

A Valediction Forbidding Excommunication: Ecopoetics and the Reparative Journey Home in Recent Work by Di Brandt¹

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Di Brandt was the first Canadian woman poet from Mennonite origins to publish an award-winning book in English. *questions i asked my mother* (1987)² garnered the Gerald Lampert Memorial Award for the best book of poetry published in Canada that year and made the short list for the Governor General's Award in Canadian literature. Publication of this book brought Brandt into sudden public acclaim, even notoriety. As the "first" woman in a newly evolving cultural discourse in Canadian writing, Brandt became known more as a rebel than as a writer of place, though images of nature have always pervaded her work. In some Mennonite circles, her name was synonymous with the "angry woman poet" because she exposed the roots of sexism in the culture with which many women were silently complicit, an exposure absolutely necessary to the development of a Mennonite literature fully representative of human – that is,

gendered –subjectivity.³ She had left “home,” but as a literary artist continued to engage in conversation that shook the Mennonite community of her origins. Her challenge to the violence of patriarchy and punitive childrearing in her Mennonite experience painted her as an iconoclast. In Brandt’s own words, “There are certain privileges attached to the difficult role of scapegoat, as I have come to know in detail: you get blamed for everything, but in exchange you’re granted a certain precarious outcast freedom that is much admired and envied, as well as feared and hated and punished” (210).⁴ At the same time, her work opened new possibilities for change and dialogue, and paved the way for later women writers, such as novelist Miriam Toews, author of the Canadian bestseller *A Complicated Kindness* (Stoddart 2004), to explore the hidden secrets of those harmed or alienated by the community.

Brandt’s *questions I asked my mother* challenged the religious orthodoxies of her devout community of origin.⁵ The first of a series of poems entitled “Missionary Position” begins:

let me tell you what it’s like
 having God for a father & jesus
 for a lover on this old mother
 earth you who no longer know
 the old story the part about the
 Virgin being of course a myth

The style of the poems in *questions I asked my mother* – without punctuation, for the most part without titles, and without capitals except for an occasional and often ironic nod to divine authority – suggests a whispered conversation between the reader and the writer. However, the authority of the voice is firm, and occasionally rises to a shout. When Brandt takes on her father, she wrests authority from its traditional anchor in the Bible as interpreted by chosen male members and enacted in the disciplined lives of a community, and offers an alternate story. The righteous conviction of the “A” student, armed with logic, reason, and good grammar, comes through as Brandt takes on her unschooled farmer father. Mastery of the English language has given her a tool with which she can best him in an argument:

the meaning I say through clenched teeth is related to the
 structure of the sentence for godsake any body can see that
 you can’t just take some old crackpot idea & say you found it in
 these words even the Bible has to make some sense the Bible
 my father says the veins in his neck turning a slow purple is
 revealed to those gathered together in His name you don’t even

go to church how can you know anything of the truth you're
no better than the heathen on the street the way
you live around here...

For the daughter, the source of truth is in syntactical structures; for the father it is in living an obedient Christian life. His daughter has become worldly, like “the heathen on the street.” Verbally demonstrating the capacity for passionate and stubborn conviction, which appears to have been her birthright, Brandt talks back to her father with authority drawn from worldly systems of thought that offer her the ability to challenge unquestioned beliefs.

In the first decade of Brandt's literary career, few if any readers would have identified “homecoming” as one of her concerns. Her primary focus during this decade was on gender and the representation of mothering. Her prose works from the 1990s included *Wild Mother Dancing* (1993), a monograph on the distinctive narrative of the representation of mothering in Canadian literature, and *Dancing Naked* (1996), a first collection of essays that made connections between, among other things, the narratives of domination in pornography and spousal abuse in conservative Mennonite communities. In the 1990s she also published three collections of poetry, *Agnes in the Sky*, which contained more Mennonite and Prairie poems (1990), *mother, not mother* (1992) which explored the theme of maternal attachment, and *Jerusalem, Beloved* (1995), a response to a trip she took to Gaza with her daughters.

Twenty years later Di Brandt's fifth poetry collection, *Now You Care* (2003) and her second collection of creative essays, *So This is the world and here I am in It* (2007) mark a dramatic shift in her work—towards ecological understandings of world, place and home. *Now You Care* explores Windsor, Ontario, where Brandt lived for a decade, while *So This is the World and Here I am in It* turns to her current home, and back towards her former homes in Manitoba, on the prairie, with Mennonites. Through the lens of ecopoetics, and her experience in a world fraught by corporate greed, environmental degradation, and the new global capitalism, Brandt is drawn full circle to reconsider the values preserved by what she calls Mennonite “peasant” culture. Yet, when examined in the context of her oeuvre as a whole, the ecological concerns of the new work reveal an intimate connection to themes present in her earlier work.⁶ As she did in *questions i asked my mother*, Brandt again poses questions – this time to the postmodern culture in which we live – about oppressive systems in which we all inevitably participate that damage our relationships to the earth and to each other, as well as belief systems in which they are encoded. Although the books evolved together--some of the essays in *So this is the World and Here*

I am in It were published before the poems of *Now You Care* were written – and complement each other, I will first discuss the poetry collection and then the essays.

Now You Care pays homage to, and deliberately fragments, the legacy of modern poetry in search of new possibilities for seeing our place in the world. It opens with “Zone: <le Detroit>”, a 5-part poem that evokes a postmodern wasteland, uncovering the habits and values that created it – habits in which we are all complicit, such as shopping and road-building and the use of cars.

Who shall be the fisher king
Over this poisoned country

she asks, using T. S. Eliot’s images to evoke the Windsor in which Brandt lived and taught for many years in the creative writing program of the University of Windsor. While Brandt thrived in the university context, the surrounding polluted environment provoked her rage and engaged her activist sensibilities. Her feminism informs her environmental vision.

Truly, in this age,
why should not all women be mad?

The snapping turtle stares
at the giant ball of rope in the sky.

The cherry trees have all been cut;
bronzed epitaphs.

No more invasions!
The earth is spitting up blood.

Now You Care is more experimental than her earlier work and influenced both by classic modernist and contemporary Canadian poetry. Yet its formal experiments serve its ecological themes. For instance, “Dog Days in Maribor,” the source of the passage just quoted, inspired by the Canadian poet Phyllis Webb’s experimentation with the ancient Persian form of the ghazal, entitled “anti-ghazal,”⁷ enables the poet to use parataxis as a means of expressing the sense of random juxtaposition that confronts the postmodern consciousness.

Now that its much much too late
Now you care

Poison ivy wrapped around the
ash trees; lover's embrace.

or

The yard hungry for rust, seducing
dead cars in the rain.

Each of us flaunting our
skeletons in front of the Opera Café

Elbows flying, eyes in the trees
fire-fangled feathers dangling down

Such a strategy of juxtaposition threatens the dissolution of coherent meaning. The reader is left to make sense of the lines without the help of narrative. The mind seeks for pattern and repetition. Throughout the poem Brandt drops phrases from modernist writers such as William Butler Yeats, Sylvia Plath, and Eliot, whose *Waste Land*, itself the arch-modernist pastiche of fragments and quotation, is shaped as a quest for renewal in a landscape of spiritual despair. The context of these quotes leaves ambiguous any conclusion about whether poetry can provide a thread to lead us through the labyrinth of environmental despair, or whether art is just another symptom of the artificial environments that we have created in order to separate ourselves from nature, and thus to obscure our responsibilities as participants in an ecosystem:

Let us have more mastectomies,
cut them all off!

Once out of nature we can sing
All the louder, n'est-ce pas,

Ma soeur, mom semblable?
The disobedient cells vanquished,

A clean nation without breasts,
Once and for all.

Yet the directive, or observational comment, of the title phrase, "Now You Care," serves to waken readers, and to forestall despair, by asking us to hold on until we can make some meaning from the wreckage. Its source, Brandt shares in an interview with Tanis MacDonald, is a quotation from Brandt's own mother, Mary:

I spent my whole life running away from my peasant Mennonite heritage. And then eventually I became old enough to see what a huge, tragic, irrevocable cultural loss my escape entailed, the loss of an ancient oral archive of peasant knowledge, and the playful erotic language and logic of Plautdietsch, my mother tongue. I said to my mother one day, “Isn’t this really sad that we’ve lost our mother tongue in this generation?” and she looked at me like she’d like to strangle me, and said, very emotionally, “Now that it’s much much too late, now you care.” There was so much eloquent grief in her about it.⁸

Thus it is the desire for the “mother tongue” that underlies Brandt’s impulse to repair the damage done to the earth, so often figured as a woman in our metaphors. Brandt goes on to explain: “I’m adapting her comment to the environmental crisis, and commenting on the way we’ve screwed up as a species, and let me sign up as the first perpetrator myself.”⁹

Brandt’s use of a phrase from her mother, a woman who is the bearer of an oral tradition, in parataxis with dropped lines from T. S. Eliot, arguably the 20th century’s most important English language poet – accompanied by her own confession of complicity in the destruction of her oral heritage – neatly demonstrates the various sources of artistic and moral authority in Brandt’s *Now You Care*. It further shows how Brandt’s environmental concerns overlap with an emerging theme in *So This is the World and Here I am in It*: a reappraisal of the Mennonite origins she fled as well as the peasant values that endured forming this agrarian community. By living and working in Windsor, a main node along the corridor of US/Canadian industrialism, Brandt has come to recognize what it means to live in the “world” against which her Mennonite teachings have cautioned her. Her flight from the community and her subsequent success – *Now You Care* was short listed for the Griffin Poetry Prize – have brought her full circle, to a new appreciation of the both the prairies from whence she came, and the values she received from her peasant Mennonite community.

Brandt’s journey home echoes Eliot’s oft-quoted passage from “Little Gidding”:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.¹⁰

Eliot’s homecoming, however, was to the English site of his American ancestors, and to the Anglican Church – both ideas of home that took

him far from his living roots in St. Louis – but which offered a sense of spirituality entwined with a sense of place. Brandt’s homecoming is to the site of her literal origins in language and family, the crucible on the prairie that shaped her values, her story, her sensibility, but it is also motivated by a sense of spiritual pilgrimage. In the essays of *So this is the World and Here I am in It*, she attempts to describe the complexities of home, its complicated loves and betrayals – personal and cultural – and to reclaim its countercultural values, its teaching to “be in the world, but not of it.”¹¹

If Brandt’s poems in *Now You Care* are characterized by outrage at modern civilization’s desecration of the environment and love for the land, the essays in *So This is the World and Here I am in It*, are still fiery, but more elegiac in tone, love letters of an exiled daughter with the effrontery to reframe the community with her re-articulation of its values. The title of this essay collection circles back to Brandt’s earlier work and the opening poem of *Agnes in the Sky*, which also includes a section entitled “Prairie Love Song.”

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 lets 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 you¹²

In some respects, this poem presents a poetic sketch for the essay collection, as the final essay echoes the final lines of the above poem. One thing that the opening essay, “This Land that I love, this Wide, Wide Prairie,” add to the poem’s outline is a lament about the ways in which her community’s use of the land directly violated the aboriginal inhabitants.

“There is regret in me... for this slow dying prairie, how she lost her stupendous wildness, forever, around the time my great-grandparents came to settle the dispossessed First

Nations territories, to break them, to plant their rich farms and gardens, that I am so grateful for, so sad about. It is why I cannot write the land, because I am torn inside over it, my implication in its demise as lawful, unlawful heir to it..." (10)

The lament opens up linguistic space for joint mourning as it intersperses aboriginal phrases with her own declarations of love for the land.

The structure of *So This is the World and Here I am in It* reflects Brandt's in-the-world-ness as well as her renewed commitment to exploring Mennonite themes in conversation with the discourses of Canadian literature and ecology. The essays are addressed to a composite of her literary and Mennonite communities. Five of the dozen essays in this collection are reflections on Canadian literature, a number of them focused on Winnipeg writers. The other seven revisit the prairies of her childhood, the Germany of her family's linguistic roots, and her ecopoetic interests in honeybees and twins. Sifted into these essays are references to Canadian First Nations and Metis poets Louise Halfe and Gregory Scofield and Indigenous thinkers such as Martin Prechtel, whose writings stimulated Brandt to imagine the aboriginal and matriarchal dimensions of her own cultural heritage.

The range of these essays suggests a complex array of factors that influenced the turn towards home in Brandt's thinking: her love of the prairies and appreciation of "wildness" – independence of body and spirit – and a return to prairie values coded as resistance to Windsor's pollution-riddled landscape. Brandt's six-month sabbatical trip to Berlin, which she thought would be an escape from Windsor to a cosmopolitan setting, instead positioned her in a new relationship to the "home" of the German language, even the Plautdietsch of her community, and the food – gurkensalat with cream, for instance. Her conversation with science, in particular genetic engineering, is counterbalanced by acknowledgement of aboriginal claims to the land, an underlying drumbeat in several of these essays. Through her reading of First Nations Canadian writers, Brandt also discovered a literature in which homecoming is a form of resistance to colonization.

In her return to the prairies in her writing, and a re-examination of the rural Mennonite community she has left,¹³ as a response to the dire state of global politics and the environment, Brandt makes use of what she calls "the reparative poetic meditation." She borrows this term from Eve Sedgwick, who argues in her essay collection, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, that the age of the detached ironic essay, the hermeneutics of suspicion, is over. In a world of globalization and corporatization of the soul, what we need is an essay form that restores feeling to a primary place. According

to Sedgwick, “a reparative impulse... is additive and accretive. Its fear, a realistic one, and the culture that surrounds it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self” (149).¹⁴ Julia Kasdorf, in a recent review of *So This is the World and Here I am in It*, recognizes Brandt’s reparative intentions: “Her writing renders consciousness and proves that feeling and knowledge need not part ways, indeed should not. Particularly in the Mennonite essays, she wields the lyric poet’s tools to make new meaning: associative logic, metaphor, a strong personal voice and mythic narrative” (653).¹⁵ Nonetheless, Kasdorf cautions that Brandt’s portrayal of Mennonite culture comes from a particular socio-historical context, and is not a portrait of Mennonites in general. She mentions that Brandt’s narrative of peasant and folk wisdom resonates with her own Big Valley Amish roots, but Kasdorf cautions that this narrative will seem unfamiliar or even bizarre to Mennonites from other branches of the heritage, a reminder of the wide diversity among Mennonites themselves, the importance of contextualization as a prerequisite for true dialogue.

Within the context of the essay collection, however, Brandt employs a dialogic strategy, exposing the multiple narratives and discourses that converge in the concept of home and opening up creative space for the reader to notice new ways in which to approach it. Brandt repossesses her origins by bringing them into dialogue with all that she has learned during her sojourn in the “world,” making self and world sound each other in new ways. In his pathbreaking essay, “Theorizing Ecocriticism: Toward a Postmodern Ecocritical Practice,” Serpil Oppermann points out that the framework of Postmodernism “is based on the idea of heterogeneity which makes it complicit with the ecological principles of diversity, interconnectedness and relationality.”¹⁶ Brandt, while skeptical of postmodernism, embraces “interconnectedness and relationality” as embodied in her Mennonite community. Furthermore, as a critic, she puts into practice what Oppermann describes as “one of the major characteristics of ecocentric postmodern thought”: a “deep questioning of all the hierarchical systems which basically privilege the concept of domination.”

Because postmodernism emphatically dismantles disjunctive opposites, it opens space for mutually constitutive relationships between culture and nature. In this system nature is no longer perceived to be the Other. Therefore, it can no longer be treated in terms of power relations.

The dismantling of hierarchy takes us back to Brandt’s first poems – *questions i asked my mother*, and the arguments she had with her

father, and by extension a Mennonite community that had lost its commitment to mutuality and become corrupted by fundamentalist sexist hierarchies and complicit with corporate farming practices.

“This Land that I Love, this Wide, Wide Prairie,” deepens the critique of hierarchy as she explores the dominator relationship to the land, through her father and brother’s cooperation with the toxic practices of mass agriculture. But her critique is framed as an act of love, rather than as an expression of anger, in this essay.

It is impossible for me to write the land. This land that I love, this wide, wide prairie, this horizon, this sky, this great blue overhead, big enough to contain every dream, every longing. How it held me throughout childhood, this great blue, overhead, this wide, wide, prairie, how it kept me alive, its wild scent of milkweed, thistle, chamomile, lamb’s quarters, pigweed, clover, yarrow, sage, yellow buttercups, purple aster, goldenrod, shepherd’s purse... chokecherries, gooseberries, blackberries, yellow currants, red currants, Japanese cherries, cantaloupe, watermelon... (1)

The enumeration in this last sentence of flora and fauna, going on for 14 lines of text, confers plentitude on the memory of an experience in nature, but Brandt further layers and complicates it with an alternative perspective on land: “This stolen land, Metis land, Cree land, Buffalo land. When did I first understand this, the dark underside of property, colonization, ownership, the shady dealings that brought us here, to this earthly paradise?”

Brandt then brings in a third perspective that reaches back before the formation of the Mennonite community to the indigenous cultures of Europe with their women healers and awareness of the earth and its seasons:

a memory of a time when the women of my culture had voices and power and freedom, and their own forms of worship, across the sea, out on the green hills under the moon, in the Flemish lowlands of northern Europe, a sturdy peasant life, deeply rooted before the persecutions... (3)

Brandt follows up this imaginative restoration of women’s collective power in relationship to earth and each other in a time before the inquisition and religious persecutions with a description of her visit to an Aboriginal moon ceremony, led by Anishinabe elder Myra Laramee. Brandt’s spiritual experience in the company of other women in relation to nature provides a healing spiritual counterbalance to the

divine images of a wrathful God “and his heavy-handed henchmen, our bishops and father.” (4) Brandt’s interest in creating a mythos of women’s presence and practices in Anabaptist history is a reminder that images of feminine space and nature are present in her work from her first book, in which she portrays her mother – and perhaps by extension a divine or natural “mother” – as finding “herself one late summer’ afternoon lying in grass under the wild/ yellow plum tree jeweled with sunlight.”¹⁷ Her imagined memory of women’s rituals in the medieval origins of her Mennonite people enables Brandt to connect to the aboriginal perspective on the prairie.

Brandt admits that she came to know the prairies through the complicity of her pacifist ancestors with the military-style overtaking of Aboriginal land in their settlement of the Canadian prairies. She compassionately shows how the logic of acquiescence to the tactics of domination trapped the grandsons of these settlers into toxic, pesticide farming practices that led to early death and disability. At the end of the essay, the poet weeps by the Forks in Winnipeg, bringing the reader to the riverside with her. She sends out an altar call, intertwining Plautdietsch and aboriginal tongues: “There is still time to turn it around, to save the land, undo its massive poisoning, the scent of prairie on the hot wind, calling out to me, my love, eck lev dee, ni-ma-ta-ten, I’m so sorry, ki-sa-ki-hi-tin, I love you.” Thus this essay’s final act of reparation is to give the prairie a voice – one of love and forgiveness – singing out to those who have loved it in their mother tongues.

Responding to “The Land that I Love, This Wide, Wide Prairie,” when it was first published alone in 1998 in *Fresh Tracks: Writing the Western Landscape*,¹⁸ critic Cheryl Lousley compares Brandt’s exploration of the natural world in relation to ideas of home to that of two other Canadian women writers. In contrast to Sharon Butala’s tendency to universalize and essentialize the natural world as “home,” Lousley credits Brandt for locating “her particular desire for the wild prairie in its socio-historical context.”¹⁹

Brandt’s text is an example of an attempt to use memory not as *nostalgia* for time past but as a *political move* to open up a distance for critique and to create a space for new possibilities, although she might not fully achieve this effect in her revival of an idyllic nature peopled by noble savages.(84)

Yet, Lousley cautions, by locating her hope in a politics of memory, “Brandt risks reverting to essentialized characteristics of women, natives, and nature, reinforcing old stereotypes rather than creating new possibilities” (86). This is perhaps one reason that Brandt had to write a book of essays that more fully explore the dialogic representa-

tion of home, and to locate it finally, not in a romanticized portrait of nature, but in language.

Lousley also sees the potential for Brandt to transcend stereotype by using memory as a “political tool” in an “act of resistance” as she claims her “lawful/unlawful heritage” (86). To take this one step farther, one might say that by embracing her exiled self as both exploiter and exploited, Brandt refuses the binary and holds the complex and contradictory presence of her “home” on the prairie in creative tension.

Two other “reparative poetic meditations” in this collection – “*Je jeliada, je vechieda: Canadian Mennonite (Alter) Identifications*” and “So This is the World & Here I am in It: Orality and the Book” – voice Brandt’s lament for the loss of the language, and thus the voice of the her Mennonite prairie upbringing. In the former essay, she says:

So, now that it’s much much too late, now that I really have made an irrevocable break with my Mennonite heritage and deep-rooted renegade prairie upbringing, and defected shamelessly... now that our Plautdietsch ways of living low to the ground with fierce communal independence are lost, at least to my family, I am trying to understand what that stern, proud, humble, retrograde, free-spirited heritage and the irreverent comically and bawdily inflected mother tongue that expressed it were really about. (107)

Characteristically, Brandt wades into the sacred territory of founding Mennonite martyr stories and connects them to the Burning Times and the Inquisition, fleshing out the silences in Anabaptist narratives of what occurred between early Christianity and the radical reformation with ecofeminist critic Carolyn Merchant’s interpretation of the Peasant Revolt in *The Death of Nature*.²⁰

Brandt supports her argument for the survival of pre-Christian pagan practices in her Mennonite community of origin by alluding to the ways in which language, and its various levels of discourse, preserve culture.

There was altogether a huge discrepancy between our founding stories, told in the language of evangelical Christianity in increasingly pseudorationalist terms, and our fiercely defended, ritually village customs, connected to the rhythms of the seasons, superstitiously so. (111)

Brandt’s feminist eco-critical perspective offers a framework for re-thinking the legacy of industrialism and its concomitant violence to women and pre-inquisition cooperative communities in which

economics, relationships to earth and to other humans, were marked by reciprocity rather than by domination and exploitation. Brandt also views the iconic Mennonite martyrs' stories in a broader historical perspective, offering possibilities for the Mennonite imagination by suggesting the ways in which witches, heretics, and Anabaptists were often conflated during the Inquisition. Her iconoclastic thinking counts the cultural costs of Mennonite martyr history as a legacy of violence directed inwards. She seeks a narrative that begins before the persecutions, that honors peasant traditions of community, work, and relationships in which cooperation between humans was echoed in a loving and respectful relationship to the land. Her attempt to weave together spiritual, cultural, environmental and economic narratives in a healing critique enacts a postmodern version of holistic Anabaptist thinking in which theology, economics, relationships to nature and between humans support and reflect each other.

Images of women and nature, of mothering and mother-narratives pervade Brandt's scholarly and creative work, but in "Je jeliada, je vechieda: Canadian Mennonite (Alter)Identifications," they are joined with an ambitious strategy – to complicate the narratives of the "fathers" of Anabaptism with the possibility of an earlier "mother" narrative – that of a feminine, egalitarian, pagan legacy. This legacy has clung to the roots of the oft-transplanted heritage of the early counter-cultural reformation religious communities, Brandt argues, and has persisted in the low German language and social customs which Brandt, herself, was too eager to relinquish. In *So This is the World and Here I am in It*, she laments her own complicity in the destruction of this legacy, not realizing at the time she rejected it that the low German tongue also embodied a form of resistance to the values of the dominant culture which had seeped into her community when it adopted the homogenizing narratives of evangelical Christianity and capitalism, that collude in wedding the values of hard work and submission in the service of hierarchical domination. Thus Brandt confronts "the fathers" – this time Mennonite scholars – with her attempt to revive an anarchic, pagan narrative that they have spent several generations attempting to eradicate as they strove to make Anabaptists respectable in the eyes of mainstream Christian theologians. Brandt's motivation, however, is to save the Mennonite heritage for use as the ground for imagining forms of community that can live in non-hierarchical relationship with each other, and thus provide an alternative to the rape of the natural world by corporate greed and resist the narratives that serve it.

In rewriting a Mennonite mythos and ethos in this essay, Brandt creates a vantage point from which to turn and view her home community and re-member it without turning into a pillar of salt. This turning

ultimately enables her to leave Windsor and head back to the Manitoba Prairies – not quite all the way to Reinland, but closer – and not only in her creative work, but in her actual life. In her current capacity as Canada Research Chair at Brandon University, one of her initiatives has been to create new opportunities for First Nations artists and writers by founding the biannual Ogamas Aboriginal Literary Festival. The integration of values, work, and creativity suggests a holistic approach worthy of her Mennonite heritage.

The final essay of the collection, “So this is the World and Here I am in It: Orality and the Book,” attempts to do for the oral culture of her Reinland community of origin what her first essay does for the prairie landscape. Brandt reflects on her language history – the Plautdietsch of home, the German of family Bible readings and church services, the German poetry taught in German school, and the English of public school. Through the essay, with its belated recognition of the value of her “mother tongue,” she enacts a rapprochement with her parents for the abrupt and eager departure that she made in her youth, drawn by a passion for literary study and the imagined freedoms of the city. Although neither Brandt nor her parents realized it, during her youth Brandt was a “cross-cultural kid whose first departure from home was to attend a Mennonite Boarding School for 11th and 12th grade.”²¹

Books offered the possibility of a whole other world, a richly inspiring, poetically inflected one, a grand getaway. Only children poised between cultures, with access to art and literature, can imagine the future filled with so much freedom and promise and hope. (207)

Brandt remembers some fine teachers from her elementary years, whose love of literature resonated with her own. But her precocious talents prompted her teachers to separate her from her twin sister by encouraging her to skip a grade. Brandt lost touch with the familiar ties that had anchored her throughout childhood, attending a consolidated high school twelve miles away in Winkler, preparing for a university education that would take her out of the village context, where opportunities were limited for a girl with a formidable intellect and a love of argument.

Like the children of many immigrants, Brandt went on to fulfill her parents’ educational dreams for her, at the cost of her connection with the community. She mourns the loss of her father before she had an opportunity to reconcile with him. Her mother’s response to her daughter’s education and subsequent writings was more ambivalent. In her marriage Brandt’s mother had acted as a subdued helpmeet, warming to the few opportunities afforded her when her husband

invited her to read aloud to the family from the Bible at meal times. When her daughter published *questions I asked my mother*, her mother responded with a mixture of embarrassment and pride.²² Brandt's subsequent writings alienated her from her siblings, but at the most recent Mennonites Writing conference in October 2009, Brandt was well-received at a *faspa* reception hosted in the Reinland Community Center for a group of about 50 writers and devotees of Mennonite Literature, at which some of Brandt's relatives were among the servers. Brandt then presented the community with a gift, and read a poem from her first book, the one that had caused so much trouble.

Di Brandt, the "angry" poet, began her artistic career as a taboo-breaking Mennonite rebel, but has matured into a writer whose work offers a model for "doing language" and imagining future conversation about community. This model, based on the reclamation of values from her broken-open and re-interpreted heritage, as well as on her commitment to an ecological perspective, invites us to a dialogue that can help us re-claim the world around us, find our place within it, and live in a reciprocal relationship with the planet by loving its particular spaces, and sharing that love through language.

In a recent paper, Brandt expressed anxiety about postmodernism: "Could it be that postmodernism repeatedly swallows up the matriarchal and indigenous-minded tendencies of many of its own liberatory strategies in order to inadvertently, and perhaps even intentionally, shore up the crumbling patriarchal dualistic mindset that undergirds modernity as a world system?"²³ Oppermann is more optimistic about the multidimensional possibilities for dialogue inherent in postmodern discourse, as these possibilities construct models of reality that invite us to imagine a healthier relationship to each other and the planet. He cautions against lapsing into binary thinking, and creating a false dichotomy between essentialism and extreme textualism, based on a misunderstanding that postmodernism denies the real. Rather, he says, "representations of nature both in environmental and traditional literature project an effect of reality but do not merely represent the *real* material condition of nature. In fact what they do is create a model of reality that fashions our discourses and shapes our cultural attitudes to the natural environment" (112). Brandt, in fact, offers such a model.

Brandt's essays in *So This is the World and Here I am in It* fashion a discourse that engages a virtual community of readers and scholars in dialogue. "Even though I ran away from my Mennonite upbringing, as far and as fast as I could, I never really left it, it never really left me," she writes at the close of "So This is the World and Here I am in It: Orality and the Book." How deeply it is still a part of her is demonstrated by the creative effort in these essays to find a way back home. She laments her unofficial but deeply felt shunning by her family

and much of the Mennonite community, the price of her “breaking the centuries long taboo against print culture, for breaking open their separatism, their stowed secrets, betraying them, as they saw it, to the world” (210). Then, by identifying her situation with that of other literary cultural exiles such as James Joyce and Leonard Cohen, she claims that in being faithful to her calling as a creative writer, she has also been faithful in her search to understand “that idealistic, crazy, stubborn, ecstatic, beautiful, terrible heritage.” The final words of the essay repeat the phrase, “I love you.” (210-211)

In 1989, when Harry Loewen’s essay “Leaving Home: Canadian Mennonite Literature in the 1980s”²⁴ appeared, Di Brandt’s *questions i asked my mother* was only two years old. In his final paragraph Loewen mentions Brandt’s work as an example of new Mennonite writing with promise. “There is an impatience, even a rebellious mood, evident in their poetry, especially in Brandt’s verses,” he observes of several new Mennonite writers, then hedges on a prediction of the future: “only time will tell whether the promise of their early work will find fulfillment in sustained literary quality – especially after the questions, the questions they asked their mothers and fathers, have been answered” (696). Twenty years and numerous books later – of both poetry and prose – the rebel daughter has come of age. She has emerged from the Reinland Mennonite community of Southern Manitoba, nurtured by the prairie and the lullabies of multiple tongues, but also by German poetry and English literature, to become a writer on the frontiers of the cross-cultural imagination, calling us to recognize and to save what we want to carry with us into the future. Ecopoetics and the reparative poetic meditation have given her a language with which to span the wide, wide gulfs between her multiple homes, and to invite reader as well to consider new ways of being at home in the world.

While the questions Brandt asked her mother and father may not yet have been answered, answers were not the point. Rather, these questions have served to engage multiple audiences in conversation, reframing the possibility of Mennonite literature as a commitment to language and its reparative powers. These questions have insinuated their way into Mennonite literary consciousness, shaping its creative channels, directing the flow of conversations to come. They have crossed borders and genders, and joined the questions of other Mennonite writers who have, through a series of conferences and publications in the past two decades, enlarged the idea of community that shapes Mennonite letters from the 19th century agricultural model into a 21st century model of communities of discourse.

Through an ecological vision and by means of the reparative poetic essay that engages our emotions and imagination with its multiple perspectives, Brandt has written a valediction forbidding excom-

munication. While the writer may physically depart from, or even be forbidden to re-enter the particular embodied community of origin, the very act of questioning is a gesture of engagement, and the creation of a literary body of work that reclaims or reinterprets some of the core experiences of living in a community ensures that the relationship will continue, if only in the virtual space of literary discourse. Furthermore, the home ground of the Mennonite community will always be one of the worlds in which the writer developed, one of the worlds she seeks to connect in a larger view of “home” as the transitional and integrative space between multiple worlds. Thus for Brandt, the writer’s journey into the world has also offered a way back home, allowing her to crack the hull of the sectarian community, to recover the kernel of sweetness that is worth passing on to a new generation – and, finally, to scatter seeds far beyond the home fields.

Notes

- ¹ An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the “Mennonite/s Writing: Manitoba and Beyond” conference at the University of Winnipeg on October 3, 2009.
- ² Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1987.
- ³ “So This is the World and Here I am in It: Orality and the Book,” in Di Brandt, *So this is the World and Here I am in It*, (NeWest Press, *The Writer as Critic*: X, 2007, 203-211).
- ⁴ In “So this is the world and here I am in it: Orality and the Book,” the final essay in the collection by the same title (NeWest Press, *The Writer as Critic*: X, 2007, 203-211).
- ⁵ Tanis MacDonald notes the trajectory in Brandt’s writing from concerns with personal violence to global conflict between her fourth collection of poetry, *Jerusalem, Beloved* (Winnipeg: Turnstone, 1995) and her fifth collection, *Now You Care*: “Brandt’s explorations of language, gender, and power expand to encompass global concerns while maintaining their specificity with the local and personal” (x). Introduction, *Speaking of Power*.
- ⁷ *Sunday Water: Thirteen Anti-Ghazals*. Lantzville, BC: Island Writing, 1982.
- ⁸ Di Brandt to Tanis MacDonald, “Reparative Strategies: An Interview with Di Brandt.” *ARC Magazine*, 2006.
- ⁹ “Reparative Strategies: An Interview.”
- ¹⁰ *The Four Quartets*. New York: Harvest Books, 1968.
- ¹¹ Romans 12:12. A Bible verse often quoted in Mennonite circles.
- ¹² *Agnes in the Sky*. Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1990.
- ¹³ Brandt’s Mennonite community of origin is that of Reinland, Manitoba, settled by Kanadier Mennonites who emigrated from Russia in the 1870s to the Western Reserve southwest of Winnipeg.
- ¹⁴ Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, 149.
- ¹⁵ *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, October 2009, 651-654.
- ¹⁶ Opperman, Serpil. “Theorizing Ecocriticism: Toward a Postmodern Ecocritical Practice.” *ISLE: International Society for Literature and the Environment*. 13:2. Summer 2006, 103-128. The quotations in the following paragraph and quotation are from a passage on p. 114.
- ¹⁷ *questions i asked my mother*.

- ¹⁸ *Fresh Tracks: Writing the Western Landscape*. Ed. Pamela Banting. Victoria, BC: Polestar, 1998. 232.
- ¹⁹ Lousley, Cheryl. "Home on the Prairie: A feminist and Postcolonial Reading of Sharon Butala, Di Brandt, and Joy Kogawa." *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* 8.2, Summer 2001, 71-95.
- ²⁰ *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. New York: HarperOne, 1990.
- ²¹ In the most recent edition of *Third Culture Kids: Growing up Among Worlds*, Revised Edition (Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2009), authors David C. Pollock and Ruth E. Van Reken describe the category of "Cross Cultural Kids," which includes those who have lived in or interacted with two or more cultural groups during their developing years. While this category is typically used to refer to children who have grown up between nations or ethnic groups, it would also apply to children growing up in an insular Mennonite community while also participating in the mainstream educational world of consolidated education. Cross-cultural kids tend to become comfortable with multiple truths and often serve as builders of cultural bridges. At the same time, their new experiences often make them uncomfortable in the original "home" community and restless with the notion of "home" as identified with a particular national or ethnic group.
- ²² Brandt, personal interview.
- ²³ "Catastrophic Thinking and Poetic Remedy: Post-postmodern Strategies in Contemporary Canadian Poetry." Delivered at "Poetic Ecologies," a conference sponsored by the Universite Libre de Bruxelles, 14 May 2008, p. 8.
- ²⁴ *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature: Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée*, September-December 1989, 687-691.