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

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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.

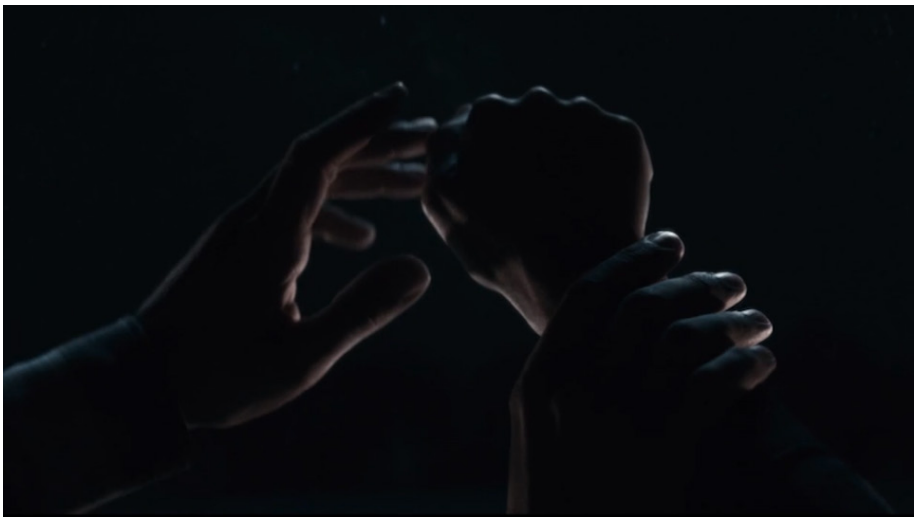

Figure 7: August and Ona's Hands

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).