

# Beginsel Nasentarera

## Reflecting on Kovach (2015) and its relevance to the Singapore Kristang context

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### 1. Introduction

Margaret Kovach is Professor in the Department of the Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia, and a fairly well-known indigenous scholar of Nêhiyaw and Saulteaux specialising in indigenous research methodologies as they appear, are concretised, and are used in Western academia. Her work thus appeared extremely useful to my interests in understanding dreamfishing in Kristang as one of these kinds of indigenous research methodologies that gain more universal applicability, and although she has written fairly extensively on the subject, her article entitled 'Emerging from the margins: Indigenous methodologies' in the 2015 edited volume *Revisiting Research as Resistance: Critical, Indigenous and anti-oppressive approaches* was especially of interest due to its particular focus on decolonisation, peaceful, non-violent resistance to oppressive hierarchies of control, power and abuse, and, slightly less overtly, psychoemotional wellness and mental health (Kovach, 2015), all informally similarly very strong themes in the Kodrah movement that moreover have become cornerstone focuses of the Second Kristang Language Revitalisation Plan (Wong, 2023c). As part of my independent study process, I thus sought to understand how Kovach's findings and considerations could (or could not) be applied to Kristang in Singapore, and our own unique conception of indigeneity, indigenous methodology, and whether dreamfishing counts as one of these. The larger forces encouraging me to consider this are substantial, with my being recognised as one of 26 Next Generation Fellowship Practitioner (NGFP) Fellows in 2023 by the School of International Futures, a prestigious futures methods grant, with the following description for my project on developing a dreamfishing toolkit:

How can creole and indigenous communities engage in structured, authentic and respectful decolonisation, reindigenisation and cultural, linguistic and socioemotional revitalisation through stronger relationships with the unknown, the intangible and the unconscious? (Next Generation Foresight Practitioners 2023)

This is the first time Kristang has ever been identified as indigenous in the public domain, and the first identification similarly of dreamfishing as an indigenous practice and epistemology; yet is this a valid way of recognising us? Although there is no issue with whether 'the Malay component' of Kristang is indigenous, informally, the main issue has often lain with how the community has often

been disclaimed as “not fully indigenous” because our indigenous ancestors ‘intermarried with the colonisers’ and hence betrayed Malaya and its other inhabitants. While historically speaking there are excellent reasons for why this declamation is invalid (the marriages were almost always forced or coercive in a colonial setting, and so there was no ability to betray since there was no free and full choice), I also seek to here reflect on the epistemological reasons for why attempts at such rigid definitions of indigeneity are not helpful in the Kristang context.

## **2. Summary of Kovach (2015)**

Kovach opens her article with a very relatable anecdote about her own struggles with positionality and even hyper-managing her own reactions to others’ considerations and deconstructions of what it means to be indigenous in an academic context, before subverting that struggle and using it to highlight two critical ideas that underpin the rest of the paper:

1. for indigenous scholars, because of who we are, our research is always political, even if that is not “where [one wants] to take it” (p. 20)
2. what Kovach calls “value-neutral research methodologies” hence cannot be anticipated as a “natural” experience for an indigenous researcher, since even the smallest action can be (and often is) interpreted as “taking a stance”, and that therefore it makes more sense to lean into this very challenging research paradigm instead, and align oneself with research methodologies that seek to liberate and empower (pp. 20-21)

She then provides sections on (1) emancipatory methodologies from a more universal (i.e. ‘non-indigenous’) point of view, (2) indigenous research in general, and (3) epistemology and the fuzziness and complexity of academic meta-language, generally seeking to illustrate the extreme difficulties that indigenous scholars in the North American context have in deciding (and/or seeking to argue for) “what counts as legitimate research” (p. 25). She especially notes the impossible difficulty inherent in “indigenizing a Western concept such as research, which is rigid with definitional categories, evaluative criteria, outcomes, and goals” (p. 25), and the additional challenge of dealing with how most indigenous cultures (Kristang included) relied primarily on the oral transmission of knowledge, and are defined by epistemologies that are “fluid, non-linear and relational” (p. 27). Nonetheless, Kovach also then embarks on a provisional definition of an indigenous epistemology as follows (sixteen numbered demarcations my own):

It Is a way of knowing that Is (1) fluid and (2) experiential, (3) derived from teachings transmitted from generation to generation by storytelling; each story is alive with the nuances and wisdom of the storytellers. (4) It emerges from traditional languages emphasizing verbs, not nouns. It involves (5) a knowing within the subconscious that is gained through dreams and vision. It is (6) a knowledge that is both intuitive and quiet. Indigenous ways of knowing arise from (7) interrelationships with the human world, the spirit, and the inanimate entities of the ecosystem. Indigenous ways of knowing encompass the spirit of collectivity, (8) reciprocity, and (9) respect. (10) It is born of the land and locality of the tribe. Indigenous knowledge ought to be (11) purposeful and (12) practical. It is born of the necessity to feed, clothe, and transmit values. As such the methods of knowing must be practical and purposeful. Indigenous ways of knowing are (13) organic with emphasis on reciprocity and

(14) humour. These ways of knowing are both (15) cerebral and (16) heartfelt. As the elders say, “if you have important things to say, speak from the heart. (pp. 27-28).

Kovach goes on to condense these into four key assertions that should guide the excavation and articulation of such epistemologies, namely:

- (a) experience as a legitimate way of knowing
- (b) Indigenous methods ... as a legitimate way of sharing knowledge
- (c) Receptivity and relationship between researcher and participants as a natural part of the research “methodology”
- (d) Collectivity as a way of knowing (p. 28)

She also explains why there is an inherent decolonisation aim and ecological interest in the development of indigenous methodologies (pp. 28-29), before outlining three “key themes” of indigenous methodology: (i) the relational, where a focus on respectful relationships “that are inclusive of all life forms” (p. 30) is paramount; (ii) the collective, where one observes “reciprocity and accountability to each other” without falling into the “anonymity or rugged individualism” of the Western research paradigm (p. 30), and (iii) methods that validate “alternate ways of knowing” (p. 32), including dream journalling and dialogue with nature or the ecosystem (p. 32). Once more, the extractive approach to culture and identity that has unfortunately characterised the Western academic method since its inception (p. 32), together with the tremendous institutional challenges and pressures that all indigenous peoples face when working within the Western academic paradigm are finally highlighted as a means of concluding the paper, with Kovach highlighting her own desire for “an authenticity” to such indigenous research, “even if carried out within the parameters of research language ... it will be a tough process, but...an exciting new discourse in a world badly in need of hope” (p. 33).

### 3. Reflection: The ‘fourth way’ creole/indigenous paradigm of Kristang

Kovach’s work, especially her systematic outline of the characteristics of what makes an indigenous epistemology or methodology (and all of which dreamfishing in itself immediately satisfies) was of course immediately validating to me as not just a fellow indigenous scholar, but as leader of the entire Kristang community<sup>1</sup>, particularly her emphasis on working with data and information from the unconscious and from alternative ways of knowing that previously were not ordinarily recognised by Western academia as valid, but in the last decade or so have begun to demonstrate both their richness and their texture, and their deep, long-lasting universal utility across many different cultures and paradigms. One critical and essential takeaway I immediately had from her work was the way she signalled the contestable and controversial associations the word “alternative” has in the phrase “alternative ways of knowing”; from the Western perspective, yes, these would be alternative ways of knowing that are deviant from the mainstream Western research paradigm, but from my own perspective, which ideally would have been framed within the *eleidi* or collective of Kristang from birth, these alternative ways of knowing would actually be the primary ways of knowing, and the primary ways of deriving the truths, patterns, facts and observable understandings of reality that the

<sup>1</sup> Previously leader only of Singapore, I now have effective leadership of the entire community at large since late September 2023 following a meeting with the Melaka Kristang community in Padri sa Chang in Melaka.

Western academic paradigm maintains through its own continued emphasis on quantitative, sensory-tangible data.

My own relationship with Kristang complicates matters further, because I was raised more or less dissociated from the Kristang *eleidi* until I was 28 years old in 2020, four years into my leadership of the Kodrah Kristang revitalisation effort and the Kristang community in Singapore. I thus actually 'bought into' or believed in the Western paradigm as being the most sacrosanct, rational approach to reality that there could possibly be until 2020, when both highly traumatic personal circumstances and COVID-19 finally helped me to permanently challenge that perspective to a functional degree that I finally had the psychoemotional space to consider the particular positionality of the Kristang *eleidi* for the first time. Prior to this, I found that "questioning [my own] established views about what counts as meaning, knowledge, and truth provoke[d] defensiveness" (p. 21) to such a degree that I would end up discrediting the work of other Kristang speakers like Noel Felix as mentioned in the previous assignment. I hence found that Kovach's anecdote at the start of the chapter, where she describes how she struggles to cope with the positional struggles that being an indigenous scholar in North America generates, very unfortunately similar. It is not that I advocate such an experience for all scholars in such a paradigm (and would be remiss to); rather, the common intensity of our troubling experiences attest to the "monopoly" that Western academia has in "defining what counts" (p. 21) as knowing, and therefore as an epistemology and methodology at all. Even more so Kristang itself, which is not simply an indigenous paradigm, but a creole-indigenous paradigm that often finds us sited on the borderlands of identity and association with the coloniser-colonised paradigm; we are neither here nor there, and in fact often find ourselves reaching for an imagined sense of belonging with other human beings who never had to experience colonisation (i.e. people that never actually existed in this version of reality) in an alternate world (Wong, 2023b) and instead finding ourselves forced to grapple with the jarring, tangled mess of everyday life that resulted not just for us and other liminal peoples, but even for the rest of the world, that now has to grapple with the ongoing and self-perpetuating fallout of such deep and terrible intergenerational trauma.

And yet I still find Kovach's work highly applicable to our community precisely for this reason. Even if Kristang is not considered fully indigenous, Kovach highlights that if one's identity or community of origin is prone to such intense and consistent stereotyping, than the two aforementioned meta-considerations that she frames on pages 20 and 21 immediately apply. In other words, instead of trying to prove its own epistemic value proposition by overconcerning itself with the stance-taking and associations that Kovach argues are inseparable from the complexities arising from the constellation of factors that gave rise to Kristang to begin with, Kristang scholarship should join

Epistemologies in feminism, critical hermeneutics, postmodern, ... critical theory, [and indigenous frameworks], all of which share an emancipatory objective. ... The epistemological assumptions of these varied methodologies contend that those who live their lives in marginal places of society experience silencing and injustice. Within the realm of research and its relationship to the production of knowledge, this absence of voice is significant and disturbing (p. 21).

The question of whether dreamfishing is a legitimate methodology or not, and whether it is a fully *indigenous* methodology or not, thus becomes irrelevant when one considers that both Kristang and dreamfishing themselves arguably even offer a third paradigm incorporating and also transcending

what indigeneity means that is simultaneously not captured by Kovach's article and yet is also precisely captured by Kovach's article in her above assertion: that if our culture and perspective have already experienced extreme forms of silencing and injustice, the importance and significance of considering dreamfishing is arguably greater, since Kristang can thus even be said to occupy an even more marginal place in society in its inherent uncategorisability as either marginal or not, as either coloniser or not, as either colonised or not.

#### 4. The impossible possibilities at the margins of the marginal

Since Kristang revitalisation expanded beyond language to culture and identity in earnest in 2022 (Wong, 2023a), we have called this kind of thinking *Lembransa Krismatra*, or Progenitor Kristang thinking, as it both steps out of its own perspective while still fully inhabiting it at the same time: a *kombundung*, or nonlocality, and also a *kontrontru*, or a paradoxically impossible possibility, one that we can understand and appreciate. Informally, one of the other foundational stereotypes about both creole and indigenous cultures and epistemologies, and one that I have even encountered from my own community members, is that these are simplistic and pale in comparison to Western ways of knowing, thinking and organising the world. Yet as Kristang people, we do not realise just how mammothly complex our epistemology and ontology are in comparison, once we do as Kovach does and deconstruct critically and empathetically why we think about ourselves in the way the Western academic lens thinks about our selves. Nonlocal and paradoxical ways of seeing the world seem to be replete in Kristang because of our very nature straddling the border of not just indigenous and not fully indigenous, but (indigenous and not fully indigenous) *and* (indigenous *or* not fully indigenous). Already, as Kovach reports in relief, much of Western research already seems to be moving in the direction of third way thinking, of “criss-crossing cultural epistemologies” (p. 27); yet in the creole Kristang *eleidi*, we seem to by default already inhabit a perspective that is even more metacognitively complex than third way thinking, occupying a fourth way in between binary and third way thinking where we can believe ourselves to be fully indigenous, believe ourselves not to be indigenous, believe ourselves to be either indigenous or not indigenous, depending on one's point of view, believe the entire thing is useless, and believe the entire thing will still be worked out at some future unknown point *all at the exact same time*.

Therefore, if one can understand and thus accept the legitimacy of *Lembransa Krismatra* as both a Kristang practice and a possible methodological approach (and *lembansa krismatra* requires that we question what even “legitimacy” is or what it means, and/or whether “legitimacy” is a legitimate construct itself in the first place), then the legitimacy of dreamfishing is also proven, since it is a real-world experience that a culture engages in, even if that culture cannot be categorised. In fact, the recursivity of definitions Kovach herself provides means that anything that cannot be classified neatly as marginal or not marginal again should also be considered as marginal, since what epistemology arguably provides is a taxonomic and scaffolded frame of reference, and anything that falls outside of that structure and its categories is disprivileged and hence marginalised.

The astute reader will have, as I did while writing this reflection, ably noticed that much of this ultimately can be seen as coming down to semantics and stance-taking – but again, does that not prove that Kristang shares the same characteristics as the ‘fully’ indigenous cultures that Kovach describes on p. 21, where everything is unavoidably political? All the more so for us, it seems, and all the more so

that we and our wondrously liminal experience of dreamfishing are as indigenous and grounded in the impossible realities of where we live as they come.

## 5. References

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### Note

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