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Toward a Kristang/Portuguese-Eurasian Literature: Contestations, Challenges and Characteristics

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Perhaps the most well-known and arguably most characteristic example of Kristang/Portuguese-Eurasian literature is Rex Shelley's *The Shrimp People* and its three subsequent successor novels which together are popularly and academically known as the Eurasian quartet, all written in English. Why are these novels significant in the body of Singaporean literature? As Peter Wicks, writing in 2002 in the edited volume *Singapore Literature in English: A Critical Reader*, initially observes:

> Shelley has fashioned a portrait of Singapore that differs significantly from the conventional ones, both official and literary. Shelley comes from the numerically small Eurasian community, and it is the distinctive historical experience of this minority, also known colloquially as *mesticos*, *serani*, or *geragok*, that richly frames his fiction. (377)

Yet, although Wicks' chapter goes on to outline Shelley's work in detail, and rightfully highlights the existence of "dramatic effect and historical value" (381) within both it and the Kristang/serani/geragok community that Shelley sought to "put down some record of" (382), neither Wicks nor the reader ever really arrives at a full, comprehensive understanding of why this body of literature, from an ethnic community so small that we are just 0.4% of Singapore's total population (Pereira 7), would merit Wicks' further assertion that our literature has a "historical depth and a kind of epic grandeur"

(382), while another of his initial comments that "Shelley's achievement is often curiously overlooked in Singaporean literary criticism" (377) is almost metatextual, for Wicks' article is one of the very few to ever identify, let alone examine Kristang literature in almost any academic form, despite the pre-eminence and "long history" (Zarine & Yeoh) of Eurasians in not just Singapore, but Southeast Asia in general (Choo).

Beyond Shelley's seminal work, therefore, what else constitutes Kristang/Portuguese-Eurasian literature, and are there distinguishing characteristics that define or highlight what exactly it means to write Kristang/Portuguese-Eurasian literature, in spite of the community's inherent hybridity and uncertainty? This chapter postulates that those characteristics not only exist, but are also indeed under constant and consistent contestation and challenge as an inherent feature of Kristang/Portuguese-Eurasian literature itself, situated, just as we, the Kristang/Portuguese-Eurasians, are similarly located at the intersection of fixed, definable comprehensibility and fluid, shifting mutability. These are conscious facets of the performance and construction of our identity, fixed elements of ourselves that we have come to recognise and fixate on as unfixed, and which in doing so have unlocked an ever-evolving series of new constellations of Kristangness that have become central to the revitalisation of who we are as a people and a way of being, an effort centered on our critically endangered Kristang language that I have led since 2016 as the leader of the Kristang community in Singapore, while also being a speculative fiction writer and a scholar-practitioner myself. Ultimately, while we are often observed (or accused) to be chameleonic, "actors playing the part of 'professional narratives'" (Sarkissian, 262), this can be absolutely true, while also being an idea that is incompletely extended to its fullest limits: such mutability, and such metacognitive awareness of inherent fluidity of identity as a performative construct, are unique to our people thanks to our creole nature and to our painful, intensely traumatic history of erasure and elision, and in no way preclude us from also maintaining a sense of culture, tradition, identity and literature that is unique and independent from all other efforts to suggest otherwise.

The Unsaid: Who are the Kristang, and Why are They So Hard to Read about in the Academic Literature?

Originally and likely ironically known as the *casados* (meaning 'married' in Portuguese), the mostly Roman Catholic Kristang began life as the mixed descendants of coercive intermarriages between arriving Portuguese colonisers and local Malay residents in the city of Melaka after its conquest by the former in August 1511 by a fleet led by Alfonso du Albuquerque; although du Albuquerque appears to have been memorialised in a notable amount of extant Eurasian literature (e.g. Edwin Thumboo's 'Alphonso at Tea', which opens the 2017 Singapore state-supported academic compilation *Singapore Eurasians: Memories, Hopes and Dreams*, and Shelley's protagonist Alfonso Rosario in *A River of Roses*), what has been less written about, if at all, is what Fong calls "the remnants of a violent colonial history largely forgotten by Singapore and many Eurasian communities" that "pervade and haunt the Eurasian-born-Catholic consciousness" (*The Unsullied Tongue of Saint Anthony*, iv). Most younger Kristang, to say nothing of non-Kristang writing about us, have very little understanding of just how deep this haunting goes—myself included, as I only discovered in 2020, at the age of twenty-eight, that my great-grandmother Mabel Tessensohn née Martens (1905-1999) and great-great-great-grandfather Edwin John Tessensohn, OBE (1855-1926) appear to have once been prominent grassroots figures under the semi-authoritarian Lee Kuan Yew government and the highly psychoemotionally damaging events of Operation Spectrum (Wong, "Linggu Skundidu"), and the colonial British administration in the lead up to the first representation of indigenous people on the Legislative Council of the colonial Straits Settlements in 1923 respectively. It was not just my family who had brought me up 'aracial' and completely detached from both this personal family history and our wider community, but the community itself—I spent four years in the national and international public eye from 2016 to 2020, without a single person ever informing me of this history, and of what I would thereafter uncover about why this history has been concealed and elided even from younger people in the community. The grassroots social justice movements adjacent to Operation Spectrum are especially extremely under-documented

in the available literature, but will again be usually acknowledged informally by older Kristang—and again, only in the last two to three years, as the psychoemotional space in Singapore has become more egalitarian following COVID-19.

As a people and culture, therefore, we therefore appear to be so unfortunately highly acclimatised to this treatment that one of the first things that many Kristang regardless of location today seem to do extremely well is to specialise in the Unsaid; in letting institutions and authorities have their way with us, and to let them imagine us as having no culture and no central essence or identity. After all:

> Regardless of race
> language
> or religion
> our ancestors are never local enough
> only because they weren't plenty enough
> (Carroll, 'Scoliosis' in *Stories by the River*, 33)

Patricia Maria De Souza's poetry anthology *Saga Seeds*, collected in 2014, is possibly an outstanding example of the Unsaid—or possibly not. One can never be sure, and one should not be sure, because to be sure is to invite the aforementioned institutional challenge and contestation, and therefore at a deeper level to invite the possibility of further traumatic, abusive treatment that we have already struggled through for generations. A first reading of *Saga Seeds* reveals absolutely nothing beyond sweet, even saccharine observations about mundane daily life in Singapore; it is only when one understands the little-attested connection to Operation Spectrum that many older Kristang may have had, that deeply painful and moving readings of many of the poems in *Saga Seeds* become frighteningly, pointedly lucid:

> A part of me has died
> But I do not mourn.
> It has been cast aside
> Like a seed newly sown
> But I do not mourn.

('But I Do Not Mourn' in *Saga Seeds*, 60)

Indeed, even when texts appear to grapple with deeper problems and struggles over identity at face value, as the relatively more straightforward 'But I Do Not Mourn' seems to above, much actually remains elided or circumferenced, walking carefully and delicately around issues that may not just bring intra-community strife, but unwanted attention from other, more powerful entities. My cousin Denyse Tessensohn, for example, in her three collections of humorous vignettes and sketches about Kristang life in Singapore that at times are quite pointed and on the nose, occasionally walks back this directness in passages that seek to highlight these contestations, but which cannot do so overtly:

> There was a time when some mixed-blooded people desperately claimed to be Anglo-Indian, Anglo-Dutch, Anglo-anything but Eurasian. The *Asian* half or quarter or less meant an inferiority that was quite clear when it came to rising in your post in the government, the most desired employer.
>
> (*Elvis Forever in Katong*, 83)

Perhaps most revealingly, again without revealing anything at all, in my Kristang grandparents' own account of their lives during the very historically highly significant period of the 1980s, *Yes! Yes! Two lives under four flags*, has exactly one single dated mention of the entire period, and it is as follows:

> The girls themselves contributed to the success of the [hockey] team. I remember having very good captains. In my mind, the best was Florence Chua, who was team captain in 1981. (Martens & Martens, 104)

'Kenneth Jerome Rozario': Others writing about Others

The result of often letting ourselves slip quietly out of history and of the Western capitalist-industrialist complex, however, is a great deal of psychoemotional projection and Otherisation from everyone else, and a sizeable number of stereotypes, prejudices and misconceptions that are also experienced by other mixed, creole and/or indigenous communities around the world, and are also completely unique to us in how they manifest in our lived

experience. One does not need to turn to our own literature to locate such suggestions: during the turbulent 1950s and 1960s, when Malaysia and Singapore sought their independence from the British, one finds multiple assertions in newspapers, from Eurasian and Kristang leaders connected with these nascent nation-building efforts, that:

> The Eurasian has shown no interest in the progress taking place around him. This indifference may even be interpreted to mean antagonism toward change. We have been accused of sitting on the fence. This charge might apparently be true. (A.S. Machado, cited in *The Straits Times*, 4 November 1962, p. 13)

Machado's words can be both taken at face value—there is minimal interest in a political agenda—and both analysed for what might be Unsaid: the idea that we need to highlight, to perhaps an excessive degree, our interest in being part of enlightened civilisation, and of working hard and being useful—exaggerations of our 'laziness' that readers from other non-White cultures and indigenous traditions, in both Southeast and South Asia and elsewhere, will find familiar. Yet this particular sense of laziness and simplicity appears to have persisted all the way into at least 1980, when the short story 'Kenneth Jerome Rozario' was published in Singapore by non-Kristang writer Catherine Lim, and which, officially, at least, caused a reinvigorating uproar among Eurasians of both Kristang and non-Kristang origin in 1989 (Pereira 48-50) that culminated in much greater participation in the nation-building project when the collection 'Kenneth Jerome Rozario' was included in was selected as a set text for a national examination. The titular character, Kenneth Jerome Rozario, again reflects many of the persuasions about Kristang/Portuguese-Eurasians, in particular, that others (though, crucially, at least from the perspective of this author, not Lim herself, despite some attestations to the contrary) have held about us:

> Kenneth Jerome Rozario, to escape the tedium of the afternoon lessons, slipped to a corner of the college grounds and there, in the friendly shade of a tree, took out his small pocket transistor radio and was soon lost to

> the world. Kenneth's soul … now lifted and blossomed. It was borne aloft by the music of Elton John. Elton John sang of love, of peace, of hope. Kenneth Jerome Rozario responded with the fullness of his being. He was happy. He was at ease with the world (62).

That Rozario skips school and thereafter is written as such does ostensibly indeed suggest that he is relatively simple and unintelligent; however, a closer reading of Lim's story suggests that this stereotype is meant to not just be problematised and unpacked for its Western-oriented gaze, but that Rozario is meant to serve as a stand-in for the Kristang Eurasians themselves, and for our experience of the world that many arguably desire but believe is beyond their reach. Rozario's later overwhelming with psychological projection in the second half of the story, to the extent that because he is believed to want to commit suicide, he ends up wanting to commit suicide is absolutely reflective of ex-Member of Parliament Joe Conceicao's ironic, and very Kristang words that "the *casados* (married ones) would in the end become the *cansados* (tired ones)" (401) in his historical novel *Love and War in Old Malacca*, and Melissa De Silva's equally and justifiably caustic suggestion that such Othering constitutes:

> a wilful act of unacknowledgement. … Naming, or leaving something unnamed, carries the weight of a lifetime of validation, or the withholding of such (*Others is Not a Race*, 78).

Papia Kristang: Conduit to Past, Present, Possible and Future

And it is work like Conceicao's and De Silva's, the latter of which won the much-deserved Singapore Literature Prize in 2018, that is critical for a wider readership to be aware of, because they, and a significant number of other Kristang writers in the 1990s and 2000s, make conscious use of elements of our culture and identity which are undeniably Kristang. In perhaps her most well-known story in *Others Is Not A Race*, 'The Gift', De Silva introduces us to what is perhaps the most evocative and essential (myriad meanings intended) of all of these elements: the critically endangered Kristang language, which,

> to me, Kristang was a sepia-tinted relic from the past. But

> to my grandmother, the language was alive and beating … the language of childhood laughter and joking repartee, the heart's tongue of family intimacy. It was the linguistic mould that had shaped and cradled her thoughts (4).

'The Gift' and other work emerging around it at the same time in 2017, from Victoria Elizabeth Scully's short film 'Nina Boboi' to Andre D'Rozario's *Boka di Stori* graphic novel project, are again fully emblematic of the wider embracing and reconciling with both the Kristang language and the wider creole identity and culture that many in our community have undertaken in the last twenty years. This movement has appeared in various forms, analogous to a wave rising and falling, since the early 1990s: the seminal and pioneering work of Joan Margaret Marbeck in Melaka and Seremban, who in the 1990s and early 2000s produced two anthologies of poetry, short stories and sketches in Kristang alongside an abundance of lexicographical material and two plays, *Kazamintu na Praya* and *Seng Marianne*, and the revitalisation of Kristang by a group of ladies at the revived Eurasian Association in Singapore that eventually gave rise to *The Eurasian Heritage Dictionary* in 2004, the only publication ever to feature Kristang in a significant way in Singapore. Australian Kristang writer Simone Lazaroo further captures this deep, resonant reconciliation with Kristang as an immensely personal, and immensely cathartic process:

> She blushed and looked out the window. What did she know about love? When her mother was alive, the Christao word for love had taken the place of eardrops. On her mother's tongue, *amor* had sounded warm and tender. (Lazaroo, *The Travel Writer*, 127-8)

Kristang is exotic, even to many Kristang today; and to seek it out, and to reconcile with it, has been a profoundly painful and exacting process—as we might say in Kristang, *tokah sanggi*. It costs blood, and touches it in a vulnerable way—and enlivens it. It is arguably exactly that process that has also provided us a new and exciting way forward to revitalise and broaden what it means to be Kristang, and to perhaps find validation and pride in who we are at last.

Kristang Speculative Fiction: Another World, And the Creole Posthuman Turn

In *A River of Roses*, writing in 1998, Rex Shelley captures the hyper-sexual, hyper-objectifying gaze of others on us as an unusual and both alien and highly attractive creole people in a full extension of the manner that 'Kenneth Jerome Rozario' and other work highlighted so far have done in more tangential terms, choosing to do so through the lens of a Portuguese priest, Padre Rocha, experiencing closeted homosexual desire toward and observing, in no uncertain terms, the nativeness of a particular member of his Kristang flock:

> [Padre Rocha]'s eyes invariably found Fonso sitting erect with his uncombed shock of blonde hair rising above the heads around him and his arms, browned dark in the sun and sea-salt, thick and muscular, folded across his chest, waiting. Like an animal. A lion. (22)

And yet, from the early 2010s, one finds this exact animalistic, 'wild' nature subverted and transformed in more contemporary Kristang work. Whether as daywalkers (Samantha De Silva, *Blood on the Moon*), pair-bonded merlionsmen (Wong, *Altered Straits*) and mermaids (Rée, "Down Under the Waters"), or, at the Othered edge of being Other itself, gay dreamtiger male sex workers who may or may not be animal, or human, or something in between (Wong, 'Another Dreamtiger'), the turn toward the embrace of the abusive, the traumatic and the projected, and its stunning and beautiful transformation through the speculative into something else, a magical, numinous new form of strange, mesmerising and powerful posthuman human personhood, is unmistakeable in recent Kristang writing. It is Atlantean, profound, Dreaming and "wild, unbelievably wild, and it tasted of power, like the richest, most shockingly robust red wine one would ever hope to taste in their lifetime" (Samantha De Silva 143); it is provocatively and proudly body-positive, embracing the objectification onto the Others of Southeast Asia by others as something that can paradoxically be put to good use. It is "so powerful, in fact, that [it is] enough to breathe life into my sisters and I: nightly wishes transformed into flesh and scales, stories made real" (Rée, "Down

Under the Waters," 112), sometimes emerging in monstrosity, sometimes in blazing, majestic virtuosity. In parallel with these ideas is the movement to another futuristic or fantastical world where Kristang is either ascendant or almost lost, once a fleeting and brief sojourn to an island as in Bernard Harrison's earlier work *Malacca and Beyond… To Catch Me a Star*, now far more permanent, tangible and concrete, as in Melissa De Silva's "Blind Date" and my own "Alabanda." As Crispin Rodrigues puts it:

> We are the merfolk of these waters. We own no
> land, yet these waters have no boundaries to us.
> …
> My grandfather, they said, was on land once,
> But gave up his tongue for a trident.
> ('We, the Merfolk' in *The Nomad Principle*, 33)

The posthuman chimeric, the hybridised and the pelagic can often be seen as monstrous; yet for us, they seem to be not only home, but a stage and archi-pelagic performance space upon which we can reclaim all three for not just ourselves, but everyone—highlighting that there is so much beauty and hope in the endless possibilities and oceans of liminality and mutability itself, and a reclamation of the idea, so mangled in 'Kenneth Jerome Rozario' that there is magic and comfort enough to be found even in the quietest and most silent of spaces: the deep blue sea of the unknown, familiar and completely ethereal and unknowable, vast and personal, formless and byzantine.

Conclusion: The Last People, and the First

In my own work, I have often referred to our community as the Last People, forgotten by time and space. Yet, after more than four hundred years of categorisation as a broken or incomplete form of Portuguese, the Kristang language has become the vanguard of a new wave of cultural revitalisation and an engendering of positive mental health and wellness emanating from Singapore and wherever else our community has found ourselves, to the extent that non-Kristangare now coming forward to write in Kristang, a language that was once alien to them, and even to us, but which is now coming home to us all. I close this chapter with the words of

'Kabah Chua Parah'/'After the Rainbow', collected in Marbeck's *Linggu Mai*, as an embodying of where our community stands, where it could one day find itself, and where our story seems to be going, at long last after so many centuries of pain, loneliness, emptiness and self-censorship:

Fazeh unga desiju, falah bela-belu.
Kereh yo fazeh unga pra bos juntadu?
Ung pasoh di oru teng na basu di arku
Podih nos komfiah ki nos olah na omba oru?

Make a wish the elders tell me to,
Should I also make one for you?
A pot of gold at the end of the rainbow,
A magical belief we see in the luminous shadow (91-92).

Nus sa kaminyu sigih bong-bong. Our journey continues on unabated.

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