DEBORAH MEMBRENO: What does your current research focus on?

Jenny Goldstein: I am currently working on a number of projects, including continuing the work I began during my time at UCLA as a PhD student in geography. I’m trained as a political ecologist, so my approach to research is showing how political economic institutions, power relations between individual actors, and environmental change interact, primarily in the rural tropics. I do qualitative research, including in-depth interviews with people and some participant observation when I am doing fieldwork. I am working on an ongoing project on the politics shaping Indonesia’s peatland degradation and attempts at restoring these degraded areas. This involves actors such as smallholder farmers, loggers, and village heads in my fieldsite in Central Kalimantan province in Borneo, as well as consultants, scientists, and government officials in Jakarta. During my time as an Atkinson Center for a Sustainable Future postdoc at Cornell, I also started a new project that asks how publicly available or easily accessible satellite data and imagery is impacting conservation and land investment practices in Southeast Asia. As the quantity and quality of this type of data has increased tremendously over the past few years and has become available to nonexperts, it raises a lot of questions about what this data is doing out in the world, who is using it, and for what purpose. My intention is to be able to explore this issue through a series of smaller case studies in Indonesia and Myanmar. Through this research I’m also hoping to build up the connections between critical development studies and science and technologies studies—two disciplines that have typically taken very different approaches to understanding the world.

DM: What sparked an interest in working in Southeast Asia?

JG: I first became interested in Asia during my undergraduate career, when I did a minor in Japanese culture and participated in a Buddhist studies study abroad program in Japan. For my MA in geography at UCLA, I spent a summer in Rwanda doing ethnographic research on coffee commodity chains. While I liked doing fieldwork in agricultural areas in the tropics, I wasn’t sure that I wanted to commit to going back to East Africa for many years to come. My heart was really in Asia, though I had never thought about Southeast Asia much before that. Several coffee buyers in Rwanda told me about their work in Sumatra and Sulawesi [in Indonesia], which sparked my interest. After some preliminary research I realized there were enough complex political-environmental issues in Indonesia to keep me occupied in the long term, even if my initial interest in coffee petered out, which it did. UCLA, like Cornell, has an excellent Indonesian language program and financial support for graduate students who work in Indonesia. In that way, the decision to work in Southeast Asia was pragmatic. So, the pieces sort of fell into place as I started my PhD and was taking beginning Indonesian language. I went to Java and Sulawesi the following summer, in 2010, for language training and to scout out potential research topics. I’ve been back almost every year since.

DM: What is the most interesting project you have worked on?

JG: I’m fortunate in that I have always designed my own research projects, so they are all interesting to me! I think the ongoing research I’m doing in Kali mantan [Indonesian Borneo] on land-based fires and transboundary haze has been the most empirically interesting, because the issue affects millions of people, has complicated causes on the ground, and is also tied to global climate change politics and finance. When these fires are very severe, as they were in 2015, they release enough carbon dioxide to make Indonesia the world’s third-largest carbon emitter [after the US and China], though without the fires they are ranked only 25th or something. This has implications for Indonesia’s broader economic development strategies and its involvement with global climate politics, such as through the UN Paris Agreement, which mandates carbon emissions reductions for all signatories. And, of course, the smoke from the fires is so noxious it will cause early mortality for an estimated 100,000 people in the region. So it’s a very large and multifaceted problem to work on, if also a depressing one. Beyond that, I have had a lot of fun exploring Kali mantan’s peat swamps in a tiny boat for my fieldwork.

DM: What do you feel is important about your research?

JG: In a way, the importance of the research I’ve been doing on the impacts of these massive fires on an entire region’s health and economy, as well as their contribution to global carbon emissions, sort of speaks for itself. But it’s harder to figure out how my approach to uncovering the deeper roots
of the problem, and to showing that its causes and solutions are not as straightforward as many people think, actually makes a difference in the world. It can be heartbreaking to hear when people I know personally are suffering from the effects of the smoke and realize that there’s not much that I, or my research, can do about it in the short term.

DM: How have you worked with SEAP or utilized its resources during your time at Cornell?

JG: I was part of SEAP’s Gatty Lecture Series in 2016, giving a talk titled “Arson on Our Own Land: The Politics of Tracking Fire in Indonesia.” SEAP funded a short trip to Myanmar that I took last summer to explore research possibilities there. I’m grateful for that financial support, which may be relatively small in the long term but goes a very long way in kickstarting a new project. That kind of initial trip, of up to two weeks or so, where you don’t know many people or even what you’re looking for might not yield a lot of research in and of itself. But it allowed me to see what kind of research is feasible and relevant there and to start building a network of contacts that I tapped into when I returned to Yangon this January. I find Myanmar to be a fascinating and beautiful place, with very kind, respectful people, and at an important point in their transition to a democratic government. I’m looking forward to returning once a year or so to build up my research there over time. Aside from that, it’s been wonderful to get to know my SEAP colleagues. It’s a very welcoming community on campus and feels very much like a home away from my home department.

DM: Advice for students who are interested in studying Southeast Asia?

JG: Graduate students at Cornell are very savvy, and many already have a good idea of where and what they want to study when they arrive on campus. But even if they have never been to Southeast Asia when they start grad school, I would say don’t be intimidated, and it’s not too late. I didn’t go to Indonesia until the first year of my PhD program. Get involved with SEAP and the language courses as soon as possible, and it’s possible to end up with a research career in Southeast Asia. I would also encourage them to take at least two years of a Southeast Asian language if they are pursuing a PhD, though most in the social sciences and humanities do that already, I think. I’d like to see more graduate students in the natural sciences, like ecology, take a year of a Southeast Asian language. Many of them do extensive fieldwork there in rural or forested areas and need to communicate with local assistants. Learning a bit of the language and culture can make the fieldwork easier and help them formulate a long-term expertise in the region. For undergrads interested in Southeast Asia, or in the “developing” world in general, I’d recommend spending a summer doing an internship there, working for a local organization or teaching English. Getting some time to live on your own, outside of a structured program, in a Southeast Asian city or village can be a challenging but life-affirming experience and expose undergrads or recent grads to new career directions.