Oba, yo: Low German, Silence and Trauma in Miriam Toews's *A Complicated Kindness*[1]

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> i have tried everything, obedience, disobedience, running away, coming back, forgetting (blanking it out), recalling it again out of the dark, killing it off, translating, leaving it. sometimes it's like a glow running through me, around me, to the horizon like an aura, sometimes it's like a scar, throbbing on my sleeve. sometimes i visualize it as a suitcase i drag around with me, centuries old, unwieldy, cumbersome, *my people's words*, handcuffing me, binding me, & then again, i open it in a new place & it's filled with coloured scarves, playthings. – Di Brandt

Miriam Toews's *A Complicated Kindness* (2004) tells the story of Nomi Nickel, a sixteen-year-old Mennonite girl who lives in the fictional East Village, Manitoba, in the early 1980s. East Village is based on a real Mennonite town in southern Manitoba (where Toews was born) called Steinbach; in both the fictional and physical town Mennonite culture remains strong and segregated (at least in the 1980s) from the rest of the world. One way in which this Anabaptist group keeps its distinction is through the preservation of its oral language – Low

German, or *Plautdietsch*. Since their late eighteenth-century migration to Russia, Mennonites have used their particular brand of Low German to sequester themselves from other folk. In *A Complicated Kindness*, Toews makes *Plautdietsch* and everything connected to it serve a double purpose: it is at once subversive, the whimsical language of Nomi's people, but also a curse for Nomi as it is used by the village's leader to enforce a system of domination and control. In turn, the inclusion of Low German in the life narrative of this Mennonite teenager embodies the double role of Low German. Nomi's story, then, exposes the duplicity or hypocrisy of her own culture and her resulting trauma of growing up in East Village. Yet, at the same time, her satire of all things Mennonite is probematized or indeed made complicated by the affection she has for *Plautdietsch* because it is the language of the people whom she loves. Through the novel's bilingualism, then, Toews's protagonist reveals the dual nature of the usage of *Plautdietsch*. Simultaneously, in navigating between English and Low German, Nomi finds her own voice.

Low German and the doctrine of separation from the world have served the Mennonite people as convergent identity markers for centuries. Hildi Froese Tiessen writes that the practice of speaking Low German continues to serve the Mennonites "as shibboleth – as a test word or catchword distinguishing one group of people from another" ("Mother Tongue" 175). Mennonites have worked to preserve this oral language through the last 200 years as an effective way of remaining separate from other ethnic groups or the world. Mennonites take to heart the instructions regarding the world found in 1 John 2:15: "Love not the world, neither the things *that are* in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (*The Holy Bible*). Menno Simons echoes these directives as he writes in his "The New Birth" and "Foundation of Christian Doctrine," respectively: "We must not love the world and the things therein, nor conform to the world," and "the people of God were already in the days of Abraham a people separated from the world" (101; 181). In a 1988 work, Leo Driedger says that "in rural Mennonite communities" in southern Manitoba, including Steinbach, "it is still possible to engage in all community activities … and in business transactions entirely in Low German" (124). In *A Complicated Kindness*, everything outside of East Village is "the world"; the boundaries separating this settlement from "the world" are determined, in part, by the knowledge of Low German. Moreover, the town's mayor imposes a prohibition on leaving East Village; trains are banned and the bus station is boarded up. Leaving East Village for any length of time amounts to, in Nomi's words, "forfeit[ing] your place in heaven's lineup" (167; 58).

Outwardly, Mennonites, and especially teenagers, are not remarkably different from other folk living in southern Manitoba. For example, when

Americans come to see the quaint historical village museum within East Village and encounter Nomi, they ask her if she is a local or a tourist (215). While Nomi's knowledge of *Plautdietsch* signifies insider knowledge and belonging, a code by which Mennonites recognize their own kind, her generation looks much the same as other Canadian teenagers. However, Nomi, as a second-generation Canadian, no longer identifies with the ways of her consanguineous ethnic group, but espouses the "insufficiency of these ways of identifying," as Andrew Smith comments on the children of migrant groups in general (249). The Mennonite tradition alone no longer suffices as a standard against which Nomi's identity can come into play. Her self-development occurs within and outside of the Mennonite milieu. Nomi, who narrates her own life story, represents the dilemma of many a Canadian Mennonite writer in that she is at once inside and outside of that insular Mennonite environment; she is a character who is "located outside or at least partly outside of that world" – outside because of her tastes in music and literature – but also inside because of her "longstanding special knowledge" of the Mennonite milieu (P. Tiessen 128). Toews's habit of having her protagonist narrate partly in Low German, albeit not fluently, manifests that special knowledge.

Nomi's bilingual narrative expresses her desire not to write off her Mennonite experience, her criticism of Mennonites not withstanding. She pays homage to that unwritten mother tongue, because abandoning Low German would mean the loss of not only her cultural heritage but also the failure of self-actualization. Nomi is not looking for a radical break with the East Village community but for a place within that community. Her *Bildungsroman* emerges through the tension between English and Low German languages and cultures. Rafael Art Javier, in discussing double-language narratives, writes of the "possibility that an experience that is not accessible in one language may be accessible in another" (79). Nomi uses Low German when she remembers her mother and the love between her parents and also when she is the recipient of some dubious kindnesses (the two instances of *oba, yo* that I discuss below). Hearing Low German reminds her of her mother, a time before her sister Tash was shunned, when the Nickel family was still together. However, its usage is a double-edged sword: Low German is also a reminder of the trauma that she endures at the hands of the village's leader for whom the language is synonymous with adherence to the old ways as determined by the Mennonite tradition of concordant patriarchy.

What Toews does is both create a distinctive double-language identity in Nomi, who uses Low German phrases but generally speaks English, and also show Nomi's in-between status. Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity can be applied to Nomi's position; no matter how isolated,

Nomi participates in more than one ethnic and cultural sphere. In "Remembering Fanon," Bhabha writes of "binary, two-part identities" and of an "emergence of a human subject … [which] depends upon the *negation* of an originary narrative" (118). Nomi mocks her Mennonite culture; in her narrative it does become the "other" against which she formulates her own identity, not the Mennonites' "other" as represented by English, big cities, and the world. Nomi's interstitial position makes her an outsider in East Village. At the same time, as a perceptive insider, who is not quite in or out, Nomi is in the position to criticize the hypocrisy of this insular community. Interestingly, S.G. Nikolaev, who also writes of dual-language usage in select Russian poetry, writes that when an author uses a second language (*inoyazychie*) in her text, such double usage serves her as an occasion for exposure of duplicity or hypocrisy (3).

The rigid culture of East Village does not allow for self-validation via independent self-discovery, at least not officially. Children are expected to integrate into the Mennonite social system without questioning it; individual development and possible rejection of that system, even in part as one matures, is out of the question. Trudie, Nomi's mother, realizes before she leaves the town that the folk who remain in East Village are the developmentally stunted ones: "there were no adults in our town" (46). Listening to American radio stations or having a library card from the city constituted the participation of Mennonites in the worldly world of Menno Simons's admonishments. One could not listen to John Lennon and read Nabokov and, at the same time, participate in the life of the Mennonite church nor include those famous artists in assignments for school. One could not do both. As Nomi points out, "that's the thing about this town—there's no room for in between. You're in or you're out" (10). Reading "forbidden" literature and listening to rock music amounts to joining the world; according to Mennonite dogma, these activities lead to eternal damnation. Toews concretizes this strict binary by pointing to the downtown layout of East Village. In Nomi's hometown, there are only two entries and exits – according to the signs on the main street – "Jesus standing … in a pale blue robe," looking "like George Harrison in his Eastern religion period," as if "saying how the hell would I know?" on a huge placard, or the road to the big city" – on the other end is another giant billboard that says SATAN IS REAL. CHOOSE NOW" – to hell (47). In actuality, "there are no … visible exits" in this town; however, a few, like Nomi's mother and sister, do make it out (167, 53). Those who like Nomi find themselves in the liminal position of not wanting to abandon their Mennonite heritage while embracing the culture, education, and freedom that big cities offer – Nomi and her mother and sister fantasize about going to New York, Boston, Montreal, even

Winnipeg – are shunned and exist "in a vacuum. In the town, but not of the town" (13).

Nomi's experiences of growing up in East Village illustrate that neat divisions between the sins of "God's chosen people" and the sins of "the world" do not exist. The narrator of *A Complicated Kindness* discovers that inevitably the devil lives not only in the world but inside her community, for the "Mennonites have produced a society capable of nurturing and sustaining internal tyrannies" (P. Tiessen 143). The trauma endured by the children and teenagers in the novel is prominent. For example, instances of corporeal punishment are surely implied by Toews's ironic narrator when she speaks of the game Mennonites like to play – golf – "because it consisted of using a rod to hit something much, much smaller than yourself and a lot of men in this town enjoyed that sort of thing" (39). Significantly, Nomi's terminally ill friend Lids would rather spend her last days in the hospital than at her parents' house: "Lids *had been wrestled into the back seat of a car*" and taken to her parental home by force (177). At school, the "gym teacher hurt girls in our class, emotionally, by saying cruel things to them," and the geography teacher "slammed me [Nomi] into the locker" (137, 141). Mr. Quiring, the English teacher, hits Nomi's back, near her kidneys, with a pencil case, which causes her to vomit, after she writes about one of the forbidden topics that she did not know was forbidden: "So far in English I was not allowed to write about Kahlil Gibran, Marianne Faithfull lyrics, marigold seeds, Holden Caulfield, Nietzsche, Nabokov … and now Turkish weddings" (152-53). Nomi writes that when she was "a kid … I thought I saw Jesus standing at the foot of my bed with a baseball bat poised to smash my head in for a lie I'd told … and forgot to ask forgiveness for" (110). The Mennonite community and children in particular are terrified into submission to the rules: "we read books … about staying quiet … and books about punishing your children" (102). Toews's narrator observes wryly, "Somehow all the problems of the world manage to get into our town but not the strategies to deal with them" (52). Because of the necessary denial of worldly problems within the Mennonite fold, predictably, solutions to the problems of child abuse, for example, would seem extraneous. The habit of keeping silent with the threat of eternal punishment by God engenders punishment by the elders in East Village.

The first usage of a language other than English in the novel signifies the absence of speaking altogether – *Silentium* (Latin) (4). Here, in *A Complicated Kindness*, enforced silence also functions as a kind of non-language, especially for women. Of the three generations of women in Nomi's family, her grandmother represents the most obediently quiet one; Deborah Cameron, referring to such evangelical women in a broader spectrum, writes that they have constantly been

prevented from speaking "either by social taboos and restrictions or by the more genteel tyrannies of custom and practice" (Deborah Cameron qtd. in Jule 69).[2] Traditionally,

> Evangelical men are rehearsed into the role of performer; while evangelical women are rehearsed into the role of silent audience member. Women's silence demonstrates to others and to the women themselves a devoutedness to God, as seen in their ability to be supportive. Their silence is their way of being good. (Jule 72)

Mennonite women have usually been excluded from participation in leadership roles, either in their work life (if they live in a Mennonite town) or church.[3] In East Village they are explicitly prohibited to speak; remaining silent is considered to be a womanly virtue. As Hélène Cixous might say, these women have "always functioned 'within' the discourse of man," a discourse that "annihilates" the "specific energy" of woman's speech and "diminishes or stifles" it (2050).

Nomi's grandmother breaks her silence, once, when she "went ballistic" in the post office: "She swore. … she snarled, she screamed, … walked home, felt good, surprisingly good" (29). While the grandmother expresses her rage that one time, and silently drinks most of the time, Trudie is, at first, only "vaguely defiant" (12). Until her final altercation with the town's minister, nicknamed The Mouth, who is also her brother, which results in Trudie's excommunication from the East Village, Nomi's mother rages silently: "but I am sure that my mother's silent raging against the simplisticness of this town and her church could produce avalanches, typhoons and earthquakes all over the world" (46). Trudie, who is "half in the world, half out" because she does not fit in with the church-basement kinds of women and spends her days reading, leaves East Village after Nomi's older sister Tash is excommunicated (12, 103). Tash, who is not considered to be one of the "obedient soldiers," questions most of the Mennonite practices in her town; "she had an awful lot of things to rebel against" (118). Instead of suppressing her rage, Tash, akin to the Victorian madwomen in attics, reveals her anger at being shut up and shut in.[4] Both Trudie and Tash rage against obliteration of selfhood in the church basement and the nursery, the latter of which is, notably, a one-way enclosed listening space. Perhaps again, in many ways, their rage represents the generation of Mennonite writers before Toews who left their birth communities in anger and rage. For example, Al Reimer, also originally from Steinbach, writes that he "wanted only to get away from the Mennonite community that held [him] in bondage" ("Coming in" 255). He recalls how he made his "getaway from Steinbach with

ill-concealed haste" and how "exhilarating" it was for him "to be able to pass for 'white' in the world out there" ("Coming in" 258). Nomi does not have a choice: her family leaves her and the community shuns her; she is denied an active place within that community where she desires to be accepted and loved. As Margaret Steffler points out, "Nomi Nickel is never given the opportunity to declare her own escape; instead *she* is the one left behind" (126). Nomi's voice is that of a teenager, who tries to cope with being motherless and sisterless during a crucial time of her life between the age of thirteen and sixteen, a teenager who expresses her pain, trauma, and sadness. Toews characterizes her own protagonist as someone who is "kind of bewildered … she doesn't quite understand why she can't just kind of be accepted, be understood in this community, and be loved" (Toews, "Spirit"). Nomi speaks, or worse, writes, and becomes a kind of Mennonite Holden Caulfield figure; both expelled protagonists show their vulnerability in part through swearing and satirizing their society around them, but, principally, they are united in their compassion that they show towards children. Nomi dares to speak, to write her own account of punishment and escape—not punishment by former Soviet powers and escape from them, as in the traditional Mennonite trek story, but the acts of tyranny performed by Mennonites over Mennonites – and hence she becomes excluded. She does not duplicate the language of silence, which is the mode of being and bearing up for most dwellers of East Village, for men and women and children, where all decisions about living in the community are handed down by the hierarchical village fathers.

The person in this Mennonite town with the authority to speak, according to good Mennonite tradition, is the town's mayor and minister, Trudie's brother and Nomi's and Tash's uncle, appropriately christened The Mouth (of Darkness) by Tash (45). Richly, The Mouth's wife Gonad (whose name evokes the reproductive system or ovaries) is the soundless supportive exemplar of womanhood: "The Mouth's wife never spoke" (84). At most, "she mimed some kind of weak acknowledgement" to Nomi and others (83). Gonad is representative of women as bodies without mouths of their own; her husband is literally The Mouth. Again, women preserve their status of moral ones in remaining silent and voicing no personal opinions. In her discussion of "'voluntary' silence," Magdalene Redekop speaks of the passivity of Mennonite women of her mother's generation when men held the power and "the Word," especially if they were preachers (239). Redekop writes that her mother "hated her mouth": "she reproaches herself constantly because it talked too much," anxious not to bring shame upon herself and her husband (239). The Mouth's wife is symbol of repression of body and language; fittingly, Hélène Cixous writes of shame regarding a woman's own body and verbal expression in

her "The Laugh of the Medusa," where she urges woman to write or speak in order "to wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes," and, more importantly, to take responsibility for her own discourse by "seiz[ing] it … mak[ing] it hers, containing it, taking it into her own mouth" (2049; 2050). The Mouth, or "Uncle Hands" (his name is Hans Rosenfeldt), does all the speaking in places public and private: in church, on municipal committees, and as he intrudes in the private lives of the Nickel family (36). He uses both official languages of East Village with phallogocentric authority; all the characters in East Village in a position to speak with authority are men. Except for the cruel gym teacher Ms. Weins (137), all the teachers in the novel are men. Again, women spend much of their time unnoticed and unseen in the church basement: "The women have to spend a lot of time there. If they don't they go to hell" (9). If a few women, notably the women in the Nickel family, refuse to be effaced of selfhood and possibly entertain new directions towards self-identity, or, in other words, disobey the male religious language of coercion into submission, their place and security in the village is lost; The Mouth has the right to enforce the draconian custom of shunning.

The Mennonite practice of shunning or excommunication is, in effect, a silent treatment. In the same article where Menno Simons writes about not loving the world, in his *The New Birth*, he also instructs that Mennonites "must practice the exclusion or the ban, according to the Scriptures" (101). Shunning is the exclusion of certain members from the life of the community; shunning or "avoidance relates to the break in fellowship, religious and social, which is occasioned by excommunication from church fellowship, and which amounts to almost complete social ostracism" (Wenger). The main grounds for shunning or excommunicating a person are "heresy, i. e., deviation from the dogma of the church, and any persistence defiance of authority of the church" (Bender). Additional offences that might get one excommunicated are "immorality in any form," including "drinking of alcoholic beverages or drunkenness, smoking tobacco, attendance at theatres (including motion pictures) … wearing of jewellery and fashionable attire" (Bender). Toews must have read the bans, for she translates them into Nomi's teenage-speak:

> Imagine the least well-adjusted kid in your school starting a breakaway clique of people whose manifesto includes a ban on the media, dancing, smoking, temperate climates, movies, drinking, rock 'n' roll, having sex for fun, swimming, makeup, jewellery, playing pool, going to cities, or staying up past nine o'clock. … Thanks a lot, Menno. (5)

The teenagers in East Village are certainly guilty of these offences. The Mouth must be at least somewhat aware of the activity at the teenagers' hangout, or "the pits": "Saturday night you'd have a hundred or more kids down there drinking, dropping, smoking, swearing, screwing, fighting, swimming, home-made-tattooing, passing out and throwing up until an hour or so before church the next morning" (34). Yet, only Tash and Nomi, of the teenagers, and later Trudie, are shunned for their "immoralities in any form." As for the teenagers, why are Nomi and Tash singled out and eventually shunned, and not their boyfriends? To be sure, because the young women are The Mouth's nieces, and as women, they are more closely scrutinized than other "offenders" in The Mouth's sexist domain. Also, Nomi is not very good at pretending to be part of any group: she remains an outsider in "the pits," trying to act cool for her boyfriend's sake, because that is what he expects of her. She cannot dissemble and hence get away escaping the strict moral binary of the town. Nomi is not like the others who are "very good at being bad without being detected" (10), like the "wealthier Mennonites" who "even though they're not technically supposed to be wealthy, do their drinking in North Dakota or Hawaii" (69).

Nomi writes towards the end of her story, "I'd just been excommunicated, shunned, banished, exiled, whatever you want to call it. If Ray [her father] wanted to keep his faith and stay in town … yeah, I'd have been a ghost to him, a kid he loved, but couldn't acknowledge" (240). The rest of the community is not allowed to interact with the shunned in any way that would preserve the victim's selfhood. After a person is shunned, she either becomes one of the town's ghosts or leaves the town – which, according to The Mouth's dogma, amounts to going to hell. After Tash is excommunicated, Nomi stops speaking altogether, in any language (173). Trudie also, after Tash's shunning, walks around the town at night like a vampire, in silence; her rage turns inward (174). The girls' mother, after the breaking-point altercation with The Mouth, turns into such a ghost, until she decides to leave Nomi and Ray, in the footsteps of her oldest daughter (171 ff.).

Those in power reserve their exclusive right to impose both silence, through shunning, and the language of choice, Low German, for those who remain in East Village. The Nickel sisters also call The Mouth the *Über-Schultz* (High German), evoking not only the leader in this patriarchal Mennonite community – *Schult* in Low German means "chief village administrator, a mayor" – but also the words "guilt" or "fault" (Thiessen). In this case, the two meanings are interconnected in that the authority figure instils guilt and finds fault: "He [The Mouth] is in love with the notion of shame and he traffics the shit like a schoolground pusher, spreading it around but never personally using" (49). In many ways, The Mouth represents the arbiter of Low German. In Brandt's

sense, Low German here is linked to "scar[ring]" and "handcuffing" ("i have tried" 183). One day, as he and his wife pass Nomi on their bikes, The Mouth greets Nomi "in the non-romance language of our people. … That's your mother tongue, he said, referring to the bit of unwritten language he'd just laid on me [*Vo est deet*, meaning roughly "How goes it"—my own translation]. He wanted people to speak it all the time. English pained him" (83). The mother tongue is enforced by the fathers of the community, represented by The Mouth.

The first occurrence of Low German, near the beginning of the novel, exemplifies the role of *Plautdietsch* as a language of jokes and subversion. This usage is Brandt's "coloured scarves" and "playthings" mother tongue ("i have tried" 183); this is "a kind of unwritten, subversive counter literature consisting of … everyday experiences fancifully embroidered … irreverent character sketches" (Reimer, *Mennonite* 13). In this early episode, *Plautdietsch* is associated with swearing or cursing: "the people behind us swore in the whimsical language of our people. It's hard to take offence when you're being called *upemmuhljefulle und siehn muhl blief ope*, or a *schlidunzich*"[5] (12). Here, Toews refers to the Low German saying *Hee es nich oppem Mül jefolle*, literally "he hasn't fallen on his mouth," said of one who is quick to speak (Thiessen). Because Low German orthography developed sporadically spellings vary. Nomi's Low German is a bit garbled, because she is not a first-generation *Plautdietsch* speaker, as opposed to her parents, for whom "English wasn't their first language" and "their mother tongue was an *unwritten language*" (43). *Op* means "monkey" or "ape" and also "open" (Thiessen); Toews displays the inconsistency in Low German spelling by writing both *upe* and *ope* in the same sentence. *Ope* also brings to mind a less mild Low German swearword: *Opemoazh*, which means "ape arse" or asshole (Thiessen). *Ope'mül*, according to Thiessen, also refers to "someone with a huge, wide mouth and a stupid facial expression." It is obviously derisive to call someone a big mouth; it is however ironic that the community leader is nicknamed The Mouth, or The Mouth of Darkness. Here, Toews satirizes her Mennonite leader and her traditions through him via the Low German swearwords. She subverts the authority of the mild Low German swearing into cursing things Mennonite through the use of its own distinct language.

In an autobiographical essay about his Mennonite identity, Reimer writes that his sudden remembrance of *Plautdietsch* (the "*Plautdietsch* I thought I had forgotten long ago") made his trip to the Soviet Union in the late 1980s to visit the home of his ancestors into "an emotional and nostalgic pilgrimage"; he felt instant belonging and a "warm embrace" through the use of "that mothering language" around which "family intimacy" is "fostered" ("Coming in" 260). For Nomi the sound

of *Plautdietsch* also elicits an emotional response; she recalls the expression of her parents' affection, using Low German swearwords (14). The two occurrences of *oba, yo*, one early in the novel (14) and the second one near the end (201), foreground instances of swearing in *Plautdietsch*. In the first instance, Nomi listens to her parents as "[t]hey say something in the old language that I think meant more or less to hell with it, except, of course, not. We couldn't use the word *hell* casually, although my parents would often say *oba, yo*" (14). Literally the phrase simply means, innocently enough, "but, yes," but when *oba* is pronounced in an authoritarian admonishing voice with a raised finger, it becomes the equivalent of "be careful, you might go to hell." Nomi's parents use the phrase in a playful joking way, for, in this instance, *Plautdietsch* represents the colourful language of the people, of jokes, an instance of Low German as just the right word or words to express something specifically Mennonite.

At the same time, Mennonites cannot invoke hell because they believe that it is a real place, and the fear of ending up in hell is ever-present. When Nomi was younger, before her sister and mother left East Village, she says, "I worried about … the constant threat of hell" (218). Nomi was raised with a crushing awareness that any unsuitable act on any part of the members of the Nickel family could send them all to hell. For example, "One time in church we were doing a call-and-response thing where The Mouth asks questions and the rest of us answer them in unison and every answer was supposed to be Jesus Christ but each time Tash said John Lennon instead" (16). And, Nomi continues to rage, with bitter irony, "Why was Tash so intent on derailing our chances and sabotaging our plans to be together for goddamn ever and why the hell couldn't my parents see what was happening and reign that girl in?" (17). Again, Nomi is swearing in English – these swear words are naïve and adolescent – but the evocations of a real hell, stemming from Nomi's childhood belief borne out fear, heard in Low German, terrify her. Nomi has nightmares of her sister burning in hell, night after night, after The Mouth excommunicates Tash. Three years after Tash's excommunication, when Nomi is sixteen, she realizes that East Village signifies hell for the Nickel sisters; at sixteen, Nomi realizes that Tash had "freed herself" from the hell of East Village (147).

The sign in front of The Mouth's church admonishes people about the real possibility of going to hell: the sign reads "YOU THINK IT'S HOT HERE … GOD" (174). "It was The Mouth making threats and using God as a dummy," says Nomi, and, at this stage in the novel, she reaches her breaking point (174). Just like her mother before her, Nomi throws rocks at the church window (her mother threw rocks at The Mouth's house), after banging on the door, asking to be let in. But The

Mouth does not let her in; he is not there or pretends he is not there, "too busy with damnation work" (175). Nomi, throughout the novel, looks for some sort of kindness, hope, or encouragement, which are in very short supply: there is "a complicated kindness" in East Village, "You can see it sometimes in the eyes of the people when they look at you and don't know what to say," but finds judgement and damnation enacted instead (46). In her rage, she "kicked the shit out of it [the sign] so that by the time I was finished black letters lay randomly on the ground next to twisted pieces of plastic" (175). By this action Nomi smashes the age-old code, The Mouth's fear-induced control over language and individual lives in East Village; in Cixous's words, woman, or Nomi in this case, thus "dislocates" being "'within'" the discourse of man and "explode[s] it" (2050). She unwrites the writing, and, at this point in the narrative, she is finished with polyglot witticisms and code-switching. Silence and exhaustion follow, as she sits on the side of the road (175). It is richly ironic that immediately after the destruction of the church sign, she is addressed in *Plautdietsch* by a passer-by; however, Nomi herself no longer provides the Low German expressions, but the English translations. Two men witness Nomi's breakdown and wrath: one of them asks "How much for a blow job?" and the other "walked past me very slowly" and spoke to her "in the mother tongue." "He patted my hair and said: And she being desolate shall sit upon the ground. I watched him disappear into Jesus's arms at the end of Main Street" (175). The Low-German-speaking man quotes from a passage in Isaiah 3:26, which refers to a shaved head as a curse on the women of Zion; the curse foreshadows Nomi's own excommunication from the Mennonite village, or, literally, a curse pronounced on her head by The Mouth.

Still, Nomi falls back into the habit of using Low German, albeit momentarily, towards the end of the novel, when she is thrown off by the passing kindness of an unnamed woman. This confusion brings about the second occurrence of *oba, yo*. On a hot day Nomi, who falls on the concrete, elicits some compassion from a woman who lives across the street in an aluminum house. She asks Nomi "in the language of our people if I was all right and I thought about the question for a while and then said *yo, yo, fane, schmack*, and a few other words I could remember from talking with my grandma on the rare occasions when she was sober" (201). "*Zeia gute, danke*, I said, waving.

> The woman frowned. *Yo?* She asked.
> *Oba yo!* I said. She went inside and slammed the door." (201)

Nomi exclaims: "Why do you hate me? I cried out. Yeah, *cried out*, to the sun. I heard a locking kind of click coming from the door vicinity of the aluminum house" (201). The distraught Nomi, overwhelmed

by kindness from a stranger, wants to thank the woman in a more meaningful way (for the woman) and tries her best at Low German, but, inadvertently, ends her list of words of gratitude with "hell, ya," which incurs the locked door. This brief encounter represents a significant juncture in Nomi's life in East Village: she is hoping that the woman's kindness is real; Nomi is ready to go "plant a church somewhere in Africa for one fucking cloud" of mercy, a cloud that would soothe her "internal organs" that are so hot that it made her wonder if she "could boil in [her] own blood" (201). Nomi is in desperate need for a concrete sign that "would encourage some kind of re-entry" into the world of East Village; in this desperate moment Nomi is willing to embrace the torturous life in her hometown in order to belong (201). However, the woman in the aluminum house is trapped in a metal cage herself; she cannot help Nomi nor does she want to understand the desperate, improper discourse. After this decisive encounter, Nomi shaves her head with Tash's razor, ironically enacting the curse upon the Zion women that the Low-German-speaking passer-by pronounces upon her, and gets herself excommunicated by The Mouth when he "and his silent wife" come over for coffee (208; 234-35).

Nomi, at the end of the novel, and at the point of the beginning of her narration, finds herself in the damnable in-between position – on the threshold between a community that has shunned her and the city she has not been to. She truly is "Nomi from Nowhere" (no me from nowhere) (56), displaying the uncertain position of Mennonites who lose favour with their community. What Nomi will do at the end of the novel is not clear. Toews offers a few alternative endings, perhaps to show that there is not just one way to live. Steffler notes that Nomi "does not come up with a complete narrative or a definitive ending for her story" but offers "potential endings" (127). Because the whole novel is an assignment that she writes for her English teacher Mr. Quiring, she herself wonders what to write; she has declared at the beginning of the novel that she has "a problem with endings" (1). Nomi contemplates one "possible ending" for her story where she treats her mom's shunning as the event that opened the doors – "a way out of this place" – for Trudie and for the rest of the family (244). Yet, in the last sentence of *A Complicated Kindness*, Nomi simply admits: "Truthfully, this story ends with me still sitting on the floor of my room wondering who I'll become if I leave this town" (246). In the end, we do not know where Nomi will go; she is the last of the Nickel family to remain in their East Village house. She is literally on the threshold, in an interstitial space. For all her satirizing of the Mennonite community, she seems reluctant to leave; she remains in that in-between position, with new possibilities, nevertheless. If Bhabha's statement regarding the formation of identity is germane, that "to exist is to be called into being in relation to an

Otherness," then Nomi's identity is a formation in relation to two "Others" – a double Otherness – that of her oppositional relationship with The Mouth, who represents the Mennonite Low German tradition as a whole, and the English Otherness, represented through big cities, literature, and longing for an unknown future (117).

Perhaps as her biblical namesake – Nomi is an elision of Naomi: "There had been an *a* in my name a long time ago. *Naomi*" – Toews's protagonist will leave her native town only to return later on (86). The Naomi of the Old Testament escaped the famine in Bethlehem, her hometown, to live in the fertile land of Moab, or the world, which, by comparison, "was a highly organized kingdom with good agricultural and pastoral pursuits, splendid buildings, distinctive pottery, and strong fortifications in the shape of small fortresses" (Thompson 787). Naomi went back to her homeland, returning with one daughter-in-law, to nurture future generations. The biblical story of Naomi and Ruth is one of women's resourcefulness, in the face of the death of husbands and sons. Perhaps Toews's Nomi will return to East Village as well, if she actually does leave and does not become one of the town's ghosts. Nomi might come back, older and educated, as an accomplished writer, to live with and for future generations.

Notably, there are numerous accounts of Nomi's love for the next generation of Mennonites in East Village; she loves the adults as well, but they, for the most part, do not return her affection because they are aware of the implications of being kind to shunned persons. For instance, to show the lack of reciprocal love from adults, when Nomi's high school principal mouths the seemingly kind words: "Clearly these are not the best years of your life," Nomi feels "almost drunk with gratitude," but the empathy turns out to be unintentional (170). The sick, the suffering, and especially the children return Nomi's affection much more readily and naturally. The episode where Nomi washes Lids's hair in the hospital – "really, really gently so that she'd feel hardly anything at all, just warm soft water and a light tender touch of my hand" – is especially moving (138). On an earlier occasion Lids writes a *requiem* poem about the best experiences of her life – those with Nomi – "about two girls playing together within some castle's walls" (33). Nomi unwittingly pronounces a blessing on Lids during the washing of the sick girl's hair through what amount to last-rites words: "I kissed her … and said … that I loved her," during this, their final, visit before Lids has "her brain electrified" (139, 242). The children of East Village, the future generation of Mennonites, are especially fond of Nomi. Noteworthy are the salient episodes where Nomi speaks and plays with children. She has a way with them; she knows how to talk to them.

Nomi, at sixteen, is in that intermediate position between child and adult herself. She has not yet learned the "perversely complicated ways" of adults who "believe that looking straight through a person like she wasn't there … was the right thing to do" (234; 242). Nomi walks around her yard with the neighbours' child, "with her hanging on my leg" and spinning "her for a long time until we both fell over" (83). On another occasion Nomi helps a boy who had been "hit in the back" by a construction worker (128). Nomi talks to her simple cousins Norm and Jakie; she pauses to speak with them whereas everyone else seems to avoid them (153). Most significantly, Nomi, together with Lids, has "healing powers" to take the cruel things away from children that adults impose on them, evoking Holden Caulfield yet again (137). One of the abiding images of Nomi in *A Complicated Kindness* is of her playing with the neighbours' child, to the end, even as Nomi starts to fill her car with her things, presumably to get away from East Village: "I had loaded everything and was ready to go" (241). Yet again, she pauses to play with the pleading child, spinning "the neighbour kid" who is laughing and shrieking with delight (241). The mutual affection between Nomi and the children of East Village clearly serves to emphasize the despicable ways of Mennonite adults regarding their often rigid, at times abusive, treatment of the children.

In the last few decades, writers of Mennonite heritage have written poetry, novels, short stories, plays, and essays about leaving their communities of origin in order to practice their art. From an earlier generation, just before Toews's, I think of Di Brandt, whose *Questions i asked my mother* (1987) broke, for herself and countless grateful Mennonite women and men, the silence imposed on women by their tradition. In her collection of essays *Dancing Naked* (1996), Brandt writes about her path to writing: "the trauma of breaking through the strict codes of separatism and … silence" that were part of her Mennonite upbringing and "how difficult it was to actually break centuries-old taboos against self-expression and art-making" (9; also qtd. by Toews in Wiebe, 116). In her books and interviews Brandt speaks honestly about the damage, from personal experience, that the Mennonite community inflicted on her: sexual abuse, violence, physical and psychological pain, all delivered under the hypocritical and self-righteous guise of a Christian religion. Brandt's writing breaks the centuries-old silences around the "internal tyrannies" of her past tradition. Toews continues to do so in her own honest and courageous way.

Mennonite lore is full of stories where its people had to escape cruel regimes. Some of the favourite Mennonite suffering stories, outside of Tielman Jansz van Braght's *Martyrs Mirror* (1660), are the "Flight of Our People" kinds of stories, especially treks from Russia to Western

Europe and North America. One such story is Katie Friesen's *Unto the Unknown* (1986), about "our flight from Russia" (2). This is the kind of story Nomi is expected to write for Mr. Quiring (132; 243). Instead, Nomi parodies this tradition; whereas Friesen writes about escaping Stalinist Russia, Nomi writes about escaping The Mouth, or the "Joseph Stalin" of East Village (10). She writes about her own family's shunning and flight from her hometown. Nomi writes about "the flight of *her* people" and "her own intended flight – from East Village" (Wiebe 106). Toews draws a parallel between those old stories and the new ones, where people like Tash and Trudie, and later Ray and perhaps Nomi, need to flee in order to be free (148).

Nomi's "Flight of Our People" story is a form of *écriture féminine*, a kind of writing that Susan Sellers refers to as "the work … of un-silencing" (qtd. in Bray 72). In Cixous's words, Nomi writes "herself into the text – as into the world and into history" and "out of the snare of silence" (2044, 2037). Contrary to Gonad or Redekop's nonfictional mother, Toews's protagonist will not be "a body without a mouth," obliterated of a self (Redekop 239). Nomi writing is a challenge to the foundational thinking of Mennonites; specifically, she questions the Mennonite traditions of shunning, silencing, and other punishments. Nomi remixes English and Low German – the latter is both her mother tongue and her oppressors' language – in order to represent her own trauma and write in her own voice. Instead of the normative expected master narrative, she writes of the plight of those who do not fit in, the plight of an artist, herself, who becomes a writer. She destabilizes the traditional Mennonite flight discourse.[6] Froese Tiessen, in her essay dealing primarily with the relationship between Mennonite writers and Mennonite communities, published four years after *A Complicated Kindness*, includes Miriam Toews with other Canadian Mennonite writers like Rudy Wiebe, Di Brandt, Patrick Friesen, and David Bergen who are "Like postcolonial writers writing back to their centres, demanding that they have a right to tell their own stories – to describe life as *they* have experienced it – Mennonite writers are in effect writing back as well, and declaring that the *official* stories of Mennonite communities and congregations are not the only stories to be told" ("Mennonite/s" 45).

A Complicated Kindness signals the closing stages of the traditional Mennonite way of life. Maurice Mierau notes that, in the late 1980s, Brandt "believe[d] that the Mennonite culture she grew up with [was] dying" (19). In the last few pages of the novel, Nomi shaves her head, wears army boots (perhaps as a sign that she is no longer a pacifist). She has been excommunicated (235), and, echoing her sister's earlier words, "this is the tail end of a five-hundred-year experiment that has failed" (94), Nomi concludes that "Menno was wrong" (209).

As indicated, in part, by the double meaning of *oba, yo*, the novel's bilingualism serves two purposes: the first *oba, yo* is used innocently and playfully by parents who love each other and overheard by their daughters; the second *oba, yo* signifies exclusion, excommunication, and shunning. Nomi is condemned to exclusion and silence upon the orders of The Mouth. Yet, she writes her story, the story of her life, in multiple languages, subverting the Mouth's Low German, because "stories are what matter, and if we believe them," she writes in the end, "we have a chance at redemption" (245). It is the very act of writing her story that will ultimately reveal the lethal duplicity of Mennonite culture and will release her from its control. In the end, what remains for Nomi is love: her love for Trudie, Tash, and Ray, and Lids, and for the children of East Village who will read the "Flight of *Her* People."

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Notes

1 I presented a shorter version of this paper at the MLA Annual Convention in Los Angeles on January 8, 2011.

2 For a gender, feminism, and language study see Deborah Cameron's *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 1998.

3 There is no uniformity on this issue among the variety of Mennonite churches. Since the 1970s, some Mennonite churches began to ordain women. Some more liberal churches today have women ministers (in Winnipeg, for example) (Toews "Spirit").

4 I have in mind the landmark study on women's writing by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.

5 Thiessen's dictionary does not have the word *schlidunzich*; it means "bumbler" or "dawdler."

6 For an insightful article on Nomi's "Flight" assignment, see Natasha Wiebe's "Miriam Toews's *A Complicated Kindness*: Restorying the Russian Mennonite Diaspora." *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 28 (2010): 33-54.