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Introduction

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Introduction

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.

Introduction

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Geography is contingent. Distance is relative. Claremont, CA may be located on the west coast of the United States, but if you fly out of LAX and follow the sun's arc toward Singapore's Changi Airport, you end up in what once was called The East. To that confusion, add another: touching down after a 19-hour flight that wings over 8765 miles (14,105 km) of the Pacific Ocean is to be disoriented; it can feel as if you never left home. That is because globalization and urbanization—as economic realities, migratory drivers, political pressures, and capital centers—have disrupted human communities and upended physical environments on different continents in seemingly similar ways. Although this complex process has not flattened the world, as Thomas Friedman once excitedly predicted, it has foreshortened our spatial and temporal experience of this blue planet (Friedman, 2007). It has revealed, too, the degree to which our economies, people, politics, and moneys interact, and the interwoven nature of the systems and structures that shape those interactions. What happens here or there—wherever those points on the compass happen to be—is bound up with the other (and The Other).

There is nothing unusual about that this claim. After all, a large body of academic scholarship has been dedicated to teasing out these relations and any number of ideological perspectives frame the resulting analyses. Which is reason enough to immerse ourselves in the study of these intersections and the fraught landscapes in which they occur, a key theme defining much of the work included in this inaugural volume of [EnviroLab Asia](#). The publication, an outgrowth of the eponymous, Luce Foundation-funded initiative in [The Claremont Colleges](#), captures in word, sound, and image some of the varied forms that globalization can take in Southeast Asia. The goal of the project has not been to explain the region to itself: those living in Singapore and Malaysian Borneo, the two sites that EnviroLab Asia and its local collaborators have studied and visited, are well aware of the factors determining their past, present and future. Instead, EnviroLab Asia's purpose has always been to employ an environmental lens to deepen our understanding of the cross-cultural and transnational character of a globalizing world, and the benefits, deficits, and confusions that come with it.

To bring these new or revised perceptions into our classrooms has been another critical objective of EnviroLab Asia, whether we are humanists, natural or social scientists, teach environmentally themed courses or those in Asian languages and studies. At times appropriative and extractive, this work remains essential because it has challenged our intellectual assumptions and pedagogical presumptions—and forced us to reconsider any innovations that might emerge from our self-reflections. How apt, then, that the Luce Initiative on Asian Studies and the Environment identified upfront some of these potential outcomes:

Environmental challenges will require global cooperation and engagement by people with interdisciplinary training, comparative perspectives and knowledge of local conditions and historical and cultural context. LIASE will provide incentives for faculty and students to think in new ways about Asia and the environment; energize Asian studies programs; and build bridges between the humanities, social sciences, physical and biological sciences, and policy and professional fields (LIASE, 2010).

Oil Palm in Southeast Asia: Culture, Politics, and Sustainability

Oil-palm, as a physical reality and an intellectual tool, helped the Claremont Consortium construct this transdisciplinary, cross-continental bridge. It brought together students and faculty from Claremont with their peers at [Yale-NUS College](#), an innovative and first-of-its-kind liberal-arts college in Singapore. The island republic is not just close to the oil-palm industry located in Indonesia and Malaysia, but its massive harbor complex and bustling airport are crucial conduits for the global transshipment of oil-palm. It is also home to Wilmar, the largest producer of the oil, and its banks and investors control a sizeable portion of the capital seeding the creation of oil-palm plantations in neighboring countries. One wind-blown ramification of this investment arrives each fall in the form of a thick haze that obscures the glass-and-steel towers of this modern city-state. In September and October, during the annual dry season, Indonesian farmers use fire to convert forest and peatlands for oil-palm production, and the smoke plumes are so large that NASA has no trouble capturing them from space. Everything is connected.



[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Central Business District, Singapore, on a hazy day - 20140921-04.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Central_Business_District,_Singapore,_on_a_hazy_day_-_20140921-04.JPG)

So argues Deborah Lapidus, Campaigns Director at [Mighty Earth](#), who works on an array of related public and environmental health issues stemming from oil-palm production. Her foreword sets the stage for the subsequent chapters and first-person reflections, a meld of academic analyses and experiential responses that are part of EnviroLab Asia's sustained commitment to the different forms of intellectual engagement. The articles and essays gathered in *Issue 1: Justice, Indigeneity, and Development* probe some of the central tensions that are shaping the quality of life in the Baram River watershed in Sarawak, a Malaysian state on the island of Borneo that EnviroLab's participants visited in January 2016. The field trip provoked intense discussion about the manner in which economic development, and the interconnections between oil-palm production and hydropower dams, was undercutting indigenous land uses, cultural practices, and legal rights, specifically those of the Dayak people. Whether in the more professional language of a scholarly chapter, or in the memoir-like tone adopted in the personal narratives, each writer has responded with care, sensitivity and not a little anguish to what they saw and heard. They found themselves in a terrain that is not their own and came away altered.

The aesthetic response was as profoundly moving. *Issue 2: Art, Agency, and Activism* contains "Forest Thredony," Malaysian composer and environmental activist Yii Kah Hoe's meditation

on oil-palm's clearing away of forest cover and dislodging of threatened and endangered species; the composition for two sopranos and a choir received its world premiere in Claremont in November 2015. Making visible Kah Hoe's auditory vision are the collected images of photojournalist Tom Iain White, taken while on the 2016 field trip to Sarawak. His is a provocative record of the costs associated with rapid land conversion but also of the community resistance and rebirth it can generate, a complicated dynamic that influences as well a number of subsequent first-person essays.

Complicating the picture further are the contributions to *Issue 3: Sciences, Economics, and Policy*, for they bring scientific discourse into dialog with the arts, humanities, and social sciences. Tackling the geospatial implications of globalization in Sarawak, assessing the attendant and perhaps irremediable damage to its terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, and exploring how megadams there (and elsewhere) fundamentally undercut rivers' geomorphology and thus their water quality and habitat integrity raises the question of what has been or can be done in Southeast Asia (and, again, elsewhere). Is there a way to maintain a region's environmental services with economic development? Is there such a thing as a sustainable future for the land, the people who call it home, and their needs for food, water, and shelter?

To these and related queries, there are no easy answers, no simple solutions. That is how we know that these writers, critics, and artists have done their job: they unsettled themselves and, by extension, their audiences. Their disorientation can help us to reimagine our coordinates, our place in space and time.

Acknowledgements

EnviroLab Asia would not have appeared without the considerable cooperation of the many students and faculty in Claremont and at Yale-NUS (Singapore) whose insights appear in its pages, and the staff that has supported the project from the very beginning, at Claremont and Yale-NUS's [Centre for International and Professional Experience](#). Their findings, arguments, and concerns in turn would have proved impossible to create absent an exploratory grant that the Claremont Colleges received from the Henry Luce Foundation's LIASE initiative; these funds underwrote their travel to and research in Southeast Asia. We will be able to publish subsequent volumes of *EnviroLab Asia* due to a just-received and munificent implementation grant from the Luce Foundation—so watch this site for our annual publication of scholarship from those who will extend this first year's productivity.

That *EnviroLab Asia*, a digital-native volume, is housed on Scholarship@Claremont, is a reflection of the remarkable support we have received from the Claremont Colleges Library staff. From Day One, Allegra Swift, who recently moved to UC-San Diego to become its scholarly-communications librarian, has been a staunch advocate for this project and a steady guide for how best to present it to a wider readership. We cannot thank her enough, or those who helped do the heavy lifting behind the scenes. Danae Hart, a doctoral student in Cultural Studies at Claremont Graduate University and User Services Assistant in the Library, has been a vital contributor; many thanks as well to librarians Maria Savova and Madelynn Dickerson. Their collective efforts testify to the centrality of the Claremont Colleges Library to academic life in the Claremont Consortium. Finally, special thanks to Sean Beld and Diana Conrad of bepress Consulting Services for genially answering countless questions that a certain techno-fool posed while learning the ins and outs of digital publishing. And, a much-needed shout-out to Karin

Mak, Project Administrator for the larger EnviroLab Asia initiative; her energy and insight have made our work so much more successful than it otherwise might have been.

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