

A New Social Contract

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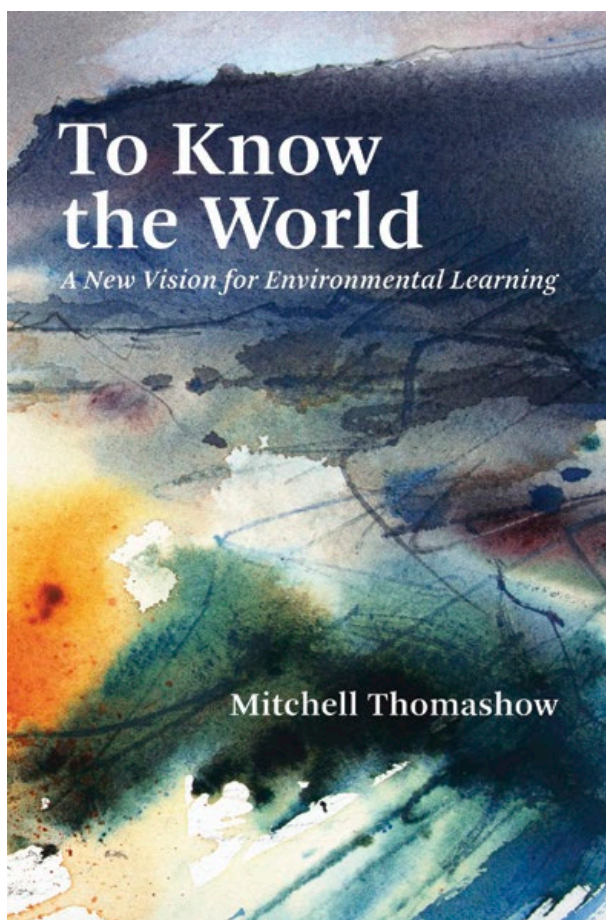
Last summer, my friend Sarah and I tried to support local businesses that were hit hard during the pandemic by meeting up at various independent coffee shops around town to do our work. Sarah, a PhD student who studies the systems that create, recycle, and ultimately dispose of plastics, always brought her own mug in case the barista would let her use it; if not, she asked

to forego the plastic lid on her coffee.

I, on the other hand—despite having watched Sarah exhibit this plastic-mitigating behavior all summer—still didn't remember to grab a mug from my kitchen before leaving the house, nor did I ask for my Americano to be handed over lidless. Thus I contributed one small cup and plastic lid to the world's landfills every time we met up.

Whenever I watched Sarah return with a lidless cup, I was presented with a tangible example of one of the many ways that narratives about global problems—climate change being foremost, but also issues including plastics pollution and unfair labor practices—intrude on daily life. Each time, I'd wonder if bringing my own mug would actually make a difference, or whether it's just a kind of empty virtue signaling. Or is that question itself simply a way to justify my forgetfulness? Climate change, pollution, and other challenges are all very real problems, of course, but our understanding of these problems, along with their potential solutions, emerges from the stories we tell about the world and our place in it. For problems that require collective action on a global—indeed, an unprecedented—scale, are we telling the right stories?

Two recent books, Mitchell Thomashow's *To Know the World: A New Vision for Environmental Learning* and Max Liboiron's *Pollution Is Colonialism*, seek to help their readers locate themselves in these narratives—one book much more effectively than the other. Both offer environmental education as an antidote to perceived political futility when dealing with global climate change, but their approaches couldn't be more



To Know the World: A New Vision for Environmental Learning

by Mitchell Thomashow. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2020, 288 pp.

different. The scholarship in these books anchors two ends of an academic continuum: from Thomashow, traditional armchair philosophizing, a casual stroll through various areas of research; from Liboiron, active (if jargon-filled) methodology and practice. I was curious what each would offer as an explanation for my coffee shop dilemma and what ideas they might provide for meaningfully discussing climate in the classrooms where I teach.

So many books urging climate action start with the individual and focus on personal responsibility or

empowerment, depending on the framing. You should be using bamboo or metal straws, bringing your own grocery bags, sorting your recycling, asking baristas to not give you a lid, etc. You alone can prevent climate catastrophe. These actions, you're told in a Smokey Bear tone (himself the product of an ad campaign intended to place responsibility for forest fires on individual citizens and protect valuable timber), will curb humanity's impact on the environment and bring about global change if everyone does them together.

There's some truth to this, of course, but the personal responsibility narrative is often blown out of proportion and severed from discussion of larger industrial and global systems of pollution. Corporations and other organizations—environmental nonprofits included—are happy to buy into this narrative of personal

responsibility; it allows them to sell the public on compostable coffee cups, plastic straw recycling drives, and Instagram awareness campaigns.

In what feels like an attempt at a Malcolm Gladwellian narrative structure, Thomashow addresses the question of personal climate responsibility by summarizing a dizzying array of primary sources in the climate change literature. He offers techniques such as mindfulness meditation and participatory democracy as ways to put the global environment front of mind for his readers. While useful for centering yourself and investigating your place in the world (and possibly helping me remember to grab a mug when I leave the house), mindfulness does not strike me as especially effective in combating industrial pollution or

decarbonizing global supply chains.

Thomashow promises pedagogical activities to accompany the reading material, so I was hoping for more concrete steps or new ways to frame the climate issue that would resonate with my students. Thomashow recommends constructing your own “filters” through which to take in climate narratives, “curating the curators” (that is, checking your sources), and situating yourself in global ecology through investigation of networks and migration. This last suggestion comes the closest to being adaptable into practice, especially in my classroom, but would require significant time and resources to turn into a usable lesson plan. When Thomashow comes to the book’s section on governmental interventions, his continued focus on the individual absolves him of detailing how coordinated action works in practice or can be achieved. Policy-wise, he gestures at participatory democracy as something worth investigating, but stops short of providing actual policy ideas or even a way of ranking priorities for action.

Liboiron (whose pronouns are they/them) takes a very different approach. They frame personal responsibility as “obligations to one another as speaker and listener [which] can be *specific enough to enact obligations to one another*” (italics in original). To partially explain how individuals interact with climate change, Liboiron, who is Red River Métis/Michif and grew up in Canada, weaves together power, privilege, sovereignty, and footing within the framework of colonialism, which is broadly conceived as a situation in which a settler society



Pollution Is Colonialism

by Max Liboiron. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021, 216 pp.

asserts sovereignty (through settlement, resource extraction, despoiling, etc.) over land that is or was occupied by Indigenous peoples. Just as early European explorers may have seen the New World as *terra nullius*, owned by no one and thus free for the taking, industrial polluters expropriate the air, water, or land through what economists call the externalities of production processes. As may be apparent from this description, the book is written in the oft opaque language and academic worldview of science and technology scholars.

Liboiron makes three main arguments: pollution is an instance of violence resulting from a history of colonial land relations and the ideologies inherent in those relations; you can take action with respect to pollution without waiting for decolonialization; and methods, ranging from the words you use in interpersonal relationships all the way to more formal frameworks leveraged in traditional academic settings, are a good place to enact the ethical changes required to mitigate the violence of colonial land relations. I found this take on personal responsibility refreshing and empowering. It makes clear that the locus of change must be working to end these violent relationships and their enabling ideologies—not, or not exclusively, on worrying about personal behavior or consumption patterns.

“I’m always glad when people raise a fist against the injustices of systems,”

Liboiron writes. “But I’d much prefer people pick up a shovel—or a microscope—with the other hand and get to work.” This call to action plays out through the rest of the book. Liboiron doesn’t provide strategies or applications, but rather invites the reader to join them in taking apart the narratives of disposability (and the resulting pollution) that non-Indigenous occupants of North America propagate, as a way of taking responsibility for land and rethinking our relationship with it and one another. Rather than Thomashow’s encomium to individual responsibility and mindfulness, Liboiron wants us to think and act in relation to the systems in which we’re embedded.

Liboiron sees the wicked problems of climate change and pollution as a series of narratives that individuals

live within: stories about land, relationships, history, and ideology. This provides a contrast to Thomashow's perspective of climate change as a collective burden but personal responsibility. And Liboiron's insight—that our individual stories can affect future collective action, even at the global level—provides new ways of thinking about our relationships with other people, with the land, and with scientific research, and how they can or must change.

Liboiron deals with the issue of scale by associating pollution with the power relations inherent in their definition of colonialism as a relationship “that allows some amount of pollution to occur and its accompanying entitlement to Land that assimilate that pollution”—the capitalized “Land” referring to both the piece of ground and the power relations that are refracted through it. In other words, “environmental violence is about who gets to erase—or produce—and how that is structured so that pollution becomes normal, even ubiquitous.” Liboiron explains that this parallel between violent colonization of Indigenous land and pollution is not an artifact of the past but a Manifest Destiny-type ideology that entitles the polluting aggressor to future environmental violence.

The solution, in Liboiron's view, is healing the relations we have with one another, which will bring about different obligations with new, less violent methods. There's a theory of change here, which starts at repairing relationships at the local or individual level but can scale up, potentially to the necessary global level. It also extends to climate science: Who gets to perform this research, and to what ends? And so how we talk to other people, how we conduct research, and how we understand our relationship to the world—

these things can bring about change through and beyond our individual relationships.

Liboiron's perspective contrasts with Thomashow, who touts “environmental learning” as a solution to the challenges of the Anthropocene and largely keeps his discussion of climate change at the level of the individual. At the end of *To Know the World*, I was left with little practicable insights beyond vague phrases like “constructive connectivity” and “cosmopolitan bioregionalism.” The bulk of his prose sits at the level of personal reflection and observations as he walks through the literature he cites. I'm not suggesting personal reflection isn't a piece of the puzzle that deserves attention, but it only begins to bridge the chasm between individual thought and collective action. Thomashow's book works best as an introduction to a long list of primary sources the reader would be well served to investigate.

I'd argue the responsible, pragmatic approach to climate change and similar global problems lies in extending the views put forth by both Liboiron and Thomashow. We must rethink our research (whether conducted ourselves or in our name), actions, and relationships in the context of global change, with the expectation of bringing about new forms of science and society. We need the freedom to enact new, nonexploitative, nonviolent social contracts, all while reflecting on the effects our choices can have on our personal spheres of influence. That sounds like a story that could make a difference.

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