

## CENTRING INDIGENOUS RESEARCH

“I can appreciate,” Margaret Kovach begins, “the value of Western research methods of coding, bundling, categorizing, and naming according to a set of beliefs and principles in knowledge creation,” adding: “My concern is not about organizing knowledge, (...) but rather it is the worldview, the epistemological underpinning of this organization with which I grapple.”<sup>1</sup> I am not sure it’s accurate to characterize the “organization” of knowledge as a “worldview,” and certainly “organization” is not all, even most, of “Western” research,<sup>2</sup> not even in education.<sup>3</sup> But that questionable equivalence is not the point of this essay, as Kovach is concerned “with Indigenous epistemology through highlighting Nêhiyaw<sup>4</sup> knowledges,” her “aim” being “to illustrate how Indigenous cultural epistemology, as a core foundation of Indigenous conceptual framing, guides research choices within Indigenous methodologies.”<sup>5</sup> Assisting her was “Michael Hart, a Nêhiyaw scholar from the Fisher River Cree Nation, Manitoba, Canada” with whom Kovach discussed “the intersection between Nêhiyaw epistemology and research methodology.”<sup>6</sup>

“Darwin’s evolutionary theory,” Korvach continues, “displaced a creationist approach and proposed that life evolved slowly and incrementally, with the superior forms of life prevailing and the inferior dying out,” referencing Vine Deloria’s association of Darwin’s concept of natural selection with the aims of the Europeans immersed “in the exploitive endeavours of colonialism.”<sup>7</sup> It is quite questionable to assert that: “The racism inherent in this evolutionary paradigm contributed to the genocidal policy towards Indigenous peoples in the Americas.”<sup>8</sup> It’s true that racists and colonialists misappropriated Darwin’s theory of natural selection<sup>9</sup> (itself formulated and published two-plus centuries after serious settlement started) to rationalize their “genocidal policy” not only toward “indigenous peoples in America” but toward Africans and Asians as well (the so-called Social Darwinists<sup>10</sup>), but it is not obvious that there is “racism inherent” in Darwin’s theory. Referencing Pam Colorado, Korvach suggests that “decolonizing analysis of the early precepts of a Western scientific paradigm” requires identifying precepts that conflict with “an Indigenous philosophy, among them that the “universe is empty, static space where atoms and particles live independent of each other and do not shift or change.”<sup>11</sup> (These “precepts” conflict with contemporary science as well.) Like central strands of Christian and Jewish thought, “Indigenous thought, unprepared to separate reason and spirit, did not espouse an evolutionist theoretical perspective,” and like much theological thought, “Indigenous knowledge systems were viewed by Western scientists as mere superstitions.”<sup>12</sup> It’s true science that constitutes “a rationalist, secular paradigm,” but scientific methods cannot be dismissed as reductionistic, as Korvach does.<sup>13</sup>

Like influential strands of Western thought, “[a]n Indigenous epistemic foundation includes the axiological qualities of spirituality, ethics, and aesthetics,” and it’s true that “holistic, spiritually imbued Indigenous thought was, and continues to be, considered by Western Eurocentrism as a belief system.”<sup>14</sup> “More specific to research; Korfach continues, “the privileging of empiricism has side-lined Indigenous knowledges,” but not only Indigenous knowledges, as arts-based and humanities-based educational research continues to go unfunded by the U.S. Department of Education,<sup>15</sup> although there is US\$153,750,000 set aside for Native American programs.<sup>16</sup> It’s unclear from the website whether these “Native American programs” must be “evidence-based,” as in Korfach’s succinct summary statement: “Tangible observable evidence is the standard in Western academic research traditions,” and “The empiricism integral to positivist research – with its emphasis on external evidence, objectivity, neutrality, testing, and universal laws of generalizability – emerging out of a deductive rationalist paradigm has a particular approach to knowledge.”<sup>17</sup> In contrast, she points out, “Indigenous epistemologies are axiologically embedded,” meaning “that they include an ethical and spiritual base associated with relationships between people, nature, and the cosmos.”<sup>18</sup> (While spiritual dimensions may be absent in contemporary scientific research, ethical elements are not.<sup>19</sup>) Korfach continues:

Indigenous philosophy emphasizes a belief system that espouses a non-fragmented, non-human-centric, holism focusing on the metaphysical and pragmatic brought alive by an animate language structure and contextualized within place and land-based knowing and teachings. These aspects of an Indigenous philosophy are bound by the relational. Thus, Indigenous epistemologies uphold the virtues of interdependence ... and must be understood from the vantage point of collectivism and relationality.<sup>20</sup>

Like “Western” thought, then, “the scope and basis of an Indigenous epistemology encompasses multiple sources of knowledge, more commonly recognized as *holism* (scope); a tangible and intangible *animate* world that is process orientated and cyclical, such as that expressed in verb-orientated languages (e.g., with *ing* endings), which comprise many Indigenous languages (basis); and a web of interdependent, contextual *relationships* over time, such as with place, family, and community (basis).”<sup>21</sup> Such keywords<sup>22</sup> - “relationality” (implying “interdependence”)<sup>23</sup> and “holism”<sup>24</sup> and “land”<sup>25</sup> (if differently named and conceived as “place”<sup>26</sup>) and “collectivism”<sup>27</sup> and “community”<sup>28</sup> - appear prominently in strands of non-Indigenous curriculum thought.

“Knowledge comes from multiple sources, such as humans, animals, birds, fish, insects, the earth, land, sky, and spirit,” Korfach points out, adding: Indigenous epistemologies are not human centric,<sup>29</sup> although I can’t imagine Korfach would deny that from wherever “knowledge comes” it is apprehended by humanity, mediated by mind, emotion, the senses, recoded in concepts, then often expressed in actions. Many non-Indigenous scholars – especially those working in the humanities and arts - would

concur with Korvach's conclusion that: "Knowledge arises from the intellectual realm of the mind, the affective domain of the heart, the kinetic domain of the body, and the spiritual domain of the soul. Knowledge is cognitive, embodied, instinctual, and spiritual."<sup>30</sup> And many non-Indigenous scholars – several scientists, too, I suspect – would agree with Korvach's assertion that "knowledge revelations emerge from a myriad of places, including intangible knowledge sources such as 'dreams, visions, cellular memory, and intuition,'" meaning that: When considering Indigenous epistemologies, there are many entry points for considering its holistic quality, including spiritual knowledge. (...) [S]pirit is deeply personal and can be experienced in multiple ways."<sup>31</sup> Certainly many theologians would concur with that last statement. Secular scientists would draw distinctions between science and myth, science and philosophy, and many would question the role of the sacred in the generation of energy, all of which is asserted in "scholarship on Indigenous science, [which] in one manner or another, references the relationship with metaphysics through creation myths, philosophies on space and time, and an energy source that Indigenous people describe as the sacred."<sup>32</sup>

"From a Niitsitapi perspective," Korvach reports, referencing Leroy Little Bear, "the notion of an animated world as one of flux, motion, and interrelationship,"<sup>33</sup> meaning that: "In considering knowledge generation from an Indigenous perspective, both the tangible and intangible factors and forces have equal weight in Indigenous knowledge construction. The tangible is always animated."<sup>34</sup> That means that: "Knowledge generation ought not to be extractive but reciprocal to ensure an ecological and cosmological balance and maintain a process-orientated, animated culture."<sup>35</sup> Many non-Indigenous scholars – think Heidegger<sup>36</sup> for instance – would concur with Korvach when she writes: "The language we speak influences how we know, and it holds within it a person's (and people's) worldview."<sup>37</sup> Referencing Anne Waters, Korvach questions "dualist constructs such as like/unlike [that] have resulted in a binary language and thought pattern in European cultures," that in contrast<sup>38</sup> to "many Indigenous cultures [wherein] the language constructs suggest a non-binary, complementary philosophy of the world."<sup>39</sup> Also a critic of binarism, Aoki seems to derive his insight<sup>40</sup> from European poststructuralism as well. It's not obvious why: "Given the philosophical basis of a complementary, non-binary Indigenous language construct, it makes sense that narrative encased in the form of oral history would be the natural means to transmit knowledges," although it's true that: "Within the structure of story, there is a place for the fluidity of metaphor, symbolism, and interpretative communications (both verbal and nonverbal), for a philosophy and language synergy that is less definitive and categorical."<sup>41</sup> Sounding like a biblical scholar,<sup>42</sup> Korvach writes: "Skilled orators, then and now, can imbue energy through word choice and allow listeners to walk inside the story to find their own teachings ...[as] stories about place make cerebral, academic language accessible, and reflect holistic, animate epistemologies."<sup>43</sup> Such storywork<sup>44</sup> conforms that the words that convey it are key; conversely: "One of the first approaches to erasing a culture is to

attack its language because language holds deep insight into the social organization of a people.”<sup>45</sup>

At this point Korvach acknowledges a certain resemblance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous epistemologies, specifically constructivism. “Similar to the constructivist epistemology within Western tradition,” Korvach writes, “an Indigenous epistemological stance is all about relationship between subject and object, tangible and intangible, self and others, self and the world,” emphasizing “relationships ... that are interdependent and collectivist,” concluding that “Indigenous culture is high-context.”<sup>46</sup> By context, Korvach seems to mean not, say, political-economic forces or events, but land, referencing Daniel Wildcat to assert that whatever one sees and hears wherever one is – forest, river, oceanside are the examples Wildcat provides – the experience constitutes “knowledge,” knowledge obviously of a different order that can be obtained in, say, a scientific laboratory.<sup>47</sup> Reiterating a point made many times by Indigenous scholars, Korvach affirms that: “Our connection with land and place is what distinguishes Indigenous peoples from one another and what differentiates us from settler societies,” adding: “Our places and connection to land give us identity.”<sup>48</sup> Korvach continues: “What we know flows through us from the ‘echo of generations,’ and our knowledges cannot be universalized because they arise from our unique experience with our places.”<sup>49</sup> As Joe Kincheloe and I argued thirty plus years ago<sup>50</sup>: “Place names make theoretical notions concrete; they offer us tacit meaning.”<sup>51</sup> For Indigenous Peoples, however, “Stories, like name-place legends, give comfort and grounding and offer the warmth of belonging,” and: “It is from these relationships that we can reach out to the world.”<sup>52</sup> I am unsure John P. Miller would agree that: “From a holistic epistemology, one relationship is not more significant than another,” an assertion I can’t imagine many Indigenous peoples – devoted to their children, parents, Elders – could accept either. Apparently Korvach is thinking epistemology not family or First Nations here: “Relational balance is holistic epistemology. Given the interdependency of the relational from an Indigenous perspective, differing relational aspects of knowing (thought, spirit, inward knowing) are difficult to define, abstract out, or compartmentalize – reductionist tools seem to not work here.”<sup>53</sup> Sounding like theologians through the millennia, Korvach notes that knowledge derived from “the extraordinary” can become “personal and particular.”<sup>54</sup>

Korvach returns to Nêhiyaw “epistemology,” wherein “[k]nowledge is transmitted through kinship relationships,” meaning that “an Indigenous research framework must not solely be an intellectual construct.”<sup>55</sup> She informs us that the “buffalo hunt exemplifies Nêhiyaw knowledges and offers a metaphor for a Nêhiyaw methodology,” as “the buffalo – *paskâwo-mostosw* – were the mainstay of the Plains Cree economy.”<sup>56</sup> Korvach makes a distinction between “the hunt and the chase,” a distinction also season in nature, as in “the autumn and early winter, tribes used a buffalo chute or pound, but in the spring and summer, as the herds moved southward, they used the chase.”<sup>57</sup> By “reading stories about the hunt, it is apparent how place,

values, and ceremony are integral to this act.”<sup>58</sup> And “underlying the hunt was a way, a methodology, that Nêhiyaw used to undertake a sacred act that kept the community and its people alive.”<sup>59</sup> Korvach characterizes this “story of the buffalo hunt is a research teaching story” as “an allegory for a Nêhiyaw conceptual framework for research: preparation (for the research), preparation (of the researcher), recognition of protocol (cultural and ethical), carrying out the action (researcher in connection with community), reciprocity (social sharing of knowledge and food), and respectfulness.”<sup>60</sup> She continues:

The pipe, the drum, the songs, and prayer are integral parts of Nêhiyaw ceremony, and ways in which to honour the Creator and seek blessing. Once an act is carried out with the sanction of the ceremonial pipe, it is considered sacred. In Saskatchewan, according to Elders, the treaties are a sacred accord that was sanctioned by the Nêhiyaw people through one of the most sacred of ceremonies, the pipe ceremony.<sup>61</sup>

In contrast, she adds, “sacred knowledge is dismissed in Western research, other than in an anecdotal, anthropological, exotic kind of way,”<sup>62</sup> an assertion that excludes centuries of theological scholarship and ignores that secular research is often conceived as a sacred calling.

Korvach teaches us that Nêhiyawewin language is “so important when considering a Nêhiyaw epistemology,” noting that “fluent Nêhiyaw speakers most often speak in the subjunctive, or ‘ing,’ mode,” adding: “The subjunctive is the opposite of declarative and suggests a worldview that honours the present, what we know now. It gives us insight into the concept of time. It also suggests a worldview that focuses as much, if not more, attention on process than on product or outcome.”<sup>63</sup> Process – in particular an emphasis on becoming – has long been a preoccupation of curriculum theorists.<sup>64</sup>

For those who have been reading these research briefs, it is clear that the Curriculum Studies in Canada Project has, from the outset, positioned Indigenous research and scholarship at the center. While distinctive and important in itself, on occasion – as in the present case - Indigenous research reveals failures to acknowledge intersections and “resonances”<sup>65</sup> with non-Indigenous intellectual traditions. Intellectual affirmative action – to borrow a now sidelined U.S. policy to redress centuries of anti-African-American oppression – is appropriate and necessary, but it risks (to borrow another concept associated with the U.S.) what we might term intellectual exceptionalism. Of course, Indigenous thought – I question the phrase as it seems to risk reductionism – *is* exceptional, that is to say, distinctive, but it is hardly entirely and always entirely unrelated to strands of non-Indigenous thought, a fact that constitutes no devaluation of its distinctiveness or importance, but a fact that is, it must be acknowledged, underrepresented in certain strands of Indigenous scholarship and research. Reconciliation may be a pipedream but truth-telling is our academic obligation.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> 2021, 63-64.

<sup>2</sup> That is evident, for example, in Axelrod's (1979) study of "intellectual breakthrough."

<sup>3</sup> Here, too, the examples of "knowledge creation" that are not only "organizations" of extant knowledge are too numerous to list, but one would be that of C.A. Bowers, whose intellectual breakthrough I underscore in a book celebrating his achievement (Pinar 2022).

<sup>4</sup> [https://gladue.usask.ca/cree\\_law\\_justice](https://gladue.usask.ca/cree_law_justice) see also:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjTQ6fgBdQ8>

<sup>5</sup> 2021, 64.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> 2021, 64-65.

<sup>8</sup> 2021, 65.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/natural-selection/> As for the “creationist approach” it’s true that Darwin’s discoveries – his “intellectual breakthrough” – precipitated challenges to (especially fundamentalist) Christian doctrine, but Darwin himself seemed not altogether certain that it necessarily need to, writing in 1863: “Personally, of course, I care much about Natural Selection; but that seems to me utterly unimportant, compared to the question of Creation or Modification”(quoted in Davis and Roper 2009, 500). Near the end of *The Origin of the Species*, Darwin writes: “Therefore I cannot doubt that the theory of descent with modification embraces all the members of the same class... Analogy would lead me one step further, namely, to the belief that ... all the organic beings which have ever lived on this earth have descended from some one primordial form” (quoted in Silverman 2009, 3). Concerning human exceptionalism, Martin and Barresi (2006, 204) point out: “Darwin’s goal was to emphasize the continuity between humans and other animals.”

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-Darwinism>

<sup>11</sup> 2021, 65.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> <https://oese.ed.gov/offices/office-of-discretionary-grants-support-services/innovation-early-learning/education-innovation-and-research-eir/#:~:text=The%20Education%20Innovation%20and%20Research%20%28EIR%29%20Program%20provides,for%20high-need%20students%3B%20and%20rigorously%20evaluate%20such%20innovations>

<sup>16</sup> <https://oese.ed.gov/offices/education-stabilization-fund/bureau-of-indian-education/>

<sup>17</sup> 2021, 65-66.

<sup>18</sup> 2021, 67.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example: [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2912.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2912.html) or <https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/research-ethics/>

<sup>20</sup> 2021, 67-68.

<sup>21</sup> 2021, 68.

<sup>22</sup> See Wearing et al. 2020.

<sup>23</sup> See Trueit 2012.

<sup>24</sup> See Miller 2019.

<sup>25</sup> See Chambers 2012.

<sup>26</sup> See Kincheloe and Pinar 1991.

<sup>27</sup> Collectivism is of course associated with Marxism: see Pinar et al. 1995, 244ff.



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- <sup>28</sup> See, for instance, Newmann and Oliver 1967.
- <sup>29</sup> 2021, 68.
- <sup>30</sup> 2021, 69.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> 2021, 70.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup> 2021, 71.
- <sup>35</sup> 2021, 72.
- <sup>36</sup> <https://philosophy.stackexchange.com/questions/22981/language-as-the-house-of-being>
- <sup>37</sup> 2021, 72.
- <sup>38</sup> Is Korvach constructing her own binary: Indigenous/Non-Indigenous?
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>40</sup> Aoki (2005 [1993], 294) writes: “But what are some features of modern society inscribed in the logo “I think; therefore, I am”? Most fundamental, I feel, is the notion of dualism in whose fabric we have come to inhabit by habit. . . . A prominent dualism is the subject-object binary, in which each segment is understood to be a separate entity, complete in itself. Furthermore, the subject ‘I’ is seen as a preexistent ego capable of thinking about the objective world out there, outside the self. This ‘I’ is saturated with the ego’s will to control and master the world through thought and action.”
- <sup>41</sup> 2021, 72-73. Depends on the story – and the listener - of course. I wonder if Korvach considers this academic writing – this example of her academic writing – as non-definitive. If so, I trust she welcomes my questioning of certain points, questioning I consider as also non-definitive.
- <sup>42</sup> I’m thinking of Schleiermacher (see Pinar et al. 1995, 640), but homiletics is relevant here as well: Pinar 1988.
- <sup>43</sup> 2021, 73.
- <sup>44</sup> See Archibald 2008.
- <sup>45</sup> 2021, 74.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>49</sup> No universalization perhaps, but generalization is unimpeded, at least in this essay.
- <sup>50</sup> In a book I referenced earlier: Kincheloe and Pinar 1991.
- <sup>51</sup> 2021, 75.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>53</sup> 2021, 76. One would argue that “thought, spirit, inward knowing” are “difficult to define, abstract out, or compartmentalize,” but can defining, abstracting and compartmentalizing be dismissed as “reductionistic”? If so, could Korvach’s essay be considered “reductionistic.”

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> 2021, 77. Perhaps not “solely” but it is also an “intellectual construct.” If not, then academic research could only be conducted through “kinship,” no? At some bloodlines and culture become secondary to the intellectual integrity of what’s being studied and asserted.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> 2021, 78. Allegory has been an important concept for me, invoking to illustrate a double consciousness, facts about the past teaching us about the present: <https://tuulistudiageneralia.blogspot.com/2011/08/william-f-pinar-allegories-of-present.html>

<sup>61</sup> 2021, 79.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> 2021, 80.

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, ASCD 1962, Jales Coutinho 2022.

<sup>65</sup> Haig-Brown 2008, 18. See RB# 3.