



CAROL GEDDES

Growing Up Native

Since Carol Geddes tells her own life story in the narrative that follows, we will not repeat it all here. Born into the security of her Tlingit First Nations family in the wilds of the Yukon, she was six when she first knew her country's majority culture and began to see the problems it causes for Native people. Since then she has spent her life integrating these two worlds. She celebrates the current "renaissance" of interest in Native culture, yet also values the rest of North American life. "We need our culture," she writes, "but there's no reason why we can't preserve it and have an automatic washing machine and a holiday in Mexico, as well." Hers is a success story. Despite the obstacles, she completed a university degree in English and philosophy (Carleton, 1978), did graduate studies in communications at McGill, and is today a successful filmmaker and spokesperson for her people. In addition to her films Place for Our People (1981), Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief (National Film Board, 1986) and Picturing a People: George Johnston, Tlingit Photographer (NFB, 1997), she has produced some 25 videos on the lives and culture of aboriginal people in Canada. Geddes is a producer at Studio One of the National Film Board, and has taught other filmmakers at the Banff Centre for the Arts. She has also been a Director of the Yukon Human Rights Commission, the Yukon Heritage Resources Board and the Women's Television Network Foundation, and is the first Northerner and first Native Person to be a Director of the Canada Council. In her spare time she does wilderness hiking and fishing in the Yukon, where she lives. Our selection, from homemakers magazine of October 1990, won the National Magazine Awards Foundation Silver Award.

1 I remember it was cold. We were walking through a swamp near
our home in the Yukon bush. Maybe it was fall and moose-
2 hunting season. I don't know. I think I was about four years
old at the time. The muskeg was too springy to walk on, so people
were taking turns carrying me—passing me from one set of arms to
another. The details about where we were are vague, but the memory
of those arms and the feeling of acceptance I had is one of the most
vivid memories of my childhood. It didn't matter who was carrying
me—there was security in every pair of arms. That response to chil-
dren is typical of the native community. It's the first thing I think of
when I cast my mind back to the Yukon bush, where I was born and
lived with my family.

2 I was six years old when we moved out of the bush, first to Teslin,
where I had a hint of the problems native people face, then to
Whitehorse, where there was unimaginable racism. Eventually I
moved to Ottawa and Montreal, where I further discovered that
to grow up native in Canada is to feel the sting of humiliation and
the boot of discrimination. But it is also to experience the enviable
security of an extended family and to learn to appreciate the richness
of the heritage and traditions of a culture most North Americans
have never been lucky enough to know. As a film-maker, I have
tried to explore these contradictions, and our triumph over them,
for the half-million aboriginals who are part of the tide of swelling
independence of the First Nations today.

3 But I'm getting ahead of myself. If I'm to tell the story of what it's
like to grow up native in northern Canada, I have to go back to the
bush where I was born, because there's more to my story than the
hurtful stereotyping that depicts Indian people as drunken welfare
cases. Our area was known as 12-mile (it was 12 miles from another
tiny village). There were about 40 people living there—including
25 kids, eight of them my brothers and sisters—in a sort of family
compound. Each family had its own timber plank house for sleeping,
and there was one large common kitchen area with gravel on the
ground and a tent frame over it. Everybody would go there and cook
meals together. In summer, my grandmother always had a smudge
fire going to smoke fish and tan moose hides. I can remember the
cosy warmth of the fire, the smell of good food, and always having

someone to talk to. We kids had built-in playmates and would spend hours running in the bush, picking berries, building rafts on the lake and playing in abandoned mink cages.

One of the people in my village tells a story about the day the old lifestyle began to change. He had been away hunting in the bush for about a month. On his way back, he heard a strange sound coming from far away. He ran up to the crest of a hill, looked over the top of it and saw a bulldozer. He had never seen or heard of such a thing before and he couldn't imagine what it was. We didn't have magazines or newspapers in our village, and the people didn't know that the Alaska Highway was being built as a defence against a presumed Japanese invasion during the Second World War. That was the beginning of the end of the Teslin Tlingit people's way of life. From that moment on, nothing turned back to the way it was. Although there were employment opportunities for my father and uncles, who were young men at the time, the speed and force with which the Alaska Highway was rammed through the wilderness caused tremendous upheaval for Yukon native people.

It wasn't as though we'd never experienced change before. The Tlingit Nation, which I belong to, arrived in the Yukon from the Alaskan coast around the turn of the century. They were the middlemen and women between the Russian traders and the Yukon inland Indians. The Tlingit gained power and prestige by trading European products such as metal goods and cloth for the rich and varied furs so much in fashion in Europe. The Tlingit controlled Yukon trading because they controlled the trading routes through the high mountain passes. When trading ceased to be an effective means of survival, my grandparents began raising wild mink in cages. Mink prices were really high before and during the war, but afterwards the prices went plunging down. So, although the mink pens were still there when I was a little girl, my father mainly worked on highway construction and hunted in the bush. The Yukon was then, and still is in some ways, in a transitional period—from living off the land to getting into a European wage-based economy.

As a young child, I didn't see the full extent of the upheaval. I remember a lot of togetherness, a lot of happiness while we lived in the bush. There's a very strong sense of family in the native

community, and a fondness for children, especially young children. Even today, it's like a special form of entertainment if someone brings a baby to visit. That sense of family is the one thing that has survived all the incredible difficulties native people have had. Throughout a time of tremendous problems, the extended family system has somehow lasted, providing a strong circle for people to survive in. When parents were struggling with alcoholism or had to go away to find work, when one of the many epidemics swept through the community, or when a marriage broke up and one parent left, aunts, uncles and grandparents would try to fill those roles. It's been very important to me in terms of emotional support to be able to rely on my extended family. There are still times when such support keeps me going.

7 Life was much simpler when we lived in the bush. Although we were poor and wore the same clothes all year, we were warm enough and had plenty to eat. But even as a youngster, I began to be aware of some of the problems we would face later on. Travelling missionaries would come and impose themselves on us, for example. They'd sit at our campfire and read the Bible to us and lecture us about how we had to live a Christian life. I remember being very frightened by stories we heard about parents sending their kids away to live with white people who didn't have any children. We thought those people were mean and that if we were bad, we'd be sent away, too. Of course, that was when social workers were scooping up native children and adopting them out to white families in the south. The consequences were usually disastrous for the children who were taken away—alienation, alcoholism and suicide, among other things. I knew some of those kids. The survivors are still struggling to recover.

8 The residential schools were another source of misery for the kids. Although I didn't have to go, my brothers and sisters were there. They told stories about having their hair cut off in case they were carrying head lice, and of being forced to do hard chores without enough food to eat. They were told that the Indian culture was evil, that Indian people were bad, that their only hope was to be Christian. They had to stand up and say things like "I've found the Lord," when a teacher told them to speak. Sexual abuse was rampant in the residential school system.

By the time we moved to Whitehorse, I was excited about the idea of living in what I thought of as a big town. I'd had a taste of the outside world from books at school in Teslin (a town of 250 people), and I was tremendously curious about what life was like. I was hungry for experiences such as going to the circus. In fact, for a while, I was obsessed with stories and pictures about the circus, but then when I was 12 and saw my first one, I was put off by the condition and treatment of the animals.

Going to school in Whitehorse was a shock. The clash of native and white values was confusing and frightening. Let me tell you a story. The older boys in our community were already accomplished hunters and fishermen, but since they had to trap beaver in the spring and hunt moose in the fall, and go out trapping in the winter as well, they missed a lot of school. We were all in one classroom and some of my very large teenage cousins had to sit squeezed into little desks. These guys couldn't read very well. We girls had been in school all along, so, of course, we were better readers. One day the teacher was trying to get one of the older boys to read. She was typical of the teachers at that time, insensitive and ignorant of cultural complexities. In an increasingly loud voice, she kept commanding him to "Read it, read it." He couldn't. He sat there completely still, but I could see that he was breaking into a sweat. The teacher then said, "Look, she can read it," and she pointed to me, indicating that I should stand up and read. For a young child to try to show up an older boy is wrong and totally contrary to native cultural values, so I refused. She told me to stand up and I did. My hands were trembling as I held my reader. She yelled at me to read and when I didn't she smashed her pointing stick on the desk to frighten me. In terror, I wet my pants. As I stood there fighting my tears of shame, she said I was disgusting and sent me home. I had to walk a long distance through the bush by myself to get home. I remember feeling this tremendous confusion, on top of my humiliation. We were always told the white teachers knew best, and so we had to do whatever they said at school. And yet I had a really strong sense of receiving mixed messages about what I was supposed to do in the community and what I was supposed to do at school.

Pretty soon I hated school. Moving to a predominantly white high school was even worse. We weren't allowed to join anything the white

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kids started. We were the butt of jokes because of our secondhand clothes and moose meat sandwiches. We were constantly being rejected. The prevailing attitude was that Indians were stupid. When it was time to make course choices in class—between typing and science, for example—they didn't even ask the native kids, they just put us all in typing. You get a really bad image of yourself in a situation like that. I bought into it. I thought we were awful. The whole experience was terribly undermining. Once, my grandmother gave me a pretty little pencil box. I walked into the classroom one day to find the word "squaw" carved on it. That night I burned it in the wood stove. I joined the tough crowd and by the time I was 15 years old, I was more likely to be leaning against the school smoking a cigarette than trying to join in. I was burned out from trying to join the system. The principal told my father there was no point in sending me back to school so, with a Grade 9 education, I started to work at a series of menial jobs.

12 Seven years later something happened to me that would change my life forever. I had moved to Ottawa with a man and was working as a waitress in a restaurant. One day, a friend invited me to her place for coffee. While I was there, she told me she was going to university in the fall and showed me her reading list. I'll never forget the minutes that followed. I was feeling vaguely envious of her and, once again, inferior. I remember taking the paper in my hand, seeing the books on it and realizing, Oh, my God, I've read these books! It hit me like a thunderclap. I was stunned that books I had read were being read in university. University was for white kids, not native kids. We were too stupid, we didn't have the kind of mind it took to do those things. My eyes moved down the list, and my heart started beating faster and faster as I suddenly realized I could go to university, too!

13 My partner at the time was a loving supportive man who helped me in every way. I applied to the university immediately as a mature student but when I had to write Grade 9 on the application, I was sure they'd turn me down. They didn't. I graduated five years later, earning a bachelor of arts in English and philosophy (with distinction).

14 It was while I was studying for a master's degree in communications at McGill a few years later that I was approached to direct my

second film (the first was a student film). *Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief* (a National Film Board production) depicts the struggle of a number of native women—one who began her adult life on welfare, a government minister, a chief, a fisherwoman and Canada's first native woman lawyer. The film is about overcoming obstacles and surviving. It's the story of most native people.

Today, there's a glimmer of hope that more of us native people will overcome the obstacles that have tripped us up ever since we began sharing this land. Some say our cultures are going through a renaissance. Maybe that's true. Certainly there's a renewed interest in native dancing, acting and singing, and in other cultural traditions. Even indigenous forms of government are becoming strong again. But we can't forget that the majority of native people live in urban areas and continue to suffer from alcohol and drug abuse and the plagues of a people who have lost their culture and have become lost themselves. And the welfare system is the insidious glue that holds together the machine of oppression of native people. 15

Too many non-native people have refused to try to understand the issues behind our land claims. They make complacent pronouncements such as "Go back to your bows and arrows and fish with spears if you want aboriginal rights. If not, give it up and assimilate into white Canadian culture." I don't agree with that. We need our culture, but there's no reason why we can't preserve it and have an automatic washing machine and a holiday in Mexico, as well. 16

The time has come for native people to make our own decisions. We need to have self-government. I have no illusions that it will be smooth sailing—there will be trial and error and further struggle. And if that means crawling before we can stand up and walk, so be it. We'll have to learn through experience. 17

While we're learning, we have a lot to teach and give to the world—a holistic philosophy, a way of living with the earth, not disposing of it. It is critical that we all learn from the elders that an individual is not more important than a forest; we know that we're here to live on and with the earth, not to subdue it. 18

The wheels are in motion for a revival, for change in the way native people are taking their place in Canada. I can see that we're 19

equipped, we have the tools to do the work. We have an enormous number of smart, talented, moral Indian people. It's thrilling to be a part of this movement.

20 Someday, when I'm an elder, I'll tell the children the stories: about the bush, about the hard times, about the renaissance, and especially about the importance of knowing your place in your nation.

EXPLORATIONS:

Carol Geddes, *Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief* (NFB film, 29 min.)

Daniel David Moses and Terry Goldie, eds., *An Anthology of Canadian Native Writers in English*

Penny Petrone, ed., *First People, First Voices* (anthology of writings by First Nations people in Canada)

Julie Cruikshank, *Life Lived Like a Story* (interviews with Native Canadian women)

Brian Maracle, *Back on the Rez: Finding the Way Home* (memoir)

Basil Johnston, *Indian School Days* (memoir)

Hugh Brody, *Maps and Dreams* (anthropology)

Tomson Highway, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (novel)

http://www.nfb.ca/portraits/carol_geddes/en

<http://users.ap.net/~chenae/natlink.html>

<http://www.nativeweb.org>

http://www.collectionscanada.ca/02/02012001_e.html

STRUCTURE:

1. "I remember it was cold," says Geddes in her opening sentence, and "Someday, when I'm an elder," she says in her closing sentence. Most *narratives* in this chapter relate one incident, but "Growing Up Native" tells the highs and lows of a whole life. Has Geddes attempted too much? Or has she got her message across by focussing on the right moments of her life? Cite examples to defend your answer.
2. Did you have the impression of being *told* a story, rather than reading it on the page? Cite passages where "Growing Up Native"

comes across as oral history, as a tale told in person. Why do you think Geddes may have taken this approach?

3. Does Geddes *narrate* in straight chronological order? Point out any flashbacks or other departures from the pattern.
4. Read paragraph 12 aloud. Analyze its power as a TRANSITION between Geddes' past and present.

STYLE:

1. Geddes' paragraphs are well organized: most begin with a topic sentence, then clearly develop it with examples. Identify five paragraphs that follow this pattern.
2. Why are paragraph 10 and several others so long? Why is paragraph 20 so short?
3. In paragraph 2 Geddes tells of "the sting of humiliation and the boot of discrimination." Find other good FIGURES OF SPEECH in paragraphs 9, 12 and 15.

IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITING:

1. Despite the hardships of living in the bush, does Geddes' childhood sound like a good one? If so, why? Give *examples*.
2. Geddes exposes various ways in which First Nations people have been STEREOTYPED. Point out the worst of these.
3. The white high school of paragraph 11 routinely put native students in typing instead of science. How do the high schools of your province advise minority students as to course selection and career? Is a minority or working-class student shut out from opportunity, or encouraged to try? Give *examples* from your own observation.
4. Geddes envisions First Nations people keeping their culture, yet also having washing machines and holidays in Mexico (par. 16). Discuss techniques for achieving such goals in the urban setting where most Native people now live.
5. **PROCESS IN WRITING:** Interview someone who either grew up long ago, or who is from a culture very different from yours, to hear her or his life story. Tape the interview, then at home play it back, taking notes. Now choose either one main event of this narrative (such as the scene in which Geddes realizes she too can go to university), OR choose to give the overall sweep