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The Conrad Grebel Review (CGR) is a multi-disciplinary peer-reviewed journal of Christian inquiry devoted to advancing thoughtful, sustained discussions of theology, peace, society, and culture from broadly-based Anabaptist/Mennonite perspectives. It is published three times a year in print and electronically.

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Articles are original works of scholarship engaged with relevant disciplinary literature, written in a style appealing to the educated non-specialist, and properly referenced. Length limit: 7500 words, excluding notes, plus a 100-word abstract. Manuscripts are typically sent in blind copy to two peer-reviewers for assessment.

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Foreword

The contents of this final issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review* (CGR) typify the journal's mandate to advance thoughtful discussions of theology, ethics, peace, society, history, and culture from broadly-based Anabaptist/Mennonite perspectives. The first article launches an ecclesiopolitical critique of the concept of obedience in the Schleitheim articles while the remaining three all engage in extended constructive critiques centered in different ways around the work of Miriam Toews, particularly her book *Women Talking* and its more recent film adaptation by Sarah Polley. Taken together, these engagements with violence, trauma, and survival seem to collectively articulate a decidedly less assured vision than the one that Walter Klaassen, the CGR's first Editor, spoke of when the journal launched four decades ago, which is not to suggest that such a vision is necessarily also a less hopeful one. I offer this observation both to pay tribute to the significance of the CGR and, perhaps, to suggest that in times that feel more uncertain, spaces like the one the CGR was able to cultivate are vital. In this sense, I hope that the conversations in the pages of the CGR will continue to be generative and that discussions about how to reimagine the kind of work that the CGR sought to do will also bear new fruit.

I am also particularly pleased that we've been able to resurrect our long-dormant "literary refractions" category for this final issue. We also have some reflections on the development of the CGR's literary refractions here alongside two other reflections on the broader history and impact of the journal. As such, I will refrain from adding to those reflections but I would be remiss if I did not pay tribute to the wonderful team of folks that have worked on the journal in the past number of years: Christian Snyder, Scott Voss, Bekah Smoot-Enns, Mariia Smyrnova, Susanne Guenther Loewen, Rebecca Steinmann, and Maxwell Kennel. I also want to thank Conrad Grebel University College and the current editorial board that consists of Troy Osborne, David Y. Neufeld, Jeremy Bergen, Melanie Howard, and Joe Wiebe as well as a broader team of consulting editors. I also want to give special mention to the numerous unpaid expert peer reviewers who enabled the CGR to consistently publish scholarship of the highest quality. These anonymous peer reviewers are, in my view, the unsung heroes of the CGR and, perhaps,

of academic publishing more generally. As editor, I had a singularly unique view into the extent to which these folks offered their considerable expertise in ways that constructively built up and strengthened the work of others and in the case of the CGR these others were often younger scholars or graduate students. It was a great privilege to witness this from the inside and I cannot emphasize the depth of my gratitude for the time and care with which these folks voluntarily took on this often-unrecognized task enough.

A final word of thanks to the authors who trusted us with their work and to you, dear reader, for coming along on the journey.

Kyle Gingerich Hiebert
Editor

Unlearning Obedience: The Ecclesiopolitical Critique of the "Sword" in the Schleitheim Articles

Marius van Hoogstraten

Abstract

This article offers a speculative reading of the Schleitheim Articles' argument on the "sword" in its sixth article. It argues that Schleitheim's argument is more concerned with the political logic of the church than with ethical rules individual Christians are to obey. The "sword" does not refer to violence in general but specifically to a particular logic of political domination. Seemingly anticipating modern discussions, this logic functions by making a distinction between lives: the "wicked" and the "good," those that are protected and those lives given up to death. Although such authority can be legitimate, Schleitheim argues the church should strive to build communities that break with that logic, in emulation of Christ's non-sovereign character. In the church, the theopolitical image of God as one who "ordains" is to be unlearned. The relationship between the two incompatible orders of sword and church remains underdetermined, giving rise to a wide spectrum of possible interactions and interminable negotiation.

Introduction[1]

In 1527, a number of Anabaptists gathered under the leadership of Michael Sattler in the Swiss town of Schleitheim to affirm a set of principles. Their declaration, known as the Schleitheim Articles, is sometimes referred to as a "confession," but it is hardly interested in the content of belief, nor in the details of ethical behavior. For Schleitheim, the decisive questions are what

1 I am grateful to Benjamin Isaak-Krauss for his comments on an earlier version of this article; my gratitude likewise goes out to the two anonymous peer reviewers for *CGR* for their constructive comments.

we might call ecclesiopolitical: it is concerned with the practices that institute, shape, and discipline the church as a collective. Its seven articles thus regulate constitutive collective practices such as baptism and excommunication, but also the election of leaders and the gathering for communion. It is of striking formality: Prospective members must be "taught" before they can be baptized, but nothing is said of *what* they must be taught; sinners may be banned, but nothing is said about what constitutes sinful behavior. Its longest article deals with what it calls the "sword," establishing an enigmatic axiom: The sword is "ordained of God outside of the perfection of Christ."[2]

In this article, I offer a reading of Schleitheim's argument in its sixth article. I will argue that its significance is more *ecclesiopolitical* than *ethical*, by which I mean it is more concerned with the kind of political logic by which the church should be organized than with establishing rules individual Christians are to obey. This may seem counterintuitive, as Schleitheim is often related precisely to an ethic of obedience, following Christ's command to "resist not an evildoer," and thus considered exemplary for Anabaptist theological ethics centered on such obedience to God's authority.[3] Yet these words are entirely absent from Schleitheim's sixth article. Indeed, as we will see, it is precisely authority and obedience that are rejected as categories for the way God relates to the church.

On closer reading, it quickly becomes clear that the "sword" Schleitheim here rejects does not refer to violence in general, but specifically to a particular logic of political domination with which the fellowship of the church is called upon to break. The "sword" is a kind of political order or legal authority that—seemingly anticipating modern discussions of sovereignty—makes a distinction between lives: the "wicked" and the "good," those that are to be protected and those lives given up to death. Although such authority can be legitimate, the church should strive to build communities that operate according to a different logic, shaping communities we might call "non-sovereign," in emulation of Christ's non-sovereign character.

2 All citations from Schleitheim are from John C. Wenger, "The Schleitheim Confession of Faith," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 19 no. 4 (1945): 243–53. Article VI is found on pp. 250-51. For purposes of readability, I will not reference each individual citation from Article VI.

3 See J.R. Burkholder, "Historic Nonresistance," in *Mennonite Peace Theology: A Panorama of Types,* ed. J.R. Burkholder and Barbara Nelson Gingerich (Elkhart, IN: AMBS/IMS, 2024), 11-18.

Read in this way, Schleitheim seems to envision the church as a place of collaborative becoming-with where the theopolitical image of God as one who "ordains" can be unlearned. On its surface, Schleitheim insists that Christians should withdraw from sovereign structures as much as possible, but on closer reading, the text also suggests that the relationship between the non-sovereign community and its political others is more complex than might initially be assumed, marked by incompatibility more than simple withdrawal or antagonism. Thus, that Schleitheim suggests something like a "two-Kingdom" theology, as this is often referred to,[4] on one hand seems beyond discussion: It indeed distinguishes between two orders or political logics. Yet on the other hand, calling this two "Kingdoms" risks eliding the strange peculiarity of the ways the text considers these two to relate to each other, or fail to relate to each other. If two normal kingdoms might reach a détente around a shared border, the relationship between the "sword" and "non-sword" orders remains one of underdetermined incompatibility, giving rise to a wide spectrum of possible interactions and interminable negotiation.

In offering this reading, I am not suggesting that this kind of philosophical-theological critique was among the primary concerns of Sattler and his fellows in any concrete historical sense. This is a constructive, perhaps even speculative reading, entering into a conversation with the words Sattler and his fellows have left us from the perspective of an Anabaptist writing in the early 21st century. I also do not wish to suggest that Schleitheim is *the* founding document of proper Anabaptism—an idea that has rightly suffered in recent decades of Anabaptist historical inquiry. Yet perhaps Schleitheim's loosening from such an authoritative status might allow us to return to it in a different way, with a different kind of reading, more constructive and speculative. After all, its concerns—how do we build faithful community in the midst of crisis and collapse?—may be closer to our contemporary predicament than we assume.

4 Ibid., 12.

An Ethic of Obedience

It has often been argued that obedience is essential to the historical Anabaptist venture in general and Schleitheim and Sattler's thought in particular. John Howard Yoder, for instance, writes that "Sattler's known writings emphasize literal obedience to Christ's words and actions,"[5] and C. Arnold Snyder frames the Schleitheim Articles as calling for "separat[ion] from the world in…careful obedience to God."[6] The sixth article in particular is described by Snyder as an application "of the general principle that true Christians must obey the commands of Scripture."[7]

More generally, both Ben Ollenburger and Stuart Murray have described the historical Anabaptist approach to Scripture as "hermeneutics of obedience."[8] Ollenburger, writing in the 1970s, argues this makes for Anabaptism's enduring relevance: Modern Christians also "must read the Bible as obedient people, followers of Christ first and foremost."[9] This suggestion that Anabaptism revolves around obedience continues to be difficult to shake, in spite of eloquent critique,[10] and the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* names Christ's "obedience" as one of His most relevant

5 John H. Yoder, *The Legacy of Michael Sattler* (Walden, NY: Plough, 2019), 7. Yoder, a perpetrator of sexual violence and abuser of his own position of power, emphasizes obedience as a central ethical task for Christians. This jarring fact may particularly encourage us to revise the place of obedience in our thinking. See especially the first two works cited under note 10 for more on this problematic.

6 C. Arnold Snyder, *The Life and Thought of Michael Sattler* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1984), 156.

7 Ibid., 163.

8 Ben C. Ollenburger, "The Hermeneutics of Obedience: A Study of Anabaptist Hermeneutics," *Direction* 6(2) (1977), 19-31; Stuart Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2000), 186.

9 Ollenburger, "The Hermeneutics of Obedience," 30.

10 See Hilary Jerome Scarsella and Stephanie Krehbiel, "Sexual Violence: Christian Theological Legacies and Responsibilities," *Religion Compass* 13 (2019): 1-13; Kimberly L. Penner, "Mennonite Peace Theology and Violence against Women," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 35 no. 3 (Fall 2017): 280-292; Dorothee Soelle, *Beyond Mere Obedience* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1982); Traci C. West, *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1999).

characteristics,[11] describes how "the Holy Spirit nurtures the obedience of faith to Jesus Christ" through the Bible,[12] and understands sin explicitly as disobedience[13] and salvation as essentially tied to obedience.[14]

So, it would not be strange to expect Schleitheim's argument against the sword to similarly revolve around the notion that God has given rules that Christians simply are to follow out of obedience to God as sovereign lawgiver. Christians, we might say, must simply obey God's command to "resist not an evildoer" (Matthew 5:39) or that "thou shalt not kill" (Exodus 20:13).[15] We might call this an obedient or "strong" pacifism, one whose nonviolence is backed up by the unwavering sovereign providential rule of the Almighty. The church is called to nonviolence, we might say, because it is called to fully trust in this rule instead of in human weapons and machinations.

In this light it may come as a surprise that the notion of obedience to a sovereign Lord is entirely absent from Schleitheim's sixth article, and that it nowhere cites such commandments to "resist not an evildoer" or "thou shalt not kill."[16] In making this argument, it points not to the sovereign character of God as a lawgiver, but to the *non*-sovereign character of Christ as an example for the kind of collaborative fellowship the church is called to be.

So let us take a closer look.

First Reading

Schleitheim's sixth article begins with a succinct axiom on which the gathered assembly has "agreed": The sword is "ordained of God outside the perfection of Christ [*ein Gottesordnung ausserhalb der volkomenheit Christi*]." So, we could say, God seems to have instituted the use of the sword for the world at large, but within the "perfection of Christ" (presumably referring to the church), different principles apply. This already says a good deal: Schleitheim is not simply positing a general critique, but one deeply related to the

11 General Board of the General Conference Mennonite Church and Mennonite Church General Board (eds.), *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 1995), 5, 6n1.

12 Ibid., 10.

13 Ibid., 18n3.

14 Ibid., 20n3.

15 See Burkholder, "Historic Nonresistance," 11.

16 As also noted by Snyder, *Life and Thought*, 165.

kind of fellowship the church is called to be. There may be other ways than this, and God may be at work in those ways as well, Schleitheim affirms—but for the church, the "sword" must be rejected.

It is important to note that the "sword" here does not seem to refer simply to the use of violence—as if violence were *generally* legitimate outside the church—but to something more specific. The term *Gottesordnung* is already suggestive of this: the "sword" is a distinct kind of *order* or political logic. This becomes more explicit in the following sentences. We read the sword has something of a dual orientation: on the one hand "for the punishment of the wicked and for their death," while on the other hand it "guards and protects the good" (a reference to Romans 13). It is with this dual orientation that the sword is explicitly "ordained to be used by the worldly magistrates," and it is the "same" one that God ordained in the first testament Mosaic Law. If, for the people of Israel, God institutes the Law as an enforceable legal order (that is, one with violent sanctions, even if not a "state" in any modern sense of that word), Schleitheim suggests, God has ordained the legitimacy of an enforceable legal order and (now) state authority in the same way.

So, the sword seems to refer to a kind of political order or legal authority that is marked especially by the capacity for violent sanction. It is not so much the question of violence that is addressed, then, but the question of violent sanction as part of a political system of authority. On the one hand, the church must recognize such power as legitimate, at least for certain purposes. On the other hand, the church must itself be a community without such violent sanction. That is not to say it is left without means to assert disciplinary force or to call problematic members to account, merely that the means it can employ must follow a different logic: It can use "only the ban," which explicitly does not kill but is oriented to rehabilitating the sinner for the community as "the warning and the command to sin no more." Not all readers will immediately be convinced by Schleitheim's optimism around the supposed non-sovereign character of the ban, it seems to me, and I will return to some of its ambivalences later in this article.

The rest of Schleitheim's sixth article is concerned with the precise relationship between the sword order and the "non-sword" order of the church. This is peculiar: Surely the initial axiom, defining two incompatible political logics or orders, is clear enough? But the text immediately seems to admit

that its schema fails to achieve the kind of clarity perhaps desired, that many questions around the relationship and possible interaction between the two orders are still open. Further stipulations are required. Schleitheim provides three such stipulations in response to three questions, "asked by many who do not recognize [this as] the will of Christ for us."

The first question is the following: *If* Christians recognize the legitimacy of a legal order, then "may or should" they not also "employ the sword" themselves for such legitimate functions? The text responds in the negative. Christ "teaches and commands us to learn of Him," and that we should particularly follow Christ's character, which is "meek and lowly in heart" (Mt. 11:29). More specifically, it cites John 8, where Jesus is asked about a case of capital punishment of a woman apparently caught in adultery. The text argues He operates exactly according to Schleitheim's dual logic: He does not doubt the legitimacy of the Mosaic Law ("ordained of God"), but also instructs "not that one should stone her…but in mercy and forgiveness and warning, to sin no more" ("the perfection of Christ"). So Christ does not cancel or abolish the Law so much as suspend its application in this case.

Second, the text similarly asks if Christians may act as judges in cases between non-Christians, for whom such judicial proceedings are, after all, divinely instituted. The answer is again no, and again by means of Christ's example: "Christ did not wish to…pass judgment between brother and brother…but refused to do so [a reference to Luke 12]. Therefore we should do likewise."

The third question is whether a Christian may act as a magistrate (*Oberkeit*), which is a representative of state authority. The answer is again by analogy with Jesus: "They wished to make Christ king, but He fled…Thus we shall do as He did." The way of Jesus, in sum, is one that refuses sovereign power, and the church is to emulate Christ in this refusal. "He Himself forbids…the force of the sword saying, 'The worldly princes lord it over them… but not so shall it be with you.'"

The text supplements these biblical arguments by reiterating and elaborating on the more fundamental incompatibility between the logic of the sword and that of the church community, noting they are oriented in fundamentally different ways.

> The government magistracy is according to the flesh, but the Christians' is according to the Spirit; their houses and dwelling remain in this world, but the Christians' are in heaven; their citizenship is in this world, but the Christians' citizenship is in heaven; the weapons of their conflict and war are carnal and against the flesh only, but the Christians' weapons are spiritual, against the fortification of the devil. The worldlings are armed with steel and iron, but the Christians are armed with the armor of God, with truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation and the Word of God.

In many ways, Schleitheim seems to be saying, the sword simply operates by a different logic than that by which the church grounds its fellowship. It understands the world and its creatures differently, it has different tools, which in turn shape the way it approaches its problems. Most importantly, it is beholden to the structures of exploitation in the "world" in a way inimical to what the church is trying to do. Though these structures of exploitation are not synonymous with the sword (which, after all, has a legitimacy, while the "world" is "abomination"[17]), they do seem to have a structural affinity or belonging: Working as a magistrate seems to thicken one's entanglement ("homes and dwelling" and "citizenship") in worldly exploitation.

Schleitheim closes by summarizing its fundamental point: The church should emulate Christ's rejection of political authority and follow Him in forming a community that breaks with the sovereign logic of the sword. "[A]s is the mind of Christ toward us, so shall the mind of the members of the body of Christ be through Him in all things," the text argues. "[S]ince Christ is as it is written of Him, His members must also be the same."

So already we can say a few things: First, the "sword" that is both affirmed and rejected here refers to a certain kind of political authority or legal order, not simply to violence in general (nor indeed to government in general, at least not in the sense of a collective administration). By extension, the church is called not simply to reject violence (nor indeed public life), but to reject the political logic the sword stands for and to give shape to a com-

17 Wenger, "The Schleitheim Confession of Faith," 249-250. This estimation appears in the fourth article, which does not discuss government at all.

munity rooted in the break with that logic. Second, in doing so, it does not simply *obey* the command of a sovereign lawgiver—which would, after all, *not* break with the logic of sovereign rule—but it *emulates* the non-sovereign character of Jesus, who himself rejects authority, suspends the application of the sword, and refuses the position of lawgiver or judge. Third, the relationship between the order of the sword and the ecclesiopolitical logic of the church is not one of simple antagonism but of incompatibility, as they are fundamentally oriented in different ways. Nevertheless, fourth, the appropriate kinds of interaction between these two orders do not simply follow from their incompatibility but require supplementary negotiation and interpretation (given here in the form of three questions).

In the remainder of this article, I will enter a conversation with Schleitheim on these four points.

A Distinction between Lives

As we have seen, the "sword" here seems to refer to a particular kind of political rule or legal order, and not generally to the use of violence. This is clear both from the way it is defined—the capacity for violent sanction—and from Schleitheim's focus in its discussion and examples, which lie entirely with questions around government and political authority.[18] Ethical issues related to the use of violence more broadly, such as the legitimacy of self-defense on the road, violent revolution (we recall the very recent peasants' war), or domestic violence, are absent entirely. This is not to say that Sattler and the others at Schleitheim do not affirm pacifism in a more general ethical sense (a rejection of "the unchristian, devilish weapons of force—such as sword, armor and the like" is found at the end of Article IV). It is merely to say that here, in Schleitheim's longest article, its focus lies elsewhere, and its argument is more political than ethical.

Yet to say the sword simply refers to what we today understand as the state or government would also be inaccurate. For one, the crystallization

18 This in and of itself is not controversial among commentators of Schleitheim: John Howard Yoder states that "in this entire discussion 'sword' refers to the judicial and police powers of the state," (*Legacy*, 42n74, glossing over the way the non-state legal order of the Law is also a "sword" order) and Snyder also notes that "the detailed sixth article on the sword deals explicitly only with the 'sword of government' rather than with the 'sword of war'" (*Life and Thought*, 163).

of the Western system of sovereign states with territorially defined borders is still over a century in Schleitheim's future, taking shape as it does with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. But the incipient state structures of Schleitheim's early modern context also do not seem to be what the "sword" is specifically referring to: After all, it names the Torah as the divinely ordained "sword" order par excellence, a type of enforceable legal order that is not a state or government in any modern or even premodern sense of that word. So, what is rejected with the sword is at once more and less specific than simply the state or government, and it certainly does not appear to refer to the kinds of collective administration and organization that we often consider essential for modern states.

The sword order in Schleitheim's understanding seems to be definitionally marked by a certain dual orientation or capacity: On the one hand, it has a destructive capability, which it brings to bear "against the wicked," whom it can "put to death" and "punish." But on the other hand, it also has a nurturing or protective capability: It sets itself up "for the defense and protection of the good," whom it can "protect" and "guard." So, the sword is not *merely* defined by its capacity for killing and destroying, but also paradoxically by its capacity to nurture, to create spaces for human flourishing. We could say that the essence of the sword order lies in this dual orientation, in the way it causes and governs over death *and* life. And essential to this dual orientation is a more fundamental capacity: The sword is the kind of order that makes a difference between the "wicked" and the "good" in the first place. The essence of a sword order seems to lie in the way it distinguishes between lives worthy of protection and those worthy of death—between lives that matter, and lives given up to destruction.

It is by making this distinction that the political logic of the sword enforces an order. According to Schleitheim, it is the practice of producing this distinction between lives that is held in common by the early modern political entities of Schleitheim's direct context—from free cities to feudal lordships and papal domains—as well as the Old Testament legal order (and, we might add, with the modern sovereign state). This essential operation lies at the root of the functioning of all of these. Again, I do not intend to say that philosophical critique of the logic of the sovereign order was front of mind for those gathered at Schleitheim in a historical sense. Perhaps their words

and selection of biblical references were more guided by the ambivalence of their own experiences with the state order than with theoretical analysis. And yet the text they have left us seems to be remarkably attuned to the ambiguity of what it is discussing, offering—despite its sweeping scope—already a somewhat nuanced understanding and critique of political power that goes beyond its immediate historical context.

In doing so, Schleitheim anticipates a modern understanding of what is known in political philosophy as sovereignty. An early definition of sovereignty is given by legal theorist Carl Schmitt, who argues that sovereign power is quintessentially the capacity to decide on the exception: That is, to have the final word in a way that surpasses the regulations or procedures of the legal order.[19] Paradoxically, the establishment of a political and legal order can only exist if it is grounded in such an exceptional power (for example, that the Torah receives its normative force in a similar way from being given by a Lawgiver who is Himself not a subject among others). Significantly for our purposes here, Schmitt argues that the distinction between friend and foe, that is, between those belonging to my own community and those we may have to face and kill, is the irreducible beginning point of the political.[20]

A generation later, philosopher Michel Foucault draws attention to the way the sovereign has the "power of life and death" in the sense of a dual orientation, in the sense—remarkably similar to Schleitheim's discussion—that the sovereign has "the right to take life or let live," noting that its "symbol, after all, was the sword."[21] Foucault notes a transformation as the West enters modernity, so that the expression of power comes to lie less in the instruments of sovereign violence, and more in shaping, regulating, and producing a certain kind of life. Foucault calls this biopower or biopolitics (after Greek *bios*, life). Yet while the orientation of sovereignty's dual capacity thus changes, the way it fundamentally takes shape as the capacity to produce a distinction in life or between lives did not. "One might say," Foucault writes, "that the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by a power to *foster*

19 Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005).

20 Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2007), 26ff.

21 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I, An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 136.

life or *disallow* it to the point of death."[22]

Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben picks up on a similar insight—that the essence of sovereign power lies exactly in this more fundamental capacity to produce a distinction between lives worth protecting and lives given up to death. For Agamben, however, this does not need to mean actively killing or executing, and he notes the oldest forms of sovereign sanction are types of banishment and exile. Echoing Schleitheim, Agamben argues the "fundamental activity of sovereign power"[23] is more fundamental than overt killing, embodied in making the distinction between life that matters and life devoid of significance. For Agamben, this is ultimately what all legal orders in the West, even ones that are not explicitly headed by a single "sovereign" ruler—from the ancient Roman kingdom to modern democracies—have in common: In their essence, they always operate by distinguishing between the lives they protect and the lives they condemn, between citizens and non-citizens, insiders and outsiders. Or, as Schleitheim puts it, between the "good" and the "wicked."

The ambivalence around this analysis, that the power of the sword can both destroy and foster life, that the protection to the "good" offered by the sovereign order always depends on its production of some others as "wicked," is central to Schleitheim's argument and seems to also give rise to its ambivalent axiom. But sovereign rule is also, less ambivalently, always "a relationship of power and domination," as theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri stress, and this is also, if less explicitly, crucial to Schleitheim's rejection of it.

> The sovereign always stands in relation to subjects, above them, with the ultimate power to make political decisions. … the concept of sovereignty that functioned in early modern Europe was also a pillar of the ideological justification of

22 Ibid., 138. Achille Mbembe has famously questioned Foucault's perspective here, arguing that modern political authority has by no means given up its capacity, nor its propensity, for taking life, for example in colonial ventures. See Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," in *Biopolitics: A Reader,* ed. Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2013), 161-192.

23 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1998), 181.

conquest and colonization.[24]

Schleitheim spends little of its explicit argument on this aspect of domination. It does not argue from the equality of all humans and the unjustifiability that some hold power over others, for example. And yet in rejecting sovereign power of the sword, it is looking for a kind of ecclesiopolitical community that is "non-sovereign,"[25] in Hardt and Negri's words, in which no ruler "lords it over" (Matthew 20:25) their subjects, in which the force of violent and final sanction is broken. The church is to be a kind of shared life not grounded in the capacity for violence or the power of some over others. This becomes clearer in its discussion of the way Jesus's rejection of the powers of the sword stands as an example for the church.

A Non-sovereign Messiah

After establishing the kind of order the sword refers to, Schleitheim addresses three particular questions around the interaction of Christians with it. In addressing these three questions, in each case, the text illuminates its point by drawing the comparison with Jesus. Here, it refers to biblical narratives in a way it does not do elsewhere, showing Jesus refusing to exert judicial and executive power in several instances. In so doing, the text not only answers the question directly at hand, but also develops the general point it is making: That the church should reject sovereign power, not out of simple obedience to a rule, but because, in this way, it emulates Jesus's own rejection of sovereign power. This is the argument throughout this article: Christ "teaches and commands us to learn of Him"; "He who wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mt. 16:24); "Whom God did foreknow He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom 8:30); "Christ has suffered (not ruled) and left us an example, that ye should follow His steps" (1 Pet 2:21).

This distinction between obeying God as sovereign ruler and following Christ as one who rejects sovereign rule might seem largely academic. And perhaps for some readers, the emulation of Christ's character is not so different from just another rule to be followed. But that would miss the way this

24 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Assembly* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2017), 25.
25 Ibid., passim.

emulation reorients the relationship between God and God's church. The text does not call for ethical obedience to God as a lawgiver, but for following Christ's example as *explicitly not* a lawgiver, as a figure who refuses the position demanding obedience and breaks with the structure of law. At the heart of Schleitheim's argument is not the discontinuity or categorical difference between God who commands and the church which obeys, but exactly a continuity or relationality between the two.

Thus, in framing its political theology in this way, Schleitheim is also making an argument about the nature of God. In giving shape to a non-sovereign community, the church is embodying a continuity with the non-sovereign character of God as revealed in Christ. God, the text seems to suggest, is ultimately, in God's most authentic expression (for this is, after all, what Christianity teaches Christ to be), not a sovereign Lord demanding obedience, but a non-sovereign Messiah inviting fellow creatures into fellowship. Jesus calls this fellowship the Kingdom of God, but on closer look, it is perhaps best understood as a non-kingdom[26] in which God is encountered as one who does not command but issues a collaborative call.

In a way, all of Schleitheim can be understood as a response to this call, which invites creaturely community into cooperative self-organization in ways not indebted to structures of exploitation and domination. After all, it envisions the church as a community of free persons, each of whom has responded to God's invitation "through themselves" (Article I), a freedom nevertheless essentially entangled in community as baptism is asked and given and enters one into a shared life among equals (Article I). It calls this path the "obedience of faith" (Article IV), certainly, but this "obedience" is nothing like the obedience demanded by sovereign authority; it is essentially described as an escape from the grasp of empire, of being "set free" (Article IV). Its leaders are elected (Article V), and their tasks clearly circumscribed, appearing more as facilitators or care workers than leaders. In sum, it is more a community of refuge than a kingdom in any recognizable sense of that word.

Embedded in this understanding of God's call as a non-sovereign invitation is Schleitheim's insistent awareness that the kind of community it envi-

26 See also Mark Van Steenwyk, *The Unkingdom of God: Embracing the Subversive Power of Repentance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), 2013.

sions does not come guaranteed. No institutions, not even divine ordinance, can be relied upon to simply make non-sovereign community happen. It does not simply gather in obedience to a sovereign Ruler, but self-organizes in response to a collaborative call, which means it needs to be made and asserted.[27] Paradoxically, it is exactly for this reason that the church must be capable of exerting force. Schleitheim has no illusions that the church could do without such a capacity, that it could do without claiming the space for its shared life against the forces that would subdue it. It is in this light that it suggests the ban as an alternative means of sanction.

The need for some way to assert the community's standards and maintain a space for its form of life seems clear. What is not immediately clear, however, is why comprehensive excommunication—if this is indeed how the ban is to be understood in Schleitheim—would really be structurally different from sovereign sanctions, especially in light of Agamben's argument mentioned in the previous section that the most originary sovereign sanctions are also kinds of exile and banishment. Does not the ban function similarly by making a distinction between lives, specifically by producing some lives as exiled from the community? It seems to me these ambivalences are difficult to dispel definitively, as indeed the history of the ban's application shows.[28]

A clue might be found in this juxtaposition between ban and sword-type

27 See also Marius van Hoogstraten, "Confession by the Deed: Asserting Anabaptist Ecclesiopolitical Performativity," *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 77 no. 4 (2023), 277-287.

28 I have investigated the possible relationship between Agamben's understanding of the "sovereign ban" and the Anabaptist ban as envisioned by Balthasar Hubmaier in Marius van Hoogstraten, "Anabaptist Biopolitics: Balthasar Hubmaier on Religious Noncoercion and Church Discipline," in *Free Speech in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Nina Schroeder et al. (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, forthcoming). In brief, Hubmaier's ban on the one hand reinforces the inside-outside dichotomy, but in the same stroke (and in spite of itself) subverts it by adding a category of persons that is neither in nor out. This becomes especially clear in Hubmaier's use of various metaphors, suggesting a peculiar non-symmetry between baptism and excommunication. The ban is thus marked by a structural ambiguity which it cannot decisively suppress. A closer analysis of Schleitheim's second article, on the ban, would highlight the rather relaxed attitude the text seems to have: Disciplined church members are not described as "rotting flesh" (Hubmaier) but simply as "slipping and falling," even "inadvertently" so. It also does not heighten the emotional stakes of repentance and readmittance in the way Hubmaier does. Nevertheless, the ambiguities of such an instrument are present in Schleitheim also.

punishment—that is, in the way the text frames the ban *as* embedded in the break with the logic of sovereignty. This break is perhaps most clearly embodied in its non-final character. While a perpetrator may need to be excluded from the community, the "warning" to "sin no more" also shows that this exclusion is oriented toward their (for lack of a better word) rehabilitation. This means, in a way, that the community is never definitively made safe from the "wicked," but those "wicked" are also not definitively so; their disciplining is oriented to their return. So perhaps we can make a distinction between the *final* temporality of sovereign power and the temporality of *repetition* that marks non-sovereign practices. The sovereign's decision (Schmitt) is not up for discussion; the sword punishes for the "death" (Schleitheim) of the wicked. But non-sovereign practice is never so final. It is in this light, it seems to me, that the non-sovereign character of the ban must also be read—or, we might say, *insofar as* it embodies this non-final temporality of repetition can the ban be deemed a non-sovereign instrument.

A similar resistance to the final character of sovereignty is found in Schleitheim's argument against oath-swearing (Article VII). In this context, I have noted in the passage that follows how Schleitheim's ecclesiopolitical venture as a whole seems to embody this temporality of repetition.

> It is in the repeated practices of this community…that it envisions its alternative to the sovereign guarantees of oath swearing. Certainly, Schleitheim's vision of disciplined and somewhat sober community is not one all contemporary readers will find appealing. Yet in envisioning a collective life apart from the structures of sovereignty, it…points toward faith as a form of life, and sees its truth manifested in the relationships shaped by its repeated practice. This is a togetherness that cannot be ascertained or guaranteed, is never finally given or achieved, but must interminably be restaged and reasserted.
>
> Assurance and trust, for Schleitheim, are given not in linguistic performatives or binding operations, but in repetition: in the interminable process of gathering, which is never quite decisively achieved. …"Let your words be yes, yes, no, no" (Matt 5:37). …Yes, *yes*: If you say yes, once will not be enough. Faith as practice must be affirmed and reaffirmed. This originary yes, not beholden to the oath structure, does not guarantee or seek to seize or dominate a

> relation to the world, but admits to its own incompleteness; another yes will always be required. Likewise no, *no*. If you say no, once will not be enough. Resistance must be reasserted interminably. Let your words, Jesus seems to be saying, not gather into themselves, but open up into the future, for you live in a world structurally not under their dominion.[29]

In sum—the church is a risk and a wager, requiring the voluntary cooperation of the faithful to persistently, assertively, bring it into being.

Two Incompatible Orders

In the latter part of this fourth article, Schleitheim stresses the conceptual or intrinsic incompatibility between the political logic of the sword and ecclesial non-sovereignty. They are oriented in fundamentally different ways, we read: One is "according to the flesh," the other "according to the Spirit"; one is entangled in the structures of exploitation that make up the "world," while the other has its citizenship in "heaven." They have distinct "weapons," we read, one "carnal and against the flesh," made up of "steel and iron," the other "spiritual, against the fortification of the devil" and consisting of the "armor of God." The point, it seems to me, is not just that the church *should* not use the "weapons" or instruments of sovereign power. More significantly, what the church is oriented toward cannot be achieved with such instruments. By their very logic, they work in a different way. The sword may be able to "protect" the church—this is a question Schleitheim leaves open—but it cannot ascertain the kind of community it is called to be.[30]

A significant aspect of this incompatibility is the way these two orders are

29 Marius van Hoogstraten, "Without Sovereign Guarantee: Reading Schleitheim on the Oath with Giorgio Agamben," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 97 (2023): 382.

30 Another way to put this would be to say that the "downstream" ethical question of violence or nonviolence is in a way already decided by the "upstream" political (or ecclesiopolitical) question of the kind of logic and authority structure that shapes the collective life of the church. The question is not so much an ethical prohibition keeping Christians from working with the state but more fundamentally whether the political logic by which the church is organized already constitutes a break with the structures of exploitation and authority of the sword order, and whether it continues to found its togetherness in a logic of some holding power over others.

structured by different imaginaries. The way they are equipped with different tools and techniques ("weapons of their conflict") shapes the way they understand the world and its creatures ("against the flesh only"), causing them to envision fundamentally different kinds of political projects ("against the fortification of the devil"). This is why, perhaps, it is so important to Schleitheim that Christians limit their interaction with the sword order: If we spend too much time in the operative logic of sovereignty, we might say, we start to think and imagine like it, and risk losing sight of the kinds of ecclesiopolitical projects to which the church is called.

But the logics of sovereignty and non-sovereignty do not merely shape the political imagination. The text suggests they also shape the theological imagination. God is encountered in radically different ways under the sword and in the church. It is important to notice that Schleitheim clearly affirms that God is authentically encountered and in active relationship with creatures "outside the perfection of Christ." Public political life is clearly not part of the "wickedness which the devil planted in the world," referred to in Article IV. But even so, God appears radically different there from the non-sovereign Messiah of the church. Under the rule of sovereignty, God is encountered as one who "ordains"—that is, He [sic?] very much still seems to be a sovereign Lord.

Again, I do not wish to suggest that those gathered at Schleitheim intended to make a point about the way our theological imagination is shaped by our political structures in any historical or literal way. But the words they have left us with seem remarkably open to this conclusion. And is it not altogether plausible that life under the rule of the sword, under political authority that derives from a capacity for violence and for making a distinction between lives that matter and those that do not, would also shape the way we envision God? That living under sovereign kings and rulers, we also come to imagine God as a king or ruler, master over life and death? If we live in a world marked by obedience and authority, we will inevitably come to see God in this way as well, the text seems to suggest. Under the conditions of sovereign power, the image of God is constricted into merely a greater or stronger version of sovereignty. Inversely, the church is tasked with being a fellowship in which God is encountered differently, a space that nourishes and shapes a non-sovereign imagination of God. It is a place where we can

unlearn, we might say, the image of God as sovereign ruler. By living together collaboratively as equals, we might learn also about the way God could be said to interact collaboratively with God's creation. Paradoxically, God's will seems to be achieved most successfully where God does not "ordain," but invites. Yet part of shaping such spaces is to affirm that God is still at work outside them; that even in the constricted imagination of God in the image of worldly power, God can still be affirmed as acting.

A Relationship of Possibility

In spite of the apparent clarity of the disjunction between these two entirely different logics of sword and non-sword orders, the precise nature of their relationship seems to require supplementary negotiation and interpretation. This at least is what the text seems to suggest as it poses three questions (and we could certainly imagine countless more) to which it provides three answers. These take up a significant amount of text in this sixth article, and further contribute to establishing the appropriate kinds of interaction (or rather non-interaction) between the two incompatible orders. As previously established, Schleitheim stipulates a restrictive approach in each of these cases: Christians should not employ the sword, nor act as judges or magistrates.

It is telling that these supplementary stipulations are necessary at all. Should the appropriate interaction not simply follow from the initial axiom that the church and the state follow discrete logics? Apparently, it does not—and perhaps more than one kind of answer would have been possible to these questions, and different questions entirely might have given rise to different answers, too.[31] Apparently, the separatist or quietist approach for which Schleitheim is renowned only represents one possible set of conclusions from its basic axiom. It is not simply and obviously implied but itself needs to be made and negotiated.

This sense of possibility, or at least of uncertainty and complexity, is also

31 In any case, Schleitheim's answers are not overwhelmingly clear, either. For one, in John 8 Jesus interrupts an execution taking place between people who are not (perhaps not yet) His followers. In which realm does this take place: The realm of the Law, and thus the sword, or of the "perfection of Christ?" By extension, would the conclusion that Christians ought to interrupt executions—not merely abstain from them—not be at least as plausible?

implicit in the way Schleitheim frames the incompatibility between church and sword. The terms it uses to depict the two orders come in strange pairs, which do not simply map onto an opposition: Magistrates have their houses "in this world," while the Christians' houses are "in heaven." This is already a strange thing to write—certainly, Christians still live in material houses, not in "heaven." But the opposition between "world" and "heaven" is also odd: should it not be between the world and the *church*, or between *earth* and heaven?

This opposition, if it is one, is rephrased in the same paragraph as being between flesh and spirit: the church has a "spiritual" orientation, while the sword a "carnal" one. That the sword is oriented to the "flesh"—so to the material and bodily conditions of life, which it fosters or destroys—seems clear enough. But the meaning of this "spiritual" orientation of the church is peculiar. "Spiritual" here certainly does not signify anything like an inward or transcendental faith: Schleitheim is entirely uninterested in inward contemplative concerns or transcendent truths. So, this is a spiritual and heavenly orientation that is, for all intents and purposes, not spiritual or heavenly at all, it is entirely negotiated in the immanent sphere of ecclesiopolitical contestation, among the "flesh." That is where Schleitheim considers the relevance of faith to take place: in concrete, embodied practices.

So, this quasi-opposition between flesh and spirit, or between world and heaven, certainly does not seem to imply that the church order might sit quietly alongside the worldly order, one responsible for the faithful's bodies, the other for their souls, existing in different spheres of life, or days of the week, one untroubled by the other. But it is *also* not a difference between two basically similar kinds of things which could coexist by taking up separate places or territories, like two states might come to a détente by drawing a territorial border between them. There is, we could say, a logical underdetermination in the way these heterogeneous orders might relate to each other.

It is because this relationship is so underdetermined, because it takes shape neither simply as an opposition nor as a complementary relation, that it requires supplementary stipulation and negotiation, and that, in turn, Schleitheim's quietism is but one of many different conceivable expressions. There is no one set of relations between the church and the sword order that is necessary or implied. Their incompatibility does not imply spatial

separation, nor quietist withdrawal, nor (for that matter) active citizenship. Each of these are just one of many possibilities. And this underdetermined incompatibility makes for a potential dynamism in this relationship, allowing it to be reinvented and renegotiated in different times and contexts—as Anabaptists have indeed done, the world over.

Conclusion

Instead of calling for nonviolence out of obedience to a sovereign lawgiver, Schleitheim's sixth article formulates a critique of political authority and a call for non-sovereignty. The "sword," which it both recognizes and rejects, seems to refer to a kind of authority or order that is rooted in its capacity for violence, and more specifically, its capacity to distinguish between lives worthy of protection and those worthy of death. In spite of its legitimacy, this kind of order is incompatible with the kind of non-sovereign political project the church is called to be in emulation of its non-sovereign Messiah.

The church is not called to be a place of obedience, but a community where we can *unlearn* obedience and unlearn our imagination of God as a sovereign master. Schleitheim's sixth article seeks to regulate the relationship between these two heterogeneous orders, but in so doing, it shows that this relationship is not simply given. Even if the church must recognize that God is in some way at work outside of the "perfection of Christ," and so must recognize the (conditional) legitimacy of states and governments, the relationship between the two is not fixed but subject to negotiation and transformation. It is this tensive, underdetermined relationship between incompatible orders—not simply different sets of laws for different domains, but truly different kinds of (ecclesio)political logic—that an overly simple understanding of church and sovereign rule as "two Kingdoms" is in danger of eliding, at least insofar as it misses that one of these kingdoms is an *non*-kingdom, and the relationship between these is far from clear.

To many readers, Schleitheim may seem to be a text with a mostly historical significance, influential perhaps at the beginning of the Anabaptist tradition, but with little direct relevance for faith and community today. It is not my purpose here to challenge this assumption—though, as a text concerned with living together in community in a time of systemic collapse and crisis, it may prove closer to our situation than perhaps initially assumed. It seems

to me, however, that insofar as Schleitheim's critique of the sword is relevant for the church today, this relevance does not lie primarily in the question of whether Anabaptist Christians are permitted to work for the state as judges or public-school teachers or social workers. Nor indeed in whether it is appropriate for them to rely on public childcare, take public transport, or indeed expect justice systems to call harmful individuals into account. Indeed, in many of these questions, Schleitheim's strange axiom may turn out to be quite sensible. It allows us to recognize the ways legitimate sovereign order and legal systems may yet play a role in God's wish for this planet and its creatures, while accompanying that affirmation with the level-headed realization that sovereignty can only imagine and work toward political projects that are in line with its own logic. This will always be in some sense heterogeneous to the kind of political imagination the church is called to.

Yet the major significance of Schleitheim's ecclesiopolitical critique is in its identification of this different path—in the call for building non-sovereign community. It asks to what extent our communities continue to participate in this distinction between lives that matter and lives that are given up to insignificance. The enduring force of its critique of sovereign power is in its contention that the church is called to work by a different logic, to become a space in which a non-sovereign fellowship can be learned and practiced. As Anabaptism approaches its fifth centennial, we may well ask whether it is succeeding at this task. Are our communities places to unlearn the imaginaries of sovereign power? Are they communities of equals that have broken with the logic of obedience—or do they continue to be rooted in the authority of some human beings over others?

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Boundaries, Violence, and Accountability: Reading Miriam Toews's *Women Talking* with Jenny Hval's *Girls Against God* [1]

Maxwell Kennel

Abstract

Beginning from the idea that boundaries, transgression, violence, and accountability are concepts that require each other for definition and coherence, this article interprets two contrasting novels: *Women Talking* by Canadian secular Mennonite author Miriam Toews, and *Girls Against God* by Norwegian writer and vocalist Jenny Hval. While Toews writes of women who dialogically seek to understand and then cross the violently imposed boundaries of their community in order to resist patriarchal sexual violence in Bolivia, Hval writes of women who iconoclastically transgress white Christian values in Norway by recovering hatred as a means of emancipation. Despite their differences, both literary figures desire to resist patriarchal violence by twisting the social bonds that hold it in place against themselves. Both *Women Talking* and *Girls Against God* represent antiviolent efforts to work against oppression, with visions of women living well together in communities apart from the world of men (yet, in complex relation to their men). This article unfolds difficult contrasts between their approaches and concludes with an examination of how these contrasts can be mediated and exceeded through a reading of Marxist philosopher Raoul Vaneigem's recently translated book, *Resistance to Christianity: A Chronological Encyclopaedia of Heresy from the Beginning to the Eighteenth Century*.

1 This article began as a presentation at the Mennonite Scholars and Friends forum at the American Academy of Religion meetings in San Antonio, Texas (November 2023). I am grateful to Kimberley Penner, Susie Guenther Loewen, Grace Kehler, and the session attendees for a valuable discussion that has enriched the present article. I also want to thank the anonymous peer reviewers of this article for their incisive and helpful comments.

Rethinking Violence

Boundaries, violence, and accountability are each essential co-concepts that stand in reciprocal relation to one another, such that to define one is to define the others. Without boundaries that mark off what we think is valuable, important, or sacred, we cannot meaningfully identify the transgressions and violations that we use the term "violence" to name and condemn. Every transgression and every violation cross a line, or a set of lines, that both bound off and socially bind those who hold them, express them, and receive them. As I argue in my recent book on violence, the term is best and most flexibly defined as *the violation of value-laden boundaries*, and this definition can be used to diagnose and interpret the core values of those who say that violence has been done.[2]

Every use of the term "violence" implies that certain boundaries around specific values have been violated, meaning that violence is a keyword that reveals what is most important to both its users and critics. This means that the term can be used in a variety of ways, to name a variety of phenomena, not all of which will fit pre-decided ideas about what is good or right—for example, acts of protest and civil disobedience may be experienced or interpreted as violent to some and liberating and emancipatory to others, and this range reflects the complexities of our social order and its profound conflicts of values.[3] Rather than defending a singular or static definition of violence, I argue instead for a critical theory of violence that acknowledges the ambiguity and usability of the term,[4] while nonetheless challenging specific forms of

2 Maxwell Kennel, *Ontologies of Violence: Deconstruction, Pacifism, and Displacement* (Leiden, Netherlands: De Gruyter Brill, 2023). For their responses that have helped me refine this paradigm, I am grateful to the contributors to "Violence and Interpretation: Conflicts of Values and Violation in Maxwell Kennel's *Ontologies of Violence*," Theology and Continental Philosophy Unit. American Academy of Religion online meetings. June 26, 2024 (forthcoming in *Syndicate*, 2025).

3 For example, see the discussion of the relationship between value and looting in Saidiya Hartman, Christina Sharpe, and Rinaldo Walcott, *Diversity of Aesthetics: Looting* (Vol. III). Ed. Andreas Petrossiants and Jose Rosales (Saline, MI: Andreas Petrossiants and Jose Rosales with Emily Harvey Foundation, 2023), 44.

4 Here I follow some aspects of the "liquidation" method that "entails the critique of absolute definitions" of violence in Willem Schinkel, *Aspects of Violence: A Critical Theory* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2010), 4.

violence as legitimate approaches to social problems and conflicts of values.[5]

At the conclusion of the book and in my recent work on the place of Social Accountability in medical education at the Northern Ontario School of Medicine University from 2022 to 2024,[6] I have been thinking about how accountability is contingent upon the boundaries and corresponding social bonds of trust that underpin all accounts of violence, violation, and transgression. To hold someone accountable is to call them to account for how they have transgressed boundaries that are defined by the social bonds of trust that structure pluralistic, democratic, and multicultural societies. When bonds are broken and when boundaries are violated, "accountability" names the desired response to those obligations that have gone unfulfilled, and it points toward the social ligatures that hold our expectations and social norms in place. Violence is a concept that rests upon social accountability because the term is used to morally condemn and call to account those who have violated the boundaries that define our societies, communities, and sociopolitical relations. If we did not have some expectation that those who commit acts of violence would be held to account for their actions, then the term "violence" would lose much of its meaning.

This means that both the concept of violence (understood here as a term that names the violation of boundaries to which specific individuals and communities accord value) and the concept of accountability (understood here as a name for critical responses to the violation of social bonds of trust) are inextricably linked. When violence is done, social bonds of trust are violated, and when accountability is called for, it is those social bonds that determine *how* those who have violated them are held to account. After an act of violence is committed—whether in corporeal, epistemological, or ontological ways (or all three)—accountability for that violation can be sought by those whose bonds of trust were violated (or their representatives). But if no meaningful justice, healing, or remediation of its trauma is possible, then individuals who experience violence in communities are faced with difficult decisions about whether to remain in their violent contexts (perhaps in hopes of surviving or reforming them), or to break with their communities

5 See, for example, Memmi's definition of racism as "the generalized and final assigning of values to real or imaginary differences, to the accuser's benefit and at his victim's expense, in order to justify the former's own privileges or aggression." Albert Memmi, *Racism*. Trans. Steve Martinot (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 169.

6 See my editor's introduction "Institutional Social Accountability from Medical Education to Accreditation and Public Policy." To a special issue dossier of the *Social Innovations Journal* 26 (2024).

in hopes of freedom and liberation from violence (and indeed, many more complex third options between remaining in and breaking with communities). Literary expressions of such dilemmas are a key part of the discourse on violence, both in the wider public sphere and within the discourse on Mennonite/s Writing and Mennonite-related literatures.[7]

In this comparative essay, I aim to test and field the critical paradigm outlined above by reading two novels against each other—*Women Talking* by Canadian secular Mennonite novelist Miriam Toews,[8] and *Girls Against God* by Norwegian vocalist and writer Jenny Hval—before concluding with a reflection on the desire to hold the history of Christianity accountable to itself for its violence, as it is expressed in recently translated work by the Marxist philosopher Raoul Vaneigem.[9] Readers of *The Conrad Grebel Review* will likely be familiar with Toews's novel and its powerful rendering of the problem of sexual violence in Mennonite colonies and communities, both in terms set by realism and in literary-figural ways.[10] *Women Talking* is exemplary for many reasons, not least of which is that it is structured by the dialogues of women, recorded by a man (August Epp), and responsive to three serious options that confront all who experience violence: do nothing, stay and fight, or leave. By contrast, Hval's novel requires more of an introduction.

Rethinking Hatred

Girls Against God, Jenny Hval's second novel in English translation following *Paradise Rot,*[11]is deeply transgressive, crossing many of the lines of propriety and uprightness that define the standards and measures by which many define violence.[12] It contains scenes of horror, the demonic, witchcraft, an

7 I have written on another expression of this problem in "Violence and the Romance of Community: Darkness and Enlightenment in Patrick Friesen's *The Shunning*," *Literature & Theology* 33, no. 4 (December 2019): 394-413.

8 Miriam Toews, *Women Talking* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2018). Cited in-text as (WT, pp.). See also Miriam Toews, "Peace Shall Destroy Many" *Granta Magazine* 137 (2016).

9 Jenny Hval, *Girls Against God*. Trans. Marjam Idriss (London: Verso, 2020). Cited in-text as (GG, pp.).

10 See the critical comments of Rebecca Janzen, "Women Talking: A Displaced Act of Female Imagination," *Anabaptist Historians* (March 9, 2023).

11 Jenny Hval, *Paradise Rot*. Trans. Marjam Idriss (London: Verso, 2018).

12 On the postural ethics of violence, see my "Violent Inclinations" *Conrad Grebel Review* 39, no. 2 (Spring 2021): 118-134.

aggressive defence of hatred as a virtue, and a complete and refreshing defiance of all social norms. The book is about a woman who turns away from the White Christian 'values' of southern Norway, moves to Oslo and joins a black metal band there, and whose first words as a narrator are "I hate God" (GG, 3). Upon her exit from the conservative south of Norway, she says,

> I hope that I can use language to step into the borderlands, the places in between imagination and reality, the material and metaphysical. That's why we write, to find new places, places far from the south. (GG, 16).

Here, the term 'south' is a stand-in for everything that holds back her creativity and her life, and so she writes in order to cross that border into highly transgressive spaces. On the way into those spaces, she says that she wants to make beauty more violent (GG, 20), but her vision of violence is not what we might think it is. Instead of causing harm, engaging in abuse, or hurting others, she sees violence as the violation of those oppressive boundaries that were forcibly foisted upon her by her conservative Christian milieu.

This all becomes part of the critical and iconoclastic vision that she finds in the musical genre of black metal (GG, 77)—a style defined by its darkness and intensity, and which leads her to "write with white hope on black hatred…to begin with hate" (GG, 29). But again, we would go wrong if we interpreted her term "hatred" in a simplistic way. Her vision of hatred is not antisocial or irreligious—and not necessarily violent, depending on what values one might hold—but instead it is a way of resisting the violence that she sees in a certain representation of God and the violence she experienced at the hands of Christians. The genius of Hval's work is in how she reverses and exposes the terms that many theologians and literary figures can become too precious about. She defends hatred in a way that preserves and advances her ability to set boundaries by saying no, being angry, and truly being *against* something (rather than falling into the neutralizing effects of trying to "see both sides," a pattern that we see everywhere in the public and political spheres today).

At the same time, the narrator of *Girls Against God* seeks out and creates a community of those who she calls "girls hating in unison," and she describes this community using unusually theological language of "mystical communication" and "ecstatic intimacy" (GG, 31)—terms that challenge any reductive interpretation of her work that would consign it to atheism. For Hval, this community of girls who hate God is transgressive and profane,

rather than institutionally religious or sacred. But upon closer examination, we can see that the narrator is just as critical of patriarchy and violence against women as Toews—and maybe even more so! Whether it is in her witch's coven, or her metal band (a term that she etymologically and figurally links with the term "bond"), Hval's narrator forms antiviolent and antipatriarchal communities and social bonds among her sisters. And when she is not socially engaged, the narrator laments that she cannot form bonds that resist authority and tradition (GG, 41). She sees blasphemy and profanity as tools for her task, because in her words, "blasphemy looks for new ways of saying *we*" (GG, 43). Against "an existence marked by submission, quietude, conformity and tradition" (GG, 45), Hval engages in forms of violence that iconoclastically violate boundaries that are violently set by conservative and regressive values. She writes that "The black threatens to crack open the white: the unceasing threat of heresy." (GG, 51). All in all, Hval's narrator argues this:

> Traditionally the world has been seen as a series of binaries: inside and outside, living and dead, man and woman, fact and fiction, science and witchcraft… Power, too, needs an antithesis, an 'it' or a 'her' that can be a container for everything that has threatened it. The witch is that container; she's the one who threatened the church, God, Christianity's domination, the establishment, emperors, kings, barons, Freemasons, medical science, philosophy, logic, brute strength. The deciding character of a witch is: she hates God (56).

This summary statement gives us a clear account of the stakes of her work: Hval's narrator refuses to remain within binaries (from gender and sexuality to religion and secularity), and instead looks for freedom through transformational opposition to oppression. This transformative and iconoclastic approach to the problem of violence in the context of communal and social bonds will resonate with the very different approach taken by Toews and the Anabaptist and Mennonite histories and presents she draws from.

Parallel Histories of Persecution, Contrasting Responses

To begin a complex contrast with Miriam Toews's *Women Talking,* I suggest considering historian Gary Waite's work on Anabaptists and witches in the sixteenth century, where he shows how Anabaptists and witches were

violently persecuted by Catholics and Reformers alike because both groups practiced unusual rituals and had eccentric or radical beliefs.[13] This should allow us to see that the long traditions that inform each of these novels—Anabaptist radicalism for *Women Talking* and Witchcraft for *Girls Against God*—have both been violently persecuted at the hands of the powerful. It bears considering that the fear of heresy, which is code for the fear of difference, is what animated and motivated the violent persecution and martyrdom of both groups. This should help temper any fearful response to the comparison between the two histories that inform these novels.

At the same time, it would be cavalier to deal in idealized representations of the sixteenth century Anabaptists or contemporary Mennonites—for both groups have been both oppressed minorities and suffering victims, as well as patriarchal and violent oppressors (and most often entanglements of the two), depending on context in time and place. Again, the ambivalence of the term "violence" and the double-edged character of all social groups and religious movements is evident in ways that call for resistance to both moral purity and fatalist withdrawal from the need to find antiviolent solutions to the social problems that violence names.

Nonetheless, the sixteenth century Anabaptists who stand behind Toews's *Women Talking* and the seventeenth century tradition of Witchcraft in Europe that lurks behind Hval's *Girls Against God* are both defined by how they transgressed the boundaries forced upon them,[14] and both traditions engaged in challenging acts that those authorities interpreted as violations of the social bonds of doctrinal orthodoxy and the normal, natural, and neutral status of certain forms of life. But Toews and Hval present contrasting literary responses to those often-similar histories of persecution between Anabaptists and witches and contrasting visions of what the word "violence" means and can mean. Here are a few of their major convergences and divergences.

13 Gary Waite, *Eradicating the Devil's Minions: Anabaptists and Witches in Reformation Europe, 1535–1600* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

14 Compare the description of how breaking with infant baptism represented an unprecedented challenge to the social and religious bonds that held together sixteenth century European society in Thomas Kaufmann's *The Anabaptists: From the Radical Reformers to the Baptists*. Translated by Christina Moss. Edited by Maxwell Kennel (Hamilton, ON: Pandora Press, 2024), with the account of how changing social roles made women vulnerable to charges of witchcraft in Sigrid Brauner's *Fearless Wives and Frightened Shrews: The Construction of the Witch in Early Modern Germany*. Ed. Robert H. Brown (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995).

Whereas Toews writes of women who dialogically seek to understand and then deliberately cross the restrictive boundaries of their community in order to resist and exit patriarchal sexual violence, Hval writes of women who iconoclastically transgress and even explode white Christian values by recovering hatred of God as a means of emancipation and community building.

For Toews in *Women Talking*, violence is a name for the horrific acts that men perpetrate against women; social boundaries are objects of consideration, contestation, and dialogical negotiation; and accountability is not achieved in the world of the novel because there are no social structures in place that could supersede patriarchal power. Nonetheless, the narrative structure of *Women Talking* is predicated on how its characters anticipate being accountable before God in the afterlife and how they hold each other accountable to their theological values and traditions as they deliberate about how to respond to their violent situation.

For Hval in *Girls Against God*, violence is a key characteristic of patriarchy and capitalism, but also something that can be reversed and used against oppressive powers by violating norms that are violently set; social boundaries are not negotiated so much as they are overturned and dismantled in movements of opposition and disruption; and accountability—again—is not fulfilled, but this time because the narrator has broken from the social bonds that she critiques to such a degree that there is no desire or structure for holding others to account. This contrast unveils interesting stylistic reversals.

Stylistic Reversals

While Toews writes in thoughtful, measured, and understated ways (at times presenting an almost-Socratic dialogue between women that leaves much unsaid), Hval's writing is pornographic, explosive, destructive, and disgusting—it is meant to shock and disturb the reader, transgressing their sense of propriety and challenging all social norms. Where Toews mediates between regard for propriety and the transgression of violently formed boundaries (in fighting back or leaving), Hval iconoclastically explodes all social boundaries in the name of freedom and life.

The figural and imagistic reversals continue. Whereas Toews uses the images of ghosts and demons to describe violent men (the "eight demons" [WT, 4]), Hval actively mobilizes images of the ghostly and demonic *against* the violent men. While Toews uses an imaginative literary form to oppose those who would reduce reality to "female imagination," Hval uses female

imagination and magical realism to oppose the ways that patriarchy reduces reality to mere empiricism and rationalism. In broad terms, both novels provide accounts of where the lines are in their respective contexts, and then engage in contestations that call those boundaries into question, from Hval's critique of realist representation (GG, 179) to how the women in *Women Talking* contest "what constitutes reality or what the options are." (WT, 7).

Yet, both literary figures desire to resist patriarchal violence by twisting the social bonds that hold it in place against themselves. The women in *Women Talking* make fine distinctions between revolutionaries and soldiers, killing and dying for a cause, dominance and submission, and love and obedience (WT, 154-161). These contrasts are not simple. In their meetings, Ona cites the writer of Ecclesiastes—that there is a time for love and a time for hate (WT, 157). Hval too transforms her key terms as the book unfolds, speculating that "Maybe it's not just about God, and hatred isn't about burning something to the ground, but about discovering a flame that illuminates the darkness, a match that ignites or creates something new." (GG, 97). For both authors, the terms of what counts as hatred are flexible and transforming rather than having a static and singular definition.

Both Toews's women and Hval's girls feel profound hatred (a very human feeling), but they respond to it in different ways that cannot be reduced to simple acceptance or rejection. One wonders: is it not better to be honest about the hatred that arises in response to violent persecution and oppression, rather than denying the parts of oneself that rightly respond to injustice and harm with a "no"?[15] Both groups in both novels form new kinds of communities, at least partly in response to the violence committed against them. The meetings of the women in *Women Talking* form the basis for a community of resistance that ultimately allows them to exceed the bounds of their violently imposed community. Hval's narrator confesses "I'm in search of community, and I search for that place where God isn't." (GG, 98), but we should keep in mind that Hval also sees God as a figure for the toxic communities formed by both capitalism and patriarchy (GG, 105). If one's experience of and associations with God are only ever capitalistic, patriarchal, and violent, then how can one not – at least partially – hate God and want to leave?

15 My language of "parts" here is indebted to Frank Anderson, *Transcending Trauma: Healing Complex PTSD with Internal Family Systems Therapy* (Eau Claire, WI: PESI, 2021) and Richard Schwartz, *No Bad Parts: Healing Trauma and Restoring Wholeness with the Internal Family Systems Model* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2021).

Antiviolent Communities

Both *Women Talking* and *Girls Against God* represent communally formed antiviolent efforts against oppression, with a vision of women living well together apart from the world of men (yet, in complex relation to their men). I will suggest that we should not attempt to reconcile their approaches with each other, lest we simplify these rich and layered narratives and make them into analogies for our abstractions or desires for purity, security, or certainty. Indeed, it is the desire for purity, unity, reconciliation, and the resolution of all tensions that often leads to the anxiety-laden fears underpinning patriarchal violence against women.[16] Instead, we should attend to the fact that both the women talking in Toews's novel and the girls against God in Hval's novel are responding differently to how the open and living character of their lives has been violently and forcibly closed by the oppressive domination of men. This will require a higher capacity for uncertainty and distress tolerance than the reactive and defensive character of patriarch allows—from the cycle of abuse to the DARVO pattern (deny, attack, reverse victim and offender).

The difference between the two novels and their approaches, however, is in *how* they respond to this profound violence of closure. Toews's novel negotiates with existing theological and patriarchal boundaries and social bonds in ways that carefully, deliberatively, and thoughtfully decide to break with those social bonds, ultimately by means of an exodus. Hval's novel does *not* negotiate with patriarchy. It opposes it with hatred, transgression, and its own version of violence that profanes every violently imposed boundary that it can find. Where Toews presents a story where women feel that they must respond to the call for forgiveness, Hval's novel does not even entertain forgiveness as a possibility. Here there is a key contrast between the idea that the women in *Women Talking* are accountable to the social and religious bonds they are beholden to, and the breaking of all bonds by the girls against God. We can imagine this by thinking about how Toews's minor image of "the bloody knife duel" (WT, 6) may be the dominant image of *Girls Against God*. Or we can consider how the three options that structure *Women Talking*—do nothing, stay and fight, or leave—are essentially distinct from the narrative of *Girls Against God*, which takes place *after* the narrator has chosen to leave her oppressive context.

In light of this key contrast, one wonders: What would happen if Toews's women talking and Hval's girls against God were to meet? How would the

16 See Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, *Women's Bodies as Battlefield: Christian Theology and the Global War on Women* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 156-159.

minutes of such a meeting reframe how we think about our social bonds, the boundaries that bind, and their transgression and violation. How would both groups seek to hold men to account for violence if they were given the chance to do so together? Again, it is vital to keep this question open without seeking the final resolution of all tensions, fantasies of rescue from complexity, or idealized visions of unity that subsume difference into sameness. One benefit of sustaining such a tension as this is to allow questions to reveal the real stakes underlying both novels, one of which is the question of whether or how Christianity contains resources from within that resist the most violent characteristics of its legacy and present. For Hval, it is unclear whether there are recoverable insights from within Christianity, but for Toews, it is clear that there are emancipatory seeds of dissent that grow even inside the most conservative traditions.

Resistance to Christianity from Within

In conclusion, I will point to one more source, more philosophical and historical than it is literary, that may provide some provisional insights into these questions. In 1993 the Marxist philosopher Raoul Vaneigem, a colleague of Guy Debord and a key member of the "Situationist" movement in France that criticized the illusions and spectacles of capitalism through avant-garde art, published a book in French called *La résistance au christianisme. Les hérésies des origines au XVIIIe siècle*, which has recently been translated into English as *Resistance to Christianity: A Chronological Encyclopaedia of Heresy from the Beginning to the Eighteenth Century*.[17] This book is fascinating and strange, and it belongs to a genre of polemical and revisionist history-writing that will frustrate formally trained historians and upset doctrinally oriented theologians because of how fast and loose it plays with its sources and how vehement its critical edge is in opposition to Christianity.

Like Hval, Vaneigem is committed to a sharp critique of Christianity, but this criticism is not a simplistic form of opposition that paints all forms of Christianity with one brush. Just as Hval retains certain forms of religious language and imagery, such as ecstatic and mystical experience, Vaneigem draws from the deep well of the history of Christianity to find groups and movements who resisted established forms of Christianity from within. His ambitious and unwieldy project that traces such resistances across almost

17 Raoul Vaneigem, *Resistance to Christianity: A Chronological Encyclopaedia of Heresy from the Beginning to the Eighteenth Century*. Trans. Bill Brown (London: Eris, 2023). Cited in-text as (RC, pp.).

two centuries would be outrageous to professional scholars trained in the disciplines of specialization, focus, and archival research. However, the way his book proceeds and the framework within which he works may give us insight into possible answers to the questions raised by the comparison of Toews and Hval above.

In his sweeping 700-page revision of the history of Christianity's opposition to itself from within, Vaneigem gives special attention to the Anabaptists, even citing the *Mennonite Encyclopedia* and George Huntston Williams's work on the Radical Reformation. *Resistance to Christianity* is composed of 48 brief chapters covering early Judean sects, messianic movements, Waldensians, millenarians, Libertines, skeptics, Levellers, Diggers, Ranters, Pietists, Visionaries, and Quietists; among these radical and dissenting groups are the Anabaptists (chapter 42). Although he is an ambitious non-specialist with a disciplined hatred of Christian oppressiveness (which brings him close to Hval), he does thematize the complex character of Christian resistance to itself, and the Anabaptists feature as a key part of this story of interior opposition. For example, Vaneigem accepts the same metanarrative of the Constantinian fall of the Church as many Mennonites do (RC, 437, 483), a story that has been complicated, for example in collections like *Constantine Revisited*.[18] Vaneigem writes:

> If in the sixteenth century no religious movement endured as much combined hostility from the Catholics, the Protestants, and the temporal authorities as Anabaptism did, this was because it added to the religious discourse of egalitarian theocracy the old social dream in which nostalgia for a golden age provided weapons of hope to the desperate struggle against those who exploited and destroyed natural wealth (RC, 529).

In a single sentence, Vaneigem manages to distinguish Anabaptism from its persecutors with mention of both its egalitarian community of goods and priesthood of all believers, while being honest about its theocratic representatives (for example, the siege at Münster in 1534) and its problematic nos-

18 *Constantine Revisited: Leithart, Yoder, and the Constantinian Debate*, Ed. John D. Roth (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013).

talgia for a golden age that, according to some historians, never was.[19] All in all, Vaneigem's project is to hold Christianity to account for how it oppresses and represses life, and to do so by showing how popular resistance and small dissenting groups alike have emerged throughout its entire history.

Arguing for a form of natural liberty that is present within all of humanity and suppressed by Christian institutional violence, Vaneigem sees the Anabaptists as one agitating group among many who resisted authoritarian orthodoxies through both violent and nonviolent means. Although he often slips into the tired pattern of calling "religious" those things he does not like and "political" those things he does, Vaneigem argues that the history of Christianity—especially in the middle ages—is, in the words of translator Bill Brown, "not the history of its ineluctable global triumph, but the history of the implacable resistance that it encountered." (RC, 13). Elsewhere, Vaneigem expresses a similar philosophy of history that places the return of the oppressed at the fore, and refuses to negotiate with the powerful:

> Dialogue with power is neither possible nor desirable. Power has always acted unilaterally, by organizing chaos, by spreading fear, by forcing individuals and communities into selfish and blind withdrawal. As a matter of course, we will invent new solidarity networks and new intervention councils for the well-being of all of us and each of us, overriding the fiats of the state and its mafioso-political hierarchies. The voice of lived poetry will sweep away the last remaining echoes of a discourse in which words are in profit's pay.[20]

Like Hval, Vaneigem takes up a poetic strategy of refusal when it comes to negotiating with the boundaries set by repressive religions and states, but like Toews, he sees potential within the tradition for resistance. Like both Hval and Toews, Vaneigem sees potential in poetic resistance to power and communities of solidarity that resist hierarchical forms of governance. Although he is idiosyncratic and difficult, Vaneigem's spirit of resistance can show one path through the deadlocks that occur when we believe that antiviolent action requires either a complete break or a wholesale acceptance of a religious

19 Jennifer Otto, "The Church that Never Fell: Reconsidering the Narrative of the Church, 100-400 CE" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 91, no. 1 (January 2017). Jennifer Otto, "Were the Early Christians Pacifists? Does It Matter?" *Conrad Grebel Review* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 267-279.

20 Hans Ulrich Obrist, "In Conversation with Raoul Vaneigem" *e-flux* Issue 6 (May 2009).

tradition or community. His approach calls for a clear reckoning with the complexities of Christianity's resistance to parts of itself (even if, at times, he misrepresents such complexities by using abstract terms like "religion" as ideal types). Unlike Hval, however, he remains interested in understanding those who agitated for change within Christian institutions over the centuries, and unlike Toews, he often, frustratingly, refuses a calm and collected negotiation with the tradition in favor of bombastic claims and condemnatory accusations. But like both, he pushes beyond simplistic presentations of violence, accountability, and community.

Concluding Connections

In conclusion, several substantial connections can be drawn within and beyond the encounter between Toews's *Women Talking* and Hval's *Girls Against God*, supplemented by Vaneigem's *Resistance to Christianity*. Both Toews and Hval negotiate with the Christian tradition in ways that both stand within and exit from specific institutional, social, and political confines. If *Women Talking* represents the efforts of a resisting group within the fold of a conservative strain of Christianity, and *Girls Against God* represents resistance from one who has decisively exited a conservative evangelical tradition, Vaneigem's heretical history stands between the two by providing an archhistory of how Christianity has always contained self-resistant strains that exceed all containment by orthodoxy and its production of those in the category of heresy. But what can such comparisons and contrasts do for us as we negotiate between religious affiliation and exit, respond to violences across the spectrum from the physical to the psychological, or seek accountability?

What we gain from Toews's presentation of internal dialogue with violence (that ultimately results in departure from it), is a vision of deliberative approaches that negotiate and reckon with violence from within while enduring it, and at times transformationally resisting it. Not everyone is in able to leave a violent context, and not everyone desires to. Such entanglements require sympathetic and careful interpretations that do not resort to moralizing calls for victims of violence to act quickly, or in ways that those who have not experienced violence would do. What we can learn from Hval's antagonistic position from outside the violent community that she exited is that exits are indeed possible, communities that form in opposition to established religious structures are no less communal or enriching, and that even the most offensive responses to violence can be emancipatory and allow us to see what insiders cannot always see.

As mentioned above, both literary figures desire to resist patriarchal violence by twisting the social bonds that hold it in place against themselves. But there can be no deciding beforehand whether the impulse to remain and reform or depart and seek new social bonds is the right one. Only complex and contextual mediations between such opposing options can point a way forward in response to violence.[21] Alongside these lessons, Vaneigem's complex mixture of resentment of Christianity and deep interest in its own self-critique can provide a model for a way that is not staying, fighting, or leaving, but an odd mix of all three. Each of these three voices enrich the conversation on what counts as violence by presenting responses to violence that transform and reframe the social bonds that form the boundaries that we use to discern whether and when violence has been done. In suggestive ways, the combination of the three can help us: understand the complexities of violence in a world where wars continue,[22] provide resources for what Daniel Shank Cruz calls a "secular Mennonite ethics,"[23] show creative ways beyond the limits of "absolute nonresistance,"[24] open up third ways of nonviolent resistance that combine "tough mindedness and tender-heartedness" in ways that avoid complacency and resentment,[25] and provide resources for moving beyond the deadlocks of neutrality that can come from feeling helpless but also from feeling in control.[26]

The temptation to provide easy prescriptive answers to the question of how to respond to violence is as dangerous as the obscurantist desire to take refuge in abstraction from real life and the need to make decisions within it.

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21 On an Anabaptist and philosophical-political model for such mediations, see my "Anabaptism contra Philosophy" *Conrad Grebel Review* 40, no. 2 (Spring 2022): 138-157.; "Anabaptist Critique" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 99 (January 2025): 209-216.; and my "Editor's Afterword" in Astrid von Schlachta, *Anabaptists: From the Reformation to the 21st Century*. Trans. Victor Thiessen. Ed. Maxwell Kennel. (Hamilton, ON: Pandora Press, 2024).

22 See Ulrike Arnold, "Living Free of Violence," in *The Anabaptist Lodestar: Interpretations of Anabaptism on the Eve of a 500-Year Celebration*. Ed. and Trans. Leonard Gross. Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies Series no. 6 (Thunder Bay, ON: Pandora Press, 2024).

23 See Chapter 4 of Daniel Shank Cruz, *Ethics for Apocalyptic Times: Theapoetics, Autotheory, and Mennonite Literature* (University Park, PA: Penn State Univ. Press, 2024).

24 See Cameron Altaras and Carol Penner, "Introduction," *Resistance: Confronting Violence, Power, and Abuse within Peace Churches* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2022), 3.

25 See Martin Luther King Jr., "A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart" in *Strength to Love* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 8.

26 See Sofia Samatar, "Standing at the Ruins," *The White Review* 30 (2021), 171.

Better to see these three literary, philosophical, theological, and historically-informed works as providing an agenda for thinking and acting in response to violence, and in search of accountability, and even facing the fear of accountability.[27] Both the inclination toward a single boilerplate response to violence and the desire to retreat into platitudes risk avoiding problems that stand right in front of our eyes. But Hval's girls against God and Toews's women talking, lead the way because they *respond*. It is an open question, dependent on context, of how to respond to violence and hold others and ourselves to account. But it is not a question, but rather a certainty, that we must respond with decisive action that engages in difficult conversations where we make real distinctions and push beyond our aversions and fears to a place where active antiviolence charts a path apart from retaliation predicated on the myth of redemptive violence, apart from neutrality that dignifies two bad sides, and apart from polarization that cannot manage fine distinctions, mediations, or negotiations.

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27 See Kai Cheng Thom, "What to do when you've been abusive," in *Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement*. Ed. Ejeris Dixon, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2020).

Breaking the Silences: A Theo-Ethics of Survival and Nonviolent Resistance to Sexual Violence in Rudy Wiebe's *Sweeter Than All the World* and Miriam Toews's *Women Talking*

Susanne Guenther Loewen

Abstract

As Hildi Froese Tiessen has observed, Mennonite literature reveals the community's contradictions and failure to embody its professed values, as seen in the failure to address sexual violence within its peace theology and practice. Using a Mennonite-feminist theo-ethical perspective, this essay analyzes two Mennonite novels on this topic: Rudy Wiebe's *Sweeter than All the World* and Miriam Toews's *Women Talking*. Drawing parallels to the work of Mennonite-feminist theologians, I take the position that these novels provide empowering theo-ethical narratives that break the silence around experiences of sexual violence and emphasize women's survival, agency, resilience, and complex peace convictions both in the midst and in the wake of sexual violence. I conclude that these narratives ultimately provide an ethical and healing way forward for survivors and the whole Anabaptist-Mennonite community.

According to literary critic Hildi Froese Tiessen, Mennonite literature serves to "recreate and redefine" identity," to "challenge and interrogate the values, dogmas, and traditions that have for many years formed the base of traditional Mennonite community consciousness," and, importantly, to "reveal the dissonances inevitably perceptible in our communities…reveal[ing] the shadows that have fallen, in the Mennonite world, between desire and actuality."[1] One such dissonance is the uncomfortable truth around sexual

1 The author would like to thank the two anonymous peer reviewers for their encouraging and constructive editorial comments as well as St. Thomas More College for generously awarding a Seed Grant for this research project. A previous version of this paper was presented at the Mennonite Scholars and Friends gathering at the American Academy of Religion/Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting in San Antonio, TX, Nov. 2023. Hildi Froese Tiessen, "Critical Thought and Mennonite Literature: Mennonite Studies Engages the Mennonite Literary Voice," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 22 (2004): 245. Froese Tiessen is Professor Emerita of English and Peace and Conflict Studies at Conrad Grebel University College, University of Waterloo.

violence within peace churches, a concern which Mennonite-feminist theologians have for decades called to be more robustly integrated into Mennonite peace theology, since at least the 1992 publication, *Peace Theology and Violence against Women*.[2] In a church and community that has in many ways replicated patriarchal norms and values, including in its traditional understandings of violence and peace, how are contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonites to make sense of this glaring failure, which threatens to undermine its very identity as a peace church? How do the silenced voices of victim-survivors regain their rightful place in shaping peace theology and ethics? If Froese Tiessen is right, then the evocative medium of literature is an important resource in naming the truths and contradictions, and I would add, pointing to a way forward that honors victim-survivors.

What follows is an analysis of two representative novels, Rudy Wiebe's *Sweeter Than All the World* and Miriam Toews's *Women Talking*, using a Mennonite-feminist theo-ethical lens.[3] While the two narratives depict quite different circumstances and historical contexts, they each give voice to Mennonite women's experiences of sexual violence, shedding light on crucial questions and ultimately emphasizing their humanity and dignity despite their victimization. I take the position that these novels provide empowering theo-ethical narratives that break the silence around the ostensibly private experiences of sexual violence and emphasize survival, agency, resilience,

2 Elizabeth G. Yoder, ed. *Peace Theology and Violence against Women*, Occasional Papers No. 16 (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1992). Cf. Cameron Altaras and Carol Penner, eds., *Resistance: Confronting Violence, Power, and Abuse within Peace Churches* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2022).

3 *Theo-ethical* here refers to theology that is centrally concerned with ethics and the praxis of faith convictions. This is evident in the Mennonite emphasis on discipleship and community, as well as constituting common ground between Anabaptist-Mennonite and feminist theologies which emphasize lived, embodied practice (orthopraxis) rather than abstract, solely intellectual assent to dogmatic beliefs (orthodoxy). See Lydia Neufeld Harder, *Obedience, Suspicion, and the Gospel of Mark: A Mennonite-Feminist Exploration of Biblical Authority*, Studies in Women and Religion Series (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University, 1998), 2, 5, 8, ix; Gayle Gerber Koontz, "Peace Theology in Transition: North American Mennonite Peace Studies and Theology, 1906-2006," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 81, no. 1 (2007): 78, 80–2, and Gayle Gerber Koontz, "The Liberation of Atonement," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 63, no. 2 (April 1, 1989): 173, 176. Cf. Malinda E. Berry, "A Theology of Wonder," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 23, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 12–13.

and complex peace convictions in the wake of sexual violence, thus providing a way forward for the whole Anabaptist-Mennonite community.

Weeping in Mother-Russia: Sexual Violence against Mennonites in *Sweeter Than All the World*

The "dramatic" unraveling of the Mennonite "Commonwealth" in Russia (present-day Ukraine) from the revolution to the Second World War (1917-40s) has shaped Canadian Mennonite identity and literature in profound ways, prompting literary critic Robert Zacharias to name it the "break event," something which "has transcended the particularities of its history and has taken on the role of a larger collective myth."[4] This era saw the economically prosperous Mennonites in their closed ethno-religious communities (who had displaced and sometimes mistreated their Ukrainian neighbors) targeted with particularly vicious attacks by Ukrainian anarchist bandits such as Nestor Makhno, as well as caught between the German, Russian Red, and Russian Imperial White armies vying for control of Ukraine.[5] Scattered and decimated by violence and famine, the communities were never re-established there; thousands fled to Canada as refugees. Yet, for many decades, these traumatic experiences were "shrouded in silence," especially women's wartime experiences of rape or sexual torture perpetrated by revolutionaries, bandits, or soldiers.[6] This silence "has a long and gendered tradition in Mennonite history," in part because of a desire to "prevent…trauma from being passed on to others."[7] Wiebe's *Sweeter Than All the World* gives voice to these experiences through the character of Elizabeth, a Mennonite woman caught between the German Nazi and Russian Red armies as she tries to flee East Prussia in 1945 with a group of elderly people under her care as a nurse. Wiebe opens Elizabeth's narrative with her father's dismissal of her mother's extended suffering due to a prolapsed uterus: "'And all her pain?' I asked

4 Robert Zacharias, *Rewriting the Break Event: Mennonites and Migration in Canadian Literature* (Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press, 2013), 13-14.
5 Ibid., 51, 53.
6 Marlene Epp, *Mennonite Women in Canada: A History* (Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press, 2008), 99. Cf. Epp, *Women without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 58ff.
7 Zacharias, *Rewriting the Break Event*, 146.

him. He was silent, and abruptly wiped my question aside with his single hand as if it were less than a fly…'We don't argue with God,'" he said.[8] Immediately after, Wiebe launches into Elizabeth's painful experiences of wartime sexual violence—thus insisting on the value of women's experiences, of their worthiness of being recalled and told, as well as implicitly subverting their theological justification as God's will. It also indicates Wiebe's emphasis on truth-telling, articulating the full range of experiences which are often unspeakable for victim-survivors.

Like so many, Elizabeth is depicted as having remained silent about her trauma for some time, only breaking it to warn her fellow nurse Sister Erika as they face an attack by Russian soldiers, making this an ethical choice on Elizabeth's part to assuage her friend's pain, even if she cannot prevent it. Overcome by memories, she tells herself, "I have to concentrate, prepare her!" And Sister Erika understands: "'You were violated.' And I can say it. 'Yes.'…'In war men are brave and killed, women are brave and raped and killed…[N]o one trains women for this.'"[9] She describes ways of coping: dissociating (including repeating the name of Jesus), cooperating with her attacker to lessen the pain. At Elizabeth's brutal descriptions, Erika becomes fearful and begins to pray for God's protection. "I cannot join her," Elizabeth says. "I have begun to weep, in the vice of memory, foreboding. Jesus, Jesus."[10] When the soldiers arrive, Wiebe's narrative only points implicitly to the two women being raped, indicated by the elders forming a protective circle "so that Erika and I can wash and wash ourselves behind their backs."[11] The two women comfort each other during the time of their victimization, and after Erika is killed, Elizabeth salvages her Bible from her grave and reads "as well as I can, 'When the Lord brings back the captives to Zion, we will be like them that dream.'" Though Elizabeth's faith is profoundly shaken (she cannot pray with Erika at first), there is also a sense in which her faith carries her, as repeating the name of Jesus is one coping strategy, pointing obliquely to

8 Rudy Wiebe, *Sweeter Than All the World* (Toronto, ON: Vintage Canada, 2002), 262-263.
9 Ibid., 269-70, 272.
10 Ibid., 273-274.
11 Ibid., 281-282.

Jesus's presence with the victim-survivor and solidarity with her suffering.[12] Throughout the chapter, Elizabeth's wartime experiences are punctuated by her requests, "Father, show me a picture," followed by descriptions of idyllic scenes captured at the height of the Mennonite Commonwealth in Russia—a stark contrast to the violence and suffering of Elizabeth's present.[13] Her faith is shaken but not extinguished as she survives and begins to dream of rebuilding her life in the wake of wartime sexual violence; though she remains in exile, she begins to dream of a return home, to safety.

Wiebe's narrative treatment of sexual violence is remarkable in several ways. As mentioned above, it is grounded in an *insistence that women's experiences of sexual violence are worthy of remembering and re-telling* in a theological tradition that has tended to dismiss women's pain, defining violence and peace in terms drawn primarily from men's experience. A narrow definition of peace practice as primarily embodied in conscientious objection to military service, for instance, excludes women from direct participation, disconnecting them from this defining aspect of the tradition. Wiebe's character of Elizabeth therefore gives voice to this too-often overlooked gendered experience and aspect of war, as well as affirming the steps she takes to resist and survive it. Wiebe's reframing echoes Mennonite-feminist theologian Carol Penner's reimagining of this core peace conviction. As she states, "Some writers have characterized patriarchy as a 'war against women.' In the face of this violence, who will be the new conscientious objectors?"[14] Secondly, though he is depicting women in the midst of brutal victimization, Wiebe's *emphasis is on their ethical agency* and what they are able to do to help each other and to *survive* the violence. This is a departure from familiar themes in Mennonite discussions of gender-based violence, such

12 Cf. Julie Clague, "Symbolism and the Power of Art: Female Representations of Christ Crucified," in *Bodies in Question: Gender, Religion, Text*, ed. Darlene Bird and Yvonne Sherwood (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005): 44ff.

13 Wiebe, *Sweeter Than all the World*, 287. The verse is Psalm 126:1. Cf. Hildi Froese Tiessen, "Between Memory and Longing: Rudy Wiebe's *Sweeter Than All the World*," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 77/4 (Oct. 2003): 619-636.

14 Carol J. Penner, "Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices: Peace Theology and Violence against Women" (Ph.D. diss., University of St. Michael's College, 1999), 174, 171. Cf. Penner, "Abuse, Worship, and Power in Community," in *Resistance: Confronting Violence, Power, and Abuse within Peace Churches*, ed. Cameron Altaras and Carol Penner (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2022), 394.

as forgiveness or reconciliation, placing Wiebe more in line with womanist theologian Delores Williams's emphasis on "*survival/quality of life*." Using the story of Hagar in Genesis, Williams highlights God's concern for Hagar and her son's survival and "quality of life" despite it signifying compromising with her abusers (Abraham and Sarah) for a time; thus, despite the lack of guarantees regarding her liberation, God is with Hagar "in the midst of her personal suffering and destitution," even when her choices are severely limited.[15] Wiebe, too, emphasizes Elizabeth's ways of coping and comforting her friend in the midst of sexualized violence as valid survival strategies within the constraints of their particular circumstances, which he frames using the powerful biblical imagery of exile. This means, thirdly, that there is *a lack of a moralizing narrative* in Wiebe's novel, specifically one that centers the needs of the perpetrator within a certain understanding of enemy-love and forgiveness as the primary responsibility of victim-survivors.[16] Mennonite peacebuilder Lisa Schirch has protested the "one-sided" tendency within the Mennonite church and institutions to "protect the dignity and life of the perpetrator" as "the enemy" in need of love, which too-often means that "[t]he victim continues to drown while the church reaches out to rescue the perpetrator."[17] Wiebe here refuses to allow this kind of victim-blaming theology to define the conversation around women's experiences of sexualized violence, sidestepping that concern altogether: there is simply no discussion of Elizabeth being required to forgive her rapists or of the violence being theologized as God's will or judgment. Instead, there is a subtle sense of God's presence and accompaniment under the surface of her traumatic experience. Wiebe's centering of the two women's solidarity with one another in

15 Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, 20th Anniversary Ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013), 5, 19-21. A similar approach is reflected in contemporary feminist trauma theologies. See Karen O'Donnell and Katie Cross, eds. *Feminist Trauma Theologies: Body, Scripture, and Church in Critical Perspective* (London, UK: SCM Press, 2020).

16 Contrast this with the multiple mentions of forgiveness in Elizabeth G. Yoder, ed., *Peace Theology and Violence against Women* (Elkhart, IN: Institute for Mennonite Studies, 1992). Rita Dirks speaks of a dynamic of enemy-love translating into women being pressured to "forgive their abusers and go on living with the assaults." See Dirks, *Silence and Rage in Miriam Toews's Mennonite Novels* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2024), 86.

17 Lisa Schirch, "Eight Ways to Strengthen Mennonite Peacebuilding," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 373.

the midst of this violence, including the repeating of Jesus's name as a coping strategy and the halting comfort Elizabeth finds in reading her dead friend's Bible, points implicitly throughout to divine solidarity with Elizabeth's efforts to survive and ultimately, with her dreams of safety, home, and an end to the horrors of her exile experience.

Crying Peace where there is None: Sexual Violence among Mennonites in *Women Talking*

While Wiebe's depictions of wartime sexual violence offer important correctives to the silencing or dismissal of these experiences, they remain but one specific example of sexualized violence. In addition, in being associated with the violence of war (something already suspect in the Anabaptist-Mennonite peace tradition), they are somewhat less fraught than when the perpetrators are themselves members of the Mennonite community. The latter constitutes a greater betrayal of individual, interpersonal, and communal trust, shattering the very self-understanding of the community as peaceable and arguably leading to moral injury (defined as "emotional and spiritual wounds" due to "perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations").[18] As Toews explains, this blatant contradiction of the community's pacifism and its accompanying secrecy and silencing of victims creates deep harms: "War is hell, it's true. *Shouldn't be exposed* is another hell"—one which "shields bullies and tyrants." And yet, in the spirit of Rudy Wiebe's first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (and with his blessing) this has been the hallmark of Toews's work: exposing and naming these painful truths.[19]

Along these lines, Toews's *Women Talking* looks with clarity at the sexual violence haunting an ostensible peace church. Here again we see women's

18 Karen V. Guth, "Moral Injury, Feminist and Womanist Ethics, and Tainted Legacies," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 38, no. 1 (2018): 167–86. Guth explores, for instance, the serial sexually abusive behaviour of ostensible Mennonite peace theologian and ethicist John Howard Yoder, which I return to below.

19 Miriam Toews, "Peace Shall Destroy Many," *Granta Magazine*, accessed July 10, 2024, https://granta.com/peace-shall-destroy-many/ Toews describes a literary event at which Rudy Wiebe publicly defended her writing (in Low German!) to a Mennonite reader who felt she was too critical of the Mennonite community.

closed-door conversations amplified, affirmed as worthy of telling and of theo-ethical reflection. Framing her narrative as "an act of female imagination" and "a reaction through fiction" to the "ghost rapes" that occurred in an Old Order Mennonite community in Bolivia between 2005 and 2009,[20] Toews does not focus, like Wiebe, on the time of the rapes themselves, but on the victim-survivors' subsequent theo-ethical discernment around how they will *respond* to what has been done to them. This is a question arguably leveled at the Mennonite community as a whole.[21] Of three options—"Do Nothing," "Stay and Fight," or "Leave"—the conversation revolves around the latter two,[22] indicating that something must be done. Despite being illiterate, "only women talking,"[23] these are no passive victims but resilient[24] survivors claiming their power and agency to make choices over their own lives—including their (re)interpretation and practice of peace theology. This reflects, according to Sabrina Reed, Toews's critique not primarily of Mennonite peace theology but of (mostly male) leaders' abuse of power in Mennonite churches and communities.[25] Whereas Wiebe avoids victim-blaming themes which normally dominate peace theology's discourse surrounding sexualized violence, Toews engages them, questioning and deconstructing them directly, and proposing a more life-giving, victim-survivor-centered theological vision. This is reflected already at the outset, in her reclaiming of "female imagination" to describe her novel, against its original (pejorative) use to dismiss the victims' experiences.

Three major themes which overlap with Mennonite-feminist theology are evident. First, *the women reclaim their full humanity* in the face of dehumanizing treatment, including the use of a veterinary spray. Several times,

20 Miriam Toews, *Women Talking: A Novel* (Toronto, ON: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2018), "A Note on the Novel," n.p.

21 See Daniel Shank Cruz, "Review of *Women Talking: A Novel*, by Miriam Toews," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* Vol. XCIII (July 2019): 430.

22 Toews, *Women Talking*, 5-6.

23 Ibid., 154-155, 179.

24 Sabrina Reed, *Lives Lived, Lives Imagined: Landscapes of Resilience in the Works of Miriam Toews* (Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press, 2022), 2. Reed defines resilience as "the ability to learn and grow from trauma rather than be destroyed by it," tracing it as an "overarching theme" in Toews's novels.

25 Ibid., 4. Cf. Dirks, *Silence and Rage*, 88.

the women assert, "we are not animals," though they have "been preyed upon like animals."[26] Deciding to respond as those "created in the image of God,"[27] the women intentionally exercise the agency denied to them in the attacks: "we're not rats fleeing a burning barn, we've made a decision to leave…"[28] This recalls feminist theological discussions of the gendered power dynamics of sin, tracing back to Valerie Saiving Goldstein's identification of the "underdevelopment or negation of the self" as a particularly "feminine" form of sin to which women are socialized, rather than primarily hubris or pride.[29] Within the context of Mennonite theology and ecclesiology, theologian Lydia Neufeld Harder has pointed out that traditional calls to obedience, submission, or self-denial too often function to reinforce patriarchal gender norms, even while they are touted as part of an ethic of nonconformity to "the world."[30] Against such calls to self-denial, Mennonite-feminist theologian Malinda Berry states, "Jesus does not ask us to love our neighbors more or instead of ourselves, he urges us to love our neighbors and ourselves" in what she calls "the double-love command (Matt. 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-34, Luke 10:25-28)."[31] The claiming of full humanity and the agency

26 Toews, *Women Talking*, 20-21.

27 Ibid., 127. Cf. Grace Kehler, "Becoming Divine Women: Miriam Toews's *Women Talking* as Parable," *Literature & Theology* 34, no. 4 (Dec. 2020): 412, 416.

28 Toews, *Women Talking*, 182. Their humor, anger, and resilience throughout the discussions also reflect their full humanity.

29 Valerie Saiving Goldstein, "The Human Condition: A Feminine View," in *The Journal of Religion* 40, no. 2 (April 1960): 108-109.

30 See Lydia Neufeld Harder, *The Challenge Is in the Naming: A Theological Journey* (Winnipeg, MB: Canadian Mennonite University Press, 2018), 96. "Biblical exegesis has contributed to making male discipleship normative for the meaning of the term, subsuming female experiences of discipleship. In Mennonite tradition this led to an understanding of discipleship that was largely associated with cross-bearing, self-denial, obedience, and servanthood, characteristics that radically challenged the expectations that patriarchal society had of men, but which affirmed what was already expected of women…A patriarchal separation of the domestic and public sphere encouraged 'servant' leadership roles for men and unquestioning acquiescence for women."

31 Malinda E. Berry, "Shalom Political Theology: A New Type of Mennonite Peace Theology for a New Era of Discipleship," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 71. Cf. Jennifer Castro, *I've Got the Power: Naming and Reclaiming Power as a Force for Good; Presentations from the Women Doing Theology Conference* (Elkhart, IN: Women in Leadership Project, Mennonite Church USA, 2018).

of ethical discernment among Toews's characters therefore directly overlaps with the priorities of Mennonite-feminist theologies.

Secondly, Toews's women *ground their decision to leave in their pacifist faith.* As Agata summarizes, "Our faith requires of us an absolute commitment to pacifism, love, and forgiveness. By staying, we risk these things… By leaving we will sooner achieve those things required of us by our faith."[32] Against their bishop's ultimatum that they either forgive the men or jeopardize their own salvation, the women discuss authentic versus coerced forgiveness and its impossibility in, for instance, the rape of three-year-old Miep. "I will become a murderer if I stay," her mother Salome states bluntly. "What is worse than that?"[33] The women here form a "circle of resistance"[34] to deconstruct their dependence on the men's forgiveness or remorse, appealing instead to God's unmediated call to forgive, only possible "from a distance."[35] Orchestrating their own radical reformation or "Anabaptist vision,"[36] the women craft their own manifesto (or confession of faith) for "A new religion, extrapolated from the old but focused on love."[37] Again, this closely reflects Mennonite-feminist rethinking of forgiveness practices in relation to abuse, such as Gayle Gerber Koontz's assertion within her "liberation pacifism" that forgiveness does not exclude anger or divorce, and that it cannot be demanded by the abuser.[38]

Along with this vision comes, thirdly, their *wrestling with questions of theodicy* and the victim-blaming they have faced, especially from their bish-

32 Toews, *Women Talking*, 111. Cf. 114, 119.
33 Ibid., 45, 26, 97.
34 Dirks, *Silence and Rage*, 86.
35 Toews, *Women Talking*, 108-109.
36 Margaret Steffler, "Breaking Patriarchy Through Words, Imagination, and Faith: The Hayloft as Spielraum in Miriam Toews' *Women Talking*," *Canadian Literature* no. 143 (Winter 2020): 61ff, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A665130337/CPI?u=usaskmain&sid=bookmark-CPI&xid=3fb3506d, para. 2.
37 Toews, *Women Talking*, 56.
38 Gayle Gerber Koontz, "Redemptive Resistance to Violation of Women: Christian Power, Justice, and Self-Giving Love," in *Peace Theology and Violence against Women*, ed. Elizabeth G. Yoder (Elkhart, IN: Institute for Mennonite Studies, 1992), 41-42.

op.[39] Before the perpetrators had been caught, their bishop had interpreted the attacks on the women as demonic or as God's punishment for their sins, invoking the theological violence of blaming victims for their own violation. When he accuses one woman, Mina, of inventing the story of her teenaged daughter's brutal rape with her "wild female imagination," she hangs herself, and he covers up that she died by suicide.[40] Together, the women talk back against such reasoning, redefining God's role in their circumstances. "If God is omnipotent then why has He not protected the women and girls of Molotschna?" Salome asks. "She will challenge God on the spot to strike her dead if she has sinned by protecting her child from evil, and furthermore by destroying the evil that it may not harm another."[41] Together, the women reject what they have been told about "ghosts or devils or Satan" or God's supposed wrath as the sources of their pain.[42] As their decision to leave crystallizes, they unravel this theology, first wondering whether the men will consider this "disobedience" to their biblical roles, but then turning to their own, unmediated, communal interpretation: "how do you think God would define our leaving?" "As a time for love, a time for peace," says Mejal, paraphrasing Ecclesiastes. And the narrator/minute-taker notes here, in parentheses, "Perhaps it is the first time the women of Molotschna have interpreted the word of God for themselves."[43] Indeed, throughout their conversation, the women have been grounding their decision in their faith, complete with footwashing and the singing of hymns,[44] and, importantly, communal biblical/ethical discernment, which is, according to Mennonite-feminist theologian Lydia Neufeld Harder, a hallmark of both Mennonite

39 Toews, *Women Talking*, 119. Cf. Sarah J. Harsey and Jennifer J. Freyd, "The Influence of Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender and Insincere Apologies on Perceptions of Sexual Assault," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (2023): https://doi-org.uoregon.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/08862605231169751

40 Ibid., 57-58.

41 Ibid., 94-95.

42 Ibid., 119. Dirks makes a fascinating connection to the association between early Anabaptist women being accused of witchcraft because of their literacy during an era of overlap between persecution of Anabaptists and witch hunts, whereas the illiterate women of Molotschna are also accused of demonic associations. See Dirks, *Silence and Rage*, 87.

43 Ibid., 159.

44 See Ibid., 19, 29, 166. Footwashing is a parallel practice to Communion, based on the Last Supper narrative in the Gospel of John, chapter 13.

and feminist understandings of biblical hermeneutics.[45] Implicit here is a powerful depiction of God who goes with them and desires their safety and peace as they, in Reed's terms, "create their own exodus stor[y]."[46]

Taken together, what emerges from these novels is a complex theo-ethics in response to sexual violence, which subverts victim-blaming narratives of abuse as one's God-given "cross to bear" and ethics of self-sacrifice and unconditional forgiveness. In remembering rightly the pain, terror, and agency of Mennonite foremothers in Russia, Wiebe insists on their dignity in impossible circumstances, providing a word of encouragement to those still exiled by the violence of abuse, for whom safety is still only a dream.[47] And in emphasizing the resilience of victim-survivors in reclaiming the power of anger and love to forge a new future, Toews imagines a more profound peace that encompasses gender equity and social, sexual, and spiritual well-being. This functions both as a call for victim-survivors to also "create their own exodus stories," but also, per Daniel Shank Cruz, "a critique written with the hope that the community will get better"[48]—meaning the entire Anabaptist-Mennonite community.

However, it must be noted that not all have interpreted this work so generously. Toews in particular has faced harsh criticism, as multiple scholars have questioned her ethical integrity in not depicting the Old Colony Boliv-

45 Neufeld Harder, *The Challenge Is in the Naming*, 56. "Feminist theology in common with other strands of liberation theology also contends [like Anabaptist-Mennonite theology] that biblical interpretation must arise out of concrete communities. Feminists understand these to be communities of liberation where women and men struggling for equality and mutuality become 'prisms through which God's action in the mending of creation is to be understood.' They insist that communities whose praxis is liberating for all its members can more readily discern the meaning of Scripture. They agree that theology is not the exclusive prerogative of a select group of people – educated, trained, ordained men – but rather is the province of all persons. They point out that the oppressed…have a particular contribution to make."

46 Reed, *Lives Lived,* 10. She also claims this "*restories* the Mennonite migration narrative" (9). Exodus is arguably a more profound biblical image than Kehler's reversal of the prodigal son parable. See Kehler, "Becoming Divine Women," 419-20.

47 Reed, *Lives Lived,* 6.

48 Cruz, "Review of *Women Talking*," 431.They point out that the front and back covers of *Women Talking* have the words "ANGER" and "LOVE" highlighted within the letters of the title. This recalls the classic text by feminist theologian Beverly Wildung Harrison, "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love" in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, vol. xxxvi (1981): 41-57.

ian Mennonite women with sufficient accuracy or even appropriating their story.[49] But according to Rita Dirks, Toews writes from the perspective that these are fellow Mennonite women, her voiceless "kin," for whom she has an ethical responsibility to speak.[50] Toews therefore will not and, in a sense, cannot leave these women trapped in the pain of these circumstances. Remarkably, I have not seen a similar questioning of Wiebe's ability to narrate women's experiences of sexual violence in 1940s Ukraine—an experience much more distant from his own. Perhaps this is due to Wiebe grappling with historical trauma while Toews attempts to reimagine the future—always a riskier endeavor, especially when undertaken with a "wild female imagination" whose authority must constantly be defended. Cruz likewise categorizes *Women Talking* as "speculative fiction," which is by definition a 'queering' of things as they currently are, an invitation and challenge to transformative change, much like political theology or what they call "theapoetics," literature which demands and opens ethical possibilities in feminist and queer ways.[51] So, the depiction of the women as illiterate need not be literally true in order to comment on the Mennonite community's tendency to silence women and limit their life choices, and the ostensibly unrealistic ending of the women leaving to start a new, egalitarian community likewise paves a hopeful and healing way forward for all Mennonite

49 See Kehler, "Becoming Divine Women," 413-14; Rebecca Janzen, "Women Talking: A Displaced Act of Female Imagination," *Anabaptist Historians: Bringing the Anabaptist Past into a Digital Century*, March 9, 2023, https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2023/03/09/women-talking-a-displaced-act-of-female-imagination/; Kimberly D. Schmidt, "Women Talking: An Anabaptist Fable for Our Times?" *Anabaptist Historians*, March 24, 2023, https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2023/03/24/women-talking-an-anabaptist-fable-for-our-times/; Kerry Fast, "Women Doing," *Anabaptist Historians*, April 13, 2023, https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2023/04/13/women-doing/.

50 Dirks, *Silence and Rage*, 89, 98.

51 Daniel Shank Cruz, "Mennonite Speculative Fiction as Political Theology," *Political Theology* 22, no. 3 (2021): 213. Cruz defines "theapoetics" as follows: "Simultaneously a practice and a theory, theapoetics makes space for both lived experience and literature as theology. Its emphasis on individual [and embodied] experiences, on the personal being political, is a queer, feminist one." Cf. Daniel Shank Cruz, *Ethics for Apocalyptic Times: Theapoetics, Autotheory, and Mennonite Literature* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2023). Cruz uses they/them pronouns.

communities.[52] There is a (in this case redemptive) slippage between "fiction" or the symbolic and lived reality; this is what marks it as *theological*. After all, this kind of utopian vision of community and creative reimagining of its ethical possibilities is in fact characteristic of this tradition of radical reformation; here it simply takes Mennonite-feminist form. Further, this is a message needed by the whole Mennonite community, as the 'ghost' of sexual violence also haunts modernized or acculturated Mennonite communities and theologies—which Cruz observes, is "incredibly damning." Cruz continues, "the same misogynist spirit that led to the rapes [in Bolivia] is present in actions such as some Mennonite theologians' continued insistence on using John Howard Yoder in their work despite his extensively documented history of sexual predation." For Cruz, this signifies that Mennonites across various contexts are called to work together against the violence of abuse and misogyny.[53]Dirks already sees evidence of change in this direction,[54] lending further doubt to accusations of unrealism and making *Women Talking* and its wide resonance and acclaim[55] an affirmation of Mennonite women's many years spent reworking peace theology toward greater gender equality. To name just one thread of this, Mennonite historians, theologians, and ethicists have highlighted the exemplary and courageous actions of the Mennonite-feminist women—some of them victim-survivors themselves of Yoder's abuse—who worked for decades to hold him accountable. Beyond questions as to whether Yoder's theology should be salvaged, these women model a

52 Ibid., 222, 224. Cf. 216.

53 Cruz, "Review of *Women Talking*," 430. Cf. Dirks, *Silence and Rage*, 95-96; Rachel Waltner Goosen, "'Defanging the Beast': Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder's Sexual Abuse," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89, no. 1 (January, 2015): 7-80; Isaac Samuel Villegas, "The Ecclesial Ethics of John Howard Yoder's Abuse," *Modern Theology* 37, no. 1 (January 2021): 191–214. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/moth.12623.

54 Dirks, *Silence and Rage*, 98.

55 I refer here to its success as a novel as well as a film adaptation directed by Sarah Polley which won an Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay in 2023.

new peace theology and praxis[56]—one that arises from a long-standing, multifaceted 'underside' of the tradition: the shared wisdom of women talking and supporting one another. Alongside the poignant storytelling of Wiebe and Toews on this very theme, this constitutes a challenge for the whole Mennonite community to follow these courageous women's examples of accompaniment and mutual empowerment to survive and resist sexual violence, past and present. As Froese Tiessen states, "What a gift."[57]

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56 Karen V. Guth, "Lessons from Anabaptist Women's Responses to John Howard Yoder's Sexual Violence," in *Liberating the Politics of Jesus: Renewing Peace Theology through the Wisdom of Women*, ed. Elizabeth Soto Albrecht and Darryl W. Stephens, Studies in Anabaptist Theology and Ethics Series (New York: T & T Clark, 2020), 210. Cf. Rachel Waltner Goosen, "Mennonite Bodies, Sexual Ethics: Women Challenge John Howard Yoder," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 34 (2016): 248, 255; and Carol Penner, "Mennonite Women Doing Theology: A Methodological Reflection on Twenty-Five Years of Conferences," in *Recovering from the Anabaptist Vision: New Essays in Anabaptist Identity and Theological Method*, ed. Laura Schmidt Roberts, Paul Martens, and Myron A. Penner (New York: T&T Clark, 2020), 53-76.

57 Froese Tiessen, "Critical Thought and Mennonite Literature," 245.

Sarah Polley's *Women Talking*: Adaptation, Trauma, and the Representation of Sexualized Violence in Film

Rebecca Janzen

Abstract

This article analyzes Sarah Polley's adaptation of Miriam Toews's *Women Talking*. Both are based on the so-called ghost rapes of the early 2000s, where men raped Old Colony Mennonite women and girls in the Manitoba Colony in Bolivia. The article discusses how the film and the novel represent these traumatic events; it focuses on how Polley's film shifts from a male to a female narrator, and how the film aims to respect survivors of sexualized violence, drawing on Polley's memoir, *Run Towards the Danger*. The article then discusses the film's choice to remove all overt references to Bolivia and to Mennonites. It shows how the film's less specific representation aligns with problematic trends of representing Mennonites, Bolivians, and Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia. This makes it impossible for the film to fully honor the survivors it portrays.

Sarah Polley's 2022 film *Women Talking* and Miriam Toews's 2018 novel of the same name are based on events that took place in the early 2000s in Manitoba Colony, Bolivia.[1] There, it is alleged that Old Colony Mennonite men raped and assaulted women and girls in their own community. The events took place at night, and at first the community's leaders attributed them to evil or supernatural forces, and so they were known as the "ghost rapes." The novel and the film represent a group of women's imagined responses to the sexualized violence that they have experienced. While the events the novel and the film portray occur in a minoritized community, Toews's and Polley's works go beyond this group and encourage readers and viewers to better understand the lived experiences of survivors of sexualized violence. The dialogue between characters in the novel and the film also explores why

1 *Women Talking*, directed by Sarah Polley (Orion Pictures; Plan B Entertainment; Hear/Say Productions, 2022); Miriam Toews, *Women Talking,* (Toronto, ON: Knopf Canada, 2018). The images used below, identified as figures 1–7, are all screenshots of the film.

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survivors make particular choices.

The film and the novel are incredibly popular for good reason. Polley's film has reached a high level of critical acclaim because viewers identify with Sarah Polley's Oscar quip that she was thankful that the Academy was not "mortally offended by the words women and talking… so close together like that."[2] Viewers are able to see, not just imagine, the fantasy of leaving a bad situation. Trans viewers, including those from conservative religious backgrounds, would see themselves reflected in the character Melvin.

This article examines the differences between the film and the novel as part of the cinematic process of adaptation—particularly the ways the film represents sexualized violence, and the film's decision to remove all overt references to Bolivia and to Mennonites. I suggest that Polley's adaptation of Toews's novel represents sexualized violence in ways that align with current ideas about the experiences of trauma, and in this way, her film honors survivors. At the same time, the decision to be less specific follows problematic trends of representing Mennonites, and Bolivians, and Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia. This makes it impossible for the film to fully honor the survivors it seeks to portray.

Toews's novel takes place in the Molotschna colony in an in-between time, narrated by the colony's teacher, August Epp. The narrator discloses that the colony's men have left for the city to find the alleged perpetrators of violence against women and girls, post bail for them, and bring them back to the colony. The women vote on whether they should do nothing, leave before the male perpetrators return, or stay and fight. A smaller group of colony women holds a meeting, and the teacher records the minutes of this meeting and his own reflections. The film, conversely, takes place in a barn in an unnamed location. It, too, takes place in an in-between time. The women vote and a young girl narrates proceedings of the discussion held by the smaller group of women on how to proceed.

Adaptation

Polley's *Women Talking* brings Toews's text to the cinematic medium. This

2 Peter White "Sarah Polley Thanks Academy for 'Not Being Mortally Offended' By the Words 'Women' and 'Talking' Following Oscar Win," *Deadline,* March 12, 2023. https://deadline.com/2023/03/sarah-polley-thanks-academy-not-being-offended-women-talking-1235296409/ (accessed September 1, 2024). See also my review of the film for the *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* 12.1 (2024): 112-114.

follows the trajectory of filmmakers who have been adapting novels since the earliest 19th century moving pictures. Polley employs general strategies of adaptation in this process. I will be considering this film from the perspective of Linda Hutcheon and her heirs, who have observed that adaptation is an extended intertextual engagement, not a word-for-word reproduction.[3] That is, this article will not be evaluating either the film or the novel for its mimetic representation of the so-called ghost rapes. Polley engages with the same topic, but she subverts and obfuscates some of Toews's Mennonite references and represents sexualized violence in a different way than Toews's novel.

Polley's film demonstrates this extended engagement through personal and professional connections with Toews's life and work. Two examples of this relationship come to mind. First, Polley thanks Toews in the acknowledgments in her 2022 memoir, *Run Towards the Danger*.[4] Later, Polley discussed their relationship in a 2023 interview with Tom Power, the host of the CBC radio show, *Q*. Polley stated that she spoke with Toews before beginning the project.[5] *Women Talking* also appeared after Polley had already adapted other works by famous Canadian women writers to the film and television screen. Polley's feature-length film directing debut, for instance, was *Away from Her*, which adapted the Alice Munro short story, "The Bear Came Over the Mountain." She also adapted Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* as a Netflix miniseries.[6]

I also consider the cinematic adaptation following the work of film critic Ilana Dann Luna, whose *Adapting Gender* focuses exclusively on women film directors who adapt the work of women writers. Luna "envision[s] film adaptation as a tool for gender subversion, a strategy that could be deployed to multiply meaning and critique the existing symbolic order of things… as a reconditioning repetition."[7] For her, it is "a strategy of cultural resistance, allowing feminist discourse to expand its audience, formulate new concep-

3 Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd edition, (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2012), 8.

4 Sarah Polley, *Run Towards the Danger: Confrontations with a Body of Memory* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2022), 341.

5 Vivian Rashotte, "Making Women Talking: Sarah Polley Explains Why Laughter Was Key to Adapting Miriam Toews's Novel," *CBC*, January 31, 2023. www.cbc.ca/radio/q/sarah-polley-women-talking-q-tom-power-interview-1.6717710 (accessed September 1, 2024).

6 Polley, *Run Towards the Danger,* 300; 353.

7 Ilana Dann Luna, *Adapting Gender: Mexican Feminisms from Literature to Film* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2018), xvii.

tions of performed gender, and even potentially open doors for other subaltern discourses."[8] Polley's film adapts Toews's novel in order to universalize the experience of Old Colony Mennonite women in Bolivia. I posit that the film offers a critique of the existing social order differently than the novel's critique in three ways: by drawing attention to the representation of violence and trauma; by carefully representing some aspects of the religious, cultural, and social practices of Old Colony Mennonites without explicitly situating the events in Bolivia; and by opting not to mention the word "Mennonite."

Violence and Trauma

Polley's film carefully adapts sexualized violence to the screen. Indeed, as scholars Marta Fernández-Morales and María Isabel Menéndez-Menéndez posit in their article on adaptation in Polley's version of *Women Talking*, the film adapts the novel and the context of the MeToo movement as it represents survivors of sexualized violence.[9] Deftly weaving together elements from the historical context and Toews's novel, Polley's screenplay and cinematic techniques play with the fantasy of leaving and the reality that many survivors of sexualized violence do, in fact, stay. In this process, the film expands several important aspects of Toews's work.

Before discussing the ways that Polley's film adapts Toews's text, I will discuss the novelistic representation of sexualized violence. Its approach to sexualized violence validates survivors in several ways. The novel offers a matter-of-fact description of events, narrated by a man who believes women. He narrates it in a disjointed or fragmented form that is similar to the way survivors remember traumatic events. This is clear from the beginning. Furthermore, the narrator avoids tropes that often accompany representations of sexualized violence, including titillation or something akin to seduction and desire.[10] For example, he states, "the girls and women were made unconscious with a spray of the belladonna plant. The next morning, they would wake up in pain, groggy, and often bleeding, and not understand why."[11]

8 Ibid., xviii.

9 Marta Fernández-Morales and María Isabel Menéndez-Menéndez, "Sarah Polley's Take on the Me Too Moment: Adapting *Women Talking* to the Big Screen," *Adaptation* 17.1 (2023): 98.

10 Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver, "Introduction: Rereading Rape," in *Rape and Representation,* ed. Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1991), 4.

11 Toews, *Women Talking,* 4.

Elsewhere, the narrator likens the women's experiences to dreams and states that "eventually, as the pieces fell into place, they came to understand that they were collectively dreaming one dream, and that it wasn't a dream at all."[12] The teacher, August Epp, who is also the narrator in the novel, reiterates the women's version of events. In this way the novel presents a man who believes women, something that often does not happen in the world outside of the text. That being said, August Epp is an emasculated male. He teaches because he could not farm, which the novel affirms as the most important calling. The fact that he is the only man trusted by the women points to an understanding that masculinity is violent. Indeed, only those who do not meet the community's standard of masculinity, like August, or Melvin, are allowed to observe the women's conversation. The novel's non-linear representation of the events, which shift between meeting minutes and the teacher's reflections, is in keeping with the ways survivors remember trauma as well as postmodern novelistic form.[13]

Figure 1: The Women Discuss the Issues

12 Ibid., 15.

13 See for example the work of Janina Fisher, *Transforming the Living Legacy of Trauma: A Workbook for Survivors and Therapists* (Eau Claire, WI: PESI Publishing, 2021) or Staci K. Haines, *The Politics of Trauma: Somatics, Healing, and Social Justice* (New York: North Atlantic Books, 2019).

Polley's work adapts these important aspects of the novel. As critics have observed, Polley does not cast doubt on the events themselves and in this way continues what Toews's work does, honoring survivors who others may not believe.[14] The film is similarly non-linear, but it is a conversation that is connected by a female narrative voice rather than August Epp's minutes that record a conversation, and his reflections that connect disparate events. In Polley's version, a girl, Autje (Kate Hallet), the daughter of Mariche (Jessie Buckley), one of the survivors, gives a voiceover as if she is speaking to the unborn child of another survivor, Ona (Rooney Mara).[15] August (Ben Whishaw) merely takes minutes on the side. This interpretation suggests that their experience does not need the validation of a man (emasculated though he may be).

On screen, then, women's bodies are important sources of knowledge. So, too, are their conversations. They chastise the teacher for not listening to them, reminding him that he is only there to provide information and to record their interactions for posterity. For Grace Kehler, this is an example of becoming divine women; in other words, the women's community exemplifies ways to become a divinely inspired community beyond Mennonite-mandatory forgiveness.[16] Kimberly Schmidt discusses these conversations in a similar way and observes that the collaborative element of the women talking, where no one is a clear leader or protagonist, is significant and in keeping with Anabaptist ideals.[17] Regardless of whether this is Anabaptist, Polley's film powerfully adapts what Grace Kehler and Victoria Glista have called the community of care evident in Toews's text.[18] This cinematic representation of women's words and bodies as the only relevant information about violence challenges the status quo.

Polley's film moves back and forth in time, like Toews's novel. In Polley's memoir, *Run Towards the Danger*, she reflects in a series of essays on the

14 Fernández-Morales and Menéndez-Menéndez, "Sarah Polley's Take," 98.

15 Ibid.,101.

16 Grace Kehler, "Becoming Divine Women: Miriam Toews' *Women Talking* as Parable," *Literature & Theology* 34.1 (2020): 414.

17 Kimberly Schmidt, "Women Talking: An Anabaptist Fable for our Times?," *Anabaptist Historians*, March 24, 2023. https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2023/03/24/women-talking-an-anabaptist-fable-for-our-times/ (accessed March 24, 2023).

18 Kehler, "Becoming Divine Women," 420; Victoria Glista, "Miriam Toews' *Women Talking* and the Embodied Life of Feminist Nonviolence," *Contemporary Women's Writing* 17.1 (2023), 100-103.

dangers she has experienced. No doubt these reflections on trauma influenced the film and her representations of sexual violence. According to life writing scholar Alana Bell, key parts of this memoir are its emphasis on the embodied nature of trauma, and that traumatized people sometimes tell incomplete stories that may change over time.[19] Polley's memoir begins with first-person narration in which Sarah Polley herself describes trauma associated with her family of origin. The man she grew up with as her father and sole living parent after age eleven behaved in ways I would label as sexual harassment but that the memoir characterizes as inappropriate. Her work as a child actor on *Road to Avonlea* was similarly abusive and the memoir details how Polley's experience worsened as her scoliosis developed in her teens.[20] In the context of the MeToo movement and the case against CBC radio host Jian Gomeshi, Polley also describes her experiences of sexualized violence. The memoir expands on her 2017 piece in *The New York Times* about Harvey Weinstein.[21] The same chapter in the memoir describes details of a date with Gomeshi that became violent and her decision not to report him at the time or to speak publicly while the crown was building its case against him more than a decade after he had allegedly acted violently toward her.[22] She criticizes crown prosecutors who told her privately that they would encourage her and other loved ones not to report sexualized violence because the reporting process itself, which their work upholds, is so violent.[23] These experiences, and her written reflections on them, undoubtedly inform the film.

The biggest difference between the film and the novel is Polley's direct engagement with sexualized violence and its effects on characters' bodies. Polley maintains the novel's commitment to not directly portray the violence; this is a feat on screen because according to film critic Niamh Thornton, gruesome and sensationalized details are common in cinematic representa-

19 Alana Bell, "'Sarah Polley Needs No Introduction': The Year in Canada." *Biography* 46.1 (2023): 10-11.

20 Polley, *Run Towards the Danger*, 89-90.

21 Sarah Polley, "The Men You Meet Making Movies," *The New York Times,* October 14, 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/10/14/opinion/sunday/harvey-weinstein-sarah- polley.html?partner=bloomberg (accessed September 1, 2024).

22 In Canada, the crown prosecutes criminal offences under Canada's criminal code. Thus, "the crown" develops a case against alleged perpetrators of crimes such as rape and murder. This is because the reigning British monarch is Canada's official head of state, and the Governor-General is its official representative in Canada.

23 Polley, *Run Towards the Danger,* 115-116.

tions of rape and assault.[24] This is a strong deviation from Toews's one purported piece of advice for Polley, which Polley mentioned in a Q and A after a public screening of the film in Torono. Critic Victoria Glista reports that Polley stated that Toews had recommended removing all explicit references to embodiment in her version of *Women Talking*.[25] The film is richer for Polley's refusal to suggest that "Mennonite women such as these would never speak about their bodies.[26]

Polley includes scenes, such as the one captured below, that portray female characters in the aftermath of trauma.

Figure 2: Ona lying in bed

This flashback focuses on the female character's own experiences. In this frame the shot is taken from above the character Ona, which gives the camera the authoritative perspective. The still image displays Ona, wearing a flowered dress and lying on flowered sheets. The off-camera voiceover describes how she and other women woke up with blood between her legs. As she speaks, the camera focuses on Ona's thighs, which are covered in blood. In addition to this skilled combination of camerawork and narration, the film makes a clear, if indirect, reference to violence, even more so than in Toews's discussion of dreams.

Polley furthers the film's representation of embodied trauma through the character of Melvin. The novel introduces this character as Nettie, who then becomes Nettie (Melvin), Nettie/Melvin and Melvin.[27] We learn that after experiencing traumatic events, this character only speaks to children.[28] The

24 Niamh Thornton, *Tastemakers and Tastemaking: Mexico and Curated Screen Violence* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2020), 19.
25 Glista, "Miriam Toews' *Women Talking*," 97.
26 Ibid.
27 Toews, *Women Talking*, 65, 87, 148, 192, 194.
28 Ibid., 64.

lack of explanation for changing names suggests that transitioning and selective mutism are trauma responses. The film consistently represents this character with one name, Melvin, and explains that Melvin used to have a different name and now has short hair and wears pants. In the film, Melvin similarly only speaks to children. The consistent naming emphasizes that Melvin has changed after trauma but that it is in order to express the fullness of his human experience, and that while selective mutism is part of those effects, a different gender presentation is not.

Following Luna's work on other films directed by women that adapt novels written by women, this adaptation allows for new feminist possibilities that challenge the status quo, particularly with regards to the question of how to represent sexualized violence and its effects. I echo other critics by emphasizing the importance of women validating women on screen, and the significance of a non-sensationalized, nuanced portrayal of violence. The body, and women's conversations, are enough.

Bolivia, Mennonites, and Bolivian Mennonites

The way the film and film critics focus on these aspects of the film, in particular, the way they laud the film's presentation of women as reliable narrators of their own experiences, makes the film's deliberate omission of words like Bolivia and Mennonite so curious.[29] Would Bolivian Old Colony Mennonite women not be the most reliable narrators of their own experience? Or, barring that, scholars, journalists or consultants who are experts on Bolivian Mennonites? The women survivors are still alive. As far as I know, no attempts were made to interview survivors. This omission deliberately mischaracterizes the women as illiterate, and restricted to their colonies, which revictimizes them. Polley anticipated questions like mine in her interview with CBC radio's Tom Power. She stated that she did not feel comfortable representing Mennonites since she is not one and explaining that she wanted to tell this story without reference to Mennonites because patriarchy is not an exclusively or essentially Mennonite issue.[30] Neither she nor the host ever

29 Lorenzo Cañás Bottos's *Old Colony Mennonites in Argentina and Bolivia: Nation Making, Religious Conflict and Imagination of the Future* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2008) and Ben Nobbs-Thiessen's L*andscape of Migration: Mobility and Environmental Change on Bolivia's Tropical Frontier, 1952 to the Present* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2020) are excellent studies that include careful attention to Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia.

30 Rashotte, "Making Women Talking."

mention Bolivia in their conversations. While it is true that patriarchy is a power structure that affects most cultures, religions, and nationalities, Polley's comments imply that the people her film represents, white people who wear less common types of clothing, who have connections to communities in Canada, would not have been informed by their religious tradition. It also implies that they could never be truly Bolivian, and that living in Bolivia would not have informed their experiences.

This is a clear departure from the novel. Toews's *Women Talking* begins with a one-page preface that explicitly situates its events in Mennonite communities in Bolivia, as shown in the following excerpt.

> Between 2005 and 2009, in a remote Mennonite colony in Bolivia named the Manitoba Colony, after the province in Canada, many girls and women would wake up in the morning feeling drowsy and in pain, their bodies bruised and bleeding, having been attacked in the night. The attacks were attributed to ghosts and demons…In 2011, [the alleged perpetrators] were convicted in a Bolivian court and received lengthy prison sentences. In 2013, while the convicted men were still in jail, it was reported that similar assaults and other abuses were continuing to take place in the colony. *Women Talking* is both a reaction through fiction to these true-life events, and an act of female imagination.[31]

The novel takes place in the Molotschna colony, a fictionalized version of the events outlined in the preface. The representation that follows is imperfect at best, and if I dwell on it I will do what Andrew Unger, on his satirical website *The Unger Review* rightly calls the Mennonite tendency to point out errors in any work about Mennonites.[32] I would rather discuss the effects of these imperfections. For Toews, this is an explicitly Mennonite story. She uses her Mennonite background to justify representing this community, and her pro-

31 Toews, *Women Talking*, iii.

32 Andrew Unger, "Mennonite Critics Excited to Watch 'Women Talking' and Find All the 'Errors'," *The Unger Review*, January 7, 2023. www.ungerreview.com/mennonite-critics-excited-to-watch-women-talking-and-find-all-the-errors/, (accessed September 4, 2024).

fessed desire to do so with empathy.[33] Toews's terminology speaks directly to Russländer Mennonites, who largely came from the Molotschna colony in Russia, and who had extremely traumatic experiences leaving the Soviet Union at various points in the 20th century. This is distinct from the experiences of the similarly white Low German speaking Mennonites in Latin America whose origins are largely in the Khortitsa colony in Russia.[34] It is important to note that the Mennonites in Toews's background are not the same as the Mennonites in her novel. Toews, however, does not make this distinction between groups.[35] Some Mennonites have warmly received this novel, especially if they come from a similar background and feel validated by a portrayal of violence in their community of origin. Others have criticized it. S. L. Klassen puts it this way: Toews "imagines *her* people, the women she knows from her own childhood Kleine Gemeinde community and what they would do and say—and sing—were they in the place of the women in Bolivia."[36] Critic Grace Kehler calls this Toews's modern slant that "threatens to efface complex distinctions of the very people it seeks to dignify."[37] The representation of Mennonites in Toews's *Women Talking* collapses differences between evangelical-adjacent Mennonites in southern Manitoba and Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia, and, more broadly, between wealthier and

33 Jonathan Dyck and Christine Kampen Robinson's "Mennonites Talking about Miriam Toews," *The Walrus* July 16, 2019. https://thewalrus.ca/mennonites-talking-about-miriam-toews/ (accessed September 1, 2024); and Will Braun's "'Mennonites Talking' Responding to the Novel, *Women Talking*," *Canadian Mennonite*, November 30, 2018, https://canadianmennonite.org/stories/mennonites-talking (accessed September 1, 2024).

34 Sabrina Reed's *Lives Lived, Lives Imagined: Landscapes of Resilience in the Works of Miriam Toews* (Winnipeg, MB: Univ. of Manitoba Press, 2022) speaks to Toews's displacement of Russländer trauma onto the women in this film; see for example 10-13, or her third chapter, 106-156.

35 Katrina Onstad, "Interview. Miriam Toews: 'I Needed to Write About these Women. I Could Have Been One of Them," *The Guardian*, August 18, 2018. www.theguardian.com/books/2018/aug/18/miriam-toews-interview-women-talking-mennonite (accessed September 10, 2024); Maxwell Kennel, "Secular Mennonite Social Critique: Pluralism, Interdisciplinarity, and Mennonite Studies," in *Anabaptist ReMix: Varieties of Cultural Engagement in North America*, ed. Lauren Friesen and Dennis R. Koehn (New York: Peter Lang, 2022), 68-69.

36 S. L. Klassen "Miriam Toews and #Mennotoo (2)," *The Drunken Menno Blog*, September 30, 2018. www.slklassen.com/miriam-toews-and-mennotoo-1/ (accessed September 1, 2024). For more context, see previous post on the same blog, "Miriam Toews and #Mennotoo (1)".

37 Kehler, "Becoming Divine Women," 413.

poorer Mennonites, and Mennonites in Canada and Mennonites in Latin America.[38] This type of representation may also imply that all Mennonites in Bolivia are Old Colony, or at least white Mennonites with roots in Canada.

Polley's film adapts this problematic representation of Mennonites without repeating it. It also includes a preface of sorts. After a few minutes of voiceover introduction that explains the sexualized violence and offers snapshots of people in unusual types of dress, the words "what follows is an act of female imagination" fill the screen as music plays in the background. This echoes Toews's language in her preface.

Figure 3: An Act of Female Imagination

When the words appear on screen, the voiceover stops, so the film does not offer the additional context that the novel does. Haunting music and out of focus fields situate the events in an unspecified rural area. The film's opening scene, then, establishes that it will portray a story about a group of women in a rural area from an unusual tradition of some kind.

This unspecified group of people, however, have a clear relationship to Mennonites. "Toews and other Mennonite consultants advised Polley during her script writing and offered suggestions on the fine details of the film's

38 Klassen "Miriam Toews and #Mennotoo (1)," and "Miriam Toews and #Mennotoo (2), *The Drunken Menno Blog*.

production from set design to filming locations."[39] "Mennonite consultants also worked alongside Quita Alfred, the film's costume designer. Together, they sewed dresses and sourced fabrics that were authentic to the community's patterns and standards of 'plain dress,' sold by Mennonite shopkeepers."[40] Although the hairstyles, kerchiefs, sunhats, and dresses are not exact replicas of what Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia would wear, *Women Talking* far exceeds other representations of Old Colony Mennonites on screen, such as Carlos Reygadas's 2007 film *Silent Light* or the 2010-2012 Mexican television show *Los héroes del norte,* in terms of on-screen portrayals that bear any relationship to lived religious practices.[41]It is also notable that Toews starred in Reygadas's film and learned Low German for it. Indeed, in a book talk about *Irma Voth,* she asserted that her inspiration for that text, about a young woman in the Mennonite colonies in Mexico, came from acting in that film and from growing up Russian Mennonite in southern Manitoba.[42]

39 Aaron Epp "Barns and Kerchiefs: The Mennonites behind the scenes of *Women Talking*," *Canadian Mennonite,* February 22, 2023. https://canadianmennonite.org/stories/barns-and-kerchiefs (accessed September 1, 2024); Christina Pasqua and Pamela Klassen, "Women Talking and Reimagining the World," *The Revealer*, April 5, 2023, therevealer.org/women-talking-and-reimagining-the-world/ (accessed September 1, 2024).

40 Darren Bernhardt, "How a Winnipeg Costume Designer Created Might for the Muted in Adaptation of Miriam Toews's Women Talking," *CBC News*, January 14, 2023. www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/quita-alfred-winnipeg-costume-designer-women-talking-film-1.6709166 (accessed September 1, 2024); Pasqua and Klassen, "Women Talking;" and Spencer Williams's " 'Women Talking' Costume Designer Quita Alfred on Authenticity and Responsibility in Costumes," *The Art of Costume*, January 19, 2023. https://theartofcostume.com/2023/01/19/women-talking-costume-designer-quita-alfred-on-authenticity-and-responsibility-in-costumes/ (accessed September 1, 2024).

41 *Stellet Licht* [*Silent Light*], directed by Carlos Reygadas (Mexico City: Mantarraya Producciones, Bac Films, and No Dream Cinema, 2007); *Los heroes del norte,* directed by Gustavo Loza (Mexico City: Televisa, 2010-2012).

42 Katrina Onstad's interview with Toews reiterates the way Toews makes the two communities equivalent. For criticism of Irma Voth, see Sabrina Reed's *Lives Lived, Lives Imagined;* Rebecca Janzen's "Mennonite and Mormon Women's Life Writing," in *Education with the Grain of the Universe*, ed. J. Denny Weaver (Telford, PA: Cascadia), 223-239; and for criticism of the Mennonite elements of *Silent Light*, see Rebecca Janzen's *Liminal Sovereignty: Mennonites and Mormons in Mexican Culture* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2018), 125-166.

Figure 4: Mejal and Greta

For example, this still image of two of the women in the barn early in the film displays the exceptional care *Women Talking*'s set and costume designers took in making the characters appear Old Colony Mennonite. The camera focuses on Mejal (Michelle McLeod) and Greta (Sheila McCarthy), who sit in the barn. The boards with cracks of light are visible, particularly behind Greta. As Greta speaks, the camera zooms in closer to the two women and the wrinkles in Greta's face move as she speaks. She is not wearing any obvious make-up, and her only adornment is her pair of wire-rimmed glasses. Her hair has a center part and is pulled back into a bun, and a kerchief covers her head. A dark-colored dress leaves only a bit of her neck visible. Mejal is likewise in the foreground but looks more to the side than Greta, and the half of her face that is in the shadows is much less visible. She is also white, and wears wire-rimmed glasses and some kind of head covering. Her dress has a more obvious floral print on dark-colored fabric. These characters are obviously "not one of us": their clothes, head coverings, and lack of jewelry or make-up all mark them as different. The designers did not even confuse the head covering with those favored by Old Order Mennonite or Old Order Amish women, which demonstrates the close attention paid to costume design on screen. The characters are undoubtedly presented as Old Colony

Mennonite women—for those who know what to look for.

Polley's film couples the close attention to costuming with the omission of the word Mennonite. For those who do not know what to look for, the cinematic version of *Women Talking* could also allude to any group of white people with a religion that claims Christian tenets and unique religious practices that make the person in the group immediately identifiable as different, especially for reasons of dress. If they are not Old Colony Mennonite women in Bolivia, they could be Old Order Mennonites or Old Order Amish women in the US or Canada, who are a recognizable commercial "brand" in addition to a religious expression.[43] They are not unlike other minoritized groups of white people like polygamous Mormons in the intermountain US west. This could lead viewers to believe that the problems in the film only happen to women in these groups.

Polley's film also continues the tendency that Kehler, Klassen, and others observed in Toews's *Women Talking* of effacing differences between different types of Mennonites and using the Old Colony Mennonite women in Bolivia as a stand-in for Mennonite women in southern Manitoba. The characters "deliberate with reference to biblical passages and sing hymns, always centering forgiveness and fidelity to God."[44] They sing hymns such as "Children of the Heavenly Father," which also appear in the novel. These hymns, sung in four parts, are not the hymns or the singing style of Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia, who engage in "line singing" following texts in the Old Colony *Gesangbuch*. These would be recognizable to most viewers as a Christian allusion, if not necessarily a Mennonite one. This cinematic adaptation, then, acts in some ways as what Luna calls a reconditioning repetition.

Not only that, the film recurs to common tropes in representations of Mennonites: one, that they have a close relationship to the land; and two, that they are a group that needs outside help. When these characters, or any character in a work of literature and art, are represented according to a trope, it is a way to communicate an idea quickly and effectively. Meredith McConnell has analyzed Appalachian people in film, and she argues that when this group of nominally Christian, rural, and white people are portrayed on screen as belonging to the land, or as needing outside intervention, it makes them seem like they don't belong in their time or their place, which, in her

43 For more information, see Valerie Weaver-Zercher's *Thrill of the Chaste: The Allure of Amish Romance Novels* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2013) and Diane Zimmerman Umble and David L. Weaver-Zercher's edited collection, *The Amish and the Media* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2008).

44 Pasqua and Klassen, "Women Talking."

analysis, are various moments in 20th century US history. [45] I think the same is true whenever Old Colony Mennonites are portrayed as outside of their time and their place, in this case, 21st century Bolivia.

The film is part of a long line of representations of Old Colony Mennonites in relationship to the land. Historians Royden Loewen and David M. Quiring, anthropologist Anna Sofia Hedberg, and geographer James W. Lanning extol the virtues of the rural Old Colony Mennonites' lifestyle.[46] This echoes the many governments in Europe and the Americas who have welcomed Mennonites and their unique religious practices into their midst over the past 300 years because they believe that Mennonites will be good farmers.[47] The Bolivian government specifically encouraged Mennonite migration because it believed they would "turn previously 'unused' land into production."[48] Historian Ben Nobbs-Thiessen expands on this perception of Mennonites as good farmers, first as a group that would settle the lowlands in Bolivia, and then as those who would improve the same region through World Bank development funds in the 1990s.[49]

It is also part of the artistic representation of Mennonites in film and photography. In addition to the aforementioned *Silent Light* and *Los heroes del norte,* it also includes photography collections such as Larry Towell's *The Mennonites,* and Eunice Adorno's *Las mujeres flores.*[50] In Bolivia, it includes

45 Meredith McCarroll, *Unwhite: Appalachia, Race, and Film* (Athens, GA: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2018), 102.

46 Anna Sofia Hedberg, *Outside the World: Cohesion and Deviation among Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia*,
(Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala Univ. Library, 2007); James Walter Lanning, "The Old Colony Mennonites of Bolivia: A Case Study." M. Sc. Thesis, (College Station, TX: Texas A&M Univ., 1971); Royden Loewen, *Village Among Nations:"Canadian" Mennonites in a Transnational World, 1916-2006* (Toronto, ON: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2013); David M. Quiring, *The Mennonite Old Colony Vision: Under Siege in Mexico and the Canadian Connection* (Winnipeg, MB: DF Plett Historical Research Foundation, 2009).

47 Blake Hamm, "Low German Mennonite Migration: A Geopolitical Framework and History," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 41, no. 2 (2023): 114-117.

48 Lorenzo Cañás Bottos, "Transformations of Old Colony Mennonites: The Making of a Trans-Statal Community," *Global Networks: A Journal of Transnational Affairs*, 8, no. 2 (April 2008): 221.

49 Nobbs-Thiessen, *Landscape of Migration*, 225-229.

50 *Silent Light*, directed by Carlos Reygadas; *Los héroes del norte,* directed by Gustavo Loza; Larry Towell, *The Mennonites: A biographical Sketch* (London: Phaidon, 2000); Eunice Adorno, *Las mujeres flores* (Madrid: La Fábrica, 2011).

the 2014 work of the Getty-award-winning photographer Jordi Busqué.[51] These artistic representations suggest that their subjects are outside of time and place, living a bucolic rural life.

The film's rural setting in a barn and a field next to the barn fulfill pastoral, purity, and land-related tropes in the representation of Mennonites. As most of the film occurs in a barn, the film itself is quite dark.[52] The only visible light comes in through the cracks between the boards that serve as the barn walls, and the scenes filmed outdoors present muted shades of green and gold. Its locations in rural Ontario were selected in consultation with experts on Mennonites, adding to the sense of connection between Mennonites and the land. The image I analyzed earlier, which displays the words "this is an act of female imagination" at the beginning of the film, enhances the sense that this film takes place nowhere. The words are in the foreground and a field, and trees are blurry in the background, deliberately out of focus, which emphasizes the words on the screen.

There are many scenes that illustrate this rural identity. One that stands out is at the end of the film when a line of buggies leaves the colony.

Figure 5: The Buggies Leave the Colony

51 Matt Fidler, "The Mennonites of Bolivia – In [Jordi Busqué's] Pictures," *The Guardian* September 10, 2014. www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2014/sep/10/the-mennonites-of-bolivia-in-pictures (accessed September 1, 2024).

52 Margaret Steffler's "Breaking Patriarchy through Words, Imagination, and Faith: The Hayloft as *Spielraum* in Miriam Toews' *Women Talking*." *Canadian Literature* 243 (2020): 61-78 focuses on the hayloft.

This overhead shot displays a dirt road that curves from the bottom right to the top left third of the screen, surrounded by green fields on both sides. A line of trees cuts across the top third of the frame, clear on the left and blending into the foggy background on the right. A glimpse of a yellow field and a grey sky complete the upper third of the image. The buggies are placed in roughly equal distance to one another along the road and people on foot accompany the horse-drawn buggies, evident with running children and the lines of women wearing Old Colony women's signature straw hats. They walk and drive, leaving their community and their land, which are intimately related to each other.

This beautiful scene, however, is not a specific rural place. S. L. Klassen observes that "we could imagine the colony as anywhere and nowhere. There's a certain *Gulliver's Travels* feel to this place."[53] The tradition of representation that ties Mennonites to land is more troubling when we consider the violence the female characters experience. This makes the actions on screen seem to take place in a living hell rather than anywhere or nowhere. I think that the evident visual markers of Old Colony Mennonitism, coupled with the deliberate dislocation from Bolivia, make it easier for the representation of the ghost rapes in Polley's *Women Talking* to align with tropes, which allow for rapid communication at the expense of the people portrayed. This representation is troubling because according to the film, the female characters do not even know where their living hell is.

Figure 6: August shows Ona the Map

53 Klassen, "Miriam Toews and #Mennotoo (2)."

This becomes clear when August shows Ona how to read a map as they sit on the barn's roof one night. This still image displays the two characters in the foreground, occupying the right two-thirds of the frame. One crouches in the middle, touching the lantern. Her hair is intricately braided and covered with a net, and the top part of her face is visible above her long-sleeved dark-print dress, as are her hands and forearms. August sits on his knees next to her. His hands jut out of his plaid shirt underneath his overalls as he shows Ona where they are and where he thinks the women should go. A metal windmill appears between their heads like a halo, whose metallic shine picks up the shine on the roof. The lamp in the center-bottom of the frame casts more light on August than it does on Ona. This alludes to his knowledge and skill as a teacher even as it casts Ona and the uneducated women in the darkness.

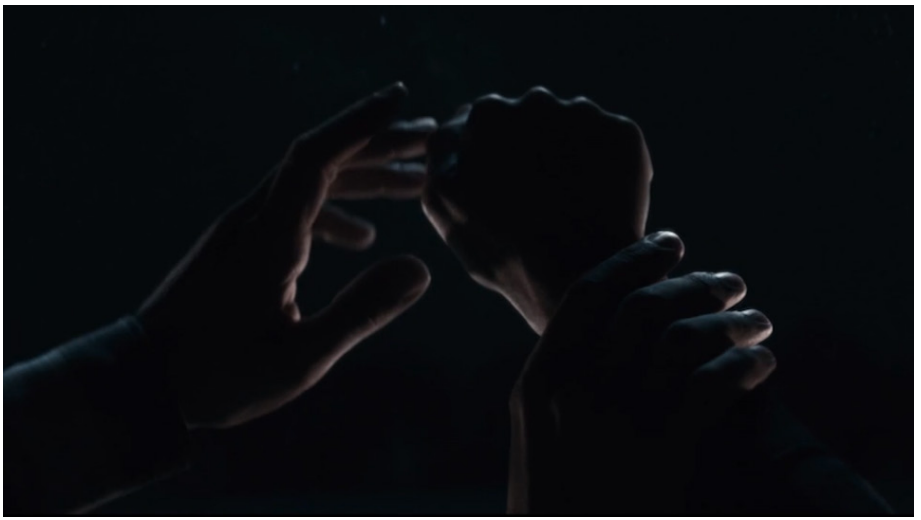

Figure 7: August and Ona's Hands

A few moments later in the film, August explains how to navigate using stars for guidance. The still shows August and Ona's forearms, backlit in the center of the frame. His left hand grasps her right so that she can use the stars 'correctly' for navigation. These representations cast the group of women as people who require a man to teach them how to leave.

The cinematic representation of August teaching Ona aligns with the tendency of outsiders to want to "fix" Bolivians and Old Colony Mennonites

in some way.[54] In the words of Kerry Fast, outsiders have consistently interfered with the lives of Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia: "journalists have investigated, missionaries have converted, development has been dispensed, movies have been made, anthropologists have studied."[55] Missionaries want to save Bolivian (Old Colony Mennonites), [56] and to bring hope.[57] They and public health workers want to heal Old Colony Mennonites of their many deficiencies.[58] This language reflects the idea that the Old Colony Mennonites are hopeless and that their lifestyle is inherently sick. This is compounded by developmentalist discourse about Bolivia more broadly, which has focused on the country's issues using rhetoric of illness since at least the 19th century.[59] The female characters' equivalents in Bolivia would not be so lost. Like many people who have less formal education, they do not use maps. They belong to a community with an alternate geography, connected to sister colonies and settlements across the Americas with German language religious newspapers and *WhatsApp*.[60]

Neither is this community perfect. Old Colony people belong to a high demand religion and women, in particular, do not write in any of Bolivia's thirty-two official languages. These challenges are compounded by the fact that Bolivia is politically volatile, economically unstable, and has bad infrastructure that affects primarily rural people, including Old Colony Menno-

54 Sabrina Reed's *Lives Lived, Lives Imagined* focuses on Toews's work and its third chapter focuses on Toews's representations of Old Colony Mennonites in Latin America (106-156).
55 Kerry Fast, "Women Doing," *Anabaptist Historians*, April 13, 2023. https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2023/04/13/women-doing/ (accessed September 1, 2024).
56 Carl Heppner, "Shared Ministry: A Narrative Budget for the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference 2012/2013" (Winnipeg, MB: Go Mission! [EMMC], 2011), http://gomission.ca/wp-content/uploads/Go-Mission-Narrative-Budget-2012-20133.pdf, 10 (accessed September 1, 2009).
57 Jacob Friesen, Lil Goertzen, Abe Giesbrecht, Tracy Dueck and Bob Milks, "Shared Ministry: A Narrative Budget for the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference 2013/2014" (Winnipeg, MB: Go Mission! November 2012). http://gomission.ca/wp-content/uploads/Go-Mission-Narrative-Budget-2013-2014-w-approved-budget-small.pdf, 13 (accessed September 1, 2009).
58 This language is evident in several studies including Judith C. Kulig, Judith C., Ruth Babcock, Margaret Wall and Shirley Hill, "Being a Woman: Perspectives of Low-German-Speaking Mennonite Women," *Health Care for Women International* 30 (2009): 324-338.
59 Michael Aronna, *'Pueblos enfermos': The Discourse of Illness in the Turn-of-the-Century Spanish and Latin American Essay* (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1999).
60 Kerry Fast, "Women Doing," and Kimberly Schmidt, "Women Talking."

nites.[61]

Polley's film makes several changes from Toews's novel, in terms of the representation of trauma, and of Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia. This decision allows for new interpretive possibilities, in keeping with Luna's observations about other cinematic adaptations of literary texts. These changes situate the film in a trajectory of the representations of Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia and elsewhere in Latin America as of the land, or as in need of some form of outside assistance. This outweighs the good that comes out of the representation of trauma on screen.

The director is so concerned about showing the universal nature of the patriarchy that the film seems to have forgotten that it is inspired by events that involve real people, who live in the 21st century in Bolivia, and who are not a trope who exist outside of time and place onto whom Canadian writers and directors and international audiences should inscribe their stories of sexualized violence. This would require awareness on the part of Polley of her positionality within Canadian film and television, vis-à-vis the women who inspired the novel she adapted for her film.

The representation of sexualized violence as contemporary and conversant with mainstream or at least academic feminism in many ways has the same problems as the film—it is an ideology of white, wealthy, women, that does not speak to the experiences of Black, Indigenous, Latina or other women of color, women with disabilities, queer or trans women, women of other social classes, or women who may be marginalized for other reasons. While the film[62] gets around criticism that could be levied against it had it used racist, ableist, cis-sexist or classist tropes, using tropes of Mennonite women as backwards is no better. Couching the representation in a false uni-

61 Associated Press, "Military Flees Bolivia Government Palace, General in Custody after Coup Attempt Fails," June 26, 2024. www.npr.org/2024/06/26/nx-s1-5020668/bolivia-coup-attempt (accessed July 1, 2024); "CAF Boosts Rural Development in Bolivia with an Investment of USD 110 Million in Road Infrastructure." *CAF* July 18, 2024. www.caf.com/en/currently/news/2024/07/caf-boosts-rural-development-in-bolivia-with-an-investment-of-usd-110-million-in-road-infrastructure/ (accessed September 1, 2024); Timothy J. Kehoe, Carlos Gustavo Machicado and José Peres-Cajías, "The Monetary and Fiscal History of Bolivia, 1960-2015," *Becker Friedman Institute Working Papers,* no. 2018-67, 2018. https://bfi.uchicago.edu/wp-content/uploads/WP_2018-67.pdf (accessed September 1, 2024).

62 The National Film Board has funded several films on this topic such as Courtney Montour's *Mary Two-Axe Early: I am Indian Again* (2021); or Marie Clements's *the Road Forward* (2017); this is a different kind of work than *Women Talking.* There are other films, podcasts, and documentaries on this subject as well. None are the type of feature-length fictional work that *Women Talking* purports to be.

versalism based on a mischaracterization of Old Colony Mennonite women in Bolivia that does not even name their religious tradition or their location is irresponsible. It shows how much of mainstream feminist ideology still needs to be interrogated so that it can speak to the lived experiences of all women.

By not seeking and amplifying women's voices, the women are silenced, and in fact, revictimized by women with more access to media and resources. If the film were so concerned with an issue facing women in Canada, it could have dealt with Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and Two-Spirit People, or connected Indigenous experts with funding to make a film that would reach a broad audience including but not limited to the festival circuit and independent cinemas where *Women Talking* premiered.

If it were committed to telling the story of Bolivian Old Colony women, it would have been better to amplify reports that draw on the lived experiences of Bolivian Old Colony women. Kerry Fast's blog post, "Women Doing," does some of this. Fast says "I have chosen to 'interfere' again in the best way I know how" by sharing stories of Bolivian Old Colony Mennonite women.[63] So does Elaine Kinich, who characterizes them as "Keepers of the Old Ways."[64] They both highlight things that women do, struggles they have, in a way that is more likely in keeping with what the women would want to share about themselves with the world.

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63 Kerry Fast, "Women Doing."

64 Elaine Kinich, "Keepers of the Old Ways: Colony Mennonites in Bolivia Preserve Tradition, Innovate as Numbers Grow," *Anabaptist World,* October 27, 2023. https://anabaptistworld.org/keepers-of-the-old-ways/ (accessed May 1, 2024).

On Animals, Wandering Anabaptists, Water, and Other Mysteries

Jeff Gundy

Amid a great deal of talk about bodies and animals at the 2022 Mennonite/s Writing conference at Goshen College, a goodly portion related to Rachel Yoder's brilliant, unsettling novel *Nightbitch,* in which a young mother, isolated with her toddler son, fears she is turning into a dog. Yoder read from her novel and discussed it with pastor and poet Sheri Hostetler during a memorable plenary session. In her Sunday sermon, Hostetler followed up by mentioning a curious passage in Carl Jung's *The Red Book.*[1] Jung's persona, on a sort of dream-quest, meets a wandering band of Anabaptists who crowd into the kitchen of a house he is visiting. The leader, Ezechiel, says that his band has no peace, asks if Jung might know what this is, and reaches "greedily and uncannily" toward him. Jung responds at once: "Let go, daimon, you did not live your animal" (294).

Not long after, Hostetler published a full, fascinating essay on Jung and "living your animal"[2] in which she focuses on an extended account in Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*[3] that resembles the "crowd in the kitchen" passage. Jung says in this volume that the experience inspired him to write the arcane *Septem Sermones* (Seven Sermons), which he distributed only to a few friends while alive but were published as an appendix to *MDR*. Both passages contain a crowd of the dead, although Jung never uses the term "Anabaptist" in the latter passage (190-1), and the timelines and details differ considerably, as Hostetler recognizes. The crowd in *The Red Book* is going *to*

1 C. G. Jung, *The Red Book: A Reader's Edition.* Ed. Sonu Shamdasani. Trans. Mark Kyburz, John Peck, and Sonu Shamdasani (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2009).

2 Sheri Hostetler, "Live Your Animal: Carl Jung and the Anabaptists," *Mennonite Life* 77 (2023) n.p. https://ml.bethelks.edu/2023/07/11/live-your-animal-carl-jung-and-the-anabaptists/#_ftn16 (accessed May 15, 2024).

3 C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections,* revised edition. Ed. Aniele Jaffe. Trans. Clara Winston and Richard Winston (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1973). Hereafter referred to in the text as *MDR*.

The Conrad Grebel Review 41, no. 2 (Spring 2023): 190-203.

Jerusalem, but in *MDR* they are coming back from the city, empty-handed.

The character of Ezechiel and Jung's conversation with him are only in *The Red Book,* as is this central passage, which deserves to be quoted in full:

> "Why do you have no peace if you died in true belief?"
> "It always seems to me as if we had not come to a proper end with life."
> "Remarkable—how so?"
> "It seems to me that we forgot something important that should have been lived."
> "And what was that?"
> "Would you happen to know?"
> With these words, he reaches out greedily and uncannily toward me, his eyes shining as if from an inner heat.
> "Let go, daimon, you did not live your animal" (294).

Are these really the same events, the same crowd, that had come to Jung's door? The more I look, the less certain I am. In *The Red Book* the scene does not lead to Jung writing the *Septem Sermones,* but ends suddenly with him being carried off to a mental hospital. It is true, though, that the *Sermons* are a kind of overview or summary of the material in *The Red Book* and offer an alternative to orthodox Christianity. They begin by noting "The dead came back from Jerusalem, where they found not what they sought. They prayed me let them in and besought my word, and thus I began my teaching" (*MDR* 378). Notably, there is no mention of "living your animal" in the *Sermons*, or of the recoil and refusal to speak further that occur in *The Red Book's* account.

In that account, on the way to the asylum Jung pulls out a copy of *The Imitation of Christ,* which he has been reading and pondering with considerable skepticism: he says that rather than trying to imitate Christ, each person must instead work out their own salvation, with Christ as inspiration and guide rather than model. Now he finds himself in a new crisis: "I can no longer say that this or that goal should be reached, or that this or that reason should apply because it is good; instead I grope through mist and night. . . henceforth all is error" (295). He then shifts abruptly to second person: "it

becomes clear to you that you have fallen into the boundless, the abyss," and then to third: "Every man has a quiet place in his soul . . . where everything is simple and clear, with a manifest and limited purpose" (339). Jung then insists that "man" must break out of this illusory calm and confront the "overwhelming stream of chaos" and the figures of "the thronging dead of human history . . . who look greedily through the empty sockets of your eyes, who moan and hope to gather up through you all the loose ends of the ages" (296). This seems perhaps an opening to what Jung elsewhere calls "the shadow," here described as "Whatever you renounced and damned, everything that was and could have gone wrong" (296).

Confronting the dead, Jung says, is necessary but dangerous, because they "fell prey to power, broken by force and not by themselves . . . If you accept them, they fill you with delusion and rebellion against what rules the world." And then the circle closes at last: "They would have nothing to do with the small lives of men. They lived on the heights and accomplished the lowest. They forgot only one thing: they did not live their animal" (296).

> The animal does not rebel against its own kind. Consider animals: how just they are, how well-behaved, how they keep to the time-honored, how loyal they are to the land that bears them, how they hold to their accustomed routes, how they care for their young, how they go together to pasture, and how they draw one another to the spring. There is not one that conceals its overabundance of prey and lets its brother starve as a result. There is not one that tries to enforce its will on those of its own kind. Not one mistakenly imagines that it is an elephant when it is a mosquito (296).
>
> He who never lives his animal must treat his brother like an animal. Abase yourself and live your animal so that you will be able to treat your brother correctly. You will thus redeem all those roaming dead who strive to feed on the living. And do not turn anything you do into a law, since that is the hubris of power (296).

Now this is curious, isn't it? I was ready for some urgent demand to recover the body, dwell in instinct and impulse; it seems shocking to be told instead

to accept my place in the herd and be grateful. Was Jung critiquing the Anabaptists for their earnest rebellion against the established order of their day? He lived in Zurich where the movement began, and was a student of history; clearly, he knew about them. But he was certainly no defender of the religious status quo, often insisting on the need for rebellion, if not downright rejection, of stultifying conventions; some sources see Jung himself in full-fledged revolt against Christianity. The pages that follow are knotty with exhortation and imperative:

> Do not throw yourself against what has become, enraged or bent on destruction. What will you put in its place? . . . Then turn to the dead, listen to their lament and accept them with love. Be not their blind spokesman, there are prophets who in the end have stoned themselves. But we seek salvation and hence we need to revere what has become and to accept the dead who have fluttered through the air and lived like bats under our roof since time immemorial (297).

I have struggled for months to understand all this, and still feel, like Jung, adrift in a chaos of words and images. One way is to read this as self-talk, Jung trying to convince himself to be more generous and understanding. The warning about "prophets who have stoned themselves" seems obscure, though intriguing. But I do love those bats, hanging upside down under the roof, fluttering out at night to feed on bits of life in the holy darkness. That just might be an animal I would like to live.

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Hostetler notes that Jung later claimed "Ecclesiastical Christianity had repressed the animal, as well as Nature and the flesh . . . This exclusion of the animal led Westerners to see themselves as inappropriately distinct from these 'lower' life forms . . . Animals, he said, were more pious because they fulfill the divine will more completely than humans ever can. Animals cannot deviate from 'natural law'; humans can." Thus, Jung's critique, she argues, is of the Anabaptists' perfectionism, their "alarmingly abstracted, overly spiritualized and intellectualized" approach to life—though they certainly had

their own pointed critiques of ecclesiastical Christianity, and they insisted that the Gospel message of peace and service was meant for actual living, not mere inspiration. Is there an entirely anachronistic critique of Harold Bender's "Anabaptist Vision" lurking here, somehow?

I cannot resist the temptation to probe these claims briefly in terms of the real lives of animals. Jung's notion that "in nature the animal is a well-behaved citizen. It is pious, it follows the path with great regularity, it does nothing extravagant" does not fit well with the mink who slipped through chicken wire to kill eighty of my friend Ray's chickens but could get none of them out of their coop, and so left bloody but without its feast. It does not fit well with the grand-dogs who greet us with entirely extravagant, outland-ish, sometimes dangerous yelps, barks, and leaps whenever we turn up at their door. And the red macaws who screeched like banshees as we watched them zoom from tree to tree, carrying their bold colors like the markings of pacifist jet planes, were entirely gaudy and indifferent to human notions of propriety.

But we should be no more bound to mere fact and reason here than Jung was when recording his complex, obscure fantasies and riffing on them. The church and Western culture has, indeed, often sought to convince us that we are somehow not animals, but immortal spirits imprisoned temporarily in flesh. Rather than labor this well-known theme, let us instead explore the final, marvelous move Sheri Hostetler makes. Returning to Jung's insistence that we need to take up the unsolved problems of the dead, she recalls a long-ago experience when she found a strange voice seeming to speak to her, offering what became her poem "The Woman with the Screw in Her Mouth Speaks." This envisioned woman, an Anabaptist martyr, offers a compressed version of persecutions and the "quiet in the land" response, but ends with a startlingly original perspective:

> For the most part, outsiders would not see us, and
> when they did, they would see only perfection.
> And now what has happened to you? Some of the ancestors
> are not pleased. They fear for you; some fear for themselves.
> They would tell you not to be messy and bold. Don't take us down
> with you, they say. But listen to me. We oldest ones remember:

> The dying was worth it, every pain. We were chosen to bring something new into the world. They had to keep us from singing. They had to keep us from singing.

"In my imagination," Hostetler comments, this woman "embodies the integration with the animal that the Anabaptists who haunted Jung had lost." Her refusal to recant, her insistence that the martyrs' sacrifice was "worth it" to "bring something new / into the world," makes the repeated final sentence a claim that their sacrifice was indeed triumphant, that their "singing" was not fully or truly suppressed.

I love this woman's unrepentant message, as spoken through Hostetler, and the call to be "messy and bold." Even so, it seems in considerable tension with Jung's claim that "The animal does not rebel against its own kind," that animals are "well-behaved" and "keep to the time-honored." This woman, unlike Jung's roving band, seems quite at peace with her martyrdom and the drive to "bring something new / into the world." And she defiantly suggests that being "messy and bold" is the *right* thing to do.

To encounter tensions and paradoxes, if not downright contradictions, in Jung's complex and often reckless prose should not surprise us. For all his advocacy of "well-behaved citizens," earlier in *The Red Book* Jung makes an equally strong case for wildness: "To the extent that the Christianity of this time lacks madness, it lacks divine life. . . But know that there is a divine madness which is nothing more other than the overpowering of the spirit of this time through the spirit of the depths" (238).[4]

I cannot resolve these seeming tensions. Is it wrong to bring them forward, as it has taken me months of contemplation to do for myself, and then try to find some sort of uneasy but possibly productive poise among them? I do believe in treating our fellow beings, human and otherwise, with consideration, with "a certain courtesy of the heart," as William Stafford once put

4 When this article was nearly complete, I read in the brand-new *Essential Dale Suderman Reader* a long review of Richard Noll's hostile book on Carl Jung. Suderman, a Mennonite intellectual and sometimes gadfly, also brings up this passage, but relies on Noll's summary and interpretation: "Jung wrote the Seven Sermons to the Dead to offer them an alternative pagan philosophy, featuring the god Abraxas" (127). *The Essential Dale Suderman Reader,* Ed. Daniel Born (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2024).

it to me. I also believe in mustering all the resistance we can to the evils and dangers and injustices that beset us on all sides, and in the need to continue to break out of our stale conventions to bring new ideas, images, stories, and metaphors into the world and into our own beings as well. Jung also saw such a process as essential:

> If you remain within arbitrary and artificially created boundaries, you will walk as between two high walls: you do not see (228) the immensity of the world. But if you break down the walls that confine your view, and if the immensity and its endless uncertainty inspire you with fear, then the ancient sleeper awakens in you, whose messenger is the white bird. Then you need the message of the old tamer of chaos. There in the whirl of chaos dwells eternal wonder. Your world begins to become wonderful. Man belongs not only to an ordered world, he also belongs in the wonder-world of his soul. . . This inner world is truly infinite, in no way poorer than the outer one. Man lives in two worlds. A fool lives here or there, but never here and there (*The Red Book* 229).

Reading Sheri Hostetler's poem, I was reminded of one of my own, also bound up with an uncanny experience. I was at a Mennonite camp on a writing retreat, with a little group of fifteen or twenty others. The dedication is to two of that group—Julia Kasdorf, a well-known Mennonite poet and a long-time friend, and Ginny Stoller, who was then my brilliant, thoughtful student and for years now has taught high school English. Ginny and I had driven out together, and had four hours of the kind of slow, ruminative conversation that driving a long way allows.

The group of us had talked, sung, written, and listened all morning. When free time came, Ginny and Julia set off to talk (someone always wants to talk to Julia!), but I managed to sneak off by myself. After a bit of walking, I sat down near Jacob's Creek and was given this poem.

Old Water

-for Julia and Ginny

If I had known, if I had known, would I ever
have thought to cross the bridge, to
shuck my clothes and slide into the cool water?
In the fall, leaves languid on the lip
as the girls who'd never look at me.
Oh please . . .

When I went under what was waiting
touched me, wrist and thigh, and held firm,
strong, and settled deep with me.
I was desperate, then wild and then
my panic drifted off like an old whiff of skunk
and left the new stars dazzling, scent
of oniongrass and violets, the shape below me,
warm and smooth, the body nestled
inside the intimate water.
You could be so free, it whispered,
you could be so good.
I could not speak—and yet
I said *Not this way.* I said
Not this time. What did I mean?
I could barely think of apples and children,
another life, and then the voice . . . *All right.*
All right. You won't go far.
Do I remember
after that? Mud, the hard sticks,
light splayed along the surface. Damp clothes
and my hands among them. Then traffic
and trees and this step, that step, thin
rusty slats of the stairs leading down.

So it's all about God, is it, or else not,
or else it's me and the stream I yearn toward
day and night, hour and year,
the stream I can hear and almost see
as two lovely women swing past
on the other trail.
They do not see me
and I let them go. But oh,
the beautiful saunter
of those women deep in their talk.
They walk the path up the mountain
and the old, old water tumbles down,
tumbles down.[5]

I hadn't looked closely at this poem in years; I had to re-type it from the book where it later appeared. And I'd read almost no Jung when I wrote it. But it seems now so much akin to the dream-visions he recounts, and to Hostetler's poem . . . No, I didn't go in the water, in truth. But that moment of being grasped from below, that strange conversation—who is it, down there? Some demon? God? A dead pilgrim? It did not seem a gentle or welcoming presence. It was, of course, just my imagination. But Jacob's Creek was and is real, and was in full flow, loud enough to drown the nearby highway. There was a thin, rusted metal stairway along an outbuilding, and I walked it just because it seemed I should.

A small digression: one college summer a few of us went to somebody's parents' pool after our factory jobs. I drank a beer, got in the water, and started swimming underwater lengths. For some reason this was my favorite way to swim—maybe because my other strokes are all choppy and awkward. But I had done two, even three lengths of this modest backyard pool; a good push off the end would carry me halfway.

I took a bunch of deep breaths at the shallow end. This time I was going for four lengths. I was confident, but if not, I'd just surface, as I had before. I remember making the second turn and pushing off, feeling strong . . . and then my head was clunking against the side of the pool, people were

5 Jeff Gundy, *Rhapsody with Dark Matter* (Huron, OH: Bottom Dog Press, 2000), 22-3.

all around me, and my wife was shaking my arm. I'd passed out, settled to the bottom, and she'd happened to notice and yelled. Two of my friends had jumped in and pulled me out, splitting open an eyebrow in the process. That got me a trip to the ER, where they put a few stitches in, told me that I'd probably hyperventilated and blown off so much CO2 that I'd suppressed my breathing reflex, and told me not to be so stupid again.

Maybe this experience connects to the imagined non-drowning in the poem, maybe not. But what about those women at the end? I was glad to see these two people I cherished a great deal meeting and getting to talk, maybe the one real chance they'd have. Maybe I was a little jealous that they were talking without me, but mostly I was caught up in the images and narrative that were unfolding as I wrote. Yes, there's a bit of yearning in that "beautiful saunter," but there's also the recognition that their journey is not mine, that we share the world but not the path, that it's the "old, old water" that tugs at me most strongly.

We're all woven together, the women in their talk and their wandering, finding the way that they need, even while I'm on another journey, without a human companion but with the water's voice providing plenty of company. Someday it will be time, no doubt, to dive in once and for all.

There's nothing particularly "Mennonite" in my poem, though Julia is a birthright Menno, and Ginny belongs to an even stricter Anabaptist-related group. There's no history other than the implied personal histories involved, and those are shadowy. Looked at one way, I suppose this is another drama of the individual soul, the sort of thing I've regarded with suspicion much of my life. Or is it an escape from that drama, into something else, more spacious, if less clearly defined?

"If you find you no longer believe, enlarge the temple," the poet W. S. Merwin wrote long ago. I don't know if my temple has any boundaries at all, though I know how little use I make of most of it, how much remains hidden. But I find my way into the water now and then, and I still like to take a deep breath and hold it, slide under the water, and push off hard toward the deep end. It's not the ocean, but it's what I have.

But What Then Shall We Do?

If we pay close, careful attention to the things of this world, Jung suggests, "a wonderous life arises in things. What you thought was dead and inanimate betrays a secret life and silent, inexorable intent . . . Nothing happens in which you are not entangled in a secret manner . . . The stars whisper your deepest mysteries to you, and the soft valleys of the earth rescue you in a motherly womb" (*The Red Book,* 260).

Like Jung, I have tried now and then to open myself to these mysteries, within and without. As the *Dao De Jing* reminds us, the name that can be named is not the true name. Even to recognize, deeply, that the world grays off into uncertainty in every direction, and that what we can know is the merest sliver of the full nature of the world, is difficult but ultimately (I have found) freeing. But even within such ambiguities and mysteries, let us not abandon the possibility and necessity of care for the world, as well as contemplation.

Perhaps a clue is in Mennonite historian Alan Kreider's claim that *patience* is the overlooked, essential element of the early church's way of being in the world. In his careful study, Kreider suggests that it is possible to practice a patience that presses for justice with all available means, while constantly examining those means lest they destroy the end they are meant to achieve. "[T]he early Christians grew in number . . . because their habitual behavior (rooted in patience) was distinctive and intriguing."[6]

Kreider does not advocate for the weak sort of patience that merely accepts the wrongs of the world; as a good Anabaptist, he is all in for the claims of justice, peace, and mercy on us. It need hardly be said that the problem of right action is enduring and difficult. The Russian invasion of Ukraine challenged pacifists in ways perhaps unknown since Hitler, and as I write, massive protests of Israel's overwhelming assault on Gaza, in response to the horrific Hamas attack of October 7, are in the news, and (as always) the protests are drawing complaints of being "ill-timed" and "too radical." Long ago now, Martin Luther King Jr. famously warned that "freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."

6 Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 2.

"Letter from Birmingham Jail" is both a landmark call for nonviolent action and (in its continued relevance) a testament to the need for continued action and the sort of patience that does not give up on a cause merely because it has not yet succeeded.

And now I wonder whether this sketched-out version of what we might call active patience meshes, at least in part, with Jung's claims about "living the animal." Through his theories, writings, and influence, Jung disrupted and resisted his own time and place in deep, rigorous, and relentless ways. Agree with him or not, like many edge thinkers he offered conflicting advice, and like most of us, he would surely agree, he contained multitudes.

Many Anabaptists, of course, were following something like Jung's path long before he was born; for centuries, retreat from "the world" to live as "the quiet in the land" was a key strategy to avoid being persecuted for their disruptive faith. They spread thinly but steadily across Europe, North America, and to much of the rest of the world as time passed. But instead of rehearsing that story, I think of another one, fictional but strangely resonant. It comes from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man,* and his protagonist tells this one early in the novel:

> He was an odd old guy, my grandfather, and I am told I take after him. It was he who caused the trouble. On his deathbed he called my father to him and said, "Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open." They thought the old man had gone out of his mind. He had been the meekest of men. . . "Learn it to the younguns," he whispered fiercely; then he died.

This advice bewilders Ellison's invisible man, who finds blending into the racist American society he encounters impossible, and eventually retreats to a brilliantly lit underground hideaway to preserve some part of sanity and

self-respect. I might suggest that it is Ellison the author, in the act of writing his brilliant, fantastic, uncompromising novel, who truly "keeps up the good fight," trusting in the phantom powers of language and narrative to resist a culture that itself proves harshly resistant to change.[7]

As Jung says, power properly used cannot be primarily selfish, but must be somehow bound into a larger concern for humanity and love for our neighbors: "What does power avail us? We do not want to rule. We want to live, we want light and warmth, and hence we need yours. . . A sunless spirit becomes the parasite of the body. But the God feeds the spirit."[8]

Within the great mysteries, I have come to believe, the phantom powers can and must be instruments both of exploring those mysteries and of working for resistance and change in the everyday world—the sort of change that respects all life and leads toward its flourishing. If power merely serves domination and violent competition, only destruction will result.

Thinking further into these matters brings me again to the power of doubt, a theme I have explored in earlier work. Jung also takes it up: "As soon as you separate good and evil you recognize them. They are united only in growth. But you grow if you stand still in the greatest doubt, and therefore steadfastness in great doubt is a veritable flower of life. . . Doubt is the sign of the strongest and the weakest. The strong have doubt, but doubt has the weak."[9] One aspect of "strong" doubt is to acknowledge the complexities and uncertainties that remain even within our most cherished traditions. Here, too, Jung claims that "ambiguity is the way of life. . . You say: the Christian God is unequivocal, he is love. But what is more ambiguous than love? Love is the way of life, but your love is only on the way of life if you have a left and a right[10]

After all this time with Jung, I still find him both fascinating and frustrating, brilliant and opaque almost in the same moment. But I have come to love his willingness to look deeply at even the most cherished conventions, and to follow his own impulses and intuitions as far as he was able—and

7 This essay is part of a work-in-progress on "phantom powers" in which the concept is explored in much more detail.
8 Jung, *The Red Book,* 286.
9 Ibid., 301.
10 Ibid., 244.

then recognizing that they would never lead him to spurious, shallow clarity. Indeed, we often say "God is love," and I love those words, but if they really settled, much of the world would surely be a very different and better place than it is.

What do I know about living my animal? A little more than I did, I think. Right now, my personal animal believes that it is time for lunch.

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A View From Inside

Stephen A. Jones

Often I have not known where I was going until I was already there.
— Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow*

Well now, whatever have I got myself into?

This question kept churning over in my mind as I walked down a college hallway after a meeting with Grebel professor Marlene Epp in May 2002. Marlene had just invited me to serve as the managing editor of *The Conrad Grebel Review* (hereafter *CGR*)—and I'd accepted and signed a contract. It was an unexpected invitation, but not a hard decision to make. After all, I'd been copyediting the journal for quite a few years (I'd picked up that job from Wendy Stocker back in the 1990s[1]), I enjoyed my Grebel colleagues and the College environment, and I even had a background in management, so what was not to like about the new opportunity?

As things turned out, accepting that invitation was one of the best moves I ever made in a massively eclectic, non-linear career.

Yet on that initial day I couldn't stop pondering what being a managing editor would entail in practical, daily-life terms. In the process I started to see that maybe I'd had some experiences that might prove useful in the new job and even function as building blocks.

One such experience, dating from the late 1970s, generated a productive relationship with several Grebel professors and administrators. At that time, I was a community liaison officer for the Faculty of Arts at the University of Waterloo, a job that brought me into regular contact with Grebel personnel. Together with representatives of the University's three other "church colleges"[2] we collaborated in offering off-campus credit courses in public libraries and other venues across Waterloo Region and in neighboring communities.

1 Wendy and I married in 2000; we are equally yoked as editors. For decades we stitched part-time contracts together, operating in a gig-economy mode before the gig economy was even a thing.

2 St Jerome's (Roman Catholic), Renison (Anglican), and St Paul's (at that time, United).

The Conrad Grebel Review 41, no. 2 (Spring 2023): 204-216.

Particularly noteworthy among these adult-education opportunities was a medical ethics course that Conrad Brunk, a longtime Grebel professor, had proposed offering at a local hospital.[3] Witnessing that proposal become reality after months of painstaking negotiations by institutions and individuals was gratifying to everyone. It was a learning experience for all, especially for me as a novice facilitator.

Come to think of it, I further ruminated, I had at least encountered all the Grebel presidents up to that point: Winfield Fretz, Frank Epp, Rod Sawatsky, and John Toews. That took some of the edge off the what-am-I-doing-here feeling. At the same time, another experiential element started drifting into my mental scenario, one that could bear more directly on what lay ahead.

I'd had the benefit, if that's the right word, of a very diverse—and arguably *CGR*-relevant—background in literature, philosophy, biblical studies, church history, theology, and other assorted disciplines at the undergraduate and graduate level. I'd even taken courses in graphic design and publishing in the 1980s, a gesture in the direction of lifelong learning and, more to the point, new employment opportunities. Some of that diversity could jibe with the journal's priorities. Indeed, it had already come in handy when copyediting *CGR* articles that cited New Testament passages in Greek. Before that, I hadn't used this arcane knowledge for decades. What's the adage—no learning is ever ultimately lost?

Okay, all that was looking positive. However, a bigger, more unsettling question was the elephant in the room: What did I really *know* about the Mennonite world? Wasn't I fated to be an outsider, perhaps too much of one? Possibly an imposter?

I was certainly aware of, but not well versed in, the manifold deep, intricate, and nuanced interconnections and relationships celebrated by Mennonites—their close bonds formed and nurtured over years, even centuries, via shared histories, common migration and settlement patterns, denominational distinctives, and ethnic and cultural identities. *Which ones are the Swiss Mennos? Who are the Russians? What are the key differences between*

3 Our common philosophical interests later saw me acting as a tutor (aka grader of student assignments) in one of Conrad Brunk's Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS) undergraduate courses for several years. Later I served in a similar capacity for professors Lowell Ewert, Larissa Fast, Dean Peachey, and Nathan Funk.

the various Mennonite groups? And what about the Anabaptist-Mennonite scholarly network? How do I access that? … So much to learn—I'll never master it, I thought.

This gave me pause, but not for long. Like Donald Rumsfeld, at least I dimly perceived what I didn't know.[4] It wouldn't be a big imposition to commit to learning on the job—and not hesitate in asking dumb questions. I'd need lots of direction and I'd be obliged to take it.[5]

Mind you, I wasn't absolutely bereft of direct *CGR* exposure to the Mennonite ethos as it is embodied outside classroom settings. At the time of Marlene Epp's invitation, I was editing the newsletter for Habitat for Humanity Waterloo Region, an affiliate of Habitat for Humanity Canada, which had set up headquarters in Waterloo about a decade earlier. Scores of Mennonites—ordinary folks and professional tradespeople expert in neighborly cooperation and community barn-raising—played key roles up and down the national organization and its local affiliates. They volunteered with people of other faiths and creeds in building houses side-by-side with needy families, practicing what Habitat co-founder Millard Fuller memorably called "the Theology of the Hammer."

From that exposure I'd gained a profound impression of the Mennonites' compassionate, often life-transforming social ethic, so strong that I wanted to stay associated with their world. Managing *CGR* would be consistent with that desire, even if it was quite a leap from editing a newsletter to managing an academic journal![6]

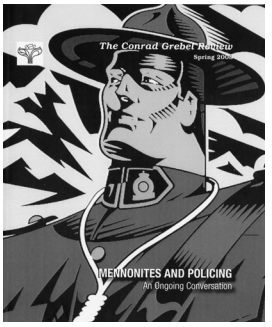
I started to grasp that all these multifaceted experiences, encounters, and exposures could very well come together in my new role. Perhaps a bit like a Mennonite quilt? In any case I'd better give it a good try, since I'd already

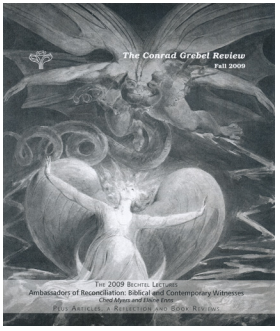
4 Donald Rumsfeld (1932-2021), a US Secretary of Defense, is the acknowledged source of this opaque utterance: "There are known knowns. These are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know."

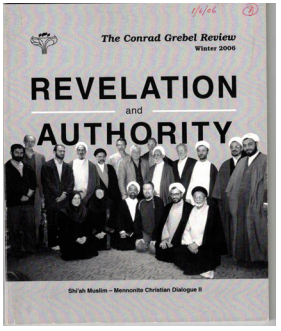
5 Heading into retirement I realized that the managing editor's tasks could be epitomized as the 5 C's: Contacting, Coordinating, Cooperating, Collaborating, and Communicating. I now offer this stunning insight to the waiting world.

6 Key animators were Mennonites. Among them were Milo Shantz, local entrepreneur and father of Grebel's current president, and pastor Wilmer Martin, who was named the Canadian office president. For several years Habitat's national and local offices shared space in the same building.

committed myself. There was no operations manual to rely on, so I'd be creating one as I went and improvising along the way, which suited my style. Soon I settled into a part-time three-mornings-a-week schedule. Over the years I worked out of several office spaces at Grebel, even a corner of the library during a major construction project.[7]







***CGR* covers took a graphic turn for several years, as did special issues in subsequent years.**

II

If thinking is bound up with action, then the task of getting an adequate grasp on the world, intellectually, depends on our doing stuff in it.
—Matthew Crawford, *Shopcraft as Soul Craft*

Since a highly detailed how-the-sausage-is-made account of *CGR*'s day-by-day internal operations is a pretty sure bet not to retain the reader's interest, in what follows I'll only touch on a few highlights of my association with the journal. A "lite" inside look, in short.

Much of my work fell under two overarching principles, "due diligence" and "quality control," which are universal across managing roles. Anyone

7 Former Grebel Director of Operations E. Paul Penner observed that I'd been shifted around more than any other employee. This was no problem; in fact, it gained me new co-workers and comrades.

who has dabbled in managing an enterprise knows that it entails myriad tasks, large and small, vital to the sausage-making in the actual moment but too tedious to relate after the fact to even the most sympathetic listener. Accordingly, this section is subjective, impressionistic, a bit reflective, and not at all definitive.

For context, we'd be wise to note the Editorial Council's aspirations for *CGR* as set forth by Founding Editor Walter Klaassen in the inaugural issue in 1983[8]:

> *With this issue we introduce to the academic and professional communities a new journal of reflection on a broad range of contemporary issues from the vantage point of the Christian, and in particular, of the Anabaptist-Mennonite traditions.*
>
> *Everything that concerns human beings is the concern of Christians. No issue will, therefore, on principle be excluded from consideration in the Review, but the means and ends of it will be subject to the searchlight of Christian faith.*
>
> […]
>
> *Our range is wide: the ethical and moral issues in farming, medical practice and research, teaching, politics, the fine arts, peacemaking, commercial and industrial management, institutions and their function, theology and philosophy and their role.*
>
> *We also hope that as we carry out our mandate with care, this journal will be of interest beyond the Mennonite community both to readers and potential contributors*.[9]

8 Regrettably, Walter Klaassen passed away in November 2024 as this article was in preparation.

9 The mandate's most recent formulation identifies CGR as "a multi-disciplinary peer-reviewed journal of Christian inquiry" devoted to "advancing thoughtful, sustained discussions of theology, peace, society, and culture from broadly-based Anabaptist/Mennonite perspectives."

Klaassen ended with an additional hope—that *CGR* would prove "lively and responsible, intelligent and readable" and over time "develop its own personality." Readers are invited to judge whether that early hope has been met during the journal's forty-year run. Personally, I'm glad to have had a share in getting the journal into the hands and minds of constituencies within the Mennonite community and beyond.

CGR Founding Editor Walter Klaassen teaching at Grebel in the 1960s.

Sometimes Daunting: *CGR* Publication Schedule

The journal always aspired to publish three issues per calendar year, both regular or "omnibus" issues and occasional "theme" issues. The idea of theme issues started as a response to a disturbing shortfall in acceptable submissions for regular issues and the consequent failure of *CGR* to come out on

time. "As a way of compensating for this lack, I began to publish thematic issues, inviting authors to contribute on designated topics," explains Arnold Snyder (Editor, 1992-1997, 2003-2007).

From the production perspective, that was a good move. Theme issues both relieved anxieties—the "Horrors! We've got nothing in the pantry" problem—and offered an appealing way to pursue topics in depth, bring more scholars into *CGR* fold, and add a certain luster to the journal's identity. Theme issues from roughly 2010 to 2020 were assembled by *CGR* editors and focused on such concerns as Teaching the Bible, Revisiting Mennonite Peace Theology, and Teaching History.

More recently, ideas for theme issues were often generated by scholars who offered to serve as guest editors. They would do the heavy lifting—corralling authors, setting guidelines, vetting submissions—and collaborate with *CGR* editors. This synergy not only spread the workload, it added breadth and freshness to the journal and burnished its reputation as a forum for leading-edge voices. Guest-edited issues included Paul G. Doerksen, Anabaptists and Disability Theology (Spring 2020); Joseph R. Wiebe, Encounters with Jedediah Purdy (Fall 2020, Winter 2021); and Paul C. Heidebrecht, Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives on Technology (Spring 2021).

The journal's ideal publication schedule proved elusive at times, but on balance it was more often met than not. However, it suffered a hit during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-22), a situation that no editor wants to see again. Nevertheless, *CGR* did trickle out as the pandemic abated and regular routines were reinstated.

For most of its existence, *CGR* appeared solely in print form. But in the 2010s, recognizing how radically transformed the publishing and scholarly worlds now were, the journal became available online via the ATLA (American Theological Library Association) database. This initiative, considerably extending *CGR*'s reach and usefulness, was spearheaded by Jeremy Bergen (Editor, 2008-2017).

What We Published: *CGR* Overview

Articles and Book Reviews

Scholarly articles commanded the largest share of my attention. Working jointly with the editor, I strove to ensure that these pieces, clocking in at about 7,000 words of text and notes, retained the author's voice, communicated effectively with "educated non-specialist readers" as our mandate required, and satisfied publishing industry standards. All of this was to honor Walter Klaassen's initial declaration of *CGR*'s aims and aspirations.

Mechanics of the process included sending anonymized submissions to two or more qualified peer reviewers, asking them to assess subject matter, suitability, advancement of conversation in the discipline, and compliance with accepted principles of argumentation. I sent reviewed papers back to the respective authors for approval before publication. Working collegially with all contributors and partners was the watchword. In my tenure, *CGR* published approximately 300 articles.

Book Reviews and Book Review Essays

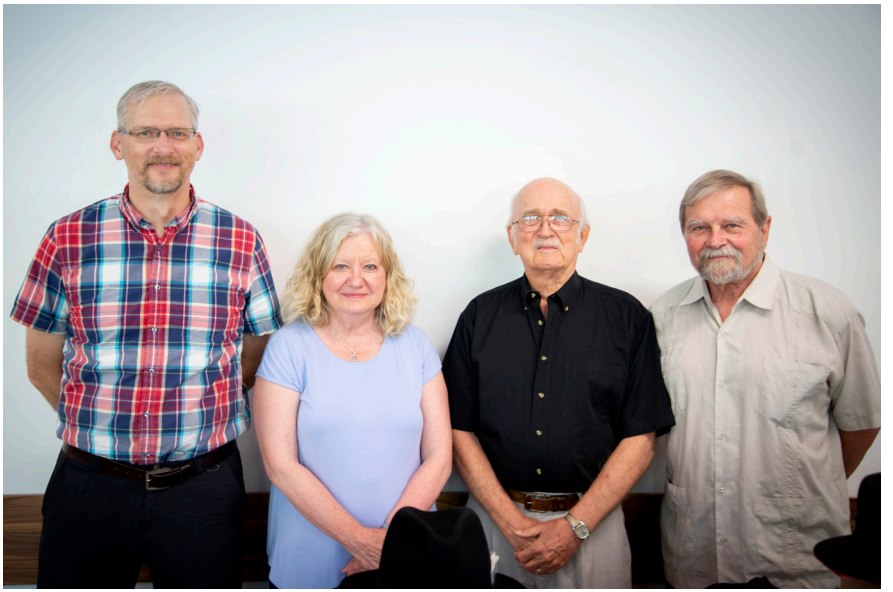
Book reviews summarized and briefly commented on a wide array of titles in numerous fields. A variant of the basic model, "Book Review Essays," was initiated a few years ago by then Book Review Editor, Kyle Gingerich Hiebert. These essays gave writers scope to engage at greater length with a significant recent book or multiple thematically linked books. Book reviews published during my time with the journal totaled approximately 420.

Reflections

"Reflections" was *CGR*'s category for thoughtful, even provocative, pieces that drew on scholars' and practitioners' personal experience, but were not research articles and were couched in somewhat less formal language. Representative examples include Isaac Villegas, "The Anabaptist Prison" (Winter 2010); Waldemar Janzen, "The Classroom as Home" (Winter 2018); and Karen Sunabacka, "Composing Louis Riel's Dream" (Fall 2021).

Literary Refractions

This category, unique to *CGR* among its journal peers, I believe, offered a space for authors to present work that fit with *CGR*'s mandate but was manifestly more "literary" in subject matter and method than either "Articles" or "Reflections." For many years, submissions in this category had been adroitly handled by Grebel professor Hildi Froese Tiessen, celebrated for her leadership in Mennonite/s Writing Conferences.[10] Among the Refractions published later, during my time as Managing Editor, were Julia Spicher-Kasdorf, "God is Closer to Poetry than Religion" (Winter 2011) and Sofia Samatar, "On Dwelling: Shelters in Place and Time (Fall 2021).



CGR Editors Derek Suderman and Marlene Epp, Managing Editor Stephen Jones, CGR Editor Arnold Snyder in June 2022.

10 For the full story on the birth and background of the Refractions category, see Hildi Froese Tiessen's "A Retrospective Look at *CGR's* 'Literary Refractions'" in this issue.

How We Did it: *CGR* Production Team

From the outset, *CGR* was truly a team effort. In my tenure, the production team comprised both internal and external members. The internal group consisted of the editor, managing editor, book review editor, and circulation manager. These positions were part-time. We worked collegially and harmoniously—not always easy in the publishing business—to publish a quality product. In the 2010s we began meeting regularly at Grebel face-to-face for optimum reporting and mutual encouragement, but this became difficult when COVID-19 hit. Nevertheless, we stayed the course as a team, and Editor Derek Suderman and I developed a new routine: conducting much of *CGR*'s business by regular phone calls—even house calls.

Supporting us behind the scenes stood *CGR*'s consulting editors (12 academics from Canada and around the world offering advice and counsel) and *CGR*'s Editorial Council—five academics (three Grebel professors, two from other institutions). More in the foreground from my standpoint were Grebel staff who helped us get things done. In early days, that included Carol Lichti and Ruth Steinman, and later Mandy Macfie, Birgit Moscinski, and Jen Konkle. External members of the team comprised not only authors whose work graced *CGR*'s pages but scores of diligent peer reviewers, plus the agency that ensured the rubber would actually hit the road, namely Pandora Press in Kitchener. The design, production, and problem-solving skills of Pandora staff—Christian Snyder, Chris Yellow, and earlier, Karl Griffiths-Fulton—were crucial to the journal's very existence, its "appearance" (timely arrival and physical look), and its impact.

Finalizing edited manuscripts for the press demanded close scrutiny and corrections of successive page proofs. I stress that this means *literal* page proofs, not on-screen proofs, which could produce surprising anomalies and annoying gremlins. Theme issues and issues featuring public lectures (see below) received special attention. Again, readers can determine if we hit the mark.

My prior experience in getting credible products out into the world plus an ingrained bias toward technical prowess—I'd grown up in a manufacturing business—made me perfectly comfortable with our Pandora partners. We enjoyed the camaraderie arising from a shared commitment to the job at

hand. And we liked to have fun: publishing an academic journal is a serious and professional business, but nothing says it has to be solemn. Accordingly, after publishing an issue, we'd always heartily celebrate our joint achievement.

To round out this sketch, I'll comment on an especially engaging challenge and say a word about my editing toolbox.

Public Lectures in *CGR*

A great pleasure of serving as the managing editor was the opportunity to work closely with speakers who presented in one of Grebel's annual lecture series (the Bechtel, Eby, or Sawatsky lectures). They were alerted to the prospect of possible but not obligatory publication in the journal when invited to deliver the lecture. *CGR* would be the medium for reaching an audience far beyond the College walls.To follow up, I made it a habit to attend the live lectures, indicate *CGR*'s tentative interest—no firm commitments at that stage—and then report my impressions to the editor. We'd typically conclude that a lecture showed real potential. I'd then contact the speaker to restate our interest in more definite terms and outline how we might convert the lecture into a viable article. The choice was totally the speaker's.

If we were going ahead, I'd obtain the lecture script and, as directed by the editor, I'd ask two or more "Qualified Readers" to peruse it and to offer, in a collegial spirit, their observations and recommendations. I'd route their comments to the lecturer for any adjustments deemed appropriate.

That's when it could get really interesting, and most engaging for me. As a longtime newsletter editor, I was always keen to combine words and images for maximum impact. So, if a lecture employed slides, photographs, or other illustrative materials—as most of them did—the speaker and I would winnow them down to those likely to communicate effectively on the printed page. This made for an energizing, creative collaboration, even more rewarding than theme issues, which were stimulating in their own right. Each lecture situation was unique, given the diverse array of subjects and academic disciplines, as well as the speakers' styles and idiosyncrasies and how they organized their material. On balance, I believe our process was successful, but readers can judge this too for themselves. Bechtel Lecturers whose talks

appeared inincluded Alfred Neufeld, Ched Myers and Elaine Enns, Roger Epp, and Christopher D. Marshall. Among the Eby Lecturers were Lowell Ewert, A. James Reimer, Leonard Enns, and Susan Schultz Huxman.

Transition in 2017: Outgoing CGR Editor Jermy Bergen (left) and incoming Editor Derek Suderman.

Copyediting: *CGR* Toolbox

While managing editor, I continued as copy editor. It was always good, sometimes a relief, to toggle back and forth between the two roles. I tried to ensure that the text of each issue—the words on the page, the grammar and style that (ideally) held things together—upheld the journal's standards, respected authors and audiences, and avoided stuffiness. As Walter Klaassen had stipulated, *CGR* had to be "lively, responsible, intelligent and readable." To shape the journal's disparate components—articles, book reviews, reflections, refractions—into a viable issue required varying amounts of editing time and different levels of input and intervention. But that was never a problem, just part of daily life—a challenge that just as often was a pleasure.

The pleasure arose from teasing out an article's underlying but perhaps inchoate thought structure, clarifying an argument, finding the most apt lan-

guage—and much else, all in service to making both the author and *CGR* look good. My editing toolbox of course included *The Chicago Manual of Style*, the publishing industry's sacred text. Alongside that massive tome which, surprisingly, doesn't cover everything, the toolbox offered for guidance and inspiration E.B. White (*The Elements of Style)*, H. W. Fowler (*Modern English Usage)*, William Zinsser (*On Writing Well)*, Iris Murdoch, and Wendell Berry, plus *The New York Review of Books* and leading *New York Times* columnists. Good company, all.

Ave Atque Vale

I hope this sketch has provided a sense of *CGR*'s inner workings from this Managing Editor's standpoint. Together, all of us on the journal's production team strove to produce a worthy publication. What the future holds for academic journals generally I can't say, but I can affirm that "whatever I got myself into" in 2002 turned out to be a thoroughly enjoyable twenty-year run.

Stephen A. Jones, Managing Editor (2002–2022), *The Conrad Grebel Review*.

A Retrospective Look at *CGR*'s "Literary Refractions"

Hildi Froese Tiessen

In his editorial for the Fall 1996 volume of *The Conrad Grebel Review*, Arnold Snyder remarked that the journal was adding "a noteworthy new feature" dedicated to "creative non-fiction": a space for poets and writers of fiction to open fresh perspectives and so expand "the interdisciplinary mandate with which the journal began." Arnold and I had decided to name the new feature "Literary Refractions." In my own introduction to this feature, I noted that stories of Mennonite experience "have in large measure been provided by historians and theologians who have functioned as the self-appointed guardians of the Mennonite master-narrative"; I went on to observe that the creative pieces we were planning to publish in this series, insofar as they "have the power to objectify, refine, recreate, and redefine identity," would "contribute to the negotiation of meaning and the modification and construction of tradition in the Mennonite world." I added that the site we had chosen to call "Literary Refractions" was "intended to evoke and embody" the sort of "creative intersection" Stuart Hall referred to when he declared that identity "is formed at the unstable point where the 'unspeakable' stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture."[1]

Possibly most noteworthy about the advent of the "Literary Refractions" feature in the *CGR* was the fact that it was driven by our recognition of the emerging state of a new literary phenomenon that would come to embrace the signature "brand": "Mennonite/s Writing." Much has been written over the past several decades about the flourishing of Mennonite writers in North America, especially, initially, the ascendance of a number of mostly youngish authors (the generation after Rudy Wiebe) who began publishing work for regional and national audiences during the 1980s. These writers—among them Patrick Friesen, Di Brandt, Sandra Birdsell, Victor Enns, Sarah Klassen, and David Waltner-Toews—were published early in their careers by one of Canada's premier literary publishers: Winnipeg's Turnstone Press. These early Mennonite writers were Canadian. Later identified by Andris Taskans, the editor of Manitoba's influential literary magazine *Prairie Fire*, as comprising a "Mennonite miracle," they established a tradition that would soon subsume, also, American writers who, unlike these mostly Manitobans,

1 Stuart Hall, "Minimal Selves," in *The Real Me: Post-modernism and the Question of Identity*, ed. Lisa Appignanesi (London: The Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1987), 44.

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were dispersed throughout diverse regions of their country: Julia Kasdorf in Pennsylvania, Jeff Gundy and Dallas Wiebe in Ohio, Jean Janzen in California, and Raylene Hinz-Penner in Kansas, for example.

In 1990, what was then known as Conrad Grebel College (where I had been teaching a course in Mennonite literature and art since the late 1980s) was the site of the first of nine (soon ten) international conferences on Mennonite/s Writing. At the College, I hosted many readings every year by Mennonite writers from across North America. I had edited the first collection of modern Mennonite short stories (*Liars & Rascals*, University of Waterloo Press) in 1989 and, the following year, I edited special "new Mennonite writing" issues of *The New Quarterly* (Spring/Summer 1990) and *Prairie Fire* (Summer 1990). In 1992, I edited *Acts of Concealment: Mennonite/s Writing in Canada* with co-editor Peter Hinchcliffe (University of Waterloo Press). These exercises in locating new Mennonite writers, soliciting new writing, and editing texts, augmented by my own writing in literary history and literary criticism, prepared me to take on the new literary task of curating the "Literary Refractions" for the *Review*.

The "Literary Refractions" featured between 1996 and 2003 were all invited. They were wide-ranging in genre (including fiction and poetry, letters and personal essays) and were intended to introduce the *Review*'s readers to fresh perspectives and innovative ways to express the experiences of Mennonites in North America in the late twentieth century. I wrote introductions for each piece, to offer some context and to inform readers generally about how various people and texts were poised to contribute to the expanding literary landscape to which Mennonite writers were giving shape. Many of the works I solicited were published in subsequent volumes of the writers' work. Together, they made up a collection of literary gems many readers a short step away from the heart of Mennonite literary activity might not otherwise encounter. I hesitate to name any of them, since I loved them all. Nevertheless, I would cite as most memorable for me a work as preciously humorous as Rosemary Deckert Nixon's short story "Mennonite Your Way" (Winter/Spring 1997). Or as provocative as Dallas Wiebe's personal essay, offered in his inimitably serious, probing, and mocking tone: "Can a Mennonite Be an Atheist?" (Fall 1998). Among classic texts now widely read is Rudy Wiebe's "Living on the Iceberg: 'The Artist as Critic and Witness' 36 Years Later" (Spring 2000). Among pieces still vitally rewarding for any reader are the evocative works of fiction by Sarah Klassen and Andreas Schroeder, and the accessible and inspiring work by poets Raylene Hinz Penner, Jeff Gundy, Julia Kasdorf, David Waltner-Toews, and Di Brandt.

I can't recall exactly why this project within the *Review* came to an end. I think I was simply giving priority, then, to other facets of the larger Mennonite/s writing adventure, including writing papers on the development of the field and using some of the tools offered by post-colonialism and postmodernism, for example, as prisms through which to observe and comment upon what we then called "the state of the art," especially as Mennonite writers settled into more broadly-based literary worlds. I had begun to conduct interviews with Mennonite writers in 1992. Around the turn of the century, I published two of these: "'Where I Come From': An Interview with David Bergen," *Prairie Fire* (Winter 1997), and "'A Place You Can't Go Home To': A Conversation with Miriam Toews," *Prairie Fire* (Autumn 2000). In 2003 I responded to an invitation to write the "Program Notes" for Anne Chislette's *Quiet in the Land* at the Stratford Festival, Stratford, ON. I co-chaired Mennonite/s Writing conferences with Ervin Beck at Goshen College in 2002 and with Jeff Gundy at Bluffton College in 2006 while bringing to light, alongside co-editor Paul Tiessen, the work of a little-known Swiss Mennonite writer, Ephraim Weber, whose letters and unpublished novel "Aunt Rachel's Nieces" are held in the National Archives of Canada. (*Ephraim Weber's Letters Home 1902-1955: Letters from Ephraim Weber to Leslie Staebler of Waterloo County*. (MLR Editions Canada, 1996) and *After Green Gables: LM Montgomery's Letters to Ephraim Weber, 1916-1941* (University of Toronto Press, 2006)). In 2002 I curated/edited a chapbook, *Rudy Wiebe: a tribute* (Sand Hills Books and Pinchpenny Press) and, two years later, guest edited *The Conrad Grebel Review*'s special issue "Rudy Wiebe and the Mennonites – forty years on" (Spring 2004).

By the time the *CGR*'s regular feature called "Literary Refractions" that Arnold Snyder and I had envisioned came to a close, many other venues had become available for foregrounding and assessing the innovative literary work of Mennonite writers— most recently, my own *On Mennonite/s Writing: Selected Essays* (CMU press, 2023). It's gratifying that the *CGR*, based at Grebel, which by the late 1980s was becoming an acknowledged centre of Mennonite literary activity, should have played so rich a role in the emergence of this ever-burgeoning field.

Hildi Froese Tiessen, Professor Emerita of English and Peace and Conflict Studies, Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo, Ontario.

Reflections on the End of *The Conrad Grebel Review*

Jeremy M. Bergen

I first became aware of the *Conrad Grebel Review* from the periodical display in the reading room of the Canadian Mennonite Bible College (CMBC) library. I began my undergraduate studies there in 1993. My plan was to study theology for a few years, and then pursue a law degree. But I was quickly drawn in by my theology courses and wondered if I should keep studying theology and see where that might lead. In that small basement reading room, the periodical display was a colorful beacon of distraction and curiosity. I would pick up physical copies of a latest journal issue and explore what was going in the fields of theology, history, biblical studies, philosophy, and literature. It was a new world.

While I cannot recall which articles I may have perused, I did perceive that in its pages, *CGR* was a forum for vigorous debate, especially about the nature of Mennonite theology and identity. In my classes I had been alerted to the fact that Mennonite theologians had strong disagreements, for example, about the significance of the creeds, the spiritual poverty or other shortcomings of the Anabaptist Vision, and whether there ought to be a distinctive Mennonite atonement theology. I was aware of passionate debates among thinkers like J. Denny Weaver and A. James Reimer, and of emerging feminist critiques, debates that were relevant to not only my developing interest in academic theology but also the very nature of the Christian life. While I did not cite any articles from *CGR* in term papers (I checked the few I still have in an old file), it was part of a wider ecosystem I was eager to explore, and eventually to participate in.

In 1999, I made the decision to move to Toronto to pursue graduate studies in theology. At the ecumenical Toronto School of Theology, I was nearly always the only Mennonite in my courses. This pushed me to understand my own tradition in a deeper way, though the experience of being asked for "the Mennonite" view on the topic of the day could often work against a niggling desire to affirm a deep and diverse range of authentically Mennonite approaches to a topic. I began to notice my own habit of deferring to just a few

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voices, that of John Howard Yoder most notably, in order to get my bearings in these conversations.

In the context of developing my theological voice in an ecumenical context, the *CGR* became relevant in a new way. It was also relevant as I took my first steps in scholarly publication. First, book review editor Arthur Boers invited me to review the over 700-page *Hauerwas Reader*.[1] Then, after helping to organize the very first Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre graduate student conference in 2002, I worked with fellow student Phil Enns to approach *CGR* about publishing some papers from that conference. We worked out a process for peer review, and one of the results was that I not only served as a bit of a guest editor, but I had my first scholarly publication: "The *Sensus Fidei* and Mennonite Theology."[2] In retrospect, I see that I was staking a claim for a Mennonite theology that was not only fully engaged with the wider Christian tradition, but actually needed that wider tradition in order to fulfill its own purpose.

I was hired by Conrad Grebel University College as a full-time faculty member in 2008, and a year later was asked to become the *CGR* editor, a position I held until 2017. These were years of some significant change for the journal, but the one constant was the steady hand of managing editor Stephen Jones, a truly excellent colleague in the world of publishing. Most of my work as editor consisted of the weekly routine of reading submissions, identifying reviewers, making decisions about manuscripts, and providing authors with detailed feedback. However, a number of the initiatives I pursued during my term as editor reveal some of the challenges in journal publishing and some of the challenges for *CGR* in particular.

In my view, a key indicator of the health, reputation, and viability of a journal is whether scholars are clamoring to publish in its pages. And while *CGR* did receive unsolicited manuscripts, there were not enough of them. The practice of having theme issues, especially if contributors are invited, can create the perception that a journal does not accept unsolicited submissions. I learned that some scholars did indeed this have this perception. Others viewed it as a somewhat "in-house" publication, perhaps because various public lectures delivered at Grebel were routinely included.

1 *The Conrad Grebel Review* 20, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 107-108.
2 *The Conrad Grebel Review* 21, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 50-58.

My first initiative was to develop a culture of engaged consulting editors. I had inherited a list of consulting editors, all of whom were men and nearly all of whom were retired. Some had been consulting editors since the journal was founded. I thanked them for their service and instituted a practice of inviting consulting editors who were active scholars and would serve a definite term of six years. I asked them to be advocates for the journal and to promote it to colleagues and graduate students as a venue for publication. In addition to occasional review of manuscripts, these editors would also be invited to provide advice on the direction of the journal.

When I began, *CGR* was effectively subsidized by Grebel's operations. Hard copy subscriptions were declining at a steady rate every year. I would sometimes receive the suggestion from others at Grebel that if we "went online" the problem would be solved, but the reality was that that would have made little financial difference. Our modest subscription rates essentially covered the cost of printing and mailing. The net cost was for staff time, especially for the managing editor, thus the cost for producing content was fairly fixed regardless of the mode of delivery to the reader.

However, we did pursue strategies to increase readership and engagement. We negotiated an agreement with ATLA (American Theological Library Association) for the inclusion of all *CGR* issues in their full-text database (with a one-year embargo), an agreement that generated some annual royalties. We also licensed our content with a humanities database, a decision made from the principle that *CGR* was not only a religion journal, though this meant our agreement with ATLA was not exclusive and therefore less financially lucrative. We also began publishing directly on our own website and invested considerable energy in digitizing several years of back issues.

I encountered wildly different perceptions about readership, and the all-important scholarly impact of articles in *CGR*. Some colleagues had the perception that basically no one reads the articles. Some looked at declining hard copy sales as an indicator of declining readership. Yet, annual PDF downloads from ATLA by 2017 were over 10,000 per year. Our own website was receiving about 15,000 unique page views per year.

At the very least, journal reading had changed significantly from an earlier era of strong hard-copy subscriptions, including some pastors and churches. In that era, one assumed that there was a defined and committed

readership, scanning every table of contents and reading some articles, just as I had done in the CMBC reading room. In such a context, an issue was a coherent artefact, with an engaging image on the cover. Increasingly, individual articles were read by those who would find them through an online search, perhaps unaware of the history or context of the journal in which they appeared.

One strategy for financial sustainability was to pursue funding from the Aid to Scholarly Journals program of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The decision to publish open access was driven in part by their eligibility requirements, as was a restructuring of our editorial board and oversight process. However, despite significant work over many years to meet their various criteria, soon after we did so, the program was suspended.

A persistent tension for the *CGR* has been between its founding vision as a multidisciplinary journal and the reality that it has been typically perceived as a theological journal. In his analysis of the first decade of *CGR*, Paul Tiessen characterized it as interested in "the religion and social practice, the art and the thought" of Mennonites.[3] He acknowledged the challenge of multidisciplinarity but also the benefit in terms of serving a minority community. For much of the life of the journal, until her retirement from Grebel in 2012, the broader vision of cultural reflection was epitomized by the "Literary Refractions" section curated and edited by Hildi Froese Tiessen, featuring the work of poets, playwrights, and literary critics. *CGR* also included works in musicology, sociology, and political science, including those by Grebel faculty delivered in the annual Eby Lecture.

As the editor, I experienced the tension between a multidisciplinary aspiration and a theological reality as primarily a pragmatic one. How will we find first-rate articles? Do we constantly solicit in order to publish works in a range of disciplines (and recognize that someone in Music may hesitate to publish original work in *CGR* because their colleagues in the discipline will not read it there), or do we follow the lead of those who submit their work unsolicited, which was primarily in theology and ethics? I inclined toward

3 Paul Tiessen, "Two Scholarly Journals and one Ethnic/Religious Minority in Canada," *ACS [Association for Canadian Studies] Newsletter*, Spring 1993, 20. The other Canadian journal Tiessen discusses is the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*.

the latter in the belief that going where the energy was would be most sustainable. It was reasonable to assume that scholars submitted manuscripts because they believed *CGR* was a place that the readers they wanted to reach would find it, and cite it, thus strengthening a virtuous cycle.

But this shift in direction, and in my experience it was a subtle shift and not a hard turn, only highlighted the questions about *CGR*'s purpose and constituency. Is *CGR about* Mennonites, *by* Mennonites, or *for* Mennonites? The issue of disciplinary scope or focus maps on to these questions in complex ways. Yet, as *CGR* articles were increasingly accessed because of specific search terms, and less so because readers had any ongoing connection with the journal, this would surely change not only reception but also who would seek to write for the *CGR*. Does following the lead of those who submit articles unsolicited, primarily in theology, change the readership, especially as such articles engage with wider theological discourses? To take myself for example, even though I am both a Mennonite and a theologian, I do not write only for Mennonites (and thus seek to publish in a range of scholarly venues), and even when I do write about more explicitly-Mennonite topics, I hope to reach a broader audience because I hope that what I write is persuasive and useful as *Christian* theology.

In his analysis, Paul Tiessen characterized the early *CGR* as exhibiting "moral urgency and social commitment," and fostering vigorous debate "not necessarily dominated by theologians," in some contrast with a detached approach that might examine historical or sociological developments without any sense of what they mean for actual communities.[4] In my experience, this sense of purpose has indeed characterized *CGR* throughout its lifespan, as I'll reflect on further below in relation to peace theology and to teaching, though perhaps more dominated by theologians as time went on. To take just one example, early in my tenure I received a letter from the Board of Faith and Life of the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches requesting that we not publish an article that would be publicly critical of their official position on "homosexuality and same-sex marriage." We did

4 Tiessen, "Two Scholarly Journals," 22.

publish it,[5] not only because it passed our peer-review process and we were not restricted by confessional statements, but because of *CGR*'s established culture of publishing provocative work on pressing social questions.

I offer a few further reflections on the content published during my tenure as editor. Given that in several institutions (including at Grebel) Peace and Conflict Studies and Theological Studies are quite separate academic departments, such siloing can be challenged through publication. I note issues devoted to the Responsibility to Protect (28, no. 3 [Fall 2010]), Mennonite Central Committee (29, no. 1 [Winter 2011]), John Howard Yoder's *Nonviolence: A Brief History* (29, no. 3 [Fall 2011]), Revisiting Mennonite Peace Theology (34, no. 1 [Winter 2016]) and Global Mennonite Peacebuilding (35, no. 3 [Fall 2017]). I note a significant number of articles devoted to peace and the character of God and also to ecotheology. I think that Malinda Elizabeth Berry's "Shalom Political Theology: A New Type of Mennonite Peace Theology for a New Era of Discipleship"[6] is one of many instances where *CGR* facilitated important constructive contributions to scholarship.

I regret that we were primarily followers, and not leaders, in the public reckoning with John Howard Yoder's legacy of sexually abusive behavior that began in 2015. The late 2000s and early 2010s were "peak Yoder" with several conferences, the appearance of several posthumous works by him, and many articles and books engaging with his theology including special issues of *CGR*. We were fully invested in this. Though I was aware of what, at the time, I might have described as his sexual misconduct (and have since learned more about the scale and extent[7]), my primary personal concern at the time was with his hegemonic status within the Mennonite theological academy. His work was becoming nearly synonymous with Mennonite the-

5 David Eagle, "Pneumatological Ecclesiology and Same-sex Marriage: A Non-essentialist Approach using the Work of Eugene Rogers and John Zizioulas," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 28, no.1 (Winter 2010): 43-68.

6 *Conrad Grebel Review* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 49-73. This essay has been included as a new type in the republication of John Richard Burkholder and Barbara Nelson Gingerich, eds., *Mennonite Peace Theology: A Panaroma of Types,* 2nd ed. (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2024).

7 See especially Rachel Waltner Goossen, "'Defanging the Beast,' Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder's Sexual Abuse," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89, no. 1 (January 2015): 7-80.

ology, a dynamic that I now recognize kept theologians invested in his theology and provided some resistance to the long-overdue reckoning. Beginning around 2016, we instituted the practice of requiring authors to acknowledge and engage with the fact of his behavior, at the very least with a footnote acknowledging the harms caused by his sexual abuse.

As I reflect on themes around which I tried to spark conversation, I am especially pleased with the series of special issues we did on pedagogy: Teaching the Bible (28, no. 2 [Spring 2010]), Teaching History (30, no. 3 [Fall 2012), Teaching Peace Studies (32, no. 2 [Spring 2014), and Teaching Ethics (35, no. 1 [Winter 2017]). This was an effort to intentionally engage with a range of disciplines but also to offer readers something different. With a mix of those teaching at Mennonite institutions and non-Mennonite ones (public and private), the result was sustained reflection on the complex and often reciprocal relationship between the practice of teaching and the development of knowledge in particular areas. While I have no need for there to be a distinctive "Mennonite" approach to teaching as a practice or to any particular discipline, these articles do highlight some common and some particular challenges that face postsecondary teachers.

What is the future for the kinds of conversations that *CGR* has hosted in the past, and will its legacy and ethos live on in other forms? While specific publishing initiatives are being explored, I know that the landscape continues to change in many ways. I recently wrote a reflection on the closing of the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre,[8] and it seems like the end of *CGR* is yet another sign that many of the institutions important and familiar to me have run their course. Whatever *CGR*'s legacy is, whether multidisciplinary engagement with Mennonite culture, or theological engagement with the wider Christian tradition from a Mennonite perspective, or something else, the nature of that legacy will need to contend with increasing academic employment precarity, disciplinary fragmentation, social media, and changes in Mennonite institutional culture. It will need to reckon with various histories of harm and newer voices calling for radical change. While I am not sure I have the publishing solution (and suspect there is no single solution), I do

8 Jeremy M. Bergen, "Reflections on the End of the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre," *Canadian Mennonite*, 19 December 2023, https://canadianmennonite.org/stories/reflections-end-toronto-mennonite-theological-centre.

believe that insightful, rigorous, passionate, engaged, and eloquent people will find ways to extend some of the conversations which, for a while, were reflected in the pages of *CGR*.

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Book Reviews

Sarah Kathleen Johnson and Andrew Wymer, eds. *Worship and Power: Liturgical Authority in Free Church Traditions.* Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2023.

"Liturgy is power-laden, and this is manifested in distinct ways in Free Church traditions that invite ecumenical dialogue" (1). Thus begins *Worship and Power: Liturgical Authority in Free Church Traditions,* a robust and skillfully curated volume which invites careful consideration of the ways power is embedded in liturgical rituals and experiences of worship. This opening statement captures a somewhat contested reality: that Free Church communities—which prioritize decentralized power and individual agency—are not absolved from the responsibility of examining the power that inevitably shapes worship gatherings.

In the context of broader ecumenical assemblies, such as the North American Academy of Liturgy from which this volume partially emerges, Free Church approaches to worship leadership are unique in their approach to liturgical authority. The reflections of this volume are most striking when taken in this broader view: whereas many denominations—Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, and many more—receive rigorous liturgical guidance from a centralized source, Free Church congregations (including Mennonites) have significant freedom when it comes to worship. By resisting top-down power structures and prioritizing committee work and census decision making, it may seem that interrogations of power imbalances are somewhat unnecessary. In this frame, one of the most significant contributions of this collection is the tools it provides to examine power in what appear to be less hierarchical structures. Whether interrogating the evolution of leadership structures over time, differences between spiritual and liturgical authority, the often-concealed processes of decision making, or the more visible dynamics of gender, class, race, and culture, this collection lifts the veil that has often hidden power dynamics in Free Church contexts.

The book is organized in three sections, with contributions written by scholars from Canada to Australia to Korea and exploring traditions from Southern Baptist to Pentecostal to Disciples of Christ. Part

one, "Contesting Power in Society," considers Free Church separation from state in the context of socially engaged worship practices. Part two, "Negotiating Power in Ecclesial Institutions," examines the role of institutional policies and guidelines for worship communities that have autonomy in decision making. Part three, "Claiming Power through Practices," explores how both established and informal rituals can become sites to challenge established authorities, particularly for marginalized people.

Two of the essays in this book are particularly relevant to readers of this journal as they address Mennonite worship. The essay by Isaac Villegas, "The Power to Re-Member Community: Vigils in the Borderlands," offers a powerful description of a weekly ritual of remembrance of individuals who died in the desert on the border of Mexico, the result of US immigration policies and border enforcement. Through the individual naming of each person who has died, and the spoken response of "¡Presente!" by those who are gathered, the assembly ties their identity to the identity of those who the government has violently erased. Villegas recounts his own participation in the Healing Our Borders Vigil in 2018, and draws upon conversations with Jack and Linda Knox, two Mennonite retirees who coordinate the service. While connections to power in this essay are less overt, Villegas effectively offers a reinterpretation of the ritual as an extension of Mennonite rituals of remembrance found in the *Martyr's Mirror,* "an intersection where one route of the Mennonite tradition crosses into a communal ritual of faith, a spirituality that conjures a communion of the living and the dead, a belonging that transgresses national borders" (71).

In her essay "Domination, Resistance, Solidarity: An Analysis of Power in the Making of a Mennonite Worship Book," Sarah Kathleen Johnson considers liturgical authority and power distribution in the *Voices Together* hymnal committee process through her experience as the worship resources editor for the collection. Johnson draws upon Amy Allen's (1999) theory of power, which articulates three forms of power: *power-over* is a form of domination by one actor over another; *power-to* is a form of resistance as a form of empowerment; and *power-with* is a way of acting collectively towards solidarity (78-79). Acknowledging the ways that hymnals hold a high degree of power-*over* Mennonite identity, Johnson uses this frame to interrogate how actors in the hymnal creation process were granted mul-

tiple forms of power, both in the foreground and background. As an example, she identifies that the open application process for committee positions initially appears to create equal access to positions of power, yet it inherently privileges those who see a hymnal as relevant, which ends up being white "ethnic Mennonites" with classical music training. Ultimately, Johnson suggests that "without clear-eyed attention to the multidimensional nature of power, Free Church worship risks reproducing relationships of domination present in our broader social context that are in violation of our ecclesiological commitments and eschatological vision" (93).

In her foreward, Lisa M. Weaver observes that the *free* in Free Church is not just an adjective describing a historical reality, it also expresses the way that communities can live and participate in worship. As the editors observe, the nature of power is that it ebbs and flows depending on who has it and how it operates. In our changing political, social, and religious climate, Free Church worship—and the power embedded in it—will continue to evolve. Weaver suggests that Free Church worshippers can "revisit, reconsider, and reimagine liturgical power and authority in ways that enable all who participate in worship to do so fully and *freely*" (xiv). With thought-provoking ideas for practitioners and scholars at a range of stages, this edited collection acts as an invitation to continue the work that the contributors have begun, consistently re-evaluating power as liturgical structures develop.

Anneli Loepp Thiessen, PhD candidate in Interdisciplinary Music Research, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario.

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Sabrina Reed. *Lives Lived, Lives Imagined: Landscapes of Resilience in the Works of Miriam Toews*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2022.

Sabrina Reed's clearly written, accessible study of Miriam Toews's novels is the first such book and rather overdue, considering how important Toews has become on the Canadian literary scene since *A Complicated Kindness* nearly twenty years ago. This is, in many respects, a good first book in the field

as it offers a reasonable, steady-eyed view of an author whose work has been the site of polarized debate, especially in the Mennonite community.

Reed, not a Mennonite, has researched carefully and offers helpful (if backward-looking) context about Mennonite communities which are the setting of some of Toews's best-known works. Not all of Toews's novels are explicitly grounded in Mennonite experience; the most recent, *Fight Night*, does not use the term and neither does *The Flying Troutmans,* one of Toews's funniest books. Reed emphasizes the repressive aspects of Mennonitism, and I was grateful whenever she substituted the term fundamentalism. She argues correctly that Toews "postulates a feminist vision of what being a Mennonite should (and can) be," (119) but too often Reed allows the suggestion to exist that Toews's progressive ideas are remarkable. (There are thousands of Canadian Mennonites involved in this quest for liberation.)

Reed organizes her analysis in chapters which pair Toews's first eight books in thematic units (*Fight Night* is the ninth and receives its own short chapter). Reed's themes involve home, road trips, Mennonite experience, and the way Toews has used autobiographical fiction to work through the tangled stories of grief in her family, particularly the grief following the suicides of Toews's father and sister. It will not surprise anyone who knows these actual people that Miriam's mother, Elvira Toews, arises as the hero of Reed's book and, indeed, several of her daughter's novels. Her mother's remarkable courage, humour, and generosity are the basis of the resilience which this study promotes as the key to Miriam Toews's work.

I cannot disagree with the resilience thesis, although for me it was restated too often, just as I became uneasy about the lengthy treatment of suicide. The discussion of mental illness and suicide is, of course, essential in a study of Miriam Toews—she has transformed stories of her father and sister in several novels. But while reading the novels, I was never uneasy about Toews's own handling of suicide. In *All My Puny Sorrows*, the circumstances are tragic, but the honouring of Miriam's sister Marj is deeply affectionate and frequently joyous. The strange hilarity of that book creates not tragicomedy (too simple a term), but something fiercely complex, resonating with profound and unsayable qualities of love.

In a book like *Lives Lived, Lives Imagined*, subjects like suicide and fundamentalism necessarily become intellectual themes, and a schol-

ar is obliged to present themes cogently and rationally. But Toews's great strength as a writer of fiction is her wildness. Her boisterous, life-affirming voice is, I would argue, the major reason readers have embraced her novels—and it would be lovely to investigate more fully this outrageous comedy.

The term autofiction is employed by Reed here, and I'm not sure how helpful the label is. Toews has certainly made use of her turbulent life—and the deaths she has mourned—but not in the self-absorbed way of a Karl Ove Knausgård. Her writing has more in common with the outward-looking, generative use of memory of a Dickens or a Margaret Laurence. Reed accedes too easily to the notion that Toews's protagonists are her stand-ins: contrarily, I see the riot of weird names for these women (Knute, Nomi, Hattie, Yoli, Mooshie) as a persuasive feat of exaggeration and distance.

Throughout Reed's book I noted flashes of insight that could be jumping-off places for a livelier discussion. Toews's insistence on the significant phrase "act of female imagination" in *Women Talking* is one such point; the imaginations on display in that novel are capacious and extremely eccentric. Then there are the unusual survival strategies. Young Irma Voth (in the novel by the same name), for example, takes comfort in believing she is dead; nearly everything Nomi does in *A Complicated Kindness* is a bizarre stratagem for underscoring the meaning of her messed-up existence, and Reed delineates Nomi's character well. The fearlessness of Toews's characters is astonishing: Irma dangerously mistranslates the orders of the dogmatic film director in Irma Voth into utterances such as "he wants us all to have fun, relax, and be brave" (quoted in Reed, 143). Reed's discussion of Irma's character is particularly effective. And Reed does good work on the motif of creating art out of chaos and pain.

But comedy could move firmly to the front of the stage. Many critics mention how funny Toews is, and Reed is no exception. But how daring this comedy is! Reed astutely quotes Magdalene Redekop, for whom Toews has a "comic vision" and "an inner clown whose movements are guided by this vision and who is brave enough to keep going no matter what" (quoted in Reed, 206-07). The vitality within Miriam Toews does come across in Reed's study because Reed quotes generously from Toews; nearly every quotation is a little explosion of vivacity and affirmation.

This is a capable first look at Miriam Toews's art, and hopefully there are many more studies to come. This one would benefit from taking more risks,

rather like Toews herself.

Sue Sorensen, Associate Professor of English, Canadian Mennonite University.

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Rita Dirks, *Silence and Rage in Miriam Toews's Mennonite Novels.* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2024.

Rita Dirks's book, as the title asserts, centers on what she labels as Miriam Toews's Mennonite novels, namely *Swing Low, A Complicated Kindness, Irma Voth, All My Puny Sorrows, Women Talking,* and *Fight Night.* The titular silence references the long-term silencing of Mennonite women, and the rage that marks many of the characters in these novels refers to the response to that silencing. This specific expression of rage is characterized by Dirks as a potentially constructive force which serves an essential role within the Mennonite world and beyond.

Dirks's introduction provides important contextual material in terms of placing Mennonites in historical context, describing the development of North American Mennonite writing, and then situating Miriam Toews's body of work within this literary context. Dirks pays attention to Toews's Mennonite novels, arguing that, taken collectively, these six novels form a stepping stone chronicle of the journeys of the Toews family (13). Dirks makes a convincing case for the strongly autobiographical dimensions of these novels, describing the writing as "autobiographically infused fiction (14)." This "autofiction (16)" provides an expression and release of rage at the powerful structures that embody patriarchy, and thus rage allows the enforced and damaging silences to be broken.

Each of Dirks's six chapters deals with one Mennonite novel, following the chronology of the dates of publication. The chapters offer keen insights based on close readings of the texts, supplemented by drawing on secondary sources and occasionally including personal commentary. Dirks keeps the dimensions of silence and rage ever present without reducing all six novels only to those emphases. For example, Dirks brings to view the restor-

ative work that writing performs in *Swing Low*; she includes a fascinating discussion of the dual purpose of Plautdietsch in *A Complicated Kindness*. Dirks also (importantly) makes clear that Toews is decidedly not anti-Mennonite. Rather, Toews's deep concern centers on problems within militant fundamentalism and patriarchal structures (98). Other examples of keen interpretive insights could be multiplied here. Overall, the strength of the book is showing the connections between these novels, along with mapping the progression on display in various characters as they find voice in the face of continued attempts at silencing, tied closely to the development seen in the expression of righteous rage that seeks to find the way to being constructive and life-giving as opposed to destructive and stultifying.

Dirks's good work could be strengthened in several ways. First, her inclusion of numerous direct quotations makes for some choppiness in the book, especially in the case of her drawing on secondary sources, which could be integrated more seamlessly into the narrative. Further, and more substantively, Dirks at times brings material into the discussion without enough development. For example, her foray into a description of Menno Simons's theology of shunning is too cryptic, especially given the weight of the role of shunning in Dirks's reading of these novels. Similarly, her abrupt leap from a torn curtain scene in *Fight Night* to the tearing of the veil of the temple in Matthew 27 deserves much closer attention (111). The interpretive impulse here is provocative, but the potential richness of that connection remains largely untapped. A similar observation could be made in the case of Dirks's connection of 'honour killings' to domestic violence in *Irma Voth*, which raises fascinating possibilities that are only hinted at here (58). Further, the assertion that Plautdietsch "has no words for affection, such as love and kindness" causes Dirks to wonder about the psyche of such a linguistic group (62). Here Dirks's brief linguistic analysis stops short of being convincing—further analysis of sources such as *Plautdietsch Wieedabuak* (Low German Dictionary) would show that there are several possibilities for describing and expressing love and kindness in Plautdietsch.

The conclusion of this book deserves specific mention here. Drawing on her analysis of Toews's Mennonite novels, Dirks writes a gripping conclusion in which her own voice calls the reader to recognize the kinds of problems that are brought to view in these novels, and the constructive possibilities

that must be recognized and acted upon. Toews's novels have addressed violent silencing by inscribing "silenced rage into the printed word" (117). Dirks presses the reader to use these kinds of insights to address violence against women, without which "we will have no currency as peacemakers in the world" (118). She expresses her own rage at readings of the Bible that serve to subjugate women under the guise of following the teachings of Scripture. But Dirks is not content to embrace rage; rather she hopes for this rage to turn into work, "much like all the protagonists in Toews's novels have learned to fight and write and live" (122). This deeply personal conclusion, along with the hard-earned insights from Toews's Mennonite novels, present to the reader the crucial importance of confronting the truth revealed to us in fiction.

Paul Doerksen, Associate Professor of Theology and Anabaptist Studies, Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

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Marlene Epp. *Eating like a Mennonite: Food and Community across Borders.* Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2023.

What does it mean to "eat like a Mennonite"? This deceptively simple question guides Marlene Epp's recent work of scholarship. It leads her through a discussion of the Mennonite history of migrations and missions, gender dynamics among twentieth and twenty-first century Mennonites (mostly in North America), a plethora of Mennonite cookbooks, the impact of histories of food scarcity, and the interplay of religion and food in Mennonite culture. This engaging book is a work of "cross-over" scholarship; it is sourced like an academic work, but it avoids jargon and clearly explains bits of theory so that readers without prior knowledge of food studies or Mennonite history can easily read and understand the research and analysis.

Epp does not provide a definitive answer to her question, arguing that Mennonites are too diverse for there to be only one food culture or food practice. Instead, she finds themes that sometimes reflect commonalities among Mennonites of different ethnicities and sometimes illuminate different historical trajectories. The chapter on the impact of hunger and

food scarcity, for example, draws largely on the stories of Mennonites who experienced starvation or near starvation in the Soviet Union. She, however, connects them to that of hunger and food scarcity elsewhere. She points particularly to that experienced by Laotian Mennonites in the late 1970s and to North American Mennonites in the Great Depression. Hunger, according to Epp, is a necessary corollary to understanding the more typical understanding of Mennonite foodways as a revel in abundance.

Apart from times of scarcity—and even occasionally during such times—food has brought pleasure for Mennonites. Time and again, Epp cites Mennonites and former Mennonites who speak of food as something to be enjoyed. In religious practice, this enjoyment is coupled with community building and/or charity at potluck meals or Mennonite relief sales. When Mennonites use food to maintain an ethnic identity, enjoyment is filled with nostalgia, often of the particular foods shaped by their people's migrations. Various branches of the Mennonite faith have scorned different types of pleasure, but even the most dour and non-conformist of Mennonite sects have allowed for pleasure in food.

The lack of food prohibitions based on religion means that Mennonite food can be any food eaten by Mennonites. Indeed, the first chapter of *Eating like a Mennonite* traces the hybridity of Mennonite foods that developed their "Mennonite-ness" through a series of migrations where Mennonites adopted and adapted local foods, or by people converting to the Mennonite faith and bringing their foodways with them. This breadth of possibility does not, however, stop food from being a cultural marker. Epp echoes other food scholars in outlining the ways in which immigrant women have served as cultural carriers, preserving ethnic identities in part through cooking and the preservation of recipes.

There may be no dietary prohibitions in the Mennonite faith but there remains a certain unease. Epp states in the introduction and again in the chapter on food and religion that some Mennonites object to linking the term "Mennonite" with food because "the former is a purely religious [category] and the second purely cultural" (186). This separation of religion and culture also coincides with the traditional division between the masculine world in the front of the church and the feminine world in the church (and home) kitchen. It is no surprise that the women who compiled the Mennonite Treasury

of Recipes in 1961 felt the need to justify their actions as to the utility of their task (that they would help future women providing food for church gatherings) and to designate any earnings to charity. Few were comfortable simply taking pleasure and pride in the foods they made and the recipes they shared.

Food ethics, like those found in Doris Janzen Lanacre's *More-with-Less Cookbook,* may be the closest Mennonites get to religious dietary prohibitions. They provide a bridge between food as sustenance and food as a concern for people living out their faith through daily life. The chapter on food and religious practice ranges from a discussion of food as a spiritual symbol to religious rituals, food charity, and communal eating. Surprisingly missing from the survey is any discussion of table grace and the propensity of Mennonites (or at least some Mennonites) to sing before meals. This reflects a tendency to focus more on the foodstuffs (and what they mean to Mennonites) than on the "how" of eating. Just as there is no discussion of the rituals of folding or holding hands before meals, there are no accounts of church kitchen disputations over whether to use fine china or pottery mugs, styrofoam cups or paper.

As a work of history, *Eating like a Mennonite* focuses on the twentieth and twenty-first century. During this period, food did not play the same roles as sex, clothing or technology in Mennonite internal conflict and controversies. This was not always true—the first Mennonite Brethren objected to the carousing that accompanied pig butchering; the followers of Jakob Amman objected to eating together with non-believers. None of these moments mark changes in the Mennonite diet but they reflect tension in what it meant to "eat like a Mennonite" before the twentieth century. Why food practices ceased to be controversial after the late nineteenth century is perhaps a puzzle for another book.

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Carol Penner. *Unburdened: A Lenten Journey Toward Forgiveness.* Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2024.

Sitting in the armchair in the corner of my office, I look at the bulletin board

across the room. The word "forgiveness" is written in the center of a piece of chart paper, which includes words that we once discerned were worth paying attention to in our ministry with individuals on the margins of the church. I've been reading *Unburdened* on-and-off over the course of the day, enamored with the picture of forgiveness that it is painting for me as I reflect on my own faith and my ministry with young adults, many of whom care about social justice issues and undoing the harms of the church. I've always found the word "forgiveness" to be a loaded one, and I was hesitant to read this book for fear of having to grapple with a word that brings me such discomfort. After reading just week 1 and topics of repentance, penitence, taking responsibility, and obedience to God, I was struck that this book of daily devotions was going to be much more nuanced and holistic than I had feared. Now that I've finished reading, my initial hunch has turned out to be true.

Unburdened is a daily devotional for the Lenten season, beginning with an intro for Shrove Tuesday and going until Easter Sunday. It is separated into the six weeks of Lent, with broad overarching themes for each week: Seeking Repentance, Addressing Sin, Pursuing Freedom, Responding to Brokenness, Building Forgiveness, and Treading Holy Ground.

Each daily reflection is grounded in a scriptural story, sometimes scriptures that are rarely used for such materials, such as the stories of Tamar, Absolom, Nicodemus, and even Ahithophel. Scripture references are more than just a few verses, inviting the reader to enter into a fulsome passage each day. The devotionals relate the daily scripture to a personal story, usually from the life of the author, Carol Penner, or from the life of someone she knows, or from Anabaptist or broader church history. These stories outline journeys that others have taken to address sin, work at accountability, respond to the needs around them, or find forgiveness. Following the written devotional, the reader is invited to pray a written prayer on the day's theme. Finally, Penner provides a reflection or journal prompt so the reader can apply the topic of the day to their own journey. The prayers are always well-written, nuanced, and reflect both gratitude and hope for change in the world and oneself.

Following the six weeks of daily devotional material, Penner provides a guide for how one might use the book for a weekly group of prayer and reflection. This is a helpful guide for me in my work, since I will most likely use this book with a small group

in weekly prayer time in the context of a gathered faith community.

It strikes me that this book of devotionals could be both a deep and meaningful personal (solo) experience or fodder for an intimate group sharing together. Notably, I don't think I would use this with a group that doesn't know each other well, since the questions and reflections can engage deep and heavy topics, perhaps not suited for a group that is just getting to know one another. That said, as a leader in a faith community that is tight-knit and used to sharing deeply with one another, I think this work could provide the container for meaningful conversations and sharing.

On a personal level, this book challenged me in a deeply meaningful way. It invited me to consider my commitment to my faith, the places I fall short, and the places I need to address my own tendency to sin and brokenness in the context of being beloved by God. I have often found myself shying away from the language of sin and confession, for fear of creating or living in shame. Penner doesn't let this act as an excuse to avoid talking about hard topics. Instead, she grounds the devotional in our belovedness and calls us to live into that belovedness in redemptive, accountable, and nuanced ways. She blurs the line between those who are sinners and those who are sinned against, reminding us that all of us have the capacity for both. She reminds us that we have things to forgive others for, things to forgive ourselves for, and things to seek forgiveness from others for. In all this, she somehow does not simplify forgiveness. She doesn't claim that those who are abused, victims, or people who have been hurt must rush into forgiveness. She recognizes that there are times when forgiveness can't or won't happen, or that it is a process we enter into over and over again. Penner's picture of forgiveness isn't an over-simplified toxically positive picture, but one that allows space for nuance, growth, and our own personal work, no matter which side of forgiveness one finds oneself on.

Steph Chandler Burns (they/them), Pastors in Exile, Pastor and Executive Director.

Cynthia R. Wallace, *The Literary Afterlives of Simone Weil: Feminism, Justice, and the Challenge of Religion*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2024.

The figure of philosopher and activist Simone Weil has inspired fascination in the English-speaking world since the translation of her texts became available in the early 1960s. Weil is someone about whom, it seems, no one is indifferent, including myself. As Cynthia R. Wallace notes early in her study of how literary writers have engaged with Weil's writings, there are multiple shapes of regard to Weil's thinking and writing, and to her brief and often sensationally recounted life. Wallace delves deeply into the feminist principles not only of Weil's pursuits, but also of how the feminist writers who grant Weil her "afterlives" in conversation and in argument do not ignore Weil's ideas of affliction, but also do not reduce that belief to a feminized self-sacrifice. Feminist readings of Weil, or indeed any reading of Weil's legacy as someone more than a deluded woman with a relationship to attention, social justice, and a criticism of patriarchal violence, continue to spark arguments (and tempers) in real time.

Wallace's book, with its careful attention to how Adrienne Rich's poems and essays, Mary Gordon's novels, and Annie Dillard's nonfiction all conduct intricate conversation with Weil's ideas, is more than welcome: a corrective to those who sanctify Weil or rudely dismiss and denigrate her. Having positioned Weil as a profound influence in the literary inquiries of three popular and intellectual American writers, Wallace completes her book with a chapter on a largely Canadian list of poets who have addressed Weil in their works: Sarah Klassen, Maggie Helwig, and Lorri Neilsen Glenn among them.

One of the ongoing issues of Weil's reception as a thinker is what Wallace calls "the challenge of religion" in the book's subtitle: that is, the problems of thinking with Weil's spiritual terms in a secular age. Wallace holds her critical magnifying glass up to this belief. In focusing on how "distaste or discomfort regarding religion…helps explain Weil's divided reception," Wallace's point of inquiry coalesces around the spiritual and the political in Weil's thought, including how each writer emphasizes, ignores, or balances the two (15).

To do so is no small task, and this book's intellectual liveliness is a boon to all who are fascinated by Weil's writings. Wallace organizes her examina-

tion of feminist engagement through four Weilian terms: force, attention, affliction (or hunger), and decreation. Then deftly, with care and curiosity, Wallace unpacks the shape and dynamic of the "literary afterlives" offered by each writer. Wallace emphasizes Adrienne Rich's decades-long conversation with Weil through poetry and essays, energized by Weil's critique of force and her ethics of attention, and mystified (and often frustrated) by Weil's seemingly self-sacrificial Christianity. Wallace notes that while Rich openly wrestles with her Weilian angel, Annie Dillard is more circumspect, acknowledging the influence of Weil's thought via the quality and energy of attention that lends Dillard's nature writing such a spiritual aspect, but folding her influence into a cadre of spiritual thinkers upon which Dillard builds. Mary Gordon's fiction is lauded for exploring Catholic women's lives throughout the historical and political entanglements of the church in twentieth-century politics. In these fictive works, Wallace focuses on affliction, spiritual and physical hunger, and "the space of unknowing" (168). (I have a reviewer's confession: of all the authors Wallace addresses in this book, I am least familiar with Gordon. But Wallace's analysis is compelling enough for me to want to read Gordon's tantalizing novella, *Simone Weil in New York*, in which a fictionalized former student of "Mlle Weil" re-encounters her in New York and must grapple with the deep contradictions of her teacher's legacy.) Weil, who by all accounts loved teaching, whether to a classroom of French schoolgirls, in conversation with friends, or by regaling the factory workers with whom she toiled with spiritual philosophy, seems a good choice for an account of pedagogy as politics.

The poets' chapter, in which Wallace unpacks six poetic sequences (some book-length), smartly refuses the saintly persona with which Weil has been saddled, and instead focuses on how such long-form poetry as a genre and a philosophy in and of itself "embraces imperfection, ambiguity, and paradox" (176): decreation as Weil form.

In addition to Wallace's command of these several forms of literary afterlives, she also provides a comprehensive discussion of other feminist authors who have been influenced by Weil, and muses thoughtfully on the impact of Weil on writers of color, including NourbeSe Philip, Cornel West, Michelle Cliff, and Sigrid Nunez. Wallace is clear that more study in this area is needed, thinking of Weil's impact beyond white

writers, and I have to agree. (I can add that Esi Edugyan includes a Simone Weil cameo in her Giller-winning 2011 novel *Half-Blood Blues*.)

Near the end of her study, Wallace includes a long quotation from Terry Tempest Williams on Weil as inspiration, someone who spent her life "paying attention to patterns, signs, and synchronicity in the desert to help us find our way" (233). I can't help but think about the aphorism by the German Romantic poet Novalis, that "philosophy is really homesickness: the urge to be at home everywhere." Whether this tracks Weil's urge or that of her readers who wish to make of her our home in the desert, Wallace's approachable and accountable study is a must-read for our homesick feminist selves.

Tanis MacDonald, Wilfrid Laurier University, Associate Professor of English and Film Studies.

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Troy Osborne. *Radicals and Reformers: A Survey of Global Anabaptist History.* Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2024.

At first glance, this new history has a familiar sense to it. For one, it echoes the very outline of C. J. Dyck's classic, *An Introduction to Mennonite History*, which it will certainly replace as the go-to text. It begins with a genealogy of late medieval reformers, moves to the Protestants, and gives a nod to Anabaptism's birth in Zurich on January 21, 1525. It follows the spread of Anabaptism to the north (Augsburg, Strasbourg, Muenster), finds Menno Simons, and outlines the "solidification" (128) of the Mennonite church in western Europe. It follows the diaspora into the Russian Empire and North America and catalogues the borrowings from other denominations along the way. Then, like later of Dyck's editions, Osborne introduces the modern missionary movement and branches out, with a chapter for each continent of the growing global community—Asia, Africa, South America—before coming back to the West and considering how a diversity of Anabaptists "put their faith into action" today (327). It even has a ring of classical church history to it, citing prominent male leaders throughout, outlining the denominational contours of the global fellowship, and referencing central theological tenets,

especially non-resistance. It celebrates the birth of this denomination and follows it teleologically, applaudingly, into the global movement it has become.

And yet there is much new here. Osborne fully synthesizes the "normative," seeking Bender and social history polygenesis schools in interpreting early Anabaptism. Then, all those male leaders are in fact foreshadowed by ordinary folk, with chapters variously beginning with allusions to an illiterate shepherd, a book peddler, a traveling merchant, a few "naked" Anabaptists, and a 25-year-old refugee poet. Innovatively, Osborne also provides sub-sections on the contributions of women throughout, from radical Swiss Anabaptist Margret Hottinger in the 1520s to Pastor Emma Sommers Richard of the US in the 1970s. Taking some methodological license, Osborne regularly and unabashedly connects past events in Europe to today's global church; thus, for example, Martin Luther at Wartburg in the early 1520s and Lee Yoon Shik's quest for pacifism in the early 1990s share the same page, while in another chapter the early Hutterites are placed juxtaposed to the modern-day JKI in Indonesia (40, 81). Finally, Osborne's analysis of Anabaptism in the Global South reflects an engagement with a much more mature scholarship than anything hitherto published. It moves, for example, with ease between the western missionaries and indigenous converts who celebrate "parts of their own culture" (174).

Osborne's book, however, is especially notable in two respects. The first is Osborne's commitment to an "honest" (13) and transparent approach to telling this story. As he puts it, "it is tempting to pluck out and remove the threads that do not live up to current ideals," (226) but he believes that it is a fuller story that "can inspire" (13). Thus, the ancient mysticism of Javanese religiosity is woven into the very story of the GITJ church in Indonesia and the bane of insidious Nazism intersects the story of Mennonites who suffered Stalin's repression. And throughout the text are numerous other hard truths of failure and disappointment that add authenticity and veracity to this broad history.

Second, Osborne seems deeply committed to an empathetic portrayal of all the nether regions of Anabaptism. At places, this search for authenticity raises curious findings. Perhaps the Old Colonists' escape from modernity in Canada was driven by a profound antipathy to technology, but did they really cross the United States enroute to Mexico "in a caravan of steel wheeled wagons?" (295) Perhaps Christianity in the Global South was more

open to a raw spirituality than the formal North encouraged, but is there empirical evidence that Tunggul Wulung actually "free[d] Javanese people from malevolent spiritual forces" through the "power of Jesus name"? Or that convert Tee Siem Tat actually "healed" as "he learned more about Jesus"? (181–182) And yet this commitment to walking in the shoes of his subjects turns a complex book into a rich and vibrant account of immense diversity.

Indeed, it is this impulse for empathy that, to my mind, marks the underlying strength of the book. Throughout this text, Osborne takes the reader to the very mindsets of a broad assortment of the ordinary Mennonite's religious imagination. Readers thus obtain much more than the modernist and critical thinking of a typical Mennonite college professor. Thus, where such a cohort has emphasized "following" Christ as central to Anabaptism, Osborne recounts early Anabaptists as especially motivated "to seek new avenues to encounter God" (19). Where Menno Simons might be credited by the college crowd with the ethics of "true evangelical faith," Osborne argues that Menno was especially bent on regeneration, "repentance and conversion" (96). Where the Hutterites are credited with excelling in mutual aid, they wrote as much about being filled with the Holy Spirit. Osborne even overturns stereotypes of African Anabaptists, pointing out, for example, how Tanzanian Mennonites have de-emphasized "the gifts of the Spirit" and focused on "confession and submission" (257). Most significantly, Osborne ends the book with a sympathetic analysis of three major streams of the faith—evangelical, neo-Anabaptist, and Old Order/Low German Mennonites—not an easy task. Perhaps this accomplishment comes from Osborne's skill as an historian, perhaps it stems from his own faith commitment, one with stories of full "accuracy" that "draw all Christians closer to Christ" (60).

This is a rich history, an audacious, and noteworthy interpretation. One gets the sense that Osborne struggled mightily with what not to say. And yet even then Sitting Bill, Mahatma Gandhi, and other notable historical figures make their surprise cameo appearances in the book. Given its breadth of interpretation, its innumerable associations with a wider world, and its ambitious agenda, *Radicals and Reformers* will certainly become the new authoritative text we have all been waiting for.

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Leah Reesor-Keller. *Tending Tomorrow: Courageous Change for People and Planet*. Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2024.

Why bring a child into a world like this? I hear this sentiment often, as social concerns combine with the climate crisis to create a growing sense of despair. Without glossing over the struggles we face as a global community, Leah Reesor-Keller's book, *Tending Tomorrow: Courageous Change for People and Planet*, urges us to see that we can transform our local and global systems and even now have hope.

The book moves through five sections—"Redreaming," "Retelling," "Renewing," "Reimagining," and "Rewilding"—each offering ways to rethink beliefs, address environmental challenges, and envision thriving ecosystems. The first two sections assert the necessity of unraveling old assumptions before weaving together something new. "Redreaming" examines our beliefs about the world, our cultures and worldviews, while in "Retelling," Reesor-Keller unpacks her family, faith, and creation stories to re-narrate them in ways that provide new sources of strength in recentering all of creation.

The "Renewing" section levels with the dismal reality of climate destruction and its impacts while holding on to hope through connection, community, and relationship. "Reimagining" leverages this hope to invite us to view leadership and community through lenses of interconnectedness and diversity, to embrace a restorative approach to harm focusing on accountability and repair, and to reimagine the church as a movement that "can keep the boundaries looser, embrace the grey areas, live with the unresolved questions and ambiguities, always centering ourselves around an ethic of life and well-being for all" (168). "Rewilding" considers how we support conditions for human and nonhuman ecosystems to reset balance for collective thriving.

The epilogue's letter from the author to her daughter ties the ideas from the book together, connecting past, present, and future with the personal, family, community, societal, and global fractal elements wrapped in her love for her child and her hope for the next generation to flourish. The clarity, hope, and inspiration glimpsed throughout the previous chapters shine through powerfully in her words to her child.

While reading, I imagined myself walking through a forest of growth,

connecting with roots, branches, and vines along different paths of learning and experience from Reesor-Keller's life, growing together in a direction of healing and hope. Much of her learning resonates with my study and experience in peacebuilding practice, and I found myself nodding in affirmation. The book responds to John Paul Lederach's call to activate our "moral imagination," which does not dismiss "the hardship and grief of this time of massive changes and loss" (30) but envisions ways of being that transform our current conflicts and crises. The organization of her book from "redreaming at the roots" to "rewilding" echoes peacebuilding interconnected frameworks, integrating "big picture" thinking with the daily experiences shaping our lives and the crises we face.

Change begins by digging into the beliefs and narratives shaping our individual and collective actions before we can create space for new vision to grow. Rather than just telling, Reesor-Keller gives a personal example of this digging, and she acknowledges the challenges. She describes the fear lying beneath much resistance to change that the "stories handed down will turn out to be hollow" (42). She confesses that this "shame work" (53) pulls at threads of identity and "narratives of goodness and purity" (52). Her honest account of despair, hope, and making sense interwoven with personal stories keeps the book grounded and relatable, despite the complex underlying theory and rich interdisciplinary connections. Her writing acts as a model of the kind of wrestling that needs to be done by each of us in our context as we journey together to make change.

The theme of collective leadership and networks woven throughout the book stands out to me. For those of us raised in linear ways of seeing process, making the shift to systems thinking proves challenging. I find her ecological metaphors helpful, particularly considering the interconnectedness and communication of species like trees and mushrooms. Her imagery sparks the imagination, inviting us to see our place in creation differently.

This book serves to create a clearer picture of the kinds of collaboration and diverse elements required to respond to such a complex challenge that our present and future hold. For those already concerned about tomorrow, connecting the pieces in this way can guide us in fitting our different gifts together in the larger work, knowing that our efforts for "courageous change" accumulate and synergize.

Church communities will find this an especially helpful resource for congregational book studies or larger church network studies as we envision church as a movement, a place to experiment with the kind of change that requires a coming together in community, emerging step by step.

Tending Tomorrow offers a message of hope that refuses to deny reality or downplay the crises we face, but gives us a way through these crises together. Rather than an express lane, this winding path through a rewilded wood creates the kind of world that invites us to bring our children along to welcome the future not with fear and despair, but as a gift of hope for their tomorrows.

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Daniel Shank Cruz. *Ethics for Apocalyptic Times: Theapoetics, Autotheory, and Mennonite Literature*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 2024.

In *Ethics for Apocalyptic Times: Theapoetics, Autotheory, and Mennonite Literature*, Daniel Shank Cruz blends together recent life writing with a sustained look at the problems and possibilities of Mennonite literature. Emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, the book employs literary analysis, anecdote, and autotheory to argue for literature as "an essential ethical resource for all of us, secular and religious, as we navigate these terrible times" (3). With wide-ranging explorations of literary form—from readings of poetry and science fiction to personal reflections on haiku and tarot—*Ethics for Apocalyptic Times* is a unique and compelling survey of Mennonite writing that takes seriously the authorial voice, particularly when it comes from the margins.

As a queer, decolonial study, Cruz's second monograph builds on their contributions to the field of Mennonite literary criticism in *Queering Mennonite Literature: Archives, Activism, and the Search for Community*, a needed intervention that highlights the link between queer theory and Mennonite literature, paying close attention to the many ways in which these discourses overlap. *Ethics for Apocalyptic Times* continues this ap-

proach, locating Mennonite concerns in places such as Miriam Toews's largely overlooked debut, *Summer of My Amazing Luck*, Sarah Stambaugh's out-of-print novel, *I Hear the Reaper's Song*, and Sofia Samatar's short story collection, *Tender*. Less expected, and all the more intriguing, is Cruz's treatment of Samuel R. Delaney's queer science fiction, recasting it as a secular form of Anabaptist ethics. Two additional chapters return repeatedly to the work of Jeff Gundy to propose an understanding of Mennonite poetry and speculative fiction as "theapoetic" endeavors.

In their introduction, Cruz acknowledges that, while they are not a theologian, they have been invited to provide commentary within theological forums, leading them to revisit their fraught relationship with institutional Mennonitism. Their strategy is to read Mennonite literature "theapoetically" and "to show that theapoetic Mennonite literature's power comes from its healthy transgression of the world's valorization of institutional Mennonitism's overly zealous policing of its boundaries" (4). Using Molly Remer's definition, Cruz understands theapoetics as a feminist viewpoint, dispensing with the patriarchal overtones of *theopoetics* that acknowledges "lived experiences as legitimate sources of direct, or divine, revelation" (10). For them, this method corresponds with Anabaptism's emphasis on low church ecclesiology and with an ethics rooted in everyday experience.

From this theoretical position, Cruz proceeds to blend their ethical concerns with their library, organizing and emphasizing particular texts as exemplary. Throughout the book, they also foreground their experiences as a queer Mennonite of color, drawing out personal connections to the texts they discuss. While this autotheoretical approach at times enriches Cruz's readings and increases the stakes of their project, the connections can seem tenuous—as when a meaningful passage from a book they are reading happens to appear on the page whose number corresponds with their birthday. For Cruz, however, the inclusion of such details emphasizes "self-attention [as] a necessary act of love in the racist society that . . . I inhabit" and demonstrates a theapoetic hermeneutic "because the Divine sometimes manifests itself to me through them" (32–33).

In its radically inclusive relation to the cosmos, theapoetics provides as much of Cruz's ethical orientation as Mennonite literature, where the author's preferred texts represent alternatives to an oppressive and divisive

status quo. Unfortunately, the ethics in question are largely left underdeveloped. For instance, on the same page that Cruz says that Di Brandt's poetry "reminds us that spiritual experiences are only meaningful if they lead to ethical actions," they follow Anita Hooley Yoder to argue that "Even if we just read poetry for its aesthetic beauty, it makes us more humane" (56). Logical inconsistency aside, both comments trade analysis for truism. Literary criticism is arguably more interested in the question of *how* than *what*. Despite moving passages of self-reflection, Cruz largely bypasses the question of how Mennonite literature develops an ethics based in reading, instead leaving the reader with affirmations of what they loosely categorize as Anabaptist. Such texts "urge," "remind," and "teach" a set of ethical positions but rarely do these texts interrogate them.

Writing this review within days of the 2024 US election, I find myself returning to the Mennonite rejection of worldly power for solace. My understanding of that rejection, like Cruz's, is somewhat different from that of my spiritual ancestors. Theirs was not a progressive, world-building political coalition but a mostly quietist departure, supported by an ethical and theological system that I would no doubt bristle under. Finding continuity and discontinuity between their rejection of the world and my own is as much a work of imagination as it is a response to a world that abolishes boundaries as quickly as it imposes them. This dis/continuity is one reason why Mennonite literature matters to me.

The reading list Cruz has assembled in *Ethics for Apocalyptic Times*, including their robust collection of endnotes, is an excellent starting point for this reflective work. I, too, believe that Anabaptism can have value for those outside the tradition, particularly in its affirmations of community, social justice, and non-violence—affirmations that are in no way unique to Mennonites. Mennonite literature, as Cruz describes it, may well be a resource for our troubled times, but does it provide solutions? That all depends on how one reads it.

Jonathan Dyck, Illustrator, Treaty One Territory, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Afterword

Troy Osborne

As we turn the final pages of the final issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review*, I am grateful for the labor of all those scholars who have supported its mandate to engage "thoughtful, sustained discussion of spirituality, theology, and culture from a broadly-based Mennonite perspective." Arising out of the conversations and disciplines of the faculty at Conrad Grebel College (now Conrad Grebel University College), the journal quickly extended the conversations beyond the faculty lounge to the broader Mennonite community.

In Walter Klaassen's introduction to the first issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review* in Spring 1983, he located the journal at a critical moment of Mennonite "self-assurance."[1] Following several decades when Mennonite identity had been strengthened and shaped through its connections to its history, especially in the sixteenth century, the time was ripe for a journal that looked at the present and towards the future. Whereas other Mennonite journals "focus particularly on the Mennonite story past and present. Our task is to reflect more on present and future in the context of the whole church and the world."[2]

Writing on behalf of the entire editorial council—the College's faculty and administration—Klaassen hoped that the content would extend beyond Mennonite matters. "Everything that concerns human beings is the concern of Christians. No issue will, therefore, on principle be excluded from consideration in the *Review*, but the means and ends of it will be subject to the searchlight of Christian faith."[3] The journal was to reflect the multi-disciplinary makeup of Grebel's faculty. Considering that several members of the faculty council were neither Mennonites nor theologians, it is not surprising that the initial commitment was to extend the journal's reach beyond strictly Anabaptist-Mennonite concerns and include Christian viewpoints broadly considered. Klaassen states, "The conditions for accepting contributions for publication are that they reflect sound scholarship and that Christian faith be the acknowledged perspective from which an issue is discussed."[4] Despite

1 Walter Klaassen, "Editorial," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 1, no. 1 (Winter 1983): i.
2 Ibid., ii.
3 Ibid., ii.
4 Ibid., ii.

The Conrad Grebel Review 41, no. 2 (Spring 2023): 250-252.

the proclamations of confidence and denominational breadth, the first volumes reflect a community of scholars still discussing the parameters of Mennonite theological thought and group identities that drew from the Mennonite and Anabaptist pasts.[5] Nevertheless, the subject of early articles soon ranged from the interplay of intellect and emotion in music to nonviolence to the poetry of David Waltner-Toews.[6] With new faculty arriving at the College, Mennonites production of literature and the arts became a trademark of the *Review*'s energetic engagement with a variety of disciplines.

The Review's success was the result of its editorial leadership and the maturity of Anabaptist-Mennonite thought. With the awareness of the dedicated work by previous scholars and former colleagues, the decision to end publication was therefore not taken lightly. In the context of changing faculty interests and a strained financial context for the College, the University of Waterloo, and higher education in Ontario, the College is hoping to redeploy its financial resources and scholarly energy in support of a new online publishing platform for scholarship on Anabaptist/Mennonite topics, working with several Mennonite institutions of higher education to explore potential models for carrying the journals' conversations into new, open-access forms. Our faculty are excited about the possibilities of this new venture. We believe that the new online project is being designed with the same multi-disciplinary spirit that animated the CGR and hope that the journal's network of readers and contributors will join us on the new platform when it is ready to launch.

I am grateful for Kyle Gingerich Hiebert's recent leadership of the journal. His team have championed the journal and its mandate and remain steadfastly committed to scholarship of the highest quality. Perhaps it is not a traditional Mennonite trait, but I am proud of the influence that this journal has had in classrooms, staff rooms, and scholarly conversations over the past four decades, and I hope that future readers will continue to find the

5 Rodney J Sawatsky, "Commitment and Critique: A Dialectical Imperative," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 1, no. 1 (1983): 1–12; A James (Allen James) Reimer, "Nature and Possibility of a Mennonite Theology," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 1, no. 1 (1983): 33–55; Maurice Martin, "The Pure Church: The Burden of Anabaptism," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 1, no. 2 (1983): 29–41; J. Harold Jr Sherk, "Rewards and Pitfalls in Studying Mennonite History," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 1, no. 2 (1983): 43–52.

6 Leonard J Enns, "Music: Intellect and Emotion," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 2, no. 2 (1984): 89–105; C Arnold Snyder, "Relevance of Anabaptist Nonviolence for Nicaragua Today," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 2, no. 2 (1984): 123–37; David Waltner-Toews, "Keeping House: David Waltner-Toews as Father, Son, and Poet," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 2, no. 3 (1984): 219–28.

records of the conversations in its pages worthy of their consideration for many years to come.

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