Singing New Stories: Provoking the Decolonization of Mennonite Hymnals

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It is appropriate that the first iteration of this paper was read in the Detweiler Meeting House, just outside Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario, culturally a very "Mennonite" space in the midst of a larger geographic place, for in many ways this meeting house set on ancient land reflects the tension that I wish to explore. Place is important. In my work with Aboriginal Canadians, I have learned that one must always begin by acknowledging kin and place. Mennonites have been good at the first. My own roots run deep in the ethnic Mennonite world: I am Geraldine, mother of Alina and Kerstin; daughter of John and Alina; descended from Balzers, Bergs, Dürksens, Fröses, Rempels, Wedels . . . and the list goes on. While my cultural roots are deep, my ancestral roots of place have never been allowed to reach into the land and have instead survived multiple transplantings: Saskatchewan, Ukraine and Russia, Prussia, the Netherlands, Liechtenstein, and Switzerland. Who really knows where my ancestors wandered?

But I am not only Geraldine; I am also Numagina, mother to Nipilayok and Nilgak, welcomed into the kinship circles of the Innuinait of Ulukhaktuk and Kugluktuk, and suddenly my story of place has changed. My settler narrative of empty lands, of *terra nullius*, discovered by intrepid explorers, farmed and industrialized by ambitious Europeans, home to the displaced seeking refuge, has become unsettled. Thus I must also acknowledge and honor the historical keepers of this land, those who were here before, those who were "discovered," those who were displaced. As participants in Sound in the Land 2014, we met on traditional lands of the Six Nations; I come from Treaty Six territory and those stories are now also part of my story.

What does this have to do with hymns in three recent collections—*Hymnal: A Worship Book*[1] and its two supplements, *Sing the Journey*[2] and

[1] *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 1992).

[2] *Sing the Journey: Hymnal: A Worship Book, Supplement 1* (Waterloo, ON: Faith and Life

Sound in the Land – Music and the Environment, ed. Carol Ann Weaver, Doreen Helen Klassen, and Judith Klassen, special issue, *The Conrad Grebel Review* 33, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 282-290.

Sing the Story,[3] used by congregations in Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA?[4] The first book is a hymnal employed widely since its publication in 1992, while the latter two supplements are seen as a "continuation" of it (see page iii of *Sing the Story*) and offer new hymns relating to both the liturgical seasons of the church and to 21st-century social and cultural issues.[5] Consequently, the songs selected for these books offer an implicit story of how one group of North American Mennonites views its faith journey. I am curious about the stories we choose to tell and those we ignore. Whose stories are they? Where were they born and nurtured? How have they changed over time? As Thomas King says, "The truth about stories is that that's all we are,"[6] and this article thus asks how these three books tell a Mennonite story.

North American Mennonites have taken seriously the call to love kindness and do justice, working in many international settings to engage theologically and to participate in relief work through medical and social assistance. Participants have often returned with music, foods, and sensibilities that are new to their home communities. As well, membership of the North American churches has become increasingly diverse and multilingual, extending well beyond the traditional Swiss and Russian Mennonite roots, necessitating the inclusion of world music in the hymnal trilogy. However, I want to problematize this inclusion of songs from around the globe in a North American context by asking several questions: Does the pursuit and inclusion of global music reflect the current diversity of Mennonite churches? Does this inclusivity enrich the musical environment

Resources, 2005).

[3] *Sing the Story: Hymnal: A Worship Book, Supplement 2* (Waterloo, ON: Faith and Life Resources, 2007).

[4] *Hymnal* was a joint project of Church of the Brethren, the General Conference Mennonite Church, and the Mennonite Church. The latter two denominations, which include churches in Canada and the US, have been integrated and reorganized as Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA.

[5] "Hymnals are comprehensive congregational resources encompassing liturgical seasons and ordinances/sacraments, while supplements frequently include contemporary western hymns, and/or musics reflecting cultural diversities" (Doreen Klassen e-mail, February 3, 2015).

[6] Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2003), 2.

of these churches? And, perhaps most importantly: Have North American Mennonites, by drawing on the music of other places, forgotten to listen to *this* place?

It is impossible to answer these questions conclusively within the constraints of this paper, and perhaps they are not answerable at all. Still, I challenge us to think of the story these music choices tell. The diversity of music in the hymnal and the supplements draws on the music of other places and connects congregations using these materials to congregations in those places. My intent is not to undermine the importance of those connections but to consider how music connects to a deeper sense of a specific geographical environment. What might music of this geographic place be? Just as Jamaican poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite advocated new literary forms because the hurricane does not roar in pentameter,[7] I wonder if we need new musical forms that are more at home in our forest cathedrals, arctic wilds, massive lakes, and diverse urban landscapes.

For the purpose of these wonderings, I have chosen the term *place* rather than *environment*. "Place," as defined by David Gruenwald, "foregrounds a narrative of local and regional politics that is attuned to the particularities of where people actually live, and that is connected to the global development trends that impact local places."[8] Does the Mennonite musical canon contained in the three hymnals connect to local and regional politics, the politics of colonialism, and the increasing concern with decolonization? The Sound in the Land 2014 conference call for submissions included a category for "songs of place," inviting composers "to pay close attention to your own local ecological reality, wherever you are, and write songs in a folk/acoustic/roots-oriented vein that are rooted in that particular place. These are not generic 'save the planet' songs—they may be songs that celebrate, or lament, or paint a picture, or tell a story of something that is going on in your own ecological 'backyard.'"[9] As I consider "songs of place," I advocate extending the folk/acoustic roots traditions to include the development of new musical

[7] Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (London: New Beacon Books, 1984).

[8] David A. Gruenwald, "The Best of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of Place," *Educational Researcher* 32, no. 4 (2003): 3-12, quote on 3.

[9] "Songs of place" is Mennofolk director Bryan Moyer Suderman's concept. See uwaterloo.ca/grebel/sound-land-2014/call-submissions, accessed February 10, 2015.

forms that connect to music in existence before European contact—music that grew out of a close relationship to Turtle Island traditions.[10]

I began my quest with a simple consideration of the three hymnbooks in order to determine the geographic origin of the collections, a task less easy than I had hoped. The editors were adept at indicating music from outside North America and Europe, but I found it almost impossible to discover which 19th and 20th-century songs were composed in North America and which in Europe through the notes provided in the texts. I was interested in geographic origins of hymns, both to consider the increasingly inclusive diversity of the hymns in the collections and to determine if songs rooted in North America were represented.

The lack of differentiation between European and North American compositions, when interpreted through a lens of postcolonial theory, underlines the centrality of these songs to this canon of Mennonite hymns, as compared to the exotic otherness of those whose non-western countries of origin are explicitly specified. "Margin" and "center" are easily identified within the hymnals. Hymnals function as a canon, and collections are the shared repertoire of a broad group of people as decided by a representative committee. It would be surprising if the core of the canon were not drawn from historic tradition and memory.

A quick summary of my findings reveals that *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, a 1992 collection of more than 600 hymns, identifies 17 as American folk music, 14 as African American, 3 as Plains Indian, and 19 from other countries of origin, predominantly from the Asian and African continents. *Sing the Journey*, a 2005 collection of approximately 100 hymns, identifies 3 as American folk, 6 as African American, and 17 from other countries of origin, expanded from *Hymnal: A Worship Book* to include the Caribbean and Central and South America. *Sing the Story*, from 2007, follows a similar pattern, identifying 2 American folk songs, 6 African American, and 13 from countries of origin similar to those in *Sing the Journey*. From this cursory count, world music, generally music of the Global South, has clearly become part of the canon. More than ten percent of the latter two collections is music from outside the European tradition.[11] Interestingly, American folk songs

[10] Turtle Island is the name for North America in several Aboriginal traditions.

[11] European traditions focus on European culture and history, including Western song

are differentiated as "other."

As a post-colonialist, I am interested in voices that are not heard. Why do songs of the Aboriginal peoples of this continent appear only in the first collection? The three First Nation songs included in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* appear with the permission of the Mennonite Indian Leaders Council or the South Dakota Conference, United Church of Christ.[12] These permissions reflect the authenticity of the hymns and the ongoing dialogue with the source communities. However, the question remains: Why are songs from these traditions not included in the second two collections? Anna Janacek, in her study of hymns chosen from *Hymnal: A Worship Book* in six Ontario congregations, noted that "by far the most under-utilized group of hymns were those which originated with Native North Americans."[13]

That all three collections are dominated by music of European traditions is not surprising. Immigration to North America was precipitated by a search for opportunity and adventure or by the result of persecution and war, traumatic events resulting in exile and nostalgia for homes lost. Edward Said describes exile as "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. . . . The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever."[14] Song, one thing that did not have to be left behind, became part of the cultural narrative. Over time, as reflected through these collections, four-part harmony, a cappella singing, and the claiming of "606"[15] as a Mennonite anthem left little space for music of this place in creating a new historical narrative. Said suggests

traditions.

[12] *Hymnal: A Worship Book,* 863.

[13] Anna Janacek, "Gutierrez is a Mennonite Name," in *Sound in the Land: Essays on Mennonite Music*, ed. Maureen Epp and Carol Ann Weaver (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2005), 193.

[14] Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile," in ed. Russell Ferguson et al., *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 357.

[15] "Invigorating, polyphonic 'Praise God from Whom all Blessings Flow' – # 606 in *The Mennonite Hymnal* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1969) – from the 1830 Boston Handel and Haydn Society Collection, appeared in Joseph Funk's first shaped note, four-part *Harmonia Sacra* [songbook] (Winchester, VA, 1832). On January 1, 1964, Mary Oyer and other hymnal editors heard this song in Virginia and included it in *The Mennonite Hymnal.* It became a North American Mennonite anthem" (Carol Ann Weaver e-mail, February 5, 2015).

that histories "selectively strung together in a narrative form" will have

> their founding fathers [sic], their basic, quasi-religious texts, their rhetoric of belonging, their historical and geographical landmarks, their official enemies and heroes. The collective ethos forms what Pierre Bourdieu, the French sociologist, calls the *habitus*, the coherent amalgam of practices linking habit with inhabitance.[16]

Have Mennonites used song as quasi-religious texts, using hymns as a rhetoric of belonging that marks them as insiders rather than settler invaders? Are North American Mennonites, by retaining the musical traditions of Europe and incorporating music born in other places, limiting their potential to connect to local environments through developing music of place? The existing hymn collections are a part of the narrative of Anabaptism, a history marked by nonconformity and separatism from the world that grew out of an historic context. As that context shifts, the narrative also shifts with the increased inclusion of music from the Global South. As North American Mennonites become increasingly aware of the issues of colonialism and the devastating impact of events related to Aboriginal residential schools, the narrative will continue to evolve.

The hymns selected for *Hymnal: A Worship Book* and its two supplements augment and become the basis for the North American Mennonite soundpool. Mennonite hymnologist Mary Oyer defines 'soundpool' as "music that is familiar, often repeated, nourishing, invigorating."[17] This soundpool becomes part of the rhetoric of belonging, the story Mennonites have chosen to tell. Anna Groff's analysis of the use of "606" illustrates how song has become a marker for those who belong and thus can serve to marginalize others. Quoting Oyer, who describes the song as "a great thing for people in the Euro-American world," and Rebecca Slough, who found that it is "the anthem for white, Anglo, educated Mennonites with Western European roots,"[18] Groff clearly identifies the problem. While "606" is iconic, the way the sound pool becomes *canon* may

[16] Said, "Reflections on Exile," 259.
[17] Anna Groff, "606: When, Why and How do Mennonites Use the Anthem?" *The Mennonite,* March 18, 2008, 14-15.
[18] Ibid.

reinforce the insider-outsider status. The gradual incursion of global music has the potential to interrupt this narrative but does not necessarily do so. At its best, the expanded canon creates a welcome space for new voices.

Within this cultural narrative there is space for the music of Latin and South America and Africa, previously called "the exotic other" and unfortunately defined as distantly representative of the Mennonite World Conference. But now, due to the increasing diversity of the global Mennonite church, this moniker no longer applies. When singing songs from Latin and South America and Africa, North American Mennonites are relieved, if temporarily, of their role as colonizers and settler invaders, and can see themselves as part of the global collective, inclusive and open to difference. Considering music originating in places other than North America forces them to recognize their complicity in the colonizing venture, the fact that the land they farmed was not *terra nullius*.

Victoria Freeman, in *Distant Freedom: How My Ancestors Colonized America*, considers how family memories are lost: "I have come to realize how much immigrants lose of their family memory because it is tied to physical places—to houses, farms, towns, landmarks, battlefields, and graves."[19] As a result, histories need to be reconstructed, as she further explains: "In the case of the colonization of North America, two kinds of memory, or rather non-memory—that of the family and that of the state—reinforce one another in suppressing our knowledge of our history with Aboriginal people."[20] My personal experiences as a 14-year resident and member of Inuit communities forced me to acknowledge this suppression, and recent events in Canada such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings into residential schools[21] and the Idle No More movement[22] have, I hope, caused all Canadians to reconstruct their national narratives.

What does this mean for Mennonite hymns? I believe a critical sense of pedagogy is needed that, in the words of Peter McLaren and Henry

[19] Victoria Freeman, *Distant Relations: How My Ancestors Colonized North America* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2000).
[20] Ibid, xvii.
[21] Canada's 2013 Truth and Reconciliation Commission is detailed at www.trc.ca.
[22] This 2012 protest about Aboriginal resources spread across Canada and beyond: www.cbc.ca/news/aboriginal/idle-no-more-where-is-the-movement-2-years-later-1, accessed February 11, 2015.

Giroux, "must address the specificities of experiences, problems, languages and histories that communities rely upon to construct a narrative of identity and possible transformation."[23] This transformation can happen only if communities move from being residents of this space to being inhabitants of it. David Orr, as cited in Gruenwald, elaborates a bioregionalist meaning of living well in place by drawing a distinction between inhabiting and residing:

> A resident is a temporary occupant, putting down few roots and investing little, knowing little, and perhaps caring little for the immediate locale beyond its ability to gratify. . . . The inhabitant, in contrast, "dwells" . . . in an intimate, organic, and mutually nurturing relationship with place. Good inhabitance is an art requiring detailed knowledge of a place, the capacity for observation, and a sense of care and rootedness.[24]

By dwelling in this place, by not seeing it as a temporary stop on the journey between places on earth or between heaven and earth, individuals and communities can learn to listen to the land and the stories that it holds. Composing and singing music that reflects those stories could and should be part of this journey, and could be one way to participate in the decolonization and re-inhabitation of this place. By learning to live well socially and ecologically in places that have been disrupted and injured through the colonization process, we can recognize and attempt to address these issues.[25]

Gruenwald contends that re-inhabitation requires us to "identify, recover, and create material spaces and places that teach us how to live well in our total environments," while decolonization requires us to "identify and change ways of thinking that injure and exploit other people and places.[26] Mennonite involvement in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the building of relationships with the Aboriginal peoples of Canada indicate that the process of decolonization has begun. As communities involving both Mennonites and Aboriginal peoples identify and work toward changing ways

[23] Peter L. McLaren and Henry A. Giroux, "Critical Pedagogy and Rural Education: A Challenge from Poland," *Peabody Journal of Education* 67, no. 4 (1990): 154-65.
[24] Gruenwald, "The Best of Both Worlds," 9.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.

of thinking that have injured and exploited the peoples of this place, further reconciliation can occur. However, learning to re-inhabit and to live well in this place challenges communities to create, to step outside the familiar story and song, and to imagine something different.

Mennonite narratives of song frequently link Euro-American Mennonites to our past, which is important, but must also link us to our present and carry us into our future. We must make room for the skin drums of America just as we have made room for African drums alongside our pianos and organs. Perhaps the echoes of our past have faded sufficiently that we can hear with new ears. One song embodying this shift is Audrey Falk Janzen's choral setting of Jo Cooper's poem, "Ancient Echoes."[27] Her composition[28] paints a sound picture of wind whispering through the prairie grasses and bison thundering over the plains, evoking sounds of this geographical place. While still grounded in western music traditions, Falk Janzen's collaboration with Cooper, a Métis poet and visual artist, acknowledges the geographic place and the original peoples of the Saskatchewan Plains. Perhaps as North American Mennonites learn to be inhabitants of this place rather than residents of it, we will also listen more closely to our own homeland and create space for music of this place. *Taima.*[29]

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[27] Audrey Falk Janzen and Jo Cooper, "Ancient Echoes," 2005. Available at ictus.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/IctusCatalogue-1.pdf , accessed February 10, 2015.

[28] A performance of this work by Rosthern (Saskatchewan) Junior College is found at: www.choirplace.com/videos/5001/ancient-echoes-audrey-falk-janzen, accessed May 23, 2015.

[29] "Taima" in the Inuktitut language marks the end of a story. It can also indicate new beginnings. For the musical duo TAIMA, it "represents the actions of a people who take the future into their own hands": plus.google.com/+PaulFrank_paz/posts/E9gGDY2zudD, accessed February 11, 2015.