

Verna Kirkness
*Creating Space: My Life and Work
 in Indigenous Education*

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This autobiography is an archive of transformative Indigenous leadership. In it, Verna Kirkness—Cree woman and visionary, teacher, mentor, friend, policymaker, culturally vibrant intellectual, and Aboriginal education trailblazer—recounts her life story. In a persistent context of systemic injustice done to Indigenous people, and as education continues to fail Indigenous students, Kirkness's story joins texts such as Patricia Monture Angus's *Thunder in My Soul* and Susan Dion's *Braiding Histories*. In these texts, Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists and educators recount their sometimes painful and frustrating endeavours to deconstruct oppressive systems and narratives. These stories offer inspiration and tools to connect and engage with more hopeful alternatives.

In the Preface, Kirkness affirms that her story of attempting to make space for Aboriginal people through “advancing Aboriginal education in different ways” (xii), is to be understood within a context of significant historical change. Kirkness's life story covers a span of time, from 1954 to 1993, that encompassed fully operational residential schools; the National Indian Brotherhood's seminal *Indian Control of Indian Education* (ICIE) policy paper; activism for increased Aboriginal parental and community jurisdiction in education; initial post-secondary institutional integration of Aboriginal perspectives and content into curriculum and structures; and the beginnings of the policy struggle with public school systems to improve Indigenous education.

In each of the book's chapters, Kirkness takes us through her life and experiences in a widening spiral of self-reflection, examination of relationships, and insights into where she came from, who she is, what she believes—her way of being, teaching, and learning. She begins by telling about her family and home community of Fisher

River and her teaching career. We read about Kirkness's connection to her mother and grandparents. She recounts memories, some of liminality, as a non-Status Indian and a member of a blended family. These memories have shaped, influenced, and supported her throughout her life and career. Notable is Kirkness's reflection on how being non-Status limited and sheltered her simultaneously, exempting her from Band membership, Indian Status, and compulsory residential school attendance. The former relegated her to non-Treaty Status while the latter left room for her to find an opportunity for self-actualization in school. Kirkness relates formative moments of her teaching career. She offers insights into the one-size-fits-all institutional approach to instruction and into the status of women in the 1950s.

In subsequent chapters, Kirkness continues to tell the story of her career through the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, as she reflects on achievements as well as life-changing challenges that she faced teaching in residential schools, isolated community schools, and urban schools. This reader is struck by the similarity between a number of practices Kirkness attests to having witnessed over the forty-year span of her career and practices that exist in the present. Yesterday and today these practices are situated on a spectrum from the blatantly assimilative to First Nations controlled. Assimilative practices are discussed, including the obligatory singing of "O Canada" to begin classes; administrative stigmatization of Aboriginal educators who provide personal attention and who listen to students; loneliness, humiliation and marginalization Indigenous students experienced when forced to attend schools far from their home communities; the erasure of Aboriginal presence, history, genocide, and resurgence in school curricula. First Nations controlled practices that Kirkness also witnessed and that continue today include the collaborative practice of parental engagement through consultation and first language communication; and, invitations extended to parents to share in school governance.

Realizations of the urgent need to reform Aboriginal education have shaped Kirkness's life and career as one of Canada's most widely recognized and respected advocates of Aboriginal education. The awareness she raised sparked the practice of ongoing initiatives many mainstream educators take for granted, such as the hiring of teacher aides to address overcrowded classrooms; the review of curriculum resources in Aboriginal education; and, language revitalization advocacy and program development. It is affirming to recognize the origins of these reforms in Kirkness's career and practice. It is simultaneously frustrating to acknowledge that the same reforms are threatened with eradication because they are far from entrenched in the public education system, even often deemed superfluous, and are in need of persistent advocacy to ensure their protection.

After a long career as a teacher, Kirkness joined the Native Indian Teacher Education Program (NITEP) at The University of British Columbia (UBC) in 1980. Kirkness remained a force in post-secondary education up until her retirement. She saw the inauguration of the International Indigenous Educators' conference (WIPCE) and played a major role in the founding of the UBC First Nations House of Learning. The UBC First Nations Longhouse remains the epicenter of Indigenous education, community programming, and events at the university. Its presence is a

recognition of territory, affirming the university's awareness of Indigenous students' needs for their own places and spaces in schools, and serving as an example to educational institutions everywhere.

A consistent theme throughout Verna Kirkness' work is insistence upon and advocacy for Indigenous education, parental responsibility and local control in that education, which are the foundational principles of ICIE. Kirkness demands these as essential to all efforts she engages in and promotes, in order to increase Aboriginal involvement in education and to counter ineffectual education systems.

This book is not only about Kirkness's role in sweeping educational change. It is also a very personal story, open and humble. Kirkness reveals losses in telling about grieving for her parents. She contemplates abiding struggles with romantic relationships. In building alliances, witnessing Indigenous resurgence and (de)colonizing methodologies in education, Kirkness embodies and reaffirms spirit.

While Kirkness is fearless in her quickly moving pattern of flow and development as an educator, her narrative is sometimes static. This attests to a struggle with a very exacting genre of writing. Inherent in the challenges of recollecting one's own past is the recounting of events in what some readers may interpret as unnecessary detail.

In a contemporary context where the proposed First Nations Education Act threatens jurisdiction and governance in Aboriginal education, meaningful integration of Aboriginal perspectives and content in a colonial education system remain subsumed by racism. Kirkness' story is a reply to this context, a significant chronicle of representational politics and cultural identity. This book offers ideas, models, and methodologies for the improvement of Aboriginal education, the improvement of general education, and for challenging the school system. As witnessing does, it calls for commensurate reflection and fierce action.