Pacifist Theology and the Problem of Mennonite Violence in Miriam Toews's *Women Talking* and Casey Plett's *Little Fish*

By Emily Stobbe-Wiebe, B.A.

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AUTHOR: Emily Stobbe-Wiebe, B.A. (Honours Equivalent, Canadian Mennonite University)

SUPERVISOR: Professor Grace Kehler

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Abstract

This paper examines how the Mennonite theology of pacifism has enacted, perpetuated, and allowed for violence against particularly marginalized groups such as women and the LGBTQ+ community. Through studying contemporary Mennonite literature, this paper attempts to discover how this literature reveals this violence, shows it to be working, and attempts to redeem the Mennonite faith and pacifism itself as positive in the world.

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Introduction

The field of Mennonite literature has blossomed since it was first sown in the early 1960s with the publication of Rudy Wiebe's novel *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. New strains in the field have cropped up in Mennonite literary criticism to question and assess these literatures: seeing what they can yield for today, uprooting the weeds and disposing of the chaff as necessary. Is Mennonite literature reaching its harvest? Is it time to reap the crop and plant something new? Contemporary Mennonite writers still think there is something to be gleaned among the tares, or why, after all these years, would they still be writing Mennonite literature?

Perhaps this farming metaphor seems like a kitschy way of beginning an academic dissertation, but I believe it accurately reflects both the traditional way of life of the community I write about as well as the deeper truth I wish to convey through this dissertation: the necessity of continually "doing again," reassessing, year after year, committing oneself to the project of coaxing out life from fertile ground, even if that ground also produces unwanted plants. Inspired by Miriam Toews in her novel, *Women Talking*, when she quotes Virgil – "Much service, too, does he who turns his plough, and again breaks crosswise through the ridges he raised" (79; 214) – I too seek to return to the field of Mennonite literature, look at the work that has been done before, and do it again, but this time, in a different direction. This project of "doing again" that I seek to undertake is a movement toward uncovering the violence in which Mennonites have been complicit in: a project of revelation for the purpose of discarding the "weeds" – that which has caused Mennonite violence – but also turning back to the faith to

renew and reform it, again asserting that there is "wheat" among the weeds; the whole field need not be burned.[1]

In this dissertation, I argue that Mennonite theologies of pacifism can perpetuate, enable, overlook, and themselves enact violence, especially upon marginalized groups such as women, black, Indigenous, and people of colour,[2] and LGBTQ+[3] folks. These types of violence include theologies of forced submission to suffering and perpetuation of domestic abuse, for example. This propensity of an ostensibly pacifist church to create violence through their very belief system is problematic. My project is to discover how contemporary Mennonite literature enters this discussion: how it reveals and sees this violence to come about and how the Mennonite faith and pacifism itself can be redeemed.

Why is this question of Mennonite violence still relevant today after sixty years of talking about it? Mennonite writers themselves are my guides here since they keep writing about this issue. Evidently, this problem has not been resolved. In fact, Mennonite writers, instead of tapering their engagement with Mennonite violence are revealing new areas of dialogue, uncovering new forms of violence hitherto not understood as violence by many Mennonites such as the maltreatment of transgender individuals. It is imperative to continue to question how these harms have been made possible in order to remedy them and learn what *else* we Mennonites have overlooked. Questions of violence, peace, and justice are timely in the social climate in which we live where movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo

[1] See Matt. 13:24-43 (*NIV Study Bible*) for the biblical use of this metaphor from which I draw.
[2] BIPOC
[3] In this paper, I will use the acronym LGBTQ+ to encompass the entirety of the Queer community.

consistently fight against far- right white nationalist, white supremacist, and Incel groups,[4] for example, which have been on the rise in the last decade. Joining these discussions of peace and justice within a specific cultural/religious reality helps ground these broader conversations occurring in the public sphere in order to find specific solutions. Finally, constructive, redemptive work rather than solely criticism is imperative in creating a generative way forward to make viable change and hope against violence. Preserving and reinvigorating pacifism and the Mennonite faith is central to this task.

Context

History and Theology of the Mennonites

The Mennonites as a cultural/religious group have their roots in early Anabaptism which began in the 1520s as a response to both Catholicism and Protestantism during the Reformation. As a part of the Radical Reformation (Gregory 150-51), Anabaptism is frequently recognized to have a polygenesis, thus embracing and causing a set of diverse convictions and beliefs that often contradict one another (Guenther Loewen 38; Weaver-Zercher 13).[5] This included both violent, fanatical sects – such as those founding the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster, an apocalyptic, polygamous group in the mid-1530s ("From Monogenesis to Polygenesis" 111; 119) – as well as nonviolent branches (Zuck 219-20). Yet despite a few groups such as those at Münster, this contested, spirit-led, and piecemeal movement cohered around the concepts of the separation of church and state and the enactment of voluntary, visible

[4] Meaning "involuntary celibates" (Scaptura and Boyle 278) – an online subculture uniting around issues of male sexual unfulfillment, blaming this state of affairs on women. This group espouses misogynistic, racist, and patriarchal ideals.

[5] See also the 1975 "From Monogenesis to Polygenesis: The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Origins" found in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* by James M. Stayer, Werner P. Packull, and Klaus Deppermann for more.

church signaled by adult baptism. These two key components contrasted strongly with both mainline Christian streams since the Anabaptists "rejected the centuries-old assumption that the gospel was best served by linking it to the state" (Weaver-Zercher 13). This placed the Anabaptists in the crosshairs of both the Catholic and Protestant (Lutheran) churches since they were considered heretical *and* politically seditious because of their challenge to church/state consolidated power and the threat they represented to the social order. This caused the onslaught of intense persecution the Anabaptists faced during the early years (Heppner; Redekop and Redekop xi; Weaver-Zercher 16-17).

As the movement progressed, and particularly during the time of Menno Simons's leadership (mid-1530s-1561) ("A Research Symposium" 599) Anabaptism began to solidify, abandoning the more spirit-led aspects of the movement, such as a penchant for the apocalyptic and prophetic, toward the goals of "unity and conformity within the community" (Harder 79) due in part to Simons's perfectionist impulse and emphasis on "the church 'without spot or wrinkle'" (91). While this move to a perfectionist ideal occasioned schisms, it also allowed for the vision of the Mennonites that many know today to emerge, characterized by an emphasis on praxis, pacifism, and separatism in some groups. The Anabaptists' emphasis on orthopraxy – right action – was an outgrowth of their belief in the visible, voluntary church marked by a lived ethical reality. Unlike Luther's conception of grace and salvation through faith alone (Guenther Loewen 38) as a personal, inner experience (Bender 14) offered by God for forgiveness of sins which resulted from unavoidable compromise with the "worldly" (23), the Anabaptists believed that faith necessitates action: ethics was at the heart of Anabaptism. Salvation, then, is a result of discipleship: "salvation is not simply the certitude of being saved

from damnation (which is only a reassuring idea or feeling), but a 'walking in newness of life'" (Friedmann 83) so that the true Christian's actions reflected their new stance of faith. It is not that faith and beliefs were abandoned as useless categories, but that they were inadequate; works resulting from faith were central (Bender 11) so that "Theology was for [the Anabaptists] a means, not an end" (15).

The Mennonites' emphasis on pacifism flowed out of this praxis orientation and is represented in the Schleitheim Confession – an early Anabaptist document thought to be penned by Michael Sattler in 1527 – which discusses "the sword": "The sword is . . . outside the perfection of Christ" (qtd in Wenger 250). The true Christian is to abandon all use of "devilish weapons of force – . . . and all their use [either] for friends or against one's enemies – by virtue of the word of Christ: Resist not [him that is] evil" (qtd in 249-50). Finally, separatism – an idea flowing out of the early Anabaptist concepts of separation of church and state and praxis but warped due to an undue emphasis on purity – began to define the Mennonites ("Pacifist Battlegrounds" 190-91), eventually causing consequent migrations in the next centuries: to Prussia, Russia, Canada, the USA, and South and Central America and beyond.

Mennonite Literature

Mennonite literature has frequently engaged this theological history to criticize and reveal the violence and hypocrisy of the Mennonite community itself as an ostensible peace church. Writers such as Rudy Wiebe, Di Brandt, Patrick Friesen, and Miriam Toews have entered this conversation, discussing the violence of the Mennonite community.[6] In her

[6] See for example, Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many* for one of the earliest instances of Mennonite literature dealing with the contradictions between pacifist convictions – specifically in the context of conscientious objection during WWII – while simultaneously committing familial, specifically sexual violence. See also Miriam Toews's *A*

collection of essays entitled *So this is the world and here I am in it*, Brandt directly correlates the Mennonites' pacifist stance with their violence toward the land and the marginalized:

> In all those years of listening to preachers preach to us, . . . endlessly exhorting us to . . . a more ethical life, not once did I hear a single one of them talk about the land, except to pronounce gleefully that we "shall have dominion over it," . . . [but] we should not go to war to defend it. Not once . . . did I hear one of them talk about an ethical practice of land ownership, or address the politics of gender and race, the economics of chemicalization, the dangers of pesticides and herbicides and fertilizers, or the implications of genetic manipulation of seeds and livestock, for the land and the creatures in it, and for our bodies. ("This land that I love, this wide, wide prairie" 7-8)

Brandt's writing is rife with revelations of this kind, uncovering the hypocrisy present in a Mennonite theology and practice that allows for violation of the land ("This land that I love" 6), sexual and physical abuse of women and children ("Dancing Naked" 38), and silencing of difference (41; "Creative conflict" 134). Revelations of this kind by the Mennonite literary community have often been understood as betrayals. But Mennonite writers have continued to ask these difficult questions and expose the troubled past and present of the Mennonites with a hope for a better, more peaceful future.

Chapter Summaries

In Chapter I, I turn to Miriam Toews's novel *Women Talking*. She writes in the form of meeting minutes fictionalizing the real-life events of the rapes that occurred between 2005 and 2009 in Bolivia's Manitoba Colony. These minutes detail the decision making process of Toews's colony women who have experienced rape and violation at the hands of the colony men, deciding whether they should "Do Nothing," "Stay and Fight," or "Leave" (*Women Talking* 6)

Complicated Kindness for a more recent example of subtle forms of Mennonite violence played out against the main characters who are portrayed as representative martyrs of the Mennonite community due to the community's propensity to exile any and all dissenters to established religious norms of separatism and denial of worldly pleasures (Stobbe-Wiebe 57).

and represents the women's process of deconstructing the faith of the men, rejecting it as deeply violent and flawed, and claiming their own voice as capable theologians. Using an historical and theological lens to chart the rise and fall of Anabaptist pacifism through its early years and on to the present, I argue that the colony's movement toward separatism and abandonment of the original Anabaptist tenets of separation of church and state has led to the unraveling of the core Mennonite beliefs of equality, praxis, pacifism, and voluntary, visible church membership, thus allowing for rampant violence to exist throughout the colony, culminating in the rapes. The women in the novel reject this separatism, instead embracing a visible church ethic which is open to the world, thereby preserving their original Anabaptist faith. Likewise, they return to their early Anabaptist roots pre-Menno Simons while maintaining the positive values he instilled in the movement but with a focus on openness, mystery, and acceptance of difference as a way forward toward life and generativity in the world.

Chapter II turns to Casey Plett's *Little Fish*, the story of a transgender woman, Wendy Reimer, who grapples with the daily violence of her own life and oppressions and ingested trauma placed on her by her Mennonite community. Here, I argue that the theology of *Gelassenheit* – "yieldedness or resignation to the will of God and renunciation of any form of selfishness" (Friedmann 124) and self-denial – has caused and perpetuated violence against LGBTQ+ individuals through the internalized urge to undercut violence as unimportant or "fine" and an aversion to aging, dreaming, and futurity as an outgrowth of distorted understandings of selfishness. This internalization leads to violation, self-harm, and despair among Mennonite LGBTQ+ characters. But *Gelassenheit* is transformed in the novel into its redemptive counterpart – *kenosis* – which is focused on accepting lavish, abounding love, especially from

the queer community, rather than focusing on human suffering as primary. In this way, Plett envisions a new, truly peaceful way of being in the world.

Chapter I

Being in the World?: Violence and Separatism in *Women Talking*

Introduction

Miriam Toews's novel, *Women Talking*, is primarily concerned with the question of how to be faithful as violated women to a purportedly pacifist faith which has participated in that violation. In Toews's novel, following the arrest of eight colony men charged with raping the women of the colony over the course of several years, two groups of women – the Friesens and the Loewens – ask themselves this same question as they decide what action to take as they debate in Earnest Thiessen's hay loft: whether to "Do Nothing," "Stay and Fight," or "Leave" (6); which action will preserve their core beliefs? During this meeting, they discover that in order to answer this question, they must know and embrace their core beliefs themselves if they have any chance of making the correct decision of what action to take.

Through imagining this process of discovery in the form of meeting minutes taken by the colony school teacher, August Epp, Toews grounds this novel in the fictionalized events of the true story of the rapes that occurred between 2005 and 2009 in Bolivia's Manitoba Colony – Toews's Molotschna Colony in *Women Talking*. The novel notes that "Between 2005 and 2009, more than three hundred girls and women of Molotschna were made unconscious and attacked in their own beds. On average, an attack occurred every three or four days" (15) resulting in "Nearly every female member of the Molotschna Colony [being] violated by this group of eight [men]" (15) using an animal anesthetic to render their victims unconscious (np). In both real life and Toews's fictional account, the group was arrested and convicted but the story is ever complicated by denial that the rapes occurred as reported, news that the arrested men were

scapegoated, and reports that the attacks are still ongoing (Heppner). Toews' novel enters this complex web of stories, questioning too whether the right men were arrested, attesting to the rampant incest and violence present throughout the colony, and pointing to theological problems as the source of colony violence rather than a few "bad apples."

Through her fictive account in which she imagines what actions the women can take over the course of their meeting while the men of the colony are away in the city posting bail to secure the release of the accused rapists, Toews reveals the violence present within the Molotschna Colony which is primarily a result of a lapsed understanding of the early Anabaptist tenet of separation of church and state. Through a study of Anabaptist history, I argue that the colony's fundamental misunderstanding of this concept and enactment as *separatism* – a leave-taking of "the world" through the formation of an alternative political/social/religious order in the form of the colony – has caused the establishment of their own "world," including the wedding of church and state authority over all colony life – the very collusion the early Anabaptists sought to avoid, as Jack Heppner aptly acknowledges in reference to the events on the real life Bolivian colony (np). This disintegration of the separation of church and state has led to a further erosion of several key Anabaptist tenets. Women are envisioned by the men as (less than) animals (*Women Talking* 39-40); patriarchal modes of "power over" (123) have been reestablished; and scriptural interpretation is only available to men. Secondly, the colony's lapsed focus on praxis in the form of pacifism and finally, voluntary membership have allowed for and encouraged rampant violence in the form of the rapes, but also caused harmful theologies of forced forgiveness as well as suicidal tendencies within the colony. The women in the novel, on the other hand, are imaged in stark contrast against the men and resemble their

ancestral Radical Reformation reformers of the sixteenth century in a number of ways: their faithfulness to the Anabaptist vision of the separation of church and state; their practice of fleeing the places in which power, not compassionate relationships, dictates everyday life; their affiliation with concepts of revolution; their association with the Anabaptist charismatic movements in which women held particularly powerful prophetic roles; and their return to the Anabaptist tenets which the men have abandoned.[7] Like their spiritual forebearers, the women renew and reform their fundamentally broken Anabaptist faith to return to a defense of lived pacifism, forgiveness, love, and equality. Likewise, the women gesture back to the early, pre-Menno Simons days of Anabaptism with their emphasis on uncertainty, difference, and acceptance of the other as well as a faith that is in the world.

The Problem

Early Anabaptist History and Theology

Anabaptism – the religious heritage which the Molotschna Colony of *Women Talking* maintains – was formed in the 1520s as a response to both Catholicism and Protestantism in the Reformation. The Anabaptists disagreed with both mainline Christian streams – specifically in their belief of the separation of church and state which neither group espoused – and was considered both heretical and politically seditious because of their challenge to church/state consolidated power (Heppner; Redekop and Redekop xi; Weaver-Zercher 16-17). The unity of church and state the Anabaptists perceived led to abhorrent abuses of power and corruption, violence against difference, and hierarchical institutions that marginalized and preserved power

[7] See Wes Harrison's "The Role of Women in Anabaptist Thought and Practice: The Hutterite Experience of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries" and Jack Heppner's "Reflections on Bolivian Mennonite Realities," for example, for more on these issues.

imbalances. The Anabaptists experienced this violence first-hand through their own intense persecution (Weaver-Zercher 16-17). Instead, the Anabaptists proposed that the church should be separate from the state, leaving each to their separate sphere of control over social life (Ainsley 137).

Flowing out of their conviction that the state should not be affiliated with the church, the Anabaptists proposed the concept of the "visible church," in contrast with the mainline churches' concept of the "invisible church" (Friedmann 117). The invisible church is a result of and correlates with the state church of which all citizens are required to be a part since the state church performs baptisms and marriages, for example, and keeps these records as a function of civic citizenship; as Mennonite historian Harold S. Bender points out, "the medieval idea of a mass church with membership of the entire population from birth to the grave [was] compulsory by law and force" (18). Since all people in the social order were included in this institution, necessarily some individuals were less committed than others to the religious aims of the church – perhaps members solely because of political/cultural necessity rather than true, heartfelt conviction. These mainstream churches were resigned to the fact that "Christianizing the entire social order" (23) was not possible and "decided that it was better to include the masses within the fold of the church than to form a fellowship of true Christians only" (12). The visible church, in opposition to the invisible, state-sponsored church, was a voluntary community. This choice was signaled by conversion and adult baptism (Hanners 190). The Anabaptists maintained that infant baptism was antithetical to the creation of a visible church since infants were incapable of choosing baptism or to follow Christ. Thus, informed and

committed adult baptism was necessary (189). Membership within this visible church community was therefore not forced, unlike the state church.

As outlined in the introduction of this thesis, the Anabaptists were focused on action as the primary religious category rather than theology – i.e. orthopraxy not orthodoxy. This emphasis on praxis led the Anabaptists to an ethics of pacifism, nonresistance, or nonviolence. This peace stance manifested itself as "an absolute rejection of the use of force that permeates all social relations within and without the community" (qtd in Redekop and Redekop xii). This – and ultimately their rejection of church/state collusion – in turn led to an emphasis on equality as a key category since "power and authority were not vested in traditional and inherited political power or in the ritually sanctioned offices of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but rather only in the individual will and the community of the faithful" (xi). The church was seen as an antihierarchical institution of shared power rather than domination. In this case, preaching, teaching, and interpreting scripture were not reserved for the clergy but were emphasized as also the task of the laity – or rather all members, including women, had equal access to divine connection through the Holy Spirit and the Bible (Davis 231-32).

The Molotschna Colony of Toews's novel falls within this strain of Anabaptist thought; the colony ostensibly believes in the key tenets of the visible, voluntary, praxis-oriented, pacifist, egalitarian church. But something has gone awry. These supposed beliefs are not put into action on the colony. This is because they have confused their primary, motivating belief in the separation of church and state with *separatism* – full political/social/religious removal from "the world" through the creation of an isolated alternative order for the purpose of maintaining religious purity while actually replicating the original problems the Anabaptists saw present in

the state. Mennonite separatism and isolation come from a misunderstanding of separation of church and state as separation of all of life from the established social/political order rather than separation of religiously-controlled aspects of life – the sacraments, for example – from the political sphere – governance and law and order. Through separatism, the Mennonites instead recreated the world in miniature which was their own self-governed order where church authority has subsumed the roles of and become the civic authority controlling all aspects of life. In essence, by retreating from the world, all the issues of church/state unity are recreated.

The Novel

The Old Colony members of Molotschna show this anxiety surrounding separation from the world. Several of the novel's characters reflect this internalized urge toward separatism, whether they personally espouse separatism as good or not, such as the narrator of the novel and the minute taker, August Epp, the colony school teacher who only recently has been allowed back into the colony after his parents' excommunication when he was a child.[8] He succinctly explains the connection between the colony and the world, saying "I came from a part of the world that had been established to be its own world, apart from the world. In a sense . . . my people . . . don't exist, or at least are supposed to be seen not to" (*Women Talking* 9). August even understands himself to embody nonexistence which he expresses in a conversation with a librarian before his return to the colony:

> My foray into the world resulted in my removal from the world, [August] said.
> Almost as though you were brought into existence not to exist, [the librarian] said, laughing.
> Singled out to conform. Yes, I said . . . Born to not to be. (9-10)

[8] For more references to the colony's disavowal of the world, see *Women Talking* 13, 80, and 128.

In this interchange, August and the librarian use a series of four paradoxes prompted by what August ostensibly views as a bizarre and irrational combination of his attending "University, briefly, and then prison" (9) to explain the tension he feels regarding his own existence and relationship to the world. His description of his existence as essentially absurd underlines the extent to which August has ingested the colony's narrative of separation from the world. But, in a surprising move which August is himself unable to fully embrace at this point in the novel, the librarian signals the fact that August's perception of impossibility between his dual sense of existence and nonexistence may not actually be the case when she says, in reference to his attending both university and prison, "perhaps the two aren't mutually exclusive" (9). This phrase can be applied to all the paradoxes August suggests so that his feelings of "removal" (9), nonexistence, "conform[ity]" (10), and lack of being no longer necessarily follow from his entrance "into the world" (9), "existence" (10), "singled out"-ness (10), or the sheer fact of his birth. But just like the librarian calls into question August's notion of the paradoxical nature of his own existence in the world, the distinction between the world and the colony is also shown to be a lie since "so much of what exists in the outside world is kept out of Molotschna, but curses, like pain, always find a way in" (106).

How does the Molotschna Colony's separatism enact the undoing of their core Anabaptist tenets? The creation of separatist, isolated communities recreates and reestablishes the unity of church and state firstly through the practical matters of colony administration, law, and order – i.e. self-governance (Heppner). This represents an important departure from a separation of church and state model. Toews's Molotschna Colony reflects the dynamics present in the real-life Mennonite colonies in Russia, Canada, the United States, and Paraguay

which sought self-governance. For example, as Jacob A. Loewen and Wesley J. Prieb point out in "The Abuse of Power among Mennonites in South Russia, 1789-1919," in Russia, "The Mennonite *privilegium* granted by the czar empowered the colonists to govern their own civic and community affairs" (96) so that, ironically, "the very Russian law . . . led to the creation of a Mennonite state and to the eventual merger of the Mennonite Church with that state" (96-97).[9] Like its real life counterparts, the Molotschna Colony in *Women Talking* reflects this reunification of church and state due to the fact that it "is self-policed" (5) so that when the rapists are first identified, Peters initially "planned to lock the men in a shed . . . for several decades" (5). When this plan proves untenable because of outbreaks of revenge-fueled violence (5; 21; 44-45), only then are the men turned over to the state authorities, "for their own safety, presumably" (5).

The Molotschnans, by virtue of having control over their own governance and thus having reunified church and state, have reinstated hierarchical institutions – including patriarchy – rather than the rule of equality. Patriarchal oppression and inequality of women on the colony appear most saliently in the women's treatment and imaging as animals by the colony men. Greta, the matriarch of the Loewen family, is the first to draw this connection (21). Her comments, sparked from a story about her horses, Ruth and Cheryl, ignites further discussion on the topic (20-25). Salome, one of the Friesen women, comments that "If we're animals, or even animal-like, perhaps there's no chance anyway of entering the gates of heaven . . . unless animals are permitted. Although that doesn't make sense because animals provide

[9] Similarly, in both Canada and the United States, the Mennonites sought social/political autonomy which, when threatened, occasioned their another migration, this time to South America where they were happily obliged in their search for political independence (Hanners 188; 202; Nobbs-Thiessen 217-18).

food and labour, and we will require neither of those things in heaven" (25). Salome's concerns reflect a potent concept: that women's status as nonhuman in the eyes of the men precludes the men from conceiving of the women as viable spiritual entities capable of heaven. Throughout the course of the women's ongoing argument regarding their human/animal status, the men's perception of the women progressively devolves so that not only are women first in the category of animals and thus subhuman, but soon are discovered to be even lesser than animals since they "have been treated worse than animals" (39-40; see also 56; 188).

The women's inequality due to their treatment by the men as animals comes to a head in their discussion of membership – a key term signaling the early Anabaptist emphasis on equality. When Mariche assumes that women *are* members of the colony – thereby affirming equality – Salome immediately "explodes. We're not *members* of Molotschna!" (120). When she rhetorically asks if Ruth and Cheryl, Greta's horses, are "members of Molotschna" (120), she makes the point that women, like animals, are not included in the religious fold of the colony comprised of the men. Salome goes on to say:

> Fourteen-year-old boys are expected to give us orders, to determine our fates, to vote on our excommunication, to speak at the burials of our own babies while we remain silent, to interpret the Bible for us, to lead us in worship, to punish us! We are not *members,* Mariche, we are commodities. (120-21)

Here, Salome lists seven actions that fourteen-year-old boys take in the colony that women are prohibited from, encompassing the women's entire existence, both secular and spiritual. This fast-paced listing of short, rapid-fire phrases comprised of a single object (the women) and verbs (to "give," "determine," "vote," "interpret," "lead," and "punish" (120-21)) all applying to the subject of the sentence (fourteen-year-old boys) reflects Salome's explosive energy and rage that the women are not allowed to perform these actions themselves. Salome highlights

one specific action that fourteen-year-old boys are to enact for the women – "speak[ing] at the burials of [the women's] babies while [they] remain silent" (121). This centering highlights Salome's acute revulsion that boys should take this action rather than the women, who rightfully should do at least this task, if not the others. This action is detailed at length by Salome, departing from her otherwise terse catalog of condemnation, allowing herself to seethingly and explicitly outline why the boys' usurpation of this activity is so repulsive to her: because the babies are the women's "own" (121). Likewise, she notes the action – or more accurately given Salome's definition of the women as "commodities" rather than "members" (121), lack of action – that the women are to take while the boys act – "remain[ing] silent" (121). Salome's description of the women as "commodities" rather than members also stresses the passive role of the women in her preceding sentence where all seven actions are taken by the subject actors of the sentence – the boys – against the women – the objects – both literally in terms of commodities and grammatically. It is impossible in a world where Salome's long sentence is true – where boys are actors and women are acted upon – for women to be anything but commodities.

The women recognize the power differential they experience over and against that of the men so that "it is men who prevent [them] from achieving those goals" (66) of "freedom and safety" (66). Ona, one of the Friesen women, clarifies that it is "perhaps not men, per se, but a pernicious ideology that has been allowed to take hold of men's hearts and minds" (66; see also 121-22) which August terms "Patriarchy" (121). This mindset is to blame for this inequality and abject use of power over the women and allows the men to treat the women as

"commodities" (121) so that they can be "used . . . up" (121) and even hyperbolically sold "at auction afterwards" if the men could (121).

Ona recognizes and names the men's denial of equality present in patriarchy as "power *over*" (123):

> Peters said these men are evil, . . . but that's not true. It's the quest for power, on the part of Peters and the elders and on the part of the founders of Molotschna, that is responsible for these attacks, because in their quest for power, they need to have those they'd have power *over*, and those people are us. And they have taught this lesson of power to the boys and men of Molotschna, and the boys and men of Molotschna have been excellent students. (123)

Peters's scapegoating of the eight accused men as the source of all evil in the colony is revealed by Ona as a ploy meant to preserve the system that created and sustained such violence in the first place. The scapegoating functions to assuage the harmed parties but maintains the system of privilege from which he and the other men benefit: the very system causing the colony violence. As Ona says, preserving and continuing the hierarchy in the colony is more important than addressing violence.

Hierarchical power as described in *Women Talking* and the interpretation of scripture are inherently connected, as Carol Penner illustrates in her dissertation *Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices: Peace Theology and Violence Against Women*:

> all Christians do not have equal access to sharing their reflections. People have differing amounts of power in the Christian community. In the Mennonite community, ministers, conference leaders and professors in colleges and seminaries have more power than others in spreading their theological views through their preaching and teaching. (12)

This hierarchical structure – and the power that is associated with it – determines whose interpretation of the Bible is validated, and whose voices are silenced – or not allowed to exist at all. This disproportionately affects women and people of colour (Harder 92), barring the

experience of these groups from theological legitimation (Hildebrand 74). It seems that the early Anabaptist belief that *all* must have access to interpreting the biblical text themselves has faded in Toews' Molotschna Colony.

The women of *Women Talking* experience this form of inequality through their prevention of interpreting the Bible themselves by the men. Not only are the women illiterate and thus technically unable to read the biblical text, but any man is deemed more qualified to interpret the Bible in Molotschna than any woman. The women are aware of this reality and bring up the question of biblical interpretation in an argument between Mejal and Salome. Salome refutes the biblical imperative for women to submit to their husbands, noting that "by leaving, [the women] are not necessarily disobeying the men according to *the Bible*, because [they], the women, do not know exactly what is in the Bible, being unable to read it. Furthermore, the only reason why [they] feel [they] need to submit to [their] husbands is because [their] husbands have told [them] that the Bible decrees it" (156-57). Notably, Salome does not question that the Bible has ultimate say over the women's lives; she merely questions what is in the Bible – or the women's ability to know what is in the Bible due to the presence of "middlemen" with vested interests in certain interpretations of the Bible that are for the men's benefit at the expense of the women.

The lapse of the standard of equality in the colony through the reestablishment of hierarchical systems, treatment of women as animals, patriarchy, and the interpretation of scripture reserved solely for men signals a move away from a peace practice oriented toward the women; instead, the men's faith turns inward, motivated by right-beliefs – orthodoxy – rather than orthopraxy – right action. This lapse of praxis unravels the men's pacifist stance in

Women Talking. If right-action toward women is no longer required, why not treat women as one pleases? Thereby domestic physical abuse, which Mariche experiences, not to mention the central violence of the novel – rape and incest – becomes permissible. The existence of these violent acts towards women eradicates all pretenses of a nonviolent stance. Salome recognizes this, saying "Well that peace sure as fuck is not happening in Molotschna" (152).[10]

The erasure of equality and praxis leads to forced church membership in the Molotschna Colony.[11] Likewise, the women of Toews's colony recognize that all boys are baptized at age fifteen regardless of personal conviction and that social/familial/economic suicide would result from not joining the church at that age due to being expelled from the colony. This ostensibly makes for no choice at all. But if it is no longer a choice to join the Mennonite faith – if adult baptism is the new requirement – this is precisely what the early

[10] Similar to the instances in *Women Talking*, Loewen and Prieb detail the collapse of praxis in the Russian colonies through the 1850-80's journal of Jacob Epp. These diaries record both the violence committed by the men of the colonies including "wife beatings" (Loewen and Prieb 112) as well as sexual abuse which were "widespread in the church and colony family. It involved a wide variety of manifestations. Several authorities have pointed out that because of low female status, men expressed their sexuality with their wives at will. . . . Some women claimed that once they were married, they never had another menstrual period" (113). These acts of violence against women are enabled because women "in general were considered *unmundig* (not capable of rational decision) or *unselbststaendig* (incapable of being independent)" (112). These diaries hold remarkable echoes with Toews's novel, including her description of the women as animals. Prieb and Loewen quote Epp's conclusions about the Russian Mennonite colonies: "Our Mennonite people think that if we refuse to go to war we are fine Christians. They forget that their hearts can be full of malice, vengeance and revenge. Everywhere there are quarrels, disputes, strife and violence. Our people have not let God's Word establish roots in their hearts" (113). Here, Epp clearly connects the treatment of women in the Russian colonies with a collapsed understanding of pacifism down to a lack of participation in war rather than a broader stance of pacifism, including the good treatment of women.

[11] In the real-world Paraguayan colony Ben Nobbs-Thiessen refers to, quoting Joseph Winfield Fretz:

> Fretz again criticized Menno Colony, this time for denying land ownership to non-church members. Referring to church control as theocratic, he argued that the colony's organization effectively, "invalidates the concept and the fact of a believer's church and the separation of church and state" where membership becomes a pragmatic consequence of "group custom and personal convenience" instead of genuine belief. These comments display a particularly ironic twist in light of the enshrinement of non-interference of government in church affairs as a core of Mennonite belief which for Menno Colony was one of the primary reasons for their initial decision to immigrate to Paraguay. (qtd in Nobbs-Thiessen 217-18)

The requirement in Menno Colony for church membership to own land contrasts with the notion of the separation of church and state.

Anabaptists fought against. Members of Molotschna may as well be baptized as infants as at fifteen if there is to be no choice in the matter.

An erasure of the choice to join the Colony leads to the final nail in the Mennonite coffin, signaling the death knell of the concept of the separation of church and state and any positive view of this variety of Mennonitism. Involuntary membership means that the Mennonite church is no longer a visible "true" church. A transformation has occurred. The church has performed a full transformation, moving from rejecting the concept of an invisible church in favour of a visible church finally to embodying the mass, invisible church idea they earlier decried.

Violence

What effects has the colony's abandonment of their original commitment to the separation of church and state created? A reign of violence in the colony has occurred in the form of rapes – the most prevalent violence in the novel – but also harmful ideologies of forced forgiveness and suicidal tendencies among all colony members, male or female. All of these forms of violence have been affected by the theology of the men in the colony caused by the collapse of their theological concepts of equality, a praxis of pacifism, and voluntary membership.

The rapes of the novel are one symptom of the colony males' lapsed theology. The reader is gradually offered more information regarding the circumstances and effects of these rapes. Early in the novel, August relates how the story of the rapes broke with the help of a student's perspective of the events:

> When I arrived in the spring of 2008, there were only whispers, fragments of whispers, concerning the mysterious night-time disturbances. Cornelius, one of my

> students, wrote a poem called “The Washline” in which he described the sheets and garments on his mother’s washline as having voices, of speaking with one another, of sending messages to other garments on other washlines. . . .
>
> On my way back to my shed that afternoon I saw the washlines of Molotschna, I saw the women’s dresses flapping in the wind and the men’s overalls and the linens and the bedding and the towels. I listened carefully but I couldn’t make out what they were saying. Perhaps, I now think, because they weren’t talking to me. They were talking to each other. (14-15)

Cornelius’s poem opens August’s eyes – or rather, his ears – to a new plane of reality of which he was previously unaware and to which he had no access. As August himself notes, while he has been granted new ears to hear that there is a conversation occurring that hitherto he did not know about, he is still unable to hear the content of that conversation no matter how closely he listens. This is because this plane of conversation is an explicitly feminine space. While male garments find their place on the washline in the form of “overalls” and the shared garments of “linens,” “bedding,” and “towels” (15), male voices do not contribute to the conversation since laundry is an explicitly female occupation on the colony speaking to the intimate concerns of women. The inclusion of male-related garments on the washline speaks definitively to the content of the washline conversations: the ways that men affect the lives of women in violent ways. This violence is present and symbolized through the very inclusion of the “linens,” “bedding,” and “towels” (15) which become soiled when the rapes occur which the women themselves must wash, very literally cleaning up the messes of the colony’s lapsed theology of pacifism. Interpreting the marks left on the “linens,” “bedding,” and “towels” (15) of the colony allows the women the space to create an alternative conversation surrounding their nightly violations to which the men have no access, thereby fashioning a space of liberation and freedom even as the women are complicit in the erasure of the evidence of their own violation.

The ubiquity of these rapes is reiterated in the frequent disclosures throughout the novel so that nearly every female character is at one point in the course of the meeting minutes referred to as a rape victim (28; 30; 43-46; 49; 57-58; 63; 64; 85; 93; 105). The effects of these rapes are manifold and intimately inform all areas of the women's lives: Ona becomes pregnant (49; 105), Greta's teeth are destroyed (30), Mejal has recurrent seizures (85), Salome's three-year-old daughter Miep contracts a sexually transmitted illness (45) and begins to regress developmentally (63), and Nettie Gerbrandt, another colony woman, delivers prematurely causing the death of her child due to the abuse, stops speaking to anyone but children (45-46), and even stops identifying as a woman, instead naming herself "Melvin" (93).

Women Talking begins the meetings with a description of the:

> strange attacks that have haunted the women of Molotschna for the past several years. Since 2005, nearly every girl and women has been raped by what many in the colony believed to be ghosts, or Satan . . . The attacks occurred at night. As their families slept, the girls and women were made unconscious with a spray of the anesthetic used on our farm animals, made from the belladonna plant. The next morning, they would wake up in pain, groggy and often bleeding, and not understand why. Recently, the eight demons responsible for the attacks turned out to be real men from Molotschna, many of whom are the close relatives – brothers, cousins, uncles, nephews – of the women" (4).

This excerpt introduces the precipitous events which led to the women's meeting but most importantly focusses on the imagery of ghosts to discuss the rapes; the women are "haunted" by "demons" (4), placing their experience into a supernatural, religious, theological context from the very beginning. This theme of blaming the violence against women in the colony on supernatural forces continues repeatedly throughout the remainder of the novel as the male authority figures of the colony attempt to exculpate themselves from any responsibility for the violence. Variously the women are told that "the devil had visited the girls and the women of Molotschna" (100), that "God brought the rapists into this world to test [the women], to test

[their] faith" (107), that the attacks were "imagined" (119), a result of "ghosts or devils or Satan" (119), or that the women are "being punished by God for impure thoughts or deeds" (119). These explanations for the rapes echo those many feminist theologians claim are justifications given to other real-life victims of rape by the church. For example, Carol Penner says that "church and society often blame . . . …wom[e]n for the abuse [they have] received" (15), implying that their violation is a result of punishment from God and that their suffering is meant to "strengthen their faith" (101-02). As in many Mennonite churches,[12] the Molotschna colony men attempt to eradicate their own complicity in violence against women through attributing it to supernatural forces, but in fact they simultaneously highlight the true culprit of this reign of violence in the colony: their theological underpinnings of separatism. Bishop Peters himself reportedly expresses the private understanding of this when he says "Dump men in the middle of nowhere, confine them, abuse them, suspend them in limbo, and this is what you get" (*Women Talking* 100); but he cannot stick openly to this claims since he quickly reneges, publicly claiming the rapes as a result of the devil (100). While the description of the rapes at the beginning of the novel quickly disabuses the reader of the fallacious nature of the attacks since the "demons" (4) are in fact flesh and blood "men from Molotschna" (4), quickly assigning blame on the individuals to which it truly belongs, the physicality of the perpetrators does not

[12] See for example Carol Penner's *Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices: Peace Theology and Violence Against Women* where she discusses the ways in which Mennonite theological writings such as those of John Howard Yoder, confessions of faith, and hymnody perpetuate seeing violence against women as supernaturally motivated by spiritualizing suffering (Penner 68) and "suggest[ing] that God is testing or punishing [women] through male violence against women" (102). As Penner aptly notes, these sources frequently "focus on the offender [in that the] . . . needs [of abused women] are secondary to the needs of the offender" (113), like Toews's colony men who blame the women for their abuse in order to preserve their own spiritual purity.

discount the spiritual nature of the attacks as hinted to by the terminology of ghostliness; these rapes are still a result of theological oppressors.

The women of the colony are further violated after the rapes through theological concepts of forced forgiveness, which Ona labels as "coerced" (26). As August reports early in the novel:

> when the perpetrators return [from jail], the women of Molotschna will be given the opportunity to forgive these men, thus guaranteeing everyone's place in heaven. If the women don't forgive the men . . . the women will have to leave the colony for the outside world, of which they know nothing. The women have very little time, only two days, to organize their response. (5)

While this excerpt may seem at the outset to support forgiveness as a voluntary practice, the existence of an ultimatum with a short deadline and the serious consequence of being excommunicated from the colony – both affecting their earthly life as well as their heavenly life should they decide not to forgive the men – make this an illusion of choice and freedom. Mariche understands the reality of the women's predicament, including the consequences if they do not forgive – earthly exile from the colony and a place in hell – suggesting that the women are under no delusion that their forgiveness of the men is volitional (24-26; see also 94; 108).

The forced forgiveness pictured on the Molotschna Colony in *Women Talking* mirrors that which Carol Penner details. She notes that victims of abuse and sexual violence in Mennonite communities are often told that they need to forgive immediately (C. Penner 36-37; 83; 113-14; 151-56). These calls to forgiveness do not take into consideration the actual process of forgiveness, which is long and difficult (156), nor detail *how* forgiveness occurs (83); instead, the concern is to bring the abuser back into the fold rather than to attend to the health, safety,

and wellbeing of the victim (113; 152). Like the concerns the women of *Women Talking* raise, the ability of the victim to forgive their offender is perceived as depending on a reciprocal relationship of God's ability to forgive the victim of their sins; "The message to women who have been violated was clear – it is their Christian responsibility to forgive the one who has hurt them. They must forgive if they want God to forgive their sins" (83): a traumatic idea for "those who are on a long journey of forgiveness" (114), especially if forgiveness is not coming easily for the victim due to trauma and the nature of the abuse.

The violence of the colony is a result of their theological underpinnings and is not only limited to the experience of women in *Women Talking* – or to sexual violence and domestic abuse. Rather, colony members have internalized this violence and directed it toward themselves. This ingestion of violence shows up prevalently in the insinuations of self-violence masked as humour and play throughout the novel, including the frequent jokes of the young girls – Neitje and Autje. For example, during the first hayloft meeting, when Autje begins to swing from the rafters, her mother, Mejal, chastises her, saying "can't she hear the rafter creaking, does she want the roof to cave in?" (27) which August adds "that perhaps she does" (27). Similarly, the girls mime various ways of killing themselves when they are bored such as shooting themselves in the mouth with a rifle and dying by cyanide pill (39). All these forms of violence are a result of a theology that supports, justifies, and perpetuates violence against women. As Toews herself notes in her article "Peace Shall Destroy Many," pacifism and non-conflict, core tenets of the Mennonite faith, may in fact be sources of [intra-communal] violence and conflict, all the more damaging because unacknowledged or denied" ("Peace Shall Destroy Many").

This self-violence shows up most significantly in the several suicides that are alluded to throughout the novel, including both Ona's father (*Women Talking* 172) and Ona's sister, Mina, who commits suicide after her daughter Neitje's rape:

> Neitje is Mina's daughter, now in the care of Salome. Mina hanged herself after Neitje was attacked . . . At first Peters told Mina it was Satan who was responsible for the attack, that it was punishment from God, that God was punishing the women for their sins. Then Peters told Mina she was making the attack up. He repeated the words "wild female imagination," with forceful punctuation after reach of the words to create three short sentences. Mina demanded to know which it was: Satan or her imagination. Mina clawed at Peters' eyes. She removed her clothes and damaged her body with pinking shears. She went to the barn and hanged herself. Peters cut her down and told the colony she had inhaled too many ammonia fumes while cleaning the yearling shed. (57-58)

Here, Mina is portrayed as a Christ figure where Jesus's anointing and passion is retold to mirror the story of the women's violation in the colony. Firstly, the physical similarities of Mina's death mirror that of Jesus's; like Jesus, Mina is stripped and mutilated (Matt. 27:28-30; Mark 15:17-19; Luke 22:63-65; John 19:1-3) and she dies by hanging, like Jesus's hanging – crucifixion – on the cross (Matt. 27:32-50; Mark 15:21-37; Luke 23:26-46; John 19:16-30). The difference between Jesus's death and Mina's, though, is that Mina enacts these forms of violence on herself. But this difference between self-hanging and crucifixion is more superficial than it may at first appear since Mina prophetically signals on her very body the physical violence in the form of the rapes and abuse of the colonists on the women as well as the theological violence of the colony in the form of forced submission and forgiveness practices. So, while Mina *is* performing violence on herself, it is the colony's violence which is being played out on her body: it is the men who theologically hang Mina, who scapegoat her because of their own resistance to having their culture's violence revealed.

Like the male political/religious figures in the biblical text co-opt the women's story and change it for their own purposes, so Bishop Peters unites the several male co-options from the passion narrative of both the disciples and the Roman guards and Pharisees. Like the disciples, Peters appropriates the role of interpreting and spreading the news of the Christ figure's death, largely erasing the role of women in religious contexts. But like the Roman guards and Pharisees, both groups the explicit "bad guys" in the gospels, Peters changes the story of Mina's death – that "she had inhaled too many ammonia fumes while cleaning the yearling shed" (*Women Talking* 58) – to cover up what really happened in order to make it less threatening to his established power structure (Matt. 28:11-15). This problematic alignment of Peters with both the disciples and the Pharisees/Romans calls into question his status in *Women Talking* as a character capable of religious truth telling and places him in direct conflict with the Christ figure.

Mina's alignment with Christ's passion in this passage in multiple ways makes significant claims about the nature of her suicide, reinterpreting it instead of as an isolated incident of personal, internal turmoil as a social, systemic issue of abhorrent violence on the part of the colony resulting from the colony's lapsed Anabaptist theological stance on equality, separation of church and state, and praxis. This understanding of suicide as something more than unmeaningful, isolated personal violence unrelated to the social/religious context of the colony can be applied to other instances of suicide throughout the novel. For example, the entire novel is bookended by the potential suicide of August. In the chronological order of the plot, August decides to commit suicide after being released from jail in England because he can find no reason to live due to his ingestion of violent theologies that reject worldly existence (*Women*

Talking 10). He is ultimately unsuccessful in this attempt and convinced to take another course of action (12). But the text of the book truly begins with a different suicide attempt by August (2-3), although the reader is not aware this is what is happening until the final pages of the novel: that August had intended to shoot himself (212). This suicide is complex since it encompasses both desperation, hopelessness, and ingested violence but also hope for the future. For example, Ona's approach stops August for the time being from following through as they are drawn into conversation on the path between their houses (211-12). Ona asks August why he has the gun, to which he has no suitable verbal reply, simply looking "into her eyes" (212), which communicates all that Ona needs to know. This look is what occasions a movement of hope when Ona takes August's "hand and [they] ma[k]e [their] first step towards the sunlight, outside the shadow that had formed around [them]" (212). Ona's symbolic act of hope away from suicide occasions another: she insists that August take the minutes for the women's meeting, giving him new purpose for his life beyond the meeting minutes. He describes this new sense of purpose this way:

> that I'm of more use being alive and teaching basic reading, writing and math and organizing games of Flying Dutchmen, than lying dead in a field with a bullet in my brain. Ona knew that all along. She told me she had a favour to ask of me that she needed me to take the minutes for the women's meetings. I hesitated at first, but what excuse could I make? What could I tell her? . . .
>
> I asked her what good the minutes would do her and the other women if they were unable to read them? . . .
>
> Maybe there was no reason for the women to *have* minutes they couldn't read. The purpose, all along, was for me to take them.
>
> The purpose was for me to take them, the minutes. Life.
>
> I smile. I see the world turning in on itself, like waves, but without a sea or shore to contain them. There was no point to the minutes. I had to laugh. (215)

August details his own thought process about how Ona's task for him to take the women's minutes and *how* Ona's favour affects a turn from despair to hope regardless of the colony's

violent undercurrent. August's understanding that it was not the minutes themselves that were important but rather life that was key is pertinent, especially considering the word "minutes" has a life-giving understanding since it signals a movement toward longevity and time. In this way, the physical minutes become a symbol of hope against the death impulse of the colony. August's phrasing that "The purpose, all along, was for me to take them, the minutes" (215) signals this time-oriented notion of the word "minutes": August is to take the physical written minutes in order to take more temporal minutes in the world. His life during the course of the novel is largely composed of the minute, or short intervals of time and tasks that help him continue to live. He finds meaning in small tasks like writing the goings-on of the women's meeting, "teaching basic reading, writing and math and organizing games of Flying Dutchmen" (215), and, problematically, "watching over the Koop boys making sure they remain unconscious long enough for the women to gain sufficient ground" (209). It is not world-shaking tasks which provide reason enough for August to live. These small things, like August's metaphor of the waves, amount to a much larger, perhaps paradoxical, reality (215) which combats even his renewed plan to commit suicide after the women's leave-taking to commit suicide (209).

The Solution

As I have argued throughout the chapter, the theology within the Molotschna Colony is responsible for the violence against women and their rapes. This is a result of a lapsed understanding of separation of church and state as separatism which eventually leads to the unravelling of the core tenets of Anabaptism and of the visible church with voluntary membership through adult baptism, with praxis – specifically pacifism – as a result of faith, and

equality of all members. The women, in the context of the colony where these beliefs have been abandoned and where church and state have effectively united, return to a Reformation-era reform reminiscent of their Anabaptist forebearers; this time, however, the reforms take place not in relation to other religious communities such as the Catholics and Lutherans, but in relation to their specific Mennonite colony. Their goal is ultimately a faithfulness to early Anabaptist tenets and tradition and a redemption of their faith through a refusal of separatism.

Return

As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, the Anabaptists were a Radical Reformation group who sought to make a revolutionary impact on Christianity and their society. Toews explicitly places the women in *Women Talking* within this story, as several reviewers of the novel have pointed out.[13] For example, Paul Tiessen claims that the minutes' beginning with a foot washing ceremony instigated *by* one of the of the women and administered to one another signals how "the women [are] placing themselves within a Menno story, even sacramentally" (np). Likewise, Grace Kehler in her article "Miriam Toews's Parable of Infinite Becoming" notes that the women affect the same move to faithfulness as their forebearers as they "forge a language from the scraps of theology permitted them, while subverting that very theology in order to redeem it and their faith as a 'homeland'" (39) and picture their leaving inside the context of the common Mennonite story of "leave-takings" (40). These reviewers suggest that the women of Molotschna – specifically the eight "women talking" – in some ways image these early Anabaptist reformers. Toews identifies the women with the earlier story through connecting the women of the novel with revolution, the role of

[13] See reviews by Paul Tiessen, Daniel Shank Cruz, and Stephanie Krehbiel.

women in the early Anabaptist movement as charismatic and spirit-led prophets (Harrison 51), and belief in the key Anabaptist tenets which the men of the colony have abandoned.

The women's identification with the concept of revolution[14] more generally sets the stage for understanding the women as new Anabaptist reformers. For example, August connects Autje's physical prowess with that needed by members of the Resistance during World War II:

> I . . . mentioned to her that during the . . . Second World War . . . civilians would hide in bomb shelters. . . .
>
> In these bomb shelters volunteers were needed to power, by riding bicycle, the generators that provided electricity. When she was swinging from the rafter earlier, with such vigour, it had reminded me of this fact, and of the volunteers who had generated this energy by riding a bicycle. She would be the perfect volunteer . . . if we were in a bomb shelter. (*Women Talking* 32-33)

August compares the women of colony to civilians in World War II – i.e. explicitly non-militants not involved in conflict. This labelling of the women as civilians seemingly prohibits the possibility of them becoming victims of warfare. But the women *have* become victims and *are* violated, receiving violence that is not rightfully theirs, like the civilians of WWII who must hide in bomb shelters due to the indiscriminate nature of bombs. But the women do not have a bomb shelter to protect them from this misdirected violence: they have a hayloft which is the antithesis of a bomb shelter: it is high in the air rather than below ground. Likewise, the women do not have the opportunity to participate meaningfully in a resistance effort in the same way

[14] Note that there is not universal agreement among the women about the women as revolutionaries. For example, Greta and Agata object (154; 156; 177) to the term "revolutionary" (154) because it recalls images of violence an "armed . . . assault" (154) – especially recalling memories of the Russian Revolution, which is not seen to have been a good thing for the Mennonites" (154-55). But this resistance to the idea of the women as revolutionaries is largely because of the violence often committed by revolutionaries, which the women are against. But this violence is not inherent to revolution on the part of the revolutionaries – see Martin Luther King Jr.'s movement and thoughts on peaceful activism, for example – thus not prohibiting the women's association with revolution.

as their WWII counterparts through riding a stationary bike to create electricity: August's metaphor only leaves room for the women to swing like Autje from the rafters. But, as the reader recalls from August's earlier telling of Autje's gymnastic exercises (27), this rafter-swinging is correlated with suicidal intent and thus can be interpreted as a playing out of the violence present within the colony turned against the self and the "civilian" members of the colony rather than toward a productive and powerful use, like the bike generator; the one outlet the women have for agency in this metaphor is undermined. This mismatched metaphor serves to highlight the intensely entrenched situation of violence in which the women find themselves. But August's metaphor also hints that the energy that motivates the rafter-swinging could be turned toward a positive, resistive purpose given the right conditions. This recognizes the women's potential to participate in resistance regardless of the appearance of hopelessness, as Autje hints when she asks, "where she would ride the bike *to* if [they] were in such an enclosed space?" (33). Likewise, the paradoxical nature of a stationary bike which appears absurd in terms of the primary purpose of bicycles as transportation devices is reimagined as a source of counterintuitive energy against oppressors; the women too can transform the enclosed, lifeless space of their existence into a source of empowerment: the very thing they are doing through their meetings in the hayloft, their very own paradoxical "bomb shelter."

The role of women in early Anabaptism is also central to understanding how the women of *Women Talking* fall within the early Anabaptist tradition. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, women formed a considerable portion of the membership of early Anabaptist movements and were treated with a higher level of respect than was the norm at the time (C.

Redekop 176), participating in theologizing, even martyred in large, unprecedented numbers for the time because of their faith (Joldersma and Grijp 13). Equality of women in early Anabaptism, though, scholars have argued, was strongly correlated with charismatic movements. Wes Harrison claims that "within Anabaptism and radical Protestant thought, . . . a more spiritualist oriented hermeneutic, provided a greater stimulus for opening the way for the role of women in religious expression and leadership" (50). These charismatic movements, while not the norm, realized the power of the Holy Spirit to move in mysterious, uncontrollable, unexpected, even countercultural ways. Thus, women in these groups were included in this experience and reception of the Holy Spirit; women were given room to flex their spiritual muscles. Kenneth R. Davis outlines this concept in "Anabaptism as a Charismatic Movement:"

> the ministry belonged . . . to the whole congregation. Here the prophetic gift is clearly laicized. Prophecy was available and open to all believers as the Spirit willed, not just to theologians, preachers or "special" prophets of the new age. Here is a kind of "prophethood of all believers." . . . Doctrine and conduct were to be determined . . . spiritually, by the Holy Spirit in the context of the redeemed community…" they were propounding a biblically based communitarian hermeneutical technique. (231-32)

Significantly, women were invited to use this "communitarian hermeneutical technique" since "There were also a number of women prophets among the Anabaptists who were at times quite influent[ial]" (Harrison 51). The charismatic nature of some branches of early Anabaptism was marked by "spontaneous and charismatic characteristics" (Davis 222), prophecy as a communal and individual function, and "The religious significance and validity of some experiences of visions and dreams" (222; 226).

Ona's role as a prophet figure connects with the charismatic role of women in early Anabaptism. Part of what allows Ona to speak unchallenged by the colony authorities is her "Narfa" – or "Nervousness" (*Women Talking* 3) – which allows "The elders of the colony [to

conclude] that Ona is beyond redemption, that her Narfa has rendered her incapable of reasoning" (49; see also 137). The women sometimes reflect this dismissive attitude toward Ona (104). The fact that some of the women still hold similar viewpoints to the men shows the complex nature of the women as a group.[15]

August explains how Ona first contracted Narfa according to the colonists:

> Ona's Narfa, the colonists say, had been latent, simmering but not unmanageable, until her father died. Afterwards, she committed her life to dreamy eccentricity, and also to facts, curiously, and to her seemingly preferred status as a pariah, as the devil's daughter, and God-given burden to the colony. (172)

In this excerpt, August portrays the colony's assessment of Ona's Narfa as something placing her outside the social constructs of the community. This leads the colonists to attribute all sorts of traits outside the moral/religious/social confines of colony life to her; she is eccentric, obsessed with facts which represent worldliness because of their connection to science, and represents religious "otherness" since she is paradoxically both "the devil's daughter" and a "God-given burden" (172). But the colony subconsciously reveals Ona's true importance when they argue that Ona's Narfa was occasioned by her father's suicide – the turning of colony violence inward. This connection of Ona's Narfa and thus her status as a prophet to the colony's violence suggests that Ona's prophethood exists for the very purpose of addressing this violence. Similarly, later in the novel, August transforms the colonist's understanding of Ona as "the devil's daughter" because of her Narfa and thus prophet status into its direct opposite – into both "God's most precious child" and "The soul of Molotschna" (198). In this way, she comes to represent both of what Jesus calls the most important commandments: love of God

[15] See also 52, 55-56, and 127 for instances of Autje and Neitje's confusion about Ona and desire not to be like her.

and love of neighbour (Matt. 22:36-39; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:27). This transformation signals a change: that Ona's Narfa is not a reason to discount her words, like the colonists believe, but is instead the very reason that the reader should take Ona seriously: because of her intimate connection with God and the colony.

Ona's designation, understanding, and portrayal as a prophetic character are most significantly cemented through her attunement to dreams. She is accused by Mariche "of being a dreamer" (*Women Talking* 56) to which Ona responds by placing *all* the women into a dreaming, prophetic role, moving prophetic power out into a broader circle than just herself:

> We are women without a voice, Ona states calmly. We are women out of time and place, without even the language of the country we reside in. We are Mennonites without a homeland. We have nothing to return to, and even the animals of Molotschna are safer in their homes than we women are. All we women have are our dreams – so of course we are dreamers. (56)

Ona explicitly counters Mariche's accusation against her as an individual dreamer, refusing to defend herself *personally* as a dreamer. Instead, Ona argues that she is a part of a *community* of dreamers beyond herself, of all women, one of which even Mariche is a part. This argument hinges upon Ona's repetition of the communal pronoun "we" eight times in this short section. Her argument intimately links the concepts of "having" and "being" so that the "we have" and "we are" sentences become interchangeable. These "we have" statements, though, function in a negative sense: the list Ona makes is of what the women *lack*: voice, time, place, language, homeland, and safety. This series of lacks is a matter of identity – they are who the women *are*, not just a state of possession or not possession. Ona effects a transformation of these lacks and states of being into a singular key state of possession: because of the state of lack of the women, Ona envisions them as in possession of dreams. This correlates to a state of being or

identity: that of dreamer. This interplay of having and being, possession and identity as it relates to the women's ability to dream is key since it sets up all women as prophetically able regardless of what resources to which they have access.

Ona has several dreams which August describes in the novel. One particular dream sparks a round of communal interpretation by the women and places them within the context of early Anabaptist charismatic spirituality:

> I dreamt that you [Agata] had died, and in my dream I said, But if you are dead then there is nobody to catch me if I fall. And then in my dream you came back from death, you were tired, your feet hurt, but you were happy to come back one last time, and you said: Then don't fall. . . .
>
> Ona, [Agata] says, we are born and then we live and then we die, and then we don't live again except in heaven. . . .
>
> Well then, says Ona, we were in heaven together. In my dream.
>
> But Ona, says Mejal, if you were in heaven you would have many people to catch you if you fell. But you'd be in heaven, so you wouldn't fall.
>
> Salome says: you might trip, though. You're clumsy. . . .
>
> Unless heaven is part of a dream, says Ona. Or unless dreams are illogical.
>
> Well, that they are, says Agata.
>
> I don't know, says Ona, perhaps they are the most logical experiences we can ever have.
>
> Heaven is real, says Mejal. Dreams are not real.
>
> How do you know? asks Ona. And don't we dream of heaven? Isn't heaven entirely a dreamt thing? Although that doesn't make it unreal. (149-50)

In this scene, Ona's dream instigates a round of communal dream interpretation by the women that demonstrates the women's ability to act as prophetic figures, like Ona claims through her earlier assertion that all women are dreamers. This dream interpretation session plays out through an argument surrounding the natures of heaven, death, and resurrection. It is important to note that the women never come to a conclusion in this argument, leaving many questions unanswered, logic unexplained, and continually broaching new unexplored problems in the argument's structure and premises, suggesting that it is the process of interpretation and

the women's participation in this process that are important rather than arriving at one particular, correct, and static interpretation of Ona's dream. This sense is especially potent because of the way the scene ends: with "Agata firmly chang[ing] the subject" (150) after Ona's new series of questions.

Finally, the women's portrayal as reformers akin to the early Anabaptists is cemented in the novel by Ona's assertion that the women's project is "to continue (or return to) being Good Mennonites" in order to "discover (or rediscover) our righteous path" (114). Here, she names the generative thrust for which they aim: to keep the traditions that the Mennonites originally held that were helpful and lifegiving. This concept of return is reiterated in the repetition of a passage from Virgil's *Georgics*, a book of agricultural poetry, which Ona and then August quote: "Much service, too, does he who turns his plough, and again breaks crosswise through the ridges he raised" (79; 214). The first occasion on which the quotation is used has to do with the question of what occupations are options for the men of the colony should the women leave. Many women assume that farming is the only option available. Ona's cryptic response to this question is the quotation. This passage refers to the important work accomplished not only by breaking the soil the first time, but by tending and improving the soil by continuing to plow in a different direction. In the context of the discussion about male occupations, this quotation suggestions that there exist ways of accomplishing the same goal – male work – that are different than what has already been done. This refers both to the actual situation of the men – finding jobs that are new – but also to finding "other ways of being in the world" (79), as Ona explicitly says, such as more faithful modes of interacting with one another. The fact that the passage is repeated reiterates the importance of doing again, making new, reforming, just as

the Anabaptists reformers and now the women do. The second time the passage is quoted, it is explicitly used in this context: as a response to August's question to himself about whether faith can "also be to return, to stay, to serve" (214). The answer provided by the quotation from Virgil reflects that yes, return is a mode of faithfulness.

The women's portrayal as reformers continues in the novel when they are shown as faithful and returning to the original Anabaptist tenets which the men have abandoned – especially the notion of the visible church out of which the women's emphasis on praxis in the form of pacifism, true forgiveness, love, and equality flows. The women's concern over the men joining their new community under false pretenses and thereby reestablishing the invisible church – the same conditions of violence in which they currently find themselves – points to this reality (71-72). The women's continual assertion that the men would be required to sign their manifesto and be "subject to certain conditions" (72) reflects the women's anxiety regarding their distrust of the men's ability to faithfully live out the ethical codes of their new community. Agata's assertion that being "born from Mennonites and continu[ing] to live as a Mennonite, with Mennonites, in a Mennonite colony, where she speaks the Mennonite language . . . do not make [her] a Mennonite" (62) – all things which are indicative of invisible, involuntary membership.

Similarly, Ona describes the sea to the children in such a way that reflects this notion of the visible church as an important category to the women. Ona begins by "describ[ing] the sea as another world, one that is hidden . . . . It is the life in the sea that she defines as the sea, and not the sea itself" (95), emphasizing the lifegiving quality of the sea. Mariche immediately interjects, claiming that the sea is only "a vast expanse of water, and nothing else" (95),

neutering the sea of the quality of aliveness with which Ona imbued it. Mariche chastises Ona for explaining the sea in a way which the children will not be able to understand – "expect[ing them] to understand what goes on invisibly" (95-96). But Salome quickly interrupts, clarifying – and denying – Mariche's implicit assertion that the "invisible church" is unavoidable, a Protestant and Catholic concept; Salome says that "the life underwater is not invisible. It isn't unable to be seen. We just can't see it from here" (96). It is a matter of perspective and location that is key in determining visibility, not an inherent state of being. Interestingly, August's description of the children's eyes as "enormous blue eyes, sea-like" (95) links the children with Ona's conception of the sea, infusing them with the very same essence of life within the sea as well as transforming them into a representation of hope for the colony to be a truly visible church: even if it is small and hard to see, even if it is made up of women and children – the most invisible in the colony of all.

The importance to the women of foundational Anabaptist values can be seen in Agata's assertion that "Our faith requires of us absolute commitment to pacifism, love and forgiveness" (111), a commitment that requires an egalitarian ethic. The women's commitment to pacifism is proclaimed early and repeatedly in the book, especially in rejection of the option to stay and fight (26; see also 92; 103-04). Staying in the colony is impossible because, as Salome asserts, "I will become a murderer if I stay . . . what is worse than that?" (97). The other women agree that they would all become murderous to varying degrees should they stay in the colony (102-03). This, Agata claims, is unacceptable (103-04). Even though Mariche argues that staying will be the best choice with peace as the ultimate goal while also preserving the separatist impulse of the colony – that the colony "will remain apart from the world, not in the world" (104), Agata

pointedly refuses this move, claiming that "there is no tenet within our faith that demands we stay apart from the world together with men who inspire violence in our hearts and minds" (104), placing pacifism on a higher plane than separatism for the women – and in Mennonitism in general. Agata's claim that separatism is not inherent to Mennonitism and thus that participation in the world is not antithetical to their goal of pacifism is an important one because it sets the stage for the women to fully embody their Mennonite heritage.

Ona explicitly interprets the women's decision to leave the colony as a move away from violence when she asks the women "how do you think God would define our leaving?" (159) to which Mejal replies "As a time for love, a time for peace" (159), quoting Ecclesiastes 3:8. This commitment to pacifism is not directed solely toward their own isolated community of women though, and is not exclusionary, but rather includes the other, recalling Agata's earlier claim that their pacifism is not determined by their separatism (104). As Salome claims, "Re-educating our boys and men is something we're *obligated* to do if we are to uphold the tenet of pacifism and non-conflict that is central to our faith and must be adhered to" (160). Salome explicitly connects their theological belief in pacifism with action in the world oriented toward the other – something they must *do,* not just believe. The women's emphasis on peaceful praxis has broad, communal implications.

In addition to their commitment to pacifism, the women are committed to true forgiveness as opposed to the forced forgiveness required by the men. Ona makes this distinction clear: "is forgiveness that is coerced true forgiveness? . . . And isn't the lie of pretending to forgive with words but not one's heart a more grievous sin than to simply not forgive?" (26). Ona's claim that forced forgiveness is not valid recalls the concept of the

women's commitment to the visible church – wanting their actions to line up with their inner beliefs rather than believing one thing and doing another. Since staying in the colony assures that "the only forgiveness [the women] can offer . . . would be coerced and not genuine" (111), the women must leave to preserve the visible church.

The idea that Ona suggests of "a category of forgiveness that is up to God alone, a category that includes the perpetration of violence upon one's children, an act so impossible for a parent to forgive that God . . . would take exclusively upon Himself the responsibility for such forgiveness" (26), is central to the women's understanding of God since it detaches the women's ability to forgive the men from God's forgiveness of the women and thus the women's entry into heaven. This eradicates the religious power differential within the colony between the men and the women caused by the men's ability "to force [the women] to forgive, or force [them] to leave the colony if [they] don't forgive, or threaten [them] with God's refusal to forgive [them] if [they] don't forgive the men" (60). Similarly, the women are no longer required to seek forgiveness for themselves from God through the men, particularly since the ones they are meant to ask forgiveness from are also the ones who committed violent acts against them in the first place (94). As Ona says, "If God is a loving God, He will forgive us Himself" (94).

Forgiveness, though, is not limited to God: "Forgiveness is moot, Ona insists, if not heartfelt" (108). But the women too, in Ona's mind, "must find it in [their] hearts to forgive the men of Molotschna, regardless of what Peters or anybody else expects of [them] and even if the men don't ask for it themselves and even if they claim their innocence all the way to their graves" (108). The women must find a way to achieve voluntary, true forgiveness toward their

perpetrators on their own schedule and of their own free will in order to be true to their faith, free themselves from the hurt the men have caused them, and cultivate a stance of peace toward the men. This conception of forgiveness which the women in *Women Talking* move toward as voluntary and including a category of "God-only forgiveness" connects to Carol Penner's scholarship on forgiveness; true forgiveness makes room for "Women who do feel hatred and rage at someone who has sexually assaulted them" (113). Likewise, the novel recognizes that forgiveness "is a long process which is extremely painful. While God may be able to forgive immediately, human beings, if they do forgive, do so over long periods of time" (156).

The women include love as well as forgiveness in their list of faith requirements (*Women Talking* 111) – a central tenet of early Anabaptism which focused on love of enemies and Christ's example (Redekop and Redekop xii). Ona frequently emphasizes love as important, saying that love is "always the subject" (*Women Talking* 124). This love is not like the love to which the men of the colony hold, pictured by the boys intentionally missing hitting their sweetheart when they throw horse excrement at her (78). In contrast, the love the women envision is motivated by their commitment to pacifism. This is why the women must leave: to preserve their love of the men since "to be near these men hardens [their] hearts . . . and generates feelings of hatred and violence" (114). So, it is love of all people – even the men – and a move against separatism that motivates the women. This love of the other is unified strongly in Ona's own love toward her unborn child, the product of the rapes: "I already love this child more than anything . . . He or she is as innocent and loveable as the evening sun - . . . And so, too . . . was the child's father when he was born" (107). Through loving her own child,

Ona is able to extend that love outward to even her rapist, not because of anything that her child, or the rapist, have done or because they deserve love, but because of the inherent nature of all people as innocent and loveable.

August outlines the complexity of love as it appears throughout the Molotschna Colony, Mennonite, and human history at the end of the novel, asking "Why does the mention of love, the memory of love, the end of love, the absence of love, the burning, burning need for love, need to love, result in so much violence?" (214). He does not answer this question directly but leaves it open ended. This question – and the lack of answer provided – also reflects how the women feel about love. For example, they point out that leaving the colony will mean they will have to leave their male loved ones behind (65). Agata concedes that

> The subject of our boys and men is a complex one. We love our sons, and with some legitimate reservations we love our husbands, too, if only because we have been instructed to.
>
> You're confusing love with obedience, says Mariche.
>
> Perhaps in your case that is true, Mariche, but it is not necessarily true for the other women in the colony. . . . In any case, we must love, or show love, to all people. It is the preeminent word of God . . . to love one another as God loves us, and to love our neighbour as we would hope that our neighbour loves us. (161)

Agata recognizes that the love the women feel is complex because it is a fact that many of the women love the men even while they simultaneously experience violence at their hands. Mariche's criticism that Agata's notion of love is confused points to a key correlation between the men's lapsed Mennonite theology and the women's: the difference between love and obedience or submission. Her comment mirrors the pairing of love and submission found in the Ephesians *haustafeln* (Eph. 5:22-33) – the household codes governing relationships between masters and servants, husbands and wives, and parents and children. In this *haustafeln,* the women are instructed to "submit [their]selves to [their] own husbands" (Eph. 5:22) while only

after this call the men are exhorted to "love [their] wives" (Eph. 5:25). In the colony, only the women's role is emphasized. Coupled with a lack of love for women on the part of men, this enables violence within the colony to occur. Mariche recognizes this shift and she is somewhat right that Agata is "confusing love with obedience" – Agata has reversed the Ephesians *haustafeln*'s exhortations to men and women by claiming that the women love the men, if only because they are told to. But Agata justifies this move; instead of splitting up love and obedience into gendered camps, assigning one role to men and the other to women, in a strikingly Anabaptist move she turns to the words of Jesus in the gospels about love of neighbour – one of the two "greatest commandments" (Matt. 22:36-39; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:27). In this move, Agata, like Ona, extends the imperative to love outside her community of women, toward the men, but also beyond, to "all people" (*Women Talking* 161), in a move against separatist modes of being.

The women's understanding of central Anabaptist tenets of pacifism, love, and forgiveness signals another aspect to which their fidelity to their faith points – a return to a desire for equality. This asserts itself particularly in a discussion of power and the women's ability to interpret scripture. As mentioned earlier in the chapter on the men's lapsed understanding and practice of equality and power, power within the colony has been misused and understood as "power over" (123), which, as Stephen C. Ainsley claims, "speaks of domination (either individual or collective), whereas power-to speaks of energy, capacity, potential" (139). The women's understanding of equality instead aligns with the original Anabaptist concept of communal power. These are alternatives to dominating forms of power. This idea is reflected throughout the novel where the women constantly ensure that they are

united in the decision-making process.[16] Agata herself names the women's meeting as "a democracy" (*Women Talking* 122). Ona imagines a future colony where "men and women will make all decisions for the colony collectively" (56). The language they consistently use is "we" – the first-person plural form (65; 73). Action on the part of the women is predicated on communal and unified decision-making hinging upon empowerment for all as individuals. Neitje and Autje embody this ethic of communal power in their interactions with one another, braiding their hair so that they are physically conjoined (59). This connection makes "Autje and Neitje sway back and forth, a tug of war with the braid that connects them, but gently" (62). The "tug of war" in which they participate signifies their differences and their struggle for unity despite their differences, but ultimately this conflict is "gentle." Their unity, even when their braid is physically undone, is not erased. Neitje "synchronizes her breathing with Autje's. They look ahead, . . . And they are silent" (151).

The women reject hierarchal power in favour of communal power, returning to the early Anabaptist ethic of equality and a denial of "worldly" power structures in favour of Christ's way of *mutual* submission – meaning where the good of the one is informed by and subject to the many. Susanne Guenther Loewen points to Carter Heyward's conception of power as "power-in-relationship" (154) or "'good power,' which is the 'creative,' 'non-compelling,' 'shared,' and participatory power of a 'non-violent God'" (154). Kimberly Penner too claims that

> Relationships of power rooted in Jesus' radical example are enhanced when power is "shared, reciprocal, and constructed by the limits that respectful interrelationship imposes." . . . [Lydia Neufeld Harder] contends that the power of the resurrection is not dependent on either the power of status and coercion or the power of domination and

[16] See for example 65, 73, and 122 for more instances of mutual decision making that honour individuality. For example, Greta asks "can we agree" (65) and states "we will arrive at a decision about whether to stay or to leave" (65). Similarly, Agata says that "these are the options we have mutually arrived at" (73).

> oppression. Rather, it demonstrates that God's power is creative and subversive. It is the power to heal, to invite, and to bring new life where there is death. (287)

Kimberley Penner's notion that God's power, and thus the power exercised by humanity, is ultimately for the sake of healing is central because it directly counters notions of power – such as those the men of the Molotschna Colony hold – that enable or espouse violence. It is the Christian's primary role "to name and challenge relationships of power that seek to dominate and control, including within and in the name of the church" (287). Theologies built on shared-power – and motivated by a strong awareness and critique of power structures that seek to create hierarchies, coerce, dominate, and control – can be effective in eradicating violence against women (288).

The women's conception of power as communal translates to their Anabaptist insistence on interpretation of scripture by the laity. Before the women even claim scripture as something interpretable by women, they undertake biblical exegesis, placing themselves within an understanding of women as capable theologians.[17] The discussion of biblical interpretation comes to a head when Mejal raises the question of "the biblical exhortation that women obey and submit to their husbands" (*Women Talking* 156) which has been interpreted for them by the men of the colony. When Mejal asks "Who else would interpret the bible for us" (157), Salome replies that male interpretation of the Bible is not necessarily true and frequently leads to violence against women and children (157), reifying the biblical interpretation the women have already been unwittingly performing throughout the novel. Ona immediately follows Salome's outburst with a quote "from Ecclesiastes: *A time for love and a time for hate. A time*

[17] For other poignant examples of the women invoking the biblical text, see 94, 96, 103, 105, and 181.

for war and a time for peace" (157). Ona makes an appeal to the women to exegete the Bible themselves – performing a positive creation of meaning after Salome's criticism and deconstruction of male interpretation.

> The Bible suggests there is a time for hate and a time for war, says Ona. Do we believe in that. . . .
>
> No, says Agata, we don't.
>
> We hate war, says Neitje. . . .
>
> Agata [asks] . . . Can we agree that we will not feel guilt . . . about disobeying our husbands by leaving Molotschna because we are not entirely convinced that we are being disobedient? Or that such a thing as disobedience even exists?
>
> Oh, it exists, says Mariche.
>
> Yes, says Salome, as a word, as a concept and as an action. But it isn't the correct word to define our leaving Molotschna.
>
> It might be *one* word, says Mariche, to define our leaving.
>
> Sure, says Salome, one word of many. But it's a word that the men of Molotschna would use, not God.
>
> That's true, says Mejal. God might define it otherwise, our leaving.
>
> And how do you think God would define our leaving? asks Ona.
>
> As a time for love, a time for peace, says Mejal.
>
> Aha! says Ona. She claps her hands joyfully.
>
> Salome smiles.
>
> Mejal is radiant. Agata moves her upper body to the left, then to the right.
>
> (I [August] am struck by a thought: Perhaps this is the first time the women of Molotschna have interpreted the word of God for themselves.) (157-59)

This round of biblical interpretation which Ona instigates is cyclical, beginning with the quote from Ecclesiastes and a call to reject or support certain features of the biblical text – that "there is a time for hate and a time for war" (157). The women respond radically with rejection of the Bible in this aspect. Ona's discussion, though, is seemingly quickly derailed as the women return to Mejal's earlier question of the biblical imperative for wives to submit to their husbands. Through a focus on the definition of the word "disobedience," the women concentrate their discussion of whether their leaving can be described as disobedient. In a postmodern move, they resolve that there are many words that can be used to define their act of leaving, not just

"disobedience." Their task here is to decide which source to believe: the men or God. Coming full circle, Ona again asks a question – "how do you think God would define our leaving?" (159) – signaling a shift in the conversation. Stunningly, Mejal, the one who was originally so committed to the primacy of male interpretation of scripture, provides the answer from the very passage Ona first quoted: "a time for love, a time for peace" (159). The women celebrate in various ways upon Mejal's proclamation. Most poignant is Mejal's "radiant" (159) appearance herself which links her to divinity as portrayed in the Bible. Like Moses who takes on the radiance of God whenever he meets with God (Exod. 34:29-35), Mejal, and thus all women, become associated with the divine in the act of interpreting scripture. Mejal's radiance alerts the reader to the amazing incident that has just occurred, which August later spells out: that "Perhaps this is the first time the women of Molotschna have interpreted the word of God for themselves" (*Women Talking* 159). In light of August's interpretation of the women's project, the reader sees that the women themselves, through the interpretation of scripture and their meeting, are transformed into theologians, no longer confined by the patriarchal theology of the men who violated and controlled them.

Theological creation by women, claims Carol Penner, is imperative to creating faith-based societies free of violence against women since they typically turn to religion and the Bible for answers to their suffering (12). As Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite argues from her extensive experience working with abused women,

> For women whose religious beliefs include extremely literal interpretations of the Bible as the norm, no authority except that of the Bible itself can challenge the image contained in these texts of women as silent, subordinate, bearing her children in pain, and subject to the absolute authority of her husband. Yet in Bible study groups, these women can learn that the scriptures are much more on their side than they dared hope. They can become suspicious of a biblical exegesis that is a power play used against

> them. The process of critical interpretation is often painful and wrenching, because new ways of looking at the Bible have to be learned. But it is also affirming, because one is telling abused women, "You have a right both to your religious beliefs and to your self-esteem." (100)

As per Thistlethwaite, putting power into the hands of violated women to both maintain their faith and experience it in a new way – as life-giving rather than violent – is a poignant step toward healing and empowerment, even a different outlook on life and religion. As Mary Anne Hildebrand claims, rather than tossing out Christianity – and Mennonitism – as thoroughly unhelpful, Christian feminists believe that "We need to focus on that which is life-giving for all of us, and who God is for us. We need to revisit history. We need new ideas that will be translated into new realities. We need new myths, new stories, new symbols and images that will change our perception of our place in the universe" (79). The women of *Women Talking* are doing just what these feminist theologians claim – returning to their faith and theologizing for themselves to heal their wounds and create new realities and understandings of the world.

Reform

Just as the women of *Women Talking* affirm their Mennonite faith and original Anabaptist tenets, they also actively seek to reform and change their faith to create a life-giving, pacifist vision of theology: to create, as Ona describes it, "A new religion, extrapolated from the old but focused on love" (56). This overtly communal and feminist project is first broached when the women make a pros and cons list about staying or leaving and is defined in their draft manifesto as explicitly constructive. This manifesto is one that "describes the conditions of life in the colony that we would aspire to / require after winning the fight. Perhaps we need to know more specifically what we are fighting to achieve (not only what we are fighting to destroy), and what actions would be required for such achievement, even after

the fight has been won" (54-55). This new religion hinges upon specific aberrations from the Mennonite faith of the colony which is defined by strict adherence to certainty but rather is a move to an embrace of mystery, complexity, and uncertainty. While this move toward mystery is a distinct aberration from post-Menno Simons Anabaptism as detailed in the Introduction of this thesis, it also represents a return to the sense of difference and uncertainty present in the early Anabaptist polygenesis (Harder 79; 92; Shank Cruz 15). The novel pays close attention to and frequently mentions the existence of uncertainty as a real category for the women (*Women Talking* 53; 59; 62; 87; 107; 124). For example, the women take joy and laughter in the fact that they "don't have a map . . . don't know where to go . . . [and] don't even know where [they] are!" (62) – an experience which Greta has personally lived since "For three years, she says, she could only walk backwards, never forwards, due to an injury sustained to her groin" (87).

The women's new religion too allows for other areas of divergence and uncertainty. For example, Salome claims that "she doesn't even believe in eternity, nothing is eternal. In fact, she says, I no longer believe I will live forever" (125). This idea is not an orthodox view held by the community, who largely believe in life after death. Salome's uniqueness is described by August when he says "Salome is such a puzzling contradiction, defiant yet traditional, combative and rebellious yet eager to enforce the rules when it comes to others" (49-50), yet she is seen as an integral aspect of the group. The difference evident among the women does not prohibit them from unity or require separation (75).

The women's emphasis on uncertainty allows also for unanswered questions and the ability to act without full understanding. For example, the women frequently decide that certain important ideas and subjects which are outside the scope of the meeting's purpose or

the time constraints set by their need for action because of the men's imminent return should be discussed at a later date. A common refrain is "We will return to that question later" (25; see also 29; 40; 54; 62; 92; 122; 127; 155; 163; 180; 184). This practice of putting off discussion does not mean that these topics are trivial or signal silencing of those who bring up the topics. Rather, it indicates a mutual movement and openness toward uncertainty and continued desire for relationship and discussion. Salome affirms this sense of uncertainty within the group, saying that their list of goals, desires, and beliefs is "not quite *precisely* put. . . But it sounds perfect to me. A perfect beginning" (153). This signals a hopeful conception of uncertainty.

The women's new religion is capable of absorbing difference so much so that when the women participate in potentially suspect actions meant to ensure their survival and aid in their escape, these acts do not preclude them from union with their community of women. For example, the women lie to the men who return to the colony for animals to sell for bail money (89-94; 134-37; 170-71). Autje and Neitje engage in sexual activities with the Koop brothers to save Greta's horses, Ruth and Cheryl, from being sold by the men (174-77) and seduce the Koops again in order for Salome to knock them out with the same belladonna spray used to rape the women (205-06). Salome sprays Scarface Janz out of fear that she will inform on them (206-08) and even her own son, Aaron, who refuses to come with the women voluntarily (206; 208). These aberrations from the norm of pacifism are disturbing and show the humanness of the women even as they embrace high ideals. Additionally, the women's ability to absorb these aberrations without totally crumbling under the tension of unmet expectations is a testament to their true faithfulness to complexity as a central category of belief and their utter refusal to excommunicate those who do not fully comply with the norms.

The women's belief that their Mennonite faith is worth preserving and reforming as faith that is *in the world* follows from their embrace of mystery and difference as a daily practice and theological goal. It allows them to put their faith back together, both maintaining their spiritual ancestry such as the separation of church and state, the visible, voluntary, praxis-oriented, pacifist, and egalitarian church, and pushing it forward to new goals focused on life in new way. Ona's insistence that their new religion requires "a map of the world" (56) to be posted points to this positive stance regarding the world. The women's song, which August points out is sung "between earth and sky" (166) at the close of their meeting also affirms the world as good, even and especially because the song that they sing is "For the Beauty of the Earth" (166). Even August's realization that "the women have left Molotschna for [peace]" (210) means that the world is where peace lies for them, not the colony.

August reflects the women's understanding of their new religion as one in the world near the close of the book, revealing for the first time the real reason for his family's excommunication:

> My father wasn't excommunicated because he showed colonists photographs of paintings by Michelangelo, or my mother because she ran a secret school for girls in the barn, during milking. We were sent away because by the age of twelve, . . . I bore a remarkable resemblance to Peters and I had become a symbol, in the colony, or at least to Peters, of shame and violence and unacknowledged sin and of the failure of the Mennonite experiment.
>
> Was that true? Could it be? Where is evil? In the world outside or the world inside? . . .
>
> When I was a boy in England, my mother was given a job at a library. . . .
>
> My mother took books home from the library. . . . My mother explained to me that a French writer, Flaubert, . . . wrote a story at the age of fifteen called "Rage and Impotence." . . . Flaubert dreamed of love in a tomb. But the dream evaporated and the tomb remained. That was Flaubert's story and perhaps, too, the story of the Mennonites of Molotschna. (213-14)

In this passage, August uses his own family's experience of excommunication to ask a key question regarding separatism, which he seeks to answer through returning to a childhood memory of Flaubert's "Rage and Impotence." His question is framed as two opposing dichotomies: is evil "In the world outside or the world inside?" (213). This question mirrors his own retelling of his family's excommunication, pitting the usual story the colony tells – because of their "worldly" practices of sharing art and education – with the true one – because August is Bishop Peters's son. These opposing stories represent two types of worldliness rather than the colony's usual storying where the colony represents unworldliness and anything outside the colony is "the world." August reveals the truth of the colony as worldly as well in the framing of his question as two "worlds" – inside and outside. By setting up his question and anecdote in this way, he asks his reader to consider the similarities between the colony and the world, to erase the seeming differences between them and strict expectations that the colony is inherently good and infallible and that art, education, and feminism are evil. His precursor questions about his own status as a symbol of evil become rhetorical: it is not true that he is a representation of "shame and violence and unacknowledged sin and of the failure of the Mennonite experiment" (213); these are not his burdens of responsibility to bear, although they do represent the true status of the colony. August's question of the location of evil is answered later in the excerpt through the story of Flaubert which August explicitly connects with the state of the colony. In this comparison, the colony format of separatism has become a tomb and Flaubert represents the Mennonites themselves. They "dreamed of love" (213), wishing, hoping, and working for love as their goal, but because they started from the wrong place – from isolation and separatism – instead of openness, the dream of love could not

survive. Only the tomb – the "shame and violence and unacknowledged sin and of the failure of the Mennonite experiment" (213) that August points to – remains. August's metaphor synthesizes how the Mennonite project has been corrupted by flight from the world, assuming that escape is possible. But, as he astutely notes, one is always a part of the world; the only question is whether it is the world "inside" or "outside" (213) – of closeness or openness. Retreating to an "inside" stance invites and perpetuates violence. In contrast, the women seek a vision of hope, of an "outside" world where love can truly flourish instead of vanishing like a dream.

Conclusion

In *Women Talking*, Miriam Toews produces a masterful project of revealing the violence some Mennonite theologies hold. But she also shows hope—hope that the Mennonite faith is still capable of inspiring life instead of death, peace instead of violence, and existence in the world rather than out of it. By taking both a critical and constructive stance, Toews does even as her characters do: is faithful to her Mennonite tradition of pacifism, equality, praxis, forgiveness, and love, but mostly the embrace of mystery and difference. She reforms that faith, refusing to keep what is violent in her heritage, and turns to a new way of being in the world.

Chapter II

Gelassenheit versus *kenosis* in Casey Plett's *Little Fish*

Introduction

> I am nothing. Without Christ, I am nothing.
> . . .
> Every instinct in my six-year-old body knew he was wrong, rebelled against the self-hating mantra that had begun in my head. I tried to stop it, but it wouldn't.
> "You are nothing! I am nothing! You are nothing...."
> It got louder and louder until it filled up my body and spilled over, drowning everything in its cruel, relentless rhythm. And I began to believe him. (Reimer 213-14)

This quote from Priscilla Beth Riemer's essay "'She Sleeps with her Girlfriend:' A Twentieth Century Excommunication" about her experience of being excommunicated from a Mennonite church because of her LGBTQ+ status encapsulates the concept of *Gelassenheit* which plays out within Casey Plett's novel, *Little Fish*. *Gelassenheit is* a key feature of Anabaptist peace theology meaning "yieldedness or resignation to the will of God and renunciation of any form of selfishness" (Friedmann 124): *Gelassenheit* includes the rejection of self-glorification, ego, and individualism as well as a voluntary acceptance of suffering and submission as good. *Gelassenheit* has often been distorted in Mennonite communities through an undue emphasis on rejection of the self, causing extremely harmful forms of self-hatred and making people believe that they are "nothing," as Reimer reveals. These ideologies, when enforced upon members of the Mennonite and especially the LGBTQ+ communities, include violence, such as rampant sexual abuse and assault ("Pacifist Battlegrounds" 87), and led to depression and suicide caused by repressive violence, internalized self-loathing, and transphobia (Bo¨deker, Iwamoto, and Nemoto 1980; Serano 125; 200; Greenberg 216). Reimer's reflections anticipate those voiced in Plett's *Little Fish*. The protagonist, Wendy – another Reimer – grew up as an

LGBTQ+ individual in an Evangelical Mennonite Church and experienced first-hand the violence of Mennonite peace theology against LGBTQ+ people, including the pressure to deny the self. But Plett also draws on the concept of *kenosis*, which can be understood to remedy many of the flaws present in *Gelassenheit* including its extreme emphasis on suffering as positive and denial of the self while maintaining *Gelassenheit*'s initial goal of disclosing Christ's self-giving and pacifist ethic. *Kenosis*, rather than focusing on humanity's response to and modelling of Jesus's suffering life (Weaver-Zercher 23), emphasizes God's self-emptying as gift. As such, *kenosis* functions redemptively as opposed to the violence of *Gelassenheit* that has begun to infiltrate Mennonite practices of peace theology. Turning to a peace theology focused on *kenosis* rather than *Gelassenheit* is a helpful step toward a truly peaceful theology and practice, as *Little Fish* demonstrates. During this project, Plett is able to recognize the tension in the Mennonite community between love and pain not uncommon in Mennonite literature.[18] Plett, similar to Miriam Toews in *A Complicated Kindness* or *Women Talking*, explores both hopes and failures. Discussing the similarities of queer and Mennonite literature in an article for the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, Plett says

> I can't help thinking about . . . the hopes and failures, promises and threats, that accompany [Queer and Mennonite literature]. In both literatures, there remains a persistent promise of a new community that accepts whatever fucked-up-ness the old community deemed sinful or improper – but of course it turns out the new community rarely lives up to its promises, that what the queer or the Menno left behind held some kindnesses and goodnesses the new fails to match. The old, established ways didn't work, but neither did assimilation towards . . . the larger world. ("Natural Links" 289)

[18] Although many authors have focused primarily on one aspect or the other; they argue either for the redemptive work of the Mennonite community and gloss over the pain and suffering caused by the Mennonites – see, for example, the pacifist work of theology of Anabaptist John Howard Yoder, such as *The Politics of Jesus* or his colleague, the Methodist Stanley Hauerwas's *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics,* both theologians' work made especially problematic due to Yoder's sexual abuse scandal – or authors focus on uncovering the violence present in the Mennonites – see, for example, Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many* or Di Brandt's *questions I ask my mother*.

In *Little Fish,* Plett attempts to give voice to both the life-giving ability of the Mennonites as well as the violence perpetuated by that same group.

Plett performs this move by taking up the concepts of self-sacrifice, anti-individualism, and suffering present in *Gelassenheit* and plays them out in the life of Wendy, a transgender woman, in November and December following her grandmother's death. When Wendy picks up the phone at her grandmother's house after the funeral, she learns from a family friend, Anna Penner, who was very close with her grandfather, Henry, that he may have been "like her" (*Little Fish* 21), which Wendy understands to mean he was transgender. Struggling to come to terms with this information, Wendy seeks to find out more from Anna, while also struggling with the daily violence of transgender life, including precarious housing, job insecurity, sex work, frequent harassment and abuse, and the threat of suicide: Wendy both contemplates her own death and mourns the death by suicide of her closest friend Sophie, who is also a Mennonite trans woman. Wendy's despair, and arguably Sophie's, stem not only from their social precarity, but also from the Mennonite theology of *Gelassenheit* which I argue are represented in various ways in the novel including in their repeated expressions that everything is "fine." Characters internalize an aversion to aging, dreaming, futurity, and desiring for the self as antithetical to *Gelassenheit*'s emphasis on abandonment of the ego which presents itself as a vacillation between hope and despair. This theology of *Gelassenheit* is seen in *Little Fish* to be a harmful one, specifically against the Mennonite LGBTQ+ community. But, as I argue in this chapter, the novel also offers an alternative vision of hope for Wendy and the Mennonite faith, interweaving the harms of *Gelassenheit* with its more redemptive incarnation present in the theological concept of *kenosis*: God's prodigal self-emptying love for humanity which is

foremost about God's boundless gift, not the suffering of humanity. Many characters in the novel including Wendy's grandfather Henry, her father Ben, and her trans community exhibit this kenotic love for one another. For example, Wendy's trans community constantly shows the boundless nature of kenosis to one another by constantly affirming the beauty of trans individuals – and thus validating the existence and rightness of trans ways of beings which directly negate *Gelassenheit*'s emphasis on denial of the self.

Theology

As *Little Fish* demonstrates, theology continues to be central to the Mennonite experience not only for more apparently stereotypical conservative types such as Anna – a strict skirt and kerchief-wearing Mennonite friend of her grandfather (247) – but also for atypical figures such as Wendy – an urban transgender woman with only marginal interaction with Mennonite culture and tradition. Wendy's experience in *Little Fish* charts a struggle with Mennonite theology, particularly in the form of *Gelassenheit*. Theology has both offered hope to and oppressed women, LGBTQ+ folks, and marginalized groups. As Carol Penner claims: "women have always turned to their faith to find hope, meaning, and the strength to carry on. But all too often Mennonite teaching on the subject of suffering has conveyed a message which disempowers women suffering from patriarchal violence, destroying their hope and spreading confusion rather than understanding" (C. Penner 99). For example, Wendy sees her Mennonite tradition as a source of loving and generous individuals such as her grandfather Henry who plays an atypical role in Wendy's life as a model of gentleness and queer historicity, but she likewise notes how Henry's life was controlled negatively by his faith: for example, he holds a complicated relationship with photographs of himself both because they are signs of

egocentricity but also as a source of his own internalized transphobia, thus creating a rift between himself and his wife (*Little Fish* 152). Similarly, Anna represents both a source of life and harm to Wendy as she embodies both a queer presence in Wendy's life as a lesbian (262) but also a denunciation of queerness since she envisions her own lesbian desires as something she must give up for God, thereby reinforcing the stereotype that LGBTQ+ ways of being are selfish and therefore antithetical to God, creating a problematic tension with the concept of queerness as a space of life. But Plett's novel opens up space for Anna to be enfolded into the LGBTQ+ community: she is not cast aside as irredeemable or subjected to the shunning and disavowal the Mennonite church has so often levelled against its opponents; even those with problematic ideologies like Anna can find space within the expansive fold of the queer community. This tension between the possibility located in Mennonite theology as well as the real harm it has caused results in conflict in *Little Fish* as Wendy tries to navigate what parts of her Mennonite theology to keep as redemptive and what to abandon as irredeemably violent ("Natural Links" 289), but ultimately lands in a place of openness.

Historically, concepts of *Gelassenheit* sprang up in the Mennonite tradition because of perceptions of Christ's suffering and death as a model for all Christians. Jesus is pictured "not [as] an image of a savior [sic] who conquers through might [but i]nstead [as] the suffering servant whose power to save came through his yielding and submission" (Cronk 7). The image of Jesus as a pacifist, nonviolent saviour informed this understanding of Christ as a model for the faithful Christian, thought of largely in terms of accepting literal persecution instead of meeting violence with violence. This understanding was useful for the early Anabaptists who

suffered extreme persecution at the hands of religious authorities because of their faith so that martyrdom, suffering, and true Christianity came to inform one another (7; 32).

But, as Stephanie Krehbiel points out, *Gelasenheit* did not remain solely about religious oppression. Instead, these "Martyr narratives also enable[d] silence around sexualized violence through their sacralization of suffering. . . . silent suffering is one way that those unable or unwilling to speak are interpellated, or interpellate themselves, into the body of Christ[;] . . . Christ's literal martyred body" ("Pacifist Battlegrounds" 171). *Little Fish* joins with this history of *Gelassenheit* at this shift from accepting literal persecution to receiving all types of suffering and denying the self. While the age of literal martyrdoms for the Mennonites eventually came to a close, their emphasis on theologies born out of their experience of persecution and belief in Christ as a model for human moral life did not. This model, as Carol Penner writes, has not been thoughtful:

> In Mennonite theology little effort has been made to distinguish between different kinds of suffering, between the pain of sickness and the pain of sexual assault, the anguish of natural disaster and the anguish of family breakdown. The common message in Mennonite thought is often that suffering, all suffering, must be endured, just as Jesus endured the cross. (99)

When all suffering is uncritically and falsely categorized as redemptive and Christ-like, there is no longer a distinction made "between unjust suffering (suffering that is not chosen and perpetuates relationships of domination and subordination) and suffering in the way of Christ (suffering in solidarity with others as a conscious choice and a sign of God's love)" (K. Penner 280); this mode of thinking and theologizing perpetuates and normalizes violence (Krehbiel 148) against marginalized groups within the Mennonite church.

Concepts of *kenosis* hold similar issues to *Gelassenheit,* as feminists have pointed out. The word "*kenosis*" derives from the Greek *kenoo* meaning "I empty" (Coakley 5) in Philippians 2:6-11 – an early church hymn detailing the "self-emptying" of God in Jesus. Here, Jesus is described as "being in very nature God" (*New International Version,* Phil. 2:6) but did not use his status of "equality with God" (2:6) for personal gain, instead "ma[king] himself nothing" (2:7) through taking on human form, living a life of servanthood, and submitting himself to "death on a cross" (2:8). The words "made himself nothing" are this Greek word *kenoo* – "emptied himself" (Coakley 5).

This form of "nothingness," in contrast with the "nothing" that Reimer details in the epigraph, is self-chosen and empowering rather than demonstrating the problematic aspects that some feminist theologians point out; *kenosis* can lead to the all-too-familiar injunctions to submit to oppression which are apparent in *Gelassenheit* such as Coakley's explanation of Cyril of Alexandria's understanding of Philippians 2 (12-13) which is rightly problematic for feminists because of "divine leakage" (15), as she terms it, where aspects of the divine "fully permeat[e] the human nature of Christ" (15), but the human does not affect the divine. This "divine leakage" signifies a total obliteration of Christ's human qualities such as changefulness, emotion, empathy, and real experiences of suffering, further supporting patriarchal notions of power as "power-over," oppression, and forced submission (15-16). Cyril's erasure of Christ's humanity as an unimportant, even contaminating element of divinity, reflects how stereotypically "feminine" experiences – those associated with Christ's human nature that Cyril disavows – are denigrated and seeks to forcefully control and limit such experiences as illegitimate, inferior, dirty, and utterly mortal. This notion of *kenosis* which Coakley outlines is

very close to the understanding of *Gelassenheit* pictured in *Little Fish*. It cements the all-too-familiar expectation for women and minorities to submit to oppression.[19]

Unlike Coakley, Anna Mercedes argues in *Power For: Feminism and Christ's Self-Giving*, that a different model of *kenosis* is possible based on an alternative understanding of Christ and divinity. For Mercedes, *kenosis* involves not power-over but rather love for the marginal – what she terms "power with" and "power for" (13-14). This is mutual power, power in solidarity, and power to give up for the sake of others where the self truly becomes a subject by interaction with the other (65; 72). Jesus's person and life reflect this *kenosis*, for example, in his empathetic and countercultural interactions with the Samaritan woman at the well (John. 4:4-26) or his life as an itinerant beggar, both becoming marginal himself and practicing radical love for the other. Likewise, as Lisa Isherwood claims, Christ's status as a queerly fluid figure who embodies contradiction and constantly "rocks the boat" represents a direct contrast to the "hetero-Christ" (1361-62) who is bent on notions of power-over. This queer sort of *kenosis* is fundamental to God's character and is foremost about God's prodigal love toward creation rather than the creature's response, as in *Little Fish*.

Understanding the focus in *kenosis* on *divine* self-emptying rather than *human* is key to avoiding dangers. Groenhout points out that "the self that was sacrificed is God" (302) in kenotic understandings. The emphasis here is on God's selfless love toward humanity, not humanity's requirement to erase the self – the aspects of *Gelassenheit* which have been most dwelled upon in Anabaptist theology for many minorities. Humanity participates in redemptive

[19] See also Ruth Groenhout's "*Kenosis* and Feminist Theory" p. 291 for more on *kenosis*'s apparent affirmation of the continued subjugation of women and apparently inherent antithetical nature to feminism and women's wellbeing.

suffering only insofar as it is voluntary (K. Penner 287) and for a loving purpose, as Mercedes claims, citing the reformer Martin Luther's emphasis on the excess of God: "we should devote all our works to the welfare of others, since each has such abundant riches in his faith that all his other works and his whole life are a surplus" (qtd in 52). For Mercedes, this "desire for the sake of others . . . is driven by plentitude, not neediness or lack. Neither is it a self-giving demanded of us, or of Jesus, by God" (52). In *Little Fish*, it is acceptance of prodigality as abounding grace, love, and acceptance which is key. At the same time, the novel draws attention to the perversion of self-emptying as a tool of power to buttress its own continued existence. Jesus's goal in his demonstration of *kenosis* was all about questioning power, not upholding it. *Little Fish* is a case in point for what happens when self-emptying becomes a project of upholding power as evident in theologies of *Gelassenheit.*

The Novel

Little Fish works within a tradition primarily started by Mennonite feminists[20] of calling out theologies of *Gelassenheit* which have perpetuated violence against the vulnerable. Plett, however, attends to the LGBTQ+ community, particularly through the characters of Wendy and Henry but also through Sophie and Anna. In the novel, ingestion of harmful conceptions of *Gelassenheit* results in and allows for the acceptance of violence.

Age, Futurity, and Dreaming

One of the primary ways that the violence of *Gelassenheit* emerges in the novel is in the recurring theme of age. Age in the world of the novel is thought of as primarily the ability to dream a future for one's self and in this way is a turn toward individualism – directly

[20] See for example Carol Penner, Kimberly Penner, and Susanne Guenther Loewen.

antithetical to distorted versions of *Gelassenheit* which are foremost about denying the desires of the self. In the opening scene of the novel, Sophie claims that age is "Different for trans people" than for cis people (*Little Fish* 11). The differences are interrogated by the women in their trans community, who offer various definitions of "transgender aging:"

> [Sophie said] "I don't just mean the difference in how long trans people live. And I don't just mean in the sense that we have two kinds of age. But the difference with transsexual age is what can be expected from you. Cis people have so many benchmarks for a good life that go by age."
>
> "You're talking about the wife, the kids, the dog," Wendy said.
>
> "More than that. And also yes, that. It didn't stop being important," said Sophie. "Cis people always have timelines. I mean, I know not every cis person has that life, but – what are the cis people in my life doing? What are they doing in your life? Versus what the trans people in your life are doing? On a macro level. Ask yourself that."
>
> "Is that just cis people or is it straight people?" said Lila.
>
> "Yeah, maybe," said Sophie. "I just mean: How mainstream society conceives of age doesn't apply to us. I swear it doesn't." (11-12)

Sophie envisions transgender age as future possibility and expectations; age for transgender people is seen as their ability to dream and pursue their dreams. The answer Sophie points to in this interaction is that transgender people in general are not expected to have prospects – or at least, the same kind of prospects as cis people – or if they do, that they are largely unachievable. Sophie, who is described in the novel as someone who did pursue her dreams, is a case in point for this argument because even though she "grew up with security and dreams" (173) which she pursued to the best of her ability (174; 280), she was ultimately unsuccessful (280). Beginning the novel with this important conversation about transgender age sets up the novel as intimately concerned with the problem of dreaming future possibilities and prepares the reader for the project of the remainder of *Little Fish*: contesting the perception that transgender dreaming is unattainable.

References to age in the novel take on new meaning in light of age's reinterpretation as the ability to dream and dreaming as a selfish act in Mennonite conceptions of *Gelassenheit*. These references occur over twenty times between passing insinuations of characters' ages (42; 278) and in-depth analyses of what age means, reinforcing the importance of age framed as the ability to dream a future for the self in the novel, whether age – and dreaming – is figured as positive or negative for the Mennonite transgender individual. For example, when Wendy is drunk wandering down the street, she randomly says "to no one, *How are you that old?*" (93). When Wendy and Raina are looking for a new apartment and find the right one, Wendy knows it because she "feel[s] like [she's] gonna grow old here" (284), suggesting a turn toward more positive views of future expectation in direct contrast with the usual transgender experience of a shortened lifespan.[21] Wendy's friends are frequently described as decreasing her age, so that with Lila "she felt younger, much younger, like she had in certain fleeting moments when she'd hung out with Sophie" (271). Wendy's frequent references to the fact that her friends decrease her age is a significant phenomenon since aging is equated with the ability to dream a future – selfishness in terms of *Gelassenheit*. Transgender people in the novel are unable to age for a variety of reasons – they almost all die young. Their shortened lifespans are largely caused by societal transphobia resulting in depression, suicide, abuse, and rape, as well as precarious working conditions such as menial low paying jobs and undervaluing of sex work. What then does the novel mean when the suggestion is offered that Wendy's age can be reversed? Is this

[21] According to researchers such as Kae Greenberg (211; 216), Tooru Nemoto, Birte Bo¨deker, and Mariko Iwamoto (1980), and Steven J. Onken (19), transgender individuals experience violence, suicide, and murder at a much higher rate than the average population. For example, "Research indicates that most trans people will be the victim of a hate crime during their lives'' (Greenberg 211). See also the real-life example of Chanelle Picket, "an MtF trans woman who was recently murdered by a date enraged at the revelation of her trans status" (216).

positive or negative? Is this for or against *Gelassenheit*? Wendy's age-reversals can be thought of as giving her longer to live, therefore increasing her lifespan, her future, and the amount of time she has the ability to dream. Transgender individuals are the actors that effect this transformation in other transgender characters. In other words, the transgender community provides in some measure for each other the ability to dream since they reverse the aging process, even if temporarily.

Wendy expresses the complexity of age for transgender individuals near the close of the novel: both the sense of futility as well as hope in futurity.

> What did she want from her life, exactly?
> Wendy was thirty years old. Her life had kinda never really changed. Sure, she transitioned at twenty-two, she was on her second stint as a hooker, but – honestly? Her adult life at thirty looked a lot like it had at nineteen . . .
> What *about* the future?
> What, she was going to live forever? . . .
> So, okay, what if her life was half over?
> What did that feel like? Why did this thought not bother her?
> Wendy wasn't happy, but she was moderately stable . . . She had so much good; she really was blessed. Should she *want* her life to change? What would that look like? What did life satisfaction look like for someone like her? . . . Was she supposed to look for a retail job again and quit hooking? . . .
> Go back to church?
> Quit drinking?
> Move away?
> Was any of that going to make her happier? (278-79)

Here, it is the question of desire that is contested and rendered complex. Through a series of over twenty questions in the full sequence, Wendy attempts to uncover her own desires and dreams for her life. She even draws direct attention to transgender age when she asks "Did she know any trans girls older than her, besides Dex and that old lady at the support group? If Wendy made it to sixty, that'd be alright, no?" (279). Transgender age as the ability to dream is taken up through these questions that, in one reading, create a sense of inevitability; her

queries pick up speed, moving from lengthy, meandering questions interspersed by reflective and descriptive statements such as

> Now, this morning, smoking in her fluffy slippers and moon-blue nightgown, air snaking into her window, this question turned itself around in her mind.
> What *about* the future? (278-79)

to short, clipped questions like

> Go back to church?
> Quit drinking?
> Move away? (279)

This change in pacing increases the sense of unchangeability as Wendy's life options and futility gets more and more entrenched even as the text of her words offer opportunities. The framing of opportunities like "look[ing] for a retail job again and quit[ing] hooking?" (279) or "Try[ing] school again. . . ?" (279) as questions which are offered but then instantly undercut denies their viability. This combines to create the perception that Wendy's life thus far has been unexceptional and unchanging, and that her future will be the same. Her repeated questions suggest that Wendy may not even be able to formulate a concrete imagined future: that a future may not even be possible. Eventually, she resigns herself to this unchanging identity: "She was a pissy, alcoholic tranny hooker, for better or for worse, and probably always would be" (280). Like the physics of "fall[ing] off a cliff" (281), LGBTQ+ futurity – or lack of it – seems to be set in stone in Wendy's view. But this passage too and Wendy's multiple questions also play an alternative, subconscious role: they hint to the breadth of options for her future that Wendy does in fact have. This complexity is also hinted to through Wendy's acknowledgements that her life *is* good, supporting a hopeful vision of transgender age in the novel.

But this entrenched pessimism about LGBTQ+ futurity again turns to hope. Wendy questions her past pessimism: "Seven weeks ago, Wendy had said to her friends, 'Henry didn't have a choice!' . . . Henry had choices that Wendy couldn't comprehend, but he did have choices and he believed in them wholeheartedly" (281). This understanding that Henry had choice and freedom suggests that he did have the ability to dream in some small way. If Henry had choice, then other trans people have choice and futurity as well. This instance signals a turning point in Wendy's way of thinking about the world and her life, moving her beyond a sense of inevitability and toward building dreams for herself. For example, she decides to go see a house with Raina in which to build a new life (281-82; 284). Additionally, she notices the inherent beauty of the city, that "the buildings were bigger and more majestic than she'd ever noticed. They glowed, huge and luminous and gorgeous" (282), signaling that even her way of seeing has changed. Even when "her eyes adjust" (282) and she realizes that "They weren't buildings. They were Christmas trees. Lined up on the hotel side of the boulevard" (282), she is not disappointed, but embraces this new and always changing vision of the world too.

Viewing age through the lens of *Gelassenheit* through much of the novel – and thus the interpretation of dreaming as selfish and heretical – signals to the reader that literal dreams in the novel reflect this notion of personal aspirations as prohibited; but the contested, hopeful nature of aging and dreams complicate this relationship in *Little Fish*. Wendy dreams frequently throughout the novel, thereby subconsciously and symbolically refusing to bow to *Gelassenheit* or espousing the idea that having "selfish" expectations for her life is sacrilegious. But her dreams are almost exclusively violent (13), thus both rejecting and supporting *Gelassenheit*. The violent nature of her dreams reflects the concept that dreaming in the Mennonite transgender

psyche is taboo and forbidden; Wendy's Mennonite upbringing has instilled in her an intrinsic resistance against dreaming, manifesting in violence perpetrated against herself – and therefore reinforcing codes of self-denial – in her dreams. In Wendy's early dreams, she is portrayed as a man (13; 64) which serves to reinforce cisnormativity as well as self-denial. Later, her dreams shift to embody her female identity, but this femininity is always pictured as violated through rape (191; 237). These new dreams begin when Wendy starts taking new hormones (65-67) – a definitive step toward affirming her gender identity and her own aspirations for her life – but these dreams shift to embody punishment for her desire to become female – in fact, for desiring at all.

Finally, the tension between dreams as a locus and symbol of *Gelassenheit* and the novel's true goal of reinforcing the viability of transgender dreaming present in her dreams come to a climax near the close of the novel when she dreams both of Henry as a woman (289) and herself being chased (288). In her nightmare,

> she dreamed of a man creaking up the stairs and slowly opening the door to her room and enveloping her in a cloud. She woke up – but she couldn't move. She screamed "Help!" with all of her might, but her muscles wouldn't move. She couldn't fucking move! With a whisper of a "help…" gasping from her lips, she woke up for real. (288)

Wendy's nightmare reinforces the concept that she has transgressed *Gelassenheit* as it has been present in her other dreams. The "man creaking up the stairs and slowly opening the door to her room" (288) emphasizes the gradual but steadily approaching punishment for transgression. The cloud which surrounds her and her inability to move or scream out represent her imprisonment in ways of thinking which support *Gelassenheit*. Conversely, Wendy's dream of Henry represents an affirmation of life and the future:

> But before that dream with the man creaking up the stairs, Wendy dreamed of herself and Henry. They were sitting on a couch, and Henry was swaddled in long billowy clothing. Henry had a baby in her arms. . . . Everyone else was yelling and there was chaos and smoke everywhere, but Henry just stayed there and smiled at Wendy, and her smile got bigger and bigger with joy pouring out of her face, and as the couch grew scratchy and the air under it whirled and screamed, Henry pulled her feet onto the couch with the baby still in both arms and leaned forward on her knees in her long billowy clothing looking at Wendy, and she laughed with her radiant, pure lit-up smile getting bigger and bigger until both of their faces were almost touching with light light light shining from all of Henry's soft lotioned body, until they were so close, Henry now silent and smiling at Wendy deep and big and light, and neither of them moved. (289)

In this dream, Henry is portrayed as woman, referred to as "her" and "she," wearing a dress-like garment (289). This depiction of Henry as a woman is an affirmation of transgender life in opposition to narratives which aim to limit transgender individuals. The dream also portrays a flurry of activity in opposition to the interaction shown between Henry, Wendy, and the baby in contrast with Henry's mild responses of smiles and joy. Wendy herself is drawn into Henry's sphere of joy and affirmation using the word "both" to describe their faces (289), inviting Wendy to participate in a new way of being in life. Chronologically, the dream of Henry arrives first so that Wendy awakens to begin her day in earnest with the nightmare as her final sensation rather than the comforting dream of Henry. But the reader is left with the opposite: the nightmare is relayed first then outshone by the dream of Henry. The placement of the dreams in reverse chronological order points to the eventual victory of dreaming and proper self-regard over self-abnegation, even if that victory is not yet won at this point in the novel.

"Fine:" Undermining Violence

The violence of *Gelassenheit* also emerges in the novel in reference to Wendy's frequent expressions that minimize her extremely difficult experiences, for example her assertions that everything is fine, that her experiences do not matter (15), or that "She never got hurt *that* bad,

in the end" (100). In fact, in over fifteen separate times in the novel, Wendy minimizes incidents that evidently take both an emotional and physical toll, signaling her acceptance and normalization of violence through a theology of *Gelassenheit* because of *Gelassenheit*'s expectation that individuals deny the desires of the self and accept suffering. The "fines" in the novel act in this way, undercutting the violence that characters experience.

Wendy's response to discovering that her grandfather, Henry, could have been transgender reflects her complex nature, reacting with dismissal while simultaneously affirming its importance through "sleuthing activities." Wendy frequently responds with immediate indifference, claiming that it did not affect her: "so her Opa'd been a woman. Fine. Closed" (24). This reaction in relation to Henry's potential transgender status is repeated in the novel as Wendy discusses the situation with her friends Raina and Sophie. Raina sees that this revelation is important, terming it "a discovery" (31) worth being "shaken up" (31) about. But Wendy responds in a mixed way, saying "I am and I'm not" (31) and "What's the point [of being shaken up]? He was probably trans. It must have been terrible. What more is there?" (32). Likewise, when Sophie suggests that Wendy delve deeper into Henry's life to more fully understand Henry's situation, she asks "Is there a point?" (36), undercutting the importance of uncovering new, previously silenced history. Wendy's frequent minimization of the importance of this information about Henry signals that her understanding of Gelassenheit becomes unhealthy, since she, at times, is unable to be emotionally affected or invested in information that is arguably groundbreaking and life-altering.

Wendy's penchant for undercutting the importance of Henry's potential queer status intersects with Thomas R. Dunn's work on queer history in *Queerly Remembered: Rhetorics for*

Representing the GLBTQ Past. As Dunn attests, history is a means by which a society creates and sustains a mythos of the past (5) meant to reinforce the status quo. These practices of telling history often revolve around silencing or the creation of "gaps," as Dunn calls them; but "While gaps in history can result from limitations of access, archives, and understanding, many of history's absences . . . are also a result of intentional erasures, misrepresentations, and forgettings in favor of supporting the privileges of dominant culture" (131). In the context of *Little Fish*, Henry's absence from family photo albums during the eighties – when he was in a relationship with another man (259-60) – represents this type of erasure, expunging a usable past from Wendy's use; she is only left with glimpses of Henry's queer history, such as "a large blue men's shirt" (80) barely visible in the background of a single photo from the eighties. While Henry does participate in his own erasure through the personal choice not to be photographed in order to avoid the dissonance between his queer identity and biology, this participation does not eliminate the societal pressures on him to erase himself. These gaps are created through processes of "misrepresentation, the subjugation of knowledge, destruction of records, disqualification of evidence, and 'mnemonicide,' . . . to resecure the center" (Dunn 3-4). All these tactics serve as a means for groups "invested in particular ways of telling the past" (8) to battle against each other in order to shape which version of history becomes status quo.

Unlike many of Wendy Reimer's declarations that discovering her grandfather's queer past is not very important, Wendy Moffat claims in "The Narrative Case for Queer Biography" that queer history is imperative to the creation of identity for LGBTQ+ people: "'we' can't be 'ourselves' without a queer culture, because we can't recognize 'ourselves' without a communal sense of the signs of a queer self" (219). The uncovering, reinterpreting, and

imagining of queer pasts performs an opening function and a creation of space for those marginalized by these "master narratives of white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity" (Bebout 160). These queer histories are imperative to queer communities as an arsenal from which to draw against these "master narratives" in order to create change and "contest the stories and power of the dominant order" (183).

In *Little Fish*, then, Plett contrasts Wendy's detachment from her discovery of Henry possibly being transgender with the response of her friends who understand and try to convince Wendy of its importance. They repeatedly attempt to sound out Wendy's feelings surrounding this history and urge her onward toward finding out more. While Wendy often remains emotionally opaque and cold to the information, rejecting the positive effects associated with claiming a queer history, her actions hint at her subconscious recognition that she values finding and claiming Henry as a queer ancestor.[22] For example, Wendy's "sleuthing" actions throughout the novel as she searches through old photo albums (24; 34), discusses the "case's" progress with her friends, interacts with Anna to find out more despite their fraught relationship, and reads Henry's letter to Anna (256-59) speak to Wendy's underlying knowledge of this revelation as key even as Wendy also denies her queer ancestry's importance. This dual movement of Wendy's insistence that the news of Henry's identity does not affect her as well as her drive to uncover more of his history indicates both an ingestion of *Gelassenheit* and simultaneously a denial of *Gelassenheit*'s influence on her to make everything "fine."

[22] See also 82 where Wendy silently promises to "find" Henry due to his absence in photo albums from the eighties.

A similar example of Wendy's penchant to undercut violence is when Wendy comes back from Montreal after having sex reassignment surgery (220-24) to create a surgical vagina, she wants to "nurture, take care of, [and] give [it] only to those who would be good to it" (221). But the first time she casually tells someone about it, thereby disclosing an important piece of her trans experience, she is immediately faced with sexual assault as the man "tugged the front of her skirt out and stuck his hand in with a twinkle-eyed cry, like someone doing magic for his grandkids, and his fingers momentarily felt like insects on her poor, healing cunt" (224). This assault is figured as a cute, harmless experience signaled by phrases such as "twinkle-eyed cry" (224) and "doing magic for his grandkids" (224), but this momentary adorability is quickly replaced with the shocking image of insects and a turn to the crude, rather than cute, language of "cunt" (224). The horrifying nature of the second half of the sentence re-informs the first half, reinterpreting the man's actions and his portrayal as a magic-trick-performing grandfather into the figure of the dirty old man who molests children. But, unlike the reader, Wendy herself is unable to see the significance of this interchange and perform in her own mind the "magic trick" of transforming the magician into a molester; she is described as entirely unable to "characterize this as sexual assault" (224), downplaying the magnitude of this occurrence: "*He was just some dumb fucking guy!* He was just some fucking guy" (224). To help make the assault seem less threatening, she even degrades her own earlier desire to take care of her vagina, claiming that "she realized how dumb, pointless, childish, and princess-like it'd been to think any part of her body could be kept sheltered and untouched and loved. The thought went up in ashes without remorse or sadness" (224). The comparison of Wendy to a child points to both Wendy's minimization of the assault's atrocity through its framing as "dumb, pointless, childish,

and princess-like" (224) as well as subconsciously reveals the true menacing nature of the incident; if her assailant is a grotesque grandfather, Wendy's portrayal as a child puts her at great risk – a risk she is unable to allow herself to see.

Sophie, another Mennonite transgender character in the novel, also exhibits this characteristic of expressing that everything is "fine" upon experiencing violence. After a call gone bad as a sex worker, Sophie repeatedly oscillates between insisting she is fine then immediately undercutting that notion in a text to Wendy, saying "*Hey I'm okay. Like, I'm not. But I'm okay*" (120), recognizing that there is a need for worry but undermining that need by restating the fact that she is okay.[23] Sophie's constant avowal that she is okay contrasts starkly with the response of her friends who are extremely worried about her safety. When they first hear that her call has gone awry, they quickly reach out to one another and rush to help (108), formulate and carry out plans of action: to charge phones, who will stay and wait for Sophie, to scope out the hotel and its environs for any clues (112-13), even investigate "Club 200" (115), a club she has only "met a trick at once" (115). When Sophie is finally located, her friends are solicitous about her, texting to see if she is alright, going to breakfast, sending supportive Facebook messages (120), and "*check*[ing] *in with* [her] *later*" (121). The juxtaposition between Sophie's response to the dangerous situation in which she finds herself and her friends' suggests that Sophie's understanding of danger, and conversely what being "fine" truly means, is distorted.

[23] See also 118 where Wendy's friend passes on Sophie's message that "She's fine. Like, physically. I mean, she said he was rough – but, like, she doesn't need to go to the hospital or anything" (118).

The concept of Sophie being fine is ultimately revealed as a sham when she commits suicide. After talking with her friend Lila on the phone for hours because Sophie was "in a bad place" (159), Sophie claims that she will be fine and is not going to kill herself (155; 159-60), even "ma[king] plans to hang out again" (155). Lila herself is convinced that "everything was fine" (160), suggesting that Sophie's attestations were convincing enough that they carried weight with her friends – the same friends who proved their ability to recognize the seriousness of her "call gone bad" when Sophie could not. But the next morning, she commits suicide. Sophie is a reminder that, in the Mennonite world, saying "fine" can cover up a lot of violence.

Just as Sophie and Wendy's transgender community are shown within the novel to understand the seriousness of situations that Wendy and Sophie themselves undercut due to their ingestions of *Gelassenheit*, the trans community comes to be envisioned as and represent embodiments of kenotic love against *Gelassenheit* – and reaffirmations that kenotic love is indeed queer love and symbolized in queer communities – even though Sophie and Wendy are not at many points of the novel able to embrace this love. The very notion of "queerness" as representing alternative, strange, fluid, unpredictable, contestable, ephemeral, conflictual, uncontrollable, destabilizing, and expansive ways of being (Bebout 157) is precisely definitional of kenotic love. The trans women embody what Althaus-Reid sees in her notion of the BI-Christ: they are "fluid and full of contradictions and therefore enable . . . destablisation [sic]" of and resistance against cemented and harmful systems of oppression (Isherwood 1361). This embodiment is evident in their continual reminders to one another of their love (*Little Fish* 50; 96; 119; 121; 145; 203; 209; 233 235) both casually in texts such as "<3" (96) as well as with heart-felt intentionality. This undercurrent of both casual and intentional love at all times

through serious situations as well as mundane life point to Wendy's transgender community as an important location of love in her life. Similarly, the trans women of the novel repeatedly support each other through incessantly confirming each other's beauty in an overflowing and boundless manner (35; 41; 47; 95; 174; 233; 285). Expressing and enjoying the beauty of others is showing love. Endorsing and affirming the beauty – and thus the goodness and authenticity of the femininity and gender expression of trans women – is a huge movement of love and acceptance toward trans women. For example, when the trans women are getting ready to go to a fancy-dress party, they exchange compliments on each other's beauty:

> Raina rapped on the door. "Can I come in?"
> "Come in!"
> She entered shyly. Wendy's mouth dropped. "Is that latex?"
> "Yes."
> "You're beautiful."
> "You're beautiful!"
> "You're going to have girls hanging off you."
> "Oh, am I," said Raina. . .
> "Your boobs are so shiny," said Sophie. (41)

This passage from the novel is rife with compliments, from the general to the specific. This trend of increasing specificity draws an affirmative line through the excerpt, first asserting the goodness of the entire self, then referencing that beauty's effect on others, and finally zooming in to admire a specific element of the body. By affirming the goodness of Raina's breasts, the trans women affirm her status as a woman. Likewise, by praising her breasts in an unorthodox way by calling them "shiny" (41), they refuse to objectify and reduce her to a purely sexual object – the usual process trans women experience on a daily basis. The repeated and prodigal nature of the compliments reflects the kenotic feeling of the trans women's love for one another.

This queer kenotic love, though does not universally prevent Wendy and Sophie from undercutting their own experiences of violence, nor Henry and Anna, who echo a similar idea in the concept of bearing burdens for God to Sophie and Wendy's "fines" which reflect the need to undercut personal suffering while also subconsciously revealing the truly violent nature of these "fines."[24] Anna demonstrates this double vision of Henry's life when she expresses Henry's life in terms of negatives rather than positives when Wendy asks if "he was happy" (252). Anna replies that "He was not a man in pain" (253). Through using a negative structure, Anna detracts from the importance of happiness by translating it into "not pain," thereby reinstating a negative metric as one that informed Henry's life. Even after Wendy's insistence that losing his lover to AIDS would have caused Henry "such pain" (260), Anna refuses to verbally engage directly with Wendy's claim about Henry's pain. But her nonverbal response shows anguish as she gives Wendy "a strange, haunted look" (260) that silently expresses the true impact and longevity of pain; like a ghost, the effects of past pain still interrupt and affect the present – it has "unfinished business." Even though Anna reflexively rejects the existence of pain, instead framing it as a burden borne for and through God, she cannot help involuntarily revealing the true and lasting impact that events such as the loss of a lover can have.

Kenosis*: A Reformulation of *Gelassenheit

Can *Gelassenheit* and a Mennonite faith be redeemed in *Little Fish* after all the harm they have caused? Through a reenvisioning of the novel as a retelling of the biblical parable of "The Prodigal Son" (Luk. 15:11-32) – or more aptly, "The Prodigal Daughter" – a few key insights

[24] See also, for example, Wendy, Sophie, and Sophie's mother Lenora who interpret Henry's trans identity as just another among many "burdens to bear" (36; 39; 135; 138; 139).

can be garnered. Trevor Burke argues in "The Parable of the Prodigal Father: An Interpretative Key to the Third Gospel," though, that this story should instead be entitled "the Prodigal Father" (219) after the father's kenotic generosity rather than the son's spendthriftiness. In light of Burke's turn toward renaming this classic parable, I follow in his footsteps, reenvisioning *Little Fish* not only as the parable of the prodigal daughter, but also of the prodigal mother/father so that the focus shifts away from the waywardness of Wendy toward the boundless – and ultimately queer in the sense of broad, flexible, unexpected, and uncontrollable (Bebout 157) – love of Henry. The biblical parable goes as follows: a younger son asks his father for his inheritance before his father's death so that he can go live a wild, reckless life. The father agrees and gives him his portion, sending his son on his way. Soon the son has spent all his money and has to work feeding pigs, reduced to eating the slop himself because he is so impoverished. Eventually he decides that he should go home and ask his father if he can be one of his servants. When he is still a long way off, his father sees him coming and runs to greet him, arranging a splendid party to celebrate his son's return.

Traditionally, this story has been taught as a morality tale about the youngest son's prodigality – his excessive wastefulness of his inheritance at the expense of his father's estate.[25] But, says Gerald Hughes, the father is "even more prodigal than the son" (qtd in Burke 223) because of his abounding generosity. The father in the parable is prodigal not only because he gives his son his inheritance before it is due (224) but also because of his joyous acceptance of the son at his return (223). As Burke points out, the father in the story "unconditionally and

[25] Alternative readings of this parable exist, including Rembrandt's painting *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (c. 1668), but these readings are nonstandard.

immediately receive[s]" his son (235). This prodigal love is extravagant, open-handed, and above all scandalous. This parable encourages the listener to think of God in the same way as the father in the story – an exceedingly prodigal God who scandalously goes above and beyond what is deserved or expected because of love for God's creation as witnessed through the incarnation in Jesus's life and death. This type of Christology informs God's character, interpreting it as a prodigal love oriented toward humanity and all creation.

Feminist Liberation Theologian Lisa Isherwood claims that the very Christian story of the incarnation

> at its heart is queer indeed. . . . That the divine immersed itself in flesh and that flesh is now divine – God became man [as the Church Fathers tell us] so that man might become god . . . is queer theology at its peak. . . . Therefore the theology this assumes is not one of denial and narrow boundaries; it is one of embrace and expansion that wilfully [sic] wishes to move the edges of the world in which we live. (1351)

God in the incarnate Christ refuses to conform to expectations of what is appropriate. Instead, as Isherwood claims, Christ's body itself "does not in any way at all hold fast to or fixes sex, gender or sexuality either in itself or in those who adore it" (1356). For example, Isherwood points to Marcella Althaus-Reid who imagines the BI-Christ: "one who is fluid and full of contradictions and therefore enables destabilization . . . beyond the hetero-Christ, . . . the Christ of deeply engrained clear and limited boundaries, the Christ of power over and hierarchies, the Christ of deadening dualism. . . . this is the Christ of liberation theology who liberates the poor and the rich from structures of oppression" (1361-62). In terms of *Little Fish*, Wendy must learn to see and accept the prodigal queer love of those around her – Henry, Ben, and her trans community – rather than being confined by theologies of *Gelassenheit* and stuck viewing herself as an apostate, prodigal daughter in a negative sense. It is this parable of the

prodigal mother/father that I believe best shows what theologians have termed the *kenosis* or "self-emptying" of God (Coakley 5; Richard 33). This vision of God as a kenotic lover counters the views that *Gelassenheit* has traditionally perpetuated – the divine expectation of forced submission and self-erasure of oppressed individuals.

The Novel

Wendy's worry about "want[ing] too much" (*Little Fish* 201) reverses the prodigality of God's love as expressed in *kenosis*, since "too much" is exactly the terrain in which God works. Throughout the novel, Wendy oscillates between an understanding of God's kenotic prodigal nature – as shown through her loving relations with family and friends – and a rejection that such radical, lavish love exists. In a key conversation about God that she has with Sophie. Wendy expresses an understanding of God as loving and ultimately gracious and forgiving toward flawed human beings – that God forgives "more than you deserve" (144). Even though this view originated in *Gelassenheit* and the need not to do anything wrong (143) – i.e. that God's love can be lost – this is an affirmative vision of God's kenotic nature, if tentative and rife with misapplication.

Henry's influence on Wendy's life portrays this kenotic quality as he attempts to instill in her the idea of love as independent of deserving – the exact definition of kenotic love. Henry expresses this concept in reference to Wendy's father, Ben:

> [Henry] would say to Wendy, "Your father loves you. He is imperfect, and he has done many wrong things."
>
> He would say: "His love is greater than his faults."
>
> He would say: "love is not attached to our human foibles because if we are truly loving, it comes from God. Love withstands our sins; love is higher than all the … crud we might inflict on those we love. Your father needs to beg forgiveness for his sins to you and to the Lord. But that is a separate thing from the fact that he loves you. And he will always love you. That is how love works." He repeated variations of this a lot.

> To many kids – many adults too, she supposed – it'd all be total bullshit. But in Wendy's case, it was true. Those were the right words for her father's love and when she was younger she believed them with all her heart. This got her into trouble later on. (81)

This passage emphasizes the recurring quality of Henry's assertion of Ben's love for Wendy through its reiteration three times of the phrase, "would say" (81), as well as the narrator's overt declaration that "He repeated variations of this a lot" (81). Each "would say" (81) changes slightly, zooming out to encompass ever larger understandings of love. The first places Ben's love immediately in reference to Wendy, beginning with the words "Your father" (81) which places love in a personal context for Wendy. The second talks specifically about Ben's love, moving outward from Wendy personally to speak about another person, beginning with "His love" (81). Finally, the third iteration speaks about love generally, simply beginning with "love" (81) in the abstract which is applied to an even greater number of people with the use of the pronoun "we" (81) rather than the "you" or "him" used earlier. This progressively enlarging discussion of love mirrors the content of Henry's speech – the radical prodigality of love that he images as "greater than . . . faults" (81), "not attached to . . . human foibles" (81), "withstands . . . sins" (81), and "higher than all" (81). Henry's adamant belief that love is expansive models and reflects a kenotic understanding of love. But Wendy is at this point in the novel not fully able to embrace it, suggested by the framing of her childhood belief in prodigal love as something she believed "when she was younger" (81), implying that she does not believe it anymore, but likewise reflecting her enduring hope for love since she got "into trouble later on" (81) because of it.

Wendy continually oscillates between understanding her own ability to be loved and doubting that lovability, feeling liable to betrayal because of her own desire to love others. This

"mixed" (150) feeling is especially prevalent in her complex relationship with Anna, who she "want[s] to love" even though she is "so, so tired of loving her people [the Mennonites] and them not loving her back" (150). Wendy's mistrust in the reality of love shows strongly in the juxtaposition of phone messages she receives from both Anna and a client:

> She bent down and heard: "… my prayers every night since you informed me [about Sophie's death] on my answering machine, dearest Wendy. I have been thinking about you. And, wishing God's angels may surround you and bless you. I know you are loved, Wendy. You are welcome in my home at any time …" . . .
>
> "You have yourself a good day. 'Bye now." There was a long, scuffling click.
>
> ~~~~
>
> She got home and listened to Anna's message again.
>
> Then she got a call from a guy she'd never seen before. He sounded real. (193)

Here, Anna's expression of love toward Wendy and the "love" of a client are contrasted to great effect. Despite all Anna's faults – her emphasis on *Gelassenheit*, submission to suffering, rejection of the individual, and disavowal of queerness – Anna too represents kenotic love, if a tempered, and partial one. In this instance, Anna's love represents a gift, just needing to be received. This no-strings-attached love makes Wendy uncomfortable because she feels as if she is in Anna's debt and this puts Wendy in a position of potential vulnerability. Wendy's client's "love" on the other hand is based on sexual gratification on a temporary and contractual basis; unlike with Anna, each side of the bargain provides something – in this case, money for sex – and nothing more is owed. The narrator's designation of the client as "real" (193) suggests that Anna and her love are not always "real" in Wendy's mind, showing Wendy's disordered understanding of love since she thinks her clients are more believable in this instance than Anna. This complex relationship with Anna is continued just a few pages later when Wendy returns Anna's call, expressing a desire to meet and reacting emotionally to Anna's own mundane offers of love – asking if Wendy "like[s] ham and cheese [sandwiches]" (195).

Eventually, Wendy moves to a place where she can imagine love existing and accept it without undermining it. When she finally tells her dad that Henry may have been transgender, something she claims that Ben could never handle (32), he takes it very well (285-86), and their interaction closes not with suspicion but with "the most loving, happiest face" (286). Likewise, the novel ends with the affirmation that love exists: "What kind of world does the core of your brain expect that you, you personally, get to live in? Wendy wanted to be loved. However easily she might have abandoned or ruined her prospects, Wendy did still believe she would have love" (292-93). Here, the narrator describes the shift in Wendy's understanding of love from the ease of denying love to a belief in love. The narrator's claim that "Wendy wanted to be loved" (292) expresses a "wanting" – desiring something for the self. This desire is antithetical to much of her worries throughout the novel of "want[ing] too much" (201) which are portrayed as a transgression of *Gelassenheit*. The confirmation here that "Wendy did still believe she would have love" (293) cements Wendy's refusal of *Gelassenheit* as a defining notion in her life and her affirmation of *kenosis*. Similarly, the final line of the novel asserts an embrace of *kenosis* over *Gelassenheit*: "She felt okay about where her life was headed" (293). This claim, although couched in ambivalent terminology such as feeling "okay" (293), is ultimately an affirmation of life and a future, even aging – the direct antithesis of what theologies of *Gelassenheit* affirm.

Conclusion

The Mennonite faith portrayed in *Little Fish* is a complicated and messy one rife with harmful theologies such as *Gelassenheit* which serve to further oppress marginalized groups such as the LGBTQ+ community through emphasizing suffering and submission regardless of the violence this theology perpetuates. But a new way is opened within the novel for *kenosis* to

heal and transform the broken aspects of *Gelassenheit* through an emphasis on receiving prodigal love, not enforcing self-abnegation – even if this love originates from flawed sources such as Anna or Ben. This *kenosis* is particularly evident in *Little Fish* in Wendy's transgender community – the embodiment of queer kenotic love. Such reformulations open up opportunities for new understandings of self-giving, suffering, and sacrifice as not ultimately oppressive but empowering. *Little Fish* is a project which constantly refuses to desert the Mennonite faith, but calls Mennonite theologies to a higher standard and ultimately to queer themselves, questioning and deserting violent theologies in order to more fully become the pacifist people they claim to be.

Conclusion

While *Little Fish* and *Women Talking* do not exhaustively diagnose the ills of Mennonite pacifist theology which have allowed for, perpetuated, and enacted violence against others, they do provide an important starting point for considering how the Mennonite community has in many ways failed to uphold their original calling – to be a peaceful people. Through studying Mennonite literatures, we can see that there are dangers lurking in theologies of isolationism, purity narratives, notions of extreme self-denial, and the urge to disassociate the self from and deny experiences of violence. But Mennonite theology too holds hope, as Toews and Plett claim. The solutions they provide are helpful hints forward toward hope and new life after violence. Returning to core practices of prodigal love, egalitarianism, acceptance of difference and mystery, and true pacificism provide hope against violence for the current world in which we live. This project of "doing again" that Toews and Plett enact, and that I in some small way aim to partake in, is key to preserving a faith worth keeping. They do with the Mennonite faith as Jacob did as he wrestled with God (Gen. 32), constantly "wanting more from [the Mennonites], . . . refusing to 'reduce' [the Mennonites] to the role of afflicter . . . In wrestling with [the Mennonites] until [they] receive a blessing, [Mennonite writers] wait to know 'that God is named love'" (Guenther Loewen 113).

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