

# Representations of Melancholic Martyrdom in Canadian Mennonite Literature

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In a recent essay, the Mennonite poet and scholar Di Brandt muses on the long history of violence in her culture, a history redolent with and bound to externally and internally imposed martyrdoms:

There was another memory... an older memory of a time... before the persecutions, the Inquisition, the Burning Times, the drowning times, the hanging times, before we became transients, exiles, hounded from one country to the next... Before the violence of the persecutions got internalized in our psyches and we began inflicting them on each other, the same violent subjugations of body and spirit the Inquisitors visited upon us. (*So this is the world*, 3)

Audrey Poetker-Thiessen's poetry collection *standing all the night through* also bears eloquent, graphic witness to the fatal psychosomatic grip of persecution on the sensibilities of the Manitoba Russian Mennonites. In Low German (*Plautdietsch*), she laments that

Ons wajch es root  
 Met bloot naut  
 Von trohne betta  
 En soltich ons  
 Noh hüs es emma  
 Wiet wajch (42)<sup>1</sup>

Our way (“wajch”) is bloody (“bloot”) and tear-streaked (“trohne”); home (hüs), heaven, is far away (“wiet wajch”). The blood and tears attest to the brutal deaths that Anabaptists and Mennonites endured in the Netherlands and Russia – but, as importantly, the body’s involuntary seepages attest to the trauma of subsequent diasporic rootlessness and to a deep unease about how to negotiate the “tension between martyrdom and survival” (Wait qtd. in Redekop, “Escape” 11). As Poetker-Thiessen suggests, survival can feel like a homelessness so profound that only the finality of death appears to offer the hope of unambiguous belonging, “a sure arrival”:

(we know in part  
 we see in part  
 an unsafe journey  
 but a sure arrival)  
*not a star but a light anyway*

we have reached light  
 have not reached day  
 follow foxfire  
 find graveyards

*death cannot celebrate thee  
 the grave cannot praise thee  
 out of so many martyrs  
 how do we live (14-15)*

To assert the martyrological underpinnings of Anabaptists and, more specifically, of those from the Netherlands and their Russian Mennonites descendents is hardly to utter a provocative word.<sup>2</sup> Still, the questions that attach to martyrology recur, urgently: “how do we” – the diasporic descendents of Menno, of whom I am one – “live” in the unfinished history of persecutions that wound and kill; how do we turn survival into a celebration, rather than deferring joy and at-homeness to an afterlife (Redekop, “Escape” 11); how do we effect psychosomatic healing within community, a community that wounds and salves; and how do we even begin to determine what constitutes

meaningful martyrdoms and which sufferings get recognized as legitimately spiritual?

Brandt and Poetker-Thiessen, to whom I will return and focus on later in this essay, belong to a long tradition of martyrological storytelling, a Mennonite tradition that involves epistolary, confessional, poetic, theological, and, more recently, academic writing. As critics such as Keith Sprunger point out, in the wake of severe persecution in the Spanish-ruled Netherlands (1531-1537), Anabaptists from 1539 forward placed “the highest priority” on publishing and disseminating the “stories, letters, and hymns of the martyrs” (156). “Immensely popular,” these early writings bear “heroic witness” to the martyrs’ faithful suffering unto death, in imitation of Christ (Gregory, *Forgotten* xviii).<sup>3</sup> The best known of the martyrologies, Thieleman J. van Braght’s *The Bloody Theatre or Martyrs Mirror*, first appeared in 1660 and was republished along with Jan Lutyen’s 104 graphic illustrations in 1685. This second edition came out both in affordable and in luxurious copies; it sold well at the time and the illustrated *Martyrs Mirror* remains prominent in contemporary Dutch Mennonite history and imagination. Moreover, as Magadelene Redekop demonstrates, the “old stories” of suffering continue to inform contemporary literature by Mennonites: poetry, criticism, and novels (“Escape” 13).<sup>4</sup>

Redekop, echoing Beck and Dyck, adroitly calls attention to the problematics of a martyrological sensibility: “Why,” she queries, “can’t there be comfort in survival, in life itself” (17)? Even more significantly for my project, Redekop posits that the “opposing pulls” of the stories of survival and martyrdom “may help to account for the fact that the phenomenon of the contemporary literary explosion is happening specifically among *Russian* [largely prairie-based] Mennonites in Canada,” who survived revolutions and persecutions and whose work at times “issues a radical challenge to martyrdom” (“Escape” 11, 19; original italics). These challenges entail opening up the potential definitions of martyrdom, refusing martyrdom as an ideal, as well as embracing the pleasures and hurts of survival. In other words, not only should martyrdom be conceived of as inherently complex, but also as historically specific. Suffering takes on many, changing forms, as does the act of bearing first-hand witness – the original meaning of the Greek word for “martyr” (Owen 3).<sup>5</sup>

The project of providing nuanced, malleable definitions of Mennonite martyrdom and of paying attention to the diversity of Mennonite voices and tales involves critical as well as creative writing. In a recent issue of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, Ann Hostetler examines Di Brandt’s capacious, “iconoclastic” representations in *So this is the World*, a volume of poetic essays which interrogates ecological and settler violence alongside of “Mennonite martyr history” and its devas-

tating “legacy of violence directed inward” (81).<sup>6</sup> In the same volume, Noon Park argues that Miriam Toews satirizes Anabaptist themes of separation, exile, suffering, and other-worldly focus in *A Complicated Kindness*. Significantly, Hostetler and Park (who builds on the work of Paul Tiessen) call attention to the literary reconceptions of martyrdom as a form of suffering *in* life, rather than as a prelude to certain death; they concur as well in their consideration of the types of persecution occurring *within* Mennonite community. I am interested in entering into these conversations through an exploration of one particular form of endogamous coercion and its accompanying internalized, psychic wounding of the individual: that is, the hurt that derives from silencing.

Numerous writers of the past twenty-five years mourn the instances in which the largely pacifist Mennonite *Gemeinde* (community) cannot or will not accommodate diversity or disagreement and instead places pressure on members to conform to a strict standard of speech and conduct. Such acts of silencing, shaming, or exiling paradoxically stem from a desire to preserve the Mennonites as a distinct cultural and spiritual group.<sup>7</sup> Yet, as critical and creative writers reveal, of those whose voices were silenced because they sounded a note of theological dissent or experienced community as coercive, even violent, many suffered the muteness and despair of melancholia. By no means do I conflate the brutal deaths of the original Anabaptist martyrs with the sufferings represented in contemporary creative and confessional writing; nor do I suggest that internal persecutions exclusively or predominantly define the Dutch Mennonites. But to idealize community without addressing its brokenness threatens a repetition of rather than an engagement of communal – not just individual – fractures. Certainly, as Redekop and Park respectively demonstrate, humour and satire perform significant work in mitigating the martyrological sensibility of the Mennonites; and Redekop compellingly calls for a perceptual shift and a reclamation of the survival stories of Anabaptists, in which inventiveness and trickery feature prominently. Contemporary Mennonite writing, nonetheless, also needs to attend to the difficulties of the past and present. Shrinking the distance between death and survival, recent Mennonite writers – including Brandt and Poetker-Tiessen – couple their grief with deep care for and connection to their inherited culture and people. This aesthetic, as Brandt has recently said, constitutes a form of praise, a paradoxical hymn of loving lament for the emergent community, whose broken beauties nonetheless bespeak the potentiality of revitalized inter-relations.<sup>8</sup>

The failures of the relational and the silences of pain take not one but many forms. Magdalene Redekop writes affectingly of a gendered silence, notably that of her mother who “was always working so hard to keep her mouth shut that her body was constantly betraying

her,” while the men openly debated and preached about possible interpretations of Anabaptist tenets and their application to codes of communal conduct (“Through the Mennonite Looking Glass,” 238). “Having an imagination can be dangerous to a woman’s health if she lives in a society that seeks to repress it,” Redekop warns, especially when her sense of self paradoxically derives from effacement and her vision of contentment gets displaced onto an afterlife (238-39).<sup>9</sup> In the vision of Miriam Toews, however, such strict verbal self-regulation that renders one a partially unknowable, ghostly personality, while one’s body translates such self-emptying into chronic illness, attaches to both men and women. *Swing Low*, a bio-narrative of her father Mel Toews, portrays generations of muted affects and curtailed conversations. Mel’s father carries himself with habitual “quiet sadness” and endures a three-month bout of catatonic despair after a job loss (77, 96). Meanwhile, Mel’s mother, who mourns the death of her second son but cannot show affection for Mel, her oldest, living son, engages in desperate drinking binges on stolen vanilla extract. Mel, who acutely feels the prohibition against inquiring into or speaking about their respective melancholias, systematically loses the capacity to tell of his own deep-rooted anxieties and troubled affects. Whereas in adulthood Mel proves voluble, creative, and charismatic in the elementary school classroom, in the home with a family he loves, he nonetheless becomes mute and enervated. His recurrent physical collapses express not only his psychic despair, but also the psychosomatic burden he bears due to the failures of dialogue in the larger community.<sup>10</sup> He composes untold numbers of factual notes to ensure his orderly, even exemplary, conduct in public. But these notes, fragments in themselves, also reveal the fractured self. He cannot write of his bipolar illness nor can he, at the end of his life, finish the phrase “I love” (5). As he goes into his final silence, the silence of a suicide, it remains for his daughter to transform his strangled melancholia – symptomatic of society’s disavowed, “negative” affects – into the deeply human story of a brilliant teacher and faithful man whose emotions should have found a public outlet and elicited communal compassion. Even with a receptive audience, Mel Toews may have ended his life at a relatively early age; yet his story is inherently inter-personal and his psychosomatic suffering an event inseparable from his Mennonite community in Steinbach, Manitoba.<sup>11</sup>

Psychic affliction, typically experienced individually, bespeaks both the inevitable failures of the relational and the need for a receptive community. Redekop and Toews testify to the agonized bodies of their respective parents, one in a confessional text, the other in a hybrid text that combines biography and imaginative (re)creation. Each writer, then, fulfils the role of a first-person witness to and critic of the human and the church as they are in order to show what the individual

and the community may become (Wiebe 46).<sup>12</sup> Indeed (as the opening excerpt from Brandt demonstrates), to witness might entail giving tangible form to a shared past (such as diaspora and persecution) and its difficult affects, so as to address the wounded community that now harms and silences its own.

The longing to connect with community and the fear of being silenced dates back to the origins of Anabaptist-Mennonite history. Theological historian Brad Gregory illustrates that the martyrs not only “openly yearned for communication from fellow believers and family,” but also that their letters and hymns “assumed a social relationship, one strained by separation but strengthened through communication” (*Forgotten* xxix- xxx). The dense scriptural allusions in their writings indicate that the martyrs trusted in a community of interpreters who shared their perspectives and would cherish their words. Yet the communication desires of the religious dissidents extended well beyond the congregational. As Keith Sprunger demonstrates, martyrs “yearned” to “testify to the crowds” who gathered to watch the executions, and martyrs and Mennonite compilers of martyrologies alike considered “muzzling” and speech deprivation “the ultimate tyrannical torment” (175). Church and state authorities ordered that the tongues of Anabaptists be cut out, burned, or screwed down, prior to their public deaths, preventing them from verbally attesting to their faith and to their willing acceptance of martyrdom, since such confessions heightened the stature of the Anabaptists in the Catholic community and increasingly called the conduct of the authorities into question.<sup>13</sup> The imperative to speak against injustice and exclusionary tactics served as hallmarks of martyrological sensibility, and “Mennonites gave special honor to the silenced martyrs” (Sprunger 176).<sup>14</sup>

For the survivors, too, testimony signalled a form of resistance to the established Catholic church, which early Anabaptists criticized for (among other things) its rigid hierarchy, its imbrication with the state, its laxness in promoting individual examination of one’s conscience, and its failure to familiarize the layperson with all of scripture. In short, Catholic authorities had miscarried in their task of interpreting the divine for the people, and the proposed Anabaptist solution was radical: the individual must turn reader and exegete within community, *Gemeinde*, that struggled to reach consensus while remaining anti-authoritarian. Institutionalized theology came to connote the domination of the poor and the uneducated by the powerful and the wealthy, raising the fear of words disconnected from individual lives. Alternatively, Anabaptists strove to endorse what Robert Friedman describes as both vertical and horizontal relationships, negotiating among language (personal words and the Biblical Word), otherworldly signifiers, and everyday material reality. In such a configuration,

*Gemeinde* “is not merely an ethical adjunct to Christian . . . thinking but an integral condition for any genuine restoration of God’s image” in the human (Friedman 81). The role of the testimony in this interconnected community of believers was to place the individual in engaged dialogue with neighbours and to affirm personal identity as included in and predicated on community.<sup>15</sup>

The personal testimony has remained central to many contemporary Mennonite church communities, which continue to value the individual voice and non-creedal expressions of faith. But witnessing within community has also proven a fraught affair, particularly the increasingly calcified practice of offering a testimony of one’s penitential turn from sin to righteousness, bolstered by confident reference to scripture, in front of the community of believers. The point of the testimony is to purge one’s doubts and to announce one’s commitment to translating otherworldly perfection into the practice of everyday living (Friedman 43). This circumscribed form of testimony leaves little, if any, room for the experience of being lost or for psychosomatic exploration of the ongoing losses, daily woundings, inside of a fallible *Gemeinde*. The sanctioned public profession tends to entail critical evaluation of one’s own life, but not of the larger community and its inept treatment of crucial issues such as eroticism or negative affects including fear and grief. And it should come as no surprise that the injunction to convert the experience of loss into a “found” story (in Poetker-Theissen’s apt phrase) has eluded many Mennonites, who write affectingly of their pain whether they delivered up the required testimonial, went silent, or spoke apparent profanations.

The evangelical revival meetings with their calls for public conversion feature in many retrospective accounts – inverted or subverted testimonies – as an unholy violence that creates unheralded, agonized melancholics. In Harry Loewen’s 1988 collection *Why I am a Mennonite*, writer after writer attests to the non-event of salvation and renewal. Patrick Friesen, for example, borrows the imagery of classic martyrdom, identifying revival meetings as sites of burning and torture, further emphasizing the de-sacrilization by appending symbols of theatricality (“choreography”) and pagan worship (“voodoo”):

Revival meetings were my blast furnaces. Here I learned to conceal emotions. I learned to play tough. I remember the choreography. The frightening sermon, the tear-jerking hymns, the altar call, the men watching from the back of the church, or from the platform in front, watching for signs of personal turmoil, watching, then moving toward some troubled person, arm around his or her shoulder, whispering into that torment, cajoling, pushing . . . .

I think most gave in out of fear. Some grew hard. Or, you became sly; skipping, stumbling, lying, cursing, laughing toward a distant day of freedom.

Those voodoo evenings of spiritual violence. No matter what choices were made, how many survived with their spirits full and rejoicing?" (100-101)

Not many, I think, factoring in Al Reimer's experience of terror in the context of "fiery sermons and thundering altar calls" (255), or John Schroeder's characterization of evangelical campaigns as "a very low point" for himself and his community (276). Threatened with hellfire, Schroeder observes, "[i]t was not unusual for a number of Mennonite people to be 'saved' several times in one summer" (276). Such expressions of fear, grief, compulsion and brittle indifference—the hallmark features of melancholia—deliberately invert the Mennonite personal testimony of penitence and religious assurance; instead these witnesses carefully but firmly identify their wounded affect as a product of a community that deploys religious technologies to hunt out and silence doubters and questioners, a perverse, internecine replay of the Catholic persecutions of Anabaptists.<sup>16</sup> Exposing the instances in which the testimony and the community have been deformed into sites of oppression, these Mennonite writers estrange the familiar in order to inaugurate a renewed, meaningful practice of melancholic martyrdom, melancholic witness. The aesthetic act of breaking open or reforming the testimony risks affronting community, but also enacts a dialectical movement through violence and deaths to re-engage communal history "as an advent," an uncertain but decidedly vital becoming (Felman and Laub 28).

The revitalized dialectic between silence and speech, death and life, features saliently in the poems and brief prose pieces of Di Brandt and Audrey Poetker-Thiessen. Di Brandt has more than a passing acquaintanceship with the fatal: she has asserted that it nearly killed her to publish her first collection of poetry, *questions i asked my mother*, a collection exquisite in its interrogation of "what should only be thought guiltily / in secret" (foreword) about the Mennonite community of Reinland, though she found muteness equally costly: in "letting the silence speak" she affirms that without therapy and writing, both forms of witness, she would be dead (57). Her poetry, like that of Poetker-Thiessen, violates the traditional form and content of testimony, wrenching words from their conventional placements and even connotations, bending, twisting structures, as a desperate but creative means of reappropriating "the language which has marked [her] exclusion[s]" (Felman and Laub 27). This



methodology of fracturing to break past the unspeakable, to testify to the violence subtending one's brokenness and grief, constitutes, according to trauma theorists Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, "the very language in which testimony must—and cannot simply and uncritically—be given" (28). As Brandt shows, she paradoxically had to steal her inherited language of faith (preface to *questions*), distorting it from its original purpose of lauding suffering as a good in and of itself, in order to reveal the burnt offerings of the self "which never reached / heaven" and the wrestling with the divine which, in direct contrast to the Biblical Jacob, yields "never a blessing / only crippled thighs & never forgiveness" (*questions* 30). In *questions* she writes, she witnesses, breathlessly, her enjambed, unpunctuated lines spilling into one another, compulsively speaking her bewilderment in the face of legalistic religiosity and the agonized futility of repeating the "old words" which offer her neither illumination nor comfort. More transgressively, her poem entitled "testimony" borrows Biblical, hymnal, and homiletic language to present a physical, erotic Jesus, whose saving of her is sexual.

they shake their heads in disbelief  
 but it's true I found jesus at last  
 i took him into my heart & he brought  
 me deep joy he was the world's greatest  
 lover he was so gentle & rough his  
 lips & his tongue & his soft hairy  
 belly his thighs & nakedness of  
 his soft hard cock he filled up my  
 aching my dark gaping void (35)

Wresting language out of the control of church pastors and elders who pronounce on when the Bible should be read literally and when metaphorically, Brandt contests the sanctioned reading of Jesus as the bridegroom and lover of the church, a unity that will take place only in the afterlife. Her eroticization of Jesus effects a recovery of him as an embodied, historical figure who lived in flesh and bone, need and desire. By extension, she approaches sexuality as a form of the sacred and the body as the spirit's rightful home.<sup>17</sup> Her most poignant suggestions, though, go beyond the sexual to the corporeal nature of communal interchanges, whether those of the couple or of family and friends. If "experience is always necessarily embodied, corporeally constituted, located in and as the subject's incarnation" (Merleau-Ponty qtd. in Grosz 95), Brandt insists on the proximity of the physical and the metaphysical. What transpires between persons in their material interactions of the everyday seminally reveals

the connection—or dissociation—between human and divine love. Touch might be gentle or rough, wanted or feared, but it is virtually unavoidable.

*Agnes in the sky* and *Mother, not Mother*, Brandt's second and third volumes of poetry, delineate multiple forms of violation she experiences within community, violations exacerbated by the prohibitions against bearing witness to her wounds: notably, the injunctions not to speak, not even to remember, sexual abuse—"Peter's hands on my throat, / death hands, full of hate, / his penis a hammer / in my mouth" (*Mother* 76-77)—and the beatings meted out to her in childhood by the "Punisher" who rends a permanent "place in [her] back like / a hole" (*Agnes* 54). "if i told even a sliver of what i know, / haltingly" she queries, "who would listen" (*Agnes* 41)? The physical violations coupled with enforced silence engenders psychosomatic suffering, which Brandt depicts repeatedly as a contortion or, more often, as a breeching or enucleation: both violence and silence punch "holes" in the self, in the face, in communication, each ritually emptied of its complex meaning.<sup>18</sup> The unsaid, the unsayable, also painfully attaches her to the meretricious, bowdlerized family script of eternal salvation, a script that survives only through brutal suppression of the real: the family sits "gagged and bound" around the table, "with blood on our hands, / but sanctified, & holy (33). Habituated to self-denial and to near fatal silences, "sometimes," Brandt confesses,

i long again  
for the old pain,

*the fist in the face,*  
*the twisted twirly*

*fate, the bitter taste*  
*of absence*

on the tongue, you.

i admit I have cried  
at night for my father

& his Word,  
the old terrible God. (52; my emphasis)

At the nadir of melancholic martyrdom, the speaker who might be Brandt, or a fictional first-person narrator, or any one of us quite plausibly could yearn for degradation, for a negative affirmation that one

exists only in the despairing, diseased psyche and in the body traced with foundational, formational violence. This body “remembers being / beaten & tortured & killed” (*Mother* 30). It bears the wounds of the original martyrs whose joyful embrace of death has come to eclipse the resilience of the survivors and gets traced with the death instincts of a current community that, in its longing for spiritual certainty, binds tongues and minds (Redekop “Escape”).

This is not where Brandt rests, however; rather she questions and struggles with her woundedness and melancholy, letting it speak bit by bit, and locating the hurt not just in the individual psyche and body, but also in the verifiable events of her world, her life. As Felman and Laub explain the practice and theory of witnessing, speaking from “within the wound and from within the woundedness . . . the event, incomprehensible though it may be, becomes accessible” (27). This accessibility comprises translating the internalized pain of the event into publically offered words, placing it back in the world. The witness thus breeches the isolation and muteness that so frequently accompany psychic wounds:

The wound gives access to the very darkness which the language had to go through and traverse in the very process of its ‘frightful falling-mute.’ To seek reality through language ‘with one’s very being,’ to seek in language what the language had precisely to *pass through*, is thus to make of one’s own ‘shelterlessness’ . . . and unexpected and unprecedented means of *accessing reality*, the radical condition for a wrenching exploration of the testimonial function, and testimonial power, of the language. (27-28; original emphasis)

Brandt as well as Poetker-Thiessen testifies to her traumatized melancholic state, in which she finds traditional ways of meaning-making inadequate – a parallel to her temporary muteness. To turn witness, she must perform a double representational movement: she must articulate her woundedness in language and forms that she bends and distorts to manifest her devastation. The language that wounded her, hence, becomes the language of witnessing to the pain, a process which is only possible if words and familiar forms lose their sacrosanct status and take on marks of the real. Brandt and Poetker Thiessen, not surprisingly, put pressure on Biblical narratives and images—or at least on their respective community’s interpretations thereof—and on conventional religious genres: the testimony, prayer, hymn, and sermon. The “old stories,” the “old words,” must be stretched and reshaped, first, to accommodate all the wrenching experiences and affects they’ve resolutely stymied and, second, to restore vitality to the

practice of witnessing by reframing it as “a dialogic process that cannot be possessed,” only explored (Felman and Laub 51).

Any dialogue that aspires to go beyond a possessive statement of truth or certainty of right(eous)ness likely entails questions – rather than pat answers – and contentious narratives that provoke in order to re-engage a community that has fallen short in its remembrances of its chequered history and its critique of its current interactions.<sup>19</sup> Such dispossession features saliently in *standing all the night through* (1992), in which Poetker-Thiessen resolutely recovers and explores Mennonite narratives of martyrdom and diaspora, stripping them of idealism. Illustrating that these historical events exemplify not only heroic self-sacrifice and pacifist non-resistance, she alternatively mines negation and paradox in verse suffused with the theme of loss (of country, land, purpose, direction, ethics, beauty) and being lost. In the stories she tells, piecemeal, at points only the “dead progress” (24), while the living “tribe” of “menno” remains covenanted to the grave and an elusive afterlife (26). Citing a fragment of a German hymn (17) and tracing a disjointed conversation in which the interlocutor and a Mennonite woman cannot come to a mutual understanding of “home” (13), Poetker-Thiessen estranges the spiritual interpretation of Mennonite diaspora as a sign of election and indisputable heavenly home-coming, turning other-wordly assurance into a negation of actual history and Biblical narrative. Poetker-Thiessen struggles to understand Mennonite historical separatism inside of various countries—the Ukraine, Russia, Germany – not because she wishes to endorse a simplistic vision of nationalism or belonging, but because she worries that her people have resorted to disowning the many uneasy allegiances that took place as Mennonites sought to preserve their pacifist stance. She voices concerns as well that they have at times avoided the taxing work of peace-making so long as they could exempt themselves from battles. Hedging their bets, the Mennonites shifted,

with each advance  
 retreat advance  
 changing to dutchmen  
 from deutschmen  
 & back again

this is how it was said to our fathers  
 thou shalt not kill (17)

This nay-saying can be courageous; it can also be a blinkered form of self-promotion that refuses to acknowledge likeness to other fallible communities. Mennonites might come “from russia, or switzerland...

the netherlands belgium/ & prussia,” but not from an already established faith tradition, notably Roman Catholicism: “before that [the diasporas] i said / we lived in darkness” (13). In Poetker-Thiessen’s view, saying no to war, priests, saints, incense, rituals, or icons ultimately should not define faith or community (12, 26). Rather, Mennonites need to ask what such traditions have meant to their spiritual predecessors, not to replicate their practices, but to make inquiry into modes of worship an ongoing process, not a one-time decision about darkness versus enlightenment, about rote versus thoughtful Christianity. Even in breaking away from a particular theology, a reformed community by definition derives from forms of worship and speech that it wishes to redirect. To efface history and to habituate ourselves to an oppositional, reactive stance creates a perilous community in which it might become all too easy to negate and sacrifice, yet difficult to affirm and forgive (Poetker-Thiessen 90).

One of Poetker-Thiessen’s most insistent modes of estrangement is to suggest that the Mennonite reach for the atemporal and eternal actually entails a deformation of the Old Testament account of God’s chosen people, the Israelites, homeless in the wilderness, but led by signs and by a promise of an earthly destination. Quite differently, while her Mennonites presume their status as an exceptional spiritual tribe, they get stranded on the journey, the bruising exodus from religious slavery and persecution, in an empty, seemingly inescapable wilderness:

we are lost  
 we don’t know  
 why we’re here  
 we don’t know  
 if it matters  
 but it might  
 it might (31)<sup>20</sup>

These are “lunatic israelites” in the “deserts of the north” who can only dream of being found and being filled (25; see also 29, 67). Strangers to themselves, they censor their doubt and pledge themselves to silence – “everyone has a story / he cannot tell” (31) – divesting themselves of the prophets and seers who might affirm a corporeal homecoming (12).

Yet precisely such a reclamation takes place in the words of Poetker-Thiessen, who offers herself as a melancholic Mennonite writer and witness. Overwhelmed by the ragged, unclaimed history and painful personal experiences that have no place in sanctioned, sanctified Mennonite discourse, she nonetheless risks herself in her frank discussion of losses and being lost, cobbling together words from incommensurate

sites, in the hope of dwelling in the here and now. Her poem about being lost and without certainty (above) references both diaspora and the prairie landscape of Manitoba with its “golden” summers and its harsh winters in which “you can get lost / ... & die a dozen steps from home” (31). Initially, diasporic rootless and the unpredictability of prairie life – at once golden and deathly – appear to confirm that contemporary Mennonites dwell in impossible uncertainties: why are we here? Does it matter? But, transformatively, Poetker-Thiessen’s weakly hopeful response of “it might” marks a moment of discursive-experiential opening in her verse that makes room for a secular celebration, a broken prayer, and, finally, an affirmative appropriation of a Biblical trope:

*summer sunday evening poem  
a window open  
to the night  
a car backfiring  
a party a way away  
carrying the night across  
bernie playing the guitar  
thank you thank you ron  
the light in the moths*

father  
lost      look  
thou

here i am  
here i am  
father (32)

The poem as much as the Sunday party carries the night, alleviating its darkness and placing the individual in everyday community with music and hospitality and with moths that catch the light rather than expiring in the flame. The everyday darkness, in this instance neither terrifying nor empty, enables a stammered, stuttering address to the divine that acknowledges the state of being lost, but pledged to the “here,” to this life. The broken verse performs a transmutation of devastating losses and suffering into a faithful love that binds the poet to this place and this people: “here i am.” The viable alternative to being lost in melancholy martyrdoms and uncharted wildernesses is not to assert a singular home, either on the prairies or in the afterlife that can be accessed only through death; no, the alternative is to dwell here in partial knowledge and vulnerability, in pain and love, giving one’s body, giving one’s words, to both.<sup>21</sup>

Di Brandt envoices a similar transformative commitment to painful loves in the first poem of *Agnes in the Sky*, a commitment all the more startling given the volume's subsequent disclosure of her "father's anger his knowledge / his cruel hands" and the unwilling, fearful complicity of her mother (14). I cite her opening poem in its entirety:

so this is the world & here i am  
 after all in the middle of it one of  
 the many broken hearted so far  
 across the centuries away from  
 home living each day for what it  
 may bring without sorrow or pity  
 for the lost kingdom face to the wind  
 this time mother please don't take  
 away my pain let's just say it is  
 mine & this is the world & here i am  
 in it hidden amazed among the trees  
 one of the many lost & found if you  
 can believe it across all this space  
 & i think i can say this from so far  
 away that i love you i love you (2)

"here i am": a response and an address, an insistence on one's singular and incontrovertible appointment to witness this world, this day, yet in the context of the "many lost & found," in the middle of the world, a world and the communities that amaze and wound. Witnessing in pain and in love liberates the melancholic from a meaningless martyrdom of prohibitions and unacknowledged endogamous violence. She shrinks the space between the lost and found, here and away, response and address, hiddenness and exposure, their precise relation unresolved but co-constitutive. "here i am" consists not of a dogmatic pronouncement or a once and for always giving of the self, "just as I am without one plea," without a doubt. This is no altar call scenario, no tidy testimony; writing as witness is to attune oneself to contradictions of the here and now, self and world, forging the possibility of address in the very place of its former prohibition.

In professing "here i am," Brandt and Poetker-Thiessen appropriate the Biblical, Hebrew trope that recurs in Genesis (22: 1, 11), Exodus (3:4), Isaiah (6: 8-10), and I Samuel (3). In each encounter between the divine and the human, the call is one from a God who is present but not possessable or predictable. Each summoned witness pledges to a task that is not yet known. Perhaps of greatest import for the witnesses of Brandt and Poetker-Thiessen are the callings of Abraham and of Isaiah. The former assumes he has been asked to sacrifice his beloved son, but

in fact he is made a witness to the divine refusal of human sacrifice. Isaiah is called to utter unpalatable truths to a community that will not perceive, will not understand, the prophet's rebuke of them, the prophet who strives to dispossess them of certainty. Still, the one elected to speak must negotiate between the vertical and the horizontal. However opaque the community finds the words, however wrenching the speaker finds it to say them, the burning coal is pressed to the lips of the prophetic poet or Mennonite witness: "here i am:" speak I must.

For many Mennonite writers, the point of speaking difficult truths about a community is not merely corrective or critical, but, more importantly, "reparative" and restorative (Hostetler 84). Thus do writers such as Brandt and Poetker Thiessen crucially reclaim Anabaptist-Mennonite radicalism that mindfully queries communal and religious codes of conduct (Hostetler 76, 84; Redekop "Escape" 19-20). They also seek a restoration of the ties between self and community. Let me conclude with one example from Di Brandt. Revisiting and incorporating her earlier poem "so this is the world & here i am" (*Agnes in the Sky* 1990) into a 2007 collection of essays of the same name, Brandt openly mourns her self-imposed distance from the Mennonite language and culture.<sup>22</sup> Her once rejected heritage, she now sees, aimed not simply to regulate Mennonite lives and speech, but also to *preserve* a distinct culture and identity that resisted the West's call to capitalism and acquisitiveness. In so doing, she draws attention to the mutual fallibilities and obligations of the witness as well as the community. Both must be vulnerable and both must be receptive to difference and to disagreement in order to inaugurate new, vibrant inter-relations.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Our way is red  
     With blood            wet  
     From tears           bitter  
     And salty            our  
     Homeward bound    is always  
     Far away.
- <sup>2</sup> See in particular Brad S. Gregory's *Salvation at Stake* (197-98), C. Arnold Snyder's *Following in the Footsteps of Christ* (159), and Stauffer's "The Anabaptist Theology of Martyrdom" (219). Sensitive readings of Mennonite martyrdoms in literature include articles by Ann Hostetler, Magdalene Redekop ("Escape from the Bloody Theatre"), and Noon Park.
- <sup>3</sup> Even the publications of Menno Simons, who was not martyred, deploy "ideas about persecution, suffering, martyrdom, and religious tyranny as a leitmotif" (Gregory, *Salvation* 220).

- <sup>4</sup> Redekop has permanently altered my vision of Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptation of Big Bear*, with her provocative statement that the title character, a first-nations chief, gets treated like Mennonite martyr ("Escape" 15).
- <sup>5</sup> Paul Tiessen makes a similar point: "western Canadian writers have found a way to tell, not *the* Mennonite story as some master narrative, whether of spiritual heroism or of moral decrepitude, but Mennonite *stories*" that inaugurate the new in part by working past previously designated opposites (146).
- <sup>6</sup> I diverge from Hostetler and her astute reading of Brandt insofar as I understand Brandt's early publications as equally experimental and iconoclastic both in form and tone. While Hostetler traces a shift in Brandt's writing from angry alienation to caring, self-implicated witness, I have argued that the care and self-implication inform Brandt's writing from the beginning. See my article, "The Subversion of Monologic Language in Di Brandt's *Questions i asked my mother*."
- <sup>7</sup> See Brandt's careful analysis of Mennonite separatism as a preserver and destroyer of community in the first essay of *So this is the World & here I am in it*.
- <sup>8</sup> She offered this insight after a reading at Bryan Prince bookstore in Hamilton, Ontario, on October 28, 2010.
- <sup>9</sup> Redekop muses that it "may be more useful, if more wrenching, to listen to silences of our mothers than to the sermons of our fathers" ("Looking Glass" 244).
- <sup>10</sup> Elizabeth A. Wilson provides an astute analysis of the inherent "intersubjectivity" of bodily and psychic complaints: that is, the pain of the individual is always in dialogue with the pain of others (10).
- <sup>11</sup> See also Noon Park's reading of silence and heterodox speech in Toews's *A Complicated Kindness* (65-66).
- <sup>12</sup> See also Harry Loewen's endorsement of "The Mennonite Writer" as a critic and witness.
- <sup>13</sup> Similarly, Redekop notes that "Torture was frequently directed at the mouth" ("Bloody Theatre" 17).
- <sup>14</sup> The martyrologies, however, also attempt to suppress disagreement. In *Forgotten Writings*, Gregory demonstrates that de Reis, on whom van Braght's martyrology is based, took great pains to suppress letters of the martyrs that raised contentious issues (including categorical statements regarding the discipline of church members whose actions appeared morally permissive or acquisitive). The depictions of martyrs were both to recall the Anabaptists to its originary focus on the scripture and the other-worldly precisely by suppressing issues that might raise dissent. The martyrs, typically shown as going cheerfully and steadfastly to their deaths, provided an imaginary, harmonious community. Yet the excisions of the early editors of martyrologies could not stop the splintering of the Mennonites and what historical theologians as well as memoirists, critical and creative writers frequently call for now is the recovery and facing of a difficult past, a past which continues to inform the diverse, contested Mennonite present.
- <sup>15</sup> Gregory (*Forgotten*), and Sprunger confirm this reading of community and inter-relationality.
- <sup>16</sup> Sprunger argues that the Mennonites welcomed the new technologies that enabled them to move from oral witness and circulated, hand-written letters to published martyrologies. But they saw the technology that created the screw as a particularly nefarious invention, designed to rob "them of their very words and voice" (176).
- <sup>17</sup> Poetker-Thiessen also composes numerous erotic poems featuring Jesus or Menno as a lover.
- <sup>18</sup> The image of the hole (including stigmata) repeats in *Agnes in the Sky* (25, 41, 54) and in *Mother, Not Mother* (28, 33, 35, 47, 55).
- <sup>19</sup> The following critics discuss the importance of interrogating truth claims: Felman and Laub xv, 15, 50; Loewen, "Mennonite Writer" 122; Hostetler 77-84; P. Tiessen 128.

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- <sup>20</sup> Other references to the wilderness or the desert recur throughout *standing all the night through*. See, for example, the following pages: 3, 7, 25, 26, 39, 48.
- <sup>21</sup> Moreover, for Poetker-Thiessen the words of love and commitment enable a movement past an unsustainable idealism to a simultaneous affirmation of prayer and parties. Poetker-Thiessen also affirms the compatibility of hymns and eroticism: “mennonite hymns / were made for dancing / ... dancing slow/ check to check... for women touching men / in the heart on beds” (36).
- <sup>22</sup> The love, mourning, and self-implication acquire special poignancy in the first essay, “This Land that I Love, this Wide, Wide prairie.”