AUTHOR	Janne Korkka
TITLE	Canadian Mennonite Narratives as Historiographic Ethnofictions of Space
YEAR	2023
VERSION	Author accepted manuscript
CITATION	Korkka, J. (2023) 'Canadian Mennonite Narratives as Historiographic Ethnofictions of Space' in Suchacka, W. et al. (eds.) *Land Deep in Time Canadian Historiographic Ethnofiction*. Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 247-267.

CHAPTER 4

Canadian Mennonite Narratives as Historiographic Ethnofictions of Space

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Abstract

When Janice Kulyk Keefer proposed the concept of historiographic ethnofiction in 1995, she drew on her own experience of "the problems and traumas and unacknowledged possibilities that compose the true site of [her] ethnicity" ("Coming Across"). She desires to depart from established ways to read, write, and transmit ethnicity, and in that project repeatedly invokes spatial concepts in both concrete and metaphoric ways. Ideas of ethnicity may comprise of narratives of "some enchanted world out of place and time" ("Coming Across"), narratives that I read to be idealised but inevitably linked to someone's memory of lived space. As Kulyk Keefer talks of her own ethnicity as a "site," she further anchors discourses of ethnicity in a discourse of spatiality.

Inspired by Kulyk Keefer, this article explores selected Canadian Mennonite narratives as historiographic ethnofictions of space. I propose they showcase a distinct strand of ethnofiction concerned with place and space that began with the writings of Rudy Wiebe, in particular his 1970 novel *The Blue Mountains of China* which looked at a Mennonite past and present in Russia, South America, and Canada. The novel no longer perpetuates the once historical and now enchanted places which Mennonites were forced to leave as authoritative sites of Mennonite ethnicity. Instead, the text turns to the unacknowledged possibilities held by places and spaces that Mennonites find new, unfamiliar and even unwelcoming.

I shall discuss Wiebe's novel and two other texts which reframe ideas of Mennonite ethnicity through shifts towards new spaces: Sandra Birdsell's *The Russländer* (2001) and Wiebe's short story "Finally, the Frozen Ocean" (2010), which brings characters from *The Blue Mountains of China* to places they only yearned for in that novel. These texts confirm Kulyk Keefer's view that a writer of ethnicity is "forever coming across bones", bones that carry the trace of history and of suffering that "we cannot not know" ("Coming Across"). Yet the texts are not only concerned with spaces bestowed with Mennonite bones, but also with new spaces that they yearn for, spaces which in Robert Kroetsch's words raise "a doubt about [their] ability to know" (23). That precious doubt about previous ways of knowing does not erase bones from Mennonite history, but I will show it may enable Mennonite voices to know something *new*, to know *more* about themselves, and to reconcile what were once incommensurable ideas of history and ethnicity through engaging with space in new ways.

When Janice Kulyk Keefer proposed the concept of historiographic ethnofiction in 1995, she drew on her own experience of "the problems and traumas and unacknowledged possibilities

that compose the true site of [her] ethnicity" ("Coming Across"). Kulyk Keefer explores her desire to depart from established ways to read, write, and transmit ethnicity, and her discussion repeatedly invokes spatial concepts in both concrete and metaphoric ways. She notes that ideas of ethnicity may comprise of narratives of "some enchanted world out of place and time," narratives that I read to be idealised but inevitably linked to someone's memory of lived space. The spaces thus crafted may be 'enchanted' and unreal, but they retain links to concrete places and times which then evolve into sites that reside in individual and collective memory. Those sites become a ground where first-hand experience of space and time begins to inseparably intertwine with stories and desires that concern those spaces and times.

As Kulyk Keefer refers to her own ethnicity as a "site," she further anchors a discourse of ethnicity in a discourse of spatiality. She recognises how she is "a self situated in the present, pulled between . . . a rapidly changing Canada, and a chaotically 'developing' Ukraine" ("Coming Across"). Keefer's exploration of selfhood in changing spaces inspires me to propose a spatial reading of selected Canadian Mennonite narratives as historiographic ethnofictions of space. I propose they showcase a distinct strand of ethnofiction concerned with place and space that roughly began with the writings of Rudy Wiebe, in particular his 1970 novel, *The Blue Mountains of China*. That novel looked at a Mennonite past and present scattered over a century of Mennonite history in the Russian Empire/Soviet Union, South America, and Canada in thirteen chapters. The novel crafts a rich kaleidoscope of voices, many of whom only appear in a single chapter, but who together speak volumes of Mennonite communal history. That history is marked by religious persecution and forced migration in more nuanced ways than what I can discuss here as I focus on narrating experience and memory of space, not the general patterns of Mennonite migration. These migrations took Mennonites from Western Europe towards Danzig, today Gdańsk in Poland, then Russia and Ukraine from the 16th to the 18th century and from there, to both North and South America in the 19th and 20th centuries. The final mass emigrations from Europe took place during the turmoil of the two world wars, and notably during the Stalinist oppression of the 1920s.

Mennonites have engaged in various forms of storytelling and historical or theological writing for centuries, but *The Blue Mountains of China* was published at a time when the tradition of Mennonites publishing fiction was still quite new. The novel is a watershed narrative in that it no longer perpetuates narratives of once historical and then enchanted places which Mennonites were forced to leave as authoritative sites of Mennonite ethnicity. Instead, the text turns to the unacknowledged possibilities held by places and spaces mostly in North and South America that Mennonites found new, unfamiliar and sometimes unwelcoming. I shall focus on fictions which reframe ideas of Mennonite ethnicity through shifts towards spaces that

challenge the characters and/or readers with their newness and resistance to previous strategies of knowing. In addition to Wiebe's novel, I will discuss the novel, *The Russländer* (2001), by Sandra Birdsell which explores spatialized memories from Mennonite Ukraine and Wiebe's short story, "Finally, the Frozen Ocean" (2010), which brings characters from *The Blue Mountains of China* to places they only yearned for in the 1970 novel. These texts confirm Kulyk Keefer's view that a writer of ethnicity is "forever coming across bones," bones that carry the trace of history and of suffering that "we cannot not know" ("Coming Across").

The two writers' relation to Mennonite identity[1] and tradition varies. Rudy Wiebe has been the most widely recognised North American Mennonite writer since his first novel *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962). That novel caused controversy in the Mennonite community, but Wiebe became a widely celebrated figure amongst Mennonites. Sandra Birdsell has been involved in varying Christian churches, but, in conversation with Margaret L. Reimer in 2002, she notes that Mennonite faith "is not far from [her] own faith" (9). *The Russländer* partly arises from her 1990s on-site research into her Mennonite grandparents' roots in Ukraine (Reimer 9). The texts explored here engage with spaces bestowed with Mennonite bones and spaces that Mennonites yearn for, and the characters in various ways trace their identity to the Mennonite community in Ukraine dismantled though not erased in the first decades of the Soviet Union. Thus, the narratives express a need to reflect on a long history of suffering and being silenced, histories which inevitably keep coming across bones. In their peculiar ways, the voices speaking in the three narratives become deeply engaged with the problem of knowing in a manner that resonates against Alberta author Robert Kroetsch's words on how writing can raise "a doubt about our ability to know" (23). Kroetsch's text does not foreground doubt only, but the possibility of new knowing, of circumventing narratives which have once gained hegemonic authority over others. For these fictional Mennonites, doubts and shifts concerning hegemonic narratives are in particular raised in relation to their previous knowing, and they may become enabling instead of daunting. Dominant narratives of Mennonite history from 1500s Western Europe onwards suggest a perpetual cycle of forced exodus where each new place offers fleeting and precarious balance at best, but starting from *The Blue Mountains of China*, these narratives raise places and spaces that can be more. Thus, departures from previous ways of knowing can be a liberation: they do not erase bones from Mennonite history, but, as I will show, they enable Mennonite voices to know something new, to know *more* about themselves, and to reconcile what were once incommensurable ideas of history and ethnicity as Mennonite writing crafts new ways of engaging with space.

"Bones and Ruins": Mennonite Identity as a Site of Spatial Knowing

What does it mean to propose a spatial concept like *site* as a depository of ethnicity and identity in Canadian Mennonite writing as well as in a broader sense, and how does that site function as a depository of knowledge? Spatialised language strongly resonates in multidisciplinary discussions of identity; for example, sociologists Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann wrote in 1966 that "[t]o be given an identity involves being assigned a specific place in the world" (152). Berger and Luckmann discuss the world in terms of social relations, but both social relations and individual identity are in powerful ways defined by the places and spaces where they are anchored. I use place and space as near-synonymous concepts as boundaries between the two remain transitory: *place* tends to host various human ideas and physical constructs while *space* may show fewer traces of human presence but is always at least *perceived* by human gaze. Ethnicity and identity, then, have been discussed as a site in the sense I propose here by scholars such as cultural theorist Stuart Hall and historian Luise White. White frames ethnicity as "a site of struggle, a place of sharp political and economic division, as a locus of debate and discord" (5), using *site*, *place*, and *locus* as partly overlapping concepts to establish a strong locationality and spatiality in discourses of ethnicity. Hall, then, uses *place* and *site* in a similar manner in *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation* (2017), where he discusses the concept of cultural identity in a way which strongly resonates with my approach to Mennonite ethnofictions of space:

> Place is one of those strong representational coordinates of cultural identity. It matters both as a dense, particular, local site where many relationships have overlapped across time, producing a richly textured sense of the ways in which space is grounded by distinctive ways of life and as a kind of symbolic guarantee of stable, continuous, cultural patterns consistently reproduced through traditions that mirror the stability of kinship and blood ties among a settled, gathered, and interrelated population. (106)

Mennonite historical spaces as represented in Mennonite writing are powerful examples of spaces that are "grounded by distinctive ways of life" (Hall 106). A key passage in Canadian Mennonite author John Weier's novel, *The Steppe* (1995), makes a parallel emphasis, noting that "[t]he [Mennonite] story comes in bones and ruins, in shards and fragments, from a thousand sites and sources" (3.1).[2] What Mennonites know about themselves is deposited in a number of sites where they once resided or encountered others. Those sites carry the trace of various markers of Mennonite diaspora, which often include the bones of ancestors in places Mennonites have been forced to leave.

White, Hall, and Weier all foreground language which emphasises spatialized discourse and spatial knowing as a key component of ethnicity and selfhood. Weier's "bones and ruins"

suggest a historical cycle in which, through repeated Mennonite exodus, historical spaces are grounded by distinctive ways of life *and* their disruption, or even end in a particular space where little more than bones may be left to mark lands that were once *home*. If that home was not in ruins when it was left behind, it may be reduced to that once abandoned; perhaps physically, perhaps in the memory of those who know that it will not be possible to go back. Knowing this may be inescapable even if, at the same time, that home transforms into an eternally unchanging, enchanted location in one's mind. The site in which such knowledge is stored becomes a multilayered locus of ethnicity, a depository of places and spaces in which not all Mennonites who believe to know them have ever lived, but which may still define core ideas of ethnicity and selfhood generations after the departure took place.

Approaching ethnicity as a site can make us more able to recognise the various ways in which real spaces and metaphoric meanings bestowed on space may become fundamental core elements of ethnic identities. Mennonite literature may be, as Tiessen notes, "a relatively small player in the vast landscape of ethnic literatures" which all debate the slippery concepts of ethnicity and identity (18), but it is of broader interest as a body of literature which engages with deeply intertwined layers of cultural, linguistic, and religious self-identification. Particularly in Western Canada, where both Wiebe and Birdsell are based, these building blocks of Mennonite identity resonate with a sense of recent departure from a very specific location, the Mennonite colonies that once existed in today's Ukraine. Robert Zacharias discusses Mennonite writings on their historical migrations in *Rewriting the Break Event: Mennonites and Migration in Canadian Literature* (2013) and states that "the 1920s migration experience continues to hold in the imagination of the Mennonite community in Canada" (186). He examines a wide variety of Canadian Mennonite writing and notes that *The Blue Mountains of China* is the only novel in his corpus to "imagine a Mennonite community beyond a strict Canada-Ukraine binary" (179). This shows that the bones and ruins but also the past lives of the Mennonite community in Ukraine remain powerful in the collective imagination after a century. Those who were able to escape the Soviet Union left and did not (could not) go back; those who could not leave perhaps perished or spent decades in internal exile. Only since the 1950s would less extreme policies allow internal exiles to return from Siberia and elsewhere in the Soviet Union to the old home, which, in the words of Jakob Friesen, a key character in *The Blue Mountains of China*, some found "wiped clean like cheap plastic" (270) of their Mennonite past.

The spatial implications of Friesen's words are clear: if the people were removed, their dwellings may also have been erased, not just repurposed. Friesen does not say what was done to Mennonite church buildings in his world, but such a gross affront to a Stalinist takeover of

the land might be destined for erasure to the last plank. What about the precious bones buried in Mennonite graveyards? If markers of their presence in the landscape were lost in a space Stalin's Soviet Union sought to wipe clean of its various pasts, the bones may remain. Even if Stalinist purges sought to remove all trace of the "stable, continuous, cultural patterns consistently reproduced" (Hall 106) by Mennonites in Jakob Friesen's previous home, his story in *The Blue Mountains of China* confirms Kulyk Keefer's views on the inevitability bones: even if they cannot be seen, the history of Mennonite suffering deposited in bones cannot not be known. To echo Antoinette Burton's reading of the importance of bones in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, bones are not an easy archive to read, but they are an archive of knowledge which is very difficult to fully erase, to wipe clean like cheap plastic. Importantly, pain and suffering are not the only things that bones suggest, and some bones not at all suggest despair and destruction. Instead, they preserve a trace of the desire to settle down and build, to *remain* in a particular space.

Jakob Friesen in *The Blue Mountains of China* and Katya (Katherine) Vogt, the protagonist in *The Russländer*, both speak as individuals who want to remain within the spaces their Mennonite ancestors had shaped by such desires but are forced to leave. It seems logical to discuss experience in those spaces before delving into the effects of their dismantling, so I will follow the historical chronology of my primary texts and start by discussing *The Russländer*, as Katya's story mostly takes place in the 1910s during the last years of relative peace in Russian Mennonite[3] colonies. Jakob Friesen, then, appears in Wiebe's novel in two chapters dated to 1932 and 1967, and I shall focus on the latter where he recounts his experiences in both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union to other Mennonites he meets on a trip to Canada. John Reimer and Liesel Driediger from *The Blue Mountains of China* return in "Finally, the Frozen Ocean" with narratives set in early 2000s to present entirely new prospects for knowing: they can revisit both Ukraine and their own past lives as they were glimpsed in *The Blue Mountains of China*. Through reading these key Mennonite narratives as they explore such trajectories, I argue that when Mennonite historiographic ethnofiction comes across bones, it also comes across distinctive ways of life which find survival beyond the discourses of enchanted worlds which may privilege a singular past over diverse presents and futures.

"God had chosen to bless the Mennonite farmer"[4]

The Russländer seems to build its main narrative arc on the inevitability of bones that Weier's *The Steppe* proposes. *The Russländer* opens with a page-long announcement from *Odessaer Zeitung* on 15 November 1917, which announces a "Massacre at Privol'noye" where "Eleven

people were piteously slain by bandits at the Abram Jacob Sudermann estate of Privol'noye on November 11" (1). The family names of the dead are Sudermann, Vogt, and Wiebe, all common (Russian) Mennonite names. For the time being, the "bandits" remain unidentified, and the narrative says no more of the massacre. Instead, it jumps back in time to 1910 to focus on Katya Vogt, who is eight years old and growing up on a Mennonite farm in the Russian Empire in Ukrainian territory (34). Katya is living in Chortitza colony, the first Mennonite settlement in the region which was established in the late 1700s and dismantled in the two world wars. She would emigrate to Canada as a young woman, and the story is framed as a kind of autobiography she is telling in her old age to a young interviewer in Winnipeg. Katya's identity reflects that of people who identify as Russian Mennonites in Canada: they often descend from ancestors who lived in Ukrainian rather than Russian territory and left that territory in the early decades of the 20th century. During the Soviet era, they were pulled between a rapidly changing Canada where they lived and the impossibility of visiting Soviet-controlled Ukraine. As in perhaps any forced exodus, this impossibility fuelled crafting an enchanted world which could only be visited in memory and whose pull would not end when the Iron Curtain was lifted.

In the four-hundred pages of *The Russländer,* the Privol'noye massacre only resurfaces in the middle of the story, which gives a detailed account of the brutal killings of the Mennonite farming families (266). To echo Kulyk Keefer again, the interviewer and the reader now "cannot not know" ("Coming Across") the suffering of Mennonites left in the hands of bandits who "thought they had to keep on killing until no one was left" as "[t]hey didn't want to leave a witness" (Birdsell 265).[5] Katya's narrative thus inevitably comes across bones and the killings become a turning point in her life: she survives, in the turmoil of war and terror, while the Russländer Mennonite way of life in Ukraine will not. Critics have pointed that Katya's world is emphatically Mennonite and seen by an individual. The Ukrainians and Russians who lived in the same localities before, during, and after the rise of the Mennonite colonies play minor roles in *The Russländer* and would justifiably have different stories to tell.[6] Birdsell's novel makes no effort to hide the aspiration to foreground an individual voice, and Zacharias reads the result as a nuanced shift away from a communal focus in telling Mennonite stories, both in relation to the novel's take on 'long' history and the specific event of the massacre (130-32). He sees foregrounding the individual as a way of shifting focus away from the massacre and thereby death to "the particularities of the lives represented" (132) lost in many retellings of Russian Mennonite history. The massacre is a watershed moment in the novel's timeline, but I propose that something of greater importance emerges through the highly spatialized sense of selfhood that the narrative builds for Katya.

The early chapters of the novel introduce Katya's family and the community, but also begin anchoring them into a particular locality and social relations reflected in the *lived* space of the Chortitza colony, lived space that Henri Lefebvre defines to attract both perception and description and which "the imagination seeks to change and appropriate" (37-38). Sometimes *The Russländer* does this through brief, matter-of-fact 'mapping' of lived space, such as a note about the village service road turning into "an avenue of chestnut trees" (19) which leads to houses at the heart of the village. More interestingly, the narrative presents detailed, subjective contemplation which both perceives and appropriates space as it reflects desires concerning the enchanted world of Mennonite Ukraine that could only be crafted *after* Mennonites were forced to leave that world behind. This becomes evident when Katya and other children are reminded by their tutor Helena Sudermann to "be sure and notice how green the steppe was around the Mennonite villages . . . in comparison to the land owned by Russians, proof of how God had blessed them" (8). Sudermann goes on to claim that

> throughout the summer, the sun scorched the land, an iron left on an ironing pad and turning it the drab colour of sand. However. A person need only travel a few *versts* in any direction from the Chortitza road, and they would soon notice that Mennonite land stayed green all year round . . . the fields owned by Mennonites were oases of green in a semi-arid Russian land. Half black, half chestnut soil; the same sun, snow, rain; but God had chosen to bless the Mennonite farmer. (9)

Some of the children question this and say, "We only saw snow" (9) when they came to the village for Christmas, and it seems fair to assume some truth in their observation. This does not mean that Helena Sudermann's account should be considered untruthful: rather, it conveys a mixture of perceived facts and desires that spill over from the future into the past to appropriate the space. Historically, after initial difficulties that farming pioneers inevitably face, some Mennonite families in Chortitza and its daughter colonies became very successful in farming and other business (see Birdsell 148).[7] For much of the 1800s, interventions by Russian authorities to their practices were limited and unlike in most of Europe, most children growing up in the colonies had access to at least some schooling in a system which the Mennonites managed themselves.[8] The land they farmed was very fruitful, which is proven by the fact that Ukraine today is globally one of the most important producers of wheat, corn, and sunflower oil. Helena Sudermann's account of the land thus reflects the historical and climatological conditions where the Chortitza colony existed. At the same time, it may confirm Kulyk Keefer's reading of the novel as "the oldest story in the world: paradise lost" ("Paradise") as Helena's account reflects desires crafted in the years after Chortitza fell, desires in which the colony

appears as an enchanted land, a perpetually fruitful green oasis set apart from neighbouring lands by God's grace.

Katya gradually emerges as a survivor of the 1917 massacre, which the reader cannot not know is coming.[9] The steps of growing up in the Mennonite oasis where her father's greenhouse appears as "Eden, where mist watered the earth" (14) may be taken on a path leading towards bones and ruins, but that path is long and set to represent a living community, not a dying one. The years before World War I and even the war years are filled with the experiences of a girl growing up rather than looming atrocity as they recount school, friendships, Katya's first period (93) and the dawning of adult responsibilities. That path is emphatically framed also as a process of growing into a landscape which exhibits the attributes of a very particular lived space crafted by the Mennonite community, a space which thus "embodies [the community's] social relationships" (Lefebvre 27).

It seems very natural to approach Katya's ethnic identity and sense of self in spatial terms as a site, as the narrative frequently speaks in terms of how both her understanding of the community's religious tradition and the ways in which its main livelihood, farming, permeate the lived space in which she operates. The novel is emphatically a Mennonite ethnofiction where layers of cultural, linguistic, and religious self-identification prominently intertwine. This becomes evident, for example, in a memory that the elderly Katya will relay to her interviewer in Winnipeg, a memory in which religious belief pervades natural phenomena: "had he noticed that on Good Friday the sky was often grey with clouds? In Russia the sky was cloudy too. Nature did that. Nature paid homage to the one who had willingly gone into the tomb" (36). The farming community's everyday work is shown to have some power to shape the space around it, like Katya's religious convictions shape the reading of Good Friday weather. Yet, it is clear that the farming discourse does not have the same power to make the Mennonite home space yield into any desired form and function:

> The day had been long and hot, and a shortage of draft animals made the harvest slow. Her uncle Bernhard's black disposition was on the verge of erupting when voluminous rain clouds appeared, rimming the edge of the valley. He was anxious for the herdsman to bring the cows home, as he wanted to go up the hill for an hour's work before it began to rain. (157)

As noted, Russian Mennonites were successful farmers and had proved they knew something about making the heat and rain of the above passage work for them. The community shapes the land by cultivating it; but the land dictates if and when they can reap what they have sown. To again echo Lefebvre (27), the land lends of itself to embody the social and economic

relationships of the community, but the farmer could never think that the land allows the heat and rain to bend to all daily needs and desires in the way the religious person observes in the Good Friday quote from Katya.

As *The Russländer* seeks to find ways to remember a specific Mennonite world which ceased to exist during war and terror, the narrative is dedicated to exploring social relations within the community. Recreating them is crucial to contemplating the "representational coordinates of cultural identity" (Hall 106) for someone like Katya who grew up in that world. Yet, as Hall states, place is important amongst those coordinates, and it may offer Katya a more permanent grounding for selfhood than the people amongst whom she grew up. If Kulyk Keefer in "Coming Across Bones" is trying to make sense of a changing selfhood in the rapidly changing spaces of Canada and Ukraine, then Birdsell presents her protagonist as a young person who is still pondering what her selfhood might be. It will be a Mennonite selfhood, but also a selfhood pervaded by a space which has the power to dictate her life and death through heat and rain, famine or plenty, but which seems willing to allow her to endlessly draw of itself and carry everything she gains with her to Canada. This process is prominent in the way the narrative frequently opens new chapters with passages that turn the reader's gaze towards Katya's perception of place and space from the second chapter onwards.[10] In Chapter Two, the opening sentence gives just a little room to the Mennonite community's imprint on the place where they live and more to the space itself: "On the final day of school the tall grass went running before them in the wind, the unbroken land around and beyond Ox Lake becoming like water, and the plumage of the grass like a silver mist rolling across it" (36). Chapters Three and Four slightly shift focus, as the former opens by noting that "it was too dark to see much of anything, certainly not the storks nesting on the *Zentralschule*" (73). The latter, then, recalls how "the weather turned as hot as summer and the tulips and irises flowered at the same time, a profusion of colour in the west garden" (92). These passages blend representing place and space as they blend notes on the community's presence on Ukrainian steppe landscape and notes on the land itself, including its other residents who are not all human.

In the opening of Chapter Six, the spatial focus shifts to a seemingly inconspicuous building, which nevertheless embodies the social relationships of the colony in both farming work and religious life:

> The equipment shed had been turned into a prayer hall, the doors standing open, a square of light framing a picture of a grooved path worn into the earth by wagon wheels. . . . This was the day of the Faith Conference, not yet noon, and already the heat inside the shed was sweltering. (128)

Katya is outside serving tea, and the men of the community are gathered inside to hear Abram Sudermann who brings news from St Petersburg that "the possibility of war is very real" (130). The very brief Chapter Seven, which closes Section I of the novel entitled "In Green Pastures", echoes with the first steps that the Empire and Chortitza are taking into war. Katya does not yet know what the war will bring, but the muted presence of her older self in Canada shows in the way the language of her memories is foreboding of war, and how its focus is overwhelmingly spatial:

> Katya would remember that clouds driven by the wind had cast shadows on the shorn fields on either side of the road, making the fields appear incandescent as patches of earth brightened to a yellow-gold and faded to the usual monochromatic beige of autumn. All around her the land glowed and dimmed; it was a remarkable thing to see how a landscape shadowed with running clouds seemed to turn itself on and off, and she stood very still, her slate-grey eyes taking it in, wanting to remember the day her father went to serve in the war. (146)

The rest of the chapter fills with spatial imagery of individuals and communities settling into wartime but still without news of battle. The focus is on how life is fundamentally shifting, but most people remain barely aware of monumental transitions being imposed on them. Katya's position seems different: in the above quote, she stops so that she can observe how light and shadow redraw the landscape around her as they have so many times before, and yet, that landscape remains a permanent fixture in her sense of self. She is also observing a loss, as she sees how "the *droschke* carrying her father and mother passed through the gates or Privol'noye, the clouds casting their shadows, the incandescent earth" (149). But when she keeps her gaze on the familiar and yet constantly shifting flicker of the landscape (146), she observes reassurance of the continuation of selfhood derived from that landscape. The site of Katya's ethnic identity is an expanding receptacle where losing people to war looms as an immanent challenge to her Mennonite selfhood, but where spatialized memory continues to feed into a sense of agency and conviction that her idea of self may endure.

The idea of Mennonite history coming "in shards and fragments" (Weier 3.1) strongly resonates against the spatial focus in *The Russländer* and Katya's spatialized memory evident in her father's departure for war and elsewhere. The bones and ruins that loom in "Massacre at Privol'noye" (1) and the turmoil that continues after it lose power to define Katya's selfhood with every shard and fragment of the record of her spatial experience *on* and *of* the Ukrainian steppe. Hall writes that given time, shared spaces and shared histories, cultural identities become so "powerfully tied to a sense of place and of group origins" that they will "[acquire]

the durability of nature itself" (107). As the novel focuses on an individual, Katya's steppe world gradually acquires that durability: it is clear to the reader that, as Hall writes, such worlds are discursive constructions (107) and that the social spaces, even the physical spaces that inspired *The Russländer* have already been dismantled. The steppe world of Katya's youth is dismantled in the novel, too, and the Sudermann, Vogt, and Wiebe families fall into the hands of bandits. But, by the time that happens, the shards and fragments of Mennonite experience in the Ukrainian steppe are so powerfully conveyed through Katya's sense of space and social relations embedded in that space that they are too durable to vanish in Stalin's attempts to wipe the land "clean like cheap plastic" (Wiebe, *Blue Mountains* 270) of its Mennonite past. The fleeting recollections of a particular space keep building into the most enduring resistance to both Makhnovist and Bolshevik violence, and Katya carries that resistance with her to Canada.

In the final chapter set in present time, Katya remembers how she and her husband Kornelius arrived on a train to Manitoba. They got off the train one stop before their destination as "Kornelius said he wanted to feel the land under his feet" (397), and they covered the final leg of the journey on foot. Katya's last note of that journey is how "[t]he sound of the wind in the grass was so loud that I had to shout to make myself heard" (397). If building Katya's selfhood in Ukraine in powerful ways relied on her relation to space, then that is also where building her Canadian self begins. The final chapter also shows her young interviewer Ernest Unger showing her photographs he took on a trip to Ukraine "nearly eighty years after [Katya] left Russia" (394) and telling her how Chortitza and many Mennonite villages had remained intact. "The Mennonite tour" (395), as he calls it, also took the group to the village of Einlage, which lay submerged after a dam had been built. In a way, the village lay buried like Mennonite bones in the steppe, but like them, it also remains in the space where it was once built: looking through the water from a boat, the group saw "the roof of the church, a wavering dark behemoth, and . . . walls of houses, broken shells where water plants now grew" (395). For Ernest, the village was "[c]ompletely covered over, flooded" and thus simply "[g]one." For Katya, it is "[f]looded, but not drowned" (395). The long years of Soviet desires to plough the steppe into a shapeless sheet of Communist sameness brought destruction, but they cannot compete with the durability of Katya's spatialized sense of self and the lived space her memory draws from. Both may have acquired some layers of the enchanted worlds that Kulyk Keefer rightly attaches to ideas of ethnicity, but they also continue to tell stories that show the durability of both a single person's memory and the trace left by the presence of a people in a space they were once forced to abandon.

Knowing Mennonite Selves: "You are that Jakob Friesen"[11]

Rudy Wiebe's fictions repeatedly manoeuvre in the territory of historical narratives where they find little more than Weier's "shards and fragments" from scattered "sites and sources" on which to build. But build they do: *The Blue Mountains of China* starts from fragments of Mennonite community history in late 1800s migration to Canada, the turmoil of World War I and the 1920s Stalinist oppression. Where *The Russländer* primarily operates through one voice, in Wiebe's novel fragments from that world inspire a narrative where a choir of Mennonite voices on three different continents speaks of a century of Mennonite life. I have previously explored Mennonite relations to key historical spaces in this novel in my 2013 book, *Ethical Encounters: Spaces and Selves in the Writings of Rudy Wiebe*, and will of course not repeat those findings here. Instead, I will focus on how Jakob Friesen's story from Soviet-controlled Ukraine and elsewhere in Soviet Union intertwines with those of John Reimer and Liesel Driediger. These three voices take centre stage in the closing chapter of *The Blue Mountains of China*, entitled "On the Way," and the latter two jump to a new time and new spaces in "Finally, the Frozen Ocean," which I shall discuss in the final section.

"On the Way" stands at a crossroads of Mennonite experience as its characters depart from the perpetual cycle of forced exodus and rebuilding the same Mennonite identity in each new place. Early in the chapter, when Liesel Driediger is asked whether she is "still a Mennonite," she promptly answers, "No. I – not anymore" (Wiebe, *Blue Mountains* 229). When John Reimer enters the chapter, he is on the move and seems to have left his old life behind like so many Mennonite generations before him. Yet, he is neither part of a mass exodus nor looking for the next formulaic Mennonite "enchanted world out of place and time" (Kulyk Keefer, "Coming Across"). Instead, he is walking alone without a clear destination towards the North in Canada. When he first appears in the chapter, he tells a newspaper interviewer that "I feel the land" (Wiebe, *Blue Mountains* 233), and this seemingly off-hand remark resonates with the rest of the chapter, where both the physical setting of the Prairies and the characters' aspirations that concern place and space become prominent. Below I will show how the novel and in particular its closing chapter pave way towards a new understanding of Mennonite selfhood in relation to space and place in a sprawling search which also motivates *The Russländer* and "Finally, the Frozen Ocean."

The Mennonite voices who gather in "On the Way" ponder revelations about shared history in Canada and the Soviet Union in conversations that culminate during a summer night spent by a roadside in Alberta in 1967, Canada's centennial year. The chapter opens with Driediger travelling to Calgary from Toronto, where at the airport she meets an elderly man who has travelled from the Soviet Union to meet family in Canada. The man does not speak any English or French, and as Liesel knows Russian, she agrees to help him on the way as they

are both heading west. On the plane to Calgary, to her great surprise, she finds out that the man, Jakob Friesen, is a Mennonite. Friesen understands the surprise and notes that he "came from the Mennonites. . . . Perhaps they are easier to find in Canada than the Soviet Union" (226). Originally from the lost Karatow Mennonite colony in Ukraine (247) and an internal exile in the Soviet Union for decades, he comes from the land where once Mennonites thrived but where now few were left as far as Mennonites living in Canada knew, and he no longer considers himself a Mennonite in religious terms. Friesen's words imply that ideas of that land hover between Kulyk Keefer's enchanted worlds, which new generations keep perpetuating, and a horrific reminder of how Mennonite communities were reduced into bones and ruins.

On the plane to Calgary, Driediger and Friesen read about John Reimer walking on the Prairie and decide to go meet him. When they find him, they are joined by Dennis Williams (or Willms) and his family who are driving to Edmonton. They all sit down by the roadside to plant a seed of a new kind of Mennonite ethnofiction in ways that echo Kulyk Keefer's notion of problems, traumas, and unacknowledged possibilities ("Coming Across"), or perhaps possibilities that were considered lost with people thought to be buried amongst the bones and ruins in Ukraine. For Zacharias, *The Blue Mountains of China* as a whole asks whether shared history is enough to constitute a community (159). That questioning culminates in the roadside gathering as it offers important discoveries on time and space as it reveals the incomplete knowing of both community and the self for those present, and how that knowing is transformed simply through the presence of Jakob Friesen, a man who is suddenly more than just a ghost left in Ukraine. As Liesel notes on the plane and John Reimer later confirms in exactly the same words, he is "that Jakob Friesen" (235, 267), a man who had already touched the lives of all the others gathered in "On the Way" before any of them knew it. As Liesel hears that Jakob is travelling to Edmonton to meet his daughter Katerina, she realises that they are already connected:

> "Did you say . . . your daughter Katerina lives in Edmonton?"
>
> "Yes, since 1957."
>
> "Trienchi Friesen, almost my age?"
>
> "Yes, we called her Trienchi, yes."
>
> "We were on the same ship, Group 4, *S.S. Hindenburg* from Bremerhaven to Buenos Aires, July 4, 1930."
>
> "Is that so?"
>
> "Yes, your wife and three girls were just down the hall. I did not know she was, in Edmonton." (234)

Liesel's account of her previous encounters with the Friesen family is brief, but the core image shows her memories in the form of spatial knowing. Liesel does not focus on what she did with Katerina/Trienchi, but on the powerful image of being on the move, being confined to the close quarters of a ship taking them towards the enchanted promise of a new Mennonite world. This is also the first time Liesel learns that, like herself, Katerina did not stay in that world. They have both stepped out of the formulaic exodus narrative where Mennonites put tremendous hopes on residing in a particular space, but which also suggests that they are bound to leave behind each new space as they had already done for four centuries on the route from west to east in Europe and to the Americas.

Jakob's presence also paves the way to new knowing for the others parked at the roadside. Dennis's wife, Esther, tells Jakob that her side of the family are Friesens, too. They trace their ancestry through a complicated web of relations through steps from the Furstenland colony in Ukraine to Simons Colony and Fernland, apparently both in Paraguay (248-49). When Esther talks about her grandmother, Jakob smiles and notes the woman was his mother; they also find that in distant Paraguay, Jakob's daughter is married to Esther's brother. The discussions in the ditch continue for several pages and break off into disconnected snippets of further ponderings on relations and Mennonite community life as well as what almost turns into a sermon by John Reimer—a call for Mennonites and others to craft new lives and a new society. Echoes of Mennonite communal history and calls for remaking it all run deep in the seemingly generic setting, which, however, lends itself as an unlikely spot of tranquillity. The Prairie ditch perhaps does not quite "embod[y] [the] social relationships" in this gathering in the sense Lefebvre (27) has in mind; the ditch is a momentary host, not a site of the stable, frequently reproduced cultural patterns that Hall (106) discusses. Those patterns emerge in spaces marked by more stationary Mennonite presence in the previous chapters of the novel, where some of the characters present in the ditch (Driediger, Friesen, and Reimer) and others raised in their discussions appear. There, they encounter echoes of Mennonite metanarratives of perpetual loss of place in the world, or finding the next enchanted world which promises to recreate that which once was, but leaves little room for the new.

Yet, the Prairie ditch may be the space in the novel that allows maximal (albeit momentary) distance from those metanarratives, and it proves a generous host for discordant ponderings of communal history and self-knowing. Here "the *right*" – that is, the hegemonic – "version of the narrative is talked away" (Kroetsch 25), and the voices now gathered have never understood the depth of shared history in the way they do in the Prairie ditch, which becomes the setting of a haphazard but most meaningful communion. If the space around Chortitza in *The Russländer* allowed Katya to endlessly draw her individual selfhood from itself through

mere perception, then in "On the Way" Prairie space lends itself to a new communal Mennonite self-identification. The scene as it culminates in the communion suggests that important departures from old modes of knowing are on the way; that this communion need not be very religious in order to be Mennonite; and that it is possible to craft a momentary lived space in which the discourses reflecting and reshaping your ethno-cultural identity flow freely:

> A sudden oneness, like a still lap of heat on a breezy day, found them in the dust of August grass. John spread the food upon the paper bag ripped up one side and like a table on the stubble between them. . . . A bit of wind drifted the oil and tire smell from them now and then, modulated the roar of trucks pounding up the slope away, into the opposite valley. The shadows of their cars above on the highway apron now reaching over their feet, they sat on the ground in the ditch; eating; talking. (251)

As Driediger and the Willms family leave the ditch where Reimer and Friesen stay until the end of the novel, the change in this gathering of Mennonites is well explained in terms of a Kroetschian doubt about knowing, of circumventing narratives that have gained hegemonic authority. The new story that is emerging is not complete, but it is "trusting to fragments of story, letting them speak their incompleteness" (Kroetsch 24). "On the Way" offers few conclusions in terms of where this change might lead, but the characters have glimpsed new ways of knowing Mennonite selfhood, a change instigated by the freedom experienced in Prairie space. Doubts about their previous knowing have been raised, by the complex family relations discussed above and by John Reimer's call for new ways of living up to Mennonite ideals, and those doubts are enabling rather than daunting. The most fundamental doubt about previous knowing is raised by Reimer's decision to walk the Prairie, a walk which in the novel does not continue beyond the ditch but which will not stop there. As noted above, Reimer said that as he walks, he "feel[s] the land" (233), and when he and Friesen are left alone in the Prairie night, he says that on the walk "I am not going anywhere, at least not in Canada" (269). He may either be wrong or deliberately deny the idea of a destination. As he desires something new, he has turned towards the North, which for him means that "[a]fter Edmonton and a few towns there are only Indian reserves, Metis cabins, and a few Mennonite settlements, and then nothing but the land, the land to finally the frozen ocean" (271). He expects to meet Mennonites, "Some very conservative ones [who] moved up there to get away from everyone but themselves" (271), but he also implies a land far beyond their communities, a land where the shores are washed by the frozen ocean, a land with no Mennonite history at all. It is too cold and remote even for those Mennonites who wanted to get away from everyone but themselves to be a desirable step in the search for a space where the enchanted ideas carried from Ukraine and perhaps places

before it could be made real. But it is also a space which has *not* been wiped clean like cheap plastic of a Mennonite past, a space which hides no Mennonite bones at all, a land deep in its own time. The space of course hides other bones, and too many of them tell of the suffering and silencing of the Indigenous people when the North was being colonised.

Despite that history, the Indigenous peoples of the North remain and find ways to voice their presence in the land. The Mennonite story that Reimer could imagine and tell from within the Canadian North could be free of the "bones and ruins . . . from a thousand sites and sources" (Weier 3.1) which hold tremendous power over so many Mennonite stories. As *The Blue Mountains of China* leaves Friesen and Reimer in the ditch, it says nothing of what Reimer will find in the north if he gets there. "On the Way" raises his desire for a new kind of knowing, perhaps a way of knowing anchored to the space he might walk to the frozen ocean, but neither confirms nor denies his ability to find it. In other words, the narrative leaves a doubt about that ability in the air, but that doubt is not an implication that he will fail. The unfinished walk seemed permanent and answers to open questions unlikely until Wiebe returned to this particular Mennonite world in "Finally, the Frozen Ocean." The short story is set in the first decade of the 2000s and revolves around Driediger, Reimer, and his niece Jane. The Soviet Union has collapsed, visiting Ukraine is possible, and John Reimer's walk, wherever it took him, is long concluded. In the closing section, I will discuss the reflections of past Mennonite worlds as they echo in a setting where it is possible to revisit Ukraine and other real and desired spaces from which Wiebe's and Birdsell's Mennonites draw their sense of selfhood.

"My grandfather says there were Mennonites near where he was born"

"Finally, the Frozen Ocean" is divided into three sections, each with a different main character who do not meet in the short story. In section 1, Liesel is travelling and staying in Yalta in the Crimean peninsula in Ukraine, where the family story of a local young man working as a guide catches her attention. In section 2, John Reimer is travelling in Berlin with his son David and wife Irene, who appeared in "On the Way" as the teenage daughter of the Willms family. Gradually family experience in Berlin shifts to the background, and the story offers brief glimpses into John's life since *The Blue Mountains of China* left him by the Alberta road. In section 3, Jane Reimer (whose last name is never mentioned) is seen in the middle of an endless Arctic summer day on Ellesmere Island.

In her section, Liesel is travelling in what could be the ultimate land of Mennonite bones, Ukraine. She and the young guide find a shared interest in reading Chekhov and soon begin putting together a puzzle which may bring their life stories together in more complex ways. Once again, the stories are anchored in place: the young man is intrigued by the perfect Russian

spoken by the elderly lady from Canada, and while Liesel says she was born "north of here," she says she learnt Russian from her father in Paraguay after they had fled Stalin in 1929 (490). The guide does not understand Liesel when she says she also learnt Lowgerman from her father, and Liesel explains that "[t]he Mennonites spoke that, here," which prompts the young man to note that his "grandfather says there were Mennonites near where he was born" (490). When Liesel mentions the old Mennonite colony of Karatov in the region, the young man recalls that his grandfather has mentioned the name and was possibly born there in 1930. Liesel is astounded, and the two decide to go meet the grandfather. Liesel asks if the grandfather knows Lowgerman, and the young man can only reply, "He… he has never said a word to me" (492; ellipsis in source). Speaking Lowgerman in Stalin's times could have meant a death sentence, so a Mennonite family might teach children to never reveal they knew the language. The short story does not show Liesel and the grandfather meeting, so questions about his identity remain unanswered, and the narrative leaves readers on the brink of revelation as Section 1 closes with Liesel asking the young man, "Tell me, what is your name?" (493). The answer is not there, but that simple name may answer so many questions and prompt new ones for Liesel: could there be a Mennonite left here, where none might have survived? Could it be someone whose family once knew her ancestors? If the flooded Einlage village prompted Katya in *The Russländer* to think that that Mennonite world was "[f]looded, but not drowned" (395), then does the grandfather *know* something about Karatov colony that might revive echoes of the lived space crafted by Mennonite voices silenced almost a century earlier?

Liesel is left on the brink of something new, something she thought she would never find, something that is very much other-than-bones and which could redraw connections between Mennonite diasporic identities and the enchanted worlds by which they are shaped. Wiebe used this strategy already in *The Blue Mountains of China*: John is left on the road leading North, on the brink of discovering something that may be entirely other to the Canada and the Mennonite communities that he knows. "Finally, the Frozen Ocean" reveals he never got to the North: Jane recalls him confessing that "to reach such north" as the Arctic by the frozen ocean, he would have needed the help of technology (512) far beyond what he was carrying on the walk. The short story does not dwell at length on that walk, but, in his section, John briefly notes that he was walking the Prairie as he did not know what to do after losing his brother Samuel, "except walk and walk and talk with whoever would walk beside him" (497-98). The Canadian Prairie lent him all the space he could ever desire to walk, and Liesel and even more so, Jakob Friesen, lent their presence to walk beside him, to bring together echoes of Mennonite communities and families that had once been to craft a new one by the Alberta road.

Even though John Reimer never reached the North, being on the way changed his life, and his niece would complete the journey he began as Jane's narrative hails from the northern edge of Ellesmere Island. She is working for the Geological Survey of Canada in a location she suggests was perhaps "never, ever, walked by a human being" (507) but soon notes that she is here to study "the meagre remains of human beings" (508) and the stones of hearths they would have built four thousand years earlier (509). Very little evidence remains of them, but their presence continues to be marked by bones and ruins. Theirs is not a Mennonite story, but as noted above, bones and ruins need not suggest death and destruction: in this region they may be read as signs of perseverance, of knowing one of the most inhospitable spaces on the planet in such a unique way that bones speak of a people who once survived there. Liesel, John, and Jane are all left in the middle of their travels: Liesel is about to meet someone who might tell her what happened after 1929 to the old Mennonite world in Ukraine, the year when that world ended for the Russländer Mennonites who went to the Americas. John is left in Berlin, in the middle of a phone call with his wife Irene's Taunte Marie, who hauled herself and her husband back to Canada in 1934 from "cat-scratching themselves among those bugs and sand" in Paraguay, and in the 1970s hauled Irene and her children away from an abusive relationship with an unnamed partner to later meet John again (505). Jane is left staring at the sea on Ellesmere Island. She does not claim to know who the people were that once lived here, but she closes on a note which suggests the possibility of shared perceptions of space, of drawing the building blocks of selfhood from surrounding space in a way similar to what Katya does in *The Russländer* through mere perception:

> Changing continuously: with an infinite slowness [the strait] is in steady motion, perceptible because the hooked iceberg far out in the strait seems to be grounded and, lying down, looking out between the circle of headstones, I gradually comprehend that the entire strait is moving past that hook: moving south. . . . Whoever once lay here inside a muskox-hide shelter looking across this hearth and blackstone beach, lay here together, must have felt beauty, must have heard happiness. (512)

Is it possible that she projects her own comfort in this space into her imaginings about the people who once lived there? Yes. More importantly, her closing words imagine a living community, not a dying one, no matter what their fate may have been. Her section in the narrative also talks about her relation to her uncle, John, and fills in both his story of walking to the north and his help in reconnecting Jane to the father she does not remember. Just as the space around her lends of itself to her exploration of selfhood (as other spaces I discussed above do for Katya Vogt and the roadside gathering in *The Blue Mountains of China*), she closes the

short story by lending the space of her narrative to the renewal of the selfhood of others, whether blood relatives or unknowable others removed from her world by four thousand years of time.

John Reimer's walk towards a new kind of knowing in "On the Way" thus continues and remains open in all three voices speaking in "Finally, the Frozen Ocean." He expressed his desire in the former text to find new ways of knowing Mennonite selfhood through both revisiting history and crafting a future not derived from the enchanted worlds which only prompt re-creation of that which once was. Liesel may soon be able to read the history of Mennonites in Ukraine in an entirely new way; perhaps not on the level of all diasporic Russländer communities but certainly on the level of a unique individual voice, a task well worth the effort as shown by the dedication to an individual voice in *The Russländer*. John's section confirms he survived his walk, but also that he found ways to reconstruct a selfhood which may have lain in ruins. Jane grants a degree of closure for John's walk as she is now in the land beyond all Mennonites, even the ones who moved to the bush of Northern Alberta "to get away from everyone but themselves" (*Blue Mountains* 271) and has come, finally, to the frozen ocean he once imagined. Yet, as the account of her comfort with Northern space is not interrupted by contemplations of departure, except for a quick reference to returning "Next summer" (512), the account of her own engagement with that space and what she desires from it remains emphatically unfinished. As noted, Zacharias found *The Blue Mountains of China* to be an uncommon Canadian Mennonite narrative in that it imagined a Mennonite community not exclusively defined by "a Canada-Ukraine binary" (179), and the short story confirms the importance of continuing to look beyond such historical and spatialized hegemonies in crafting Mennonite historiographic ethnofiction. Like the two novels, the short story presents a world where revelations on selfhood, kinship, and ethnicity become inseparable from revelations on place and space. Untapped forms of knowing and agency may lie in that blending, and coming across bones in mapping the historical and narrative spaces which fuel such knowing suggests not just endings, but a complex archive of voices which may endure as guides between lived and enchanted spaces.

Notes

[1] While problematizing Mennonite identity at length is beyond the scope of this article, I am aware that Mennonite identity in Canada and Canadian Mennonite writing, let alone beyond that, is not limited to a singular unchanging tradition. For illuminating insights on the evolution of the critical discussion on identity in Mennonite writing in North America, see texts collected in *After Identity: Mennonite Writing in North America* (2015), edited by Robert Zacharias.

[2] Weier's novel uses a system of numbered journal or archive entries instead of standard pagination.
[3] The term 'Russian Mennonite' does not refer to Russian ethnicity, but to the history of Mennonites who were ethnically primarily German residing in the Russian Empire from the 1700s to World War I and the 1920s, when tens of thousands of Mennonites left Russia and the Soviet Union. Many 'Russian' Mennonites lived in territories that today lie in Ukraine.
[4] Birdsell 9.
[5] The killings are carried out by men led by Simeon Pravda, a real-life character and one of the leaders of Makhnovists, a Ukrainian anarchist movement who were active in the final stages of World War I and established anarchist rule in South-East Ukraine until they were defeated by Bolsheviks in 1921.
[6] See Kulyk Keefer, "Paradise"; Mierau; and Zacharias for his response to the previous two (130).
[7] As the communities grew, they also saw the division of their inhabitants to those who owned land and those who did not. For an account of socio-economic differences and their possible impact on the desire to migrate to Canada already in pre-Soviet times, see Plett.
[8] See, for example, Brown.
[9] See Zacharias for discussion on the implications of the near-absence of narrating the details of the massacre (137-39).
[10] This strategy is already illustrated in the quote from page 157, the opening of Chapter Eight. The novel does not use chapter numbering.
[11] Wiebe, *Blue Mountains* 267.

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