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

Reading My Life in the Text: Adventures of a Queer Mennonite Critic

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Although I have been reading Mennonite literature consistently since taking the Mennonite Literature course at Goshen College in 2001, and although I have been seeking out queer texts steadily for the past decade as one way of helping me understand my own queerness, I didn't discover queer Mennonite literature until 2012. Prior to this I had written a small amount of scholarship on Mennonite literature, and had decided that I was no longer going to participate in the field because it was taking energy away from my other scholarly interests. But then I was asked to contribute an es-

say to the After Identity: Mennonite/s Writing symposium that would take place at Penn State in May 2013, and when you are a pre-tenure scholar and someone invites you to a conference, you don't say no.

Much of my non-Mennonite related scholarship deals with queer themes, and I had thought about the seeming lack of queer characters and themes in Mennonite literature before. Of course, these themes cannot be forced into art, and so I hoped that eventually these queer Mennonite texts would appear and moved on to other possible topics. My initial idea for my After Identity essay was to write about the transgressive sexual elements in Janet Kauffman's *The Body in Four Parts* (1993) and Rudy Wiebe's *My Lovely Enemy* (1983), both of which might be considered "queer" in the political sense, though not necessarily the sexual one. In Kauffman's novel, Margaretta's "wholly sexual […] body-in-process" (35-36) and Jean-Paul's ambiguous gender (e.g., 99-100) are examples of liberated, fluid views of the body. In Wiebe's novel, the magical realist scene at the end of the book where Liv and Gillian make out and the two couples have a dreamy nudist almost-foursome (229-234) offers a rich conceptual space for rethinking oppressive homophobic mores. My plan was to see what these texts could offer when viewed through the lens of queer theory.

However, once word got around that I was writing on queer themes I received two recommendations of novels whose subject matter was explicitly queer: Jan Guenther Braun's *Somewhere Else* (2008) and Stephen Beachy's *boneyard* (2011). It pleases me to no end that the broader academic Mennonite community helped me to find these texts: how Anabaptist!

Reading these books was a revelation. *Somewhere Else* is a gut-wrenching coming of age story that moved me deeply because of the protagonist Jess's self-imposed exile from the Mennonite community, which is necessary for her to fully realize her lesbian identity. I myself had to leave the Church before I could claim my own queerness, and am still trying to figure out whether it is possible to go back. Jess's attempt to do so at the end of the novel resonated with me because of its acknowledgment that it is impossible to ever fully get away from one's Mennonite roots, and thus one is left with the task of figuring out how to integrate those roots into queer life. While the kind of break with the Mennonite community that Jess experiences has been a common theme in North American Mennonite literature since its beginnings,[1] her attempted return is not. This return recognizes that one never completely escapes and thus that it makes sense to try to make some kind of peace with the tradition instead of fighting it, because one is mere-

ly fighting oneself.[2] That Mennonite self never fully goes away, as much as one might try to flee it. This new twist to the usual narrative spoke powerfully to me.

When I read *boneyard*, the story of a gay Amish adolescent who is into bondage and uses the *Martyrs Mirror*'s illustrations to fuel his sexual fantasies, it was the closest I have ever come to having a novel describe my own story. For approximately a year I had been making notes about a future writing project that would examine my affinity for BDSM[3] and whether it was connected at all with the obsessive discussions about violence and peace throughout my Mennonite childhood and my frequent browsing of Thieleman J. van Braght's *Martyrs Mirror* as a pious teenager. Certainly my Mennonite upbringing and its emphasis on pacifism gives me a unique view of the simulated violence present in BDSM: it has helped me understand the role of coercion in real violence, as well as helping me to think about the role of love in discipline, whether at a personal level or a denominational one. The theological fetishizing of humility and bodily degradation in the *Martyrs Mirror* in some ways echoes the sexual fetishizing of them in BDSM practice, and Beachy's novel explores these similarities in incisive ways. Frankly, reading *boneyard*, I was jealous. I thought to myself, "that punk stole my idea!" But I was also incredibly excited. I remember reading the first passage that deals prominently with BDSM, where Jake takes a vocabulary quiz that is littered with bondage terms (32-34), and feeling a streak of recognition that kept intensifying as I read on.

After reading these books I decided it was necessary to write my essay about them, in part as a way of celebrating their essential stories and in part simply because they helped reveal my own self to me. As I began to write I discovered a third queer Mennonite writer, Casey Plett, through a most fortuitous occurrence. Plett was part of a group of contributors to the anthology *The Collection: Short Fiction from the Transgender Vanguard* participating in a reading at Westminster College in Salt Lake City, where I was teaching at the time. As she read an excerpt of her story "Other Women," which mentions Winkler, Manitoba (105), my Mennonite radar started beeping. Afterwards, I walked up to her and said "Hi. My name's Daniel. I really enjoyed your story. Are you Mennonite?" The shocked look on her face was priceless, and we had a good chat. Plett did not read the parts of "Other Women" that explicitly identify it as a Mennonite text, and I worried that my identifying of her was an unwelcome claiming into the Mennonite literary fold. However, I felt such an intense feeling of kinship as

she read that I thought was worth acknowledging. I decided to incorporate "Other Women" into my essay.

Writing the After Identity essay[4] was extremely difficult, not because I did not know what I wanted to say, but because it felt so personal. Even though I was writing in a formal genre, literary criticism, it felt like my guts were splayed out on the page. As I was writing it was as though I was mediating between two angry family members. On the one hand were my Mennonite ancestors reminding me of my roots, and on the other were my new queer comrades urging me to move forward and leave this outdated, institutionally homophobic tradition behind. But, of course, it was this Mennonite tradition that taught me to care for the oppressed, and to question authority, and to be open to radical ideas scorned by mainstream society. I would not be able to appreciate queer theory or the journeys depicted in queer literature without the love for justice taught to me by the Mennonite community.

And thus writing the essay has ended up pulling me further into the Mennonite community than I have been for years. Instead of lamenting the tension between my Mennonite self and my queer self—because on the bad days they do feel like polar opposites—I have been continuing to explore what each kind of thinking may offer the other. I have been away from the Church for a little more than a decade now, but I am finally realizing that despite this theological distance, Mennonite thinking is home for me, and I cannot escape it no matter how hard I try.

A recent experience helped to make this realization plain to me. I have been wrestling with depression for about a year as a result of a divorce, and what has made this time especially difficult is that the one refuge that I have always counted on to help me recenter during times of crisis—reading—has stopped working as a balm. This loss of an activity that felt most essential to my sense of self, and the subsequent awareness that I am going to have to rebuild my entire life from scratch, not just my love life, is something terrible that I have no idea how to adequately describe. But what has kept me going, the few stories I have been able to find that have been at all appealing to me, has been Mennonite literature. Despite feeling alienated from reading, I bought Miriam Toews's new novel *All My Puny Sorrows* and Rudy Wiebe's new novel *Come Back* out of force of habit. Even though they are both depressing books, and even though neither one focuses heavily on explicitly Mennonite themes, they helped remind me where I come from, which has been invaluable because I do not know where I am going. A non-Mennonite friend asked me recently whether I would return to the Church after my divorce because "that's what people

do," and I laughed her off, but that question has been resonating with me in ways I was not expecting. What else is left for me?

But queer thinking is now also home for me. Queer theory's emphasis on questioning basic societal structures in pursuit of a more just world speaks to me, as does its advocacy for the oppressed. It is intellectually rigorous, stretching my thinking in pleasing ways. In my experience the queer community is welcoming of diversity in a manner that I have not found elsewhere. Queer writers such as Samuel R. Delany, Wayne Koestenbaum, Imogen Binnie, and Audre Lorde write about marginalized characters who are invisible in most mainstream literature.[5] Things on the margins are difficult, but also vibrant and fun and full of transformative potential. Anything can happen. This is also the case in writing by Beachy and Plett and Braun. Thus my explorations of queer Mennonite literature have been one way to try to synthesize those two conceptual homes in my life.

Since writing the essay I have further discovered some of the, if not the earliest, queer Mennonite texts through the recommendations of others, including Lynnette Dueck's handful of novels beginning with *sing me no more* (1992),[6] as well as more recent books such as Christina Penner's novel *Widows of Hamilton House* (2008). It has been gratifying to find that the queer Mennonite storytelling tradition is older and larger than I suspected,[7] but it also saddens me to see how long it took me to find it. Part of this is the fault of my own lack of research—the books were there, and had I tried harder I could have found them—but it is also telling that they have generally been ignored by literary critics. Much like Wiebe's *My Lovely Enemy*, some of these early texts may have been ahead of their time, and I hope they will be rediscovered. They deserve space in the Mennonite literature canon. Similarly, it is my hope that the significant queer characters in texts such as Jessica Penner's *Shaken in the Water* and David Bergen's *The Retreat* receive critical attention.

In writing this essay about a topic that I find both professionally and personally significant, I have struggled with issues of feeling that my voice is unimportant, or that it is somehow wrong to write about my own experiences instead of just focusing on the literature itself. But this is one reason why queer Mennonite literature is valuable: it claims space for individual stories and voices from all perspectives, including the margins, arguing that they must be heard in order for the Mennonite community (broadly defined) to remain healthy. I hope that queer Mennonite literature continues to be written, and that more critics begin writing about it. I hope that there will be space for this writing, both creative and critical,

in journals and magazines affiliated with Church institutions. I think that the LGBT panel at the Fresno Pacific Mennonite/s Writing conference, at which this paper was first presented, portends well for queer Mennonite writing and criticism. But there is more work to be done. I am excited to keep doing it, and I hope others will join me.

Notes

[1] This tradition goes back at least as far as Gordon Friesen's 1936 novel *Flamethrowers*.

[2] Thich Nhat Han's teaching that one must "not fight against" one's negative emotions because they are a part of oneself, just like one's positive emotions (2-3), was essential in helping me to articulate this interpretation of Jess's return.

[3] That is, bondage, discipline, Domination/submission, sadism, and masochism.

[4] The essay was ultimately published as "Queering Mennonite Literature" in *After Identity*, a collection of essays from the symposium edited by Robert Zacharias (143-58).

[5] This is especially the case in Delany's *The Mad Man*, Koestenbaum's *Humiliation*, Binnie's *Nevada*, and Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, though this concern is present in various of their other works, as well.

[6] Dueck's other novels are published under the alias Lynnette D'anna.

[7] Indeed, during the question-and-answer time at the end of the LGBT Mennonite Fiction panel where this essay was first presented, Lauren Friesen claimed that there is an oral tradition among Dutch Mennonites that the *Martyrs Mirror*'s illustrator, Jan Luyken, was sexually attracted to men. It is impossible to know whether this story is true or not (though its persistence through the centuries may indicate that it is), but if it is true then the queer Mennonite literary tradition is nearly as old as the Mennonite literary tradition itself.

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