

A wee primer on colonialism

The following is an excerpt from the CLEAR lab book (January 2021) written by Dr. Max Liboiron:

Colonialism isn't synonymous with capitalism, patriarchy, racism, or other bad stuff, even if they're related (Tuck and Yang 2012). The following is an amended excerpt from *Pollution is Colonialism* (2021), by Max Liboiron, to help us understand what colonialism is like so we can understand what *anticolonialism* might look like in our science and mentorship. At the same time, there is no final, single, coherent, English-definition of colonialism that will work in all contexts. There are many colonialisms that are shaped by the places they are from and the people resisting and benefiting from it. This is a primer, not a definition.

In 1956, Lloyd Stouffer, the editor of America's *Modern Packaging Magazine*, addressed attendees at The Society of the Plastics Industry in New York City, USA:

"The future of plastics is in the trash can.... It [is] time for the plastics industry to stop thinking about 'reuse' packages and concentrate on single use. For the package that is used once and thrown away, like a tin can or a paper carton, represents not a one-shot market for a few thousand units, but an everyday recurring market measured by the billions of units." (1963, 1)

Stouffer was speaking at a time when reuse, making do, and thrift were key practices reinforced by two U.S. wars. Consumer markets were saturating. Disposability was one tactic within a suite of efforts to move goods *through*, rather than merely *into*, consumer households (Packard 1963, Strauser 2000). Today, packaging is the single largest category of plastic production, accounting for nearly 40% of plastic production in Europe and 33% in Canada (PlasticsEurope 2016, Deloitte 2019). The next largest categories are building and construction at just over 20% and automotive at 8% (PlasticsEurope 2016, 12). Stouffer's desire looks like prophecy (Spoiler: it isn't. Still colonialism).

Stouffer's declaration about the future of plastics and trash cans assumed that household waste would be picked up and taken to landfills or recycling plants that allowed plastic disposables to go "away." Without this infrastructure and access to Indigenous Land there is no disposability. He assumed that Land would provide a sink, a place to store waste, so profits could be generated through flows of waste-as-consumer-goods. That's colonialism.

While there are different types of colonialism--settler colonialism, extractive colonialism, internal colonialism, external colonialism--they have some things in common. Colonialism is a way to describe relations characterized by domination that keeps Land available for colonial and settler goals--relations that grant colonial and settler "ongoing state access to land and resources that contradictorily provide the material and spiritual sustenance of Indigenous societies on the one hand, and the foundation of colonial state-formation, settlement, and capitalist development on the other" (Coulthard 2014, 7), regardless of the intent, politics, practices, identities, heritages, and values of individuals and their ancestors. Emphasizing the centrality of Land to colonialism, Edward Said writes that,

"To think about distant places, to colonize them, to populate or depopulate them: all of this occurs on, about, or because of land. The actual geographical possession of land is what empire in the final analysis is all about. At the moment when a coincidence occurs between real control and power, the idea of what a given place was (could be, might become), and an actual place--at that moment the struggle for empire is launched. This coincidence is the logic

both for Westerners taking possession of land and, during decolonization, for resisting natives reclaiming it.” (Said 1993, 93)

Let’s take a moment to focus on that bit about Westerners. Western culture—the heritage of social norms, beliefs, ethical values, political systems, epistemologies, technologies, and legal themes and traditions heavily influenced by various forms of Christianity and Judaism that had some origin in Ancient Greece and heavily influenced Europe and beyond—is not synonymous with colonialism. Western culture certainly has its imperialistic and colonial impulses, histories and ideas of what is good and right, but they are two different things. When I hear “isn’t doing research ethics paperwork colonial?” from researchers, it is a conflation of Western with colonial. I remind them: treaties are paperwork. Wampum belts are governing documents, as is paperwork. If paperwork is used to achieve the possession of land and secure settler and colonial futures, then yes, it’s colonial. But there is also anticolonial, Western-style paperwork that accomplishes the opposite, like research ethics paperwork. Colonialism, first, foremost, and always, is about *Land* and the genocides necessary to clear that land for settler desire, including the circumvention of ethics paperwork so researchers can have unfettered and unaccountable access to field sites, archives, samples, and data. Oh.

Land, with a capital L, which comes out of various Indigenous cosmologies, is not the same as land with a small l used in terms like landscape that are common nouns in English. Land is about relations between the material aspects we might think of as landscapes—water, soil, air, plants, stars—as well as histories, spirits, events, feelings, and other more-than-human relatives. Potawatomi scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer writes that Land is, “everything: identity, the connection to our ancestors, the home of our nonhuman kinfolk, our pharmacy, our library, the source of all that sustains us. Our lands were where our responsibility to the world [is] enacted” (Kimmerer 2013, 13).

The focus on Land—what it could be, might become, what it is for—does not always mean accessing Land as property for settlement, though it often does (TallBear 2019). It can also mean access to Land-based cultural designs and culturally appropriated symbols for fashion. It can mean access to Indigenous Land for scientific research. It can mean using Land as a Resource, which may generate pollution through pipelines, landfills, and recycling plants, or as a sink to store disposables and other waste. It can mean imagining a clean, healthy, and pollution-free future and conducting settler-led beach cleanups on Indigenous Land without permission or consent. **It means imagining things for land in ways that align with colonial and settler goals, even when those goals are well-intentioned.** Especially when they are well-intentioned. Which means it’s time to talk about environmentalism.

Environmentalism and colonialism

Environmentalism does not usually address colonialism and often reproduces it. Potawatomi scholar Kyle Whyte (2017), and many, many others, have pointed out that often environmental solutions to pollution such as hydroelectric dams (Nunatsiavut Government 2016), consumer responsibility, and an appeals to the commons (Mildenberger 2019), are based on having access to Indigenous Land and its ability to produce value for settlers and colonial power. Environmentalism often “propagate[s] and maintain[s] the dispossession of indigenous peoples for the common good of the world” (Byrd 2011, xix).

Colonialism isn’t about asshat goons. Colonial land relations are inherited by settlers (and others) as common sense, even as good ideas (see CLEAR’s paper on plastic research in Inuit Nunangat). Environmental historians have shifted the origins of environmentalism from back-to-the-land and save-the-(access to)-land movements in the 1960s and 70s to earlier imperial archiving, cultivation, and control measures necessary for the flourishing of empire around the globe, within and outside of where is lately called North America (e.g. Anker 2001, Komeie 2006, Grove 1990 & 1996). They argue that

colonial scientists attempting to mitigate and halt environmental destruction in colonies so the colonies might flourish are “the pioneers of modern environmentalism” (Grove 1990, 12) where “environmentalism is police action, inseparable from western conceptions and attitudes” (Barton 2020, 6) of how to best organize and govern land.

The way that environmental crises and their solutions are often techniques to maintain rather than change existing power structures is central to the scholarship of settler anthropologist Joseph Masco, who points out that “crisis,” environmental and otherwise, has “become a counterrevolutionary idiom in the twenty-first century, a means of stabilizing an existing condition rather than minimizing forms of violence across militarisms, economy, and the environment” (2017, S65). Rather than using crisis as a relational model that puts certain things beyond dispute in the imperative to act at all costs, a focus on colonialism within environmental narratives and action can be one way to address this usually unmarked power dynamic.

Indigenous sciences are different than anticolonial sciences

Indigenous sciences are done by Indigenous peoples, full stop. Sometimes Indigenous sciences use methods, tools, theories, and frameworks developed out of European and other non-Indigenous sciences. Sometimes not. Sometimes they involve settler scientists. Sometimes not. These details play a minor role in the defining feature of Indigenous sciences—that they are an expression of Indigenous sovereignty over knowledge production on Indigenous Lands, by Indigenous peoples, from Indigenous cosmologies, ontologies and epistemologies.

CLEAR does not claim to do Indigenous science. While some of our Inuit, Métis, and First Nation members draw on what is often called Traditional Knowledge and certainly work from their worldviews and even with their families and homelands, we do not give this to academia (McGregor 2005, Nadasdy 1999 & 2005).

We also have a lot of settlers in the lab and likely always will. They need to do science differently as well, and they can’t do Indigenous science; the appropriation of Traditional Knowledge or Indigenous sciences is just another form of settler and colonial entitlement to Indigenous life and Land. Not our goal! At the same time, Indigenous lab members solve scientific problems in ways that align with traditional teachings. For example, after a CLEAR meeting where we discussed how we might discard fish guts after we had analysed them for plastics in a good way, people talked with their families. This is Edward Allen’s story:

I asked my Elder about ‘sharing’ animal guts. After several moments he shared a memory starting in his childhood. It was my memory as well, and undoubtedly the same memory his Elder kept. When I was young, I was told to take what remains over to feed the dogs, or the birds in the summer months, and these other ones to another place so that the mice might enjoy them. Some were left to be reclaimed by the waters and all that lived below them, and some to go into the ground. As the memory travels through the generations, the only difference was how much there was to take. There was no such thing as waste. All was consumed by us, the animals we shared the land with, or the land itself. Everything is in movement. Even things that were still were gone by morning. Spreading what remains around ensured that they were shared efficiently, and that no remains were piled to the point of contamination. And while the delicacies found in entrails have been forbidden to me because of PCBs and other things from away, the remains still have purpose in the larger whole. They are part of sila and keep me, my Elder, and my Elder’s Elder buoyant.

Edward's conversation with his Elder was one small part of what is now a regular CLEAR practice: we return fish and other animal guts to the water when we're done. Indigenous teachings and practices, while they certainly are part of how things happen in CLEAR, are not a shared knowledge system in the lab. Laurelyn Whitt explains that,

a knowledge system can be defined in terms of four characteristics: epistemology, a theory of knowledge giving an account of what counts as knowledge and how we know what we know; transmission, dealing with how knowledge is conveyed or acquired, with how it is learned and taught; power, both external (how knowledge communities relate to other knowledge communities) and internal (how members of a given knowledge community relate to one another); and innovation, how what counts as knowledge may be changed or modified. The systemic nature of knowledge is due to the reciprocal influence of these four characteristics upon one another: how we know, how we learn and teach, how we innovate, and how power figures in this are linked." (Whitt 2009, 31)

It is not that Indigenous sciences are over here as a monolith and anti-colonial sciences, Euro-centric or "Western" sciences, and other sciences are over there as different monoliths. As different knowledge systems, part of them overlap. Yet, Indigenous sciences have fundamentally different obligations and structures of accountability than other sciences. For instance, CLEAR is not accountable to Edward's Elder, but Edward is, including whether and how he shares his Elder's knowledge in the lab. I don't get access to Edward's Elder to ask whether I can share his story in this lab book: I ask Edward, who asks his Elder. Protocol helps us see our different orientations.

CLEAR is oriented towards mitigating and undoing colonialism, towards anti-colonial science. The term "anti-colonial science" can make it appear as though there are two stable entities, one called anti-colonial science and one called dominant or colonial science, that are fundamentally distinct. Not so: science(s), colonialism(s), and resistance(s) are neither monolithic nor stable, but rather changing, moving, patchy, incomplete, plural, and diverse. Often I hear scholars and activists alike talking about capitalism (or patriarchy or racism, but mostly capitalism) as if it is a solid monolith that we can dash our bodies against to no avail. But that gives capitalism and colonialism more power by erasing the patchiness, the unevenness, the failures of reproduction of those systems. It erases the other kinds of economies and land relations that happen within, alongside, in spite of capitalism and colonialism. So let's not.

There are many anti-colonial sciences even within dominant science: queer science, abolitionist science, Zapatista science, feminist science, anarchist science, anti-capitalist and communitarian science, and many more. So why not just say we're doing intersectional feminist and queer science in a decolonial lens? First, queer, feminist, and other sciences are not monolithic or stable, either—some expressions of these sciences can even be colonial in their entitlement to Land. By foregrounding colonialism, it avoids the idea that a queer or feminist future is automatically and simultaneously an anti-colonial future. An anti-colonial science does not conflate and collapse different forms of oppression and resistance into one category.

So: what are some ways we can bring anticolonial commitments into our everyday science work?

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