

INTERVIEW WITH DOREEN JENSEN

LYNNE BELL AND CAROL WILLIAMS

Artist, teacher, historian, curator, political and environmental activist, Doreen Jensen was born in Kispiox and delivered by a medicine woman in her great-grandmother's bedroom. In the interview that follows, Doreen talks about the role of the traditional Gitxsan artist and the significance of dance, song, performance, story-telling, and the visual arts in the everyday life of her community. A graduate



of the Kitanmax School of Northwest Coast Indian Art in Hazelton, Doreen Jensen, (1992) Photograph by Alexis MacDonald Seto.

Art in Hazelton, Doreen talks about this school's curriculum and its significance for the cultural revival of the Gitxsan peoples of the Upper Skeena. Stressing the importance of listening and learning, Doreen talks about her work as a historian and curator for the exhibition (and subsequent volume) *Robes of Power: Totem Poles on Cloth* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1986), in which elders and artists share their knowledge about ceremonial button blankets. In 1991, Doreen Jensen and Cheryl Brooks guest-edited a special issue of *BC Studies* entitled "A Celebration of Our Survival: The First Nations of British Columbia (no. 89)." In 1996, Doreen co-curated the exhibition

Topographies: Aspects of Recent BC Art (1996) at the invitation of the Vancouver Art Gallery. Most recently Doreen has contributed an essay for the exhibition *Through My Eyes: Northwest Coast Artifacts* on exhibit at the Vancouver Museum to 1998. A versatile artist working in carving, weaving, jewellery, printmaking, and button blankets, she is one of four indigenous artists featured in Loretta Todd's video *Hands of History* (NFB: 1994). She is a founding member of many organizations, including the Ksan Association and the Society of Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry. In addition she is a contributing member of the research collective, the Ksan Book Builders. In 1992 she was awarded the honorary degree of doctor of letters by the University of British Columbia.

In October 1995 we met with Doreen Jensen in her home in South Surrey. A large winter storm the previous night had caused a power outage, and we conducted the interview huddled in front of the fireplace, surrounded by candles, and using Doreen's battery-operated tape recorder. At times we interrupted our talk to examine her carvings, bentwood boxes, prints, and button blankets, all of which are displayed throughout the house and in her working studio. The interview was edited and slightly modified, with Doreen's assistance, in the spring of 1997.

This following conversation with Doreen Jensen is one of sixteen scholarly interviews conducted by Lynne Bell and Carol Williams with Canadian artists, curators, film- and video-makers, and critics over the past three years. The subject of these interviews is women and change in the visual arts, and they were made possible thanks to a research grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

CAROL: In the video tape *Hands of History* by Loretta Todd, which features the work of four Aboriginal women artists, Jane Ash Poitras describes the artist as a healer, while Rena Point Bolton talks about the role of the artist as a carrier of her people's culture during the potlatch ban from 1884-1951. Will you tell us what you think the role of the artist is?

DOREEN: Traditionally, in my culture the role of the artist has been to record family histories. The artist collaborated with the person who commissioned a piece, before going into retreat to develop a visual history of that person's family. The work

was shown publicly after it was completed, just as happens today at an art exhibition, only the artist composed songs and created performance pieces to go with the work and the chiefs were called in from the surrounding areas to witness it. Art is a holistic thing, it tells the history of the people and it is a way of communicating that history from one generation to the next.

Women play an important role in the preservation of my culture's history and traditions because we're a matrilineal culture. So, in my work as a visual artist, oral historian, writer, and public speaker I have to bring forward my family history. Most of the arts that are created by First Nations artists are important on many different levels: they are important as objects of beauty but they are also important for their sacredness and for the history they tell. When you look at a piece you know that a family has been represented: it's like opening a book and reading, if you understand the language of that culture.

LYNNE: In *Gallerie* you describe yourself as a traditional Gitksan artist, a designation which encompasses your work as a teacher, historian, community organizer, curator, mother, and political activist as well as a visual artist involved in carving, fabric, dance, songs, performance, and writing. Can you talk about how you've developed this diverse practice and why it is significant for you to work in so many different capacities?

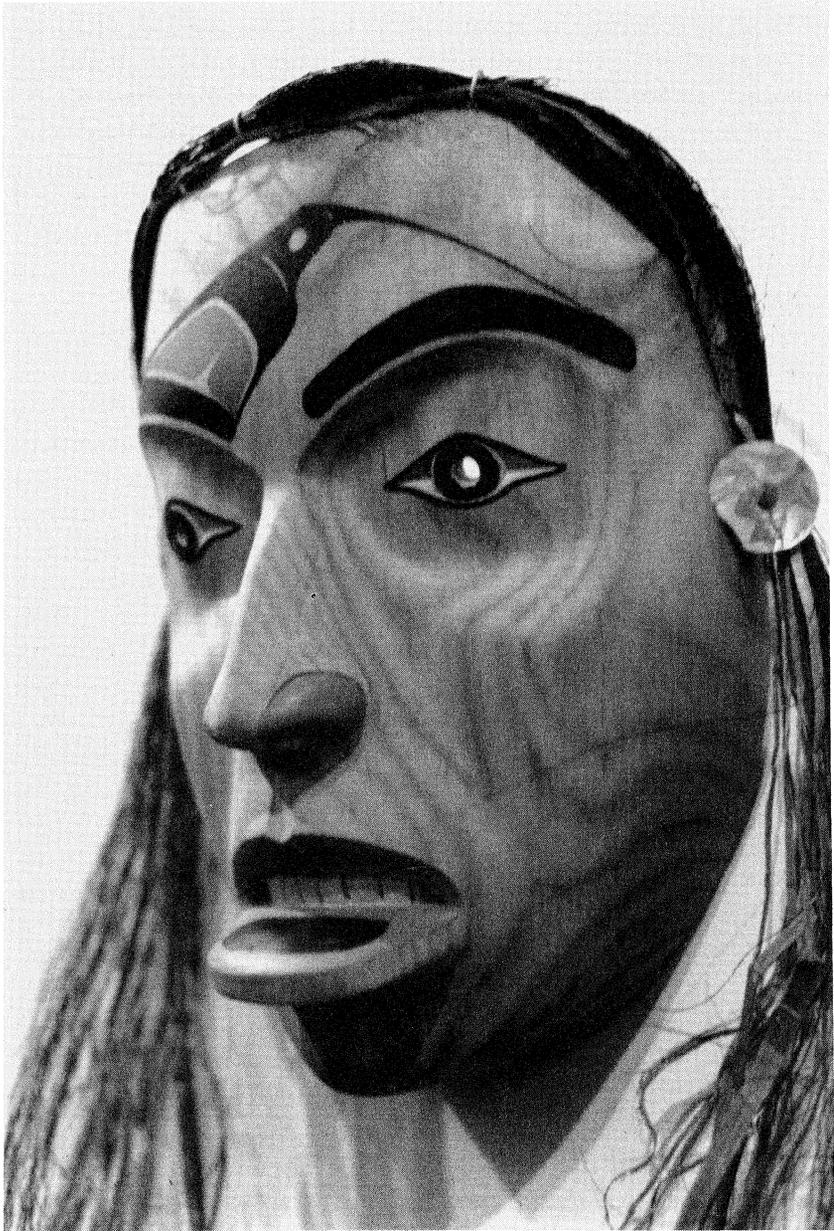
DOREEN: Whenever people used to ask me what I did, I didn't know what to say because I was always doing something other than "art-making." I began to work in this diverse way when I first realized that we Gitksan did not have a voice out there. When the potlatch ban was lifted in 1951, I felt that work had to be done to educate people to develop a better awareness of our art and culture: this is how I started as a teacher. And I am a historian because I go and seek out people who have the knowledge, the old knowledge, nothing that you can read in books. As to being a community organizer, we are raised to understand how to be good community organizers because the women are the ones who put on these huge feasts. Our system works so well, everybody knows what to bring to the feast. All of the *Fireweed*, for example, know that they have to bring a big pot of soup, a case of bread, a case of oranges, and a case of crackers to be handed out to the guest witnesses. On top of that, we stockpile all kinds of things as payments to people who act as witnesses for our business transactions at the feast. So right from an early age I

learned to be a community organizer because that's part of our job. As to being a mother, we know what mothers do more than anything else: they nurture. So it seems that nurturing comes out in whatever I'm doing. It's all part of what I am. I am also a grandmother and a friend.

As a visual artist, I try to portray things that are important to me. When I did the portrait mask of my great-grandmother, for example, I imagined how she would have looked when she was younger, when she wore the lip labret. By the time I was old enough to know what was happening, all of our customs had been banned and she could not wear her lip labret. I used to wonder why her lip hung down and then I noticed there was a hole right through it. When I asked my family about it they would say, "Oh, that's what we call lip labrets." That's all they would say, they didn't talk about the banning of our cultural traditions. When I was young that answer was satisfactory, but later on, I thought, "Why couldn't my great-grandmother wear a lip labret if she was a noble woman and had the right to wear a lip labret? Why was she made to stop?" So I became interested in being a political activist working for people who can't speak for themselves anymore because they are gone and for people who have been marginalized. I work for people who have somehow lost their voice because the dominant society has spoken with such force and said, "This is how it is." And I'm saying, "No, no, we have to speak up if we ever want to reclaim our identities."

We don't have a word in our language for "art" because art was all around us. If I went for a walk as a child I'd see the totems and the community hall, which not only housed art but was a work of art in itself. And the story-tellers were very artistic in their delivery of the stories. When my grandfather, grandmother, mum, or dad spoke, I would see an image of what they were talking about. You never interrupted a story-teller when they were speaking. If there was something you didn't understand, you had to ask later. Art was fully integrated with the daily life of my people. Artists were provided for on a life-long basis: they didn't have to go out and hunt because their work was art. They had to understand all of the different family histories and the imagery that went with these histories. Their lives were fully integrated with the larger community, they were not separate from it.

I started curating because I felt that it was important that our voices be heard. I don't go looking for work, I'm invited to consider different



Doreen Jensen "My Great-Grandmother with Lip Labret" (1994). Alderwood, horsetail, and red-cedar bark, acrylic paint, abalone shell. Photograph by Vickie Jensen.

projects. But I still have to go for an interview and the usual question is, "Well, what is your background?" So I say, "I was born in Kispiox and I was delivered by a medicine woman in my great-grandmother's bedroom." I know this is not the background they are talking about, but this is *my* background. We have different ways of defining what is important to us. I was born a *Fireweed* and nobody can take that away from me: my family crest is the two whales and that's an earned identity. Our family has to pay taxes in the feast hall to keep up that title: all of the family members have to contribute, and the chief, in particular, has to contribute large sums of money. The financial institution of the Gitksan is very much the same as the financial institutions of the Western world except that we have much more fun paying our taxes. We put our \$100 bills on a tree branch and dance forward to put them into the pot. This is our contribution and it is recorded. What we are doing is maintaining our level of government because our chief has to be able to provide for the whole family unit, which is huge.

At one time our financial contributions were used partly to maintain the territories which are now all logged off, mined out, or have roads, railway tracks, and power poles running through them. The Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en peoples took their land claims to the BC Supreme Court in 1987. Our claim is in the records now, so that's good, even though we *did* lose the case. It was ironic that the decision was brought down on International Womens' Day on March 8th, 1991. At the time, I thought, "How shocking. Why would this White judge, Chief Justice Allan McEachern, bring this negative decision down on International Womens' Day? Did he do that on purpose because we're a matrilineal society?"

The term "Land Claims" is really a misnomer, we're not really claiming land because it's our land. I would just say that we are redefining our boundaries. We actually do have boundary markers still out there, although some have been cut down and taken away. Last summer, the Gitksan sent people out into the forest to photograph the territorial markers. We had a really sophisticated system of marking the boundaries, using not only the rivers and streams but also the living trees, which are carved with the symbol of whomever held title to that part of the territory.

I'll never forget the first day of the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en court case. Mary Johnson, one of the elders from Kispiox, wanted to sing one of our dirges before the court began because that's our traditional



“Territorial Marker of Geels House. Fireweed Clan. Gitksan Nation. Outside of Geels (Walter Harris) Studio in Kispiox.” (1991) Photograph by Amy Napier-Henry.

way of doing things. Before you do anything important you sing this very ancient dirge. And Judge McEachern said, “I’m not having drums in my Court House! And besides I’ve got a tin ear.” So Chief

Mary Johnson went right up to the judge and said, very slowly, “Your Honour, I have a can opener!” and then she laughed. Chief Mary Johnson was devastated that she could not use her very ancient song, so she used humour in her response. But it was lost on the judge because he had no sense of humour, he just didn’t understand her point. But I felt that she made quite a brilliant response.

CAROL: With your political commitment and your diverse practice as an artist, you obviously can’t work full time as a carver. In *Hands of History*, you state that you’d like to spend more time with the community of Gitxsan carvers and talk to them about their art. May we ask you the same questions that you said you’d like to ask these carvers, namely, “What does it feel like when you do your art?” and, “Why do you do your work?”

DOREEN: When I am doing my art I really feel like I’m in a different place. It sometimes feels as though there is someone behind me who is guiding me. I just feel that presence. Once I get started I don’t want to stop, and sometimes I will work till three or four in the morning. And when I get up the next day I’ll think, “Gee, I don’t remember doing that part. Did I do that part?” It seems as though I’m being guided and that the piece just comes together. It always amazes me when this happens.

When I do commissions for ceremonial use my heart is really honoured. It’s a special thing to have a chief commission you to do something. I remember how this chief, who was assuming her mother’s name, commissioned my mother to do her new button blanket. But my mother had “to give hands” to me and my sister, so that we were the ones who actually carried out the making of the button blanket. We made sketches and talked to the chief about what she wanted, and when the design was agreed upon we went ahead with the piece. There is never a downpayment for these ceremonial commissions, but once the chief puts the button blanket on and it is witnessed at the feast hall then the chief acknowledges the artist and pays them very handsomely not only with cash but with goods — food, blankets, dishes, or whatever. It is very exciting to work on these commissions: if you’re making a button blanket for ceremonial use, you know that it is going to live for many generations because it gets passed on.

Although I really enjoy getting these commissions from a chief, I also enjoy getting commissions from people who would like to have a piece of my work. That has a different kind of excitement. It feels

really good when people like my work, and the financial reward is also very welcome. I'm certainly not averse to receiving financial reward for work that I've spent maybe months on.

LYNNE: Since the 1950s you have worked steadily for the revival of Gitksan culture, and we note that you are a graduate of the Kitanmax School of Northwest Coast Indian Art in Ksan along with such artists as Dempsey Bob, Frieda Diesing, and Roy Vickers. Can you talk about this school's history and its significance for the local community and the Gitksan cultural revival?

DOREEN: The Kitanmax School of Northwest Coast Art was started because we needed to reclaim our traditional performance arts for a play we were putting on called *Breath of Our Grandfathers*. Up until 1951 we couldn't practice our arts because of the potlatch ban and the danger of going to jail. Once the potlatch ban was lifted, we had to reclaim our arts by relearning them. Work on the performance *Breath of Our Grandfathers* started in 1953, but the school wasn't officially established until several years after the opening of the Ksan Historic Indian Village in 1968. And *Breath of Our Grandfathers* was performed in 1972 when we took it to the National Art Centre in Ottawa.

Breath of Our Grandfathers explained the intricacies of the feast, or potlatch. Most people think feasting is about gorging, but the feast is really our court of law where all kinds of business is carried out, whether it's a person receiving a name, a person getting a divorce, a child getting its first name, or a child getting its first menstruation. So we composed *Breath of Our Grandfathers*, which incorporated all of the things that would go on at a feast, including dancing, singing, feasting as well as the business that was carried out and the gift payments that were made. There are many reasons why feasts are held, and there are even shame feasts. If a chief, for example, accidentally wears his robe upside down, or inside out, then he would have to have a shame feast so that the shame would be wiped off him. One man actually spent two years preparing for his shame feast because he had complained about the quality of the oolichan grease, and threw it on the ground. He really felt he had to do a lot to cleanse himself of the shame of being disrespectful to such a wonderful thing as oolichan grease which you know comes from that little smelt-like fish that we call "the healer of all humanity." He composed songs and performance pieces and designed masks and then called in the people and had a big celebration just to show that he wanted his good name back.

So the Kitanmax School of Art grew out of the need to put on the play *Breath of Our Grandfathers*. There was also a need to replicate the old pieces so that we could send ambassadors out into the world: the masks and totems are considered ambassadors. It's like making a book and then sending it out as your ambassador into the world to tell your story. We've trained quite a number of people through that school. At first it was mainly Gitksan people who trained there, but now artists come from a wide area.

Once we had the training, we were able to create the first replicas of the old pieces, and then, as we grew in our artistic and creative skills, we began to create our own version of our stories, histories, legends, and myths. People come from near and far to see the Gitksan Gift House in the Ksan Village; some people buy pieces, others don't, they just come to appreciate what is there. So the school has had quite an impact. When I attended the school, I took a two-year course. In the first year we studied the design elements — the ABC's of Northwest Coast art — the ovoid shapes and the crescents, and we practised and practised. We also learnt how to do flat design. In the second year, we studied three-dimensional pieces: the instructors set up the project and we all did the same thing. But now they have a graduate program where you go out on your own and you design and make something with your teacher there to help you. I would like to take the Master's program now — or maybe start at the beginning again! [*laughter*]

CAROL: Have you taught at the school?

DOREEN: I didn't teach at the Kitanmax School of Art, but I was on the board of directors and I helped to organize classes in wood block printing, Chilkat blanket weaving, and bentwood box making. All of these skills had to be researched, and experts were brought in to teach the classes. I taught silkscreen printing and the Gitksan language to school children. The children used to come to me after school because Gitksan wasn't allowed in schools at the time. So I taught them out of class. And today, some of the students are in university and they say, "I am so glad that you taught me how to read and write Gitksan because it's so useful to me now."

CAROL: Did you have the language yourself or did you have to relearn it?

DOREEN: I am fluent in Gitksan, but I could not write or read it until I studied it. My cousin Lonnie Hindle developed the phonetic

system for the Gitksan language with Bruce Rigsby, a linguist from the States. So I used their information and started teaching. I just found a space and did it. There was no money for grants in those days, you just did it because it needed to be done. The old people, my masters as I call them, taught me the songs, the dancing, and how to perform the movements of different animals. I was taught by twenty great masters, and because I could write down the songs I was able to teach a whole group of people. At first they were resentful because they didn't want to have all this stuff on the blackboard they didn't understand. But it wasn't long until they caught on. Even the people who could not speak the language could sing the songs because they could read Gitksan. So it worked out really well in the end, and there's about three or four generations now who are singing the songs.

CAROL: So, early on, you saw the significance of the role of the educator?

DOREEN: Yes, even though other people didn't see it at first. They were rightfully nervous about making our cultural heritage available because they felt that their voice had been stolen away for so long by the varied newcomers who came — the scholars, the traders who actually took the arts away, and the missionaries. The early missionaries were the worst: they were given pieces as a very special gift and in some cases they turned around and sold them or they kept them for a while and then eventually sold them. That really was a disappointment, as they were given the gifts in good faith. But we have different values. In the Western world when you get paid it's in cash and you feel perfectly free to go and spend it. But when you're paid in an object that has been created especially for you, it is for *you*, and it's not for you to sell or to put in a museum.

LYNNE: In *Gallerie* you state that the elders of your people have nurtured the important cultural traditions against tremendous odds and that they have bequeathed your people a great legacy of communication through the arts. Elsewhere, you talk about the role that your grandparents and parents have played in training you in the arts, ideas, and histories of the Gitksan. And throughout the video *Hands of History* you talk about your mother, Clara Harris, as having given you support at crucial points in your career. For instance, she gave you tremendous support when you were a young girl in the White school system and when you made Ron George's ceremonial vest. Can you talk about the power you draw from the elders in your own work?

DOREEN: Well, I'll start with my mother. When my mother walked through the forest with me, she talked to the plants as though they were living creatures, but really she was teaching me. She talked to the little bunch-berries about how pretty they were and how good they were at thickening our jam, and she talked to the big broad-leaf fern that we used as a place-mat. This is how we were taught the names of these particular things.

When mom taught me how to cut the salmon for smoking, she didn't say, "This is how you cut it," she just did about three and then she said, "Okay, you can do it now," and then she left. And I had the knife in my hand and I thought, "What am I going to do?" I really tried my best to remember how she had done it because our teaching is voiceless. We have to learn to watch and understand what's going on. Anyway, mom came back out after about half an hour and I had totally mangled my salmon. It looked like a filigree, there were so many holes through it. But she said, "That's pretty good," and she took a few little sticks and wove the broken meat together and said, "You can hang it in the smoke-house now!" So I hung this precious piece of fish up and my mother worked away at it again with little sticks and I just stood there and watched. That's how we learn. My younger sister learnt really well, and now we learn from her. She's just like mom, she doesn't talk, she just works away and expects you to stand there and watch. When she's got everything cleaned and filleted, she'll sit on a stump just like mom used to outside of the smoke-house and she'll have a cigarette. We don't ask questions, we are supposed to remember how she did it. That's the difference between the Western style of learning and the Gitksan way of learning. The Western way is with words — a steady flow of words — which you have to retain. With us the teaching is wordless. I think it's important to notice these differences because there are many different ways of learning. There isn't just one way.

LYNNE: As a curator and historian you have promoted the work of Aboriginal artists — in particular women artists — who work in the contemporary practice of traditional arts such as basket-weaving. And you talk about the importance of resisting the dichotomous labels of art/craft and traditional/contemporary that have been imposed on this work by European historians and anthropologists. Can you talk about the significance of recording the histories of these traditional art forms in order to give "voice" to your people's culture?

DOREEN: Well, my heart is just in awe of the women who create these traditional works of basket-weaving because they are masters of mathematics. They also have to completely understand the medium they are working in so that they can gather it at just the right time. The West Coast women who work in sea grass, for example, have to understand what sea grass looks like because they only use the female grasses. I once asked this elder, "How can you tell which is the male grass and which is the female grass?" This big smile came on her face and she said, "The male grass has a very hard central piece so we can't use it because it's too hard and it breaks." I was so embarrassed for asking such a stupid question, but she was really nice about it. Curating exhibitions such as *Robes of Power* and participating in videos such as the *Hands of History* is very time-consuming for me. But although this work as a historian takes a lot of my time, I think it is important work.

CAROL: Yes. Will you tell us about the exhibition *Robes of Power: Totem Poles on Cloth*, which featured contemporary robes of power [button blankets]? Will you tell us how you first started to work on this exhibition, where it travelled, and how it was received?

DOREEN: It really had a magical beginning. I went to Australia in 1978 to a Commonwealth conference on the effects of museums on indigenous peoples. I presented a talk at that conference as well as putting on a very small performance piece because we don't just read papers, that isn't what we do. So, in order to make it somewhat like a traditional Gitksan teaching, we also brought in two other people to work with me on a performance. Silver Harris, the exhibitions manager of the Adelaide Festival Centre where the conference was being held, was absolutely intrigued with the button blankets, and she said, "We must have an exhibition of ceremonial robes one day," and I said, "Sure." I always say "sure," and I never know what it's going to lead to.

Six years later, we were sitting around in the family room having coffee with my sister and her husband, enjoying the afternoon, and the phone rang. I picked it up and Silver Harris said, "Do you remember that we talked about having an exhibition of the ceremonial robes when you were here in Australia the last time? I'd really like you to curate an exhibition of the ceremonial robes." And I said, "Sure, I can do that. When would you like it?" I mean, I never thought about all the things that you have to do to put on such an exhibition.

First of all you have to decide who to invite (the exhibition was invitational because I had such a short time to prepare it). I also had to fund-raise: once I got to Australia there was money for me but there was no money for my travel. So, first of all I had to do a proposal to take to the different funding agencies to lobby for money. Then I had to get letters of recommendation from various people asking them to support my work. I had my band send in a letter. And in the meantime, I drafted up a letter to twenty-five artists, asking them to be a part of this exciting project. I wasn't offering them any money, just the opportunity to show their art, and they were really excited to be part of the exhibition. I said, "Your robes are going to be away for a whole year on exhibition tour in Australia, would that be all right?" And it was fine with some of them, and some of them wanted to sell their works, so I negotiated the sale of their work when the exhibition came back to Canada. I sold half of the works to the Royal Ontario Museum and the other half to the Indian Art Centre in Ottawa, with the exception of three robes, which the artists chose to keep.

CAROL: Did you negotiate these sales in advance?

DOREEN: Yes, I had to think through how it was going to happen. So, I said to the artists, "Well, I need these pieces and what I can do is, I can sell them for you." I didn't get any commission for selling them, but I did have the honour of having the blankets in my exhibition.

CAROL: All of the blankets were contemporary, weren't they?

DOREEN: Yes, they were specially commissioned for the exhibition. There was one older blanket, it was Tony Hunt's personal ceremonial blanket, and he allowed it to be used only for the exhibition. The exhibition went to six venues in Australia, including Sydney, Melbourne, and Canberra, and it premiered in Adelaide at the Adelaide Festival Centre. I accompanied the exhibition for three weeks, giving workshops to grade-four children. They actually made their own button blankets based on their own experience — things that were important to them. They didn't appropriate any of our imagery; they created their own, and it was very successful. The teachers were enthusiastic, the parents were enthusiastic, the grandparents were enthusiastic, and they all came and helped the kids get their robes done in time so that we could have a big celebration feast at the end of the three-week workshop. And they danced in their robes. It was wonderful.

The grandmothers, as I called them, were the ones that taught the workshop. There were five of us all together. We travelled to Adelaide for three weeks and then spent one week in the Outback, doing women's business with Aboriginal ladies. That was quite an experience. We travelled in a four-wheel drive with a guide. All we had were sleeping bags, and we slept outdoors with just a fire in the centre of the camp to keep the dingoes away.

When the exhibition came back to Canada it premiered at the MOA [Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia] and Dr Michael Ames, the director, said that it was one of the most wonderful celebrations that they had had up to that time.

LYNNE: Did it travel anywhere else after that?

DOREEN: Yes, it went to Toronto to the Native Business Summit, and Princess Anne from London, England, opened the conference. She was very interested in the robes. I was one of seven people who were presented to her, and she almost curtsied to me with my robe on. She had heard that somewhere in the text one of the people said that maybe the work came from the Pearlies, and she said to me, "Oh no, I don't believe it came from the Pearlies, I think the Pearlies got it from you folks!" And I thought, "Well, she's well versed in things when she appears at these functions." I was quite surprised. She wanted to know about the robes, and I said, "Well, when we put our robes on, it's like showing you our whole family history."

LYNNE: In focusing on contemporary robes of power, the exhibition reveals both the continuity and change that has taken place in this traditional art form of the Northwest Coast. Is it important to you that the traditional art forms are kept updated and relevant in the present?

DOREEN: Yes! When you were talking earlier about the Gitksan revival, I should have pointed out that it wasn't really a revival, it was more a reclaiming of our culture. During the potlatch ban we continued to learn about our histories, we didn't lose them. One of the old people, when we were going to name the first little museum in Hazelton, told us not to call it a museum but to call it the Skeena Treasure House because our treasures are in there. This very wise elder said, "Our culture is not dead, it's only sleeping." I thought that was so powerful, and from that day on, his words have spurred me on. This was in 1953.

CAROL: We were intrigued with the way in which you organized the research for the exhibition catalogue for *The Robes of Power*, which you co-authored with Polly Sargent. In the introduction, you state that you organized the text of the catalogue on the format of the potlatch: it has three sections: "Requests," "Responses," and "Results." Will you talk about the significance of using this format and how it worked?

DOREEN: Well, it really is very simple. I didn't want to call the sections "Preface," "Introduction," and all that sort of stuff. So, I said, "Why don't we call them 'Requests,' 'Responses,' and 'Results' because this is what happens in the potlatch." First, you send the "Requests" out, the "Requests" are the people who personally deliver the invitations, requesting the presence of guest witnesses at the potlatch; the "Responses" happen at the potlatch itself, when people speak in the feast hall and business is carried out; and the "Results" happen at the end of the evening, when the host chief, who has put on the feast, summarizes what has taken place and the guest witnesses have committed the business to memory. I chose to echo this format of the potlatch because it's almost like voiceless teaching: in talking about my culture, it teaches other people that there are other ways of doing things.

LYNNE: When I read the exhibition catalogue in preparation for this interview, I kept searching for the definition of a robe of power. But instead of a single definition, I encountered multiple and, at times, contradictory, definitions given by the various designers, makers, historians, and elders. In the "Results" section of the catalogue, you state that "simple, single answers are hard to come by in the real world," pointing out that the robe's role varies from area to area, village to village, and from chief to chief in the same House. Can you comment on your approach to history in this research project?

DOREEN: I thought it was really important to talk about all of the different roles for the ceremonial button blanket because everybody is right in their way of interpreting "history," and it's important to acknowledge that there are many truths. And at the end of the "Results" section, I pose a challenge, asking, "Who will take over where *Robes of Power* leaves off?" Traditionally, the challenge would take place at the end of the potlatch: you'd challenge the next person to really do something or there would be a challenge in the chief's summation. So, I issued a challenge at the end in the form of a

question, asking, "Where does it go from here?" And a lot of people really picked up on this. They've started up a museum in Haida Gwaii on button blankets, and they're collecting marvelous stories about them. It has really been an important research project for me and I'm glad I took part in it. I know at the time I'd sometimes come home so tired, I'd fall asleep in the bathtub. And at the end, I thought, "Gosh, I've spent four years of my life doing this, I could have earned myself a BA at least, if I'd gone to university." But Michael Ames, the director of MOA, said, "Well, you did a much better thing than getting a BA."

CAROL: And because the exhibition travelled, it educated many people. I've learnt so much local history from reading this catalogue.

LYNNE: Can you tell us how you conducted your interviews with the blanket makers, designers, and historians for the exhibition catalogue? We are currently working on a series of interviews with contemporary Canadian artists, and we have become acutely aware of the politics of the interview process. In *Robes of Power*, Polly Sargent and yourself put together a list of procedures for interviewers, which included the directives to "tell it as it was told" and to "make sure that every informant has seen his or her material and is satisfied with its content" among other things. Are there any ideas that you'd like to add to their list of suggestions?

DOREEN: Listening ... and not interrupting. If you have a question, ask after, because you spoil their train of thought. I really only had one question that I asked when I went around to visit people. But I did send a letter first, saying I was coming and posing a few questions, such as: "Why is the button blanket shaped the way it is, red only on three sides?" and, "Where did they first originate?" I didn't ask them anything really specific, it was more like musing about such things as the colours of the blankets. I was interested in why the blankets are white in Bella Bella and in Kwaguhl country they are green, and in the northern part of the province they are mainly navy or black with red. So by the time I visited them they had already thought about all of these things, and I didn't ask them any more about them. I just asked the one question: "I'd really like to know what your very first experience with blanket-making was like?" And that was how the stories came out. They would just talk. They had only one spokesperson, but they brought their family group together just to reinforce what they said. I found this really interesting.

I carried a wad of fifty dollar bills in my purse because as soon as they had given their story then I would dance around and give them their fifty dollars as an honorarium. I just felt that for too long people had taken their information and never even given a book in return. So, I felt it was really important to pay them each fifty dollars for an interview, and I also promised them ten books each once the book was out. Once the interview was transcribed, I had to put it in a form that flowed a bit better, so it went back and forth several times until they agreed that it was fine. I also told them that I was not going to benefit from their knowledge but that any royalties were going to the Kitanamax School of Northwest Coast Arts so that there would be continuing research and, hopefully, more books would come out of it. Every once in a while somebody will casually say, "Oh, by the way, we just got the cheque from UBC Press for \$500."

CAROL: Yes, it's still a popular book, and widely distributed.

DOREEN: And the same with *In Celebration of Our Survival*. Because it was an anthology, I paid each of the writers a small amount for contributing and I told them that I was turning over any royalties to the First Nations House of Learning (UBC). And that has also done quite well, so I feel really good about it. But my next book will be my own story. I also have a children's book that I want to do. It is the story of me and my two friends, how we got together in the summertime and just visited. It tells how we went for walks and looked at the plants together. My one friend who has blond short hair and wears Coca-Cola glasses always carried her little book of plants in BC with her, and she used to get right down and look inside those tiny little flowers with her magnifying glass. She opened up a whole new world to me. My other friend, who is originally from England and is now a school teacher, used to say what the common name of a flower was in English and in Latin, and then I would say its name in Gitksan and tell them what my grandmother had taught me about its use. The book will be called *Summertime Friends*. I've got most of the text ready, but I still have to do the illustrations. We're big people now but the story will talk about those six- and seven-year-olds who were summertime friends. There is a double meaning to the title: summertime friends also refers to the flowers, there are so many different varieties that grow together. It also shows that there are many truths and each one is valid.