LGBT Mennonite Fiction: A Panel from Mennonite/s Writing VII

A Complicated Becoming

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I was born into a legacy of commas. The 'priesthood of all believers' has always been comma-separated, so the fact that our panel at the 2015 Fresno conference was the first ever LGBTQ Mennonite Literature panel at the ongoing Mennonite/s Writing Conference series is actually quite surprising. What is not surprising, unfortunately, is that while queer and trans folks are part of the multitude of comma-separated Mennonite peoples, transphobia and homophobia prevail. While many of the most celebrated Mennonite writers have been maligned or interrogated by the wider Mennonite North American community, that experience of being othered has been slow to translate into explicit support for queer and trans Mennonite writers—either from those who have offered comfort and support to Mennonite writers more broadly, or from the writers themselves.

While subjectivity may seem to be a decidedly twentieth and twenty-first century interest, Anabaptists have been doing a very good job of both investigating and living the question of comma-demarcated identity since their inception. Identity-theology is something that I would see as the religious equivalent of identity-politics for Anabaptist/Mennonites. For this, I believe the proof is in the schism pudding. Even at a conference such as Mennonite/s Writing, it was plain to see the demarcation between Swiss and Russian Mennonites; between U.S. and Canadian Mennonites; between Russian-born Canadian Mennonites and Russian-born Paraguayan Mennonites, and the list goes on. Your last name alone is enough to give readers significant amounts of information about where you're from and what you're about. Not having a "Mennonite" last name can give the reader even more information. I can't help but wonder about the beginning of our history when the demarcation between Anabaptist/Mennonite people was not made through last names and it was impossible to know whether a Gingrich was an Anabaptist or Roman Catholic.

When I attended Canadian Mennonite Bible College to earn a Bachelor of Theology degree, it quickly became clear that not all Mennonite history is created equal. All students had to take a minimum of six credit hours of Mennonite history, and I will be the first to admit that the dramatic sketches and stories from the *Mar-*

tyrs Mirror were far more gripping than the recounting of the multiple meetings which took place to create yet another schism in the contemporary Anabaptist movement. When I finally reached the chapter outlining the creation of the then General Conference Mennonite Church of Canada (which wasn't named in the text book until the description of events was complete) my first thought was, "I wonder which weirdoes these are going to be?" It turned out to be me.

Even though the comma is nothing new to Mennonite history, now that I find myself moving in queer politicized circles particular to Toronto I've been challenged to think about it even more than before, and in different ways. Rather than eschewing the comma in favour of some kind of "we're all human" mantra prevalent amongst those who talk about cultural "melting pots," the communities that I am a part of now are finding agency and subjectivity in comma-delineated identities. I could introduce myself as a white, queer, Mennonite, female-identified, cis woman from rural Saskatchewan, and it brings meaning to my context and being. In the same way that my dad might introduce himself as the son of so-and-so who is the son of so-and-so and so and so forth, people are creating new lineages for themselves by claiming complex, overlapping identities that move beyond traditional kinship or family ties. This new creation relies on the revelation of formerly unseen identifiers. It is a response to patriarchy, and an antidote to the hegemony of things that flow from patriarchy—white supremacy, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, and ableism, just to name a few.

While this broadening of our primary affiliations runs the risk of being distasteful for some Mennonites because it may set aside the importance of who your father is and who his father was, it has a parallel practice in history. After all, the Anabaptist tradition – and Christianity itself – finds its roots in Jesus' very radical act of breaking down familial bonds in favour of a collection of like-minded weirdos, who only sometimes include family. For queer and trans writers, biological family seems to be a main character in so many of our stories though; there is often a yearning to belong. This yearning is quite common, but belonging can sometimes be at your own peril.

It may be tempting to say that the LGBTQ panel at the 2015 Mennonite/s Writing conference in Fresno, California was the start of some kind of history. But of course, it was not the beginning of anything. What is the tie that binds something like an LGBTQ panel? A shared otheredness around our sexual and gender orientation is obvious; everyone sitting on the panel was classified under the

umbrella of "LGBT Fiction." There is also something about the embodied experience particular to being Mennonite that we share. But we all have a multiplicity of identities—it brings to mind those infinite lines and nodes, or 'line blocs,' that Deleuze and Guattari talked about—individual identities that in some ways cross over and in some ways veer away from each other. My colleagues on that panel, for example, have some pretty impressive credentials and accolades: a Ph. D, a Ph. D in the making, a graduate degree from an Ivy League school, and, most recently, a U.S. national literary award. While I was growing up I milked cows, and in my early twenties I studied theology.

Or take the fight for marriage equality. The panel was comprised of two Canadians and two Americans, and although our countries are neighbouring, there are certainly meaningful cultural differences even in the context of LGBTQ rights. In Canada the issue of same-sex marriage hasn't really been an issue for a long time, with a bunch of provinces creating marriage equality laws just before the federal government finally stepped up in 2005 to legally affirm it across the country. For queer Mennonite communities in the U.S. (and their straight allies), however, their recent work towards marriage equality has been a top priority in their fight for justice. With more than a decade of experiencing marriage equality in Canada, however, I would caution that on the path to subjectivity, it is but a minor stop with its fair share of peril. Marriage equality has become a primary symbol for queer communities for what it means to be liberated and to live in a state of justice, but to be honest, I don't quite understand why. Perhaps it is a way of putting all the LGBTQ people under one big umbrella, asking them to forget about all the other complexities of their identities and to just be happy with the state of the world now that they can legally marry. Within the multitude of all of those identities it's easy to see that for some, marriage equality will change their lives for the better. I can't deny that. But it does not begin to address the injustice and oppression that many others face on a daily basis. The fight for marriage equality is important, but adopting it as the primary struggle for LGBTQ people risks ignoring the much broader and more complex elements of our individual lives. It is these individual lives, after all, which both create and enter communities through their varied nodes and intersections. In this respect, I find myself thoroughly in a sort of "but, and" category of thought. Conjunctive in nature but not necessarily in full agreement. With commas.

For many, myself included, the story of coming out is a grand one. It is literary in scale; it could be staged as a play, or spun as a

story of courage, or even a cautionary tale. But there is also a narrative before that story; there was a time before I came out and that story had a weight that could only be carried on the shoulders of poetry and literature. When I needed someone to step up to the terror of my subconscious, to carry me forward, it was poetry and literature that did so.

There were a lot of narratives in Mennonite literature that resonated with me growing up. When folks like Patrick Friesen and Di Brandt spoke of being othered—emotionally, physically, spiritually—they represented for me the voices of victims, and survivors, the voices of those who refused to conform mostly because they couldn't. Theirs were the only words that could reach me on a farm in Saskatchewan. They said the things that they weren't supposed to, and they gave some of us the courage to do the same. I felt like an outlaw with their words in hand; like someone who finally had a posse.

When I first attended a Mennonite/s Writing conference in Goshen, Indiana, however, I felt the impossibility of belonging. I was not a writer, but someone who wrote. Still, one night I happened to be invited along with friends to a dinner that has been imprinted on my mind. I sat around a table with the majority of my literary heroes: Di Brandt, Patrick Friesen, Sarah Klassen, Sandra Birdsell, and David Waltner-Toews—I had read all of their work as a means of survival, and had gone on to study it in university classes too. What I remember most vividly about that night was a heated discussion about the difference between the U.S. and Canadian writers. A theory was put forth that the Canadian writers were far edgier and darker because they had faced obstacles and had not been embraced in the same way that the Mennonite community in the U.S. had embraced their writers. I looked around the table at writers whose work reflected, in large part, a commitment—in my mind—to not being acceptable. I believe that this commitment informed my own path towards becoming a queer writer—which is not simply a sexual orientation. It is a questioning, and I believe that it is a discomfort with being acceptable. When the group of writers gathered around that table agreed that being wholeheartedly embraced was bad for writing, there was something about the declaration that rang true. I didn't want to be entirely acceptable on a personal level, and there is something in being entirely acceptable that I believe means that you're not doing your job as a writer.

At the time, I thought that being a writer was a place that you got to, and that I would know when I got there. More and more I see it as a becoming. And more and more, I see myself as someone

who must create the space for others that I felt I so desperately needed.

When I started writing a novel about a young, queer, Mennonite woman from Saskatchewan much like myself, I didn't think for a second that I was writing a novel. It was just a poem that was getting rather long. I started overhearing the conversations of my characters and I couldn't help but write them down. I had never read a book like the one I was writing. Except of course I had. I wrote and write the characters that I know, and I think the reason I do that is because the people I have read did the same. When Di Brandt put Jesus and sex together I knew that I could put queer and Mennonite together. When Patrick Friesen wrote about being exiled from the family, there was the experience of violence that resonated deep within me. The tension between Metis and Mennonite identities in Sandra Birdsell's writing was a reminder of yet another kind of othering—both a choice and an inheritance. And I think of one of my favourite Mennonite authors, Miriam Toews, who wrote one of the most heart-breaking stories I've read giving a fictionalized account of the suicide of her sister in *All My Puny Sorrows*, and who still, somehow, manages to bring humour to those dark places. Rudy Wiebe was recently quoted as suggesting that "laughter is too easy a way to face the wilderness of this world; you can too easily laugh yourself past the difficulties," but Toews' novel demonstrates how laughter can be a method of engagement, of resistance. Its humour is never glib, nor is it used to avoid the incredible pain of her subject matter, but rather it brings about the brilliant, beautiful humanity of her characters. In fact, without the humour of writers like Toews—which in essence signals a profound and caring vulnerability—I don't think that I would still be here today.

It is the vulnerability of my Mennonite writer forbearers that is, in part, the reason that I am still on this earth. Going through the terrible trauma of being someone who is not wanted on the voyage (thank you Timothy Findlay)—to be a queer Mennonite who dares to exist as such—has meant that I have needed the courage of the Di Brandts and Patrick Friesens, but also the courageous humour of the Miriam Toewses. And given my rural upbringing, I've found myself in need of some of David Waltner-Toews poems about cows to bring me to a rooted place. It is in the vulnerability of their writing that I've found my strength, just as it's in the vulnerability of my Anabaptist and Mennonite ancestors that I have found my strength and courage. And hey, what the hell, it's in the vulnerability of the Jesus of Nazareth narrative that I have found strength and courage too.

But back to the LGBTQ fiction panel at the 2015 Mennonite/s Writing conference. Both during and after the conference, all of the panelists, including myself, heard much talk about how the panel was "ground-breaking," "important," and "historic." That was all very great to hear, but I would have found it much more interesting to hear *why*, exactly, people felt that way. To be blunt, none of the writers on the panel are in league with Rudy Wiebe. None of us are well known, and most of us are at the beginning of our career. And the LGBTQ Mennonite writers panel didn't come into being because the conference organizers sought us out in order to give voice to an otherwise marginalized group of Mennonite writers. Some folks, led by Andy Harnish, felt that it was important that we have a seat at the table and proposed a panel. Our proposal was accepted, yes, but when we asked for money to help fund our travel we were told that there was none. It would be easy to come to the conclusion that we weren't actually wanted at the conference. And why wasn't there such a panel years ago? It was 2015 after all.

Remembering our comma-delineated identities means pausing to consider the panel in other ways, as well. One look around the conference could easily tell you that the participants were nearly all white, or at least white-appearing. As a white person, I know it is all too easy to be comfortable in those settings, to not question it, to see it as normal. But I also know that there are millions of Mennonites worldwide who are not white, and some of them have got to be writers, and it makes me wonder where their voices are. Perhaps the queering of Mennonite literature needs to start by recognizing the voices, beyond our own, that are not read, promoted, taught, or otherwise brought to the table.

What was it about the LGBTQ panel that conference goers found so historic? Perhaps the truth of the matter is that they didn't really know what made the panel valuable, or couldn't articulate its significance. And perhaps that unknowability is itself the key. I'm sure that our presence, and that panel, made many people at the conference extremely uncomfortable. But maybe the lesson in being a queer Mennonite writer, and the significance of that panel, is remembering otherness itself, even in the midst of acceptance and change. There's something really great about being uncomfortable at a conference about writing. For better or for worse, opening up to discomfort can be a transformative experience. There is a gift of sorts in not being wanted, or at least having experienced less than a full embrace.

While it is certainly true that queer and trans Mennonite writers have inherited subjectivity from our Mennonite/Anabaptist

forbearers, we have also, at least in North America, found ourselves with an inherited peace. This state of peace has come at a cost (largely achieved through colonialism) but it has allowed our wider community access, wealth, land, and privilege. And all of that can be ours too at the low, low price of partially or completely abandoning our queer and trans identities. Within a community that already fancies itself (and truly is, at times) to be countercultural ("in the world, but not of the world"), assertions around another kind of subjectivity are often not well-received. I wonder if the slow pace of the larger Mennonite writing community in its acceptance of LGBTQ writers is that it challenges their outsider status. This offers a stark reminder to LGBTQ Mennonite writers such as myself. Remaining open and vulnerable to the idea that we are not always going to be outsiders will be the challenge for LGBTQ writers in the years to come. To be clear, we are not there yet, but recognizing the complexities of our identities means naming power. I believe that queering Mennonite literature, at least in the North American context, will mean so much more than the politics of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Hermeneutics is not a concept normally associated with prose and poetry, but I believe that it is the comma-separated identities that form a call to action. The labour needed in becoming a subject, especially in the LGBTQ communities I find myself in, often has the effect of having an eye for others who are also struggling to become. Chiselling out your own identity can make you keenly aware of those who are doing the same; it should always make you aware of the ways in which you may be standing in the way of others becoming. A comma-separated identity can make you far more in tune with the possibilities and challenges that others face. This is the beauty of the inheritance of our Mennonite identities: they teach us a complicated becoming.