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

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Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

23 Ibid., 154-155, 179.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

40 Ibid., 57-58.

41 Ibid., 94-95.

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

43 Ibid., 159.

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

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

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

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

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

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

47 Reed, *Lives Lived,* 6.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

54 Dirks, *Silence and Rage*, 98.

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

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

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

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