

Breaking the Binary: Queering Mennonite Identity

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Introduction

“We all can’t be wonderful Mennonite people nor should we be.”¹ These words spoken by Erin, a transgender woman, are indicative of the experience of many transgender,² genderqueer,³ and gender non-conforming⁴ people who find themselves in a position of being rendered unintelligible and unethical within the discourses of the Mennonite community. What do these discourses say about gender identity and sexuality and how do gender non-conforming people interact with them to articulate or reject a Mennonite identity? Judith Butler, a foremost scholar within queer theory, suggests that identity is performative, in that it is created by that which it purports to describe.⁵ How could Mennonite identity be viewed in a performative lens and be re-signified and changed in the identification and dis-identification of transgender, genderqueer, and gender non-conforming persons with the label of Mennonite?

To answer these questions, I interviewed four people who hold a variety of diverse gender identities⁶ and sexual orientations. These

people include Erin, a transgender woman; Peter, who identifies as a gay male, as well as a woman within Mexican Mennonite circles; David, who identifies as a gynasexual⁷ biological male and sometimes as genderqueer; and Purple, who identifies as nongender,⁸ asexual and aromantic.⁹ All of the participants currently live in Manitoba, are Caucasian and have current or former associations with Mennonite churches, towns, colleges, high schools, universities, or families.¹⁰

Significance

The stories of transgender Mennonites are important for a number of reasons. Firstly, there is currently a lack of studies on diverse gender and sexual identities within Mennonite studies. The works which have been published remain largely auto-biographical in nature. For example, Roberta Schowalter Kreider's three volumes of auto-biographical stories of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) Mennonites, primarily features individuals from the United States seeking affiliations within Mennonite religious contexts.¹¹ Likewise, Jan Braun's work takes her personal experience as a queer woman and interweaves this with an explanation of the changing pronouncements of Mennonite Church Canada and the Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Interests.¹² A scholarly account of LGBTQ Mennonite identities is present in Pamela Klassen's article on Mennonite weddings. Klassen examines a lesbian wedding, among others, to argue that such events can be sites of conflict where individuals interact with idealized pronouncements to mitigate and intensify a conflict which is never resolved.¹³ Braun has also written on same-sex marriage, bringing together an analysis of Mennonite Church Canada and Canadian legal transformations on the topic, framing the discussion within a human rights lens.¹⁴ All of these works are helpful to bring forward the stories of individuals holding diverse sexual identities and showing the pervasive sexuality norms present within Mennonite circles.

My book, *Negotiating Sexual Identities: Lesbian, Gay, and Queer Perspectives on Being Mennonite*,¹⁵ features the stories of nine individuals who hold a variety of diverse sexual identities. While idealized discourses hail Lesbian, Gay, and Queer (LGQ) people as unethical and position heterosexuality as essential to Mennonite identity, the lived experience of these Mennonites is a testament to the way in which the meaning of Mennonite identity is constantly

changed by the very identification of these individuals with the label of Mennonite. This work did not include the voices of any transgender, genderqueer, and gender non-conforming individuals. I see this paper as an important contribution which builds upon previous work to more fully represent the diversity of experiences within the LGBTQ community.

The stories of gender non-conforming Mennonites are also important because I believe that they are integral to any discussion of gender. In the last fifteen years, a growing body of work has been written on Mennonite identity and gender norms. Integrating social history and gender theory, these studies told the stories of women to show how some of the dominant historical paradigms are gendered¹⁶ as well as how religious and gender teachings shape the lives of women and men in different ways.¹⁷ Scholars such as Funk-Wiebe,¹⁸ Schmidt and Reschly,¹⁹ as well as Pederson,²⁰ demonstrate how Mennonite women's bodies have been scrutinized and their behavior disciplined by strict gender norms. These authors show how gender norms are frequently the means through which social stability is sought and through which core cultural values are thought to be passed on during periods of change. To take this a step further, I argue that the very division of all persons into the binary categorizations of male and female is also a means through which cultural stability and thereby patriarchal control, is maintained. Scholar Anne Fausto-Sterling writes that "[t]he process of constructing apparent sexual dimorphism constitutes one of the fundamental projects of patriarchal cultures."²¹ To what extent do cisgender²² and heterosexual ideals function to maintain Mennonite culture and values? Is it the case, as Joane Nagel suggests, that "ethnic boundaries are also sexual boundaries" and join together to form "ethnosexual frontiers" which dictate who is pure and who is not pure?²³ Indeed, the ethnosexual frontiers of Mennonite identity require an examination in Mennonite studies.

Yet, while women have been subject to control by gender norms which curtail the opportunities for expression and action, women have not been the simple passive recipients of oppressive ideals. Rather, women have dynamically interacted with these expectations to negotiate places of belonging and Mennonite identification which challenge Mennonite discursive idealizations. Marlene Epp, in her examination of Mennonite women in Canada suggests that "women were constantly acting in ways that unsettled a clear delineation of their roles."²⁴ To what extent can this same phenomenon be seen in the lived experiences of people whose gender or sexual identity challenges the discursive ideals of the

Mennonite community? Unfortunately, there is a lack of studies to date that examine these questions.

The lack of scholarship in the area of gender identity and sexual identity is itself a reflection of the pervasive silence concerning gender and sexual identities in the Mennonite community. As Pamela Klassen asks, given that Mennonites study Mennonites, “how does it shape how gender, sexuality and race are seen or not seen by scholars?”²⁵ Woman scholars in the 1980s and 1990s wrote that the socialization of women within Mennonite contexts to be modest servants was in many ways responsible for the long standing neglect of Mennonite women’s history.²⁶ Likewise, to what extent are Mennonite ideals on gender and sexuality responsible for the silence and neglect of LGBTQ Mennonite stories? There was, and perhaps remains, a resistance to feminist or gender theory within Mennonite circles due to its perceived inconsistency with Mennonite ideals of communal servanthood.²⁷ Similarly, queer theory has failed to find a holding within Mennonite scholarship. It is for this reason that the voices of genderqueer Mennonites desperately needs to be heard.

Queer theorists call into question the concept of two distinctive and binary sexes or genders. Queer could be thought of as a “radical destabilizing of identities and resistance to the naturalization of any identity.”²⁸ Anne Fausto-Sterling explains that “sex’ is not a pure physical category. What bodily signals and functions we define as male or female come already entangled with our ideas about gender.”²⁹ Queer theorists also question the concept of heterosexuality and homosexuality as well as the duality implied by these terms. Jonathan Katz in his book, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* argues that too often heterosexuality is “invented in discourse as that which is outside discourse.”³⁰ In other words, heterosexuality remains the unquestioned normative standard by which all else is judged, evaluated, and discussed. Heterosexuality becomes something which is innate, stable, and existing without an appreciation for its changing meanings and significations over time.

The challenge that queer theory presents to Mennonite studies is to re-examine the seemingly unquestionable concepts of heterosexuality and binary sexes/genders and to see the disciplinary force of these concepts in a historical lens.³¹ If we dare to think of identities as performatively constituted, or that they are formed by the same expressions that are said to be their results, identities are always relational, changing, and in flux. In terms of Mennonite identity, this could mean that while I identify as Mennonite and being Mennonite has particular norms and practices associated with it – such as being cisgender and heterosexual – I am

not the passive recipient of these norms, which are never fully realized in my being. Rather, I live and interact with these norms and as Judith Butler suggests, if “I am someone who cannot be without doing, then the conditions of my doing are, in part, the conditions of my existence. If my doing is dependent on what is done to me, or, rather, the ways in which I am done by norms, then the possibility of my persistence as an ‘I’ depends upon my being able to do something with what is done to me.”³² Gender can also be seen as performative in that it is created over time through actions and in relation to discourses.³³ In fact, Butler suggests that in the performance of any identity, there exist spaces for re-signification and change.

Identification in this frame is also closely related to that which it is not. Stuart Hall suggests that identifications are always representations of discourses and ideals of belonging which are “constructed across a ‘lack’.”³⁴ In other words, a group identity is always constructed around a sameness which is built around shared purposes or beliefs and which positions itself in opposition to that which it is not. In the case of Mennonites, the cisgender, heterosexual ideals synonymous with being a ‘good’ Mennonite are closely connected with the very ‘other’ that such discourses construct as not Mennonite, including being transgender and queer.

Utilizing Butler and Hall, Mennonite identity can be thought of as something which is not based on an innate, unchangeable characteristic but rather that which is formed through a constant repetition or rejection of particular acts and meanings of being Mennonite. In this way, by interacting with the idealized discourses of being Mennonite, those that I interviewed are fashioning a Mennonite identity or a disidentification with being Mennonite. In this interaction the cisgender, heterosexual idealizations of Mennonite identity are re-configured, challenged, and questioned which may open up spaces for other Mennonites to do the same.

Discursive Idealizations

In my previous study of Lesbian, Gay, and Queer Mennonites, I undertook a discourse analysis of the texts and statements of several large and prominent church conferences and organizations.³⁵ Looking at the official statements and policies of three major church conferences, I found that sex itself is purported to be an unchanging, essentialized core and divinely instituted binary.³⁶ From this binary, gender flows unproblematically and heterosexuality is positioned as the natural and uncontested sexual

desire. Furthermore, within the church, heterosexual sexual relationships are sanctioned only within marriage. In church discourses, other sexual practices, gender identities, and sexual desires are systematically 'other-ed' and stigmatized.³⁷ Furthermore, the diversity and complexities of identification is brought to the point of erasure through an almost exclusive discussion of 'homosexuality' rather than addressing the identities present within the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Genderqueer, or Gender non-conforming community.³⁸ Within Mennonite churches, the use of euphemistic language promising love and dialogue covers over the exclusionary violence of these very discourses which hail gender non-conforming people as unethical and unintelligible.³⁹

Mennonite institutions, for the most part, construct their policies and practices around the discourses of the church. Even if policies allow for some gender or sexual diversity, the dominant cisgender, heterosexual paradigm filters into the ethos and culture of many organizations to make them, at best, an uncomfortable space and, at worst, overtly violent towards gender and sexual diversity.⁴⁰ For example, while some Mennonite churches or individuals may allow for the limited inclusion of LGBTQ couples who are in monogamous, committed same-sex marriages, the scope of sexual practices and gender identities remains restricted. Bonnie Moradi and Cirleen DeBlaere note in their discussion of transgender identities that even within marginalized communities, ideologies work to establish prototypic and non-prototypic members.⁴¹ I would argue that the prototypical LGBTQ person among Mennonites is the gay cisgender male who is interested in adapting the heterosexual marriage norm to his sexual orientation.

While church and institutional discourses play a pervasive role in communicating expectations around gender and sexuality, the family is also an integral force in creating discursive idealizations. Historical research has suggested that for many Mennonites, the primary unit of allegiance was kinship and family ties. Within this sphere, clear normative rules and behaviors were transmitted. Royden Loewen writes, "[t]he family ordered one's very life: it determined the people with whom one would interact most often and most intensely during the course of life; it influenced the most important decisions in life."⁴² It is not a leap to presume that families and kinship ties continue to play a pervasive role in communicating expectations in the lives of many Mennonites. Discursive idealizations of gender and sexuality within churches, organizations, and families have a profound impact on the lived experience and identification process of genderqueer individuals.

Findings

For those that I interviewed, Mennonite churches, family members, and institutions all play an important role in communicating expectations about gender and sexuality. Peter recalls listening to sermons in his Evangelical Mennonite Church which featured pictures of pride parades and “in the same breath, pray[ed] for and condemn[ed] these people and warn[ed] us to beware their lifestyle and never become that.”⁴³ Erin notes that through her religious Mennonite experience, she gained particular ideas about transgender people. “I thought that they were all drag queens, flamboyant, exhibitionists,” she recalls.⁴⁴ Purple also notes a number of incidences in which overt homophobia or transphobia was present in Mennonite institutions that *xe*⁴⁵ attended. At one event organized by students to talk about gender, people who did not conform to the gender binary were accused of pushing an agenda. “I was just absolutely horrified when I heard that. And there were a lot of comments like that from a couple of people who were in charge of that thing...That hurt me a lot.”⁴⁶ These incidences are examples of the explicit way in which people with diverse gender identities are stigmatized and ‘other’-ed within Mennonite contexts.

The binary division of all people into two sexes and two corresponding cisgenders which flow from these sexes, was a common message and lived experience. Reflecting on the separation between men and women in the Old Colony Mennonite Church of which he was a part, Peter reflects, “I never felt like I belonged on the male side.” Peter notes that he never liked family gatherings because the “men would be in one corner... and the women would be in a corner... and I just didn’t fit in...[I] didn’t feel comfortable in my own family setting.” Likewise, David remembers not fitting in within his family or the wider community circle. At one family auction David was helping in the kitchen, which drew many looks and elicited a lot of confusion. “They just couldn’t believe there was a man in the kitchen,” David reflects. Yet, he notes that he felt like it was the “most natural place to be in a setting like this.”⁴⁷

A number of participants noted that misogyny, sexism, and/or trans-misogyny⁴⁸ have played a role in their own process of coming to terms with their gender identity. Erin shares that she internalized the misogyny present in the Mennonite church which made it difficult to come out. David also notes that there is still a lot of trans-misogyny which has been challenging for him as a genderqueer person, reflecting that “[i]f you identify as

genderqueer right away, that misogyny starts clicking in because you're identifying with the group that is seen as less-than."

While gender and sexuality norms were communicated explicitly, very often the messages on norms came implicitly or through silence. David explains that within his family context, "gender and sexuality is very much on a binary. And you start talking about anything else and they will just very quickly change the subject. We just don't talk about those things which seem to be very characteristic of Mennonite culture. Anything to do with sexuality, you just don't talk about." Within Mennonite institutions, the silencing of diverse perspectives on gender was also noted. Purple explained that at the Mennonite college *xe* attended, "there have been a couple of times when they've tried to...create discussion...and it just ended up [that they were]...talking about talking." Peter similarly echoes that, "I felt like they were always talking about having dialogue with the LGBTQ community but that the dialogue never actually happened."

Peter describes that within the Old Colony Mennonite community of which he was a part, there was no discussion at all on LGBTQ issues. Peter explains that he knows of no word in Low German that he can use to talk about his sexuality and gender identity. The silence in and of itself sends a message. Peter explains that "the fact that I'm a gay male, that instantly means that I have no place in the Mexican Mennonite community as such. When I'm home it's not something I talk about. It's not something I mention."

Yet, these participants, by virtue of being who they are, are disrupting the silence of these dominant discourses. The participants themselves are aware of and experience the tension of being both Mennonite and gender non-conforming and it is those who are gender non-conforming who must bear the constraints of this silence. At the same time, family members, teachers, church members, and administrators are, in the words of Purple, "talking about talking" or not talking at all, which is not an indication of the absence of tension. Rather, the fact that the silence is so pervasive on a topic which is central to everyday life – sexuality and gender – demonstrates the immense level of interpersonal, religious, community, and ethnic conflict which exists, but which, for various reasons, is not usually acknowledged verbally. By being gender non-conforming, these individuals are re-creating the meaning of Mennonite by bringing forth a much-needed disruption to long-held and often silent ideals of gender and sexuality.

This disruption is more easily evident in cases when participants did not fit the gender norms of the church, institution, community,

or family of which they were a part, and experienced an explicitly negative reaction. David comments that while in some contexts he can dress more feminine, in other places, such as in church community settings, he has to be very careful. "I guess anytime I did push a little bit [by dressing more feminine] there would be some messages....you'd get the looks, you know? Snide comments and things like that." When beginning his career, he was explicitly told that if he wanted to get a job in a Mennonite area "you better not have earrings."

David states that even though he is not out to tell many people about his gender identity, he is known as being supportive of LGBTQ issues and as a result of this has been on the receiving end of threats of violence. Although his parents do not know about his gender identity, "even the fact that I express support [for LGBTQ people] is very difficult for them. They have a really hard time with that." David has even heard people in his community explicitly advocating violence towards LGBTQ people. "In that community...they actually felt comfortable...to advocate killing someone because of their identity. That just floored me." Again, David's experience of receiving negative reactions to gender non-conformity is an indication of the disruption created in holding a gender identity which does not conform to the binary.

The silence and overt negativity about diverse genders and sexualities frequently translates into a self-censoring or a fear of being out and known as having a different gender identity or sexuality. When reflecting on the long time it took her to come out, Erin states that "[i]t's the...undertone of judgment that kept me quiet....I thought there was something wrong with me. And that was drilled into me at a young age...everything from sitting in church as a child and listening to how women should be subservient...or ...going to a friend's wedding."

David, who sometimes identifies as genderqueer, notes that a reason that he does not openly and freely identify as such in his community is for fear of the response that he would receive. He says, "I find that I have to be very careful about the terms that are used...I'm still editing myself because....of where I am and the culture, community that I'm in." He notes that when he left his community and interacted with people outside of that context, "[i]t really made me aware of how much I was self-censoring...to survive you have to." Purple reflects that xe feels like people are more accepting of xyr's nongender status at first because they do not understand what that identification means. However, Purple notes, "I feel like the minute I would actually mention surgery,

that's when people would start looking at me...[and] getting offended." As a result, Purple self-censors xemself.

Erin shares about an experience she had going to a friend's wedding where a sermon was preached on how women needed to be subservient to men. She was surprised that such a sermon would be given to a couple which already seemed to be conforming so closely to Mennonite gender norms. Erin reflects that she remembers thinking, "I can't stay here...knowing that I didn't fit as a heterosexual, cisgendered male. I was so scared. What would they do to me if they found out?" Erin notes that she found the lack of discussion about various issues stifling. "When I would ask questions I would be told...'this just is' and I need more than that." Likewise, David says that although he has spoken in his church on tolerance and references children's books on gender identity and sexuality, he does not dare to read these books out loud. He notes that this self-censoring pervades his whole town. "In our community, to have a gay-straight alliance? Good luck!...What kid is going to ask for it because they know it's going to come down on them if they do. People [are] self-censoring so it's going to be years for kids...to feel like they can ask for something like that." This self-censoring is a further sign of the way in which gender identity and expression can be in conflict with the dominant norms of the Mennonite community and may require a re-imagining and re-evaluation of identity, relationships, as well as gender expression in the name of self-preservation.

Not surprisingly several interviewees noted that when people believed them to be cisgender and/or heterosexual, they experienced more acceptance. David states that when he joined the local quilt group, at first "there were a lot of raised eyebrows." The immediate assumption was that David was gay. However, when the members of the group found out that he was married to a woman and had children, it led to more openness and acceptance from others in the group. David reflects that when people perceive him as straight and cisgender they tend to listen more to what he says: "that privilege [of being a cisgender heterosexual male] is inherent particularly in the Mennonite culture."

Peter received a measure of acceptance for his gender identity and was brought into familial circles of women, but acceptance for his sexuality was off-limits: "For some reason the women have no problem with me in their circle of women but it's not like I'd be able to complain about my boyfriend in the same way as they complain about their husbands...there again is a distinction. I can gossip about anything else with them. I can do jobs in the kitchen. I can talk about girly things but...I have to desexualize myself."

Purple notes that xe is sometimes perceived as a tomboy rather than nongender. As a result of this or because of the confusion many people have over what it means to be nongender, xe finds that most people do not react too negatively to xyr gender identity declaration. Rather, it is Purple's sexual identity and sexual practices which seems to garner the most opposition from others. Purple explains that xe has felt the pressure to get married.

I think that's the most frustrating part: the expectation to be married....It doesn't really matter where you go. It's young people, it's old people. Everyone's really interested in 'why am I single?', 'why am I not dating?', 'what are my thoughts about marriage?' Marriage is nice if you are interested in it....I just...have no interest...but a lot of people don't understand that.

Purple also comments on the pressure xe has felt to have children and that as an asexual person who is also aromantic, xe finds it challenging to contend with those expectations. So while in many instances Purple's gender identity does not seem to bother others, xyr lack of interest in marriage or child rearing seems to cause the greatest upset, limiting xyr access to the curtailed acceptance offered by those who would allow for sexual and gender diversity within the parameters of the heterosexual marriage norm.

Peter's experience of de-sexualization is not unlike what is noted in the histories of cisgender Mennonite women whose bodies, and thereby sexuality, during various periods of history, were subject to norms aimed to solidify women's role as child bearing, submissive, modest, and 'pure' rather than child free, independent, and sexually desiring people.⁴⁹ Similarly, when Purple faced incredulity for failing to conform to the bodily expectations of child bearing/rearing and monogamous marriage, and when David received affirmation for seemingly having conformed to these norms, this too is an indication of the important foundation that heterosexual marriage as well as procreation has within patriarchal Mennonite cultures. The experience of living in contrast with and interacting with these cisgender privileging norms, creates a transformation in the lives of transgender individuals as well as the Mennonite families, friends, and acquaintances who interact with these gender non-conforming individuals.

While a negative response to non-conforming gender identities was commonplace, a measure of openness or acceptance was also experienced by each of the participants. Peter indicated that he has received a measure of acceptance as a woman-identified-man within his Mennonite community. At one family gathering, Peter recalls being explicitly invited and welcomed to sit and talk among

the women. “[I]t was only...a few days later that I realized, oh, like they wanted me in that group and that’s where they considered me. They didn’t ask why I wasn’t with the guys. They specifically invited me into their group of women and that is when I realized that they really saw me more as one of them.”

Erin’s parents openly supported Erin through her transition. Erin was surprised to learn that her parents took the materials that she gave them when she came out as transgender, created pamphlets and went across Western Canada distributing the pamphlets to their extended Mennonite family. Shortly after her coming out, Erin’s parents also accompanied her to undergo facial surgery in Thailand and immersed themselves in the transgender community that was there awaiting surgeries. Erin remembers, “[t]hese are conservative Mennonites...and they are in Thailand and they are chatting with people from all over the world...and getting to know each of their experiences.” Through acts of acknowledging, supporting, and discussing gender identity as illustrated in these stories, some cisgender Mennonites are coming alongside genderqueer individuals to twist and challenge gender norms within the Mennonite community.

While there were pockets of support within these stories, it is clear that the dominant discourses of the Mennonite community and the practices therein, can make it difficult to be Mennonite. At the same time, these individuals were not the passive recipients of these disciplinary norms, but were living in transformative ways to identify or dis-identify with being Mennonite.

Erin considers herself a humanist and does not identify as Mennonite. She notes that dis-identification with being Mennonite was a necessity. “I had to get away from that kind of value-based judgment...It felt like self-preservation.” Yet, Erin points out that as a transgender woman, she does not have the luxury of not educating and informing others and so she continues to engage with and challenge Mennonite friends and family on questions of gender and sexual identity. She explains, “I guess I’ve always had a predisposition to questioning everything and...because something is traditional, [there’s] all the more reason to question it.”

Purple, who grew up within the contexts of a Mennonite school, college, and church and appreciated the strong sense of community in these places, has since drifted away from a Mennonite identity. Purple notes, “I find it difficult being in a community which is a community for everyone except. You know it’s an exclusive community that once you’re in it you do feel welcome but then you start meeting people that are excluded and then you realize that...it’s a bit of clique.” Purple reflects that *xe* would rather sit

back and wait at the periphery to see if things change in terms of LGBTQ inclusion before becoming involved or associated with Mennonite circles again.

Peter likewise, has disassociated completely with the Mennonite church. "I didn't want to fit into a church anymore, I wanted to do my own thing," he states. In the past, Peter was involved in speaking out on LGBTQ issues in the Mennonite university that he attended. "I was that angry feminist and queer theorist who wanted things to get done now and I became an instigator and became very confrontational." Yet, although he no longer goes to church or is associated with the Mennonite community in his day-to-day life in Winnipeg, Peter identifies with his Mexican Mennonite roots more strongly now than ever before. "I guess I identify with my Mexican Mennonite roots [be]cause it's still something that roots me, that allows me to tell my story and that when something is happening that I don't understand or that I don't identify with, that allows me to say, 'well, that's because this...is my background.'" Peter's identification as a woman is intimately tied with his Mennonite identity. While others may assume him to be a white male, people who know Peter well know that he identifies much more strongly with being Mexican Mennonite and his identification is as a woman in that culture. Peter says that he often jokes about what a good Mennonite woman should be. "If I have friends over for supper and I...bake my own bread...if someone comments on that [saying] 'this bread is really good', I will say something like 'well it has to be, if it wasn't I'd be shunned, I wouldn't be a good Mennonite woman.'" In his life, he says that he does those tasks typically assigned to women because "I feel like it's almost my job to do because this is where I identify with them." Still, he cannot be open about his sexuality. "Back home I have to be very Mennonite again. The Mennonite woman is who I end up becoming; the desexualized Mennonite woman."

David struggles with his Mennonite identity which is also intimately tied with his gender identity. "In the Mennonite [realm] a lot of the things that I see as being part of myself are what are identified as being feminine characteristics...so when I look at my gender identity...where do I fit...? Within that context...[my gender identity] doesn't fit the masculine end but it doesn't fit the feminine end." In the Mennonite context genderqueer seems to be an identity label which fits well for David. However, he notes that in other contexts, where the gender binary is not as strong, the genderqueer label "doesn't seem to fit quite so clearly." David reflects that "you also get whiplashed sometimes," moving between Mennonite and secular gender contexts.

Throughout the narratives of the four people that I interviewed, it is possible to see that while each person is constituted in some ways by the gender and sexuality norms inherent in being Mennonite and dependent on these, they are simultaneously living in ways that maintain a transformative and critical relation to them.⁵⁰ For example, while Erin has disassociated from a personal Mennonite identification, partially due to its exclusionary nature, she continues to engage with and challenge Mennonites on topics of gender identity and through that engagement, challenges, re-configures, and spurs perhaps some re-evaluation of these gender norms among cisgender Mennonites. Purple's disengagement from Mennonite spheres itself spurs a transformation of Mennonite identity. In the act of disassociation, something is necessarily changed, both for the individual as well as those who know them. In the cases of David and Peter, it is within Mennonite contexts that their non-binary gender identities are most pronounced, which is an indication of the rigidity and dualism of gender within Mennonite contexts; it is also an indication of the phenomenon described by so many in which identification and group belonging positions itself in relation to what it is not and in that very process, becomes very closely associated to the 'other'.

Conclusion

In conclusion, within Mennonite institutions, churches, families, and community spaces, cisgender identities and heterosexual desires are the largely uncontested basis for ethical existence. Those whose identity, desires, or practices challenge this paradigm are rendered unintelligible and subject to overt discrimination, stigmatization, exclusion, and silencing. This 'other'-ing was apparent in the narratives of those that I interviewed who identified the need to self-censor or disassociate with Mennonites as a means of self-preservation. The ethno-sexual frontiers⁵¹ of being Mennonite define purity in terms of cisgender heterosexuality. Following Jonathan Dollimore, we could argue that in this way, certain forms of subjectivity are refused or made impossible for gender non-conforming Mennonites.⁵² While forced to the outside of belonging in one respect, these individuals, and in some cases their family members, are simultaneously negotiating their identifications in interaction with the idealized discourses of being Mennonite, and in the very act of either associating or disassociating with being Mennonite, are re-producing and re-

creating those very norms which create the meaning of being Mennonite in the first place.

We always exist in relationships of power with discourses that shape us while we ourselves are shaping, transforming, and rejecting those very discourses. As Hall suggests, any identification is very closely related to that which it purports to describe as well as that to which it positions itself in opposition. In the words of Judith Butler, “I cannot be who I am without drawing upon the sociality of norms that precede and exceed me” or without reference to ‘you.’⁵³ Perhaps it is not surprising that for two interviewees it was actually through being in Mennonite contexts that their gender identity as a woman, in the case of Peter, and as genderqueer, in the case of David, became more pronounced. In fact, gender non-conformity was integral to their Mennonite identity.

What does this mean for how we conceive of being Mennonite? If we look at identity with a queer, performative approach, it requires us to question the stable, binary sexes and genders which have pervasive discursive force, yet remain largely unexamined. It requires us to de-stabilize Mennonite identity as we know it and to recognize the pluralities of genders, sexualities, and bodies present among us. Utilizing performativity, Mennonite identity can be considered an ever-changing re-signification, re-invention, and transformation through lived experience. Through the identification and dis-identification that transgender, genderqueer, and gender non-conforming individuals make with being Mennonite, we can see that change is stimulated and thereby so is the meaning of being Mennonite.

Notes

- ¹ Erin Wiebe, interview by author, digital recording, Winnipeg, MB, August 08, 2014. All subsequent quotations from Erin Wiebe are from this interview.
- ² Transgender is an identity held by some people whose gender identity differs from the social expectations of their socially assigned physical sex at birth. This may include people who identify as neither female nor male and/or as a man or a woman or who have other gender identities. See University of California, Berkeley, “Definitions of Terms,” Gender Equity Resource Centre, available at: http://geneq.berkeley.edu/lgbt_resources_definiton_of_terms, accessed: October 2, 2014.
- ³ Genderqueer is an identity held by a person whose gender identity is between or beyond genders, is neither man nor woman, or is some combination of genders. It may also describe someone who resists the social construction of gender, gender stereotypes or the gender binary system. See University of California, Berkeley, “Definitions of Terms”.

- 4 Gender non-conforming is an identity held by person who does not follow society's expectations of gender expression based on the gender binary. See University of California, Berkeley, "Definitions of Terms".
- 5 Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 187.
- 6 Gender identity is the gender with which a person identifies or an individual's internal sense of gender, which may or may not be the same as one's gender assigned at birth. Some gender identities include: transgender, genderqueer, gender non-conforming, cisgender, etc. See University of California, Berkeley, "Definitions of Terms".
- 7 Gynosexual is a sexual orientation describing someone who is attracted to femininity. Defined as per David (pseudonym), interview by author, digital recording, Winnipeg, MB, September 09, 2014.
- 8 Nongender is a person identifying as neither male nor female, without a gender, or as a mix of genders.
- 9 Asexual and aromantic describe a person who identifies as not sexually or romantically attracted to others. See University of California, Berkeley, "Definitions of Terms".
- 10 In order to find participants for the project, I contacted a number of community organizations serving Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) populations to promote the project and quickly received feedback from individuals interested in participating in the project. The stories which were shared with me are a small sample and do not fully capture the multiplicity of identifications found among transgender, genderqueer, and gender non-conforming individuals. I come at this project from the perspective of a white, cisgender, bisexual Mennonite woman and because I am cisgender, I cannot fully understand the experience of those that I interviewed. Furthermore, because of the privilege inherent in my gender identity and race, I know that I have opportunities to speak and have my voice heard and recognized in a way that is not always available to transgender people. For me it is an honour to share these stories and I am indebted to the people I interviewed who made this possible.
- 11 Roberta Showalter Kreider, ed., *The Cost of Truth: Faith Stories of Mennonite and Brethren Leaders and Those Who Might Have Been* (Kulpsville, PA: Strategic Press, 2004); Roberta Showalter Kreider, ed., *From Wounded Hearts: Faith Stories of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People and Those Who Love Them*, 2nd ed. (Kulpsville, PA: Strategic Press, 2003); Roberta Showalter Kreider, ed., *Together in Love: Faith Stories of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Couples* (Kulpsville, PA: Strategic Press, 2002).
- 12 Jan Braun, "From Policy to the Personal: One Queer Mennonite's Journey," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 17 (2008): 69-80.
- 13 Pamela Klassen, "Practicing Conflict: Weddings as Sites of Contest and Compromise," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 72, no.2 (1998): 225-241.
- 14 Jan Guenther Braun, "Whose Law?: Queer Mennonites and Same-Sex Marriage," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 32 (2014): 97-113
- 15 J. Alicia Dueck, *Negotiating Sexual Identities: Lesbian, Gay, and Queer Perspectives on Being Mennonite*, Vol. 6 of Master's of Peace, Wolfgang Dietrich, ed. (Zurich: LIT Verlag, 2012).
- 16 See Marlene Epp, *Mennonite Women in Canada: A History* (Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press, 2008).

- ¹⁷ See Ruth Derksen Siemens, "Quilt as Text and Text as Quilt: the Influence of Gender in the Mennonite Girls' Home of Vancouver (1930-1960)," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 17 (1999): 118-129; Carol Penner, "Mennonite Women's History: A Survey," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 9 (1991): 122-135.
- ¹⁸ Katie Funk-Wiebe, "Me Tarzan, Son of Menno- You Jane, Mennonite Mama," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 17 (1999).
- ¹⁹ Kimberly Schmidt and Steven D. Reschly, "A Women's History for Anabaptist Traditions: A Framework of Possibilities Possibility Changing the Framework," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 18 (2000): 29-46.
- ²⁰ Jane Marie Pederson, "She May Be Amish Now, But She Won't Be Amish Long': Anabaptist Women and Antimodernism," in *Strangers at Home: Amish and Mennonite Women in History*, Kimberly Schmidt et al., ed. (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2002).
- ²¹ Anne Fausto-Sterling quoted in Maria Victoria Carrera, Renee DePalma, and Maria Lameiras, "Sex/gender identity: Moving beyond fixed and 'natural' categories," *Sexualities* 15 (2012): 999.
- ²² Cisgender describes a person who conforms to the gender/sex-based expectations of society and/or the gender/sex binary. It can also be used more generally to describe an approach or set of values which only recognizes binary manifestations of gender. See University of California, Berkeley, "Definitions of Terms".
- ²³ Nagel suggests that not only do ethno-sexual frontiers govern who is pure or impure within a particular group, but they also help to distinguish one ethnic group from another whose sexual practices may be different. In the case of Mennonites, sexual practices could be argued to be a central unifying factor which is used by Mennonites to set themselves apart from other ethnic groupings. Joane Nagel, *Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality: Intimate Intersections, Forbidden Frontiers* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- ²⁴ Epp, *Mennonite Women in Canada*, 5.
- ²⁵ Klassen, "Practicing Conflict," 240-241.
- ²⁶ Schmidt and Reschly, "A Women's History for Anabaptist Traditions," 30.
- ²⁷ See Marlene Epp, "Women in Canadian Mennonite History: Uncovering the 'Underside'," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 5 (1987): 93; Rachel Waltner Goosen, "A Gender Gap Among Mennonite Peacemakers," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* Vol.73, No.3 (1999): 545.
- ²⁸ Elizabeth Stuart, *Gay and Lesbian Theologies: Repetitions with Critical Difference* (Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2003), 10.
- ²⁹ Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2000), 4.
- ³⁰ Jonathan Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 182.
- ³¹ Queer theory, although difficult to define due to its inherent post-structuralism, aims to look at seemingly unquestionable concepts, tracing their historical development. Queer theory examines the way in which sex and gender in particular are constructed within differentials of power. For an interesting discussion of queer theory, please see William Benjamin Turner, *A Genealogy of Queer Theory* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2000).
- ³² Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 3.

- ³³ Many scholars have raised objections to Butler's assertion of gender performativity and criticize the lack of recognition given to corporal existence and the lived bodily experience of transgender people. For further discussion on the topic, please see: Jay Prosser, "Judith Butler: Queer Feminism, Transgender, and the Transubstantiation of Sex," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2006).
- ³⁴ Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?", in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Stuart Hall and Paul duGay, eds. (London: Sage, 1996), 6.
- ³⁵ These organizations and conference bodies included Mennonite Church (MC) Canada, the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, the Evangelical Mennonite Church, Canadian Mennonite University, and Mennonite Central Committee Manitoba.
- ³⁶ The key and foundational church documents of all three Mennonite conferences contain references which assert two binary sexes, male and female, which are divinely given by God. See MC Canada's *Resolution on Human Sexuality*, for example, which states that "sexuality is a good and beautiful gift from God...and a way of being in the world as male and female" (Mennonite Church Canada, *Resolution on Human Sexuality*, General Conference Annual Sessions, 21-27 July 1986, Saskatoon, SK). The Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches (CCMBC) and the Evangelical Mennonite Conference (EMC) correlate binary sex with binary gender roles. For example, the CCMBC suggests that man and woman were made in the image of God which "is expressed in the maleness of man and femaleness of woman" (Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, *Homosexuality: A Compassionate Yet Firm Response*, Faith & Life Pamphlet Series, Canadian Mennonite Brethren Board of Faith and Life [Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Publications, 2004]).
- ³⁷ This 'other'-ing and stigmatization takes many forms including when the 'homosexual' is positioned as external to the community and the consequence of modernity's influence in Mennonite circles (Dueck, *Negotiating Sexual Identities*, 102). This stigmatization is also apparent when alternative desires and genders are closely equated with promiscuity, bestiality, addiction, pornography, and other practices deemed unethical within the church (Ibid., 102-103).
- ³⁸ Homosexuality as a concept entered Euro-American discourse in the last part of the nineteenth century and resulted in the division of every person into the binary categorizations of homo- or hetero- sexual. Homosexuality is not a word usually used to self-identify among LGBTQ people, is generally considered to refer primarily to gay cisgender males, and has associations with the pathologization of same-sex desires. Please see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008); Dueck, *Negotiating Sexual Identities*, 97-98.
- ³⁹ Dueck, *Negotiating Sexual Identities*, 104-108.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 109-124.
- ⁴¹ Bonnie Moradi and Cirleen DeBlaere, "Replacing Either/Or with Both/And: Illustrations of Perspective Alternation," *The Counseling Psychologist* 38 (2010): 462-463.
- ⁴² Royden Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and New Worlds, 1850-1930* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 32.

- ⁴³ Peter Friesen, interview by author, digital recording, Winnipeg, MB, August 12, 2014. All subsequent quotations from Peter Friesen are from this interview.
- ⁴⁴ Erin Wiebe, interview by author, digital recording, Winnipeg, MB, August 08, 2014.
- ⁴⁵ By request of the interviewee, I used gender neutral pronouns of ‘xe’, ‘xem’, ‘xyr’, ‘xyrs’, ‘xemself’ to reference the participant. In terms of usage, ‘xe’ is used for the nominative (subject), ‘xem’ is used for the objective (object), ‘xyr’ is used for the possessive determiner, ‘xyrs’ is used for the possessive pronoun, and ‘xemself’ is used for the reflexive.
- ⁴⁶ Purple (pseudonym), interview by author, digital recording, Winnipeg, MB, August 13, 2014. All subsequent quotations from Purple are from this interview.
- ⁴⁷ David (pseudonym), interview by author, digital recording, Winnipeg, MB, September 09, 2014. All subsequent quotations from David are from this interview.
- ⁴⁸ Trans-misogyny describes the combination of misogyny and sexism in the lives of transgender women or other people with female/feminine characteristics or identities. For more information see Julia Serano, *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2013).
- ⁴⁹ Funk-Wiebe, “Me Tarzan, Son of Menno- You Jane, Mennonite Mama,”; Pederson, “She May Be Amish Now, But She Won’t Be Amish Long”; Schmidt and Reschly, “A Women’s History for Anabaptist Traditions.”
- ⁵⁰ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 3.
- ⁵¹ Nagel, *Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality*, 1, 9.
- ⁵² Dollimore argues that subjectivity and sexuality have had a very strong inter-connection in the Western world so that it is the case that ‘deviant’ desires or sexual practices often lead to a refusal of particular kinds of subjectivity. See Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 339.
- ⁵³ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 32.