"This Land Is Ours": Investigating Settler Narratives in Ontario Swiss Mennonite Plays

Janna Martin, *University of Guelph*

My Swiss Mennonite ancestors were among the first settlers in Ontario. In 1803, Pennsylvania Mennonites purchased Block No. 2 of the Haldimand Tract (now Waterloo Township). The 60,000 acres they acquired for £10,000 was land promised to the Six Nations (Steiner, 2015). Two decades later, Amish from Bavaria came to settle nearby in what is now known as Wilmot Township. Historically and today, my Swiss Mennonite community benefits from, and we are implicated in, the structures of settler colonialism. These narratives are often missing or suppressed in Mennonite writing. This denial of settler colonialism and settler complicity in ongoing harms is described in the literature as "moves to innocence" (Mackey, 2016; Regan, 2010; Tuck & Yang, 2012). In this study, I demonstrate how claims of settler innocence in settler-colonial narratives persist in Mennonite communities.

My motivation for writing this research paper was to partake in truth-telling about Mennonite settler narratives. By sharing problematic aspects, I hope Swiss Mennonites in Ontario may take collective action to re-tell our narratives of settlement in a way that recognizes Indigenous sovereignty and our role as settler colonizers. A settler colonizer "seeks to transfer land from Indigenous peoples to their own control, exerting sovereignty over territory and

wrapping particular narrative forms around this transfer" (Lowman & Barker, 2015, p. 38). Through an analysis of three plays, a review of scholarship on settler colonialism, and an assessment of Mennonite historiography, I investigate how Swiss Mennonite narratives of settlement in Waterloo Region perpetuate a settler identity.

With a particular interest in narratives and collective identity, I explored the past projects of the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario (MHSO) preserved in the Mennonite Archives of Ontario (held at Conrad Grebel University College). I found three plays commissioned by the MHSO in the 1960s–70s. Written by three Mennonite authors, they re-tell my ancestors' journey from Pennsylvania and Bavaria to Ontario. The titles are *This Land Is Ours* by Urie Bender, *The Trail of the Conestoga* by Norma Rudy, and *The New Commandment* by Barbara Coffman. As didactic plays, they intended to educate Mennonites on their own history and values. Of the three plays, two were prompted by historical anniversaries. They tell the story of early Mennonites leaving Pennsylvania to find land in Ontario and returning to convince their home communities to jointly purchase a tract of land. They also tell the story of Christian Nafziger, the first Amish settler to come to Ontario from Bavaria, and how he negotiated a land deal for his community. Significantly, these plays were commissioned by an institution with the purpose of celebrating Swiss Mennonite collective identity.

Methodology

I employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) because of its problem-oriented focus, assumption that language is not neutral, and claim that power relations can be uncovered to some extent through discourses (Mullet, 2018). The goal of CDA is to critically describe and interpret how discourses reinforce and justify social inequalities. A researcher operating within a CDA framework rejects the idea of being neutral and objective and locates their own standpoint (or positionality) in relation to the research. The CDA framework informed how I analyzed data as well as my choice of writing in first person and locating myself in the research.

I am a Swiss Mennonite Canadian settler living in southwestern Ontario. I grew up in a Mennonite church and have worked, volunteered, and studied at Mennonite institutions and organizations. I am familiar with Mennonite religion, culture, and narratives because I was socialized into them. Unlike people who are not connected to Mennonites, I have certain biases because of my Swiss Mennonite bloodlines, culture, and past religious affiliation. As a

white cis woman, I fit within the normative identities of Swiss Mennonites around me. While I am on the journey to recognizing my privileged white settler identity and challenging my internalized biases, there is still much more work to be done. I conducted this research out of a desire to interrogate my own and my community's settler narratives and I hope that this paper can inspire other Mennonites to do the same.

The focus of my research is on the shared Swiss Mennonite narratives of settlement in southwestern Ontario. This led me to search the MHSO archives for stories. The MHSO is an appropriate source for this study because of its location and its mission is "to encourage and support projects that interpret Mennonite heritage to Mennonites and non-Mennonites" (Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario, n.d.). MHSO supports projects representing a wide range of Mennonite heritage in Ontario and has commissioned a total of five plays, all of them written in the mid to late twentieth century. I chose three plays because they focused on Swiss Mennonite (Amish and Pennsylvania Mennonite) settlers, while the other two told the story of Russian Mennonites coming to Canada.

A Brief History of Early Indigenous-Settler Relations in Waterloo Region

Waterloo Region is the traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishinaabe, and Haudenosaunee peoples who resided here for millennia and have unresolved claims to this land. In about 1700, the Mississaugas (Anishinaabe) forced the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) from what is today known as southern Ontario. The Mississaugas stewarded over 3.9 million acres of land and water in this region (Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, n.d.). In 1784, the Crown created the Haldimand Tract, encompassing six miles on each side of the Grand River, from land formally "surrendered" by the Mississaugas, and they promised this land to the Six Nations (Haudenosaunee) for fighting with the British during the American Revolution (Steiner, 2015). Many Six Nations villages, vacated during the Revolutionary War and within the newly independent United States, were no longer safe to return to. Through negotiations with the British, the Six Nations selected the Grand River tract to re-locate their villages in a familiar territory (Hill, 2017, p. 133). In *The Clay We Are Made Of: Haudenosaunee Land Tenure on the Grand River,* Hill (2017) notes the Mississaugas communicated to the British that they accepted compensation for this tract of land because of their "willingness to share the territory they had been using for roughly a

century. [The Mississaugas recognized] mutual responsibilities between themselves and the Haudenosaunee based within older treaty relationships" (p. 144). Therefore, the Mississaugas did not consider the Haldimand Tract land ceded to the British, but land they had agreed to share with the Six Nations.

In 1796, Joseph Brant, a controversial Six Nations leader, began to sell land on the Haldimand Tract on behalf of the Six Nations to land speculators, including Richard Beasley, who purchased the large block of land known as Block No. 2 (Steiner, 2015). Due to his English skills and connections to British colonial leadership, Brant had represented the Six Nations in negotiations with the Crown about title to the Haldimand Tract. However, "Brant was never given complete authority to act on behalf of the Six Nations" (Hill, 2017, p. 134). Without their knowledge, tracts of Block No. 2 were sold to Pennsylvania Mennonites by Beasley. The Mennonites confronted Beasley when they found out that there was a mortgage on their land. To raise capital to pay his mortgage, Beasley offered to sell them the remaining land in Block No. 2. In 1803, a group of Mennonites in Pennsylvania formed the German Company to raise the purchase price of £10,000 for 60,000 acres in what is now Waterloo Region (Steiner, 2015).

The Six Nations community did not receive payment for their land because Brant and the British authorities controlled their financial matters (Steiner, 2015). Meanwhile, under treaty relationships with the Six Nations, the land sold to Mennonites was still occupied by the Mississaugas, who continued to hunt and fish in the Grand River Valley (Steiner, 2015). Clearly stated in agreements with the British, the Mississaugas' intentions to share the land according to treaty relationships (such as the Dish with One Spoon Wampum) were not fulfilled (Hill, 2017).

The MHSO and its Plays

The MHSO was founded in 1965 to promote interest in and support research and dissemination of Ontario Mennonite history. This included initiatives such as collecting historical materials for the Conrad Grebel University College's archives (now Mennonite Archives of Ontario) (Fretz, 2000). Grebel's first president, J. Winfield Fretz, also served as the first president of the MHSO. A year after its founding and timed to correspond with the celebration of Canada's centennial in 1967, the MHSO decided to commission its first play, *The New Commandment*, to share the story of the Mennonites and Amish in Ontario (Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario,

1967; Fretz, 2000). Barbara Coffman, a founding member of the MHSO board of directors, was chosen to author the play. The MHSO played an active role in its production. Correspondence records from 1967 show that the MHSO, rather than Coffman, held the copyright for the play and Fretz gave creative feedback and guidance on the script (Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario, 1967).

A few years later, in 1969, the MSHO commissioned a new play, *Trail of the Conestoga*. The play helped raise funds to publish the book *Mennonites in Canada, 1786–1920* (Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario, 1969). The MHSO received permission to base the play on B. Mabel Dunham's 1924 book of the same name. Scholarly work by Ross Fair (2006) has explored how the original 1924 book was central to crafting a "homemaking myth" for Pennsylvania Germans in Ontario. In the MHSO meetings to develop the book into a play, Norma Rudy (a local Kitchener woman) was "persuaded to write it . . . as she had a flair for writing" (Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario, 1969). In 1970, a third play, *This Land Is Ours*, was produced to celebrate the sesquicentennial (150 years) of Amish settlement in Wilmot Township. MSHO President Fretz invited Urie Bender to write the play. Employed by Menno Travel Services in Pennsylvania at that time, Urie visited Ontario to do research for the manuscript (Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario, 1970–1975). Each of the three plays was performed in Mennonite communities in southwestern Ontario on more than one occasion.

The *Trail of the Conestoga* and *The New Commandment* tell the story of Pennsylvania Mennonites migrating to Canada. The main character in both plays is Sam Bricker, who travels to Ontario with his brother John and sister-in-law Annie. They buy land from Richard Beasley. A couple years after settling on the land, Sam Bricker discovers Beasley has a mortgage on their land and confronts him. Beasley offers them the remaining 60,000 acres for £10,000. Returning to Pennsylvania, Bricker attempts to persuade his community to invest in the land. He is ultimately successful and, in the following years, many more Pennsylvania Mennonites migrate to Ontario.

This Land Is Ours primarily tells the story of the Amish from Bavaria migrating to Ontario. *The New Commandment* also has a short scene on the Amish. Christian Nafziger was the first Amish settler to arrive in Ontario from Europe, in 1824, seeking land for his community because of "a desire for new land and exemption from military service" (Cressman, 1959). In the play, Nafziger travels to Pennsylvania alone and meets Swiss Mennonite settlers. They suggest the land in Pennsylvania is too expensive for his community. Following their advice, Nafziger explores Canada and meets Samuel Eby, a prominent Mennonite from Pennsylvania. Eby helps Nafziger

find a block of land for his community. After conferring with Governor Maitland about opening the land for settlement, Nafziger returns to Bavaria and convinces his home community to migrate to Canada.

Theoretical Framework

How do these Swiss Mennonite narratives of settlement in the Waterloo Region perpetuate an enduring settler identity? I frame my analysis within theories of settler colonialism and, more broadly, narrative and collective identity formation. Settler-colonial narratives sustain structures supporting settler superiority. According to Lowman and Barker (2015), stories can be powerful apparatuses to justify settler expansion and Indigenous erasure and transform violent colonization into heroic struggle and the inevitable establishment of a successful, just, and distinct society (p. 33). In *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview,* Veracini (2010) explains that "the stories settlers tell themselves about themselves are crucial to an exploration of settler colonial subjectivities" (p. 103). Settler identity depends on two core myths: *terra nullius* and the frontier narrative. Each serve to erase Indigenous peoples from the land and history. Terra nullius is a Latin phrase meaning land belonging to no one. The logic of terra nullius maintains that settlers carry state sovereignty with them and justify their claim over new lands through narratives of progress and racial or cultural superiority (Lowman & Barker, 2015, p. 26). The frontier narrative supports terra nullius by claiming that settlers, coming to a land of opportunity with few resources of their own, survived, and eventually thrived, through hard work and optimism. The frontier narrative ignores Indigenous socio-political structures and legitimates settler sovereignty. These stories ignore settler complicity in settler-colonial state actions including the intentional spread of disease, war, incarceration, child abduction, and forced assimilation. This narrative also ignores that many early settlers were helped by Indigenous communities who taught them survival skills (Lowman & Barker, 2015, p. 35).

Narratives simultaneously inform and reflect collective identity. According to C. Smith (2003), narratives distinguish what is sacred, what is normative, and what ought to be. Literary scholar Robert Zacharias (2013) affirms that there is a close reciprocal relationship between literature and collective identity formation (p. 14). In his work *Rewriting the Break Event: Mennonites and Migration in Canadian Literature,* Zacharias (2013) explains that no one text

accurately or fully represents a community's identity. However, when re-occurring themes appear in multiple texts telling a community's key historical narratives, they reflect and construct communal identity (p. 16). The reciprocal nature of literature and collective identity suggests that a change in one will lead to a change in the other.

Within this framework, institutions such as the MHSO play a key role in defining and promoting stories of peoplehood (R. Smith, 2003, p. 48). In *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership,* Rogers M. Smith (2003) asserts that stories of peoplehood are political projects because people who fully accept without questioning the story feel an obligation to help secure stable power to accomplish the collective goals (p. 37). According to Smith, this involves two core components. First, stories of peoplehood are exclusionary—when one story is embraced, others are rejected. Second, group memberships are constructed rather than inherited (p. 56). People have agency in choosing which stories they live out of and which ones they ignore or discredit. The plays selected for this study closely resemble what Smith terms "ethically constitutive stories," as they were written to depict heritage and celebrate various historical anniversaries in Canada. Ethically constitutive stories "proclaim that members' culture, religion, language, race, ethnicity, ancestry, history or other such factors are constitutive of their very identities as persons, in ways that both affirm their worth and delineate their obligations" (pp. 64–65). These stories give people a sense of purpose, place, belonging, identity, and stability (pp. 98–101). They offer people self-worth, "as one of 'God's chosen people' a 'master race,' a great culture or historic people" (p. 69).

As R. Smith (2003) notes, institutions define and promote stories of peoplehood. In this respect, analyzing stories promoted and commissioned by an institution will provide insights into collective identity. The Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario is one institution (among many) that Mennonites in Ontario find influential in constructing collective identity. The plays in this study tell the key historical narratives of Swiss Mennonites and Amish in Ontario. According to Zacharias (2013), they contribute to the reflection and construction of collective identity. By interpreting Mennonite history for their audience, MHSO provided guidance to the authors on the development of the plays. Since stories of peoplehood are inherently political and exclusionary, these plays illustrate the political project of the MHSO in the mid-twentieth century as well as who was excluded from this project. I use the word "project" to illustrate the intersection of worldview and "strategy combined with motive combined with practices and habits" (Tuck & Yang, 2018, p. 7).

Ideas of Land in MHSO Plays

In *The Settler Complex*, Wolfe (2006) notes that, over time, settler colonialism evolved from frontier violence to a range of strategies and discourses (p. 402). At the centre of the settler-colonial project is the continual pursuit of land. Land is important to settlers because it sustains their family, selfhood, identity, and belonging. According to Wolfe (2013), these are qualities that people will fight for (p. 1). Settler societies seek to erase Indigenous peoples' histories so their own presence on Indigenous land can appear legal and just. Lowman and Barker (2015) refer to this as a "narrative transfer" whereby "stories about the land are told and retold until they are taken as truth and used to undermine Indigenous peoples' claims to land" (p. 26). The strategy of eliminating Indigenous peoples' history occurs in tandem with settlers exerting their sovereignty over the land. Therefore, discursive, legal, and physical dispossession are intertwined.

According to historians, agricultural practice rooted Ontario's early Anabaptist settlers in the world and shaped their sense of place. Furthermore, Mennonite relationships with the land were informed by their post-Reformation experience. Escaping persecution, they lived as itinerant people settling temporarily on land that would allow them religious freedom in exchange for agricultural development (Miller, 2017; Brandt, 2007; Epp, 1982). Richard K. MacMaster (1985) suggests that "land and family were not only ends in themselves but were also bases of the religious community" (p. 114). Land—and lots of land for agriculture—was required to continue their way of life. Frank H. Epp (1982) claims that early Mennonite settlers in Canada ploughed lands for the first time (p. 6). Mennonites and Amish asserted their settler status of being "the first" to cultivate the land in Ontario. In doing so, they laid claim to a unique sense of belonging while failing to recognize prior Indigenous cultivation techniques. Steiner (2015) argues that, in the 1800s, Mennonites were not settling in wilderness. The Mississaugas often hunted and fished in the Grand River Valley. They collected maple sugar and harvested corn, beans, and potatoes.

References to land are replete in the three plays commissioned by the MHSO. The plays give the impression that the settlers arrived in Ontario to uninhabited wilderness. Several times in the 1972 play *This Land Is Ours*, the land in Ontario is described as "untouched forest" and "forest in every direction." In *The Trail of the Conestoga* (1969), the first Pennsylvania settlers arriving in Canada comment that there is no sign of life, and the Mennonites they meet in Canada say they don't often have visitors. In *The New Commandment*

(1967), Eby says to Nafziger, "There is land everywhere. Just walk out—through the forest—if you want new land. Of course, you'd have to go to York—to the government to see if the land is open. Some is set aside for Crown and Clergy Reserves" (Coffman, 1967, p. 65). From Eby's perspective, the land is empty and in need of settling and the colonial government has the authority to sell the land.

Land serves as the motive for Pennsylvania Mennonites seeking property in Ontario that is good and cheap. These two qualities often accompany each other when the play's characters speak about land. For example, in *The Trail of the Conestoga*, Sam hears that there is a valley in Ontario where the land is good and he immediately asks if the land is cheap (Rudy, 1969, p. 23). Sam's friend John also claims that the reason he wants to move to Canada is because the land in Pennsylvania is "getting scarce and dear" but the land in Canada is "plentiful and cheap" (Rudy, 1969, p. 13). In *The New Commandment*, the Mennonites in Ontario worry that if Sam cannot get money from his community to pay for increasingly expensive lands in Pennsylvania, they will have to look for good and cheaper farmland in Canada (Coffman, 1967, p. 15).

This suggests the theme that moving to Ontario will be worthwhile if land is affordable and good for their traditional agriculture. This Mennonite narrative assumes land is a commodity and does not have inherent worth outside of the market, whereas Indigenous nations and people have place-based identities. At the root of terra nullius is a failure to recognize Indigenous ways of understanding land. Lowman and Barker (2015) argue that Indigenous peoples have place-based identities formed by long-standing intimate relationships with particular places (p. 51). For instance, the Haudenosaunee are named after "key geographical features of their home territories," such as the Oneida council name *Nihatirontakowa* meaning "those of the great log . . . which refers to a log bridge the Peacemaker crossed to get to the main Oneida town" (Hill, 2017, pp. 35–36). Their name denotes ancestral connection to land and a responsibility to care for land as a living being. Indigenous relationships to the land are a balance of giving to the land and allowing for the land to care for them. In contrast, settlers treated land as nonliving property (Lowman & Barker, 2015, p. 53). Narratives that reduce land to a commodity make the purchase of land from the British colonial government seem logical and just. The view that land was "uninhabited wilderness" ignores the legacy and skills of Indigenous nations who cared for and cultivated the land, making the settler cultivation of land seem productive and civilized.

In the MHSO plays, Mennonites and Amish are depicted as trustworthy and valued settlers who settle an empty land. They leverage

these identities to exercise privileged relationships with representatives of the state. In *This Land Is Ours* and *The New Commandment*, after hearing where Nafziger is from and why he wants to leave Bavaria, Governor Maitland asks how many of Nafziger's people will come. Nafziger says, "perhaps thirty in a year or two. More later—if there is land" (Bender, 1972, p. 59). Maitland replies, "There is land—begging for people. Tell me—would 200 acres for a family be sufficient?" Within a few minutes of meeting Nafziger, Governor Maitland is open to accommodating however many people Nafziger thinks will come. Maitland's comment that there is land begging for people depicts a land that is vacant and in need of settlers.

The very few times Indigenous people are mentioned in the plays, they are usually associated with wilderness and settler fear. A man in Pennsylvania lists the dangerous things settlers experience on their way to Ontario. He adds, "and always there are Indians and wild animals" (Rudy, 1969, p. 14). By listing Indians next to wild animals, he insinuates Indigenous peoples are wild and a danger to the Mennonites. In *This Land Is Ours*, a vignette shows an Indigenous male lurking in the shadows while a family passes by on a wagon. The two oldest children point him out and express fear (Bender, 1972, p. 69). In both plays, the audience experiences Indigenous peoples as wild and something to be feared.

Indigenous peoples are simultaneously depicted as being dispersed, with no permanent settlement or infrastructure on the land. The adjective "sometimes" is used to qualify the Indigenous peoples' presence on the land. For instance, when Nafziger arrives in Ontario, Eby says to him, "The land is good, well-watered. No one is there—a few Indians sometimes—mostly Mohawks, I think. Friendly" (Bender, 1972, p. 55). Later, when Nafziger is back in Bavaria, a man asks him if there are roads where he was. Nafziger responds, "only a trail used sometimes by the Indians" (Bender, 1972, p. 61). This suggests Indigenous peoples were few in number, did not permanently live on the land, and merely passed through the region. The dialogue shows that the characters believed roads to be a sign of inhabited land, yet they discounted the trails created by the Indigenous peoples as a sign of inhabited land. This absence of roads, while posing logistical challenges, assured prospective settlers that the land was unused and available for settlement. The argument that our ancestors were not aware of Indigenous civilization and took land that they thought was free implies good intentions and innocence (Lowman & Barker, 2015, p. 60).

Even as Mennonite settlers described their newly acquired lands as empty, they simultaneously viewed them as predestined for

agriculture. In *The New Commandment*, the narrator claims, "The Pioneer Memorial Tower near Kitchener marks the location of the farms they purchased in 1800 from Richard Beasley, part of Block No. 2 of the Six Nations Indian Land" (Coffman. 1967, p. 8). This statement, presumably presented as factual information, actually reveals the author's flawed assumptions. The statement claiming Mennonites purchased farms is false because they paid money for land and later developed farms. This is an intriguing point because it illustrates the belief that land was waiting to be farmed by Mennonite settlers and had no purpose or value in its natural state. A similar assumption is made in *The Trail of the Conestoga*. Before the characters leave for Ontario, Annie asks Sam which farm he is setting up. Sam replies, "my farm is in Canada" (Rudy, 1969, p. 13). Sam is an ambitious character with a big imagination so this comment may be interpreted as his dream for the future. Nevertheless, these statements reveal that in the mid to late twentieth century, the authors and MHSO promoted the idea of terra nullius, which is defined by Mackey (2016) as the belief that Indigenous land is "uncultivated wilderness" in a "state of nature" (p. 48), and settlers who cultivated it gained possession through the "right of husbandry" while Indigenous peoples were perceived to lack sovereignty.

The Swiss Mennonites characters migrating to Ontario arrived with the expectation that it would be hard work to settle the wild land. In *This Land Is Ours*, a messenger tells a family in Bavaria that there is land for the taking in the new world, but it will require "hard work—a load for every back" (Bender, 1972, p. 45). In the same play, when Eby and Nafziger meet, Eby tells him that "when you buy a hundred acres, you buy a lot of hard work" (Bender, 1972, p. 54). Nafziger replies that he knows about hard work and is willing to do it, but he doesn't have much money to pay for the land. In *The Trail of the Conestoga*, before leaving for Canada, Sam explains to his friend that in Canada there will be dangers, it will require hard work, and they will be lonesome sometimes (Rudy, 1969, p. 11). The audience learns that early settler Mennonites were keen to work hard to cultivate their farms. Some characters are more expressive than others about their love of hard work. In *The Trail of the Conestoga*, Sam exclaims how fun it will be to "dig a farm out of bush!" (Rudy, 1969, p. 15). The hard-working theme is connected to a desire to cultivate the land. Sam's excitement to work hard is driven by a desire to own the finest orchard in Canada (Rudy, 1969, p. 15).

Throughout the MHSO plays, the land is depicted as not having value until it is cultivated into farms. Mennonites are portrayed as the best citizens to farm the land. For instance, a Swiss Mennonite character explains that "Manitoba is an ideal spot for the

Mennonites coming from Russia. They'll soon turn those prairies into grain fields" (Coffman, 1967, p. 24). This line portrays Swiss Mennonites as eager to assist Russian Mennonites with settling the land, the Russian Mennonites having a similar desire to change unproductive land into productive agricultural land. In *The New Commandment*, the epilogue emphasizes that Mennonites have done their part to show the world the glory and worth of the land. This suggests that the land's worth and glory was not obvious to the world before the Mennonites arrived in Canada. The epilogue lists other things that Mennonites have accomplished for Canada in hospitals, schools, science, art, and music. This gives the impression that Mennonites are good citizens beyond their agricultural contributions. This is also emphasized earlier in *The New Commandment* when Governor Maitland says he found Anabaptists to be good citizens and Nafziger affirms that Maitland will not be disappointed with his people. The themes of hard work and improvement of the land are central to what the author, Barbara Coffman, understands good citizenship to be.

This narrative of hard work turning wasteland into valuable land is central to the frontier narrative (Lowman & Barker, 2015). To recall, the frontier narrative claims that settlers came to a land of opportunity with few resources, but that through hard work and optimism they thrived. The frontier narrative ignores the Indigenous peoples' social and political structures and legitimates settler sovereignty. Lowman and Barker (2015) state that "the question of the legitimacy of the new people on the lands" is avoided "by focusing on settler hard work, struggle, and effort, and their eventual conquest of the land, as if it made conquest of people inevitable and immaterial" (p. 34). Settler narratives claim colonialism as "simply something that happened in the past" that may regrettable but which was also inevitable and "not worth critiquing given the overwhelming benefits of our 'great nation'" (p. 31). Each of these elements of the frontier narrative are demonstrated clearly in the plays.

A narrative of setter superiority is also evident in the plays. Intertwined with narratives of progress, narratives of racial or cultural superiority support the logic of terra nullius (Lowman & Barker, 2015, p. 26). Elaine Enns (2015) suggests that the Mennonite perception of their ancestors' survival and hard work has led to a superiority complex which works to inhibit Mennonites from recognizing the negative consequences of their settlement in North America (p. 50). A common myth held by Mennonites is that their ancestors made Canada a better and more productive place. This insinuates that before the settlers arrived the land was not cared for

properly (p. 49). In reality, settlers benefited from land that was previously cultivated by Indigenous peoples (Miller, 2017, p. 156). In terms of agriculture, Wolfe (2006) argues it is a "potent symbol of settler-colonial identity" (p. 396). Settlers justify the dispossession of Indigenous people from their land by claiming they make better use of the land (p. 389) by pointing to their "work, sacrifice, and earning things the hard way" (p. 1). Paradoxically, the frequency by which settlers assert their work ethic reflects their anxiety that the land may not be rightfully theirs.

Lastly, the Mennonite and Amish settlers' attachment to place informs how they relate to the newly colonized land and the original Indigenous people on that land. Operating from the premise that no particular piece of land has inherent meaning until agriculture is established, settlers found it difficult to understand how other people could have place-based identities. Perhaps the Mennonite narrative that land is not valuable unless farmed prevented them from understanding Indigenous identity intertwined with their ancestral lands. This epistemological, economic, and legal perspective of land ignores and negates Indigenous ways of relating to the land (Mackey, 2016, p. 47).

Providence, Persecution, and Community Growth

Community growth and God's promises constitute two recurring core themes in the MHSO plays. First, God blessed the expansion of Mennonite family settlement on wild lands that needed cultivating. Second, like the Israelites, Mennonites were persecuted and called to the promised land of Ontario. In all three plays, the characters felt like God was calling or guiding them to Ontario. In *The New Commandment*, the Pennsylvania Mennonite family who said goodbye to their community explained that God was calling them elsewhere and they were "prompted by firm conviction" (Coffman, 1967, p. 4). The church leaders expressed their hopes for the family to be blessed by God. The themes of God's calling and blessing are intertwined. Perhaps God calls them because they are blessed or perhaps if they follow God's call they will be blessed. When Nafziger leaves his family to go to North America in *This Land Is Ours*, he reads from the Bible about the Lord telling Abram to leave his country for a land that God will show him (Bender, 1972, p. 51). This biblical imagery parallels Nafziger's story by suggesting that God is guiding him to a land that is meant for his people. Several times throughout the play it is mentioned that the Lord guides, and is with, Nafziger. After hearing about what Nafziger found in Canada, a

bishop remarks, "God has led his children out of the wilderness in the past. He can again." He depicts the Amish as children of God and has faith that God will lead them to safety. At the closing of the meeting, a man prays,

> Oh Lord, Father of pilgrims in every nation. Teach us Thy will about this new land where Thy children can worship Thee without fear, where governments do not conscript us to kill. Hitherto hast Thou helped us. Guide our feet yet again, so we may fulfill Thy purpose. Bless our brother who has suffered much hardship to seek out the land. Bring him in safety to his family and all of us into your kingdom for Jesus' sake. Amen. (Bender, 1972, p. 65)

By praying to the father of pilgrims in every nation, he suggests a commonality between his community and other pilgrim communities who all are in need of God's guidance and blessing. The plot moves from this prayer to the Amish settling in Ontario, thereby implying God guided them to Ontario.

The plays emphasize that the primary reason the Pennsylvania community bought land in Ontario was to live out the biblical principle of helping their people, and to ensure their children would be future landowners. In *The New Commandment* and *The Trail of the Conestoga*, the Pennsylvania community was not interested in investing in land in Canada until the argument for doing so was based on biblical principles. In both plays, a man reads from the Bible while persuading others to emigrate. In *The New Commandment*, John Eby reads a verse about loving one another as God has loved you. John argues that men should not worry about losing money, but rather should consider their "brothers who will lose everything if we don't help" (Coffman, 1969, p. 13). In *The Trail of the Conestoga*, Hannes reads a verse about providing for one's people. He argues that even if migration would not make them rich, community members have a Christian duty to help their brothers. It is interesting to note that both of these reasons are rooted in a sense of duty or responsibility towards their people, whether they are current community members or future generations. A similar theme is present in the Amish story. A choric group describes the hard work the Amish have invested in Canada's land with "the axe a tool of creation to carve a home from wooded wilderness and shape a full today in land of promise. Ploughing the soil of hope to plant a future for children not yet born" (Bender, 1972, p. 72). These lines reinforce the belief that hard work by settlers transforms the wilderness into productive land for their growing community, all guided by God's promise.

The assertion that God guided the Mennonites and Amish to Ontario highlights their good intentions, legitimates their possession of

land, and limits capacity for ethical analysis on the effects of settler colonialism. On one hand, the narrative of God's divine approval gives the play's characters a firm sense of meaning, place, and purpose (R. Smith, 2003, p. 98). On the other hand, it justifies asserting control over the land and other people and contradicts the principles of non-violence and peacemaking. The Amish and the Mennonite "love for land and for large families" as blessed by God (Epp, 1982, p. 81) may be interpreted as "settler desires," assumed to be innate, natural, universal human desires (Beenash, 2013, p. 78). Settler desires ignore how Indigenous cultural survival is at odds with settler desire for private property, neutralizing the erasure of Indigenous peoples.

Scholars who write on Mennonite-settler narratives suggest that a common myth told by Mennonites is that settlers appropriated the wilderness into commercial agricultural production according to God's plan (Good, 1995, p. 161). On this perspective, Good (1995) writes that Mennonite settlement narratives commonly assume that

> after Indians were domesticated they came to realize that they had no proprietary rights in land which had not been cultivated for the use of God's people. They then compliantly retreated before the advance of the Mennonite settlers who would appropriate the wilderness to human use by committing it to commercial agricultural production according to God's plan. (p. 161)

To varying degrees, the plays utilize the metaphor of settlers as Israelites coming to the promised land. While enduring the dangerous and wearying journey from Pennsylvania to Ontario, a character in *The Trail of the Conestoga* reflects, "If it weren't for the dream of the promised land I would feel like goin' home myself . . . We is chust [*sic*] like Moses in the wilderness" (Rudy, 1969, p. 19). Another character traveling with Sam compares their forty-day journey to Canada to the Israelites' forty-year journey to the promised land (Rudy, 1969, p. 24). This comparison emphasizes the Mennonites' suffering and their faithfulness to God. Another quote reads, "We have to work—work—, cut down trees—ach my, there is no end. But the land is good. And in the years to come it will be to our children's children a land filled with milk and honey" (Rudy, 1969, p. 38). This quote illustrates many significant themes in the play.

Sam Steiner (2015) notes the diverse reasons that Mennonites moved to Ontario from Pennsylvania, observing that the Mennonites were not typical British loyalists, because they did not fight for the British; however, Mennonites were welcomed as settlers in Canada, because "the British wanted to populate the land as quickly as possible to secure it" (p. 58). Yet in the plays, some Pennsylvania

Mennonite characters are motivated to move to Ontario because they are worried about being persecuted after the American Revolution and are more confident that the Crown will protect them in Canada. In *The New Commandment*, the narrator explains that "many who refused to take up arms against the King made their way to Canada" (Coffman, 1967, p. 2). The first to leave Pennsylvania expressed their anxiety about the new government but felt they would be more secure in Canada, since it is a "land where the King still rules" (Coffman, 1967, p. 3). Similarly, in *The Trail of the Conestoga*, some Pennsylvania settlers are concerned the United States won't keep the promise the British made to the Mennonites about their freedom of religion and exemption from the military. Christian Eby expresses his fear of losing their farms or landing in jail (Rudy, 1969, p. 8). Christian's memory of his grandfather's persecution is clearly still on his mind. He is anxious that the same thing that happened to the Anabaptists in Europe will happen in Pennsylvania.

The plays' central narrative, that Anabaptists moving to Ontario are God's chosen people entering the promised land, positions the land as theirs to take and negates any Indigenous claim to the land. Anabaptist histories of fleeing persecution may have contributed to generational trauma fostering feelings of innocence and superiority (Enns, 2015; Schlabach, 1988; Yoder, 2007; Miller, 2017), a lack of responsibility for taking Indigenous lands (Schlabach, 1988, p. 37), and feelings of superiority and self-righteousness (Enns, 2015, p. 25), along with a persecution complex that "prevents historically victimized but now privileged communities from seeing other people as victims and responding in solidarity" (Enns, 2015, p. 2). According to Enns (2015), Mennonites live out of myths of toughness, resilience, and superiority to assure themselves that their ancestors' trauma no longer damages them. This suppression of trauma inhibits the ability to show empathy to other traumatized people (p. 51).

Lowman and Barker (2015) propose that many settlers in Canada, coming from diaspora populations, have a strong need for a permanent place to call home and may be anxious when they hear about Indigenous title to the land (p. 53). Their need for a new land to call home often supersedes how they perceive the needs of the original population. From this perspective, "Canadians can often reference a historical oppression or forced relocation as a reason why they should be exempted from responsibility for settler colonialism" (p. 55). The myth of the promised land reinforces the theology that God endorses Christians' expansion of power and wealth. In "White Christian Settlers, The Bible, and (De)colonization," Diewert (2013) maintains that this harmful idea supresses the truth of God as creator who wants all humans to live in harmony and humility (p. 134).

Conclusion

A trend observed by Steiner (2015), is that current Mennonite stories of settlement in Waterloo Region often focus on positive relationships with Indigenous peoples with little recognition of how Mennonite settlement contributed to the removal and displacement of the Mississaugas and Six Nations from their land. When we recognize that our narratives reflect what we believe in, then "might we ask what, exactly, we have been telling ourselves to believe? Might we work to better locate our stories within the earlier and larger stories told in this land?" (Zacharias, 2016, p. 69). This paper highlights the importance of honesty about our settler identity and engaging in critique of our community's lived story so that we can be accountable for the exemplary and problematic aspects of it (Enns, 2016, p. 6). The plays in this study were written in the mid to late twentieth century and do not necessarily reflect the narratives we tell today, as evidenced by recent collaborations between Mennonite and Indigenous people in re-telling the story of Mennonite settlement. For instance, "The Landed Buggy", curated by MCC's Indigenous Neighbours engagement associate, Rebecca Seiling, is an artistic land acknowledgment that displays Swiss Mennonite heritage and Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe teachings and history (MCC Canada, n.d.). This is a promising step towards re-telling our story as Anabaptist settlers in a way that recognizes and respects Indigenous peoples' history, sovereignty, and resurgence.

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