Reciprocity: An Antidote to our Global Crises
DAVID MANUEL-NAVARRETE

“One thing to remember is to talk to the animals. If you do, they will talk back to you. But if you don’t talk to the animals, they won’t talk back to you, then you won’t understand, and when you don’t understand you will fear, and when you fear you will destroy the animals, and if you destroy the animals, you will destroy yourself.”

attributed to Chief Dan George, Tsleil-Waututh Nation

“Imagine living in a world where there is no domination, where females and males are not alike or even always equal, but where a vision of mutuality is the ethos shaping our interactions.”
ell hooks

SOME BELIEVED, especially white men like me but not only, that the most exciting challenges of this century would be technological or organizational; such as the conquering of outer space or artificial extensions of our intelligence or life span. Then, COVID-19—ever-worsening fires, heatwaves, floods, and hurricanes, too—gave us a preview of the global devastation that larger disruptions such as pandemics and global climate change may unleash. With the hindsight of this vulnerability, the main challenge of the century appears much more cumbersome: we either restore reciprocity, or the planet may well just dispose of us. Some still believe that current crises can be weathered with just technological innovation, such as vaccines, electric cars, or geoengineering. While material inventions will remain important and buy us some time, there is growing concern that addressing global inequality, climate dis-
ruption, and other concurrent challenges will require a fundamental transformation of the ways in which modernized individuals relate to others, ourselves and the planet.3

Reciprocity can be defined as giving back the equivalent of what one takes or receives. Inspired by the cognitive shock the COVID-19 pandemic forced upon many of us, and Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche’s teachings on how to face fear4, I outline a cycle of three existential moves to guide the restoration of reciprocal forms of relationality as a guide for Western-modern people who feel ready to start restoring reciprocal ways of being. These “recycling” moves can be named Facing the Other, Facing Ourselves, and Re-enchanting the World. Jumping into this existential wheel would require what Chögyam Trungpa might have called the fearless attitude of the warrior; the attitude of recognizing our fears, smiling at them, and eagerly learning to return, over and over, to a state of equanimity in relation to all existence—choicelessly, without hard edges, guided by true compassion towards ourselves and others. Fear here is a tool, an ally to teach us, through the process of embracing, accepting and dissolving it. Fear teaches us how to rebuild communities deeply guided by reciprocity.

Indigenous scholars have convincingly shown that non-Western cultures engage in diverse forms of reciprocity with the more-than-human world.5 As a white, male, Hispanic-Catalan settler in Arizona, I am not the first to valorize reciprocity. My approach as a sustainability professor is to teach that the basic currency of life on Earth is mutually beneficial relationships; that is, Life—including human life—is fundamentally premised on the state of being reciprocally connected. However, I do so within the four walls of university classrooms, equally square screens, and within institutional contexts that value comparison and competition over relationality, and a cultural milieu obsessed with measuring and rewarding individual success over reciprocal collaboration.

The reciprocity-building wheel outlined above presents a process for people indoctrinated through Western education to transform their ways of being and learning with insights about reciprocity from non-Western knowledges. This transformation should not be purely intellectual, but enacted. Our intellectual capacities for abstraction and objectification, when left unchecked, hinder reciprocity through reifying abstract boundaries and divisions that can get solidified into cultural beliefs and practices. Privileging abstraction over relational thinking (and emotioning6) is a hallmark of colonialism & modernity, the cultural forms that have sown unsustainability by systematically eroding reciprocal relations in favor of competition, exploitation and accumulation.7 For instance, abstracting non-human species from their ecological relations, biological needs, or sentience enables reducing them to meat for mass-consumption, object of entertainment in circus or zoos, or experimental objects
routinely tortured in science labs. Over-abstraction generally supports coloniality as a structure of management based on attaining control through homogenization.⁸ Embracing reciprocity means recognizing that ethical concerns do not arise from rational arguments and discourse alone, but from experience, spirituality, love, desire, or emotions. Walter Mignolo suggests that “[a]s we lose respect for our emotions, we begin to use rational arguments to hide, deny, or justify them. We do so in a path that progressively leads us to the negation of the other.”⁹

The erosion of reciprocity is connected with global environmental change and recurrent pandemics. It also hinders our response to them. At the same time, the effects of concurrent global crises can become opportunities to curb the inertia from centuries of systematic suppression of reciprocity. However, these opportunities will likely go wasted unless people encultured in Western techno-scientific ways (today, it seems like that’s almost everyone) rein in their habits to accumulate, abstract, isolate, and objectify everything, including themselves. The next sections discuss each step of the reciprocity-building wheel.

Facing the Other

Facing the Other is a generative move towards pluriversality; a decolonial concept inspired by the Zapatista’s idea of a world in which many worlds can coexist.¹⁰ Modernized individuals who overdevelop egocentric and purely intellectual forms of engaging the world often feel highly insecure and fearful of otherness. This is because “the other”, by definition, cannot be known as one knows oneself, thus creating cognitive dissonance and division that the intellect alone cannot resolve. A positive feedback loop may arise where we avoid fear by turning our gaze upon ourselves, inflating the ego, isolating us further.
from that which is different, undermining reciprocity at its roots, and nurturing even more fear.

Colonial culture sanctions temporary means of dealing with existential fears by eliminating or assimilating the other. Thus, recognition of the other, which is a precondition for listening and reciprocating, is either repressed and eliminated, or subdued and exploited. Modernity and capitalism become natural allies of coloniality as mass media and the market tend to homogenize and commodify everything in order to make it communicable and consumable. The resulting sameness and mass extinction of cultures reduce humanity’s array of experiences, as well as our ability to adapt and evolve in an increasingly variable planet. But at the root of culturicide is the inability to face the fear that arises from having to deal with the unknowable, which is, essentially, otherness. As an existential move, Facing the Other means dealing with otherness openly, without trying to reduce it to the familiar or already known, and from an awareness that we are connected through a deeper interdependence beyond the intellect’s grasp.

Chögyam Trungpa described this move in terms of becoming a spiritual warrior: a person who faces the other, oneself, and each moment of life not merely though the intellect, but rather through the innate courage, faith, belief, and joy that resides within our core being. Western culture must face and rise to meet the other again; each one of us must turn our gaze away from ourselves, back to the diversely different community of all existence to which humans are inherently connected. In this process, great inspiration can be provided by Indigenous knowledges and Buddhism.

Indigenous cultures have created myriad ways of truly listening and acknowledging others (human and non-human) without objectifying or commoditizing them. Ancestral knowledge can help us to learn to Face the Other again and rebuild reciprocal relationships. For instance, *Etuaptmumk* (Mi’kmaw for “Two-Eyed Seeing”) is a practice that has been passed through generations of Mi’kmag Knowledge Keepers to equitably embrace multiple perspectives. This practice can be used to see through the eyes of other-than-human beings, as well as from multiple cultural eyes. In this sense, Mi’kmag Elder Albert Marshall applies Two-Eyed Seeing for “learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the strengths of mainstream knowledges and ways of knowing, and to use both these eyes together, for the benefit of all.”

The Buddhist path of loving-kindness for all beings provides useful practices and wisdom that can be mobilized to Face the Other. One of its basic ideas is to build a genuine connection to our world as one cultivates good humor and a state of satisfaction while getting in touch with the goodness inherent in
ourselves and the phenomenological world around us.\textsuperscript{17} Another key element of loving-kindness is about seeing clearly—through being in the present moment—the people who are in our lives, our current situation, emotions and thoughts without trying to improve anything.\textsuperscript{18} This is important because the impulse of achieving more, acquiring, becoming better as a separate individual, and then “bettering” the other has been a major psychological drive of colonially and capitalism, which is detrimental because they generate suffering and injustice while homogenizing and destabilizing the planet.

Facing Ourselves

Facing Ourselves entails realizing that human beings are much more than the images and stories that we create about ourselves. There are intricate mysteries about who we are, incomprehensible to the intellect despite one’s best attempts at finding certainty by religious or scientific inquiry. For instance, the mysteries of what happens to one’s sense of individuality after the body dies, or to what extent animals, plants or rocks participate of the same spiritual nature or consciousness as humans do. Creating images of oneself and of others reduces human beings to their social roles and ideologies such as scientists, activists, entrepreneurs, members of the public, liberals, conservatives, or religious people. This reductionism is a basic abstracting capacity of the human intellect. It can be useful for social-political engagement, but Western techno-scientific culture—its equating of perception with physical senses and the intellect—normalizes our total identification with mental images about ourselves. This amounts to a “epistemological fallacy” (as critical realists like Roy Bhaskar put it) that reduces personhood to ideas of oneself, while hindering emotional or spiritual ways of being and perceiving.\textsuperscript{19} Living without being able to know what or who we really are can be destabilizing. The plethora of images about oneself (i.e., the ego) distracts away from the acute pain generated from an ignorance of our own nature. Facing Ourselves is fundamentally about accepting and embracing this existential pain instead of trying to escape it through the illusions of the ego.

Embracing a pluriversal perspective opens the possibility of a continuous dialogue, hybridization and interaction of diverse worlds that cannot be reduced to one perspective or culture. Mahāyāna Buddhism speaks of two truths; relative and absolute, which can be seen as two levels of reality or ways of approaching reality. Relative truth encompasses distinguishable phenomena captured by the intellect through the conventional operation of thought: fragmentation, objectification, classification, and so on. The absolute is beyond what our sense perceptions can grasp, but we are fundamentally in unity with
that absolute truth, whether or not we can detect it. Meditation facilitates our ability to perceive this absolute reality permeating us and all things. The absolute creates no distinctions, but the key point here is that both relative, and absolute truths are equally real.

Mi’kmaw Indigenous elders called the practice of speaking and listening in different worldviews Etuaptmumk (Mi’kmaw for “Two-Eyed Seeing”).20 Etuaptmumk is a practice that indigenous people were forced to acquire when European colonizers imposed their culture and worldviews upon them. However, Mi’kmaw elders ask that everybody cultivates the capacity of seeing the world simultaneously through two cultural perspectives because it provides a richer perception of reality that will help us face the current global environmental crises. Another ancestral Indigenous practice that integrates ways of perceiving is senti-pensar (feeling-thinking). Senti-pensar combines the heart with the mind by thinking with the heart and feeling with the mind. This practice was explicated to Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda while conversing with fishers from San Martín de la Loba, a community of land, rivers, wetlands, and people thriving as an “amphibian culture” since pre-Columbian times. The integration of thinking and feeling takes places in the context of relational ontologies, where people feel-think with the non-human, with the Earth.21

Overall, Facing Ourselves entails cultivating our capacity to see and perceive from multiple cultural and human perspectives simultaneously, and learning how to meaningfully weave them together by raising awareness of reciprocal relations. When human experience is grounded on culturally fixed epistemologies, instead of fluid and pluriversal ways of knowing, reciprocity withers.

Re-Enchanting the World

Re-enanting the World entails a return to perceiving beyond what the intellect can grasp. It is about embodying and enacting the world relationally by breaking our experience free from the modern atomistic perspective which portrays individuals as self-sufficient repositories of reason existing outside of place or milieu.22 It connects into Facing the Other with an invitation to embrace Indigenous knowledge, specifically Indigenous ecology and science, which are rooted in spirituality.23 It connects with Facing Ourselves as it requires ontological and epistemological openness.24 Facing the irreducible mystery of human existence calls for feeling and embodying the world in new ways: “as a place that is sentient and alive, even invested in our collective wellbeing.”25 Modernity’s deficit of reciprocity is also a deficit of relational, collectivist, and holistic logics. These deficits desacralize nature and conjure up a terrifying sense of
isolation that misrepresents Life as an endless struggle to survive in a hostile environment; a space of demands, mistrust, and control.26

In practice, re-enchanting the world may involve meditation techniques, such as mindful eating, that allow us to be fully present to our feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations involved in daily activities, while simultaneously acknowledging and expressing gratitude for all the beings that co-operate in these activities. A more intense and powerful practice coming from indigenous culture is the vision quest ceremonies.27 Vision quests usually involved a series of guided rituals and trainings in order to prepare people to spend days with mother nature, strictly disconnected from their habitual cultural milieu. The goal is to gain a “vision” of our deep and reciprocal interconnection with all beings. These types of techniques and practices experientially bring to the fore the limitations of Euro-centric ontologies; where the World and the Universe are assumed to be made of inert, purposeless matter.

Holistic logics subsume individuals under the collective; the absolute value resides on the social whole, rather than the individual or private property. Individualism may have helped to balance out extreme forms of collectivism and holism which deprive the self of any sovereignty. Individualism has played its role in countering the hegemony of European monarchs, ideological collectivism, and religious dogma, but modernity has taken it to the extreme by wholly embracing the logics of possessive individualism, where the individual is “seen as essentially the proprietor of [their] own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them.”28 “The supremacy of possessive individualism leads to the suppression of reciprocity towards others, collectives, and the world at large.29 To make things worse, possessive individualism has been sacralized by some in a “winner takes all” economy, and a dangerous “cult of selfishness”30 which rejects the bearing of any responsibility and accountability for the effects of individual actions and decisions, independently of how harmful they might be to either others, or (even) oneself. Such narcissistic forms of hyper individualism underlie our failures to coordinate collective responses to global crises.

Modern culture needs to balance ego with eco;31 and rationality with the magical sensing of the “otherworldly mysteries” that would pervade our quotidian experience if we were open to them. From such re-balancing, new reciprocal practices, social contracts, ontologies and cosmologies may emerge. Indigenous practices and cosmologies can assist in the recalibration of global modern culture. For instance, the Haudenosaunee or Anishnaabe Sky Woman’s cosmology are not abstractions that explain human perceptions of the world or universe, but “literal and animate extension of Sky Woman’s and First Woman’s thoughts.”32 The immaterial beings of Indigenous cosmologies are real. Humans generally perceive and experience them through the filters of
our senses and minds, which distort their true being-ness. This is inevitable, but it is also problematic when inevitable partial representations are taken as complete truths. In such cases, the ego takes precedence over the eco; and the balance is broken. However, an attitude of constantly accessing deeper layers of perception and paying attention through the wholeness of one’s entire being, can restore the balance by realizing that the ego’s discriminating mind is only capable of accessing a small bit of what is going on in any situation. This is consistent with some Buddhist conceptions of humility, which are “not about how you compare yourself with others or place yourself in a larger context, but about denying the reality of such a self”.

Buddhist practices such as visualization, and ideas such as right view, can assist us in harnessing the ego, transcending culture itself, and realizing that we are all part of one living, spiritual being. There are multiple ways of being attentive to the sacredness of life and planet. My own subjective path was accelerated in several ways. Authors, such as David Abram’s beautiful use of the written word guided me to re-enchant my experience of the world. Plant medicine and cultural immersion in communities inhabiting and guarding the Amazon have unlocked and softened some of my most entrenched cultural boundaries and ego. Yoga training in India, and the easier connection with wild animals there, pushed me towards a more meaningful embodiment of the world’s integral magic. A Vipassana retreat, the pandemic years, starting to grow my own food, adopting a pet, and imbuing my days with a more meditative stance have all raised my awareness about the deep presence of current experience. Through this chain of events I have started a path towards deflating my ego-system, softening my cultural boundaries, and paying more attention to the reciprocal relations that sustain Life and Spirit. The most recent episode in my open-ended process of re-connecting consisted of a vision quest ceremony in my indigenous forests near Barcelona. Confronting the fears of spending a night alone and unprotected yielded to an embodied sense of wholeness and reciprocity with all life that I could have only barely hypothesized a decade ago. Words cannot adequately portray this “vision” of connection, but it is within everyone’s reach, and it has changed the way I see myself, the planet, and other selves. The challenge is to keep the vision alive while operating within egocentrically unbalanced social systems.

Facing Current Existential Crises Through Reciprocity

Reciprocity is an antidote to global crises rather than a solution. The world is not a problem, but a living being in distress. Building reciprocity addresses the roots of the distress, which Otto Scharmer characterizes in terms of
three big divides: social (self/other), spiritual (self/Self), and ecological (self/nature). The three existential moves of the reciprocity-building wheel proposed here aim toward bridging these big divides, and can be enacted in many ways. Several Indigenous and Buddhist practices can inspire these enactments, but there are many other helpful practices—quantum approaches, non-duality, transdisciplinarity, or Sufism, to mention just a few—that could not be explored in this essay.

Reciprocity deficits have also hindered some nations’ and our global response to COVID-19. Facing otherness, particularly in multi-cultural countries like the U.S. and Brazil, would have resulted in coordinated responses that were in touch with the diversity of realities on the ground. Technocracies have failed to account for structural social and racial divisions within, and between, countries, thus producing asynchronous responses that have worsened inequalities. Uncapable of facing ourselves, many people across the planet and their institutions resorted to old images and stories that reduce the pandemic to a sanitary problem, and were unable to see the existential roots through which current global crises unfold. While myopic responses, such as vaccines or green technologies, are useful and necessary in the short-term, they do little to address root causes. Unable to overcome the possessive individualism that supports modern capitalist cultures, the pandemic has unveiled the problems of our atomistic views of the individual that hinders responses based on solidarity, selfless sacrifice, working towards the common good, and taking responsibility for others and the planet.

Modern and post-modern cultures have failed for decades to respond to global environmental change, which is a much harder test, on an even larger scale and with higher stakes than the pandemic. The wildfires that have engulfed the Amazon, Australia, the northern Mediterranean shores, Siberia, and the U.S. west, should, at the very least, act as a wake-up call, but: Is it too late? The inability of wealthy societies to adequately respond to COVID-19 indicates that just improving our capacity to materially respond to climate change may not be enough. Even the best technical response will likely be dramatically insufficient. We will need to avert it, but the paradox is that our most powerful tool to avoid climate change is to use its most dramatic effects as levers to push us away from our hubris and narcissistic excesses.

Humans would do well to start treating these global crises as fundamentally existential—not climatic or sanitary—and as a creation of Euro-centric culture and institutions (through colonialism, modernity, and capitalism, but also through techno-scientific culture). Science, as we know it, is part of the problem and cannot become part of the solution unless we decolonize it and transform it into a transdisciplinary endeavor in which diverse ways of know-
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...ing and levels of reality (i.e., ontologies) are embraced as equally valid on their own terms. The ultimate questions are: What do these crises can do to help us change? And how can we use these crises to reduce our deficit of reciprocity and build a global culture organized towards, and around, mutually beneficial relations?

My mother-in-law tells us that, in her native Uganda, when someone died, a relative would explain what had happened to the banana plantation formerly tended by the deceased. The relative would talk to some trees and ask them to pass the word to the rest. They would also explain that leaves would be collected to cook special food in honor of the departed. It was said that failing to engage in this ceremony resulted in loss of crops in subsequent years as plants, too, need to mourn.

From a colonized mind, deficient in reciprocity, it is easy to disregard this ancestral practice of talking to the plants as superstitious and out of touch with “reality.” A colonized mind under decolonial recovery may display sensitivity towards Indigenous knowledges, but still look for the “rational” explanation behind the Baganda practice, even arguing that it plays a key “real” social function in these communities. This patronizing attitude seeks to be inclusive, but still reduces (or collapses) cultural diversity into the rational-empirical model of reality. It attempts at reciprocating with the other, but in truth it is just a hidden move towards making it knowable to the modern mind, thus leaving little room for otherness.

At a higher degree of reciprocity and more advanced stage of decolonization, one may accept that plants actually “feel” the farmer’s absence and that the lack of proper mourning may, via non-empirical processes unknowable to the intellect, end up diminishing crop yields. The colonized mind could still resist and hold its ground by arguing that the material effects of “hurting vegetation’s feelings” can nevertheless be rendered irrelevant through modern agriculture techniques. However, our concurrent global crises suggest that, in the long run, failure to listen and reciprocate will eventually backfire in one way or another. If so, then the challenge of this century is clear: we need to re-enchant the world through re-establishing cultures of reciprocity that are sensitive to the needs of non-humans, and all the mysteries that we cannot fully grasp intellectually. For instance, Indigenous people from Colombia told me that one of the main roles of their leaders is to talk to the climate. They have done that over many generations, but our global leaders are not listening or talking to the climate and this is creating an imbalance and a dangerous situation for all.

Crisis can foster radical transformations when societies are capable of embracing fear and listening to what the crises have to say about our collective condition. Black Lives Matter, one of the largest movements in recent U.S. his-
tory, is a form of societal feedback regarding centuries of anti-Black racism and brutality. But the dire need for reciprocity will go unnoticed if governments and corporations are more effective at exploiting fear than people are at metabolizing it individually and collectively. The deployment and normalization of surveillance and tracking technologies during the pandemic, for example, has been paired with militarized machinery and used against civilian protesters under the pretense of keeping us safe from imagined threats. Centuries of suppressing reciprocity has allowed Western techno-scientific culture to colonize and assimilate others, to the point of nearly eliminating “otherness” altogether. Pathological reductionism has impoverished the human condition, eliminated hundreds of languages, erased entire knowledges systems, and radically reduced planetary diversity.

COVID-19 has forced many people to take a deep breath and momentarily slow down the treadmill of consumerism and capitalistic self-exploitation; others, meanwhile, were immobilized by disease or stuck at the frontline of the frantic fight against the virus. The mere act of slowing down is a radical action in our modern “burnout society;” where so many define themselves in terms of external achievements and socio-economic success. Countless people have become human projects, entrepreneurs of their selves, achievement subjects, but the images and stories so meticulously put together; the all-inclusive curriculums and fantastic biographies, are now scrutinized under the new perspectives that this pandemic has brought. Now it is time to start listening to, and feeling, Life and Spirit again, before the tweeting and re-tweeting of our own mental chatter deafens us completely and forever.

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eco-centric and kin-centric economies towards global sustainability.

NOTES

1. Cree speaker (attributed to Chief Dan George of the Tsleil-Waututh Nation).
13. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, *Smile at Fear*
18. Pema Chödrön, *The Wisdom of no Escape and the Path of Loving-Kindness* (Boston: Sham-
bhala Publications, 2010).
37. Thich Nhat Hanh et al., *Spiritual Ecology*.
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