Carson Fellowship Project Description—Gregory T. Cushman

The Anthropocene:
A History of the Earth under Human Domination

In 2016 or 2017, an international society of earth scientists is set to make a decision: Is modern industrial civilization making a mark on earth systems so distinct and lasting that it will be readily detectable in geological strata millions, even billions of years in the future? Has our species initiated a unique "human epoch" of geological history that should officially be called the Anthropocene? During my residence in Munich, I will make extended use of the Carson Center's rich collection of research materials on environmental history and draft two parts of a book-length study exploring the deeper causes and human values that have brought human-nature relations to this juncture. One broad goal of the book will be to produce a concise overview of the history of the idea of the Anthropocene and to evaluate the range of competing alternatives that have been proposed for the timing and causes of its onset from the viewpoint of a historian. The second, more specific goal will be to connect the beginning of the Anthropocene as a geological epoch to a particular period of human history and set of causes. Environmental scholars have only begun to interpret the linkage between historical trends of the Age of Revolution (circa 1776-1848), its immediate aftermath, and an ongoing ecological revolution that has transformed modern societies' most basic patterns of production and consumption. The Anthropocene concept challenges us to consider that this ecological revolution, in terms of its ultimate significance for planetary history, may be the most important outcome of the Age of Revolution.

Here are some thoughts that are currently guiding my development of this project: At the moment, the Anthropocene concept has been expanded to include a grab bag of concerns and would benefit greatly from historical grounding and analytical precision. For me, the most interesting issue at the heart of the Anthropocene concept involves the recognition that humans have become powerful agents of geological transformation. Environmental historians have given relatively little attention to our changing relationship with the rock beneath our feet—to the division of nature we once called the mineral kingdom, and now call the lithosphere. Yet when compared to the thin veneer of air, water, and organic life that covers our planet's surface, the earth's mineral realm is incredibly vast, and thanks to human intervention, has enormous potential to alter these other spheres. During my time at the Carson Center and beyond, I am going to explore the proposition that modern industrial civilization is having an unprecedented impact on the planet, in large part, because it is built on a fundamentally new ecological relationship with the non-living, chemical constituents of the earth itself. Meanwhile, the unrelenting drive to mine the earth, synthesize new substances, and discard unwanted waste has been a potent generator of new kinds of human exploitation, environmental hazards, geographical inequalities, and political conflicts.