Cultivating Imagination: Leading Towards a Just Future
Transcript for Episode 10

Hope is in The Collective: On Leading Within Community For Eco- Social Justice with Yi Chien Jade Ho and Victor Elderton

Stephen Hurley:
And welcome back to another episode of *Cultivating Imagination.* I'm Stephen Hurley along with Meaghan Dougherty and Gillian Judson, and today we have two very special guests for this episode. I'm going to, as always, turn it over to Meaghan Dougherty for those introductions.

Meaghan Dougherty:
Thank you. We're thrilled to have two amazing scholars and practitioners, leaders, joining us today. We have Victor Elderton and Yi Chien Jade Ho. Victor has been an educator for over 40 years, focusing on place conscious and nature based experiential learning. He's held leadership positions as a principal at NV outdoor school. He's a founding member of Environmental Educators of BC and founding director of the capacity building charitable not-for-profit Pacific Foundation for Understanding Nature Society. He's honored to be a PICS Fellow working on rewriting the BC Education Environmental Learning and Experience document, and is a member of the Wild Pedagogies Research Consortium. He's currently a sessional instructor and mentor for pre-service and graduate teacher students at both Simon Fraser University and UBC, and also in his spare time– he's very busy– is a PhD student at Simon Fraser University and his research focuses is on place and nature based experiential education and how this informs learning and fundamental understandings, as well as how it helps us form the people that we become.
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So we're thrilled to have Victor, as well as Doctor Yi Chien Jade Ho, who is a postdoctoral fellow at the School of Public Health and Social Policy at the University of Victoria. Jade earned her PhD in education at Simon Fraser University, and her doctoral work, entitled *Radical Pedagogy of a Decolonial Feminist: Exploration of Returning, Organizing and Resisting* centers on developing radical pedagogy of place through the lens of decolonization in cross cultural contexts and the connection between place, land, and identity in marginalized communities in Taiwan and in Vancouver. Jade is also a labor organizer and a housing justice organizer, working with the Vancouver Tenants Union, primarily in Vancouver's Chinatown, to fight against gentrification and anti-Asian racism. So we're so thrilled to have both of you joining us today, and we're really looking forward to our dialogue.

Stephen Hurley:
Thanks. Meaghan. I wanted to jump in as a first line of conversation to have you talk about the work that you're doing. Meaghan outlined some of the roles that you have, but, Jade, I wondered if we could begin with you and have you talk about your current role or roles from that leadership lens and in particular, what priorities for leadership are emerging in the work that you're doing currently.

Jade Ho:
So, yeah, thank you for that really wonderful introduction. Right now I am a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Victoria, but I also find myself just really lucky to be able to step into this project that I'm working on right now. So this project is called Holding Space. It's led by doctor Jeff Masuda at University of Victoria. And this project primarily supports indigenous frontline workers in the downtown eastside in organizing indigenous SRO tenants. SRO is the single room occupancy housing that's primarily in the downtown eastside. The project that I am actually in charge of is to really think how we can bring low income Chinese communities in Vancouver, Chinatown, with the downtown eastside community together to foster more relationship building and more solidarity, because a lot of the struggle that we see in that area is actually quite common for the both communities. And however, historically, you know, there has been kind of a racial division that has happened between the two communities through various colonial and capitalist forces. So, yeah, thinking through kind of like a leadership kind of perspective, I think that for us, when we think of leadership in this kind of, like, organizing environment where we are, you know, bringing people together and trying to foster what we call collective power to kind of, like, also fostering, like, collective imagination of, like, what we really want to see in our community. I feel like leadership in this sense are people who have deeply embedded kind of place based knowledge and practices that are from the community that are able to, you know, come together and facilitate a process of– So that everyone can think together and act together and fight back together.

Stephen Hurley:
So, Victor, I'm going to turn to you and ask you the same question about your current role and the work that you're doing through that lens of leadership and maybe some of the leadership priorities and language you're bringing to that work.

Victor Elderton:
Thanks, Stephen. For me, my starting point always is to recognize a concept that my partner Colleen and I have been playing around with and have been introduced to. What's the story before this story? What's the story of this place before, you know, my happening to be here? And so what I'm always trying to think about is what's that story? And then thinking back, you know, what is the story that goes on beyond that? So really, in a lot of ways, my work now is more in the mentorship role and thinking about who can be the next people that might consider these challenges that we're obviously facing, both existential, but I think also internal challenges that we are…. So my work now really focuses on mentorship, mentoring with pre-service teachers, also graduate teachers that are pursuing a secondary degree towards maybe graduate studies. So I'm always thinking about what is the story before their story, where I get an opportunity to work with them. And then I try to overlay that with what's the physical story, the place story, the human cultures and natural cultures that have all been interplaying with one another? And how can those things inform the way we might want to approach leadership and the way we might want to think about leadership? And right from the get go, what I try to do is get folks to think about how they are part of leadership and what kind of leadership do they want to have. And for me, where I'm from, what I'm always trying to do is think about in this place where I have the honor of being able to live, what's the story from a cultural perspective and

from where I live, that would be the story of Tsleil-Waututh and Squamish peoples who had a certain type of relational aspect of the land. And I do most of my teaching primarily in the territories, which are unceded and in many ways, well, they were, they were just confiscated, stolen. But there's a relationship story there that is also about the biology of this particular place. So a term that I like playing around with these days is also, how can we be thinking in more biocultural terms? How can we be thinking not only within the teaching that I might do or the mentorship work that I do and the co-learning that I do, but how can we be leaders where that's a very conscious thing that's happening? And so I would say that the work that I'm doing now in that biocultural perspective is to think about the cultural stories, but also the natural or biological stories that have continued to play out and have brought us to this particular place.

Stephen Hurley:
Victor, I wanted to stay with you for a second. And when you talk about imagination, what words do you find coming out of your mouth when you try to explain imagination to someone else? What is your conception of imagination and how do you describe that to someone else?

Victor Elderton:
I usually don't describe it as that particular term. I describe it in actions. And one might point to the tools, for example, and the different types of prompts in the work that's being done and then sort of reverse engineer it, if you want to call it that, because I think people are engaging in these imaginative processes and not really naming it imaginative processes. And I think that in the mentorship role and the teaching roles that I have right now, I see the work as quite often being quite imaginative and using these imaginative tools that have been, you know, examined by Gillian and obviously Kieran Egan, and they're not naming it that way. I would also argue that it's also in this biocultural realm that people are using biocultural ways of understanding the world without giving it that terminology. So I like to play around with actual direct experience and engagement and then start to ask or pose questions with regards to, so how would you, as an individual or a group, how would you describe that? And then look at it sort of from the perspective of imagination, and people start to see the linkages between that and, you know, as a teaching technique, that's no different than how I might teach a young learner to consider the natural world. I generally don't start with the naming of things. I usually start with the relational aspect of things. And then we might explore sort of like, well, what might you want to call that? Or how might you want to identify that? That's how I would describe imagination. I would describe it as, you know, these processes and then get back to, okay, so how are you getting at these processes? What's the thing that you're doing with regards to that?

Stephen Hurley:
Do you see that as being a little countercultural in the fact that you're not denying the importance of language but kind of sidelining that at the start.

Victor Elderton:
You might interpret it as being countercultural. I guess potentially the reason why I think this way is because I work both at sort of the university graduate student level, but I've always had a practice where I'm working with young learners as well. And if I start introducing language that

there isn't a cognitive bridge that we can create between myself and them, then they struggle with that a lot of, and I guess also I'm trying to emulate the way that I learned the best. I certainly don't start with the words. I would tell you that I wasn't a child who spent very much time reading about things or those kinds of things, but I did spend a lot of time playing with things, you know, investigating things directly, experiencing things. And from that then I was motivated to write about these things more or read about these things more. But it was in that first sort of touching of something, that first imagining of something that then that sort of led to me developing interest of how would I express that to others. Then, obviously, skills like reading and writing started to play a bigger role. But I would tell you probably, and, you know, maybe my family members would tell you, is I'm a very oral based storyteller and learner. And so it's… It's in the storytelling. I can bring my voice around with me everywhere. I can't necessarily bring a notebook or something to write with everywhere, but since I have the ability to speak, then I can bring that anywhere. It's a really, in quotes, high tech, but low tech tool, if you want to think of it that way.

Stephen Hurley:
Interesting. Jade, I wanted to go to you on your concept of imagination and how you describe it to other people in the work that you do. Or do you describe it?

Jade Ho:
I think the word imagination, we do use a lot, especially in kind of the community organizing side of things, because I think imagination is the center of the work that we do. Because if we're literally trying to get out of the present order, right, the kind of, like, colonial kind of oppressions that we are trying to get out of, we actually have to imagine a different thing that's then we have now. And I think that imagination is both what propels us to move forward, but it's also the work that we are doing as well. For example, many years back when I first got involved in doing organizing in Chinatown in 2015, at that time, we were fighting against a huge development that was coming into Chinatown called the 105 Kiefer. This is called the 105 Kiefer Campaign because the site, one of Ayker street, was where the development was going to come in. And I think at that time, everyone, a lot of folks, especially the low income residents, have already been feeling kind of like the brunt of gentrification. And that we can tell that the city and the developers and the kind of like, uppercross elites are seeing Vancouver Chinatown as kind of a tourist destination, so to speak. Right. By mobilizing what we would call a bit of an orientalist way of building up this place. And that's the story that they're telling about the place. And that's the story that most people hear right when they think of Vancouver Chinatown. But there is actually a very different story that's being actively hidden, which is the story of resistance, which is the story of the resilience of the people since the beginning of the establishment of Chinatown. Even though Chinatown was built out of anti-Asian racism at the time, people didn't make it into a safe place for everyone. Right? And I think that all of these processes involved imagination. And I really like the concept of Max Haven's concept of imagination. He calls it a radical imagination, which he talks about how imagination is, lies within the collective, right? It's not just a property of an individual, but that when the collective come together and really think about what they want for the community that they are in, a radical imagination happens. And I think that's what motivates us, and also it's the process of our work.

Stephen Hurley:
So is this something you speak explicitly about with the people that you work with?

Jade Ho:
Yeah, this is something actually we have discussions about all the time. Right? Like, if we say we don't want this development, what do we actually want? You know, like, what does the people who live there depend on the services and who actually is the one that's building up the community within Chinatown? Like, what exactly do we want to see Chinatown become? Right. And I think that that does take a lot of imagination, and it does take a lot of respect and centering of people's own experiences and their history within that place. So we do talk about that a lot. Like, how do we want to imagine this place in the future? Like, when we say we want Chinatown to be a safe place, to be an inclusive place, what do we mean? What do we want to see?

Stephen Hurley:
So it's not just pushing back against an idea, but pushing forward as well, into something different.

Jade Ho:
Exactly. And I think that's really important for us to consider, especially when we are doing resistance work. And especially we are, if we are engaged, you know, in this project of decolonization, I think it's actually really important, you know, following the Indigenous leadership to think about the beyond. Right? Like, we are actually building towards something, but that something also, it's not something that we wait for to happen, because it is a process of moving towards it. Right. So we are also practicing it every single day. It's not just dismantling something, but we are actually building something in the place of the thing that we are fighting against.

Stephen Hurley:
Victor, you wanted to jump in on something here. Yes, I just wanted to say that I really appreciated Jade's perspective on that. This imagination exists in a communal kind of way, you know, in Jade's context. You know, that's very practical and pragmatic with regards to the kinds of issues, the social issues that are, you know, in Chinatown. I would say that that imagination is collective for me in the inclusion of the more-than-human world, because I don't think that there is full imagination going on unless there's reciprocal relationship between the human and the more than human. And what I'm trying to get at– And that's one reason why I like playing around with those concepts that I mentioned before that story, before this story. Because obviously, if you start to go down that road, there's a story before that story, before that story, perhaps dating back to the, you know, the creation of the planet self, the universe, potentially. But also, I like this interplay between this biocultural perspective, because, you know, where we are physically in the world is influencing the biology of that particular place, but conversely, the biology of that particular place– and if you extend that to the climate and some of these other kinds of things– there's this dance that's called going on. And so when Jade says things like, you know, this is a

communal kind of perspective, a dance, from my perspective, doesn't really fully exist unless there's an interaction. Even if it's a performer on a stage, they're having some kind of interaction with other dancers, but also with the audience as well. And so I really appreciated that aspect of Jade's answer to your question. I think it's very insightful, and it's probably changed the way that I might phrase some things moving forward. So thanks, Jade.

Stephen Hurley:
I've written a ton of notes already, but I know that Gillian and Meaghan have written a ton of notes as well. So I'm going to turn to Gillian and bring her in on this.

Gillian Judson:
Thank you so much, Steven, and to Jade and Victor, so grateful you're here today sharing your experiences and your wisdom and insight. I wanted to ask you, Jade, and you began to speak to this a little bit. You talk right from the beginning about your work as being reimagining the ways we do things, the ways people are treated, the ways we storify existences. And I wondered, like, what is your process? Are there particular activities you like to do to sort of help, for example, when faced with the Kiefer situation, help people reimagine things in new ways? Are there any kind of community activities you facilitate that really allow imagination to work?

Jade Ho:
Yeah, there was definitely a huge process that was put in that we call it the organizing process. Right. But I feel like at the very beginning, to do this work, we even have to almost be empowered to know that we are people who can imagine differently. I think that at the beginning, most of the residents that I work with, they are all low income Chinese seniors. And I think at the beginning, when we started to organize, the thing that you hear a lot from Chinese immigrants is that we shouldn't rock the boat. We should just put our head down and keep doing the things. We shouldn't push back on all of this, right. I think, like, even just to come to the place where we can say that: You know what? We actually can imagine something different for our lives. We actually can imagine something different for this place, and we actually can fight for that. I think even just that process was so important. And so some of the things that we have done during that process, some of it are quite like, you know, we will come together, for example, and we will do things like power mapping where we map out kind of like the power interplay, you know, within Chinatown, and then the power interplay within, you know, maybe the development corporation. And then kind of by thinking about the power dynamic within the city, right? If we want to make some demands, you know, where do we kind of, like, put our pressure the most, even to just go through a process like this, to kind of, like, help all of us to grow that political consciousness into thinking, rethinking about what does power mean, right? Because a lot of times when we think of power, we think of kind of like the hierarchical, kind of like the colonial power, right? Whoever is on the top is the one that holds the most power. But then we were trying to change that story. We were changing a story like, yes, systemically, structurally, they do hold a lot of power, but we are people. And when we come together, we actually hold a lot of power as well. That's what we call collective power, right? So I think even the beginning, we had to kind of go through a process of empowering ourselves to know that, okay, it is challenging because we are pushing against the established power, so to speak. But we

actually are also people who have power. And when we come together, we can do things together. So power mapping, that kind of stuff. And a lot, a lot, a lot of relationship building, because most people are actually quite isolated within Chinatown and because of language accessibility and various other kinds of reasons, right? So even just like, you know, start building relationships with each other, with their neighbors. And I think a very important aspect for us is the intergenerational kind of element to it. I think that for us, a lot of, like, youth– we are still youth for our seniors. So, like, you know, being able to be in Chinatown and do this kind of work with our Chinese seniors, with our, you know, essentially our grandparents, like, you know, our grandpas and our grandmas, has been a very essential kind of element in the sense that we are learning from their lived experiences. We are also being able to contribute kind of like, because most of us, we have language skills and we know how to access that, say, a city process and things like that. Right? So to be able to work together intergenerationally also healed kind of some of the inherent divide that has happened within immigrant communities. So I think that all of those processes needed to happen for us to feel empowered. And then it's starting to be able to get in touch also with people that we don't normally think that we can have relationship with. Right. I think for a lot of our Chinese seniors, they don't feel like they are actually able to have relationship with their Indigenous neighbors, for example, because of language, because of all of the history that has happened in the area, and the ongoing kind of systemic kind of a divide that's happening. So facilitating spaces where people can come together, sharing food, sharing stories through interpretations and things like that. So, yeah, we have done a lot, a lot, a lot of different kinds of things from, like, you know, thinking through political system, actually talking about what what decolonization means for us to, like, you know, the most important, like, social aspects of things to bring people together.

Gillian Judson:
Thank you so much. Jade, you're really pointing for me in an interesting direction in terms of this notion of imagination and the collective nature of it. I feel like there's more imagination through those collective and diverse kinds of relationships. But I also feel, and Meaghan and I are really interested in seeing how we can support communities in which we can imagine, and we can feel safe to think differently because it is risky in many cases. So in yours, it sounds like you really do create a safe and brave space in which people can voice their thoughts in a situation where they feel like they don't have a voice. So it seems to me that there's multiple layers of the need for this collectivity. I'm just aware of our time, and I know we want– Steven, you want to dig into notions of eco justice, perhaps with Victor?

Stephen Hurley:
Yeah, we wanted to. The subtitle of this podcast leads us to this whole idea of eco and social justice. And, Victor, I'm wondering, in terms of social and ecological justice and imagination, how do you bring those two things together? How are you thinking about the whole idea of justice? And how imagination might be able to lead us into those conversations in a different way.

Victor Elderton:
Yeah, I think it's a really good question and a thinking kind of question. I think that there's already been some themes for me that in our conversation that have come out that sort of bring

forward how to consider these things. I think this question of being relational, and also one where we're thinking about what are the power dynamics that already exist. And so when we're thinking about those kinds of things, for me, I would start primarily from the perspective of what's the relational aspect, first of all, of the individual to the place that they're in, but also then start to down a road of thinking, what's our communal relationship to the place that we're in, and what voices are not representative in that conversation. Obviously, I think it's easier from a human perspective to think of human voices. But, you know, we are also thinking about other than human voices that we know exist, but we may not be able to speak those languages specifically. So I think that that relational aspect of things is incredibly important. I also think that another, you know, theme that has come through in our conversation today has been about the collaborative or communal aspect of those things. And once we start to think about that and start to probe into what could justice be, I think that there needs to be a dialogue going on, because my interpretation of what justice might be might be quite different than somebody else that might live in my own neighborhood or my own community, for example. So I think there has to be some dialogue that happens around that. And then using our imagination, think about what justice might be, for example, to a spawning salmon that's trying to make it up a creek where its ancestors have been coming for thousands of years and can't make it up to the creek anymore because there isn't the amount of water that used to be there or the temperatures are too high. So I think that for me, those two aspects, that relational aspect and also the communal aspect, and then considering what could be people's perception of what justice is, if we can kind of come to some kind of way of thinking within our community, the kinds of work that Jade is doing within our communities, our human communities, then I think there's an opportunity then to extend that out in terms of what justice might be from a river perspective or something like that.

Stephen Hurley:
Well, you've mentioned a couple of times the phrase “more than human.” And I'm wondering in particular how imagination can allow us humans to dig into that and explore that idea of more than human.

Victor Elderton:
Okay, so the way I would approach that is I would ask people in a very sort of open system to close their eyes and think of a place where they got a sense that it was far more vast than what they can actually comprehend just by looking at things. There's some important questions out there with regards to the way that imagination-based learning happens, where we're asking ourselves to extend ourselves beyond our physical selves to something greater than that. And when I've asked that kind of question to different groups I've mentored with or helped learn with, often they are talking about vistas, or they're talking about an emotional attachment to a sunrise or a sunset, or just that rare moment where something other than human approaches them in a kind and sensitive way. Almost like that they're communicating. And I haven't found a group yet that there's been an individual that hasn't had at least some moments like that. And for me, in the way that I like to approach my teaching or my mentorship or my co learning, is that I'm reaching for that as many times as I possibly can, whether that's with younger learners or people that are older. And what are those contexts like from the cultures that they represent as

well. I'm fascinated by that particular type of question. So that's how I would answer it. I would say that that's how I would start to think about what that is. Because I think any of us who have viewed gorgeous mountain around here, for example, with snow on it, or even the small little crack in the pavement, and you see this bright spark of a little purple flower that's resisting the concrete around it, those things are inspiring. And to me, they are kind of a touchstone to that thing that we might want to call more than humanity.

Stephen Hurley:
I appreciate that. Jade, I wondered if I could get you to comment on those concepts of social and ecological justice and how imagination might get us into those conversations in a different way.

Jade Ho:
I think, as I mentioned earlier, that for me, imagination really is an essential, key ingredient to the kind of work that we're doing in social eco justice because without imagination, we cannot think about, you know, what it is that we want to build, right? What is that we need to move forward. And that I think imagination really is at the center of doing this type of work. A lot of times I think I share, maybe I share this a while ago with our imaginative education network, that I think a lot of times imagination is also part of our survival in some ways. A lot of times when we know that our situation is really dire. I work with a lot of folks who are unhoused. You can see that being able to imagine a different way of living, a different way of building their community, being able to imagine how they can assert their agency into building the kind of community that they want has really been what's propelling everyone forward. Right. Knowing that we can build this different tomorrow. So, yeah, it's, you know, as I said earlier, it really is essential in the type of work that we are doing.

Stephen Hurley:
Well, you've both described very compelling and inspiring work, but I know that on a day to day basis, there are ups and downs. And so, in the final reel today, I wanted to ask you about hope and what gives you hope in the work that you're doing? What gives you hope that it continues to matter to people and that you are actually having impact. Jade, let's start with you. What gives you hope?

Jade Ho:
Yeah, this is a really, really good question, because, you know, sometimes they are more cynical days. You know, like, if you're really looking at the current situation of, you know, where our, where the environment's at, you know, all of the social issues that we are facing, sometimes it's really easy to feel hopeless. Especially– well, I feel like I'm more speaking to, like, grad students now– like, especially if you have to, like, you know, be isolated and do the work that you're doing. Right. Like it is when we are isolated and not being able to think and act and be with the world and with other folks, that's where hopelessness comes in. I think, for me, hope is so important in joining us together. But also, hope can be only felt when you're within a collective. Sometimes when we are doing our work in Chinatown, like, you know, people are literally facing, you know, evictions and being able to, like, you know, facing displacement, like, in any moment,

right? But we are still being able to share, you know, joyful moments together, like, when we come together and make food for each other, for example, such a simple act of just, like, taking care of each other, you know, like, action through mutual aid. All of those things really kept me going. Right? Like, because I see that it is worth the work that we are doing. It is so worth doing because all of this joy and all of this hope that are being generated through just communities coming together.

Stephen Hurley:
And, Victor, the final word to you on hope and the work that you're doing.

Victor Elderton:
Well, Jade said so much in terms of how that it's an essential quality. And I guess for somebody like me, who draws so much from being out and about– and when I mean out, I mean physically out– that hope comes from me, from the perspective that I started off with. What's the story before this story? There's a lineage here of story that, that has continued since, you know, time immemorial. And to me, hope is the fact that there is a continuance of that story. And whether we like to think about that or not, for me, I'm totally accepting of hope also, including with regards to the natural world or just existence, that it doesn't necessarily have to include humans. I know it's not something we like to think about, but it doesn't have to necessarily do that. But for me, hope is the fact that there is great opportunity. The second thing, and I think Jade said this very clearly, that it's that there's a communal aspect of things, having the opportunity to find other folks like myself who are worried about this, but are also trying to do something, they're not hampered by things. So I think that that's really, really important. And opportunities to see ourselves collectively working towards things, trying to make differences and those kinds of things, that's a wellspring of hope for me. And I continually find those things, including opportunities, even like this podcast, for example, to explore some of these opportunities from multiple perspectives, because there are multiple perspectives, and it's an ecosystem that really depends on each aspect of the different thoughts that are brought forward. So that's how I see hope.

Stephen Hurley:
Well, Victor and Jade, you've given us so much hope, and I wanted to thank you for the work that you're doing for being with us today. Thank you for your insights and those words of hope. And Meaghan and Gillian, thank you for the opportunity to participate and be part of these conversations.