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

Natural Links of Queer and Mennonite Literature

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Ever since Daniel and Andy invited me to be on the LGBT Fiction panel at Mennonite/s Writing VII, it's been on my mind as odd that in 2015 there are few explicitly queer Mennonite writers, by which I mean people who are out as queer and Mennonite who openly write about queer and Mennonite things. Both queer literature and Mennonite literature have been around for decades and produced hundreds of books, yet to be queer and Mennonite and a writer and do all of those things at the same time seems to be a very rare thing. Transgender Mennonite writers are particularly rare; I don't know of any others besides myself, and I'm only twenty-eight.

Except even in our current world of Mennonite literature, which has embraced and opened itself so much over decades, maybe it's still not so odd. Not that long ago, I went down to Winkler for a cousin's bridal shower. On the drive, my other cousin told me they wouldn't be able to invite her fiancée's uncles, since said fiancée's parents would then refuse to both host and attend the wedding. The uncles are gay. We got to the bridal shower and the fiancée's mother couldn't look me in the eye. No one was that surprised.

The thing is that even among assimilated and worldly Mennonites, those who go to bars and read Miriam Toews, who might think of themselves as open-minded and perhaps even liberal—the disdain and hatred for LGBT people that *other* Mennonites might have is still tolerated. I think homophobia and transphobia is seen as a foregone thing—unfortunate maybe, but inevitable. And queer Mennonites pay a price for this. That we don't have a lot of gay Mennos writing books is just one of the costs.

The same cousin also told me about her best friend who just recently came out to his family. I know him, he's a sweet lovely young boy; he hosted this cousin's wedding.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Oh he's kicked out," she said, with a casualness that underlined the inevitability of such a family response. "But not excommunicated though, so that's good."

During the weekend of Mennonite/s Writing VII, I thought persistently of how much queer literature and Mennonite literature hold in common. What their concerns are, what gets at their hearts. Family, community. And of course, the loss of family, the loss of community. Displacement, the destruction of stability. I don't think a book like Sarah Schulman's *Rat Bohemia* reads all that differently from a book like Miriam Toews' *A Complicated Kindness*. *Rat Bohemia* is set in mid-'90s New York during the apex of mass death from AIDS. It centers on Rita, Killer, and David, three young gay people whose friends are dying from the disease—as is David himself. All of them are estranged in various ways from their families. *A Complicated Kindness* is set, of course, in a fictionalized Steinbach centering around Nomi Nickel and her father Ray, both suffering from the loss of the other half of their family as their suffocating community judges them, and suffocates them further. Both books are about broken people who lost the love and community with which they were raised, and yet who continue to cling to family and community love even as that love betrays them to cruel ends. Sometimes that betrayal is explicit: Rita's dad instantly kicking her daughter out of the house; The Mouth excommunicating

Nomi. But often it's implicit, behind glass, unspoken but equally harsh: David's father declaring his son as loved and cared for while resolutely ignoring the fact that he is dying (62-69); The town cop who nods thoughtfully as Ray considers who could hate him enough to shoot his window (it turns out to be the cop's son [160]).

The message is more outwardly political in *Rat Bohemia*, but the concern is the same in both books: The particular evil pain of rejection wrapped in kindness. The newly homeless Rita is receiving supper from a neighbour who learns through a phone call that Rita is gay: "When she hung up the phone she could no longer look at me," Rita explains. "But she did put the meat on my plate. And that was my second lesson about being a homosexual. Not everyone would refuse me, but there would never be a full embrace" (193-194). I read that passage and I think instantly about Nomi in *A Complicated Kindness*: "My mom had told me about the table trick," Nomi explains. "How if, say, your wife was shunned, you weren't allowed to sit at the same table as her but if you put two tables together, with an inch between them, and then put a tablecloth over them, it would seem like you were at the same table, which would be nice" (45).

Similarly, a book like Imogen Binnie's debut novel *Nevada* shares a great deal with Sandra Birdsell's first title *Night Travellers*. That might sound psychotic if you are one of the (few, I'd imagine) people who have read both books: *Nevada* is a profane drug and sex-filled novel from 2013 about a trans woman in New York City who is self-destructing; *Night Travellers* is an interlinked collection of stories about a family from rural Manitoba set (in part) nearly half a century earlier. The prose style, too, is undeniably opposite: Binnie's voice is conversational and rapid; Birdsell's is precise and reserved. And yet the recursive stasis of both books is so similar. *Nevada* ends with Maria, who has been abandoned by James—the one person she thought she could help—playing slots in a Reno casino, broke and homeless and friendless. Instead of admitting he is trans, James had freaked out and called his girlfriend to get him; he spends the ride home dreaming of having sex where he can envision himself as a girl (240-243). *Night Travellers* ends with Betty, who, after having gone through the gauntlet and back in Winnipeg, returns on the last page to her rural hometown, keeping her memories to herself from her children (180-182). These characters—or rather, these women—have ventured out, shredded their lives, and come to the end to find that little has changed. There is no climax. They have discovered the evils and hopelessness in the world and come back to find nothing

is truly new or different, even if their vision has been broadened. I feel something very similar when I finish both of those books.

And finally I can't help thinking about the topics of assimilation and community in both queer and Mennonite literature, and the hopes and failures, promises and threats, that accompany them. In both literatures, there remains a persistent promise of a new community that accepts whatever fucked-up-ness the old community deemed sinful or improper—but of course it turns out the new community rarely lives up to its promises, that what the queer or the Menno left behind held some kindnesses and goodnesses the new fails to match. The old, established ways didn't work, but neither did assimilation towards what many in the larger world would've viewed as normal. The transplanted queer and the apostate Mennonite often find these larger worlds more difficult than they may have bargained for, and so they have to figure out something else. Michelle Tea, for example, has written beautifully and painfully about her poor upbringing in Chelsea, Massachusetts, and the contrasts she draws with her new moneyed gay friends always get me. At the end of *The Chelsea Whistle*, for example, she writes about throwing a white trash party as a joke while watching the 1992 vice-presidential debate:

> I put deviled ham on Saltines, with little bits of olive. I cooked Tuna Helper on a pot on the stove. I put on my mother's clothes: stirrup pants and flat-heeled shoes, a thin gold chain with its clump of twinkling charms ... They didn't get it, they were rich kids. I brought a plastic bowl of bright orange macaroni and cheese into the parlor ... They were laughing at everything. Laughing with, laughing at—I understood the difference, and it was unexpected. My mother's worn shoes were tight at my toenails, her weighted necklace swung out when I bent to place the food on the table. I was a monkey shelling peanuts ... If Ma had seen me, there in her pumps, making a joke of her to my new friends. (359-360)

I don't find this passage much different from many a passage in Mennonite writing about escaping Southern Manitoba. Among all the eviscerating text in Miriam Toews' *All My Puny Sorrows*, a passage about Yoli's mother in Toronto has always stuck out to me:

> She showed me her new shoes, a quality pair of black leather slip-ons that she'd bought at a trendy Queen West boutique. My mother is not a hipster or a style maven. She's a short, fat seventy-six-year-old Mennonite prairie woman who has lived most of her life in one of the country's most conservative small towns, who has been tossed repeatedly through life's wringer, and who has rather suddenly moved to the trendy heart of the nation's largest city ... I've started making a shit list

> of shops and cafes on Queen West here in the "art and fashion district" who treat her with less respect and professional friendliness than they treat their younger and more glamorous clients. My mother doesn't even notice, she's jovial and curious and delighted and oblivious to snottiness ... She would like to engage these pale, thin retail workers in conversation, she'd like to get their story ... which makes their cold bony shoulder treatment of her that much more heartbreaking. And then I boycott them forever.

I think Miriam and Michelle could bond.

I don't mean to argue for a grand theory of how queer literature and Mennonite literature are the same; there are certainly many areas where they diverge. I would argue, for example, that with regards to appearance and visibility the two literatures often have completely different sets of concerns. But what I would like to argue is that there are certain natural dispositions both traditions share with each other, especially with regards to family, home, and new/old communities. While the failures and complexities of assimilation is certainly a common theme across a lot of literature, I would argue assimilation has a particular political salience for both queer people and Mennonite people in 21st Century North America.

Queer and Mennonite writing have so much to share with each other, and writers like Toews and Tea and Schulman and Birdsell and Binnie are speaking from such heartbreakingly similar places. I love that four of us went to Mennonite/s Writing VII to be openly queer and Mennonite and writers at the same time, and I hope there are more of us in the future.

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