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## Oceans of Space

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# Oceans of Space

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Stephanie Steinbrecher received her BA in English with a minor in Environmental Analysis from Scripps College. Past affiliations include School for Field Studies, Sierra Club, and McSweeney's Publishing. Stephanie was an EnviroLab Asia fellow from 2015-2016 with the Arts and Communication research cluster. She lives in San Francisco.

## Oceans of Space

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**Abstract:** "Oceans of Space" relates my observations of the 2016 EnviroLab Asia Clinic Trip to Singapore and Sarawak, Malaysia. In this meditation, the concept of space serves as a lens to examine assumptions of geopolitical, historical, and philosophical positioning—regionally and globally. At the center of my inquiry is EnviroLab's connection to the Dayak communities in Baram, Sarawak. This region is experiencing dramatic social and ecological change as a result of industrial development. By triangulating my subjective impressions of this space, various knowledge systems, and the qualitative data EnviroLab gathered in Southeast Asia, I aim to untangle some paradoxes that complicate the understanding of disparate narratives, and the empowerment of social and environmental justice. My case study is about generating questions—and the effort to find answers in other perspectives.

When I think of flying, I sometimes imagine Walt Whitman's noiseless, patient spider—"surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space." Like arachnids, airplanes drift from place to place, connecting spheres, briefly suspended in air. Whitman's poem foregrounds the humble power of a single creature's perspective, but the world is full of infinite others. We live within a web of experiences and meanings. I'm reminded of this when I fly, when a tiny airplane window offers a macro view on the "vacant vast surrounding" of the planet.

Boarding a plane to Singapore in January 2016 was déjà vu. Eleven months earlier, I had traveled the same route before continuing on to Cambodia, where I spent the [semester](#). I watched the flight move through time and space on a GPS map, amazed by the seeming paradox of life and travel. In another paradox, landing at Changi Airport felt familiarly foreign. So, too, did the Southeast Asian humidity that clung to my arms as I slung my pack over my back. Singapore sparkled. "We're proud of our city," my cab driver said as we careened past verdant parks and a bustling port, on towards Yale-NUS. Supertrees sent gardens into the sky; iridescent skyscrapers disappeared into heavy clouds; a "merlion" watched over it all. The future passed by my rain-splattered window.

Part of EnviroLab Asia's aim is to consider and create different forms of knowledge. This does not just mean expanding the amount of stuff we know, but examining how we know it. A lens we've adopted to confront this massive intellectual exercise is the concept of *space*. How does space—geographic, cultural, economic, etc.—inform what we know? How do we step outside our own spaces, or connect to others? Is it even possible? In Singapore, and eventually in Malaysia, we aimed to find out.

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At Yale-NUS, the Claremont and Singapore folk discussed our imminent visit to the state of Sarawak, Malaysia. We would stay with indigenous activists protesting a [dam project](#) on the Baram River. We would study deforestation and the palm oil industry. We would ride in trucks with four-wheel drive. We would be wet. The next day we flew to Kuala Lumpur before continuing on to Miri, in Sarawak, on the island of Borneo. More spaces, new faces, lots of movement. On the second flight, I sat next to Professor Rachel Mayeri and a Malaysian businessman. We had two conversations: one about orangutan protection, one about forest clearing for oil palm “reforestation.” *Reforestation*—was I perplexed by the semantics of the sentiment, or the ecological views it reflected? Both, probably. I watched the sun rise over the green island.

In Miri we met Charles and Philip—perceptive, impassioned, charismatic men who were deeply attuned to life on the Baram. Their personal perspectives (and translating assistance) shaped my vision of the concerns, aspirations, and generosity of the Dayak communities who greeted us at blockade sites and longhouses deep in the island. “Stop the bloody dam!” “Damn the dam!” Philip called at gatherings, to the applause and fist pumps of other protestors. Their urgency was palpable: blockading since 2013, these indigenous people feel threatened by the imposition of “development” in the region through dam projects. The nearby [Bakun Dam](#) has demonstrated what [Baram](#)’s future could look like, complete with displaced people and cultural identity, contaminated drinking water, unfulfilled promises of amenities like healthcare and schools. Dams, plus an established logging industry and growing oil palm sector, have transformed the space Dayaks have occupied for centuries. They want to be both included in discussions about development and afforded the right to self-determination. These communities argue that the state and national governments routinely circumvent such recognition by ignoring customary land rights and centuries-old communal boundaries. They have a lot to say that is not being heard.

At the first blockade site, twenty or thirty people lined up—some in ceremonial attire, others in “Stop Baram Dam” t-shirts—to personally shake the hands of each member of our crew. This gesture of openness and trust extended as we ate together and listened to stories our hosts shared. One was particularly shocking: coffins of the dead had washed to the surface as landscape modification had loosened soil and changed hydrological patterns. The people and environment of this space are irrevocably rocked by “development,” for better or worse. The perennial question: better for whom? At whose cost? The truth is neither known nor certain, especially between the different parties involved.

At an oil palm plantation we spoke with a local family who reported that a foreign company had started planting the trees on their ancestral lands, brought migrant laborers to work it, and offered meager to no compensation to them as residents. Community cemeteries, they claimed, reflected their longstanding land ownership. There was no free, prior, and informed consent. Among the secondary forest and swaths of oil palm plantations in Sarawak, this was a lesson that human rights, ecosystem viability, and economic prosperity all come to bear on real lived experiences.

When I was in Sarawak I thought about the privilege of individuality, so valued in the political and economic space of the West. But in Sarawak, I was asked to understand that one person’s story was everyone’s story. *Dayak* is a broad term reflecting all people native to Sarawak; our hosts and guides identified as Kayan and Penan. Leaders like Philip from several indigenous

communities are part of the network [SAVE Rivers](#), a grassroots NGO. For collective survival in Sarawak, the Dayak peoples have formed coalitions as an activist strategy, and for communal support. Their message is solidarity. In every group photo we took (and there were many), at least one person holds up a raised fist. Converging narratives, a unified voice, and desire for a space fostering communication—such are the politics of Baram.

An important thing about engaging with new places is being able to feel the immensity of others' experiences with all your senses. The hard part is then reconciling this input with what you already know. Between blockade sites, plantations, and longhouses throughout Sarawak, Taylor Swift shrilled on the radio, flatbeds carrying logged timber barreled down the roads, rambutan juice made my fingers sticky. I think about the compilation of narratives I've born witness to deep in the secondary forest, where runoff silt muddies the once-clear river that is still the lifeblood of people passed over on maps and in bureaucratic development reports. I think about the narrative I'm writing now, as a witness.

I would have liked to hear from government agencies and pro-development groups in Sarawak, especially those with particular economic goals in mind, but time was short and we soon returned to Singapore. Among Southeast Asia's most cosmopolitan places, Singapore was a fitting space to continue digesting questions of land ownership, government control, growing industry, and globalized processes. The small nation state has colonial roots and its own histories of migration and foreign trade. This is manifested in its diverse populace and lucrative businesses. The whole city is clean and manicured, running as efficiently as its MRT system. Last year Singapore experienced ugly, prolonged haze as a result of slash-and-burning in Indonesia—this consisted, most ostensibly, of peat and forest clearing for oil palm development. Hearing about the haze from Singaporeans was a jarring reminder of the transience of space, even between distant islands. When we visited the office of [Wilmar International](#), a leading oil palm producer, the immense power vested in corporate action became obvious. Through its global supply chains, Wilmar and its competitors are invested in spaces far and wide—from plantation production to Girl Scout Cookie consumption. What counts as “sustainable” production? Who is responsible for enforcing human rights? Who decides when forests count as degraded and development-worthy, or in need of protection? Regardless to the answers, Wilmar is always at the table to discuss these questions that are, for some, matters of survival. A stakeholder with a voice.

When it came time to fly back across the Pacific, I felt the responsibility that comes with knowledge. I reflected on the liberal arts sensibility we tout in Claremont, which is an anchor of my education and Western worldview: the ideal of not valuing one kind of thought over another, or privileging one system of knowledge production. At its best, this calls for bridging connections, having dialogues, and welcoming the fact that there will always be more to learn. I hurtled across the sky—the same one I had seen, one evening, hours along a muddy, rutted logging road near the Baram. It was the night we stayed at the blockade by the proposed dam site. The thick clouds had cleared and we could see the stars. Dr. Bryan Penprase had pointed out celestial objects and described myths attached to them. He noted that every culture sees meaning in the sky differently. The Bornean sky looked different from California's, and even from much-nearer Cambodia's. I couldn't say how or in what way (not an astrophysicist), but it did take looking up to realize it.

I mentioned the life and travel paradox. A friend once explained it this way. In Cambodia the year before, he and I also had studied regional development and ethics, cultural histories, and fragile ecosystems supporting vast economies and populaces. But then we left. The weight of knowledge looms heavily, like clouds that are about to drop rain (a known entity, in Southeast Asia). And with distance and time connecting spaces and knowledge becomes trickier, but somehow even more essential. Paradoxically. Perhaps there's no reconciling how it all works—how Charles and Philip are fighting in a sphere far removed from my own in California—but that does not make any of it less true. So what am I to do with this new knowledge, with an appreciation for a different kind of knowledge, across the chasm of space?

I check ingredient labels looking for palm oil, telling others to do the same. I follow news feeds and local movements. I consider forms of voice in media, politics, and markets, and how they affect action and awareness. I remind myself that learning is a constant practice, as is improving, and fostering inclusive decision-making processes. I remember that the stories I've witnessed are just a few of an infinite number, and I constellate the immensity of that.

I'm grateful to have the space to emulate Whitman's spider—to be “ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them.” The EnviroLab Asia trip revealed the futility in the binary thinking so characteristic of my worldview—of perceiving here and there, in and out, good and bad. The world in all its immaculate interconnection is more textured and deserves more nuance—there is no single story, but rather an endless lattice of narratives. To experience as many as possible—and to amplify the ones being silenced—is a critical first step towards creating a new approach to knowing, and acting. As I hurtle towards graduation in May, and different possibilities after that, I look forward to working towards this goal as far and wide as I can possibly reach.