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INTERVIEW



Finding a good starting place: An interview with scholars in the CLEAR Lab

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ABSTRACT

The CLEAR lab is an interdisciplinary plastic pollution laboratory whose methods foreground humility and good land relations. In this interview, María Fernanda Yanchapaxi and Eve Tuck speak with CLEAR lab founder, Max Liboiron, and co-investigators, Katherine Crocker and Deondre Smiles. Together, they explore Indigenous perspectives on climate change and outline the problems with how Western education thinks about it. Our guests question individualism in the understandings of and responses to climate change and reveal the importance of dismantling individual saviour complex perspectives embedded in educational approaches. Our guests invite educators to reflect on and redefine the values at the core of their practice and seek new ways to act on them.

Max:

My name is Max Liboiron. I am Michif or Red River Métis. I grew up on Treaty 6 Territory in Lac la Biche, but my family is from Red River, Manitoba through the Woodman line. My pronouns are they/them. I direct CLEAR, the Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research, based in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, Beothuk homelands. And both Dr. Crocker and Dr. Smiles are part of CLEAR which is what brings us together as co-teachers and co-learners today.

Katherine:

Hawé, we Kanza nikashinga, we Katherine Crocker migreche bliⁿ. My English name is Katherine Crocker, and I am a mixed settler/Kaw citizen of the Kaw Nation of Oklahoma. I am speaking to you from the occupied territory of Lenape and Wappinger nations, which is lately known as the New York Metropolitan Area of the United States. My pronouns are they/them and she/her. I am currently a postdoc at Albert Einstein College of Medicine and also a member of CLEAR.

Deondre:

My name is Dr. Deondre Smiles. I am of the Bullhead Clan and I'm a citizen of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe. I am of Black, Ojibwe and settler ancestry. I'm a co-investigator in the CLEAR Lab. My regular day job is as an Assistant Professor of Geography at the University of Victoria where I am the director of a new lab called the Geographic Indigenous Futures Collaboratory.

Eve:

In education, where do you see conversations about climate crisis getting stuck? Where are the problems in how these conversations are framed or are understood?

Katherine:

The more I learn, especially as a co-learner in CLEAR, the more I come to consider individualism itself to be a sticking point. Climate change is something that affects communities and metacommunities differently depending on where we are in the world, what access we have to resources, and what resources are taken away from our communities. But it still affects whole communities. Individuals can't solve problems at a community, or metacommunity, or global level. CLEAR is a collective and it focuses on developing methods in that collective paradigm (CLEAR., 2021).

Deondre:

A lot of times, when we learn about climate crisis, it is a very individualistic kind of approach. It's fighting settler paradigms where it's always: "Well, if you don't recycle, if you don't take all these individual actions, you are contributing to the Anthropocene, to the climate crisis." It's part of the savior complex. A lot of times that does come through in education. We focus on the individual.

Max:

The other sticking point with climate change is that it's a symptom of a greater set of relations. And so, what we do at CLEAR and what I do when I teach is really focused on colonialism as a type of land relation that begets things like climate change, and plastic pollution, and violence against women and gender minorities. So, it's proliferating these issues and they all lead back to colonial land relations, and dealing with that at CLEAR needs all of our knowledges.

Eve:

Max, I remember being at a café with you one time, and I felt shy about how many little tiny milk containers I was using in my coffee in front of you. When I told you this, you helped me to see this in a different way.

Max:

Because of my work, people often feel self-conscious about their plastic around me. And I don't even notice, because it does not matter. I think one way to think about scale in a non-individualist way is to think about which relationships matter to the issues that you're dealing with.

When it comes to something like climate change or plastic pollution, your individual choices—no matter what you do—will not move the needle on those problems. They

might scale up a little as a citizen, say, when you're voting or putting in your input in policy. They might scale up to relations that matter as part of an Indigenous nation that has sovereignty and governs land, and is in relation with many generations that you're drawing through and towards. They might scale up more as a scientist, although we can talk about that fairly poor theory of change in science where the assumption is that more data somehow results in more change. But scientists have a different type of authority and therefore jurisdiction.

Carrying the weight of a collective as an individual is a super bad misunderstanding of scale, and relations, and obligation. And it's not a surprise that what Deondre called the saviour complex comes out of Western, individualistic, and capitalist traditions because I think each of those is invested in mismatching scales—they put work into promoting a misalignment of scales between problem and intervention.

Eve:

This misalignment of scale certainly informs climate education as it's done in K–12 schooling and then also climate education as it's understood in teacher education. "We just need to encourage people to use less plastic, and recycle more, and take fewer showers," and so on. When I meet a scientist like you who is a scientist of the harms of colonialism rather than one who is invested in individual actions as being a form of redress, then the theories of change are surprising to me because even as a person who cares very much about decolonization, I don't feel like those are the ones that I have access to as also a person who is moving, and consuming, and making life in the world.

Max:

When I say that your individual choices don't matter, I don't mean your ethics. Ethics matter because your ethics are not individual. They're always collective. And if you think they're individual, you've misunderstood ethics. So, you wanting to use fewer mini milk containers is not nothing. That scales in that it recognizes that you are part of larger collectives, and it is an orientation. And orientations, which means the direction you're moving in with others, matters, but not in the way of, like, you will turn the needle on the tonnage of plastic pollution because of your milk use. I think confusing being ethical with meaningful action happens a lot in universities.

Deondre:

I teach a course on Indigenous environmental activism, and one of the very first things I talk about in the class is the weird contradiction that marginalized and racialized people are kind of placed within. You know, there is always that individual ethics of action, as Max mentioned, that you have to be mindful of. But a lot of times, I think when it comes to education in the ways that racialized, marginalized, and colonized people are placed within, their individual actions count more than other people's actions.

One of the things I talk about is the time old paradox of Indigenous nations that are forced to engage in resource extraction and other extractive industries in order to cope with the pressures of capitalism. And people will wave their fingers at them and say, "No, don't do that."

What I really felt was missing in a lot of my education when I learned about environmental issues was these larger scale processes of capitalism and colonialism that are underpinning them.

Katherine:

And it's not just that a lot of our Nations are forced to participate in various extractive industries. It's in order to survive. It's also that if we refuse to participate in those industries, what will happen is our resources will be taken away or we won't have enough resources to impersonate respectability politics. When that happens, we experience further loss, things like having our children taken away. There's not a way out of it.

At the same time, I can get tangled up in the difference between taking accountability for my individual actions versus taking on responsibility for all of the plastic pollution because I buy things in plastic. And I think that's something that some of my community members also get stuck in as "are we bad Indians because we are participating?" And, how do we disentangle individual accountability and being in good relations? I think that's one thing I really enjoy about Max's work in general, is that the clarity with which they disentangle these two things.

Fernanda:

What might be some of the big contradictions or hypocrisies that you have identified between faculties of education, or teachers, or schools as collective about climate crisis?

Deondre:

One of the really big contradictions that we often kind of find with this kind of stuff is really it boils down to kind of that savior complex.

If only we can tech our way out of this, everything will be alright. If we could only pool a ton of money, if only we can bring more flow of capital into the Global North to try to fix the problems of the Global South. It really leads to this individualistic moral high ground approach. And we find out that it really doesn't make a difference on the ground. What's really nice about what we do in CLEAR is that because of the collective way that we do things, individuals don't really pop out.

Max:

We all know that when a group is in power or is benefiting from those in power, there will always be a gap between verbal commitments and actions. Sara Ahmed (2021) says that's what verbal commitments are—smokescreens to action. And so, one of the big things we work on in CLEAR is that we don't do verbal commitments. We always start from values and things flow concretely from those values. One of our orienting values is humility. When we start with humility, our connections to others, the training we do is based in peer to peer training, for instance. And we take turns speaking in the lab. And that requires stepping back. So, these things are very interwoven I think when you start with values instead of like political commitments, or statements of commitment, or flavor of the month commitments, which always, always leave these gaps. It's how gaps are born.

Katherine:

Dominant culture encourages even those of us who are really invested in addressing climate change on a values level to try to do this by reinvesting in practices, or institutions, or precedents that are preexisting and actually accelerating the problem. Pushing our perception of “oh, no, is climate change happening” to the Global South by taking more resources away from heavily colonized places is not actually going to solve anything. Something that CLEAR does that I really appreciate learning from is starting with values and asking, “What is a good starting place?” and “How would we know a good starting place when we find it?”

Eve:

When you are teaching about climate crises, what stories from communities do you share with others that deeply illustrate the seriousness and what stories reveal community actions, or interventions, or perhaps resistance against climate crisis?

Deondre:

I teach a course on Indigenous environmental activism. And one of the very first things that we talked about in the course is that, and one of the things that we know in Indigenous academia, in Indigenous communities more broadly, is that people really like to feed off of Indigenous trauma. Like, Indigenous trauma, and sadness, and things like that seem to be that kind of bar that a story has to reach or an example has to reach in order to express its seriousness. Like people feed off of Indigenous trauma in various ways. And I really try to push back against that because I like to tell my students if we focused solely on the trauma as a way of demonstrating the seriousness, right, then we start to erase the agency of communities in the actions that they take to try to tackle climate change.

I really try to subvert that by bringing in guest speakers who are doing the work on the ground because almost like 100% of the time, their stories are always full of hope. They're full of energy, hope, and action.

Katherine:

Like Deondre, I also don't tell stories. I'm currently located in medical biology spaces. Few would be surprised how often I'm asked for stories of various Indigenous traumas or my experiences as an Indigenous person. And I think people ask me these questions because they really want to understand my perspective. They think they're coming with as open of hearts as they can manage. I also get the sense that frequently this is linked to their own desire for emotional catharsis about something. There's this sense that you have to observe a spectacle in order to vicariously participate in what could be seen (or, as Deondre has said, fetishized) as a form of resilience. And that's a form of catharsis.

What I do instead is to turn the tables and ask, you know, “What are your stories? What are your community experiences? What have you seen that happens to your community, or the place you grow up, or your family as a result of climate change?” And I don't say it, but I'm asking them to do that work partly because I want them to experience their own vulnerability rather than what they perceive to be mine.

Max:

I also don't usually share stories for the exact same reasons. And I learned this from you, Eve, your *Suspending Damage* paper (Tuck, 2009), which I assign to almost all of my classes because that theory of change where you have to show the blood, and guts, and trauma, and harm in order to prove that something is bad enough for justice to happen is not okay. And I find even if I try and tell stories that are sort of in the gray area, they get sucked right back down into trauma narratives, which of course has centralized certain communities as traumatized, or always in trouble, or in deficit.

Instead, what we do in CLEAR is that we partner with Indigenous communities or with local fishing communities. And what happens is that through partnership, you have to negotiate relations and then you get nuanced and then the story starts coming out of that *partnership* and then you get the feeling of knowing. I think the reason people ask for stories is so that they can get that feeling that is supposed to steer them in a certain direction and to teach them certain things that just facts can't. And I think that leads to the issues that Katherine and Deondre are talking about.

But through partnership, the obligation of partnership, I think it gets you further and firmer. I am very much for a theory of change where if someone doesn't believe there's an issue, doesn't believe that climate change is a problem, you're not going to change their mind, or heart, or soul. So, just work with people who are already onboard with that and *do* things as opposed to the energy it takes to tell the super convincing stories of whatever.

It's not that it's not important to teach the urgency or seriousness, which is what foregrounds partnership and its obligation, but this idea that you have to universally convince everyone is no good—universalism is a very Western and dominant idea and it's not actually shared across a lot of cosmologies. It's about focusing on the people who are going to move the truck as opposed to convincing people that, yes, it is up to mud to its fenders. I mean, let's just move the truck. And if you see a denier in the mud and they're denying that, well, we'll throw them a line, but then we got to go.

Eve:

You know that I agree. At the same time, I'm trying to be thoughtful about my internal panic when we're talking about letting go of the project of trying to convince or educate deniers. In part, that is because Indigenous peoples, like on St. Paul Island where my family is from, experience climate crises that are sped up by other people's behaviors. For this reason, I'm invested in the behavior of people who don't care about what I would ever think or say. It's a conundrum for me as an educator, for me as a person who's watching rising waters where my family lives.

Deondre:

I want to piggyback off of what Max says about the pitfalls of a universalist outlook because it always gets weaponized against Indigenous people. We always have to have the burden of proof to try to convince everybody of our cosmologies or ontologies and things like that and also academics. I can guarantee probably all five of

us in this room have had somebody say to us, “Oh, well, you need to convince me of the utility of this.”

What Max said really resonates with me because there is that point where obviously you want to try to educate people, but also, to use a little folksy analogy here, you can lead the horse to water. You can't make it drink. I can do all the educating I can, but if somebody is that convinced that they don't want to listen to what I have to say, at some point, I have to spend my energy on people that want to listen. So, I say that. But also recognizing with you, Eve, kind of the inherent discomfort that can come with that. I got this fancy PhD and got these letters after my name because I need to educate people. I enjoy teaching and things like that. So, how do we sit with that?

Fernanda:

How do you see faculties or schools of education open or reluctant about pushing for structural change? What does structural change look like in education? What different imaginaries will that require of all of us who are colleagues, who are educators, educational researchers, or curriculum developers?

Katherine:

I see a lot of effort in dominant culture, academic, and professional spaces to embrace structural changes oriented around social justice. There are a lot of different acronyms that use or reference the words “justice,” “equity,” “diversity,” and “inclusion.” I wouldn't say I perceive a lack of expressed openness because to me that implies some sort of ideological resistance to change, but I notice that there's a lack of actual disruption or commitment to what that change would mean.

I think the way Max directs CLEAR provides a good example of how positive disruption of institutional structures can happen—especially towards openness and accountability. And I also think that's not a generally transferable model because it's intensely place-based and community-focused and designed to serve specific communities and their self-identified interests.

Deondre:

I think that the modern university, the modern North American university is inherently a conservative space. But you know, the fact of the matter is if you continue to do things the same way, you'll notice that things don't change because you haven't taken a step to see what else is possible. CLEAR is just one example of the ways that you can open up new possibilities by changing what you're doing. So, in grant funding structures, what CLEAR does, you talk about funds that go to the community. That it isn't just eating up an overhead in cost from the lab, but also funding stays with the community or broader accountabilities.

There's certain knowledges and certain things that don't get shared outside of the community, at any rate. We don't share anything without community consent or we don't even share anything about our lab without lab consent. And because of even the small things like that, that's an example of a way that even just kind of small little changes can lead to kind of more radical change. I think other institutions could do the same.

Katherine:

I think something that might get lost to people who don't see the work that Max does is that there's a huge amount of labor and effort put into boundaries so that CLEAR can be insulated from things like what Deondre identifies.

Max:

I think this question is another way of asking, "what are your theories of change"? I don't know if it's a theory of change, but there's a saying from the Zapatistas: It's not only that another world is possible, but another *possible* as possible (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, 1996). So, even the theories of change that are readily available to you, no, because most of those conserve structure—like recycling, or verbal commitments to equity. It's really hard to imagine beyond those things. CLEAR tries to practice anticolonial relations in every part of our work—so anti-colonial budgeting. What does that mean? Well, we have to figure that out. And that takes imagination because it's not obvious.

And what Katherine says is if you're zigging when everyone is zagging, you have to put a lot of boundaries and safeties in place because the people you're bringing with you, you don't want to lose them off the side when suddenly you're going left and everyone else has gone right. A lot of that is invisible labour.

Because there aren't a lot of road maps for some of this, we produce a lot of stuff that is free and available online, including a collective manual on how we run CLEAR. So, you can just look it up. A lot of our work is on the CLEAR website, on Twitter. Our request, rather than asking for more meetings with us, is that people go and read the things we've already made for them.

Katherine:

And then cite us.

Max:

Yes, and then cite us. That's an ongoing problem with our "grey literature." Also check out the work of other collectives, such as the Women's Earth Alliance & Native Youth Sexual Health Network's (2016) *Violence on the Land is Violence on our Bodies*, which is about how colonialism is the cause of both missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls as well as ecological devastation.

Deondre:

Another example is a report that came out from a number of Tribal Nations in Minnesota two years ago called *The Minnesota Wild Rice Task Force Report (2018)*. Very plainly named, but it was literally a collaborative effort by Tribal Nations to answer the question from the State of Minnesota "Well, what should we do to help preserve the health of wild rice beds?" And the tribal nations said, "We've done years of research on this. Here is literally the guidebook that you need to follow in order to do right by us, our treaty obligations, and our nonhuman kin, which in this case includes wild rice."

Notes on contributors

María Fernanda Yanchapaxi is a Ph.D. student in the Social Justice Education Department at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, at the University of Toronto. Yanchapaxi is Kichwa/Mestiza from Panzaleo territory (Sigchos, Ecuador) where her family still lives. Her research examines the suitability of the intellectual property system to protect Indigenous knowledges and its impact on the assertion of Indigenous knowledge sovereignty.

Dr. Max Liboiron (Michif, they/them) Liboiron is an Associate Professor in Geography at Memorial University, Canada. Their lab, CLEAR, is an interdisciplinary plastic pollution laboratory whose methods foreground humility and good land relations.

Dr. Katherine Crocker (Kaw, they/she) is an interdisciplinary biologist interested in how animals are influenced by the environments of our ancestors, and how we gain and describe knowledge. They earned their PhD in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology (and their MS in Post-Secondary Science Education) from the University of Michigan. They are currently a postdoctoral research fellow in the Department of Genetics at Albert Einstein College of Medicine, and a co-Investigator in Dr. Max Liboiron's CLEAR lab.

Dr. Deondre Smiles (he/him/wiin) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Geography at the University of Victoria (BC, Canada). A citizen of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, Smiles' research interests are multifaceted, focusing on critical Indigenous geographies, political ecology, Indigenous cultural resource preservation, and science/technology studies. Smiles is a co-investigator in the CLEAR Lab and is the director of the Geographic Indigenous Futures Collaboratory (or GIF Lab) at UVic.

Eve Tuck is Associate Professor of Critical Race and Indigenous Studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto. She is Canada Research Chair of Indigenous Methodologies with Youth and Communities. Tuck is the founding director of the Tkaronto CIRCLE Lab. Tuck is Unangaꞗ and is an enrolled member of the Aleut Community of St. Paul Island, Alaska.

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