

"Sophie Robert"¹: Remembrances of Secwepemc Life

A Collaboration

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Elder Sophie Robert recalls some of her early childhood experiences before attending residential school and some of her experiences as a young adult, wife, and mother. Her talk was given to Celia Haig-Brown in 1986 during an open-ended interview on residential schooling in 1986. Six years later, Sophie and Celia have worked together to share the following story/transcript with readers of this journal. Sophie's story contains powerful messages for individual and family healing. Celia Haig-Brown's response shows the influence of Sophie's teaching on her work in academe.

It's the early spring of 1986. Two women sit in a room on the top floor of what was the Kamloops Indian Residential School. The room has shocking pink walls. People say it used to be the nuns' bedroom. It is adjacent to what was the senior girls' dormitory. For years of nights, the rows of beds held sleeping bodies of young Shuswap, Thompson, Okanagan, and Chilcotin girls. Now it makes up the office and classroom complex of the Native Indian Teacher Education Program.

We are having tea and chocolate cake and talking. A tape-recorder is running. Sophie Robert is an Elder, a respected educator of the Shuswap Nation and former student of the Kamloops Indian Residential School. Born in 1918, she attended the school from 1926 to 1934. Celia Haig-Brown, a non-Native woman in her late 30s, is also an educator. She is working as coordinator of the teacher education program and is engaged in research for a master's degree. She is writing a thesis based on interviews with former students of the school. Most of the people she is interviewing are friends from a variety of situations. Sophie Robert is a person she has heard speak at conferences, but the two have only met that day. Celia spent some time working up the nerve to ask Sophie if she could conduct an interview. Sophie happily agreed and they arranged a time and place to meet. That persistent irony—that their conversation is being woven in a residential school that is now a band-controlled center—is not lost on them.

As is so often the case with open-ended interviews, the conversation becomes more than was intended initially. The talk reaches back to the

time before Sophie came to the school, time with her family, and then forward to the time after school and her life as a woman in the Secwepemc culture from the late 1930s on. This article focuses on those times before and after Sophie's attendance at the school.²

*Sophie Remembers*³

I could think way back long before I even came here what it used to be like. Then I can picture the area where I was born and raised. I guess at that time there was very few non-Indian people in the area of Salmon Arm. As I see it, when I was little, it seemed like it was an awful lot more bush or woods. It was not that much acreage cleared yet. The thing I could see now, the difference was, there were very few fences.⁴ ...

And there are so many happy memories I had of the time. I remember a time we were picking saskatoons along the river. And it was a really hot day and we got tired picking, picking, picking so finally—I guess the hottest part of the day is around three o'clock, so I imagine it was around there then that we just sort of half way gave up. We told our grandma, "Could we go down and swim?" She said, "If you fill that basket once more you can go." So we hurried up and, of course, my little brother was way younger than us. And he had a hard time filling his baskets 'cause the berries were quite high, so we'd help him, my sister, older than me, and I. We would help our little brother and we'd finally fill all our baskets and we'd go to Grandma. "Look we filled our baskets." "All right, you can go." So we went down swimming. And we used to have these little homemade undies, made out of flour bags, but my little brother he had to swim bare naked. But my sister and I had little petticoats made out of flour bags, you know Big Hoover, and we used that for our bathing suits and we started swimming. Gee, we were having a lot of fun. It was nice and cool.

And I don't know which one of us happened to see these three little animals going back and forth on a big cottonwood tree. The wind must have blew it and half of it was in the river and the other half was up on the bank. It was a huge one. And here is these three little things going up and down, black and white. And we ran and we cornered them, each one of us caught one. And darn little thing it would lift its tail and spray us and gee it would stink. And we'd run in the water and we'd go down holding it, and we'd wash its little tail in our petticoat. And soon as we'd get out of the water it would lift its tail and, "Psst," another spray. And we were laughing and oh we were making a racket and I don't know where the mother of them went.

And I guess my grandmother got a whiff of it, "What are they doing?" And here she came running down the river bank. "What are you doing? What smells?" And here she saw us standing there with these three little baby skunks and we stunk like heck. She made us let them go, "And the mother will find it," she said. We didn't know what happened to the

mother. It would have come after us, but it was nowhere in sight, so we let them go.

But you know, when she took us home back to the little log cabin we couldn't even come in the house. I guess we looked kind of pitiful sitting up on the wood pile. Till today I can't remember what my grandma—she went out, and I know the only thing I can remember is the mint grass. What the other material was that she used she boiled. She made us sit out on the wood pile until way late at night, just so she could bath us and wash our petticoats. But we sure learned our lesson. We were freezing; she wouldn't even give us anything else to wear. We sat out by the fire. But you know, those days we did get into a lot of trouble like any normal children. And my grandma she'd threaten she's going to whip us or she's going to leave us home, eh, never let us come with her. And she'd be hitting the ground with her cane and threatening, "I'm going to whip you with my cane, you stop it." And then we'd run around and play and then all of a sudden we'd figure she'd forgot and then we'd do it again. And those are the kind of child pranks that we played. Nothing really serious, and I guess my grandma never ever took it serious enough that she stopped to really give us a good welting. I didn't know one word of English. I remember we used to go, my mother and them used to take us to town with them. And we used to be really surprised at these people in the store, you know. They were speaking a different language. And I couldn't begin to understand or say one word of English.

After seeing the stores and how they operate, we used to play store at home. But the way we used to speak English was I pretend I'm the storekeeper and mumble jumble something. That was our English version. And then we would pretend pouring sugar and "I'm gonna sell it to you." And the other one would pretend and then we'd translate it. "This is what I'm going to be saying," and we'd mumble jumble and we'd act it out. And that was our game when we were home, trying to be a white person.

And I remember the first scares that we ever knew. You know, a frightening thing was they told us tales, you know. You sit around, children, and listen to people, adults, talking. And I remember one thing that they talked about was a big excitement going on and somebody had died. A woman and her child, or her child had died and she was in a very bad condition. And I could barely remember them talking about it. But the thing I learned from that was that a white man was to be feared. If you see a white man coming run and hide. And apparently, later on in years, I asked my mother, "What was it you guys used to talk about when we were kids? About a woman laying on her baby and smothering it?"

She did mention a name and I can't remember. She said people were hunting and fishing somewhere up towards Pillar Lake in that area somewhere, Pinantan, somewhere up there. Women had that habit, when you want to move from one area to the other, after the women finished packing

and loading everything on, they would start walking ahead. And the men would come along with the wagon and team of horses. And I guess what they wanted to do was go ahead and go to the bathroom before you get on the wagon because you know you're going to feel uncomfortable if you don't.

So I guess that's what this woman did was she walked up ahead. And three men come out of the woods, knocked her down, raped her with her baby strapped on her back. And she lay on the baby and all three of them took turns on her. Killed her baby. And when the man came up to her with the wagon, he found her sitting there with a dead child in her arms and she was crying. And that's what they were talking about and something about that story stayed in my head.

And I remember my mother saying, "When you see a white man coming run and hide. That's the first thing you do is run and hide." And I used to fear white people, and I remember there used to be an old non-Native guy lived somewhere up above on the hill way up. He used to take a short cut, right through the reserve and into town to do his shopping. And I guess he was a harmless old man. But it was just the idea of the old people telling us. We'd be playing, having a good time, and all of a sudden one of us would spy him. "Ahhh, here comes that sa7ma!"⁵ and we'd run like heck and hide. And that was my impression of a white person.

And then out of the blue there came this car. Drove up to my mother and father's place. And my mother was dressing up my sister and me. I must have been seven years old and my sister was going on nine. And they were dressing us up, you know, in different kinds of clothes. And my mother told us that we were going to be riding in that car and we were going to be going—we didn't know what a school was.

And they told us that we were going to go with that man and we were going to school. And I thought maybe we'd go there and come right back. And that was the most terrifying part of my whole life. It seemed like that car chugged along forever.

There was quite a few of us were in that car. That was a priest going around collecting these kids. And it took us, seemed like a whole day. And it seemed like we were gone to the other end of the world, and we'd never find our way home. And we were scared; we were hungry.⁶ ...

And when I reached the age of 16, I really wanted to get an education. Because I knew I was smart, not to brag, but I always was a learner, eager to learn. [But] there wasn't anybody I could think of that [could help]—I didn't write a letter begging could I get further education. Anyway, the one thing I stole from the school, and I wish the heck I'd hung onto it, was an old torn-up dictionary. I snuck that out of the school when I left at 16. And I used to carry that dictionary with me a long time.

And I guess just to kind of go over quickly my life history. When I left school here the traditional way of treating a girl 16, you were considered a

woman, ready for marriage. I wasn't. I fought it. I didn't want to get married. I wanted to know what it was to be independent and I fought my mother. I rebelled against her.

I remember my dad used to go and work for the farmers in the summer with his team of horses and wagon. And he'd go and haul hay and stuff like that. And one time I went with him and I asked a non-Native couple way out in the valley if there was any way I could work for the lady. They didn't have any children. "Is there any job I can do?" and I really wanted to learn. And they tried me out, and she said, "I really need my ceiling and walls washed. Do you think you can do that?" I said, "Oh yeah, I know how to do it." And I washed her ceilings in her house. It was a two-story building. I worked and I worked and worked.... I'll never forget that comment she'd made. She said, "That's the first time I ever had anybody wash my ceiling and walls that got the corners clean." And that is what sold her on my help. She hired me and for \$5.00 a month, room and board, that's what I got. And I had my own bedroom. I shared the bathroom with the people.

In Salmon Arm I worked for the couple all that summer, and all that fall, till way in the spring. And the woman was getting sicker and sicker. She had really bad case of ulcers so they sold the farm and that was the end of my job. But the thing that I learned when I was with them, we used to sit around the breakfast table and dinner table and I used to pay attention to their conversation. I'd hear a word—one word that always sticks in my mind, the very first word I learned that I'd never learned before, was the word *naive*. And I thought, "Gee, that's a new word." After I finished eating, I excused myself. I ran up to the bedroom; I looked through my dictionary. And I studied how you spell it, and how you pronounce it, and what is the meaning, and then a few days later I'd try to use it in my own conversation. That was the very first word I learned in the outside world. Naive. And there were many words after that, that I had not learned and I always listened.

And I read a lot: those people had a lot of books and soon as I'd finished all my work that's what I looked forward to. I'd make sure everything was just spotless, everything was done. And then they would wonder, "Where is Sophie?" And I'm sitting out on the veranda reading a book. I read books one after another and I'd try to study them. And I began to learn. I learned how to express myself, and you know, I learned how to talk, a little better than what I learned in here.

And then from there I went home after the couple left and, of course, there they chose a husband and I didn't know who he was. I've never known him. I've never seen him. That was a real funny one.

Anyway, when I first came home, when I turned 16, I knew my mother had this planned because my sister wrote me a letter and told me that "Mom has picked you a husband. And they are going to force you to get

married as soon as you get home," and I thought, "No way." So when I got home that summer, I knew that was the end of my schooling, eh. We were going to a big gathering in Chase and it was a three-day gathering. And I told my sister, you show me who the lucky man is, you point out the man our mother wants me to marry.

I didn't say that. I was scared. I was really scared. So we went; my mother was very good about dressing us nice. We always had nice clothes, a really ambitious couple, she always made sure we were dressed nice. And I had a real nice little figure—I was always slim. You would never believe it now to see me. And always full of life, I've always been that way—really outgoing, friendly. I always made friends. So we went to this dance. It was an outdoor type of thing, it had a floor, and a halfway wall around and then they must have put rafters up and then a big tarp over it and then the rest was closed in. They must have chopped some cottonwood trees and closed it in. Like it looked like a wooded area where they had Indian dancing. And then up till midnight—well maybe not midnight—then the guys would play the guitar and fiddle and then we had modern dancing.

So anyway, we went in there and, of course, we never were allowed to sit away from our parents. It was always a family group. No matter what we did, it was always a family group. And my mother, gee whiz, she would make us sit near her and if she didn't like the guy and he came to ask me to dance, I could feel her pulling my skirt: "You don't go to that guy."

And you know I was attracted to one guy, gee I fell in love with that guy. And I used to tell my sister, "Darn, I wish Mom wasn't so strict because I really like that guy." And you know, we used to make eye contact and all that. And he used to come and ask me to dance with him. I could feel my mother pulling my skirt, so I confided in my brother and I told him, "I really like this guy, but Mom won't let me dance with him." My brother solved my problem. He'd come and take me to dance half way around the room. And then he'd tag so I got a chance and every time I came where my mother was sitting I'd look the other way because I knew big daggers were coming at me.

Anyway, we were sitting there and then all of a sudden I saw this guy walking in, with real nice white shirt and a tie, his hair all slicked. And I had been filled in what he was—real good guitar player, good violin player, good banjo player, he could sing. He was an all around athlete, he played ball, he played hockey, and his parents were not bad parents. They were hardworking people; and I took a look at him and my sister and she said, "There he comes, the one with the white shirt," one of these top-heavy, athletic, good-looking guys. He asked me to dance, and I was so scared, I guess I was kind of shaking. 'Cause I remember the first thing he

asked me was, "Are you cold?" And I wasn't cold, I was so scared. And I said, "No, I guess I'm just nervous."

And he started talking to me: he was nice, he talked to me. He never mentioned about the promise of me marrying him and I found him a real gentleman, really easy-going. And after the first dance, my sister asked me, "What do you think of him?" I said, "Gee, I expected him to be a real savage: 'I own you. You're promised to me.'" I told her, "Gee, he is nice. He didn't give me any indication that I'm promised to him and that I should obey you know. He's a really easy type of a guy."

But I rebelled against marriage because I wanted something better for myself. And the guy was patient enough to wait for me. Because those other families wanted him to marry their daughter, but he wouldn't. He'd come and visit me and he'd tell me, "Whenever you're ready I plan on marrying you." He was quite a bit older than me. He'd already left [school]. He was out working for himself.

But, anyway, going back to my own experience—I went home and I stayed home with my mother. I helped in all the kinds of different [ways] like gathering foods and learning how to dry salmon and digging out the gardens, putting it away for the winter. Experiencing the type of foods ... I had to acquire the taste to it because I had forgotten it after so many years [being away at school]. In the winter we ate that ling cod. My mother'd have to go out there, and I enjoyed it. I loved it. We'd go out, and we'd fish for those little tiny fish to use for bait. And we'd dig holes out on the ice and throw the bait in there: tie it around a stick and put it over the hole in the ice. About nine, 10 o'clock at night—I used to love it—my sister would harness the single horse and hitch it to the cutter, little single sleigh, and we'd ride, take the lantern, to go down to look at the fishtraps. A lot of women would go down. We'd go down as a party and we'd look and we'd come back with loads of fish. And I acquired the taste to it and I enjoyed it. I lived an Indian way, you know.

I found that I'm easy to adjust to things and I'm always aware that this is an experience I want to learn. And I wanted to know, "How did my parents survive here in the winter?" And I found the answer: eating different kinds of foods like the pheasant. There used to be loads of those things—lots of it and we got tired of fish. My mother would tell the boys, "We've been eating fish, fish. Go and get some chicken." And my brothers at night—the pheasants roost up in the old thorn trees—they went with a flashlight and bang, bang. What a great big pot of soup, chicken soup.

My dad was home, he was working, they logged. Then my dad and brothers, they hunted in the fall. I had fun learning how to dry fish and meat.

I guess it was the learning experience I was looking for. I rejected—I hated the priest, I hated the nuns, but I loved God. That was one thing I

accepted was my higher power. And there was always the question, "Is it really that bad being an Indian?"⁷

I was ashamed to a certain extent because we used to get criticized when we went to town. I never liked going to town. When you walked downtown, you'd meet some of the young boys and young girls and they go click, click imitating your language. And it was very embarrassing. That's why I never did go into town. When I worked for the non-Native couple, I never went to town. The woman bought me my clothes and then gave me the \$5. Five dollars used to go home to my parents to help them. I never saw that money; it was always sent to my dad.

But anyway, going back to the Indian way—after school, my dad and them I guess began to use the modern types of food as well as the old way. I remember in the fall we used to go up the lake. I went one year that fall and they are fishing for these trouts that spawn in the fall along the lake edge. Oh, it was fun, it was nice and it was peaceful. But still I was yearning for more learning. After one year at home ... I guess the reason I wanted to get out of there was my mother wouldn't leave me rest. I had to get married. But I didn't want to; I wasn't ready yet.

So I took off from there. I got on the bus one day and I came to Chase and I stayed at my uncle's. And it was there that I got another job with another non-Native couple, same thing as on the farm and I loved it there. I worked with them for pretty near a year. The old man drank though. They used to have gas lanterns in that house; they have a basement. They used to have to have stacks and stacks of ale down there. And he'd go down there and he'd get drunk and he'd pass out. And his wife liked him though just the same. And that was my first experience of alcohol. I hated the smell of it. I didn't like him when he was intoxicated, but as a sober man I loved him.

But anyway, I learned a lot more there from the woman. I learned how to can food, fish, meats, chicken; I learned how to make relish. I learned how to make pickles; I learned how to can tomatoes, fruit, all the things of the modern way of food.

I worked for them for about a year and there was another disaster. The wife had to go to Vancouver. I can't remember what she had to go down there for. And she gave me an alternative whether I wanted to stay there with her husband, cook for him, or would I like to take a week off and go home to my parents. And I had accumulated all my pay cheques and I wanted to buy my mother her first linoleum in her house. So I said, "No, maybe I'll go home to Mom and then I'll come back when you get back." And I didn't like her husband anyway when he'd get drunk. So I left, I went. So I guess after I left she went to Vancouver. About a week and a half after I had been home I heard that their house had burned down and the man burned in that house.

I lost all my clothes in that place. And I had gone home and I bought linoleum for my mother in her big log house. I put linoleum all over her floors. The first house on the reserve to have linoleum and the Indian women around there used to say, "You should go see Christine's house. Her floor is just like glass." ...

I guess nature is so strong you can't help it. You can never destroy nature. You know your body grows. It needs the different things as your body is growing. And you can't—I don't care if you cover it up with layers and layers of clothes, it is still doing its thing, as a human being.

But one thing though that almost destroyed my first marriage—I say my first marriage because I was married to that man for two years and he got hurt and died. And I had a little boy, just a tiny baby when he died. My first, I guess, shock of the marriage was my mother always threatened us if we went all the way with a guy that we would bleed and even half of our intestines would come out. It gave us so much fright about sex that I was so scared. And I used to question and I was so scared to talk about it because here [at the school] they also told you it was shameful to talk about sex. Your body was never to be exposed, you couldn't even look at yourself. They used to make us wear tight homemade bras so that your breasts didn't show. And with that kind of teaching I was really kind of terrified about getting married. And it was very hard for me to tell my husband why I used to just cringe.

And I knew one way or the other I had to give in to marriage—what it was supposed to mean—but I was so terrified. After two months of marriage, believe me, he started rebelling against me. He used to tell me, "Oh you're just scared that I'll find out." And that's how patient he was. After two months I still couldn't go all the way with him: I'd just cry. And then one time he got impatient with me and he said, "You probably been with some guy and you're afraid I'll find out." His mother was starting to treat me mean. She probably asked questions and found out that I still couldn't, you know, go all the way with him.

So finally I spoke to my older sister and I told her about it. I said, "It seems like we're—why is he mad at me all the time?" And one day I walked away from the house and I took a long walk and I ended up at my sister's. And I was telling her about it and she was the one that encouraged me to tell him the truth. So when I went back, he wasn't there and I was so scared he had left me for good. Probably gone to find another woman. But when he did come back, it happened that we were all alone in the house—like we had to live with his parents. His mother and father were gone, and when he came back I—it's funny that's the first time I've ever talked about this part of my life and to a total stranger at that—anyway I had to tell him the truth. Why I was so terrified of sex was because the way my mother always told us what would happen to us.

And I guess I had so much pride in myself that I never could cross that border line. I'd just go so far and then come back. And I hated it and I hated myself. I never seen a man naked and it terrified me when I first found out. I've seen little boys all that time and I thought that's the way they were as they grew up. I didn't know parts of their body grew as well and I was just terrified.

And that's what the teaching here and my mother's—the priests said that you were never to talk sex to your children, that you prevented your girls from going all the way with a man by frightening them away from sex and all that. That's what they were told in the outside. But luckily my sister—I don't know where she got that different approach to marriage.

Finally that day—and I guess the reason why I couldn't talk openly to him was we were always in the company of his parents—but it happened to be a day that his parents weren't home. They weren't going to be home that night. I can't remember: they left for somewhere and we had the house all to ourselves. That's when I broke down and I told him the truth. And boy, I have never seen a man cry. He cried, he felt so sorry for me. He just held me for a long time and he cried. And he said, "To think that I hurt and called you names and put you down all these two months and here you were just living in dread, in fear."

And that's because of the teaching that we were getting from our parents and the school here. It darn near destroyed me. And I've been talking to a lot of my schoolmates and that same thing happened and that was why their whole marriages blew apart and they ended up on skid row. So that is the very first time I've been able to talk about it, and my marriage after that was just a real happy marriage.

It was about six months after I was married I finally got pregnant: I had a little boy. And my husband—the men used to—they never had no way of traveling. Money was scarce and the only way they could travel to look for jobs was on freights, they used to ride freights.

He was riding on a freight from Salmon Arm to Chase and I guess he went to jump off and he slipped and his leg got pulled under. Cut it off right up here, and at that time I guess the doctors weren't as smart as they are today in dealing with really bad. Anyway they figured there was no way to save him because he was badly hurt. And he just lived all that night till early in the morning and he passed away. And here I am just a young woman and a baby left, orphaned baby.

Anyway I stayed single for five years after and I started working out again. I'd grab anything I could do. I supported my little baby and seen my little boy grow to five years old, when I finally remarried. It took me a long time to trust in marriage again because I had been really broken up, eh. But I remarried and started building my life back together. I guess my life is so full of different kinds of experiences both physically, mentally, emotionally.

And I can get really hurt, but always manage to come out of it. That last time I was really hurt was when I married my husband. He was really a good man; we were really happy. We had three children when we were down—like he was—his dad was from the States. We had lived down in the States for pretty near a year and we were happy. There was no alcohol in our life.

And then we came back to Canada. We weren't home very long and he joined in the army and that's when my whole life just seemed to fall apart. When he came home after two years I didn't know him. He was a different man. He was drinking, messing around with other women. And then my hell started again: he came home and I was a non-drinker. I guess feeling guilty he would practically rape me and I'd be pregnant again. Pregnancy one after another, eight boys and six girls. I didn't want that many, but it was forced on me. And I knew what he was doing but I couldn't rebel against him. The Indian people believed in marriage, and marriage could never be broken no matter what. In those days there was no such thing as welfare. We didn't know what welfare was, and I would sew baskets, gloves, moccasins to help me survive, me and my children, and that was hell. And then he finally got himself killed, got hit by a train.

That was just a struggle, being both father and mother to my children. But I guess God looks after you. My family and I have been sober the last 14 years: it's about 14 years since we started on the road to sobriety.

And we haven't got what you'd call wealth. Moneywise, we're not wealthy or anything. But we have something that's priceless. It is family unity; we're a very strong family. My family are well knit. We work together: if one goes down, we're all there to pick him up. That's the kind of family I have. I have a home off the reserve that's paid for and it's not through government grants. It's a home that's made with hard-earned money. And it is paid for, fully paid for. Fifty-four acres off the reserve, it is fully paid for.

All in all my life hasn't really been that bad. It is just knowing I went through that humiliation and that hurt, that low self-esteem and having to come out of it. And never leaving that hate leave a scar on me. I don't hate any more. I don't know what it is to hate. I can't say that I don't get angry. I do get angry but it doesn't mean I hate anybody. If I see somebody doing something that I know is going to hurt themselves or other people, I step in and I get very angry. And I'm not afraid to confront them with it and give them an alternative to how they can cope with it, without them hurting other people. That's the strength I got from what I went through. In a lot of ways I have this place and the people that put me through it to thank for the strength I got, you know. I can't say it was all bad, I got a lot of good out of it: it gave me a lot of strength to fight back and that strength I got is what's made me into the woman I am today.

Sophie's Words and Mine

For nearly six years these rich remembrances of a woman's life sat in the drawer of a filing cabinet. When I heard about this edition of the *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, "Giving Voice to Our Elders," I contacted Sophie, sent her a copy of the transcript, and we began working together over the telephone and through the mail on this version. Her words have been sounding in my head since the day I first heard them. They have given me strength in many times of uncertainty and difficulty. If she can survive and prosper in the circumstances that surrounded her, I can challenge those who would silence and contain me.

Let me not romanticize or simplify. Her position as respected Secwepemc Elder and teacher and my position of privilege as a white middle-class, middle-aged Anglo-Canadian are only some aspects of our difference. (The lack of parallels in that sentence is deliberate—our lives have few parallels.) And yet the evidence of her strong commitment to learning and teaching inspires me to continue to work to do likewise and, as a part of that work, to respond to a responsibility I feel to pass her powerful words on to others.

As an Elder woman, she is a role model for me, a gentle teacher who never stops teaching. She speaks clearly to all who learn to listen, with the voice of one who strongly identifies herself as a Secwepemc woman.

We are two women talking together. In one of our discussions about this article, Sophie wondered why she had decided to tell me the intimate details of her life, details she had never before told anyone. She said, "I guess because we're both female, I had the trust" (personal communication, 1992). Sophie continues to guide me in the way I use the words. I have spent time seeking models of text that will do justice to, that will honor, her words as I move them from her initial act of speaking to a textual form.

The interview from which this article is taken was part of an earlier work on residential school. When the work was published as *Resistance and Renewal*, I was asked to speak in various contexts about the school and the people I had interviewed. Being conscious of concerns about the participation—the intervention—of non-Native people in First Nations affairs, I found myself hesitating to speak as any kind of authority. Yet people like Sophie had spent time educating me and I felt a responsibility to pass their teachings along to others. Each time I speak to audiences about the experiences documented in the book, I see in my mind my meetings with Sophie. I hear her voice; I feel her words moving me to deeper understanding. Her distinction between anger and hatred as she points to the necessity of action is especially compelling. In redressing injustice, one must be angry enough to act but never hateful. I seek inspiration from the times we have had together, inspiration to retell her stories and those of the others with some of their original intensity.

When I ask myself, “Who am I to do this work—I, a non-Native person?” Sophie’s directive calms me. I try to use her words as they were given.

Why was I so slow to publish this work? White people’s work with First Nations people, no matter how well intentioned, arises out of a history of cultural invasion (Freire, 1970, p. 150) and colonization. I continue to wonder about the possibility of my contributions being useful to the people with whom I work, or if they may somehow serve to inform those who would continue to dominate and oppress. The following words of mestiza⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) spoke to me in this regard:

Many men and women of color do not want to have any dealings with white people ... Many feel that whites should help their own people rid themselves of race hatred and fear first. I for one chose to use some of my energy to serve as mediator. I think we need to allow whites to be our allies.... They will come to see that they are not helping us but following our lead. (p. 85).

In this interview, Sophie’s mediation allowed me to learn about her life and presented the possibility of work as an ally. Anthropologist Julie Cruikshank’s (1990) work with Yukon Elders further reassured me about my role in this regard. She recounts setting out to interview Elders for her own purposes, but being firmly redirected by the three women with whom she was working so as to emphasize “‘more important’ accounts they wanted me to record” (p. 14). Similarly, this interview on residential school expanded as Sophie told me what she wanted me to know, record, and pass along. Her lead is clearly one to follow.

I hesitated to publish for another reason. The issue of appropriation of voice has been dominating discussions of First Nations and non-Native interactions in academic and writing communities for some time. Increasingly, critical academics acknowledge that a person’s social location, where one speaks from in terms of ethnicity, class, gender, for example, “affects the meaning and truth of what one says” (Alcoff, 1991, p. 6). Not only that, but speaking from certain privileged locations for an “other” may actually increase or reinforce “the oppression of the group spoken for” (p. 7). Lee Maracle’s (1989) eloquent plea to Anne Cameron to “move over” and let First Nations authors speak for themselves is now commonly accepted as a landmark statement in these interrelations (see, e.g., Emberly, 1992; Alcoff, 1991).

When considering my responsibility to Sophie’s words, I worried about the issue of usurping her voice. Another article by Lee Maracle (1992) finally gave me what I needed to make sense of this dilemma. Recognizing the power of her own particular voice “and the inability of anyone to steal it,” she said, “I am neither that simple nor that victimized” (p. D9). It had seemed ludicrous: no one could “steal” Sophie’s voice—she’s much too strong for that—and I certainly could not steal what had been given to me. I do recognize the importance of being careful with what

Sophie has given me and made—and make—every effort to use her words only in ways acceptable to her. I also realized the absurdity of considering to speak for Sophie. Her words are eloquent. I have been useful in getting the words to print.⁹ I have been careful to distinguish between her words and mine so that readers may read one or the other or both and draw their own conclusions.

Other works by women of color encouraged me to publish Sophie's words. Bernice Johnson Reagon (1983), an Afro-American feminist (and incidentally a leader of the group Sweet Honey in the Rock), writes of the importance of coalition work. While she acknowledges the necessity of some time "in a little barred room" where "you sift out what people are saying about you and decide who you really are" (p. 358), she says that ultimately one must recognize that there is a world outside that cannot be ignored. People must learn to work together respectfully across differences. They must never deny difference, never simplify it to "benign variation (diversity) ... which bypasses power as well as history" (Mohanty, 1990, p. 181). Mutually respecting one another's power and history, Sophie and I did work across differences to contribute an understanding of a Secwepemc woman's life to the academy. In this sense, perhaps we have managed to approach the voice to which Chandra Talpade Mohanty directs people who work seriously to promote change in power relations:

I think the important point is that it be an active, oppositional, and collective voice which takes seriously the current commodification and domestication of Third World people [or First Nations people] in the academy. And this is a task open to all people of color as well as progressive white people in the academy. (p. 208)

The historical details in this article give readers some glimpses of a First Nations woman's life not available in many mainstream (O'Brien, 1982) history books. Berry-picking and baby skunks exemplify the responsibilities and free investigation of traditional Shuswap childhood. The horror of the rape of the young mother and the murder of her baby, and the tears of the young man as he realizes the fear with which his partner has been struggling speak to the stark reality of cultural disruption. These poignant rememberings in the context of the intense passion for learning that enthralled Sophie throughout her life extend readers' knowledge of the life of one remarkable Secwepemc woman and simultaneously suggest congruence with others.

There are many tapes and transcripts in many drawers. There has been a discernible shift in emphases in academic and governmental research from faceless, nameless statistics to the reality captured in people's testimonials.¹⁰ This shift offers an opportunity for a wider audience to have access to these tapes. Researchers can insist that policy makers, academics, and politicians build their understandings not only out of the scientific manipulation of numbers. They also can take the time to move beyond the numbers to serious, slow, and rigorous consideration of the rich details of

the individuals who live and have lived in the territories of this country. This is the information we need to understand who we are as people living in a place together. This is the information we need to address the inequities among people that arise out of our historical and contemporary social relations.

I am honored that Sophie chose to give me such deeply personal details of her life as a young woman. I am grateful for the time she continues to give in the editing process and for her continuing trust in my efforts to be of use. The Cheyenne have a traditional saying: "A nation is not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground" (Bataille & Mullen-Sands, 1984, p. vii). There has been no conquering of Sophie's nation. Her heart soars:

I don't hate anymore. I don't know what it is to hate. I can't say that I don't get angry. I do get angry but it doesn't mean I hate anybody. If I see somebody doing something that I know is going to hurt themselves or other people, I step in and I get very angry. And I'm not afraid to confront them with it and give them an alternative to how they can cope with it, without them hurting other people. That's the strength I got from what I went through.

Notes

¹To respect her wishes to remain anonymous, Sophie Robert is a pseudonym.

²Other portions of the transcript, those that pertain to residential school, have been previously published in Haig-Brown (1988).

³Wanting to maintain the integrity of Sophie's original words as much as possible, I was faced with the problem of reducing a 37-page transcript to approximately 20 pages. I was also concerned with preserving some of the tenor of her speech. After consulting the works of a number of researchers who include significant portions of transcriptions in their works (e.g., Wickwire & Robinson, 1989; Silman, 1987; Burgos-Debray, 1984; Tedlock, 1983), I found the direction taken by Cruikshank (1990) to fit most helpfully with what I hoped to do. In the text based on her collaboration with three Yukon Native Elders, she chose to retain "something close to paragraphs for sections Westerners normally associate with autobiographical accounts" (p. 18). This interview clearly falls within that purview. I have also chosen to eliminate my questions and brief comments in order not to interrupt the flow of the narrative.

⁴A substantial portion of the text related to time with Grandmother, and also included in Haig-Brown (1988), is edited out of this version.

⁵sa7ma is pronounced something like *semah* and is the Secwepemc word for white person.

⁶At this point Sophie spoke of time at residential school, see Haig-Brown (1988).

⁷In her talk of residential school, Sophie remembered the times that the children were lectured "not to think or act or speak like an Indian. And that we would go to hell and burn for eternity if we did not listen to their way of teaching" (Haig-Brown, 1988, p. 54).

⁸Anzaldúa writes of herself, "I am a border woman. I grew up between two cultures, the Mexican (with a heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo (as a member of a colonized people in our own territory) (1987, p. vii).

⁹I do continue to wonder if an academic journal is the most appropriate place for these words. But Sophie is satisfied with their being here. And other possibilities may arise where they will become accessible to more people, especially the young Secwepemc people who will perhaps value them most.

¹⁰Benmayor (1991) writes of testimony as "the speech act that imbues life history with intent" (p. 173). With the publication of *I, Rigoberta Menchu* (Burgos-Debray, 1984)

academics have paid increasing attention to testimonial writing as a focus of study. For additional discussion see Sommer (1988, 1991), Salazar (1991), and Marin (1991).

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