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Jesse Hutchison

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# “She Is Already Telling Me a Story”: Intertextual Relationality and Autonomy in Rudy Wiebe’s *Of This Earth*

JESSE HUTCHISON

**O**F *THIS EARTH: A MENNONITE BOYHOOD in the Boreal Forest* (2006) is Rudy Wiebe’s memoir is about his childhood experiences in Saskatchewan. Wiebe has been no stranger to autobiographical writing throughout his career, with novels such as *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962), *Sweeter than All the World* (2002), and *Come Back* (2014) all bearing traces of his life. All of these books illustrate his preoccupation with family.

In *Of This Earth*, Wiebe pays much attention to his family, in particular his sister Helen, who died from a prolonged bout of rheumatic fever in 1945 at the age of seventeen. He uses sources such as photographs and letters to build a narrative of his past. One of the most intriguing sources is Helen’s diary from the 1940s. Although Wiebe includes only a few diary entries, and though, on the surface, Helen appears to reveal only small details, the entries allow the reader to know a lot about her. Amy Kroeker correctly points out that “Helen has a presence in this story almost greater than that of those living as she haunts its edges” (170). In many ways, she plays a vital role in the narrative because of her place in the family story as “the first of us to die, in late March when World War II in Europe is at last coming to an end” (Wiebe, *Of This Earth* 26). Wiebe often stresses the importance of her life, and, significantly, he structures the memoir so that Helen participates in telling her own narrative.

In this article, I consider Wiebe’s use of Helen’s writing in light of what life writing critic Amber K. Regis calls “intertextual relationality” or “the construction of narratives and subjects in response to existing, alternative versions of a life” (289). Regis builds upon previous theories from life writing scholars such as Nancy K. Miller and Paul John Eakin, who see identity as relational and therefore shifting between self and other. Regis, however, sees life writing texts themselves, rather than the

identities constructed by them, as neither “fixed” nor “isolable” (289). Therefore, rather than examining autobiographical works for their presentations of fluid identities, Regis is interested in life writing texts that, in many ways, recycle previous life writing texts. She argues that this intertextual relationality involves revising and appropriating these earlier texts in order to suit the agenda of the author.<sup>1</sup>

I see Wiebe’s use of Helen’s diary as an example of intertextual relationality, albeit with some crucial differences from Regis’s concept. Wiebe does incorporate a previous life writing text by interjecting Helen’s diary into his memoir, and in doing so he runs the risk of appropriating her voice for his own narrative. Yet, importantly, he calls attention to his role as a mediating voice in the text and effectively counters the criticisms of appropriation that have been directed toward some of his other works. In *Of This Earth*, Wiebe uses intertextuality to grant Helen the autonomy to tell the story of her life in her own way. Although the entries do reveal the particular constraints of women’s life writing in the 1940s, I employ Helen Buss’s conception of “decoding” to consider what Helen reveals about herself in the silences and the discussions of others in her diary. I do not see the intertextual relationality in *Of This Earth* as resulting in revision and appropriation. Rather, I argue that Wiebe creates a space in his memoir for Helen to articulate her own life story as a sick young woman living in the boreal forest of Saskatchewan and, in doing so, reveals how such stories have frequently been silenced or reshaped by narrative constraints.

For the most part, incorporating other life writing texts into one’s own life writing project has been approached within larger conversations about the role of ethics in life writing. Miller, for example, takes on this issue directly in her article “The Ethics of Betrayal: Diary of a Memoirist,” in which she debates whether or not to use the “letters written by my ex-husband to me” in her memoir (151). Suggesting that the ethical decision (or, as she puts it, “ethical betrayal”) is to “publish the letters and let the man speak for himself” (157), Miller highlights the importance of giving narrative control to the represented other in the text.

The issue of ethics in life writing is critical when discussing Wiebe’s memoir, which focuses on the private lives of his Canadian Mennonite family. After all, his first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, elicited negative reactions within certain Mennonite circles precisely because Wiebe

“opened a private people’s private affairs to public scrutiny” (Froese Tiessen, “Introduction” xiii). A memoir such as *Of This Earth*, which not only focuses on the private lives of others but also includes his sister’s diary entries, raises the question that Claudia Mills asks in her article “Friendship, Fiction, and Memoir: Trust and Betrayal in Writing from One’s Own Life”: “whether one can indeed value one’s loved ones appropriately while also drawing on their lives as material for one’s work” (104).

This issue is further amplified when one takes into consideration Wiebe’s history of incorporating other people’s life stories into his own work and his anxiety about appropriation. A significant example of his anxiety is found in his 1974 short story “Where Is the Voice Coming From?” In it, a writer concerned with telling the story of the capture and eventual killing of Cree leader Almighty Voice by the police. The writer observes that, though “all the parts of the story are themselves available, . . . they are, as always, available only in bits and pieces,” with “some written reports of the acts contradict[ing] each other” (135). Despite the absence of a fully accurate historical account, the writer intriguingly suggests that one can glean a story from the imprint left behind by historical figures and events, which in this case manifests itself in an “unending wordless cry” (143).

Yet Wiebe troubles the writer’s role in terms of putting words to this imprint: “I say ‘wordless cry’ because that is the way it sounds to me. I could be more accurate if I had a reliable interpreter who would make a reliable interpretation. For I do not, of course, understand the Cree myself” (143). Here, Wiebe calls attention to his difficult role as a non-Cree author attempting to tell the story of a Cree leader — an issue rendered even more complicated when we consider how First Nations voices historically have been appropriated by the dominant culture. As Sophie McCall puts it, Wiebe’s story “highlights the central paradox in the transcription and translation of told-to narratives: to simultaneously control and erase processes of mediation in the making of the ‘Native voice.’ The voice that speaks for itself, yet cannot be heard without the intervention of a translator, is a recurring construction in the history of recording Aboriginal oral narratives in North America” (18).

Despite his awareness of these difficulties, Wiebe has often taken on the role of mediator, particularly of First Nations stories, as in *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973) and *The Scorched-Wood People* (1977).

The most obvious example is the collaborative memoir *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman* (1998), in which Wiebe constructs the life story of Yvonne Johnson, who was imprisoned for murder. As has now been frequently reported, Johnson specifically requested that Wiebe help her to tell her story after reading his book on Big Bear, whom Johnson regards as her great-great-grandfather. Their collaboration elicited mixed reactions. Susanna Egan indicates the main criticism when she observes that “Wiebe positions himself from the beginning of this text as so immersed in Cree culture as to have no critical distance, no position separate from Cree culture from which the Mennonite writer, Rudy Wiebe, may come into the situation. For me, this immersion . . . provoke[s] the politically correct reading that excoriates Wiebe for appropriation of a Native woman’s voice and story” (23). The very notion of “appropriation” was at the heart of many concerns regarding Wiebe’s role in the book.

In a review of the criticism on *Stolen Life*, Jonathan Dueck observes that Wiebe was charged with having “stolen a First Nations voice” (146). Dueck notes that several critics concluded that, “by appropriating *and misrepresenting* the voices and stories of First Nations people, Wiebe has supported a stellar writing career with less-than-stellar writing” (146). McCall, however, counters these criticisms of *Stolen Life*, arguing that the book is “self-conscious about the process of representing another’s voice” and “draws attention to its mediated status as well as to the co-authors’ widely differing life experiences, levels of education, and socio-economic opportunities” (32). McCall goes on to say that the text uses a variety of “techniques” — such as “juxtaposition and self-referentiality” — that demonstrate “the irrefutable differences between Wiebe and Johnson” (32). Her reading of *Stolen Life* is useful in my interpretation of *Of This Earth*. Although, admittedly, Wiebe’s use of his sister’s diary brings up issues altogether different from those that arise over his use of First Nations stories, in both cases Wiebe confronts the problem of representing the life story of a person from a group that historically has been marginalized and whose stories have been appropriated, albeit in different ways.

Ultimately, I argue, Wiebe’s memoir counters criticisms about appropriation and misrepresentation in the same way that McCall argues *Stolen Life* does. Like Miller, G. Thomas Couser concludes that life writers respect their subjects by giving them a degree of autonomy, which

occurs “when subjects are granted some control over their stories” (22). Significantly, Wiebe is not satisfied with simply speaking *for* his subject in *Of This Earth*. Rather, his use of Helen’s diary entries ensures that Helen speaks for herself. This is crucial given the way that women’s lived experiences historically have been overlooked or excluded from the realm of so-called legitimate life writing.

Buss’s examination of early Canadian women’s life writing (including diary writing) is valuable in my consideration of how Wiebe’s use of Helen’s diary helps to convey important aspects of her life beyond the confines of dominant discourses. Buss argues that “Women encode, both in conscious and unconscious ways, what cannot be openly expressed, given the rational nature of patriarchal language. Only by decoding . . . can such lives be disclosed” (45). For Buss, it is up to the critic to uncover the lived experiences that women writers express in their writing without explicitly talking about them. She notes, for example, that a female diarist “had personal knowledge she has not shared with us, but which led her to encode certain presences as silences in her text” (23). Intriguingly, much like in Wiebe’s discussion of *Almighty Voice*, Buss confronts and interprets “silences” for what they can reveal.

Importantly, though, Wiebe does not simply do the work of decoding for the reader (though he does participate in the act of decoding, as I discuss below). Rather, he publishes passages of Helen’s writing, allowing his sister to speak for herself even if her writing demonstrates the kind of encoding work that Buss describes. Also, given that he occasionally bounces back and forth between his own writing and the diary entries that he has chosen, Wiebe does not erase his role as a mediator in the story. Rather, he uses the same tactic of “juxtaposition” that McCall describes him using in *Stolen Life*. To use her phrasing for that book, Wiebe jumps “from one genre and way of speaking to another” (32) and signals to readers each time he does so, making them aware of his role in choosing and interpreting particular diary passages.

Significantly, a good deal of Helen’s writing is seemingly not about her life at all. Yet, to borrow Buss’s terminology, we can see how her experiences are encoded in the events that Helen describes in the text. Wiebe points out how she was primarily “chronicling all our family illnesses” in her diary (*Of This Earth* 86). Indeed, he chooses particular entries that detail how “Mrs Wiebe got sick,” “Helen Wiebe got sick”

(141), “Dan Wiebe got sick,” and “Rudy Wiebe got sick” (142). The emphasis on family illnesses rather than on Helen’s own experiences is typical of early women’s life writing because, as Buss points out, “cultural definitions of a ‘good’ woman as one always sacrificing the self for the other has meant that while it is possible for a woman to write a memoir (a recounting of one’s place as a member of a group) without too much censure, autobiography (the account of one’s self development) is a risky activity for women” (24).

Helen’s diary entries reinforce Buss’s observations. Helen puts the family at the forefront while pushing herself to the background. What is more, as the quotations above point out, she does not even use the autobiographical “I” when recounting her own illness. As Wiebe states later in the book, “her tiny pulp-paper notebook” conveys how “she always recorded the dates of her life in the third person” (*Of This Earth* 231). This observation is not entirely accurate, as the diary entries themselves prove. However, many of the entries that Wiebe provides do show Helen referring to herself as “Helen” rather than “I.” In doing so, she de-emphasizes her role as the author and instead inscribes herself in the text as simply another member of the family.

Yet, while Helen sacrifices the narrative of self, she encodes a great deal of information about herself. Her obsession with writing about familial illness speaks to her anxiety about her own illness, which left her largely housebound and took her life only a few years later. The diary entries that Wiebe provides illustrate the severity of her illness:

1940. Helen Wiebe got sick 5 of Jan. On her birthday [her twelfth]. was sick quite a while had to go to hospital [North Battleford] on 13 of Jan. got operation the same day 13 Jan. at 5 P.M. was very sick got water about 15<sup>th</sup>. got meals on 16<sup>th</sup>, then came home on 24 of Jan. still was very sick then on night about the 26 of Jan got very sick got heart trouble and stayed in bed 4 months and on Mother’s Day [May 12] Schroeder [with his truck] came over and brought me too church & after she was well. (86-87)

Significantly, in this moment, while Helen attempts to remain objective in her descriptions, she cannot help but slip into the subjective voice when she writes that “Schroeder came over and brought me too church & after she was well.” The “me” and “she” within the same sentence are both Helen, and this moment reveals the tension of “many writing

women, [who wished] to speak fully of their lives yet [were] aware of the special concerns of their intimate readers" (Buss 43).

These moments of tension between "me" and "she" convey the negotiations at work not only in women's life writing — the need to both speak of and de-emphasize the self — but also in early illness narratives. Recent studies observe that "autobiographical illness narratives reclaim patients' voices from the biomedical narratives imposed upon them by modern medicine" (Jurecic 3). "Autobiographical illness narratives" are important because they allow for those who suffer from illness to tell their own stories outside the confines of other powerful models of discourse — precisely what Helen's incorporated text does within the larger autobiographical narrative written by Wiebe. That said, perhaps what is remarkable on first examining her text is how little it challenges "biomedical narratives." This is not so surprising when one takes into account Couser's point that "the impulse of patients to reclaim their bodies and their stories from medical discourse" is a "postmodern experience" (11). It is likely that, because Helen was not writing in an age when it was common to question master narratives, she conformed to a rather cold, clinical, and disinterested description of illness more in keeping with medical discourses.

In many ways, Helen was distancing her writing self from the body experiencing the illness. Her understanding of illness was rooted in a pre-postmodern sensibility, reflecting the fact that we work with the discourses available to us. Yet her writing conveys precisely how, in the words of Wiebe, "she lived such a continuous illness" (*Of This Earth* 142-43). Importantly, in other diary entries, her personal experience with health becomes more pronounced, such as when Helen notes in her penultimate entry that "Today I feel better" and, in her final entry, "lets all pray I can have more breath and sleep" (247). Her use of the diary to list family illnesses, and her occasional use of the subjective "me" and "I" in place of the impersonal "Helen," illustrate her need to speak to her own experiences suffering from a severe illness within a discourse that largely prevents both women and the sick from having such discussions about themselves.

Helen does not just write about illness, though. Wiebe also chooses passages from the diary in which she describes significant changes in the family. She notes how "Emmanuel and [her sister] Mary got engaged" (155), "Gust and [her sister] Tina drove away" (162), and "Abe Wiebe



and Gilda Heinrichs [Aaron's daughter] got engaged" (163). Although these entries might suggest that Helen was simply interested in crucial changes to the familial structure, Wiebe provides an entry in which Helen also describes how the neighbouring "Koehns moved away" (232). This final entry reveals that her interest in detailing marriages and migrations has to do with more than changes to the family. I contend that these entries, much like her discussion of familial illnesses, encode another of her preoccupations.

Significantly, Wiebe provides his own decoding of one of Helen's entries later in the text, and I suggest that it provides some insight into the above entries. Discussing a section of her diary in which Helen describes reading books with Wiebe, he notes,

What an obvious book *High Hedges* is now when I look for it in a used book store: a wealthy heroine exactly Helen's age whose life is filled with abrupt disasters always resolved so happily by amazing — often money — coincidences. But there is one chapter title I have never forgotten: "The Heel Woman Walks." And Helen — perhaps she dreamed of a life chauffeured about between estates in big cars, lying on beaches and never, not even for an instant, feeling sick. (266-67)

This is perhaps a good example of Wiebe's interpretation of the silences while calling attention to his role as an interpreter.

The interpretation, though, is a good decoding of why Helen spoke of this book. Other entries in the work reveal an interest in escape — whether the house and town via marriage or simply moving away — in much the same way that the heroine of *High Hedges* evades disaster and lives an escapist life "in big cars" and "on beaches." Helen is unable to escape her illness and consequently unable even to leave her own home. Taking a cue from Wiebe's own decoding, I argue that Helen's discussions of marriage and migration reflect a deeper desire not to live "a life chauffeured about between estates" but to live the kind of life that she saw everyone else around her living.

Her observation that the Koehn family was moving away, according to Wiebe, is perhaps another encoded diary entry that reflects these particular wants. Not only does Helen's diary illustrate that the family moved away, but also it indicates how "John Koehn got an operation" (232). Wiebe goes on to explain that "John was the fourth child of George and Liese Koehn, a year older than Helen. What had happened

— or not happened — between them that she should mention him? What could happen, with Helen so much in bed, barely able to step outside the house for a brief picture?” (232). Wiebe stops short of decoding here, and of course there is no evidence to support speculation about John’s role in Helen’s life. Yet Wiebe’s insinuation that John might have been at least a romantic interest for Helen reinforces the points above that her diary entries, despite being impersonal and frequently about others, reflect a desire to escape from the confines of her illness and live the kind of life that her illness prevented her from living.

Buss points out that in a woman’s life writing text the author will displace her own experiences “into another experience” (43). She notes how this “is a strategy that while seeming to de-emphasize herself and her feelings, draws attention to them” (43). This is the case with Helen’s writing, which focuses on the illnesses, marriages, and migrations of others, all of which reflect her own preoccupations. Particularly intriguing, though, is that the diary entries do not add significant details to Wiebe’s own story. Rather, they are important because they give Helen a voice with which to articulate her experiences and feelings, encoded as they might be. Whether or not they serve to better someone else’s story appears to be beside the point.

In fact, Helen’s diary entries do not quite work to strengthen or legitimize Wiebe’s autobiographical account. They do not necessarily add any information about his youth, nor do they help to bring Wiebe any closer to an authentic or more truthful account. He does position Helen’s diary as more concrete than the ephemeral oral language used during the time period about which he writes. Wiebe notes how he and his family spoke Low German, “[a] language that could not be written down, nor corrected by being made visible” (*Of This Earth* 141). Because it was not a written language, “Everything my parents and I told each other in the first twelve years of my life [is] gone” (141). This is different from Helen’s diary, written in “neat English” and containing words “still here on the paper of her tiny notebook” (141). Consequently, the diary operates as one of the few living documents written during the period that Wiebe represents in the book.

Yet, despite the status of the diary as a concrete document from the era, Wiebe demonstrates that it does not shed light on the way things actually occurred at the time. He makes this clear when he points out a discrepancy in Helen’s diary regarding his own sickness:

Helen's little notebooks actually record "Rudy Wiebe got sick" twice, but they are exactly the same words and there is a contradiction in the dates. One note says it was "1940" and "Sat July 22," the other "1939" and the day "Sat July 27." But these dates are reversed: in 1939 Saturday fell on July 22, and in 1940 on July 27 and therefore both dates are wrong. So, which year was I sick once? Was I almost five or almost six years old when I was dragged uselessly from "Doc" to "nurse" to be brought back "home in the night" and be "very sick for first weeks"? If only my sweet sister, now sixty years gone, had left a single descriptive word about my sickness. (143)

Wiebe suggests that Helen's entries are not entirely trustworthy. They are untrustworthy not because Helen was lying (there was very little for her to lie about) but because she was writing diary entries susceptible to minor errors, memory lapses, and so on. Much like the narrator in "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" — who confronts contradictory written reports — this moment in *Of This Earth* reinforces the instability of the historical artifact. As Hildi Froese Tiessen puts it, for Wiebe "fact and artifact fail to provide a secure and reliable entry into . . . [the] past," and though artifacts can "suggest something about what the past might have been" they "fall short on conveying what it was and what it meant" ("Between Memory" 628). Again, in *Of This Earth*, the historical documents that Wiebe uses serve a purpose other than finding the real story of his past.

Wiebe makes it clear that he is not necessarily incorporating Helen's entries to better define a sense of himself. If this were the case, then he would not point out examples of entries that only confuse questions about *what really happened* to him as a child. Rather, the diary entries illustrate how Helen was reacting to her own experiences and how she encoded those reactions in her writing. Wiebe anticipates potential criticisms of appropriation and counters them. Helen gets to share her story in the way that she could tell it, regardless of how precise or imprecise it might be.

Her diary entries speak to what Buss refers to as the "need to be watchful, not only for the ways in which women situate themselves inside the genre, but also for the ways their texts transgress the generic bounds" (17). The early women's writing that Buss examines reveals how women were locked into patriarchal generic constraints but nevertheless articulated their own voices in moments of generic transgression.

Readers are consistently confronted with these transgressions in Helen's writing because of her refusal to shape her life into already prepared narratives. At one point, Helen notes, "It's three months I have been in bed today. Biechs were over today. In the evening Rudy read stories to me. Got a dozen oranges from Mrs. Biech" (*Of This Earth* 266). Here Helen forgoes any kind of linear development. We move from the Biechs who were over in the day to the evening when Rudy read stories back to the day when the family gave her oranges. Helen, as a diary writer rather than a memoirist or autobiographer, challenged any demand to structure her life in conventional ways.

She did not write from a temporal distance from her illness but as the events themselves were happening. As Margo Culley says about diaries, "A novel creates a fictional world complete unto itself, while an autobiography or memoir looks back from a fixed point in time which is the terminus of the retrospective. A diary, on the other hand, is created in and represents a continuous present" (20). Culley notes that the lack of temporal distance in a diary does not mean that the constructed self is any more authentic than the self of an autobiography or memoir. On the contrary, "The pages of the diary might be thought of as a kind of mirror before which the diarist stands assuming this posture or that" (12). Nevertheless, Wiebe's incorporation of Helen's notebook entries allows us to glimpse how another person conceives of, or at least writes about, her lived experiences beyond the constraints of certain narrative strategies. This is particularly noteworthy in her avoidance of conventional plots taken up in narratives of individual illness, such as the conventional recovery plot.<sup>2</sup>

Ultimately, the private notebook, particularly in regard to writing about her own illness, allowed Helen to explore and consider her experiences outside the demands of more public or literary forms, which typically would have required her story to be shaped into a plot. Couser raises this point when he discusses illness narratives:

Although memoirs cannot render the subjective experience of illness, they can represent conditions (and outcomes) unavailable to autobiography. . . . To a lesser extent so can the diary (or journal) precisely because it does not await the resolution — whether in recovery from or accommodation to dysfunction — that seems to license most retrospective autobiographical accounts of illness and disability. (6)

Although Wiebe chooses several passages in which Helen discusses her illness, they do not follow any particular trajectory; she is either “sick quite a while” (86) or feeling “so good I had to spill ink” on the page (*Of This Earth* 247). The penultimate entry, in which Helen writes that she is feeling better, is immediately undercut by her final entry the night that she dies, undermining expectations formed from literary conventions of potential recovery that Couser discusses above. To his credit, Wiebe maintains this lack of development and refuses to shape Helen’s entries into any kind of linear order. In fact, he highlights the fragmentary trajectory of her writing by relaying several of her entries after her own final one (267).

It is in this sense that I see the book as an example of intertextual relationality but in a way that Regis does not fully allow. Critical to her notion of intertextual relationality is the notion of overwriting. For Regis, overwriting occurs when an author engages in “revisions and appropriations” by incorporating an older life writing text into a newer life writing project (289). This is why she argues that “the palimpsest” functions “as an appropriate model for the revision, repetition, and accumulation of life narratives” as the earlier text becomes less and less clear the more it becomes recycled (290). In that sense, these auto/biographical works always expose the self who is writing the life (either autobiographically or biographically) and the agenda at work in the text. Nevertheless, each revision of a life narrative “adopts a pose of authenticity” (299), as if each new text finally reveals the true story. Yet, Regis acknowledges, this pose must be an “acknowledged fiction” to allow for future revisions (299).

Although Wiebe constructs a narrative for himself as well as for Helen “in response to existing, alternative versions of a life,” I argue that he incorporates her diary not to reinforce an agenda-driven conception of her life but to present her diary as an alternative version of life in the boreal forest that Wiebe writes for himself in the rest of the text. *Of This Earth* tells the story of a boy’s experiences growing up in rural Saskatchewan, and though Wiebe talks about the roles that others played in his youth he refrains from explicitly telling their stories. Borrowing from Henry Adams, Buss notes how, “if we depend on men’s histories to know women, no woman will be known” (46). *Of This Earth* is not simply a man’s history. Wiebe certainly tells the story of his early life, but he also opens spaces for others to tell their stories,

particularly Helen, whose writing does not serve to reinforce or even complement his narrative. Instead, Helen speaks her own history and serves as a reminder to readers that alternative stories were taking place at the time. That her entries disrupt Wiebe's narrative only reinforces for the reader that women's lived experiences typically have been left out of historical records and that their narratives often are discounted as legitimate life writing. The entries reveal in some ways the constructedness of the smooth patriarchal master narrative.

Wiebe's main goal in placing the diary entries among his own biographical details about Helen appears to be to tell readers his perspective: that her life and experiences should not be forgotten. Rather than overwrite her words, Wiebe redirects us to them. Consequently, the question that must be asked is why he singles out Helen. After all, he notes how his sister Liz "continued" to write in Helen's diary "on the day after [her] funeral" (*Of This Earth* 272), and he provides several of her entries as well. Wiebe addresses this point when he notes how Helen's diary managed to remain a family possession sixty years later: "Beyond all odds in my older sisters' relentless opp'rieme, cleaning up, after our mother died, Helen's notebooks have survived. . . . It may well be these notebook words exist because they were Helen's; her life was so short and we had so little to remember her by; and she lived such a continuous illness that the repeated litany became her solitary solace" (142-43).

On the surface, Helen appears to have lacked the kind of experience frequently deemed necessary to construct one's self as an autobiographical subject. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson put it, "Experience, then, is the very process through which a person becomes a certain kind of subject owning certain identities in the social realm, identities constituted through material, cultural, economic, and psychic relations" (31). Indeed, ill since birth, Helen was largely bereft of the events and social relationships crucial for constitution of the identities (and, consequently, autobiographical subjects) that Smith and Watson describe. Wiebe's book illustrates that, though Helen was denied the moments in life and social relationships conventionally held as significant in informing one's subjectivity, she had real experiences and real feelings, as encoded in her diary, worthy of readerly attention. Ultimately, by placing Helen's diary entries within his own narrative, Wiebe has preserved her story, and, importantly, because *Of This Earth* is in the public sphere, her story is

preserved in the realm that Helen was largely denied access to for most of her life.

Regis argues that intertextuality reveals either the wish of the author to “overwrite” the previous text, so that it aligns with the agenda of the current life writing project, or the motivation of the author “to ‘resurrect or uncover the underlying text,’ to restore an original, authentic account” that, in fact, does not exist (298). Approaching *Of This Earth* strictly in these terms, though, would be limiting and in some cases incorrect, for Wiebe does little “to restore an original, authentic account.” In fact, he goes out of his way to avoid these pitfalls and, in doing so, counters the criticism that his other texts have received. He neither appropriates Helen’s story nor erases his own role in shaping the overall narrative and the way that her diary entries fit into it.

Rather than simply consider what intertextual relationality tells us about the author and his attempt to overwrite a previous autobiographical account, I think that it is necessary to consider that these moments of intertextuality shift the focus away from Wiebe himself and onto Helen, who has encoded her unique feelings and lived experiences. Wiebe does not use Helen’s text to tell readers more about himself, nor does he attempt to recycle her story into an agenda-driven, so-called objective account of her life. Rather, he uses her diary entries so that Helen can tell her own story in ways that both conform to and transgress the constraints of the time in which she was writing. Ultimately, in *Of This Earth*, both Wiebe and Helen represent a girl who lived a brief, sheltered, but nevertheless significant life.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Regis examines both a confessional autobiographical account of British author Vita Sackville-West and biographical accounts based upon this confession written first by her son, Nigel, and then by Nigel’s son, Adam. Regis notes how Sackville-West’s son and grandson recycled her initial confession first to blanket and then to “restore its narrative of homosexuality” (298). This is significant because here the purpose of recycling was to alter the public perception shaped by the previous act of intertextuality.

<sup>2</sup> See Prodromou for a more in-depth examination of the recovery plot.

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