

RECIPROCITY?

“To us,” Heather McGregor and Michael Marker begin, “decolonizing refers to ongoing processes of coming to know the ways that colonizing relations have shaped the conditions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous lives and relationships to land in the present.”¹ Such “knowing must be accompanied by actions to account for those conditions, actions that seek ethical relationality and re-center the interests of Indigenous peoples.”² They “believe that research, and its methodologies, require decolonizing, and can potentially contribute to decolonizing within and outside of academic institutions.”³

Referencing Verna J. Kirkness and Ray Barnhardt’s “First Nations and Higher Education: The Four R’s—Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, Responsibility,” McGregor and Marker focus on “reciprocity,” wondering “what a commitment to reciprocity in decolonizing research methodologies implies for researchers.”⁴ The promise of reciprocity is that might promote “greater equilibrium and congruence between researchers affiliated with the academy and their research participants, often affiliated with the community—recognizing there are many variations within, between, and beyond these categories.”⁵ The reality, however, is that “despite this proliferation we remain cognizant that Indigenous peoples are still highlighting that what is often produced by research—putting it generally—is incongruence and disequilibrium.”⁶ McGregor and Marker “summarize four dimensions of reciprocity, finding resonance with the conceptualization of reciprocity as a ‘stance’⁷ taken throughout a research journey, rather than being achieved through any particular method.”⁸

One dimension of reciprocity is “the obligation to give something back in return for gifts received,” a conception that “led us to wonder whether it is being simplified and conflated with Western notions of compensation or one-to-one, ‘fair’ exchange.⁹ Such “value systems emphasizing work and exchange ... have proven toxic to Indigenous economies and ecologies,” so McGregor and Marker ask: “is this interpretation detrimental to other forms of reciprocity?”¹⁰

They note, for example, that “reciprocity may be pursued in transactions with participants, sometimes after the research is completed (i.e. the ‘give back’), but end up hidden to those who later read the resulting research.”¹¹ Or “reciprocity may be pursued through guiding concepts and decisions in the theoretical and methodological design phases of research, and yet end up hidden to participants directly affected.”¹² They note that not “all research has human participants—historical research based on archival or documentary sources may be designed with reciprocity in mind, or research may pursue reciprocity with the land ... or other beings.”¹³ They worry that the “Indigenous conceptualization of reciprocity may be subject to processes by which deep and complex thoughts rooted in paradigms that differ significantly from the culture of the university, are simplified, essentialized, sedimented or conflated.”¹⁴

McGregor and Marker reference Margaret Kovach, who “describes reciprocity as inseparable from responsibility and respect,” who asserts that seeking knowledge “ought not to be extractive but reciprocal, to ensure an ecological and cosmological balance,” providing strategies to facilitate “giving back,” pointing out that “[h]aving a pre-existing and ongoing relationship with participants is an accepted characteristic of research according to tribal paradigms,” practices of “critically reflective self-location” that can “keep us aware of the power dynamic flowing back and forth between researcher and participant.”¹⁵ Even choosing a topic or determining the purpose of proposed research should reflect the individual researcher’s capacity to give back and assist the people studied.¹⁶

Referencing Jo-Ann Archibald, who depicts reciprocity in terms of the “hands back, hands forward” teaching she received from Musqueam Elder Dr. Vincent Stogan, McGregor and Marker characterize reciprocity as signifying “a cyclical and circulating responsibility to teach what one has learned, passing on knowledge between generations.”¹⁷ To receive teachings, and pass them forward, still referencing Archibald, one must be culturally and holistically “ready,” or “worthy,” “to fully absorb cultural knowledge.”¹⁸ For Archibald, they report, such a concept of sharing knowledge constitutes a principle of reciprocity.¹⁹

Then McGregor and Marker reference Shawn Wilson’s insistence that “relationship precedes, and forms, both self and research,” implying – Wilson drawing here on Cora Weber-Pillwax – that “reciprocity is more than the giving of a gift.”²⁰ For Wilson, respect, reciprocity and relationality imply “relational accountability.”²¹ “Relational accountability means that researchers consider their relations in choosing topics to research, in the methods used to collect data/build relationships, in how analysis is carried out, and finally in the way outcomes of the research are presented.”²² As participants accountable to researchers?

Next McGregor Marker reference Rauna Kuokkanen²³ who regards “Western ideas about reciprocity” as “predicated on the binary of exchange,” reciprocity driven “by individual self-interest, and the ethos that it is ultimately undesirable to be dependent on or responsible to others.”²⁴ Kuokkanen presents Indigenous views of reciprocity as “circular,” meaning that “reciprocity is not for the accumulation of gifts or assurance of counter-gifts later on, as in the modern economy, but rather to keep gifts circulating, to ‘actively acknowledge kinship and coexistence with the world.’”²⁵

McGregor and Marker recall that Kuokkanen positions “the principle of giving back through research” as “now part of the broader decolonizing movement,” which means: “taking the concerns of the community into account when formulating a research agenda, reporting back, sharing the benefits, and bringing new knowledge or vital information to the community.”²⁶ They quote Kuokkanen: “This kind of reciprocity implies *response-ability*—that is, an ability to respond, to remain attuned to the world beyond oneself, as well as willingness to recognize its existence through the giving of gifts.”²⁷ For Kuokkanen reciprocity means more than considering “one

researcher's agenda in relation to their participants," it also affirms "a willingness to contribute to changing what it means to participate in the university and in research altogether."²⁸ Then McGregor and Marker reference Kuokkanen's acknowledgement such conceptions of "gifts" can produce ambivalence," can even be interpreted as a form of threat," especially if they are understood to "undermine prevailing modernist-capitalist economic creeds."²⁹ Kuokkanen's specific target, however, is the university, an institution she seems sure when be transformed by bringing differing notions of reciprocity into it. the university, in service to the project of transforming the university itself, such reciprocity "predicated on recognition and response-ability."³⁰ Recognition implies "epistemic recognition ... something that Indigenous peoples have not fully received from the university," meaning that "processes of reciprocity and decolonizing, then, are deeply intertwined."³¹

"[I]ndigenous reciprocities," McGregor and Marker assert, "are fundamentally metaphysical ... not restricted to the human, but rather acknowledge and enact exchange with the more-than-human,"³² an assertion concurring with the creeds of monotheistic religions everywhere, although apparently "reciprocity in Indigenous methodologies takes a different tenor because of its cosmological connotation, concerned with maintaining balance not just between humans, but with energies that connect and thread through all entities in the universe,"³³ an idea also associated with "new age" spirituality,³⁴ a phenomenon critiqued (and to my mind inadvertently if indirectly endorsed) by many, including the social theorist Philip Wexler.³⁵

For the Indigenous, McGregor and Marker continue, reciprocity is "a disposition and as a practice, rather than a contractual arrangement."³⁶ They quote Trainor and Bouchard, who depict reciprocity as "an ethical stance, rather than a simplistic exchange of goods or tolerance."³⁷ The concept of "stance" is "more holistic than any one method," meaning that "it is important to describe in detail, and *without smoothing out the complexity*, how relationships contribute to a research study."³⁸ Trainor and Bouchard place emphasis on researchers interrogating their "biases and assumptions, finding creative spaces to hold conflict, honoring the contributions of participants in personal ways, and becoming available and vulnerable to participants in research."³⁹

For McGregor and Marker, the "expanding understanding of reciprocity we are generating here moves from thinking of reciprocity as a concept to which methods can be matched, to thinking of it as the stance ... the researcher takes, over and over throughout a journey," stance "comprised of four dimensions, all of which must be interpreted and adapted to fit local conditions."⁴⁰ These include:

- 1) recognizing relationships that make research possible at a particular time and place through offering gifts that have meaning or purpose; 2) participating in local ways of teaching, circulating or sharing knowledge, and preparing oneself accordingly; 3) enacting response-ability toward others through continuous practices of openness, recognition and negotiation without closure; and 4)

pursuing a stance of reciprocity even while maintaining an awareness of its tenuousness—that a gift will be interpreted as a threat, that a gift will not be accepted, or that a gift will not be enough. Perhaps we might think of reciprocity as a journey, and not a fixed point on a map.⁴¹

These would seem to challenge the intellectual independence of the researcher, but McGregor and Marker appear to leave some wiggle room for the researcher when they write: “Taking a stance of reciprocity, the researcher negotiates the participants’ visions and dreams for the research as much as they do their own.”⁴² I am focused on the verb “negotiates” which the Cambridge Dictionary defines as having “formal discussions with someone in order to reach an agreement with them,” as the “government has refused to negotiate with the strikers,” or “I’m negotiating for a new contract,” or “I’ve managed to negotiate a five percent increase with my boss.”⁴³ There come those “modernist-capitalist economic creeds” again.

McGregor and Marker don’t define “negotiates” that way. Apparently, negotiation in an Indigenous sense implies “keeping one’s eyes and spirit open to the connections to be made, remade, unmade, and not made,” a stance “makes researchers vulnerable”⁴⁴ - but apparently not those they are studying. But, McGregor and Marker caution, not being vulnerable makes researchers even “more vulnerable.”⁴⁵ They conclude: “Perhaps undertaking decolonizing research with a commitment to reciprocity should be understood as the sensing and witnessing of a path through dense spaces; let it be a path that is more creative and more intimate than the paths laid out before.”⁴⁶ Those “dense spaces” would seem to be structured by shards of cultural incommensurability, not cultural negotiation, at least not in any non-Indigenous sense.

McGregor and Marker conclude that “the decolonizing researcher concerned with reciprocity might find that the directives of their university ethics review board contradict the stated interests or protocols of the community,” as “they might find that it is not the right time in the community, politically or otherwise, for the research they have in mind,” and, moreover, “they might find that they cannot fulfill the relationship-building expectations of the Elders, or the participants they have in mind are too busy for research,” deciding “it is best not to proceed, rather best to pull back and conduct research drawing on existing resources, such as documents or archived materials,” discovering “that *they* must change, rather than ask more of others.”⁴⁷

Anton Birioukov-Brant – the research assistant who provided the passages I quote here – notes, in his commentary, that

McGregor and Marker move away from Western notions of reciprocity – which frames it as a gift, or perhaps more accurately a token of appreciation; in other words, an exchange of goods for services rendered – to a more holistic framing, or stance, of being reciprocal. Although not articulated as such, there appears to be an encouragement of decentering the research, and arguably the researcher, as the focal point of the academic research endeavour. Rather, McGregor and Marker argue that researchers must be self-reflexive in analyzing

their motives in carrying out the research, and the impact said research will have on the community, thereby making the community the focal point. Thus, reciprocity moves from a verb (i.e., something we do) to an adjective (i.e., something we are).

That “something we are” would seem to be servants of “the community,” a subject position that risks undermining, if not erasing altogether, the intellectual independence of the researcher. Reciprocity in this sense would seem to be not reciprocity at all.

REFERENCES

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ENDNOTES

¹ 2018, 318.

² Ibid. McGregor and Marker reference Dwayne Donald in regard to “ethical relationality.” See RB#93 and index for additional Dwayne Donald references.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Quoted in 2018, 318.

⁸ 2018, 318

⁹ 2018, 320.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ 2018, 321.

¹⁵ Quoted passages in 2018, 321-322.

¹⁶ See 2018, 322.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Quoted in 2018, 322.

¹⁹ 2018, 322.

²⁰ Quoted in 2018, 322.

²¹ Ibid.

²² 2018, 322. Academic freedom – admittedly often an only aspirational ideal – requires deemphasizing if not ignoring altogether “relationships.” Carried to extreme, positioning relationships first implies corruption.

²³ See RB#4.

²⁴ 2018, 322.

²⁵ Quoted in 2018, 322.

²⁶ 2018, 323.

²⁷ Quoted in 2018, 323.

²⁸ 2018, 323. Is Kuokkanen implying here that her scholarship – cited approvingly by McGregor and Marker - would become somehow in appropriate if she herself changed “what it means to participate in the university and in research altogether”? Without teaching, scholarship, and service what, I wonder, would faculty do?

²⁹ 2018, 323. Of course, Indigenous conceptions are hardly the only ones to “undermine prevailing modernist-capitalist economic creeds.” Never mind Marx, the Canadian public pedagogue George Grant undermined such “creeds” constantly during his legendary career: Pinar 2019.

³⁰ 2018, 323. Kuokkanen’s complaint about “epistemic recognition” recalls Paraskeva’s more radical – I’d say sensationalistic - claims of “epistemicide.” See Paraskeva 2011, 2016.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/New-Age-movement>

³⁵ Wexler 1996, 2013.

³⁶ 2018, 323. These are hardly mutually exclusive.

³⁷ Quoted in 2018, 324.

³⁸ 2018, 324.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ 2018, 325.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/negotiate>

⁴⁴ 2018, 325.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ 2018, 325-326.