

# Haunting Modernity

Vanessa Machado  
de Oliveira

"This is a book  
about breaking spells.  
And not just the  
obvious kind, but the  
grievously impacted,  
deep-in-the-psyche  
variety."

—Martin Shaw,  
author of *Courting  
the Wild Twin*

Facing Humanity's Wrongs  
and the Implications for  
Social Activism

# CONTENTS

<i>Preface: My Grandmothers' Gifts</i> . . . . .	xiii
--	------

## PART 1: *Warm-up / Prep Work*

Warm-up: Into the Future . . . . .	3
Prep Work 1: Who the Heck Is Modernity? . . . . .	15
Prep Work 2: Why Read (or Not) This Book . . . . .	29
Prep Work 3: The Most Important Chapter . . . . .	41

## PART 2: *Hospicing Modernity*

1 A Single Story of "Forward" . . . . .	65
2 Mapping Horizons of Possibility . . . . .	87
3 The House of Modernity. . . . .	105
4 Faster than Thought . . . . .	121
5 Surrendering Arrogance . . . . .	141
6 Getting to Zero . . . . .	163
7 Living and Dying Well. . . . .	187
8 Returning Home . . . . .	201
9 There Is No Away. . . . .	215
10 As Things Fall Apart . . . . .	233
<i>Notes</i> . . . . .	251
<i>Index</i> . . . . .	261
<i>Acknowledgments</i> . . . . .	271
<i>About the Author</i> . . . . .	275

# PRAISE FOR *HOSPICING MODERNITY*

“Beyond a mere critique of modernity, this is a book written for us as people who struggle with the everyday manifestations of modern power. Clear, creative, and cogent, the work offers cutting-edge philosophy at the same time that it furnishes usable guidance for how to cope with the coming perils of colonialism and capitalism. It’s a book for the future, yet written to meet us where we are at right now as individuals living with trauma and facing ethical dilemmas about what it means to take meaningful actions under conditions of complexity.”

—KYLE WHYTE, PhD, George Willis Pack Professor of Environment and Sustainability at the University of Michigan

“Asking the question ‘What if racism, colonialism, and all other forms of toxic and contagious divisions are preventable social diseases?’, *Hospicing Modernity* invites its reader to dare and educate themselves by undergoing a process of self-unmaking. Drawing on and moving beyond traditions of radical pedagogy, such as those inspired by Paulo Freire, Vanessa Machado de Oliveira has created a powerful tool for uncovering, undoing, and recovering from the deadly ways in which modernity also lives and dies as humans experience it subjectively.”

—DENISE FERREIRA DA SILVA, PhD, professor at the University of British Columbia Social Justice Institute and author of *Toward a Global Idea of Race* and *Unpayable Debt*

“This book is rude. Like the shaman’s confident cackle. Like the punch of an elder whose eyes shimmer with a secret. Like a trickster’s feverish dance to a drumbeat in a time supposedly passed. And right there—my fellow modern citizen—right there, in the author’s cosmological rudeness, lies her deepest medicine. Her generous gift to the need to upset the terraforming coloniality of white modernity. Navigating her rigorous work is an exercise in defamiliarizing modernity as the air we breathe, the site of our persistent illnesses, and the earthly thing that can give way to something else. It is time to gather. We can start here, together.”

—BAYO AKOMOLAFE, PhD, author of *These Wilds Beyond our Fences*

“This is not an ordinary book and it may not be for everyone: it is a thought experiment that skillfully and creatively creates conditions for us to shed our arrogance and to get our proverbial shit together. The author puts it beautifully but bluntly: she lovingly does not care about ‘what’ you think: your delusions of ends and means and your sense of self-importance are part of the problem. The book is about the necessary expansion of our capacity for dealing with difficult and painful things, to sit in complexity and uncertainty, to show up to difficult conversations and to exist differently and, put frankly, to grow up. It does not matter if you agree or not with the premise that modernity is dying and in need of ‘hospicing.’ If you take it hypothetically, and engage with the exercises, you will be a more decent human being as a result of reading this book. If what the author is saying resonates, if you are ready to do this difficult work, get over yourself and read it, for the sake of the people around you, and of the planet.”

—DAN MCCARTHY, PhD, director of the University of Waterloo Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience (WISIR)

“This is not a book to be picked up lightly. Vanessa Machado de Oliveira is carrying stories that will do things with you. Her book will change you, if you let it. There’s strong medicine here, badly needed. There are clues to how we find the paths that lead to the unknown world ahead, beyond the end of the world as we know it.”

—DOUGALD HINE, cofounder of the Dark Mountain Project  
and A School Called HOME

“This is a book about breaking spells. And not just the obvious kind, but the grievously impacted, deep-in-the-psyche variety. Important and powerful, *Hospicing Modernity* diligently tracks a complex word—modernity—through the bewildering forest of our times. Variety of approach is part of its effectiveness: intelligence and instinct form a weave rather than a stand off, and underneath it all is Machado De Oliveira’s tracking of stories that make a world, not just describe a world. That’s a very beautiful, very subtle distinction. And once you see it, you can’t un-see it.

This is not a book to promote comfort, but to seek shelter. Admirably pragmatic, it guides us away from conceptual sedatives into much livelier, sophisticated ground. The primordial shelter of stories both personal and mythic, that humbly suggest we have work to do. Stories that dare to be teachings, that have the perfume of a wider earth infused within them. Colonial intent doesn’t go away with pulling down a few statues, its primary habitation is the unconscious. Machado De Oliveira’s book challenges us to get conscious. Not in an inhibited, neurotic fashion, but with an artful gaze, with grit, a little playfulness.

Vanessa Machado De Oliveira’s a real storyteller, and that’s a praise word where I come from. *Hospicing Modernity* is a troubling gift in a big cultural moment, and I’m delighted to have encountered it. It seems alive, crawling around my desk, hooting at the moon.”

—MARTIN SHAW, PhD, author of *Courting the Wild Twin*



“This is an outstanding book—truly original and profoundly perceptive in its contents and arguments, and multi-modal in its pedagogic approach. It examines a range of urgent philosophical issues about modernity and its deep contradictions, and the ways in which its inevitable demise might be steered towards more morally and culturally productive futures. It is a book that is not only thought provoking but also helpful in guiding genuinely worthwhile discussions.”

—FAZAL RIZVI, PhD, Emeritus Professor, University of Melbourne, and University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

“Vulnerability is the new spice of life, and nowhere does it take centre stage more than in Machado De Oliveira’s book. Here, we see fallability being repositioned as a virtue: it should never have been set aside! In a suite of stories, informed in part by Indigenous thinking, Machado De Oliveira ruptures certainty with the void that many Indigenous peoples have recognized for millennia, pushing the reader over the edge into mocking darkness. The reader (and the world at large) must now make a choice: does our agency lie in tentatively plaiting the gloom we’re in, to make sense of our predicament and to try and grapple with it, or do we default to the brilliant intellect and its offer of comfortable certainty? Machado De Oliveira has established that we need to do the former and, with the telling of fragility, she promotes a new strength through mystery. Beware, though: this is not a book for the faint-hearted. Be prepared to be confronted by the world—don’t expect to have it nicely served up. The work she calls for is difficult, but ultimately it is the world that is at stake.”

—CARL MIKA, PhD, director of the Centre for Global Studies at the University of Waikato and author of *Indigenous Education and the Metaphysics of Presence*

## *Prep Work 2*

# WHY READ (OR NOT) THIS BOOK

The stories, tools, and exercises in this book invite you to witness and offer palliative care to modernity dying within and around you. The stories relate to modernity as a living entity with many facets, a complex adaptive system. They tell a tale of how modernity's desires to conquer and engineer the world on its terms have given us remarkable gifts while also causing unimaginable suffering and destruction.

It is important to say that this book is not about fixing, rejecting, destroying, replacing, or transcending modernity—these desires are part of modernity (and are also faster than thought!). Instead, the stories invite you to sit with a quickly aging modernity as it approaches and resists its own death. You will be invited to offer modernity compassionate assistance while bearing witness to how it grapples with its own life story. This invitation can enable you to learn from modernity's passions, promises, failures, fantasies, betrayals, and brokenness—all without drama or sentimentalism. Once we can process all of these difficult lessons, they become part and parcel of modernity's gifts.

Thus, this book is about honoring the gifts of modernity by offering readers strategies to process their challenging teachings. The stories, tools, and

exercises intend to help modernity die with integrity, having taught the lessons it came to teach and having made peace with its own mortality. However, because hospicing involves modernity dying within and around us, this can be a difficult, painful, disorienting, and destabilizing process, which may or may not be what you need in your life right now (or at all).

Those who will benefit most from this book are already wrestling with the complexities of a *dis-eased* modernity, those who have already noticed that what worked before is no longer working, those who have arrived at a place where they do not know what to do. Conversely, those who are heavily invested in celebrating modernity or believe they have the answers as to how to fix or replace modernity may find this book challenging, and perhaps even damaging. I feel that my responsibility in this chapter is to give you as much warning as possible about the risks of reading this book so that you can decide for yourself whether it is the right book for you; and if it is, whether this is the right time for you to read it.

## Different Readers, Different Responses

This is a book about hospicing modernity, but modernity itself conditions us to resist accepting its death. Before we know it (literally), modernity's desires for universal formulas, consensual definitions, creative solutions, and hopeful futures can hijack our attempts to grapple with the complexities of its own dying. In this sense, it may be useful to evoke a distinction between *problems* (things that can actually or potentially be fixed) and *predicaments* (things that must constantly be dealt with, won't be solved, and won't go away). There is also a difference between something *complicated* that can be sorted with careful planning or engineering (e.g., a long car trip with toddlers) and something *complex* that is moving, multidimensional, and largely unruly, unmanageable, and unpredictable (e.g., raising children).

Modernity's violence and unsustainability are usually interpreted within modernity as *complicated problems* that can be solved rather than *complex predicaments* that need to be confronted. This prevalent pattern of addressing the violence and unsustainability of modernity as complicated problems has major real-life implications. For example, a substantial amount of time and resources are invested in addressing the symptoms of violence and



unsustainability rather than their root causes. And even when we look at the root causes, we try to manage them as problems rather than engage with them as complex predicaments.

This problem-solving compulsion also has serious implications as to how this book will be read by different people. From the outset, I must warn those readers seeking universal formulas, consensual definitions, hopeful alternatives, heroic role models, or revolutionary manifestos that this book could either be unbearably frustrating or perhaps open up a whole new world of possibilities.

For some readers, engaging with this book may be occasionally irritating, overwhelming, and discombobulating. In such cases, common responses may include defensiveness, deflection, and resistance. These conditioned responses are caused by unconscious affective feedback loops and emotional forecasts wherein people predict and then try to avoid feelings of embarrassment, shame, guilt, worthlessness, or powerlessness. Unfortunately, in order to disarm these affective land mines, we must seek them out—and risk them exploding as we walk; it is understandable why people may try to avoid that. However, this book can help you hold space for these responses from a more resilient and stable head/heart space.

Although unpleasant responses can teach people when they surface, they are not generative if people get stuck or trapped in them. Therefore, you will be offered strategies on how to move through a wide range of affective states. These strategies will eventually also help you develop the capacity to map your affective landscape and its potholes, ditches, and land mines. Once you have a better affective map, it should be much easier to avoid getting stuck. However, in order to map the location of a ditch, you need to get very close to it. To support you in getting closer to the ditches without falling in, you will also be offered tools to help interrupt the fear of approaching that edge and also to help you get out if you fall into a ditch. Initially, this will be challenging and uncomfortable, but with new tools, practice, discipline, and patience you should be able to get through the process.

Readers who have faith in modernity and want to protect it from dying will probably be annoyed, irritated, or outraged by the text. To them, it may seem like this book is actually trying to kill or to destroy modernity by announcing its death—something no book can do. Some readers will read

this book selectively, looking to consume what fits their agendas and discard what does not. Some will look for something or someone to disagree with, and still others will respond to the book with anger and righteous indignation. Unfortunately, this is probably inevitable in these polarizing times of late modernity.

Readers who seek universal meanings and definitions, and neurodiverse readers who feel destabilized by paradoxes, uncertainty, and ambivalence, may feel disturbed by the unconventional use of pedagogy and language in this book. There is not much I can do about that other than tell them not to read the book. Please take this warning seriously. People can be damaged by what they don't want or are not able to hear, and it is not my intention to do that to anyone. The choice to proceed—or not—is always yours.

I have attempted to map five general profiles of readers, based on how they may relate to modernity. This map is offered as a thought experiment designed to surface affective responses of resistance to what this book has to offer. The profiles are not exhaustive—many more profiles could be added. Readers who find themselves resonating with assumptions and investments listed in this map will likely express a dismissive reaction to at least some aspects of this book. This may or may not dissipate if they choose to read the rest of it. I invite you to use the exercise as a way to decide whether this book is for you.

### Exercise

You are invited to assess to what extent you align or identify with the assumptions and investments presented in the general profiles described below. You might see yourself in multiple profiles, but the key is to try to be honest with yourself regarding the gaps between where you see yourself and where you actually are, and also between how you see yourself and how others see you. Try to do this with humor and compassion; don't take it too seriously. Consider this an exercise in learning to map your own affective landscape. If you disidentify strongly with or feel deeply offended by any of the descriptors, this may be an affective land mine proximity alert. Pay attention and carefully map the landscape by taking a step back and observing yourself reacting without investing in the reaction itself. You are also invited to create your own profile with some of the elements listed here.

**Profile A**

This profile encompasses people enchanted by modernity and heavily invested in its continuity—in avoiding modernity's death at all costs. Those who align with this profile want to prove that modernity is the best thing that has ever happened to humanity and that there are no better alternatives, no alternatives worth considering, even no alternatives at all. Some people who identify with this profile believe that those who embody modernity and who are highly functional within it (including themselves) represent the apex of civilization and therefore should arbitrate for everyone which pathways should be pursued and which paths should not. Some believe that, in general, humans have never been healthier, wealthier, or happier. Those who associate with this profile are seeking arguments to justify the expansion of modernity; some might explain its violence and unsustainability as collateral damage; while others simply see this violence and unsustainability as lies that are part of a conspiracy theory designed to plot the destruction of modernity. Included in this general profile are those who want to save the environment by further commodifying it, and who seek arguments proposing that more modernity will solve the problems that modernity has created.

**Profile B**

This profile relates to people who are disenchanted with some aspects of modernity, but still believe modernity can be fixed so that its promises can be realized. This profile covers a wide range of perspectives, but those who tend to align with this profile think that only corrupt governments, elites, and corporations are to blame for the failures of modernity to deliver on its promises. They seek arguments that can affirm the universal fix that they have identified for it, be it policy, protest, religion, technology, population control, civil war, green deals, art, nuclear power, or any other technical or creative solution. Some people who identify with this profile believe that modernity has been derailed by capitalism and want to redirect modernity toward socialist or anarchist visions. Others promote equity, diversity, inclusion, and reconciliation so that we can all “move forward” with the project of modernity as a way of expanding access, opportunities, and social mobility to a larger group of people and realizing the dream of a universal middle class for all. People with this profile tend to demand the validation of their benevolent leadership, contribution, and agency, which tends to become an obstacle to deeper and more genuine forms of engagement with the world and other worldviews.

**Profile C**

This profile relates to people disenchanted with the aspects of modernity that have caused them harm; and they seek harm reduction, redress, and their legitimate place heading a more progressive modernity. Those who identify with this profile have been historically and systemically oppressed and feel that it is their turn to enjoy modernity's benefits (regardless of their costs). They may seek arguments that mobilize support for their preferred form of social enfranchisement. Some people who identify with this profile have been invested in critiques of modernity and see themselves as outside of it, but still unconsciously reproduce modernity's desires and modes of relationality and politics. Some seek the affirmation of their self-image as avant-garde or revolutionary. Given the multiple forms of violence inflicted upon their communities historically and systemically, many will understandably seek to mobilize critique and activism toward the pleasurable promises and entitlements of modernity as a form of compensation for past and ongoing harm.

**Profile D**

This profile relates to people who are disillusioned with many aspects of modernity and seek alternatives beyond modernity, *with guarantees*. They tend to see their chosen alternatives as outside of modernity—often not realizing how these alternatives are made possible by modernity itself, along with its entourage of violence and unsustainability. Some people who identify with this profile feel that they have already found a lifestyle that eliminates their complicity in harm and seek to boost a self-image of righteousness and virtue that is validated by people who share their beliefs. Some believe that love, oneness, or spiritual enlightenment can overcome modernity's violence and, sometimes incessantly, seek arguments that can validate their sense of innocence and purity. When faced with critique, people who identify with this profile can unleash a landslide of highly charged forms of resistance and defensiveness, especially when they have invested a lot of hope in the viability, decency, and harmlessness of their choices and self-images. In order to keep the sense of hope, faith, and belief alive, and as a form of legitimization and belonging, they need to recruit others into the same beliefs and choices.

**Profile E**

The fifth general profile relates to those who see the promises of modernity as broken, who feel shortchanged by modernity and want to force it to work for them at any cost. They feel that their freedoms and privileges are under attack and want to defend their perceived entitlements to unrestricted autonomy and self-expression—without accountability. They seek arguments that affirm their sense of victimization and they use this to legitimize aggression, scapegoating, and calls for escalating violence. They mobilize antagonism and the allure of transgression as successful means of recruitment. They feel wronged by and deeply resent the elitism of liberal meritocracies with a mix of envy and disgust, since they also perceive it as a source of constant humiliation and powerlessness. In this sense, they want not only to win power, but also to vanquish the opponent completely. They proclaim that they seek a return to traditional roles and social hierarchies perceived to be disrupted by people they view as interfering with the “natural order” of society. They also tend to seek arguments that increase their sense of self-importance and popularity on social media, with no regard to the veracity of their claims.

## What to Expect

The profiles illustrate a specific template of stories of change within modernity. These stories start with the articulation of a problem with the system that needs to be solved. The degree of the problem can vary from the system “not working optimally” to “totally damaged.” The logical solutions proposed necessarily need to keep our hopes (in the futurity of modernity) up: “we” the (virtuous, woke, righteous, deserving, or enlightened) people on the “good team” can choose to fix the system by either patching it up or offering a known replacement, a better alternative.

The analysis in this book has a different starting point. It begins with an examination of how violence and unsustainability are conditions that are necessary for modernity to exist, how we are part of modernity (and complicit in harm), and how modernity has both offered us gifts and harmed all of us. This analysis is about how modernity:

- ♦ has kept us tied and addicted to its promises and comforts;
- ♦ has limited the ways we can see, feel, relate, desire, heal, and imagine;

- ♦ has led us to deny the violence and unsustainability that are required for it to exist, as well as our interdependence and the depth and magnitude of the mess we are in;
- ♦ has encouraged us to create narcissistic delusions about our sense of self-importance and our perceived entitlements, keeping us in a fragile and immature state that leaves us unequipped to face the challenges of our times;
- ♦ has untethered us from the realities of the planet, and the fact that our mode of existence has caused the extinction of multiple species and is set to cause our own.

This analysis also emphasizes how immensely difficult (but not impossible) it is to interrupt these patterns and let go of the harmful attachments and codependence we have developed with modernity itself, so that we can learn to let it go and create space for something genuinely new to even become possible. Without this cognitive, affective, and relational clearing, we will only be able to want and imagine different versions of the same thing.

Therefore, readers who will find this book most useful are already going through disenchantments and disillusionments with multiple aspects of modernity (no one is completely disenchanted with all of it). Some of these readers may feel extremely frustrated and disheartened with self-serving, feel-good, quick-fix approaches to social and global change because they cannot ignore the complexities and paradoxes related to modernity's violence and unsustainability. However, they may feel ill-equipped to navigate these complexities and paradoxes and may find themselves immobilized without the tools for getting unstuck. They may also feel that they do not have words to describe what they are going through or a community that could relate to their struggle. Others, who may already be used to examining complicities and privilege, may be seeking new vocabularies and support to face the difficulties and failures of this kind of work.

What you can expect from this book is assistance to sit at the edge of modern modes of relating to the world; and to work through the denials of violence, unsustainability, entanglement, and the depth of the challenges we face—understanding that modernity rewards upholding these denials. You will be taught some of the acrobatic steps needed when learning to walk on



a tightrope between projective (naive/delusional) hope and projective (nihilistic, hedonistic, or misanthropic) hopelessness, but it is you who must ultimately find the balance. This book is about rescuing hope from the cages of projections into the future and enabling it to weave relationships and movements in the present—the very texture that futures are made of. Whatever happens “then” depends more on the quality of relationships in the “now” than on the accuracy or appeal of images of the future that one projects as a way forward.

The stories and exercises in this book are not trying to convince you of anything. They are neither descriptive nor prescriptive; they may be better described as provocative and integrative. They seek to create some generative chaos in your existence in order to make you somewhat uncomfortable and activate learning in your “stretch zone.” These stories seek to move you from a state where you may be stuck within modernity’s cognitive, affective, and relational structures toward other possibilities, but they do not seek to determine the form or format of these possibilities for you. Furthermore, these stories are not intended to convince you to leave modernity or to “trash” modernity’s structures, but rather to help you grapple with the limits of these structures and how they are gradually becoming obsolete, and to take account of the often invisibilized costs of sustaining them.

If you find yourself wondering, “What political or ideological position does this book want me to align with?” The answer is, “I am not asking you to align with anything!” I don’t know your context; I don’t know what is happening around you. All I am asking of you is to be open to a head/heart experiment. I am also not trying to please you or to play to your expectations—simply because I am not trying to recruit you for anything. The point of this book is not to gather followers. This has been tried before and has failed every time. I (lovingly) don’t care about what you think, but I care deeply about our collective capacity to dig deeper and to relate “wider.” In order to make possible deeper engagements and better relationships we will need to reactivate capacities for sensing, relating, and imagining that have been deactivated within modernity. This does not require you to abandon convictions—just the arrogance, indifference, and contempt that modernity has implanted in all of us.

Generative disenchantment and disillusionment with modernity’s modes of relationship are indispensable aspects of hospicing modernity, processing

its teachings, and composting its waste. This creates new, fertile soil for other possibilities of existence to emerge. There is a popular saying in Brazil that illustrates this insight using water, rather than soil, as a metaphor. The saying goes that in a flood situation, it is only when the water reaches people's hips that it becomes possible for them to swim. Before that, with the water at our ankles or knees, it is only possible to walk or to wade. In other words, we might only be able to learn to swim—that is, to exist differently—once we have no other choice.

People's priorities are bound to the level of water around them. As the waters rise, but have not yet reached our hips, we can prepare by learning to open ourselves to the teachings of the water, as well as the teachings of those swimming for their lives against multiple currents of colonial violence. This is the same violence that supports our comforts and securities within modernity.

This book draws on and is inspired by Indigenous teachings from communities of high-intensity struggle in what is known as Latin America and Canada, who swim against the flood of colonialism that subsidizes modernity. However, these communities are diverse and complex, and do not have answers applicable in all contexts. They cannot tell us exactly how to swim in the waters rising around us because their techniques are specific to their particular contexts. On the other hand, they do have practices that remind us that the flood is coming for us as well, that our bodies can swim, that human bodies are mostly water, that we are entangled with water as a living entity, that our existence begins in the water, and that beyond our temporal human embodiment we also *are* the water.

## Interrupting Self-Infantilization

The stories of this book heed the Indigenous insight that amongst all other animals humans are the youngest, and amongst all human cultures the modern culture is the youngest and is caught up in a loop of immature, irresponsible, and self-infantilizing behaviors. Therefore, the stories issue an invitation for modern humans to wake up, smarten up, step up, own up, clean up, grow up, and show up differently as the metabolism of the planet and humanity within it face enormous challenges.

You may find this invitation somewhat patronizing and all these explanations about what this book intends to do repetitive and unnecessary. Good! That is your first chance to turn your defensiveness and resistance into teachers showing you how unconscious investments, projections, and insecurities are socially conditioned. When this happens, it may be useful to ask, “How could the modern assumptions and colonial desires informing my reaction be restricting possibilities for me to sense, relate, and imagine otherwise?” or, in other words, “What could I be missing out on?” If you find this question irrelevant, please gift the book to someone for whom this question could be important.

Losing the satisfaction we have with self-infantilization can also be a difficult process with detrimental consequences. Imagine how you might feel when what is pleasurable and comforting for you may no longer feel appealing. Imagine no longer being able to enjoy the sense of self you previously held because it no longer offers the satisfaction you expect. Consider the effects this may have on your relationships and social circles. Despite this book trying to ground you in other forms of wellness and sources of vitality, there is a slight risk you may get stuck in a state of dissatisfaction with no way out. For some this may feel like standing at a locked gate and having nowhere left to return to.

Since most affective and relational investments are unconscious, their interruptions are extremely difficult and rare. These interruptions can also often be very painful and similar to the interruption of addictions. Think of it as a form of disenchantment and disillusionment with our known world that can happen suddenly, abruptly, and randomly; or slowly, gradually, and with assistance. If you knew that disenchantment and disillusionment with the promises of modernity were eventually inevitable, which path would you choose: sudden, abrupt, and random, or slow, gradual, and potentially assisted?

Here is the deal: this book may be able to help with the second option. The stories, tools, and exercises were designed to make it possible for you to hold disenchantment and disillusionment in a different space where modernity within and around you can die in generative ways. We can soften the crash, but not prevent it: disenchantment and disillusionment will happen, one way or another. But it is your call whether to move toward it now or not, slowly or not, with assistance or not. The book is not pushing you, either way.

However, if you do choose assistance, you must consider your side of the deal. I need you to agree (at least temporarily) to sit with the good, the bad, the beautiful, the ugly, the broken, and the messed up of humanity and modernity within and around you. I ask you to choose depth over drama, to stay with the trouble, to walk toward the storm with the stories you will dance with. I ask you to allow this book to constantly invite you to look at the world in the mirror to see what is real and not turn away. This is what “sitting with” means and it is very different from strategies to fix or save the world that promise you validation, triumph, power, and pleasure. If you are really looking for strategies that can make you feel good, look good, and move forward, and if you know that this is what you need right now, do not read this book. Seriously, put it down.

I actually feel it is my responsibility at this point to urge you not to read this book. This statement is not about whether I think the book will be useful for you—only you can decide. The statement is a way to ask you to stop and consider why you should proceed after all the warnings issued so far. Are you just curious? Do you really have an idea of what you are getting into? What if the process is costly for you? What if getting to see, sense, relate, and imagine differently has a price in your context that right now you are not aware of, and if you were, you would not be prepared to pay? What if you find motivations and responsibilities you won’t be able to ignore, but no one around you will understand you anymore? This may sound like I am being pretentious and overstating what this book can do; fair enough, you could just consume this as we are all used to, or simply ignore it. But what if the stories land where they will and manage to do the work they intended? It is your call, your responsibility. Do not put it on me. You have been warned.

If you do not agree with the premises of this book and decide not to proceed, I respect your dissent. If you decide to proceed, the next chapter will offer you seven basic indispensable tools for witnessing modernity. Yes, you will need to wait a little longer for stories and exercises, but without the tools presented next, the stories in subsequent chapters may have very little chance of landing.

## *There Is No Away*

At an Indigenous gathering in Brazil in 2010, I was told that there are three ways of imagining society: individualism, collectivism, and metabolism.<sup>1</sup> It took me several years to wrap my head around what *metabolism* meant in that comparative frame. The best definition I can offer, with the language I have—and this is my own interpretation—is to say that metabolism evokes nested systems and entities that operate in rhythms and cycles and that are constantly exchanging and processing energy and matter. In the language of modernity, seeing the planet as a metabolism can only be used as a metaphor that gestures toward something that is living, that contains us, and that has a much longer temporality than humanity. The metaphor of metabolism is an invitation to seeing everyone and everything (human, nonhuman, seen, unseen, known, unknown, and unknowable) as *nested* living entities engaged in nonlinear movement, in nonlinear time.

Some people now talk about a “metabolic turn”<sup>2</sup> in the sciences, where a mechanistic view of human and nonhuman bodies is being slowly replaced by a more organic and dynamic image of entangled shape-shifting matter. However, unlike the scientists that are now paying more attention to metabolic processes, the way I use the word *metabolism* here is not representing something that humans (who are a small part of a greater metabolic entity) can fathom. In this sense, metabolism has its own bio-metaphysical intelligence,

authority, and autonomy that are integrated with, but much larger than human intelligence, authority, and autonomy.

However, for many Indigenous people, the reality of metabolism (whether they use this word for it) is not a concept or a metaphor—it is a “thing thing-ing” and we are part of it. Through the sensibility of separability that has been imposed by modernity, it is still very difficult to fathom what relating to the world as a metabolism beyond concepts and metaphor feels, tastes, and looks like. We have lost the metabolic literacies necessary to notice and sense how we are entangled with everything else. Modernity has vigorously attempted to eliminate these literacies and it actively selects against them: people who choose to hold on to these ancestral literacies tend to disidentify with (or reject) the metropolitan consumerist individualism that is necessary for social mobility. Thus, these literacies are exiled from the house of modernity.

I have had many teachers of metabolic literacies, but the most impactful one has been Mama Maria Jara Qquerar. As part of my attempts to learn about my Indigenous grandmother’s history, twenty years ago I went to Valle Sagrado (Sacred Valley) in Peru to search for relatives. I could not find them there, but I got lost and was found (literally) by a Quechua family who since then became part of my own. For the past two decades, through regular visits, we have supported each other as life unfolded in each context. Mama Maria, the matriarch, took my son in when he needed support in his teenage years. He is *our* son now.

I have witnessed with awe and been inspired by her work. She is a force of nature who does not stop for a second. She is relentless in her commitment to the health and well-being of everything and everyone around her. She hates being seen as a guru because her practice and teachings are about staying humble and about accountability. Mama Maria is like all of us: she is an imperfect human being who makes mistakes and needs good friends to call her out sometimes. It took me fifteen years and a lot of mileage on the road together for me to do that for the first time. There are numerous stories I could tell about what we have lived together, but I chose those that taught me the most about metabolism.

## Toilet Protocols

Mama Maria’s place in Pincheq, near Pisac is a piece of land at the top of a steep hill. When I met her twenty years ago, it had three small adobe buildings. The



one with the thatched roof was the kitchen, and it had been built by her great-grandma a hundred years before. The other two buildings, with tin roofs, were small bedrooms that also worked as living areas. There was no toilet on site. None. When I visited, she would insist that I take one of the two adobe tin-roofed buildings for the length of my stay, while the rest of the family (five people, including small children) would sleep in the other building. I always felt embarrassed to take up so much space and tried to argue my way out of it, but there is no arguing about hospitality with Mama Maria!

Another thing that made me really uncomfortable in the beginning was the toilet protocol. Every night, Mama Maria would bring a bucket to my door with a huge smile on her face. In the morning, I was expected to hand her back the bucket with liquids and solids inside. I am convinced the huge smile was there to disarm me—she knew I would try to resist letting go of my bucket and she was ready to gracefully and humorously stand her ground. The first time she came for my bucket in the morning, I refused to hand it in. She insisted. I felt really attached to my bucket. I hugged it close and told her that I would dispose of the contents myself. She wouldn't have me do that. She explained to me that I would not know what to do: that the liquids would go in one place, with one type of potato peels; and that the solid stuff would go somewhere else, in another compost pile that served a different purpose. Besides, it was rainy and muddy and the terrain was steep, so it would definitely be more work for everyone if I fell and broke my ankle, than to just hand in the bucket. I knew I could not win that argument. I had to put my pride and vanity aside and surrender the bucket. In our relationship, the practice of handing in the bucket, and later of holding the bucket, were to be repeated copious times—both literally and metaphorically.

In one of the visits I asked her if I could shadow her for a week in her daily routine. My university had a study abroad program that made it possible for me to send students to visit and be taught by Mama Maria's community. However, before sending the students, I wanted to assess the social, economic, and cultural impact that this program could have in the local context. We tend to think about exchange visits as only beneficial, but exchange students and volunteers can be a lot of work and I did not want to see the community's labor exploited or their daily lives disrupted for the benefit of already very privileged and often very entitled people. So, Mama Maria agreed that I could

shadow her for a week. The experience lasted forty-five minutes. She hated being followed around and I also felt very awkward. I asked her if, instead of shadowing her, I could help her with anything. She was offended by the question—what made me think I could be of any help to her? She felt patronized, as if I was treating her like a charity case and she was not happy about that. I subsequently learned that self-reliance and independence are highly valued in Quechua culture.

Then, she turned it around and said, “I can help *you*.” I was caught off-guard, but agreed nevertheless. She said: “You don’t look like you can sell anything. I could train you as a street vendor. You can spend the week helping me at the *tienda* [small shop] in Pisac.” I saw no other choice. For the next seven days I trained as a street vendor in Pisac. The first thing she did, with great gusto, was to gather all the other women and kids in the family to dress me up like the other local women. I wore long white socks with colorful alpaca leg warmers; several *polleras* (skirts) one on top of the other to increase volume, fastened by a *chumpi* (belt); a lacy white shirt with a *jobona* (colorful wool jacket) and *lliclla* (cape) on top; and a black bowler hat (yes, you read that right). In my new attire, my stylists told me, I was indistinguishable from the other vendors. My Spanish (or Portunhol, a mashup of Portuguese and Spanish) was passable at the time, but they also insisted that I learn some Quechua to add to the experience. I was supposed to sell handmade bracelets for around \$2 apiece and also help at the *tienda*. Mama Maria said I would get a commission on my sales.

## Relational Economies

The experience was completely disastrous in terms of improving my ability to sell anything, but that had nothing to do with Mama Maria’s training protocols, which were incredible. It was also painful in terms of understanding the political economy of the place, especially when it came to the extractive attitude of most tourists and the role of foreign tourism agencies in sustaining predatory practices that exploited Indigenous communities. But the experience was also extremely rich in terms of observing how capitalism was somewhat “tamed” by the local community in ways that were extremely clever, compassionate, and humbling (for me).

While I spent my time for the most part really angry at the tourists' rudeness, selfishness, and narcissism, Mama Maria saw them as lost and confused. She would repeat to me: "Don't be mad, they don't know better. They believe money is everything, they have got a long way to go." She was always worried that my irritation was going to affect my capacity to learn how to sell the bracelets. She needed me to release the anger and calm down in order to learn how to "read" what the tourists were looking for (whether it was something material or spiritual, driven by consumerist or existential motives) and change my approach accordingly. In my training as a vendor she told me I should offer tourists what they were looking for, plus a little more that could help them in their journey. I was also told I should inflate the price by 20% and sell for the cost-recovery price at 60% if I felt it was necessary, but most tourists were bargaining to buy things for half of the price or less.

One of these experiences was very impactful to me. A Swedish middle-aged lady approached me for a conversation (she wanted to practice her basic Spanish) and asked me to help her find a bracelet for her niece. We talked, she chose a bracelet, and I was happy I was about to make a rare sale. Then her husband approached us and asked how much she was paying for the bracelet (\$2). He stopped her from handing me the money, saying that the bracelet was only worth 50 cents. I asked him, in English, how much the minimum wage was in his country and if he knew how long it took to weave a bracelet like that. His wife was furious—with me! She did not expect to hear me speak English and she was not happy that I challenged her husband. My response disrupted the fantasies of benevolent protagonism (of being the central virtuous characters of a romantic, adventurous, or heroic story) they felt they had paid for. She aggressively took my hand and put both the bracelet and the money in it. She told me that I should give the money to my family, because since she set foot in "my country" all she had done was charity (and there she reclaimed the story she had paid for).

I considered how Mama Maria and the other vendors had to put up with this patronizing behavior toward them every single day and I felt both absolutely furious and completely powerless. I went back to the *tienda* and cried out of frustration. As I was crying, I was worried that I and my emotional outburst were not helping Mama Maria's business. Mama Maria came to my rescue with *agua florida* (cleansing flower water) and branches of rue (also for

cleansing and protection). She took a sip of *água florida* and spat it on my head. She then whacked me with the rue branches for a while. I stopped crying and my outrage turned into indignation, which gave me a huge surge of motivation to act. I remembered I was also a professor and that I could do something. I mounted my imaginary high horse, and, with my hands defiantly on my hips, I told Mama Maria that I would create a project for ethical tourism in the region that would teach those tourists to behave properly. Mama Maria could not help but burst out laughing at the ridiculousness of what she saw. To my own surprise, instead of feeling offended by her laughing at me like that, I started to laugh as well—uncontrollably. She had held back a mirror and it was the first time I could see myself as cute and pathetic. And it was the most liberating thing I had ever felt. This wordless teaching was also eventually transformed into a recurrent practice.

During that week, I observed how the local economy worked on a relational basis. Resources were distributed according to needs; no one was planning too much for the end of the month. They believed their responsibility was to keep the flow of reciprocities going in the collective bodies, including in the relationship with spirits and ancestors, so that metabolic regeneration and abundance could take place.

In this worldview, one thing is clear: accumulation leads to scarcity. Period. It took awhile for that teaching to land for me. By the end of the week, I was worried that I had not sold anything in the streets and I could see that the shop had not sold much either, probably because I was always angry and my vibe drove the customers away. I felt responsible for a week's lost income and I was worried about the rent that Mama Maria would have to pay, and I knew she would not take any money from me as a donation. So, I decided to make a purchase from the shop at the value of a month's rent. Since I knew the prices of things, I made a pile of gifts for family that would both fit in my bag and enable me to offer her the money for the rent. As Mama Maria started to add up the prices of the merchandise, she kept giving me huge discounts (not part of my plan), which forced me to include more items to make up for the amount I wanted to spend. I ended up with more things than would fit in my luggage.

She knew I was up to something, so she asked why I was buying so much. I told her everything—about the guilt, and the plans for the rent. She sat me

down again to kindly tell me that she had always been able to pay the rent—that her rent was not my business. She took the money and showed me how she would spend it. She paid for meals for people in neighboring shops who had been struggling. She bought a stock of bracelets (despite having hundreds of those at the shop) to help a street vendor who needed to feed her family. She helped her neighbor pay the rent for her restaurant. She bought *granadillas*—similar to passion fruit—for us and all the kids playing in the street. By the afternoon, the money I thought should have been saved for rent at the end of the month was all gone. She was really happy to work in *ayni*, the Andean practice of entangled reciprocity and of becoming “common.” I was really impressed about how she could operate in a brutal capitalist context without being determined by it.

### Exercise

Although modernity defines large economic structures and expectations, practices of value exchange are passed down (or rebelled against) in families. For example, from the German side of my family I learned that you never spend more than you earn and that you need to build provisions for rainy days, both for yourself and for those around you. From the other side I learned that these provisions need to be small; otherwise they block the flows of abundance and vitality in your life: you may be financially wealthy, but you become existentially poor. I was also told something along the lines of “the bread that you withhold is not yours to keep, because it will go moldy in your cupboard while others go hungry.”

Both sides had an element of care for others, which I am really grateful for, but the current tendency within modernity, of economies based on debt, lends itself to economic practices that are immediate-pleasure-oriented and egotistical. I invite you to reflect about these issues in relation to what you have been exposed to in your family or immediate community. What economic practices have you embraced or pushed back on? How do these practices limit or enable different possibilities in your existence? How do these practices manifest your accountability toward other people (e.g., those who pay the real costs of your comforts) and toward the planet?

## Toilet Teachings

Still, during that visit to Mama Maria's, I was obsessed with my discomfort with the toilet protocols at her house. I even tried to convince her that I should stay in the town of Pisac for her convenience (and my toilet access), but she would not have it. Toward the end of the visit, I learned that I could leave some money behind as long as each amount was marked for a specific future purpose (so that it was neither charity nor payment); for example, I could leave a \$50 contribution toward her son's school uniform, another \$50 toward the replacement of the thatched roof in the kitchen that I heard was going to take place, etc. In my list of contributions, I sneaked in \$100 for a toilet. The protocol was to hand her the money and explain quickly what projects the funds were for. She accepted it, thanked me, and we both went back to cooking chores. Then it hit me. Why did I still want a toilet? It occurred to me I had not really asked her what she herself felt needed to be done in the house. There were a number of things she wanted to improve or renovate, but a toilet was not one of them. I asked her if I could change my contribution and reallocate the money for the toilet toward another priority she had identified. She agreed. Then I asked her why she had accepted the request for a toilet. She told me that they would build one just for me, if that made me want to come back more often. Her priorities and generosity left me speechless.

For a long while afterward I started to pay attention to modernity's obsession with flush toilets. I knew of several fundraising projects for building flush toilets in underserved communities. I had heard of a development project in a village in Nigeria where German engineers had built toilets that were repeatedly destroyed by members of the community. They figured out later that the women vandalized the toilets because the only time they could gather without male surveillance was when they would get together to do their thing in the bushes. They did not want to lose that. On my next visit, I also observed how flush toilets were resisted by peasant women in another village in Peru. An NGO wanted to bring tourists to their village and had told them that, since the tourists would need the toilets, they might as well build one in each of the houses. To the NGOs, toilets were a sign of social mobility and the villagers should be grateful and happy with the offer. But this was not the case. The women said they could build a house with toilets



for the tourists, but they did not want flush toilets in their own houses. To the NGOs, these women were backward and unappreciative. One person even called them “uncivilized.” I quietly asked one of the women from the village why she thought the flush toilets were a bad idea. She told me that they would lose the ability to “read.” We got interrupted at that point and I was left wondering what *reading* could mean in that context.

Modernity is fixated on a project of perfect form, efficient functionality, and maximum regulation, including sanitary regulation. The intention is to control nature and to achieve timeless permanence—to defeat decomposition and death. In order to do that, modernity needs to hide the shit. Flush toilets are a great way of doing that. Flush toilets have been designed to sanitize our metabolic reality. We sit comfortably, dump our shit in clear water, and with a magic flush, the shit disappears; it is taken “away” forever. However, if we can pause for a second our sense of separability inherited from modernity, in order to see the planet as a dynamic metabolism, we may realize that there is no “away”: our shit goes somewhere even if we don’t know exactly where or face any responsibility for it.

When reflecting about flush toilets, I realized that *reading* for the woman in the village could be about seeing the cycle of shit becoming land, and then food, and then shit again. It could also be about reading the shit itself to interpret how the body is processing food in order to detect illnesses and imbalances. Or it could be about getting out of the house to read the context outside, while you are doing your thing. Like Mama Maria who knew what to do with liquids and solids in my bucket, this woman had metabolic literacies that modernity had deprived me of. It was clear in this case that my privilege was also a loss of capacity to “read” a lot of things. In this sense, modernity’s toilets make us illiterate: we lose the capacity to read what comes out of our bodies and how that part of us goes back into the land to feed other beings that in turn feed us as well. Without practices of metabolic literacies we cannot see ourselves as living metabolisms nested in wider metabolisms. Having the flush toilet as the “most civilized” practice of shitting is a terrible idea from a metabolic perspective. Flush toilets reinforce the belief that we are separate individuals entitled to poop comfortably, to send shit away with the water, and to never have to think about it again. This could be what both women in Peru were trying to avoid. Metaphorically speaking, this aversion,

avoidance, and lack of ability to compost shit may be what got us into the mess we are in.

### Exercise

Everything you put in your mouth is either already dead or dying and will be decomposed, or is alive and will add to the living ecology of your guts. Every day each person poops an average of 500 grams of fecal matter. We have around 7.8 billion people alive today. You can do the math yourself. Remember that this is just organic stuff that decomposes relatively easily; the other “shit” we discard (like plastics and other waste toxic to us and the metabolism) is much more difficult—and there is more of it.

Another interesting fact is that we have prayers for things that go into our bodies, but not for what comes out. Across cultures, we have practices of gratitude toward those responsible for bringing the food to our tables. Some cultures also pray for the food to give them health and strength to be in service of others. But, what would a prayer look like for what we return to the earth? Who or what would you be grateful for? What could be a good prayer for your shit and the land that will receive it (think beyond your own digestion)? If everything is sacred, pooping should not be an exception. What do you think your toilet socialization has given you and deprived you of? The next time you need to go to the toilet, pause for a while as things are brewing, and contemplate that part of you that will be released in a metabolic cycle that does not stop with the flush.

## Metabolic Literacies

Trying to experience the world and ourselves in it as metabolism gives us one way of recalibrating our existence—away from separability and toward entanglement. The sensibility of knowledge-mediated hierarchical separability imposed by modernity, which is based on human exceptionalism, transactional interactions, and expansion of consumptive entitlements, has led us to cause the extinction of countless beings and brought us to the brink of human extinction. Metabolism, even if just used as a metaphor (which is what we can

do from within modernity) can help us move toward a sensibility of metabolic entanglement based on the call for maturity, sobriety, discernment, and responsibility toward realness and healing and for relationships grounded on trust, respect, consent, reciprocity, and accountability.<sup>3</sup>

Metabolic literacies are about intake, process, integration, and output in nested layers. I can also say that this language is extremely limited and mechanistic. There is much it cannot express in relation to our metabolic reality, in the same way that there is a great deal we cannot even see or imagine because of the patterns of sensing, relating, and desiring that we have inherited from modernity. As a starting point, let us imagine four juxtaposed layers of metabolism: me (my individual temporal body, which is also a nested system for other entities), me and you (the many social bodies both human and nonhuman we inhabit), me in you (the planetary body, where we are all “in,” which is a larger entity with a much longer temporality), and us in neither me nor you—which refers to our existence beyond time, form, and space.

One of the most difficult things to explain about Quechua and other Indigenous worldviews is the fact that the ancestors are also an active part of the metabolic reality. Just as tangible as the plants that grow in the fields, the ancestors who have gone before and are yet to come are integral to the ecology. Ancestors belong in the layer of existence beyond time, form, and space; therefore those who have come before and those yet to come are part of the same ethereal matter (whether one believes in reincarnation or not).

Ancestors are also special because they can intervene across metabolic layers and negotiate on our behalf. These negotiations can include anything from how diseases are healed, the amount of rain that will secure the crops, and the good fortune of businesses, to the trajectory of our livelihoods. This is one of the reasons why it is important that education in this life also prepares us to become good ancestors on the other side, and for ourselves in the next life. The ancestors need to be “fed” and therefore offerings are necessary. The importance placed on the ancestors can be observed very clearly when catastrophes happen—people will use the scarce resources they have to make the offerings even if it means going without food or other necessities. In this worldview, misfortunes are caused by blockages in the flows of reciprocity of the metabolism and if this is not rectified right away more misfortune of one type or another will follow.

The first time I visited Mama Maria, I was taken to the thatched roof building by her daughter Noemi. Outside the building, she told me that her *abuelita* (grandma), the daughter of the woman who had built the kitchen, had died a few years before at the tender age of 110. She then invited me into the kitchen to meet the *abuelita*. The building was dark and I could not see much. I was expecting to be shown a picture of her. Suddenly, Noemi said, "There she is!" She reached for something in the adobe wall, picked it up, and placed it in my hands. It was *abuelita's* skull! I froze right there, with *abuelita* so close. This was an intimate encounter I was not prepared for. Noemi did not even notice that my brain had not yet adapted to the situation, and she kept talking. She mentioned that *abuelita* protects the house and talks to the spirits at night and that there is evidence of that because her teeth are still wearing out. She then opened *abuelita's* mouth, the skull still in my hands, to show me the white marks on the brown teeth. I just stood there, frozen. With *abuelita*. Somehow, at one layer, *abuelita's* bones were also my own. Time stood still for a while. We were both dead and alive somewhere, sharing a moment. Next thing I remember was the *cui* (guinea pigs) running in the kitchen....

I learned very quickly that offerings to the earth and mountains were really important. *Quintos* (three coca leaves arranged as a fan) were offered to the *apus* (mountains), the winds, and each other any time there was a chance to do so during the day. Individuals and families had regular *pagos* (offerings) performed by local shamans and any new project (such as building a house or starting a business) required a larger offering as well. In Peru, you can buy a package for these offerings in special shops. Each package comes with more than fifty different items wrapped in pieces of newspaper. The items range from grains, seeds, dried fruit and herbs, coca leaves, sweets, llama fat, Monopoly money, ribbons, alphabet pasta, confetti, wax figurines, and—the most important part—a dried llama fetus. These items evoke different commitments and manifestations that remind you of your embeddedness in a wider metabolism. They conjure up abundance, well-being, joy, prosperity, security, vitality, fertility, balance, good fortune, and protection from jealousy, envy, disease, anger, and bad luck. The *pagos* need to be burned in a ceremonial fire. Specific wood crackles, types of flame, and the color of the ashes produced in the burning process tell whether the *pagos* were well received by Pachamama or the *apus*. Not all offerings are successful and some go down all too well.

In one of my visits, I took a group of practitioners from Central European NGOs to be taught by Mama Maria and to assist her in the creation of an educational center. There were many complicated negotiations involved in this—from the title of the project, its aims, to whether there would be a website or any written materials about it. There were many things that needed to be decided by the community, and the process was really slow because everyone was busy with regular work. Despite the strong drive of the European NGOs to get the community together and get things done, the more the community felt pressured, the less we saw of them. This is passive resistance to what can be perceived as a forced imposition that resonates with colonialism. For Mama Maria, nothing could be started without first offering a *pago*, but the local shaman, Don Isidro, was also very busy and could only come the following weekend. In the middle of this, I received some news that meant I had to cut my trip short and leave in two days. Mama Maria would not let me leave without making a personal offering. She told Don Isidro that this was an emergency situation and that he needed to come right away.

The next morning Don Isidro showed up early, but warned us that he had other clients waiting and had to leave by midday. Mama Maria asked him to read the coca leaves to decide how and where my offering should take place. The coca leaves told us that the offering needed to be burned at the nearby mountaintop. I was worried about my flight the following day and about Don Isidro's other clients, so I said it would be okay to burn my offering where we were. Mama Maria would have none of it. She convinced Don Isidro to take us up the mountain. My son, who was living there at the time, came with us. Halfway to the top, Don Isidro said that he had run out of time and that the fire would have to be made where we stopped. My son and I noticed all the dry grass surrounding us. We looked at each other and we both thought, "They must know what they are doing." At the time, there was no wind, so it seemed somewhat safe. As Don Isidro started the fire, a gust of wind appeared out of nowhere and I could see flames rising to Don Isidro's height.

Totally calm, Don Isidro told me to lie on the ground, next to the rising flames, with my *pago* on top of my head. My son looked at me and asked if we shouldn't, perhaps, call the fire brigade. I reminded him that we were in the middle of the Andes and that it was unlikely that a fire brigade would easily reach that place. At this point I remembered the story of a Czech tourist in

Chile who started a fire that destroyed thousands of hectares of the Chilean part of the Patagonia National Park. I could already see the newspaper headlines announcing: "Brazilian mother and son burn down half of Peru." Meanwhile, the fire had spread widely across the ground, eating into the slope of the mountain with the flames up to five meters tall. Unfazed, Don Isidro still wanted me to lie on the ground. I explained that I would not be doing that and instead I started to shout for help. Mama Maria had already run to the foothill to try to get other people to bring water. In five minutes we had the community and the NGO people forming a chain of buckets around the fire. Don Isidro was still meticulously guarding a precious little flame for my offering, which happened eventually without me lying on the burnt ground.

I felt awful and responsible for the fire. I spent the afternoon with Mama Maria debriefing the situation. She was as traumatized as I was. That night the whole community finally came together and we could also do some work on the project of the educational center. We started the gathering with an assessment of the fire event. My offering had resulted in us burning one of the faces of the mountain, destroying a large patch of San Pedro cacti. The community's analysis of the event was very interesting. There could be a number of reasons why this had happened, they said. And each of the reasons would require a different restorative measure. The first reason brought up negligence on the part of Don Isidro, who shouldn't have rushed things. But there were also other reasons. The strong gust of wind appearing out of nowhere was a sign of ancestral intervention. The fire and the mountain also had their own messages to deliver. There was also a teaching in the mass sacrifice of the sacred cacti. The event was a means for the community to be brought together again. The upcoming educational center needed a name. *Los Chamuscados* (the Singed Ones) was the first suggestion. The name of the center ended up being the name of the mountain that had been scorched: Apu Chupaqpata.

The gathering had started in a somber tone, given the gravity of what could have happened, but reliving the experience together helped us laugh at our own absurdities. Although I was relieved that nobody placed any blame on me, I was sorry for Mama Maria, who was not entirely off the hook. Don Isidro was not welcome back to the community for quite some time, but he repented and was eventually forgiven. Since we had the community in the



room and a new name for the educational center, we took the opportunity to ask what people felt the center should be about. The conversation focused on Quechua teachings about life and education. The community was reluctant to have anything they said written down. Their experience was that writing distorts the teachings by fixing them in just one form and that seeing things in writing makes us believe that we have already accomplished something when the work has not even started. The NGO people acknowledged the risks and asked the community if they could make an exception that day. They received consent to write down ten principles that were articulated for the educational center Apu Chupaqpata that evening, on the condition that these principles will always be presented as a glimpse of a much larger body of wisdom that requires discipline and practice, way beyond reading and writing:

1. The entire planet Earth (i.e., Pachamama) is my home and country, my country is my mother, and my mother knows no borders.
2. We are all brothers and sisters: humans, rocks, plants, animals, and all others.
3. Pachamama is a mother pregnant with another generation of nonpredatory children who can cultivate, nurse, and balance forces and flows, and who know that any harm done to the planet is harm done to oneself.
4. The answers are in each one of us, but it is difficult to listen when we are not in balance; we hear too many different voices, especially in the cities.
5. The priority for life and education is balance: to act with wisdom, to balance material consumption, to learn to focus on sacred spiritual relationships, to work together with the different gifts of each one of us, with a sense of oneness. Our purpose is to learn, learn, and learn again (in many lives) to become better beings.
6. There is no complete knowledge, we all teach, learn, and keep changing; it is a path without an end. There is knowledge that can be known and described, there is knowledge that can be known but not described, and there is knowledge that cannot be known or described.

7. Our teachers are the *apus* (the mountain-ancestors), Pachamama, the plants, what we live day by day and what has been lived before, the animals, our children, our parents, the spirits, our history, our ancestors, the fire, the water, the wind, all the different elements around us.
8. The serpent, the puma, and the condor are symbols of material and nonmaterial dimensions; of that which can be known; of that which cannot be known or determined; and of the connections between all things.
9. The traditional teachings of generosity, of gratitude, and of living in balance that are being lost are very important for our children—it is necessary to recover them.
10. The world is changed through love, patience, enthusiasm, respect, courage, humility, and living life in balance. The world cannot be changed through wars, conflicts, racism, anger, arrogance, divisions, and borders. The world cannot be changed without sacred spiritual connections.<sup>4</sup>

These principles underscore a metabolic sensibility where nobody can be overlooked. Everything and everyone is a teacher and a learner at the same time. We are all nested in a larger metabolism driven by a metabolic intelligence. If this metabolism is sick, so are we. If we have made it sick and thus made ourselves sick, we have two options: either we heal or we die. We will need to choose between metabolic integration and regeneration or self-destruction. There is no middle way. And there is no “away.” And because it is urgent and we are running out of time, we need to slow down in order to grow up.

The teachings of this chapter were significant because they outpaced the speed of modernity of my thoughts, and forced adaptations that had ripple effects. They involved elements of surprise (seeing myself as cute and pathetic for the first time); of being taught about responsibility (being trained to sell bracelets without anger and facing the prospect of being responsible for a major wildfire); of release (surrendering my bucket to Mama Maria and my anger at the tourists); and of (re)integration (sensing timelessness with Noemi’s grandma). These teachings forced me to confront the limits of

modernity both within and around me and they keep teaching me new things every time I revisit them.

For the past four years, Mama Maria has become a very active mentor and advisor in my research collective. In March 2020, a group of twenty of us, including Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, from Brazil and Canada, visited our partner communities in Brazil and Peru. We were the last people to cross the terrestrial Peruvian border before a state of emergency was declared in the country due to COVID-19. Since all the airports were closed, those of us from Canada had to stay with Mama Maria's family much longer than we had originally planned. We were eventually repatriated back to Canada. During this last visit, we watched her tirelessly looking after all of us, while she looked after the land, the ancestors, and her family. Many of us noticed that Mama Maria had become an archetypal image of human accountability for the group. I use the term *human* here in its broadest sense: Mama Maria is a flawed, fallible, fabulous friend who teaches us to be accountable in at least four different layers.

First, Mama Maria's accountability refers to the visibilization of the metabolic processes we are all part of. This accountability can be initially exercised as a calculation of the labor, costs, debts, and harms involved in keeping us alive. These include the labor of the land; the labor of the other animals and plants (including the bacteria in our guts); the disproportionate amount of devalued and invisibilized labor; as well as the loss, pain, and sacrifices of those at the receiving end of historical, systemic, and ongoing violence.<sup>5</sup>

Second, Mama Maria's accountability refers to limiting excesses and indulgences, and redistributing both abundance and burdens. In this sense, it compels us to follow her example: do what is needed rather than what you want to do.

Third, Mama Maria's accountability refers to a commitment to not adding unnecessarily to these burdens. In our collective we say that "due diligence" refers to getting our shit together, so we do not add to Mama Maria's labor.

Fourth, Mama Maria's accountability refers to a commitment to "growing up"—to manifesting the unlimited generosity of Mama Maria in our commitment to becoming healthy and responsible elders and ancestors for all relations. If we want to activate the possibility for existing "otherwise," we first need to become much more like this side of Mama Maria: renouncing our

desires for the unrestricted autonomy and consumption that modernity sanctions, and embracing accountable autonomy and response-ability.

Having said that, it is important not to idealize or romanticize Mama Maria as a human being. Romantic projections and idealizations are not sustainable and violate the integrity of Mama Maria's humanness and learning process. If you visit Mama Maria today, you will see that the thatched roof houses have been replaced by a much larger house where groups of visitors can stay. There are five bedrooms and each bedroom has a private flush toilet.

### Exercise

When you think about accountability, what image comes to your mind? Make a list of everything and everyone to whom you are (or think you should be) accountable. Think about people in your closest circles, but also those far and out of sight, like the people whose lands were mined for the metals of your computer, the cheap labor involved in the production of your food and clothing, or the forests that were cut down for the production of this book. How long is your list? When you think about response-ability, how many passengers on your bus feel inept or inadequate? How many of your passengers insist on doing what they want rather than what needs to be done? How can you invite these passengers not to turn their backs to responsibility? How can you invite all your passengers to learn to build relations (with everything and everyone) based on trust, respect, reciprocity, consent, and accountability, as Kyle Whyte suggests?

I invite you to recall a situation in your life where you had to confront modernity within yourself, and to write up the story for yourself to make the ripple effects visible. Think about an event that really taught you something. Go with the hunch and just write what you remember for five minutes, uninterrupted, without censoring or correcting yourself. Let the processing of the story happen through the writing, rather than in advance. See what happens.