Two Worlds, One Body: A Conversation about Aboriginal-Mennonite Relations Through Marriage

Janis Brass, University of British Columbia
Marilyn Iwama, University of British Columbia

"Try writing an ethnography of something very close to you," Richard Quinney challenges his readers. Our response is this discussion of Aboriginal-Mennonite intermarriage by the children of such marriages, presented in the form of a conversation that we call a dialogical autoethnography. In North America, autoethnography emerged in the tumultuous wake of postmodernism, a period when many anthropologists began to focus more on the nature of ethnography as a fictional "text" than on the cultural content which that text was seen to represent. The "new" or "experimental" ethnography of the 1980s was self-conscious, polyphonic, dialogic, intersubjective, concerned with the construction of knowledge and power, and eager to cast off its old role of representing the cultures of others. Now anthropology could imagine colonized subjects as authors of their own ethnographies, "represent[ing] themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer’s own terms."

While introspective narratives of ethnographic fieldwork appeared well before the 1980s, anthropologists generally published these tales as adjuncts to their ethnographic accounts. Conversely, autoethnography arises from the convergence of both the outward-
looking ethnographic and the inward-looking autobiographic impulses. The resultant dual vision of autoethnography performs a reflexive critique: the story challenges academic conventions and practices even as those conventions assist the storyteller to communicate the world of his or her culture to those within and outside of its boundaries. In the construction of these communicating narratives, autoethnography appropriates the language and forms of received social science discourse as it transforms that language. This means that while some portions of our narrative on Aboriginal-Mennonite intermarriage resemble traditional social science, the purpose of our engagement with disciplinary conventions goes beyond simply reproducing them.

Nevertheless, even as our conversation offers a significantly modified version of the traditional research paper, we incorporate social science practices as one way of understanding intermarriage. We acknowledge the research of scholars in the field of intermarriage and discuss the findings of several such studies. This contextualizing introduction is, itself, a disciplinary convention that we offer in spite of our resistance to steering readers towards a certain interpretation or way of reading this text. At the same time, we suggest that our less formal conversation about a family photograph—our story—is an equally legitimate approach to Aboriginal-Mennonite intermarriage—as autoethnography and as a way of acknowledging the importance of story in Aboriginal pedagogy.

Neither of us claims authority to speak as Aboriginal people. We occupy that cultural border territory of mixed bloods who were “raised white” by Aboriginal parents. It could be said that we each embody the “contact zone” in which the colonizer and the colonized meet and establish relations of coercion, inequality, and conflict. Some of that ambiguous history unfolds in the pages that follow; some we may never know. What we are learning is that “story is at the very crux of healing.” That in coming to knowledge we must “become open to the roles of sensation, perception, imagination, emotion, symbols, and spirit as well as that of concept, logic, and rational empiricism.” Aboriginal peoples were constructing dialogic cultural accounts for some time before the new ethnography emerged. Our exploration of Aboriginal-Mennonite intermarriage is one step in our journey of understanding the stories of a culture that was almost lost to us. We offer this story as another way of coming to understand the conditions that contributed to this particular Canadian social reality.

Although we have been cousins for over forty years, we first met just three years ago. Our parents are brother and sister, born to a Cree/Saulteaux/Métis woman who, for reasons unknown to us, left these children to be raised by their mother. Family members say they do not know who our grandfather is. After the death of their grandmother Bella, our parents became estranged and spent the majority of their adult lives denying their Aboriginal background, cutting off all communication with Aboriginal family members and attempting to pass as “white”. In what some might call a paradox, each of our Aboriginal parents—and their mother—married Mennonites. Furthermore, both of our Mennonite parents have de-emphasized their own heritage and attend non-Mennonite churches. Our Métis grandmother died before we learned of her identity, although we were privileged to meet her Mennonite husband shortly before his death. Our parents continue to resist acknowledging their Aboriginal heritage.

We write from disparate academic backgrounds. Marilyn’s interdisciplinary graduate studies concerned the contrast between the textual subjectivities that Japanese Canadian
women construct for themselves and the subjectivities that others create for them. Now Marilyn is nearing completion of a postdoctoral research project involving Aboriginal women's stories about Indian Residential Schools and an autoethnographic approach to her own Aboriginal history. Janis is pursuing an undergraduate degree in History and Women's Studies, while working full-time in the engineering field as a drafter. She is also conducting research into the history of both her father's Aboriginal family and her mother's paternal Mennonite family. Janis's research has opened avenues of communication with many members of our large Aboriginal family.

For three years, we have engaged in a vigorous correspondence by telephone, electronic mail, and in person. Our last meeting in person was at the University of Winnipeg in October, 2000 at the symposium entitled "The History of Aboriginal-Mennonite Relations." For the two of us, the process of becoming acquainted with each other and with the history of our family has been largely joyful, in spite of the significant re-ordering of our worlds and the re-naming of our "white" selves as "mixed bloods" or, perhaps, "half-breeds". But our happy process of self-discovery has also entailed confronting our parents with knowledge that always prompted in them a deep sense of shame and rejection. Thus, our communication commonly features deliberations over the historical conditions that may have necessitated our parents' denial of their heritage, including our Mennonite parents' apparent rejection of their Mennonite background.

Because the grandmother who raised our parents spent part of her childhood in Residential School, our correspondence also includes discussion of the intergenerational effects this experience may have had on our parents and on us. This same grandmother and her husband were convinced at a young age to exchange their treaty rights for Métis scrip; thus matters of Canadian federal policies on status and assimilation also preoccupy us. We sift through government and church documents that classify our Aboriginal parents as "Scots" or "French", and non-Christian family members as "heathen". We discuss our meetings with non-Aboriginals who, as children, knew of our parents, but had no direct contact with them because they were not allowed to play with "Indians". Always, we return to the complexity of socio-historical events that engendered such lasting shame in Mom and Dad.

It is for these reasons that we offer a sampling of our conversation on these topics as testimony to the social reality of experience that has been suppressed and denied. Our account of these happenings is a partial and contingent telling. This particular "conversation" is a pastiche of transcriptions of written and oral communications that have passed between us over the past three years; other sections include edited correspondence that was exchanged in the course of writing this paper. We co-wrote the paper, through its many versions and revisions, by relying on electronic mail and telephone. At times our story is only witness to what we do not know. We are not offering it as an authentic alternative to conventional scholarship, or as an account that has greater truth-value than any other. Nor are we offering our story as a cultural artefact. Rather, we are suggesting that in the process of thorough scholarly investigation, there is time to pause and listen for the critical voice in stories such as ours. Time to imagine just how the storyteller and the scholar might make theory together.

*Marilyn:* Let's begin by explaining the circumstances that prompted us to write this paper. At the symposium on Aboriginal-Mennonite relations we heard several
participants speak of the challenges facing individuals and groups that move between the two experiential and historical “worlds” of Aboriginal and Mennonite cultures. For us, the use of this “two worlds” metaphor creates a tension between language and experience. On the one hand, the metaphor suggests that cultural groups are discrete entities—worlds that one might describe as “separate”, “exclusive”, or even as “homogeneous”. Yet it seemed obvious to us, from the discussions at the symposium, that a degree of cultural mixing exists in each of these communities. Speakers seemed to be acknowledging that through adoption and conversion Aboriginal and Mennonite communities are each, to varying degrees, already heterogeneous, especially in relation to spiritual practice.

Janis: I’m not sure that the idea of a “world” necessarily implies the degree of sameness that you’re suggesting. The Mennonite world has always been diverse. From their beginning, Anabaptists from several European nations walked a line between Catholicism and Protestantism, continually being exiled and then re-forming all over the globe.

Marilyn: Maybe we should be using a “many worlds” metaphor. Even the notion of an Aboriginal “world” blankets a community of nations with worldviews and customs that can be as different from each other as they are from any other nation. But can we agree that speakers at the symposium seemed to be using the metaphor of the two worlds to communicate a sense of moving between cultures that were distinct from each other?

Janis: Of course, that’s why we were so surprised: we thought it was going to be all about us! Remember my uncle asking, “Are there that many marriages, that they can have a whole conference on the topic?” Adoption and conversion weren’t exactly the “relations” we were expecting to hear about.

Marilyn: Exactly. We thought someone would address what we supposed was the high incidence of Mennonite-Aboriginal intermarriage, but when people started using the two worlds metaphor I wondered if we were at the wrong conference! As children of Mennonite-Aboriginal intermarriage, we found the concept of separate worlds strange and irrelevant. In our experience, these two worlds live in one physical body.

Janis: But remember how astonished we were when we first realized the number of Mennonite-Aboriginal connections there were in our family? When I pointed this out to one of my Mennonite aunts, she was also surprised; she said she’d never thought about whether anyone in the family might have an Aboriginal spouse.

Marilyn: You’re right; it’s not a common topic around the dinner table, is it? Maybe that’s why we were so excited when we talked the whole length of that cold Winnipeg walk about writing a paper on our version of Aboriginal-Mennonite relations.

Janis: Yes, but here we are, after delving into the research on Mennonite intermarriage, still feeling invisible. How do we write a meaningful essay on something or someone that doesn’t seem to exist?

Marilyn: We start where you and I always do, I suppose, by witnessing to the reality of experience that discourse ignores.

Janis: That sounds “soft” to me; you know I’m an empirical historian at heart.

Marilyn: Yes, but as we’re learning, the harmony inherent in an Aboriginal approach to reality embraces the physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of each situation,
as well as the mental. Maybe getting our “atypical” family story on the page will help to balance the abundance of more overtly rational approaches toward intermarriage.  

Janis: More testimony?

Marilyn: For now. It’s only been a few years since our parents were reunited and since they realized that they’d each married a Mennonite without the other knowing. Now we know that their mother, our grandmother, started her second family by marrying a Mennonite as well. Shame, racism, and the “unspeakable” separated our family and kept that knowledge from us. Maybe similar histories have left other Aboriginal-Mennonites as invisible as we feel.

Janis: But the last thing I want is to betray our family and cause more pain.

Marilyn: So let’s start again, this time with the “dark head” photo. If we change all the names, the story will still unfold as we talk. That’s what’s important.

Janis: Okay. The picture in my head as we spoke about our family that day was the one I sent you of my dad surrounded by all of his blond male in-laws.

Marilyn: Right. I’ve got my copy—go ahead.

Janis: There’s Mom’s sister Margaret’s Lutheran husband. When Margaret married him, she left the Mennonite church. Their first child, a daughter, married an Aboriginal man. Next is my dad, Aboriginal. Mom also left the Mennonite church. Then there’s Mom’s dad. He belonged to the Sommerfelder Gemeinde and married a woman from the Bergthaler Gemeinde, which was more liberal. Although they remained in the Sommerfelder Gemeinde and raised their children in it, none of their children remained with that church. To my knowledge, only one child married within the Church and kept his Mennonite faith, and then his oldest daughter married an Aboriginal man.

Marilyn: So even your grandparents intermarried, didn’t they? As we’ve seen in the Church Membership Surveys, until 1989 Mennonites primarily considered intermarriage to be a meeting of denominations, not “races.” Most studies emphasize marriages between Mennonites and non-Mennonites. But some scholarship defines intermarriage more finely, as that occurring between Mennonite denominations. In any case, Mennonite discourse on intermarriage has historically identified marrying outside of whatever was considered to be “your” group as probable cause for “leaving the church.”

Janis: Which is another way my grandfather “fits” the Church Membership Survey. With time, my grandmother wooed him away with her Bergthaler liberalism! They ended up in her church after marrying in his. Next is Mom’s brother, Abram. His first wife was Aboriginal, and they didn’t remain with the Mennonite church. Beside him is Mom’s brother, David. His wife is Aboriginal and they also left the Mennonite church. The one squatting is Uncle Henry. His first wife was also Aboriginal. They have a son whom he never sees.

When Henry remarried a Mennonite woman, she left the church. He never remained with the church either. He took his second family with him and moved to northern Manitoba where he worked for Manitoba Hydro. In an interesting twist, he ended up negotiating land rights between Hydro and Aboriginal people. I remember a wonderful photograph he took near Hudson’s Bay of three women smoking fish in the bush. They could be our relatives. Now his youngest son lives with an Aboriginal
woman and her kids in Winnipeg.

Marilyn: Your cousin’s situation makes me think of the part that place and proximity play in intermarriage. It sounds like his family lived in direct contact with Aboriginal communities, like the kids in your mom’s family did. Remember her stories of playing baseball against the “French” of nearby Ste. Agathe in Manitoba. They may have been French-Canadian, but given the pattern of Mennonite settlement, perhaps they were Métis.

Janis: Makes you think of the ballgames between the Wapiti Métis and Mennonites in Rudy Wiebe’s novel, Peace Shall Destroy Many, doesn’t it?17

Marilyn: Sure does—or the marriage of Mennonite Mika and “French” Maurice in Sandra Birdsell’s Agassiz.18 Or my “Irish” mother. These labels. For generations, Mennonites and Métis seem to have relied on euphemisms to make identity acceptable to mainstream society. Makes you wonder how many Aboriginal-Mennonite marriages might have been recorded as “Catholic-Mennonite”.

Janis: But you brought up proximity....

Marilyn: Right. We know that the federal government often granted Mennonite settlers rights to Métis settlements and reserve land. Sometimes, the settlers were aware of these previous land rights.19 At the symposium, we learned that Mennonites have begun acknowledging their complicity in this displacement of Aboriginal people. We even heard discussion on the need for justice in this area and what form restitution might take.

What isn’t so well documented is the fact that, however insular their communities may have been, Mennonites often lived nearby the very people they displaced. Both Birdsell and Wiebe posit at least a meeting, if not an enthusiastic mixing of the two cultures. Maybe the familiarity your cousin knew, growing up in contact with the Aboriginal community up north, played a part in his choosing an Aboriginal woman as a partner.

Janis: You’re blurring the line between fiction and history here a little too much for my comfort.

Marilyn: I’m not suggesting any qualitative similarities between the two genres. But the research we’ve seen to date and our knowledge of family history both suggest that at certain times and places in Canadian history, received notions about Mennonite intermarriage did not include the possibility of Aboriginal spouses. Such unthinkable social realities may appear as “fiction” before they qualify for the “really real” of scholarship.

In her monograph, Davies calls Aboriginal-Mennonite intermarriage a “tradition” on the Pennsylvania frontier. While she admits there’s no official record of such marriage in the early years in Canada, she doesn’t hesitate to mention the “marked Indian likeness” among certain Canadian Mennonite families.20 And Epp suggests that as far back as the mid-nineteenth century, Mennonite “progressives” were marrying non-Mennonites.21 But until scholarship fully addresses Aboriginal-Mennonite intermarriage, fiction is one of the few categories that accommodate it. You’re not forgetting the excitement of recognizing your life in those novels. are you?

Janis: No, as long as you’re not forgetting they’re stories.

Marilyn: I’m not forgetting.
Janis: Speaking of stories, though, I loved the grandmother story Maria Campbell told at the symposium [see Campbell elsewhere in this issue]. The tale of her Koohkom and the Mennonite Om visiting under the willow trees—without a common spoken language between them—was a wonderful way to set the tone for the rest of the conference. While listening to her, my mind went back to another family story. Mom’s grandmother told her that when they first came to Manitoba they lived in a dugout with only a sod roof for the first winter. Mom remembers two things Great-grandma said about that winter: they were very cold, and they got their milk “from the Indians.”

Knowing that Mennonites were dependent on Aboriginal people in the beginning, I thought that more interactions would occur. I do know that Mennonites living in Blumenort, Manitoba in the late nineteenth century also had non-Mennonite neighbors, judging by this letter describing the French-speaking village of Ste. Anne: “A settlement of half-breeds lies five miles from here and trips are often made to the place, where a brisk trade is going on. And if one goes from house to house to buy peas, chickens, or cats one is compelled to stop at each place for a little [visit].”

But last year I decided to look at whether or not the two communities co-existed as partners, and I was saddened by the lack of exchange. I pulled out all kinds of books from the library and skimmed through the indexes looking for the words “Indian”, “Métis”, and “Aboriginal”. Other than the stories of missions among First Nations peoples, the older stories related more to a history of separation or conflict, like the time Mennonite delegates to Manitoba were trapped in a hotel room with a group of “hostile” Métis in the lobby below. I also read a letter by Jacob Shantz to the Mennonites in Russia reassuring them that Aboriginal people were harmless.

Marilyn: ...but untamed.

Janis: And “lazy farmers,” as one of those delegates described the Métis. So, even though Great-grandma and others got their milk and other necessities “from the Indians,” and my Mennonite family married so many people of Aboriginal descent, you wouldn’t know it from the published works.

Marilyn: Another reason individual stories are so important.

Janis: Right. It’s not only Maria Campbell’s story: look at the encounters in Rudy Wiebe’s stories, and Sandra Birdsell’s stories. I guess I’m going to have to accept that a lot of literature is based on historical “truth.”

And another thing. As I read the article on Mennonite intermarriage by Driedger, Vogt, and Reimer, I was wondering, “what exactly is a Mennonite?” They provide so many tables showing the declining number of Mennonites remaining with the church, now that intermarriage is becoming “common”. My mother was baptized in the Bergthaler Church as a Mennonite, but now she attends the United Church. Between churches she married outside of her “race”. Does that mean she is no longer a Mennonite? She doesn’t think so.

The concept of Mennonite has then to be defined for me. In both of our cases, one parent is of Mennonite background and the other is of Aboriginal background. Yet until a short time ago, you and I knew nothing about either one—or about each other, for that matter. Am I a Mennonite? Am I Aboriginal? Even though my father never claimed Aboriginal blood in all of the time before you came on the scene, I knew that we were “Indians”. How that came into my consciousness I’ll never fully
understand. Was it because Mom said we were? Or was it because other people identified us as such?

Maybe I decided we were “Indian” because the other two “Indian” men in our small community claimed my dad as one of their own. He would drink and fight with them, but never admit to being anything but white, especially when I said anything to the contrary. One of his mates was a Cardinal, and the other was a Deiter. We were the Brass representative of the “Nation”. Interestingly, I never knew that Cardinal, Deiter, or even Brass were Aboriginal names. Of course, in that little community “racial” identity didn’t seem that important. I didn’t recognize other Métis children or even their Aboriginal parents. Our “Wong” family was Norwegian, not Chinese. And my mother’s family was “Dutch”.

In our isolated town, the most important distinction was whether you were from the “Base” or the “Logging Camp”. A more subtle difference was the division of the “Base” people into Catholics or Protestants, but the only time that seemed to matter to us kids was on Christmas Eve, or when my friends had to “go to Catechism.” I had no idea what a Mennonite was; I couldn’t grasp the concept that people would identify significantly with their religion rather than their nationality.

Marilyn: I wanted to jump in at several points during what you’ve just said, but I kept quiet, for one reason especially. The formation of identity is a complex process, but as what you’ve just explained makes clear, it’s further complicated when you’re of mixed blood—in large part because of how people perceive you. I remember the first time I was out in public with my first son and a complete stranger asked me: “Why are his eyes like that?” That question brought me up short, not only for its rudeness, but because it taught me that a racially ambiguous appearance—or connection—makes you public property. My second son was only four years old when the challenges he faced in the sandbox prompted him to ask me, “What am I anyway?”

People were questioning my family’s identities like this in the 1980s. Sometimes people put such questions to you out of benign curiosity—sometimes. Since you and I learned this other truth, that our heritage is Mennonite and Aboriginal, we’ve tried to imagine the challenges people put to mixed blood children and parents back in the 1920s and 30s, when our parents were growing up.

Janis: Like the fact that even though our parents call themselves “white”, the Jacobsen sisters tell us they weren’t allowed to play with our parents because they were “Indian”.

Marilyn: Right, so we shouldn’t wonder that so many people, of all sorts of backgrounds, have urged us to be respectful of our parents and try and learn and appreciate how hard it was for them. It’s interesting to me, and painful, just how difficult I find it to remain respectful, even after studying in some depth what some of the consequences were for people who intermarried in the early- to mid-twentieth century.

When I was deep into Japanese-Canadian intermarriage, I couldn’t escape one quotation contemporary with our folks’ era, especially when I thought I was just white:
Near my home is an eighty-acre tract of as fine land as there is in California. On that tract lives a Japanese. With that Japanese lives a white woman. In that white woman’s arms is a baby. What is that baby? It isn’t white. It isn’t Japanese. It is a germ of the mightiest problem that ever faced this state; a problem that will make the Black problem of the south look white.¹⁰

In the heat of my research on intermarriage, “that baby” was my “Japanese/White” son. Now it’s my mom, your dad—that was the environment they were born into. This is a clergyman speaking, and by his reckoning, the very existence of mixed blood children was odious, and threatening enough to the state to invert the extremes in racialized thinking: mixed bloods made “black” seem “white”. As I found in that study, Canadian discourse of the 1920s and 30s deemed intermarriage to be just as unnatural and immoral as American writing did. In fact, Canadian writing about intermarriage routinely featured metaphors of barrenness, pollution, sickness, and death.

I remember the night of that snowy walk when I told Mom I was going to marry an Okinawan/Japanese man. Her only question was, “What about the children?” I thought racism was in that question, but now I realize how much anguish and love her question really held. Some days I can’t get past the anger, though, can’t get around thinking of all the family we lost before we ever knew them, all the secrets, all that we were denied because our parents couldn’t acknowledge their past....

Janis: Believe me, I know. But our parents’ denial and turning their backs on the past have been a way of giving us all the opportunities we’ve had. One thing we’ve both gained is privilege—privilege and enough distance from the racism and shame of the past to look at our history and learn from it, and then share that learning with others.

Marilyn: Yes. Sometimes I forget that. With the privilege of that distance, we’ve also learned to spot the ambiguity that language can disguise. Take your question about who qualifies as a Mennonite. I suppose we can gain comfort in knowing that thousands before us have asked the same question! Challenges to identity often happen at critical points in collective and individual histories. In Canada, for instance, Mennonites were pressured during wartime to define just who was a Mennonite, especially when some Mennonite young men became eligible for service before they came of age for baptism. the sacrament that admitted adults to church membership.³¹

Like you, my great-grandparents also came from a Mennonite colony in Ukraine, but because the Mennonite part of my family history was glossed over almost as much as the Aboriginal, I also grew up calling myself “Dutch”. Then I came to two critical junctions in my journey. The first concerned an embarrassing epiphany—the day I asked, when I was almost forty years old: “Why, if we’re so white, are those people in our family photo album so dark?” The second was a more gradual realization that if I was “Dutch” on my father’s side, from what place did I write this poem?

*Things my Oma Taught Me*

Summer borscht is different
than winter borscht.
Porridge tastes better on toast.

Grace is best in High German. Always take special care of the good china.

Janis: And my grandma taught me that porridge tastes better fried the next day! We did learn things from our Mennonite grandmas. What about our Aboriginal grandmother? No one in our family, not even our parents ever spoke of her. She only died a few years ago, but we never met her. It’s as if she never existed.

Marilyn: You know, I’ve been thinking about our Aboriginal relatives, at least the ones we’ve “found”, and every one of them is of mixed blood. The ones who married Mennonites were living off the reserve and already seemed to be trying to assimilate. It’s as if they continued the process by marrying white. In fact, sometimes I think our parents went out and married the fairest people they could find as a way of completely fading into whiteness.

Janis: That’s right, not one of the ones who married a Mennonite was a Treaty Indian. Do you suppose this means that our Aboriginal relatives weren’t committed to sustaining the heritage of their parents? Howard Adams writes poignantly about the rejection involved in his process of becoming white: “...I had discarded my parents; I had even given up visiting them. They reminded me of everything that was halfbreed. I was making it in the white world and I didn’t want anything holding me down...I had shaken off the ugliness of Indianness.”31 My father identifies with this passage.

Marilyn: Some researchers identify intermarriage as a step in the process of assimilation. They argue that endogamy, or marrying within your group, increases with both increased involvement in community “networks” and separation from urban “mainstream” culture.32 That argument supports the suggestion that increasing urbanization among Mennonites might appear to be a factor in the increase in Mennonite intermarriage. Yet even though the 1989 Membership Survey reported that the rate of intermarriage was 38%, it showed no difference in intermarriage rates between rural and urban respondents.33

Janis: But this research is still defining intermarriage as a matter of religion. Aboriginal-Mennonite marriages aren’t even on the map yet.

Marilyn: Well, some researchers have studied Mennonite attitudes towards inter-ethnic marriage. For instance, in 1971 Anderson and Driedger found that Mennonites in Saskatchewan were more opposed to religious than to ethnic intermarriage.34 Maybe Saskatchewan Mennonites are particularly open-minded about racial difference: the 1989 national Membership Survey showed that 50% of Mennonites surveyed still believe in a biblical basis for the separation of races, and 77% think it’s preferable for blacks and whites not to mingle socially.35 Given those figures about racial attitudes in general, I don’t find it surprising that you and I have yet to find research specifically related to Aboriginal-Mennonite intermarriage. And we’re back to that discursive vacuum.

Janis: The same one that swallowed our Aboriginal grandmother?

Marilyn: Well, it makes you wonder, doesn’t it? Remember how you felt about the “Aboriginal us” when we read the way Rudy Wiebe answers the question of why...
Hermann Paetkau shouldn’t have married Madeleine Moosomin?

The reason lay painfully open now: she was a half-breed, and a Mennonite just did not marry such a person, even if she was a Christian. He stared at the bared thought. Despite this summer’s work with the breed children every Sunday afternoon, he suddenly knew that he had not yet seen them as quite human. At times a glimmer of it had been there, but not really...if one of the children had become a Christian, what would he have done with that child?36

Janis: Yes, that passage jolted me; to read such about such blunt racism is startling. I immediately thought of my parents and wondered if my Mom had to experience intolerance for her choice of a partner. Did my Dad have to suffer any attitudes or remarks from Mom’s community that hurt him?

But let’s return to the research.

Marilyn: Okay. But can we first agree that it’s unnecessary, and maybe even unwise, to try and distinguish between Mennonite ethnicity and Mennonite faith in this conversation?

Janis: Meaning, we agree that Mennonites have constructed an identity composed of both ethnicity and faith?37

Marilyn: Well, the idea warrants more discussion, but I’ll accept that, keeping in mind that place is a significant aspect of ethnicity.38 What I can’t accept is the suggestion that intermarriage happens when individuals choose not to sustain their cultural heritage, that marrying out is, necessarily, a form of cultural rebellion.

Janis: That’s why I pointed out that our Aboriginal family members who married Mennonites were already, as non-status Indians, “impure”.

Marilyn: Yes, but why didn’t they have status? Shall we go into the pressure put on Grandma Bella to sign over her treaty rights? Do we talk about residential school? Or about the influence of Hudson’s Bay men on our other grandmothers? Or do we tell the story of Great-great grandpa Peter refusing to sign Treaty 4 because he was afraid the government rations might be contaminated? How relevant is government-decreed “status” to one’s identity as an Aboriginal anyway?

Janis: You know I’m not trying to trivialize the influence the government and the Church had on the choices our parents made.

Marilyn: I’m sorry. I don’t mean to jump on you. It boils over sometimes, doesn’t it?

Janis: Especially when you remember that the Mennonite Church was our family too.

Marilyn: Especially.

Janis: Okay, so back to the question of whether intermarriage is a choice of one culture over another....

Marilyn: Well, we don’t have the space to discuss it in depth here, but my position is that research on intermarriage, Mennonite or otherwise, has been hampered by an emphasis on structural signs of assimilation and an easy acceptance of categories like “race” and “culture.”39 In fact, during the Second World War, the federal government identified and encouraged intermarriage as a way of assimilating new Canadians.40
Janis: You mean researchers have been too quick to accept what’s “pure” and what’s not, who’s in and who’s out?

Marilyn: Right. For instance, we simply can’t argue any longer that the world’s peoples can be ordered within a discrete, meaningful category like “race”. Yet social science still relies on the terms of racialized discourse to conduct research on intermarriage.

Janis: We’re doing it ourselves, talking about “Aboriginal-Mennonite” intermarriage, even after acknowledging that you can’t distinguish the limits of either label.

Marilyn: Similarly, researchers have chosen structural, or objective, indicators like the ethnicity of one’s spouse to measure the assimilation of ethnic groups into mainstream Canadian society, or the rate of divorce among intermarried couples as a measure of the “success” or “failure” of intermarriage itself.

These indicators can’t accommodate the subjective, experiential side of ethnicity. They don’t tell us what culture is being transmitted to the children of intermarriage, nor do they account for causes of divorce that may have little or nothing to do with intermarriage. Look, what we’re offering up here is not a thoroughly researched study of Aboriginal-Mennonite intermarriage. It’s a tentative first step, a conversation that we hope illustrates that the lines you draw around a race or culture—

Janis: or a “world”....

Marilyn: ....yes, a “world” can be pretty fuzzy.

Janis: Like someone in the audience pointed out at the symposium.

Marilyn: Right. I wanted to speak up in agreement then, but I wasn’t sure how safe it was. Even now, together, we try and talk about surveys and statistics and metaphors, but we keep circling back to the difficult challenges of a fuzzy existence, and trying to imagine how it must have been for the people who became our Aboriginal parents to marry the people who became our Mennonite parents.

Janis: Someone said Uncle Abram’s granddaughter and her three children are living with a man on his reserve somewhere in Manitoba. I’m applying to be a Treaty Indian. Perhaps we’re coming full circle. The Aboriginal is dispossessed of his or her land by the Mennonite, and then marries the Mennonite. They become a people outside of their traditional identities, and have children who return to their Aboriginal roots. It would be a nice thought if it worked that way. Unfortunately, no empiricist can make that hypothesis work with just two people talking.

So we’re back to the importance of all of these individual stories that, I will agree, are much more than “anecdotal evidence”. Although we haven’t determined why so many of our family intermarried, we are witnesses to the fact that they did. By 1956, 83% of Mennonite marriages were still endogamous. And by 1956, six of the eight children in my mom’s family were already married, four to spouses who were Aboriginal. Marilyn: And keeping your aunts and uncles company in that 17% minority were my father and his Metis wife, and my cousin—“the one who married that woman who was always so proud of being Indian”—and our friend Shelley’s mother and her (“French”) Metis husband....

Janis: ....and our Cree/Saulteaux/Metis grandmother Sarah—

Marilyn:—who was not invisible....

Janis: ....and her Mennonite husband.
Notes

1 I would like to thank my cousin Marilyn for ensuring that this story has been written down and acknowledged. The sharing of family history is difficult because of the fear of hurting anyone’s feelings, but my Mother has been very supportive throughout. She has given me the courage to write about this ‘unique’ aspect of our family story.

Thank you to my cousin Janis for her exacting genealogical standards, and for her willingness to take this public step. I am grateful for the support and example of family members, especially those who walked a difficult path before us. I also acknowledge the generous support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Centre for Research in Women’s Studies and Gender Relations, UBC.

We owe a debt to Bell Hooks and Mary Childers for the dialogical model in their essay “A Conversation about Race and Class,” in Conflicts in Feminism. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1990).


4 Clifford (1986) reassures us that to describe ethnography as “fiction” is not to connote falsehood. Rather, the term fiction “suggests the partiality of cultural and historical truths, the ways they are systematic and exclusive” (6).

5 Clifford and Marcus, 11-19.

6 Pratt, 7; emphasis hers.


9 Pratt, 6.


11 Gregory Cajete, Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence (Santa Fe: Clearlight, 2000), 2.

Two Worlds, One Body:  
A Conversation about Aboriginal-Mennonite Relations Through Marriage


13 For one reading of Aboriginal pedagogy, see Eber Hampton, “Towards a Redefinition of Indian Education,” in First Nations Education in Canada: The Circle Unfolds, Marie Battiste and Jean Barman, eds. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1995), 5-46.

14 Kauffman and Driedger, 202.


16 Driedger, Vogt, and Reimer, 144.


21 Epp, 138.


23 Cited in Royden K. Loewen, Family, Church, and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and the New Worlds, 1850-1930 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 82.


26 Epp, 188.

27 Driedger, Mennonite Identity, 57.


30 Epp, 379-80.

31 Howard Adams, Prison of Grass: Canada From a Native Point of View, Rev. ed. (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1989), 123.


33 Kauffman and Driedger, 110-11.

34 Anderson and Driedger, 161-80.

35 Kauffmann and Driedger, 203.

36 Wiche, 130.

37 Driedger, Mennonite Identity, 38; Enns, 100.

38 James Urry, “Of Borders and Boundaries: Reflections on Mennonite Unity and Separation in the

39 Iwama, 137.

40 Burton W. Hurd, "Intermarriage," *Ethnic Origin and Nativity of the Canadian People* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1941), 96-112.


42 Driedger, Vogt, and Reimer, 134.