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

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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).