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Theatre & the Environment: Cross-Cultural Exchange Through Travel and Performance Activism

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Cover Page Footnote

Betel Solomon Tesfamariam will graduate from Pomona College in May 2020 with a degree in Environmental Analysis, the Environmental Justice: Race, Class, and Gender track. She aims to minor in Africana Studies and is passionate about the intersections of disciplines and historical movements such as Gender and Women's Studies, Racial Justice, Anti-colonialism, and Anti-imperialism. Her interests include travel, reading books written by African authors, and art in all its powerful forms.

Theatre & the Environment: Cross-cultural Exchange through Travel and Performance Activism Betel Solomon Tesfamariam¹

As an African international student from Ethiopia and Eritrea, who was raised in Southern Africa, what interested me most about EnviroLab Asia was the opportunity to learn about the specificity of the environmental context of Southeast Asia. And about the powerful connections between possibilities and challenges—in terms of awareness, education, policy, governance, and activism—that this region, like other parts of the world, faces. During the 2018 EnviroLab Asia Clinic Trip to Thailand, I was a member of the Performance Lab. As EnviroLab Asia Fellows, we represented various parts of the world. Although many are from the United States, some of us are also international students, or have a connection to countries outside America. In coming together through performance activism, to bring urgency to ongoing environmental issues that are being exacerbated by climate change—not only in Thailand but globally—we were also embodying the interconnectedness of the impacts of climate change around the globe.

I had the honor of learning from Ruth Pongstaphone—a guest lecturer whose research interests and work locate the body as a legitimate site from which to problematize, resist, and transform social injustice through theatre. As a Thai and American educator who deploys anti-colonial and anti-imperialist frameworks in her work, she helped me understand how theatre can be used to reveal the workings of various systems of domination on the lived experiences of daily life.

I had the opportunity to create a theatre piece in collaboration with my peers from the Claremont Colleges, Burapha University and Chanthaburi, which, despite language barriers, we successfully performed at one of the King's Projects. I probably had the most fun on educational excursions with my peers, writing the script, designing costumes, and rehearsing. The experience was a reminder that successful communication, either between two people or to a larger audience—especially about complex issues such as environmental degradation, conservation, and climate change—relies on keeping things simple, mutual respect, and flexibility. Although I have travelled to Thailand before, the knowledge I gained about the historical, geographical, and socio-political context of Southeast Asia during the semester prior to the Clinic Trip, as well as the opportunity to travel to Chiang Mai and Chanthaburi, enabled me to not only have a more nuanced understanding of the country, but how it compares to other countries I have lived in and travelled to.

In regard to how national conservation efforts compare, for example, I think a lot about how curated, contained, and isolated the King's Projects in Thailand seemed. Also, how locally

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situated their histories, management, and purposes were. What I observed and learned in Thailand was very different from what I was used to growing up in Southern Africa. I compare the King's Projects to the expansive and open Mlilwane Wildlife Sanctuary, or the privately owned Mbuluzi Game Reserve in Swaziland, and Chaminuka, the privately owned nature reserve in Zambia that my family and I visited often. In the case of Swaziland for example, something I learned recently on the Mlilwane website is that conservation efforts have a history that is imbricated in British colonialism—the recurring characteristic of leadership positions at parks and reserves being dominated by white men is evidence of this legacy. Comparisons like these beg questions such as: how can histories of conservation efforts, regionally, inform managerial practices and understandings around representation-across race and gender- and access today? What are the short-term and long-term implications of privatizing game and nature reserves? I look forward to filling in the gaps of my knowledge, specifically in relation to the challenges and possibilities for conservation, through travel, research, and exchange. This will be important if I want to contribute to contemporary discussions and discourses around environmental justice in Africa, deploying a well-informed comparative framework, as well as a critical and feminist lens.