Interview with Kerry Reed-Gilbert

Anne Brewster and Kerry Reed-Gilbert

AB: I’d like to start off by asking you about your childhood.

KR: I always tell everybody that I’m a fruit-picker by trade. I come from the paddocks and I’m very proud to be a cherry picker’s daughter. I’m a bushy. We’re a pretty big mob and my family come from Condobolin. Condo’s where I grew up. It was an amazing community; we all knew each other, who we were, where we come from; there were close knit families. You went to school with a big mob and that was really important. We were fruit-pickers and that meant that we had to go to other towns to pick the fruit: Griffith with the grapes, Leeton with the oranges, Cowra with the tomatoes, cherries at Young and Orange.

It wasn’t an easy life as kids. In those days Aboriginal people weren’t given pensions; we had to earn our living and that’s what we did. We worked during our holidays and if there was fruit available after school we’d come down into the paddocks to this amazing woman who is Mummy, who reared all us kids up and kept us together. I really honour her because without her it would have been a lot, lot harder. We would have been stolen by the welfare if it wasn’t for her and Daddy. People actually say to me you must have learnt a lot off your father Kevin Gilbert, but I say ‘well I did, but in actual fact I learnt it off Mummy.’ Mummy is my father’s sister so she’s my aunt in non-Aboriginal terms. But in Aboriginal terms she’s my mother. She created me – who I am, my strength and my dignity. I am Mummy’s daughter and I’m very proud of that.

We were a very hard working family and I still have that with me today, that ethic of hard work. It pulled us together as well because it was the only way that we could survive. But it was also the way that we outran the welfare. It had a double purpose, because if you were out in the bush where I was, there weren’t
so many stolen out my way. The welfare made people state wards more than stealing them. Me and my brother Kevin were actually state wards and my sister and brother, Lynnie and Paddy, they were too. Us four younger kids of the eight kids that Mummy raised were made state wards. So we know what it’s like to be under the government.

**AB:** So you were a state ward, but you weren’t removed.

**KR:** Yeah. I tell everybody I was one of the lucky ones. I’ve always known who I was and where I come from, so very lucky.

**AB:** So why do you think they didn’t remove you?

**KR:** Well, it had to do with the government policies. The whole policy was about assimilation and non-Aboriginal men were actually encouraged to go with Aboriginal women. It was a policy of breeding out Aboriginality. They believed that the white male would become the dominant part of that family and that the kids would be brought up white.

**AB:** Did your Mummy have a white partner?

**KR:** Yes. Daddy is Mummy’s husband; he was a returned serviceman. So I think there was a belief that we would be brought up and mixed into the white community, but that didn’t work as was hoped under the government’s white Australia policy. I say to people ‘Daddy was a good Dad but he had the issues of returned servicemen, you know, all those kind of things’. Men came back from war with social and emotional issues and so did Daddy. It was hard for some of them to recover from what they went through in the war and it showed in their relationships as husbands and fathers. I don’t remember Daddy being around in my life all the time.

**AB:** Did he travel with you when you were fruit picking?

**KR:** Sometimes, but not much. Most of the times it was only Mummy and us kids. As I said, Daddy wasn’t around that much. He also worked on the railway too. He was a fettler, so they went out scrub. It was usually just us.

**AB:** I think I’ve read somewhere that you said school was a happy experience for you and you didn’t feel much racism. Was that because you said you were a big mob at school?

**KR:** Racism never ever went away. In Condo it was pretty good because all of us mob stuck together. In other places, whether it was covert or overt, racism was very much there. I felt the brunt of racism where we lived in a little town when I was in my last years of primary school; kids can be cruel. And then in my high school years the black kids were down the back and you put your hand up and it was ignored. That was only for some teachers, though. I don’t think any Aboriginal child would be able to tell you that they never faced racism any
time in their life, whether it was at school or growing up. I believe as Aboriginal people we face racism every day of our lives. It can be somebody on TV saying something; or it’s picking up a newspaper; or it’s hearing something on the radio. Everybody wants to attack the Blackfella. I watched the documentary by John Pilger, *The Secret Country*, where he said: ‘the slaves became the masters’. All the ones that they brought out from England and Ireland, they became the masters and the Blackfellas became the slaves. That mentality hasn’t changed and you get tired of continually trying to knock down those barriers. There’s racism in this country in 2015, the same as there was the day I was born all those years ago.

We lived on the Island in Condo. That’s when our house got burned down. I was seven, maybe eight. We made a humpy on the block of land and Mummy got a big old bus and converted it. There was a lounge and the bedroom in the bus. The humpy was made of corrugated tin – it had a bedroom and a kitchen. Then the welfare came and said to Mummy, you’ve got six months to get these kids a house or we’re taking them. And then we basically just went on the run. We did the fruits. We left Condo to live at a place called Koorawatha. We worked enough in the paddocks and we earned enough to put a deposit down on a house at Koora. Mum was the first Aboriginal person in Condo who was given a loan by the State Bank. We were so proud of her.

*AB*: She must be a remarkable woman.

*KR*: She is. She had the ultimate respect of everybody. Everyone knew her in Condo and in Koora as well. After they got over Blacks living in their town, they all knew her as a hardworking woman trying to raise a lot of kids. Sometimes family members would tell us stories about how she wasn’t scared of anyone. Mummy tells the story about how once she’d run out of food in the days of the rations when every Aboriginal person received rations and there was no work available. She went up to Sergeant Cunningham and said, ‘I need some food to feed these kids’ and he says, ‘it’s not time, Mrs Hutchings.’ She says, ‘I’m bringing every single kid up here and we’ll sit on here until you feed them.’ So he gave her the rations. She was an amazing woman and she was a hard worker. She slaved her guts out you know. Don’t forget sometimes we always had one or two of Mummy’s nieces and nephews with us as well.

*AB*: And what kind of huts did you live in when you were fruit picking?

*KR*: I had already told you about the hut on the Island when the house got burnt down. Well, over in Orange we actually lived in an old railway carriage when we were doing the cherries. It had a lot of holes in the walls so we-plugged the holes up with wet newspaper.

*AB*: They didn’t have electricity I suppose.
KR: Yeah some did, some didn’t, but not on the huts because we had candles. Mummy would be lying in bed reading her book with the candle right beside her. In some places we were allowed to run an extension cord from the main shed to the hut so that we could finally have a fridge etc.

AB: You were talking earlier about the Tent Embassy. What do you think the Tent Embassy achieved?

KR: In just one act, the Tent Embassy achieved everything. It gave white Australia an insight into Aboriginal Australia; it brought awareness of the plight of Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people were living in refugee camps, third world conditions, in their own country. It talked about land rights and it empowered Aboriginal people. It was the first time in this country that Aboriginal people could say, ‘hey, hang on, I’m a Blackfella and I have a right to be here’. That spiritual empowerment was a big thing for Aboriginal people and I think in some ways it’s lacking now. Everybody is so scared of what this government will do to them as a people. They are so concerned with their own personal safety that the unity spirit is sometimes not there anymore. But you have to understand why. You have a government that now threatens your safety to say what you want on a social media page and which has genocidal policies in place towards Aboriginal people. People are scared. I have Mob inbox me and say ‘Thank you Aunty/Sis for what you do. I can’t do it because I could get in trouble in my job if I did’. Aboriginal people still have to live. We have to pay our rent and buy our food just like everyone else. But unlike everyone else we can’t be too radical.

You also have to understand that we have a lot of Johnny-Come-Latelys and they get the jobs with no real cultural or life experience. So we don’t see them out there getting dirty at protests or the Tent Embassy.

AB: I’m writing a chapter on Aboriginal women’s protest writing and I wanted to ask you about some of the poems in Black Woman Black Life which talk frankly about violence against women. I wondered whether you found it difficult to write about violence. I wondered if there was a time when Aboriginal women didn’t want to break ranks with Aboriginal men.

KR: I’ll tell you why they didn’t do that. And it was about the fear that if they did get the coppers in for the domestic violence that their man would go to jail and become another black death in custody. That was the biggest barrier and it was why Aboriginal women were sticking with their men and not reporting them. And the reality is that it’s a very relevant fear for people. And so to get justice and equality and the criminal system to work for Aboriginal people there has to be no fear of black deaths in custody happening.

I went through domestic violence but I should tell you I was married to a white
Australian not a Blackfella. You try to stay married for the sake of your kids but then you finally you realise that was totally the wrong reason to stay. I say to people if there’s more bad times than good get out now. Don’t use your kids for an excuse to stay in an abusive relationship. The kids don’t benefit, neither do you. They grow up with social and emotional issues from watching and feeling the abuse, just like you. In relation to allowing a man to hit you I can’t speak for non-Aboriginal women, but I think we as Aboriginal women could take and give as good as we got. It wasn’t about sitting there and allowing it to happen or anything like that. My ex was pretty bad, but he got what he was given. It was punch for punch and he was a six foot roof tiler and I’m a five foot two Blackgin.

It’s about allowing women or girls to know that there’s more out there. You don’t have to be some man’s punching bag. My ex, from sheer jealousy broke my nose once. We were in a shop and the woman says, ‘what happened to you? You look like your old man back-handed ya’ and I said, ‘he did!’ And he’s standing there beside me and says, ‘what the fuck did you tell her that for!’ I said back to him, ‘well it’s true isn’t it? You did do it, didn’t you?’ So you know, it’s about not saying, ‘ah … I walked into a wall’ or whatever, but saying, ‘well, yes, he did it. He did this to me and I didn’t deserve it and there’s no reason good enough for him or anyone ever to hit or murder a woman’. And we women have to take our power back and not hide behind closed doors, not make excuses and say ‘Oh, I walked into the door’. It is about saying to him ‘every time you do it I will shame you’.

I was with my ex for eighteen years – a really long time. What made a difference for me was getting a TAPP traineeship (Training for Aboriginal People Program) and that started me on my journey to where I am now. I was thirty. Before that I had a part time job working at Wagga Base Hospital as a catering maid and I was still in the paddocks as well. In the late 1980’s the Australian government established traineeships for Aboriginal people. You had to knock on a employer’s door and say: ‘my name’s Kerry Reed-Gilbert, I’m an Aboriginal woman and if you train me the Australian government will pay my wages’. I was lucky I knocked on women’s housing – SHE Inc supported accommodation in Wagga – and they took me on. So that made a big difference in my life. As a part of the traineeship you had to have an educational component so I chose Associate Diploma in Adult Education at UTS in Sydney. I completed my traineeship and went on to get a Bachelor of Adult Education. I was one of the first Aboriginal students to get their BA. Then I got offered a job as a Community Employment Officer at the Wagga Advancement Corporation and that was wonderful work ing with Mob. After I left my ex for good I eventually got offered a job up in Sydney working for Youth Affairs, one of the Aboriginal Careers Program. So I packed my kids up, my dog and my cat and I started a new life and I went to
Sydney. It was the best thing I ever did. I took the traineeship in 1987 and I moved to Sydney in 1990.

AB: Do you think that writing is an important way of empowering people?

KR: Readers see that you had that kind of life too. I often say that my first book, the collection of poetry, *Black Woman Black Life*, is my healing book. It’s a woman’s book no matter if you’re Aboriginal or not. It was sitting there for ages and Anita Heiss said ‘you’ve got to publish it.’

AB: I wanted to ask you about a poem which talks about domestic violence, the poem, ‘*Why?’* in *Talkin’ About Country*.

KR: That poem wasn’t about domestic violence. It was about what kids tell you as a parent. It is about being sexually abused by their father or others and then not telling their mother until after the fact. It’s about when they say: you could have stopped him; why didn’t you stop him? Well, people can’t stop abuse if they didn’t know about it.

AB: It’s a very elliptical poem. Are some of these things hard to write about directly, because they’re painful?

KR: Yes, I think some kids crucify their parents. There’s another poem I wrote called ‘Lost Years’ – when your kids scream at you: ‘you’re a lousy mother, you did this, this and this’. Well, you know, I’m actually a good mother. And I remind everyone who screams about their parents that nobody ever said there’s such a thing as a perfect mother or father.

AB: It’s interesting what you said about women giving back what they got. Although you do talk in both books about the suffering of women you also have a lot of expressions of pride at being a woman. Sometimes discussions of domestic violence characterise women as powerless.

KR: Oh yeah. Ah totally. I’m as good as any man and if that man and I had to go head to head, a punch to a punch, I would do it. Women don’t realise that they are as good as any man. But it’s not just about strength. It’s not about having the muscles. It’s about your mentality of how you see yourself and your self-worth. And Mummy taught us that. I’ve seen my mother lug more buckets than a man and years ago her and her sister, Aunty Doris, could cut down a tree better than a man. She could swing an axe better than a man. In my family us women are stronger than the men. It’s just amazing how you get that mindset from one woman and that woman was Mummy. That woman is me now.

AB: And your father, Kevin Gilbert?

KR: He was a strong man as well.
AB: He was very articulate.

KR: But he wasn’t articulate until he went to jail. He had a dictionary or an encyclopaedia … he learnt while he was in jail. He went to jail with fourth class education because in those days they didn’t teach Aboriginal kids. I always say to people, the sadness for me is that my mother had to die for my father to become the man that he became. Now that wouldn’t have happened if he was a white man in this country. Please don’t think that I’m justifying my father killing my mother. I’m not doing that. That’s what the sadness is. My mother had to give up her life for my father to become the man that he become, and he was an amazing man. He did the ultimate sin, but he was an amazing man. The knowledge, the gift, the speech, the whole lot, he had it. Just imagine if he had those opportunities before he went to jail.

AB: Many Aboriginal families seem to be matriarchal because the men are in jail and the women are bringing up families alone. Do you think it’s changing?

KR: We are a matriarchal society, anyway. In Aboriginal communities it’s still a woman that’s the strength in keeping that family together. I think what happened with society is that with all the Government’s Acts and policies and injustices our men were no longer able to be the hunters. In my opinion they actually took away our men’s right to be men and our men are no longer allowed to be men. In Australian society overall, the basic role for a man in this country is about five or six things: you go to school, you get your education, you go to uni or you get your job, you find your girl, you get engaged, you get married, you buy your house and you have your kids. That’s a pretty standard. What’s there for an Aboriginal man? Nothing.

AB: He misses out on each step of those opportunities?

KR: Yeah exactly. How can our men be men? There’s a select few if you look around – with no disrespect to some our men that I really honour out there – but some of them are from the stolen generations and that’s where they had their opportunities. Other Aboriginal people never had the opportunities.

AB: So you feel that a lot of the stolen generations kids got ahead?

KR: Not all, but some. Do you know what I mean?

AB: Those who were lucky. Yeah.

KR: Yeah, well … I don’t know if ‘lucky’ is the word.

AB: Those that didn’t get abused.

KR: I wouldn’t say abused because not all kids got abused. And I wouldn’t say lucky either because you can’t be lucky if you were stolen from your mother and
your family. Some people were provided with opportunities, whereas in some instances Aboriginal people who weren’t stolen didn’t get those opportunities. My father had to go to jail to have opportunities; that’s a better way to say it.

**AB: You say at one point that you see yourself as Aboriginal first and a woman second.**

**KR: Totally. I use feminism as an example. I’m not a feminist. There are Aboriginal people who are feminist and that’s fine, but the majority of us will never be feminist and the simple reason is: how do we fight for our rights as women and leave our men behind? And that’s what feminism is all about. It’s not about ensuring that the men get some rights as well. So that makes that much difference for Aboriginal people.**

**AB: Would you critique male Aboriginal violence?**

**KR: Yes, I could write all the factors. I can talk about having violence in my family and other forms of violence. Violence has no colour. But I’ll never put myself before an Aboriginal man. I’ll put myself beside that Aboriginal man and I think that’s what feminism forgets.**

**AB: You talk a lot about equality, don’t you?**

**KR: Yeah I do. And it’s missing in this country, in more ways than one.**

**AB: It is. Do you think equality between Aboriginal men and Aboriginal women is lacking?**

**KR: Yeah, in more ways than one. Yeah I do. Again I go back to why we have a lot of domestic violence in our families and in our communities. We expect Aboriginal men to do these wonderful things out there: get the house, get the job and all that and the reality is that they can’t. The odds are stacked against them. Please don’t think I’m justifying violence because I’m not. But, you think about it: when has an Aboriginal man got power? It’s when he’s drunk and belting his woman and that is a crime. That’s a humanity crime. And look, some people are just bad and they belt their women because they’re bad. But if you gave proper opportunities to Aboriginal men, I think you might find that there will start being a difference in our communities.**

**AB: What if the woman’s life is in danger?**

**KR: No, that’s different. You know my father murdered my mother. He pulled a shotgun on my mother and shot her, and not just once. So I think I’m a pretty good expert on violence and domestic violence. My father was honest about what he did and you’ll notice in his first lot of books he said he did fourteen and a half years for the murder of his wife. He murdered my mother. After he passed away his third wife Eleanor (Ellie) describes it as an unintentional. So she
has been flippant about my mother’s murder by that one statement. I have fought her for many years to have the Author’s Note that she wrote in the book *Because a White Man’ll Never Do It*, published by Harper Collins, changed. This is what she wrote:

In 1957 he was sentenced to life imprisonment for the unintentional killing of his wife. He served fourteen and a half years in Her Majesty’s prisons – institutions of which, he said, she is perhaps not as ashamed as she should be.

Since I couldn’t get any justice for my mother from her I finally wrote to Harper Collins and they have agreed to make changes.

In 1957 he was sentenced to life imprisonment for the killing of his wife. He served fourteen and a half years in Her Majesty’s prisons.

*AB*: At least he was honest on that count.

*KR*: While I think he didn’t want to accept the reality of what he did, in a way he was pretty honest but not honest enough. He had the gift of words. I don’t like what he did and I’ll never accept what he did because you can’t accept anybody killing anybody; life’s precious. But he tried to right some wrongs for Aboriginal people. In one of his documentaries he said in jail he was being rewarded for something that he’d done which was very, very bad. He said: ‘I’ve done the ultimate sin but they’re rewarding me for it because they’re giving me three meals a day, they’re giving me a roof over my head, clothes on my back and a bed to sleep in, while my people, Aboriginal people out there, were living in refugee camps’. That’s where his driving force to make some difference came from. And I’m proud of him for that and love him for that, because he wanted to make a difference for his family and for Mob.

*AB*: I appreciate you being so frank, Kerry.

*KR*: That’s all right; I don’t mind. My father was pretty honest about what he’d done. I think that took a lot of courage. And he always said you do the crime you do the time. But it was never an accident. And I don’t allow anyone to write it off as an accident. My brother and I lost our mother because of his actions.

*AB*: Did he see any of your writing before he passed away?

*KR*: No. He knew I was writing but he never got to read any of my stuff because I didn’t really start writing until I got to Sydney. I went to Sydney in 1990. He died in 1993.
AB: So do you think there’s some connection between him passing away and your writing? When he passed away do you think that on one level that gave you permission to write?

KR: Ah yeah, totally.

AB: Do you think your style derives from him at all…?

KR: No.

AB: …or your concerns? You’re both very strong protest writers.

KR: Ah yeah, yeah. I think because we’ve live it every day – the injustice that is directed at Aboriginal people, the racism that’s directed at Aboriginal people. I live it every day of my life because I still got family who live it every day. I think the call for justice is very much a part and parcel of who we are as a people and as a family.

AB: And I think your contribution as a woman speaking is very significant because a lot of that early generation was dominated by male writers.

KR: Yeah, totally.

AB: When you were growing up did you see much activism?

KR: No, because we lived in a different time. The Tent Embassy allowed Blacks to be Blacks. We had nothing prior to that. All we did was work, go to school and work, because living was more important than anything else. Mummy making sure that we had food in our belly was the priority in those days. But the Tent Embassy gave us strength to stand up and be counted and unite as a people. I remember Mummy being so proud. Looking at the TV, watching the news.

AB: And you visited the Tent Embassy.

KR: Yeah, I went to the Tent. Mummy took me when I was a teenager. But only for the day; never to stay. I was still a state ward so Mummy would have that fear for us kids and the welfare finding out and taking us from her. They literally could do whatever they wanted with Aboriginal kids and families.

AB: And so when would you describe yourself as becoming political?

KR: Well, I believe that we’re political from the day we’re born. It was always political, confronting racism. That’s what being political is about: voicing our opinions, standing up for human rights.

AB: When did you become involved in organised activism? Was it through literature?

KR: Pretty much. Yeah. It was in 1993 in the year of the World’s Indigenous People in Sydney. Anita Heiss and I were asked to do a reading at Harold Park Hotel. So that’s the first time I ever read any of my work.
AB: I asked you yesterday what you thought the difference between your work and your father’s work was.

KR: A lot of my poems are very short. They’re a one punch king hit. Some people interpret me as an angry person, but I’m not angry, I’m just passionate. In reality we’re the same as other writers, except we are screaming out for justice, self-determination and self-management as a people. The principle is our sovereignty and our fight for justice and treaty and human rights. I think a great example of this is how my father put all his energy, all his passion, all his hate and anger into *Living Black* and then *Because a White Man’ll Never Do It*. You know, going around talking to Mob, talking to community.

AB: In the 1970s and the 1980s it was mainly Aboriginal men who had the political limelight, but the women were doing a lot of work keeping the families together, weren’t they?

KR: Everyone knows about Kevin Gilbert but nobody knows about his amazing sister Joyce who reared up his kids. She reared up all together five of her nieces and nephews, plus all the stray nieces and nephews that we had living with us at any one time. She reared up her grandkids too. But she also reared up my father and her two sisters – she was only seventeen and my father was seven – when they lost their parents.

While the men and some women were out there in the 1970s doing the Tent Embassy and the land rights act, women like Mummy were still fighting to keep their kids. That’s what Mummy was doing, that’s what my aunties were doing, all my extended family and cousins. They were taking care of the family, looking after the kids which was more important to them than going out there and having a political thing about land rights, because land rights wasn’t going to feed their kids. That’s the choice that they had. And that’s why I want to write my story, because my story is Mummy’s story, not so much my father’s story. One of the saddest things for me is that my father never dedicated one of his books to his sister Joyce. His first book should have been, thank you Joyce, thank you my big sister for looking after my kids. That’s what his first book should have said. He never said thank you to Mummy.

I found one of Mummy’s papers. She said she’s always wanted to write her own story. I’ve got the first five pages to her book, written in her own hand. Mummy’s now got dementia and she’s ninety and in the old people’s home. My story is about Mummy – this amazing woman who reared up all these kids, who’s got her name in Young as a king picker, the woman who could swing an axe better than a man and who walked two miles to earn two bob to feed her kids.

**AB:** And she had a political consciousness didn’t she?
KR: Oh she did. One of my biggest memories is when John F. Kennedy died and when Martin Luther King died and Mummy just sobbed. When we were kids and somebody passed away you weren’t allowed to have the TV on or anything like that for days. The TV was just turned off and if you were watching something on TV, the TV was just turned off straight away. And I remember Mummy saying when John F. Kennedy was President, ‘we need a President like him in this country. We need somebody like him who cares about Blacks’. But her priority was saving her kids, keeping her family together.

Once the welfare came to get us kids and Mummy had a shotgun which was broken. They were knocking at the door to get us kids and she said, ‘you come in here you bastards and I’ll blow your brains out’ and they went. And the gun was broken! If they had come in they would have taken us kids, but they didn’t.

AB: Did you get flack from Aboriginal people because of what your father had done or that was just from white fellas?

KR: No, just white fellas as far as I can remember. I only ever had one Black-fella ask me how I could love my father. And I say to him, how could I not? Because, how could I not? But when my father come out of jail, he married Cora – his second wife who used to write for New Dawn – and he came down to us (I was fourteen and a half so my brother would have been sixteen) and they wanted to take pictures of me and Kevin being reunited with our father and our Mummy. This amazing woman, Mummy, said no! You know why? She said: ‘These kids have been persecuted enough every time somebody found out that they were a Gilbert and you’re not going to put their faces all over the newspapers for them to be persecuted some more’. She had to do that to her own brother who she supported in jail for fourteen and a half years. How hard would that have been for her? So this amazing woman is where I get my strength from. What courage did it take her to say that to her brother the first time that she’d seen him out of jail in fourteen and a half years?

AB: I was going to ask you about your demands for a treaty and Aboriginal sovereignty in your two books.

KR: Oh I believe we need to have a treaty. We need to have that more than anything. We need some recognition in this country that there were Aboriginal people prior to Cook. We need to make a legal binding document with the Australian Government and the Australian people that gives us some rights, some power and some equality in this land. Now my father wrote the first draft treaty. It’s called *Aboriginal Land, Life and Freedom: Draft Treaty*. We haven’t got sovereign rights as a people and that treaty gives us recognition and power to negotiate as the First Nations of this country. We’re the bottom of the food
AB: I wanted to ask you your thoughts about non-Aboriginal people who are teaching and writing about Aboriginal literature. Can we play a role and if so what sort of role? Do you have any advice?

KR: Yes, I do, I do (laughter). I’ve got lots. Look, first off, do it! There’s not enough of us. We need people to walk beside us; and it is about walking beside us not in front of us. And so yes please, write your books, but please don’t chuck us in there as a token Abo. Bryce Courtenay, I read one of his books and he was writing about boxing. The Aboriginal young boy is going to fight the white young boy and guess who went and got on the piss the night before the fight…? Non-Aboriginal people (school teachers) can teach Aboriginal studies but really we should have Aboriginal people doing this as well. Non-Aboriginal teachers should invite Elders and community members in as guest speakers and they should make sure they are teaching the right stuff. But we haven’t got enough educators out there so we have to use the skills of others and there are a lot of good non-Aboriginal people in this land who are committed to making a difference.

AB: But writers often resort to stereotypes?

KR: Yeah. They can’t write anything Australian unless they put the Abo’ shit in it. That makes me mad. And so what I say to people is: you can write it, but do you need to have something in your book that is derogatory? What I say to people is, ‘look, if you’re going to do a book that’s got a reference to Aboriginal people, get somebody to have a look through it. Get an Aboriginal person to have a look through it. There’s always somebody who will have a look’. That is the role of FNANWN (First Nations Australia Writers Network). If you want somebody to have a look at your work now, you know you contact us at FNANWN.

AB: What about academics who write criticism about Aboriginal literature and teach it? Do you have any advice?

KR: Keep going at it. The reality is there’s not enough of us – Aboriginal writers.

AB: The other thing I wanted to ask you about is the two poems ‘Blackness 1’ and ‘Blackness 2’ in Talkin’ About Country – two very frank poems about skin colour. You have a line, ‘what I can’t accept is your lack of acceptance of yourself’ and I wanted to ask you about that.

KR: It’s a hard issue. There’s so many things about identity. There’s a lot of propaganda out there as well nowadays such as special treatment and handouts and some people are scared to admit they’re Aboriginal. And then on the other hand we have non-Aboriginal people who believe the propaganda that Aboriginal
people get ‘special treatment’ and that they claim Aboriginality for this reason. What I find is that a lot of the young people in their twenties and thirties, say, ‘Oh I’m part Aboriginal, but I’ve got English or Irish or Indian heritage.’ I think they do that so that they don’t get the stigma of getting special treatment.

I have a problem with people who say: ‘I’m part Aboriginal, and I’m Chinese, English or Irish.’ We, Aboriginal people will tell you, are Aboriginal 24/7; there’s no cut off point. It’s about who you’re reared up as. I’m an Aboriginal person. One of my great grandfathers was Irish, but I’ve never been Irish in my life. I have got no association with anything Irish. My grandfather’s family disowned him when he went with my Aboriginal grandmother. So there’s no essence of me that is Irish. My mother was a white Australian. My white Australian family wanted nothing to do with me and my brother. I’ve never been white in my life so why would I ever want to say that I’m Aboriginal and white Australian or part Aboriginal?

I’m an Aboriginal first and foremost, the same as I’m Aboriginal, then I’m a woman. I’m Aboriginal, then I’m Australian because that’s our identity. People are now saying you’ve got to acknowledge your other heritage. No you don’t. If you have not lived that other heritage you don’t have to say that just to make somebody happy. My ex was a white Australian, but he married into an Aboriginal family. He did that freely, and that meant that his children would be grown up Aboriginal and for all his faults he was happy with that and loved my family. Now that’s what I find with the majority of white men who marry into Aboriginal families. My grandkids have got blonde hair and blue eyes and different shades of colour but they are Aboriginal. And so it’s about giving them the confidence to be able to proudly say, ‘I’m Aboriginal’.

AB: So do you think it would be accurate or acceptable for some people to say, for example, that they’re Aboriginal people with Arabic heritage.

KR: Now that . . . . I love people saying it like that. I can’t stand people who say I’m half Aboriginal and half Irish or a quarter Irish . . . When an Aboriginal person who introduces themselves as a part Aboriginal that’s actually not a good thing to say. People who have not had their Aboriginality or been denied their Aboriginality need to learn their Aboriginality, learn their belonging, learn their history. I’ve never not been black for one day in my life, so I’m gonna die black. You know, over here at the Canberra Cemetery over in Mitchell, they’ve got an Aboriginal section.

AB: Oh!

KR: And I’m going to be buried in that Aboriginal section, you know why? They never assimilated me when I was alive and they’re not going to assimilate
me when I’m dead! Isn’t that bloody wonderful?

AB: (laughter) Yes!

KR: Why should we continue to be put in that melting pot? I don’t like the word multicultural. I don’t believe that we should be put into that multicultural melting pot because people are still trying to steal our identity as the First Peoples of this country. I say to people, we all belong to country. The difference is in that belonging. You said you are fifth generation Australian. Nothing wrong with that. Be proud of that. For you, if you’re acknowledging true country, people, history and heritage you’re doing your belonging with dignity and respect. I say to people: how can you belong to a country if you don’t know the history of that country? How do you belong to the country if you don’t know the people of the country? Now, that’s your belonging. You’ve got to learn it.

AB: In closing I wanted to ask you about the poem ‘On the other side of the street’ in By Close of Business (70). You write in one stanza: ‘on the other side of the street I sit / I watch the tourist walk up and down … I hang my head in shame as I glimpse you walk on by’ and then in another you write, ‘on the other side of the street I hold my head high / as I walk with dignity against the odds’. I wondered about these two different things happening there – hanging your head in shame and holding your head up high.

KR: That was written for Alice Springs. The tourists go to Alice Springs to see the Blacks – the Blacks that are down and out, that have got their head hanging in shame. But on that other side of the street while the tourists are walking past you’ve got the proud Blackfella sitting there. It’s about saying, you may be sitting on the side of the street and you may look down and out but you can still hold your head up high and be proud of who you are.

NOTE

Thanks to Michelle Levin for transcribing the interview.