consider the complicated ways in which nature and culture are braided together and how biological processes intersect with class politics, labor practices, subjectivities, technological advancements, economic conditions, and the philosophical questions of life and well-being. In light of this, my work in environmental sociology has been driven by the concern with poverty and sustenance, particularly in relation to the broader debates about environmental politics. How do slums, subsistence agriculture, and extreme poverty fit in the current debates about sustainable future? Where do people, animals, plants, and microorganisms that are categorized as worthless and even parasitic belong in the visions of sustainability? What is the relationship between subsistence and sustainability? Too often, I have found, current visions of sustainability advanced by politicians and transnational institutions reproduce Eurocentric and teleological ideas about what constitutes development, progress, civilization, and well-being, overriding locally existing practices and experiences.

My intellectual path in developing this line of inquiry was informed by three schools of thought. Building on the pragmatist tradition, a number of scholars in science and technology studies have underscored the centrality of practice and performance in understanding the development of ideas. As I began writing my dissertation, Andrew Pickering pressed questions of materiality and agency on the topics that seemed to belong to the more abstract domains such as poverty and identity. Zsuzsa Gille, on the other hand, encouraged me to link material agency with the issues of political economy and the classical sociological questions of power and social inequalities. More recently, conversations with James C. Scott led to grounding my work in the tradition of agrarian studies, a field that has been particularly concerned with interrelations between labor, land/territory, and the state.

It is in the synthesis of these approaches that I locate my book project that focuses on informal agro-food economies and the politics of economic isolation in Eastern Europe. The primary purpose of this book is to bring a comparative-historical perspective to studying sustainability. In it, I compare two raw milk economies in post-socialist Lithuania, an informal and poverty driven networks on the one hand, and artisanal production, on the other. Relying on ethnographic fieldwork, I seek to document the ways in which boundaries between two different modes of production, consumption, and distribution are created and reproduced. In so doing, I seek to theorize a space that

separates subsistence from sustainability and alterity from alternatives. This research highlights how state and transnational entities have played a key role in establishing a narrative and material grid and institutional infrastructures for separating different economic networks.

As with all academic endeavors, new research projects require time, space, and inspiration. I am deeply indebted to the Rachel Carson Center (RCC) for providing all three. It is in Munich that I crystallized my research questions, built theoretical foundations, and drafted chapters. The RCC community, including fellows, staff, and graduate students, shared their valuable time and resources and provided the much needed feedback, encouragement, and assistance. Most importantly, the fact that I started (and have now finished) four additional articles on a wide range of topics testifies to the vibrancy of the intellectual life at RCC. All of four articles speak to interdisciplinary audiences in environmental studies. This suggests that the interdisciplinary encounters taking place at RCC continue to germinate well beyond the end of the fellowship. This also means that given the right conditions, the grueling work of wordsmithery can be transformed into the source of inspiration.