DON MITCHELL TRIES TO CHALLENGE students' perceptions when they enter his Geography 172 class, World Cultures. For example, during one lecture he might assert that, biologically, there is no such thing as race. Once he has students convinced of that view, he turns the tables. In his next lecture, he proposes that while race may not have a biological basis, it is “very real on the ground. People have to deal with it every day.”

Mitchell, 36, a professor in the geography department of the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs and The College of Arts and Sciences since fall 1997, hopes his students will argue with him during both lectures. “I try to be provocative,” he says. His aim is not to impart a set of facts, but rather to nurture an inquisitive frame of mind. “I want students to think about how there is a wide set of processes that construct the world we’re part of. I want them to know what some of those processes are, but I’m not interested in pat answers.”

That goes for his own views, too. Mitchell says his ideas often evolve as a result of give-and-take in the classroom. And he doesn’t want students to consider his opinions sacred. He often makes fun of his own socialist politics as a way of encouraging students to disagree with him.

Many people may think of geography class as being more about learning how to read a map, or memorizing Brazil’s top 10 exports. But Mitchell is a cultural geographer: His interest is in investigating “the way people think and live their lives in particular places.” How does this differ from disciplines such as history, sociology, and anthropology? Mitchell says that these days the lines are blurring, that all these subjects draw on each other. But geography “brings a specific focus on space itself, a focus on the spatial relationships between places and people.”

Mitchell’s own work has often focused on how the interaction between society and its marginalized members changes the landscape. His 1996 book, The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape, explores how the conflict between farm workers and farm owners shaped California’s Central Valley between 1913 and 1945. The book was well-received, and marked Mitchell as a rising star in geography circles, according to geography department chair John Mercer. It may also have brought Mitchell to the attention of the MacArthur Foundation. In June he was awarded one of 29 MacArthur Fellowships for 1998. The fellowship, commonly known as a “genius grant,” will pay him $235,000 over the next five years. Mitchell is the first SU faculty member to receive this honor.

A MacArthur Fellowship is not something for which one can apply. Each year the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation invites more than 100 people, selected for expertise in their respective fields and their ability to identify exceptional creativity, to serve as nominators. Typi- cally, between 20 and 30 fellows are selected each year.
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the program began in 1981, 531 fellows have been named. A few, like author Robert Penn Warren and choreographer Twyla Tharp, are well-known to the general public. But many are unknown outside their own fields.

MacArthur Fellowship recipients are not expected to use the award to produce specific projects or reports. "The creative person is at the heart of a society's capacity to improve the human condition," says Adele Simmons, president of the MacArthur Foundation. "By supporting these highly talented individuals working in a wide range of fields, the foundation means to honor creative persons everywhere."

Like most MacArthur recipients, Mitchell had no idea he was being considered for an award. His only contact with the foundation had been to write a letter of recommendation for another nominee, historian Mike Davis, who also received a fellowship. "It was a total surprise," he says. Mitchell found out about the award through a telephone call late in May while he and his wife, geomorphologist Susan Millar, were in Scotland to attend her brother's wedding. The call prompted a brief celebration, but then his good fortune went on the back burner while the family concentrated on his brother-in-law's special day. Mitchell was out of touch with the United States for several days while traveling in Scotland, which he says was probably a good thing. It gave him time to absorb the news.

As successful as he is becoming in his field, Mitchell wasn't initially focused on geography. He went to three colleges as an undergraduate, finally finding himself attending San Diego State University on a music scholarship. But he eventually concluded that teaching music wasn't his calling, so he cast about for another major that would incorporate his interest in the environment and his desire to "save the world."

Mitchell settled on geography because the department seemed to offer many interesting courses. The first geography class he took was "terrible," but it did have a few glimmers of interesting material. So he stuck with it, earning his bachelor's degree at San Diego State and his master's degree at Penn State. In the process, his interest shifted from environmental issues to social and political ones. While pursuing a doctorate at Rutgers University, Mitchell found himself browsing one day in the Rutgers library when he happened upon a book about the Industrial Workers of the World. He realized that researching the history of the radical labor union might be a way to illuminate issues of social justice in which he was interested.

While researching the labor movement, Mitchell came across the records of the California Commission on Immigration and Housing. The commission came into existence in 1935 in response to a riot by hops pickers in Sacramento over poor labor conditions. It was the state's main agency for dealing with labor conditions until World War II. "I tried to reclaim the history of migrant workers in California during that period," Mitchell says. His research showed how their struggles affected the landscape, for example through the building of housing for migrant workers by the federal government during the New Deal era.

Another interest of Mitchell's is public space, such as parks. He has published several papers on how society limits the use of this space by marginalized populations like the homeless. He will pull together his research in this area for a book called The Political Landscape, to be published next year. Mitchell is also working on a text titled Cultural Geography: A Critical Introduction, scheduled to be published in 1999 as well. Designed for first-year graduate students or advanced undergraduates, the book will "look at the relationship between geography and cultural studies," Mitchell says, and will largely be a synthesis of other scholars' work.

He next wants to study big engineering projects that took place in California before World War II. "I want to look at labor geography—where the workforce came from, how they lived, how their needs were met, or not," he says. Then he'd like to tie it into his previous work.

As if all that along with his teaching load is not enough to keep him busy, Mitchell now must decide what to do with the windfall from the MacArthur award. He is considering using the money to assemble a group of scholars to create a "people's geography" of the United States, which would chart the development of Americans' "social relationship with their landscape," he says. "I don't know exactly what such a thing would look like. The first step is to talk to a lot of people and get their ideas."

For now, Mitchell plans to continue teaching, researching, and writing as usual. "I really enjoy teaching," he says, and it seems that his students enjoy the interaction, too. In evaluations from fall 1997 courses, 90 percent of his students said they liked him as a teacher, and many said they would recommend his courses.

"His students really enjoy his class," says Heather Muldoon, one of two teaching assistants for Geography 172 last year. "The ideas he presents are complicated, but he discusses them in a way students understand." She says he spends little time at the front of the classroom, instead moving around to get everyone involved.

One student liked him enough to follow him from the University of Colorado, where he had taught since 1992. Bruce D'Arcus had Mitchell as an advisor when he was working on a master's degree at Colorado. Now Mitchell is his doctoral advisor at SU. "A good advisor is incredibly important for graduate work," D'Arcus says. "For me, the main thing he does is evaluate my work, give suggestions." He adds that Mitchell can be quite critical, but in a constructive way. "When I was writing my master's thesis, I would get pages of comments from Don," he says.

One reason Mitchell chose to move to Syracuse was to be closer to his wife, who teaches at Central Connecticut State University. However, he was also attracted by SU's highly rated geography department. The department is going through significant changes now with several new hires, and Mitchell predicts it will become a relatively young department in the next few years. "I think it will be exciting," he says.