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Straits Talk

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Cover Page Footnote

Char Miller is the W.M. Keck Professor of Environmental Analysis at Pomona College and one of the Co-PIs of the EnviroLab Asia grant from the Luce Foundation.

Straits Talk

Walking can only tell you so much about a place. And I walked a lot during six summer days in Singapore while on a fact-finding trip as part of EnviroLab Asia, a Luce Foundation-funded initiative at the Claremont Colleges to integrate our programs in Asian Studies and Environmental Analysis. The pedestrian perspective is especially incomplete for a port city, which is why I was glad that we took to sea, shoving off from the Republic of Singapore Yacht Club. Six hours later, after we had plowed past a seemingly endless stream of cargo-transshipment centers, dry docks, and refineries, I had a better sense of how little my daily rambles along Singapore's board avenues, backstreets, and linear parks had prepared me for what I witnessed afloat.

Although I knew Singapore's harbor was one of the world's busiest, and that its economic import depended on the republic's deep-pocketed commitments to build and rebuild its sprawling port facilities—an ongoing rehabbing that one of my fabulous former students has been engaged with since graduation—the abstract became very real shortly after we pulled away from the marina.

Within moments, my Claremont colleagues and our hosts from Yale-NUS had had whipped out their cameras and cellphones and started clicking. What caught our collective eye was the endless stacks of multi-colored containers lined up in phalanx; the rows of looming gantry cranes; the forklifts zipping around this manufactured landscape. We did not miss either the scores of cargo ships and freighters, some gleaming, others rusted; some riding high, their containers offloaded; others low, waiting their turn. The size and scope of the operation, and the choreography of movement required for it to function properly, was breathtaking.

We had been sailing but ten minutes.

An hour later, after cruising past ExxonMobil's massive refinery, the corporation's largest integrated manufacturing site anywhere; after registering the site's gleaming white tanks, red-and-white striped stacks, and a flotilla of bulky tankers pumping crude into the facility's pipelines; after entering the Strait and watching an unending stream of vessels the size of the glass-and-steel towers that frame the Singapore skyline, I was hit with sensory overload—and stowed my phone.

My fellow travelers seemed just as overwhelmed, turning away from the harbor's frenetic energy to more quiet conversations. Ok, we had to shout above the rumbling engine, but the content of those discussions was collegial and compelling. Pomona's Marc Los Huertos, a biogeochemist, along with Brian McAdoo, a geoscientist at Yale-NUS and a group of others wondered if there was a way to conduct comparative experiments measuring the relative air and water quality in the ports of Singapore and Los Angeles/Long Beach. Might it also be possible to link

up their quite-distant classes via videoconferencing, a real-time demonstration of scientific collaboration?

This integrative impulse is exactly what the Luce Initiative on Asian Studies and the Environment (LIASE) is designed to stimulate, and I hope to mimic some of its elements in my course dubbed *Cities in Nature*. It is an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural exploration of the interactions between the built and natural environments, and nowhere does that dynamism appear to play out more vividly than in Singapore.

Or so I mused when we disembarked on Kosue Island, crossed its white strand, and waded into the ebbing tide, for one soaring marker of this complicated interconnection lay directly across from where we stood: architect Moshe Safdie's now-iconic Marina Bay Sands Hotel, with its curved, upsweeping glass columns anchored by SkyPark, a hull-shaped, green space complete with an Infinity Pool shaded by palm trees floating nearly 700 feet above water and street.

Another dawned on me the next morning as I strolled down the Ulu Pandan Park connector, a busy pathway filled with joggers, bicyclists, and those just stretching their legs. The connector is part of a larger national park system that parallels the city's now-concretized streams and creeks, open space that is at a premium in this densely packed urban environment. "Let's Make Singapore Our Garden," a sign read, yet that ambition to regenerate some ecosystemic functions testifies to others that have been paved over, a worldwide phenomenon.

The globalized nature of these intertwined concerns could not be missed, either. Twenty-four hours earlier we had seen its impact in the flow of natural resources and capital into and out of the harbor. Two days later later it was reflected in the muted resentment my taxi driver expressed while ferrying me to the airport: he had been a well-paid truck driver at the port but was laid off when shipping companies brought in cheaper labor from Indonesia, Pakistan, and elsewhere. I caught a final glimpse of its workings shortly after take-off, when the pilot urged us to look out the window to catch the early light glittering on the Straits of Singapore. My attention instead was riveted on the hundreds of ships surging through the slate-blue waters below; the next port-of-call for many of them was like mine: Los Angeles.

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