Making Tracks: Shane McCorristine

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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**.

New Places
By **Shane McCorristine**

On my first day in Munich I got lost looking for the Rachel Carson Center. But I was close. After wandering around what was (from what I could gather) a Catholic institute and then bothering bemused-looking staff on reception at a frightening gymnasium, I retraced my steps, confirmed I was indeed at Leopoldstraße 11 and looked out for a sign. Like a good geographer I had explored the boundaries, passed through trials of endurance, and could now make sense of this place. I entered RCC at last, dear reader, and although my period there was all-too brief, I have plenty of wonderful memories of the place as well as a formidable and cosmopolitan network of colleagues and friends.

As someone who trained as an historian, is currently based in an English studies department, teaches human geography, and will move to an archaeology department shortly, I am not a typical environmental humanist. But meeting my colleagues in the RCC taught me that there is no such thing as a typical environmental humanist. Indeed I shudder at the thought of such a thing, for the calibre of talent and expertise that I encountered in Munich showed how varied and atypical this discipline could be. Where interdisciplinarity is all too often a hindrance in the Academy, here it was celebrated and prioritised as the process of connecting environmental and social relations. For me the RCC patronised the idea of a *field* of researchers, each working under a programmatic umbrella but with such diversity and excellence as to render the Fellowship the start of something, and not a limited term appointment with specific outputs. I now conceive of environmental humanities as a home for roaming minds, as a point of departure that does not necessarily demand membership of a society, publication in particular journals, or self-identification.

Shortly after my time in Munich I completed an article on Victorian Arctic exploration and sent it to a prestigious historical journal for peer-review. “Hmmm”, mused the editor, “I wouldn’t know where to start finding reviewers for this. Could you suggest some historians in your field?” Oh, I thought, that’s a tough one. In the article I was dealing with British naval explorers, but I was following them in strange directions towards shamanism and supernatural beliefs about the Aurora Borealis. In the end I gave a list of names, one or two who worked in imperial history, but most who worked in Arctic anthropology. An anonymous reviewer (probably one of the historians) soon got back with a negative report and the exasperated editor suggested I look elsewhere. It was at this point that I stopped trying to fit my ghosts into an ill-fitting historical shoe and re-wrote the article focusing on embodiment, environment, and enchantment. Certainly, I came out with another interesting mess (published in the *Canadian Journal of History*!), but at least I walked the trail before deciding where I would end up, and I think this is an important lesson that I have learned from reading environmental historians. Don’t miss the wood for the trees!

Another lesson came from William Cronon, who at his presidential address to the American Historical Association this year highlighted storytelling as an essential activity of the historical disciplines. Addresses like this give one a shot in the arm, an instigation to return to the kind of omnivorous reading we all did as undergraduates. But then demands on time, and whole days spent answering emails, leave us with little opportunity to read for pleasure, outside monographs and articles on our to-read list. The quest for me then, is to displace the stress of shrinking time into a re-enchantment of academic research. I enjoy researching to be sure, but it is hard to write one’s own work as a decent story, especially when the magic has evaporated after years of drudgery and self-flagellation.

I have since re-thought my re-thinking of Arctic exploration many times. My dual approach remains challenging traditional knowledge regarding British Arctic exploration, while bringing the ”Arctic” and ”exploration” into current discussions in the humanities and social sciences. This reflects on the legacy of British “heroic” exploration but maximises the appeal of my stories for readers looking at things like spectrality, gender, and affects. Anthropologists have paid some attention to the adaptation, or lack thereof, of westerners to Arctic mobilities and ecologies. But what of the moments of reverie or ghost-seeing in which the explorer (through journals and fiction) located his presence within a wider field of human and nonhuman inhabitation? These moments typically came following the contemplation of the ”sublime wilderness” and disrupt any easy understanding of the actor in a malevolent environment. While asking new and

fundamental questions about the western experience in and of the Arctic, I have become more aware of the multi-locality and multi-vocality of human interaction with the world.

I still try to think about European exploration in the Arctic as a passage, and narrations of Arctic exploration as descriptions of movement, rather than static snapshots of unadapted bodies in an unforgiving landscape. Having travelled to Arctic Canada, I no longer assume that everything is rooted and static. Places can also be buoyant and atmospheric; the sea, the ice, the land, the stars, and the sky are all part of Arctic place.