Narrating Communities: Constructing and Challenging Mennonite Canadian Identities through Narrative

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1. Introducing Mennonites as *Narrating Community*

Contemporary life is complex and wrought with challenges. To be able to make sense of the multiple information people are confronted with and to create meaning we tell stories. By connecting information and bringing together events in a cohesive and coherent fashion and in an aesthetic form, we make new meanings, establish relationships, and provide memories for further generations. Yet, naturally, these stories do not portray reality as it presents itself to individuals. Rather, they portray a construction of realities, held together by means of storytelling. As a result, stories do not only function as means of structuring experience, but they also create new meanings and therefore have an effect on the world they are presenting (cf. Neumann and A. Nünning 2008). Stories are vehicles to make sense of the world, while simultaneously having an effect on it, or, as Robert Kroetsch phrased it, "[i]n a sense, we haven't got an identity until somebody tells our story. The fiction makes us real" (Kroetsch, Bacque, and Gravel 1970: 63).

To explore this phenomenon I propose to focus on Mennonite identities and storytelling, the intricate relationship between narratives and the construction of cultural identities, and the formation of communities around cultural memories. I am specifically interested in literary texts that present "aesthetically condensed narratives," which do "not only illustrate the workings of narratives but also take an active part in the collective construction of cultural narratives" (Neumann and A. Nünning 2008: 4). Mennonite identities have traditionally been characterized by religion, ethnicity, or history. While all of these markers are important, a predominant focus on them has established binary identities: people are either clearly Mennonite because they identify with the history and faith and have a long line of Mennonite ancestors, or they do not and are therefore not Mennonite. Yet, faced with contemporary challenges in the Canadian context, such as the deconstruction of settlement history, the exploration of the colonial history, and debates on feminism and sexualities that have entered Mennonite congregations all over the country, this simplified approach to Mennonite identity constructions proves to be outdated. In order to meet the contemporary challenges, I propose to explore Mennonite identities as narrative identities. While I do not want to discredit the usability of the aforementioned categories completely, I suggest that their significance to contemporary identity constructions is limited and needs to be complemented by an analysis of the stories Mennonites tell. The writing by Canadian Mennonites is particularly interesting

when it comes to discussions of narrative identities, because as a migrant community, Mennonites have been especially dependent on storytelling for constructing and perpetuating a sense of self. Therefore, the following thesis will explore these questions: How do narratives affect the process of identification for Canadian Mennonites? Which narratives have been prominent over the last 60 years? Which have been silenced or ignored? How are collective identities constructed in Mennonite narratives and what master narrative(s) result(s) from that? What are the challenges to these master narratives? How have these challenges been perceived in the field of Mennonite Studies? What are the aesthetic characteristics of Mennonite narratives? And finally, what new identities are constructed in Mennonite narratives?

To understand the relationship between narratives and identities it is necessary to explore aspects of narrative worldmaking,[1] a phenomenon most prominently discussed in Nelson Goodman's seminal publication *Ways of Worldmaking* (1985). Goodman determines that every narrated story indicates a host of stories that are not told. Because of the impossibility to narrate the entirety of any given event, Goodman argues that narrators have to choose only those aspects and details that are relevant for their particular story (ibid. 19). Worldmaking in Goodman's sense is intricately related to the act of narration as one way to create meaning out of an abundance of information. The leading questions in his research on worldmaking are about the construction of and the relationship between different worlds. "In just what sense are there many worlds? What distinguishes genuine from spurious worlds? What are worlds made of? How are they made? What role do symbols play in the making? And how is worldmaking related to knowing?" (ibid. 1). Goodman investigates the very processes that, he suggests, are central for narrating: 1) ordering, 2) composition and decomposition, 3) weighting, and 4) deletion and supplementation. These individual processes indicate the constructedness of narrations, which results from narrators' attempts to create meaning out of a complexity of

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[1] Wie der Begriff *worldmaking* bereits vermuten lässt, geben die Erzählungen nicht die Erfahrungen der realen Welt wieder. Schriftsteller konstruieren neue Welten über Symbole und Zeichen. Um dies zu untermauern, betonen Nünning und Nünning die konstruktivistischen Voraussetzungen des Worldmaking-Ansatzes in ihrer Einführung in die kulturellen Wege der Weltmacherei (2010: 8-12). In konstruktivistischen Ansätzen argumentieren die Autoren, die Realität wird immer schon konstruiert, während aus einer radikalen konstruktivistischen Position die Menschen nicht in der Lage sind, auf die Realität als solche zuzugreifen, sondern die Realität wahrzunehmen, wie sie bereits durch Geschichten vermittelt wird (2010: 8). Anstatt davon auszugehen, dass die Menschen die Realität durch Geschichten darstellen oder nachahmen, behaupten radikale Konstruktivisten, dass es umgekehrt sei: die Geschichten, die der Wirklichkeit der Konstrukte erzählt werden. "Die Weltmacherei ist also als eine Tätigkeit oder ein Prozeß konzipiert, die Muster und Versionen aktiv konstruiert und nicht nur sie repräsentiert" (ebd. 8).

information, which in turn creates stories that fit "the needs of the present" (Neumann and A. Nünning 2008: 6–7). Therefore, even stories about the past, are more revealing of contemporary narrators and their audiences.

The relation between narratives and identity is a well explored one,[2] yet several scholars caution to assume that it is self-evident.[3] While some positions seem radical since they construct narratives as indispensable for humanity in general (cf. Wolf 2013),[4] other scholars focus on the various functions of narratives for our lives in a less dramatic way.[5] Building on these results, literary and cultural studies' scholar Wolfgang Müller-Funk, explores storytelling as a "transcendental prerequisite for 'culture'" (2008: VII; my translation).[6] Although taken by itself, this statement may also be read as leaning towards an all-encompassing understanding of narratives and their importance for people and cultures, Müller-Funk indicates that not everything that is cultural is also narrative (2010: 309).[7] His term "Erzählgemeinschaften" underlines the necessity of storytelling for any community[8] and inspires the title for my own project. *Narrating communities*[9] is my adaptation of Müller-Funk's "Erzählgemeinschaften" that I use to explore the intricacies of Canadian Mennonite ways of narrating identities in fictional texts. "Erzählgemeinschaften," according to Müller-Funk, designates communities,

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[2] See Becker (1997); Bruner (1991); Eakin (1999; 2008); Goodman (1985); Kuester (2007); Müller-Funk (2010; 2012); Neumann and A. Nünning (2008); A. Nünning (2010); Wolf (2013).

[3] As Neumann and A. Nünning point out, the relationship between identity and narrative is "far from self-evident" (2008: 3). Eakin also warns us from making hasty assumptions when pointing out that "life certainly isn't a story, at least not in any simple, literary sense, and we also know that a person isn't a book" (Eakin 1999: 99).

[4] One example for a radical position is Wolf's argument that it is first and foremost the ability to narrate, which ultimately defines humans: "[W]e cannot dispense with narratives, for we would cease to be humans" (Wolf 2013: 2).

[5] For an overview of the functions of narratives see A. Nünning (2010: 239) and Wolf (2013: 5).

[6] "Sie [die aktualisierte Theorie des Narrativen] kommt zu dem Schluß, daß Erzählen nicht nur universal ist, sondern auch – im Sinne von Kant und Cassirer – eine transzendentale Voraussetzung für 'Kultur' darstellt" (Müller-Funk 2008: VII).

[7] "Nicht alles, was eine Kultur ausmacht, ist narrativ. Wenn man also Kultur als Ensemble von Erzählungen auffasst, dann heißt das nicht, dass damit alle Aspekte, Funktionen und Phänomene einer Kultur erfasst sind" (Müller-Funk 2010: 309).

[8] "Jede Kultur kann als eine symbolische und narrative Gemeinschaft aufgefaßt werden […], die zugleich jene menschliche Beziehungen in rekurrenten, langlebigen Formen symbolisiert, die synchrone Einheit verbürgt" (Müller-Funk 2008: 253).

[9] I prefer to use the progressive form in English, because I understand the narrative process as ongoing and fluent instead of a more static interpretation that I feel is expressed by using the direct translation, "narrative community."

nations, and cultures that share a certain repertoire of stories that differs from the repertoire of other cultures (Müller-Funk 2008: 14; my translation).[10]

Conceptualizing Mennonite Canadian literature in terms of a *narrating community*[11] is advantageous for the three following reasons: Mennonites have relied on storytelling throughout their history, because they have no home country. The conceptualization allows us to explore Mennonite writing not in binary terms, but as a complex web of stories. Finally, the connection between my key concepts – identities, narratives, and memories – is already incorporated in the concept of "Erzählgemeinschaften," and will be further specified and explored in my conceptualization of Mennonites as *narrating community*.

First, as a group with roots in the European Reformation in general and the Anabaptist movement in particular, Mennonites quickly became dependent on stories to identify with and used them to separate themselves from other groups. The group's namesake Menno Simons, a former Roman Catholic priest from Friesland, joined the Anabaptist movement during the 1530s. He served as an important authority because he provided the group with confessional writings, which ultimately served as a basis for the formation of the Northern European Mennonite movement.[12] Because of the group's reluctance to perform child baptism or join the armed forces, in addition to their conviction that state and church matters have to be separated from each other, they soon made themselves a target for persecution. To be able to sustain themselves, they were forced to migrate both within and outside of Europe. This circumstance made it impossible for them to form any ongoing and lasting bonds to a certain geographical place. Consequently, Mennonites had to find other ways to unite themselves. Given their particular separatist nature, combined with the fact that they had been a displaced or diasporic group[13] from their early beginnings, storytelling quickly became one of the most important

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[10] "Zweifelsohne sind es Erzählungen, die kollektiven, nationalen Gedächtnissen zugrundeliegen und Politiken der Identität bzw. Differenz konstituieren. Kulturen sind immer auch als *Erzählgemeinschaften* anzusehen, die sich gerade im Hinblick auf ihr narratives Reservoir unterscheiden. Das gilt für die Mythen traditioneller Gemeinschaften ebenso wie für die modernen großen Erzählungen" (ibid. 14; emphasis in original).

[11] In contrast to Benedict Anderson's (1991) term "imagined communities," my use of *narrating communities* stresses the importance of stories for the construction of identities and is thus more specifically suited for my context.

[12] For more information on Menno Simons and a detailed exploration of his influence on the Anabaptist movement see Bornhäuser (1973) and Goertz (2002).

[13] For an exploration of Mennonites as a diaspora see Zacharias (2010; 2013)

sources for identification. In his article on "Region, Gender and Nation," Martin Kuester argues that storytelling is especially important for dispersed people and cultures that cannot rely on a shared sense of values in a postmodern Canadian society.

> The common values that used to hold dispersed and diasporic groups together are more than threatened, as is the idea of nation in a post-national state, so that new identities have to be created, and the most important way of creating those identities is through the telling of stories. (2008: 18)

The writing of Canadian Mennonites has often been characterized as a way of writing the self into existence. Tiessen affirms that some authors have used their writing to locate themselves somewhere between their Mennonite background and the larger Canadian context they are growing up in (1998: 492). The fractured nature of Mennonite identities partly lies in the fact that they have been constant migrants without a common homeland. Given that even those Mennonites who live in Canada cannot fall back on the same historical experiences, they are distinctly dependent on storytelling as means of creating a shared sense of identity.[14] Müller-Funk argues that diasporic communities are in general "highly interesting narrative communities with regard to their (fragile) identities" because "there is a strong and permanent need for storytelling" (Müller-Funk 2012: 194).

Second, I argue that it is particularly by understanding Mennonites as a *narrating community*, i.e. as a community that depends on narratives and the narrativization process, that we gain an understanding of Mennonite Canadian narratives as complex web of stories. As Mennonite communities in contemporary Canada are fragmented, with multiple differences between the more conservative communities in southern Ontario and the more assimilated communities in the rest of the country, this fragmentation recurs in their stories as well. This multiplicity of stories results in contradictory and challenging narratives. However, in the construction of an "Erzählgemeinschaft," it is natural and, as Müller-Funk emphasizes, even desirable to deal with stories that offer no easy conclusions about the *narrating community's*

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[14] Rudy Wiebe urges scholars to take note of the manifold differences between Mennonite groups, who do not necessarily share the same roots. "Mennonites are nothing quite as simple as an ethnic group, that is, racially something specific. Even historically they come from at least three or four different ethnic groups. […] So the beginnings of all we now call 'Mennonite' are racially very diverse. They are central European, but that doesn't make them the same" (in Hutcheon 1990: 80–81).

alleged uniform identities (Müller-Funk 2008: 129).[15] Thus, the concept of *narrating community* does not only allow us to acknowledge the inconsistencies in a corpus of writing, but it demands to turn our attention to these fractures and challenges. At the same time, using this concept I am able to avoid an essentialized understanding of Mennonite writing and culture in general.

A third advantage of the conceptualization of Mennonites as a *narrating community* lies in the connection that Müller-Funk establishes between memories and narratives, a connection that is, as pointed out earlier, essential for my project. Müller-Funk emphasizes that narratives are highly functional in memory discourses, because "all forms of memory are either explicitly or implicitly based on narratives that try to overcome the conflict between narrative time and narrated time" (ibid. 251; my translation).[16] Moreover, Müller-Funk cautions that memory must be understood as flexible and fallible storage medium in which memories will always be lost, or, (sub)consciously reconstructed and altered (ibid. 251).[17]

In the following thesis I want to explore Mennonite narrative identities by conceptualizing Mennonites as *narrating community*. While Müller-Funk's concept of "Erzählgemeinschaft" serves as point of departure in its emphasis on the importance of storytelling for communities, I am also interested in the formal and narratological constructions of narrative identities. I want to combine the exploration of Mennonites as *narrating community* on a contextual level with an analysis of the aesthetic construction of the Mennonite *narrating community*. Narrativizations of the past, as well as of contemporary challenges are therefore informative in two ways: First, they indicate the construction of narrative identities around these categories. Second, they help to explore how narrative identities are constructed narratologically.

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[15] "Was hier vorgeschlagen wird, ist die Einübung in die Ungemütlichkeit und das Leben mit Geschichten, die Unsicherheit und Unheimlichkeit nicht nur gestatten, sondern lebbar machen" (Müller-Funk 2008: 129).

[16] "[A]lle Formen des Gedächtnisses [basieren] explizit oder implizit auf retrospektiven, das heißt zeitverschobenen Narrativen […], die den unüberbrückbaren Zwiespalt zwischen Erzählzeit (Zeit der Erzählung) und erzählter Zeit (Zeit der Handlung) zu überwinden trachten" (ibid. 251).

[17] "Wenn man das Konzept des Gedächtnisses als eines Speicherraums, in dem nichts verloren geht, aufgibt, dann muß man sich auch von der Idee eines starken und stabilen Subjekts verabschieden" (ibid. 252).

1.1   The Multiplicity of Stories among Canadian Mennonites

When it comes to the connection between identities and narratives, Eakin suggests speaking of "'registers of self and self-experience'" because "there are many stories of self to tell, and more than one self to tell them" (Eakin 1999: xi). When we think of identity as a pluralised concept that is always in flux, never static and shaped by storytelling, we consequently expect a variety of different stories to reflect these multiplied and varied identities. Research on Mennonite literature in Canada tends to seek out a certain degree of commonality that justifies labelling a body of texts "Canadian Mennonite writing." In my thesis, I want to enter a discourse on Mennonite writing as a multiple and diverse critical concept beyond categories of ethnicity, history, and faith.

Exploring the narrativization of the plurality of experiences and stories in Mennonite Canadian literature lies at the heart of this thesis. However, it is not the multiplicity of stories alone that I am interested in, but the fact that these stories may at times express contradictory notions on Mennonite identities and therefore inhabit a marginal position in the corpus of Mennonite literature. Müller-Funk stresses the importance of stories that have been thrust to the margins of any given canon.

> If narrating is also a form of creating personal and collective identity, of building symbolic spaces, then the development of post-traditional models of identity and alterity depends on innovative forms of narrative in which the *Other* in a double sense […] is not automatically displaced, but gains a positive function in an open narrative structure. (2012: 201)

Some narratives have been repeated excessively among Mennonites and one wonders whether the constant repetition of one story does not also lead to the forgetting or active silencing of others. Müller-Funk stresses that forgotten narratives are not only a by-product of the storytelling process.[18] "Stories are told in order not to tell other stories. Thus, the manifest, literary or non-literary story serves as a headstone for forgetting, for the individually or collectively produced unconscious" (Müller-Funk 2008: 91; my translation).[19] I will explore

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[18]   See my explanation on Goodman's concept of *worldmaking* above.

[19]   "Man erzählt eine Geschichte, um womöglich eine andere Geschichte nicht erzählen zu müssen. So legt das manifest, literarisch oder unliterarisch Erzählte den Grundstein für das Vergessen, für das individuell oder gesellschaftlich produzierte Unbewußte" (ibid. 91).

these rarely told narratives and their relationship to master narratives in order to analyze Mennonite ways of storytelling.

Robert Zacharias points out that some narratives have been considered influential while others have been largely ignored in the field of Mennonite studies. Zacharias explores how especially the Russian experience has been claimed as a formative narrative for all Mennonites. This particular narrative centers on Mennonites' historical experiences in Russia and the present-day Ukraine after World War I.[20] It has been repeated and reproduced often enough for Kroetsch to suggest that by now it constitutes the master narrative in Canadian Mennonite writing (in Tiessen and Hinchcliffe 1992: 224–25). Zacharias refers to the downfall of the "Mennonite Commonwealth," as it has repeatedly been called, as a collective myth that has been formative even for those Canadian Mennonites whose ancestors were never affected by this particular experience.

> [W]hen a past displacement reaches a certain prominence in a community's collective memory - through cultural production, memorialization, historical studies, and so on – it begins to overshadow the complexity of a community's larger migration history and comes to function as an originary myth for the community as a whole. (Zacharias 2013: 14)

This focus on an originary story that in fact relates to the history of only a number of contemporary Mennonites in Canada tends to silence other experiences and narratives. A very similar phenomenon can be found with the Martyr narrative. Among Mennonites martyrs have become "cultural icons" (Beachy 2010: 26) and their stories have been interpreted as stories of victimization and suffering. The *Martyrs Mirror*, a massive collection of martyr stories, commemorates this victimization.

The fact that Mennonites hold on to those stories indicates a tendency to perpetuate binary conceptions of Mennonite cultural identities and Mennonite literature, as Tiessen explains.

> The fixed categories of identity that Mennonites once believed they could slip into unproblematically are no longer useful. The binary oppositions inscribed in their literary-critical writing and thinking over the past half century serve them ill. (Tiessen 1998: 500)

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[20] In 1786 Tsarina Catherine II invited farmers from all over Europe to settle the newly seized regions, often referred to as "New Russia." Mennonites from the area of Danzig followed the invitation and settled north of the Black Sea, in an area that lies in present-day Ukraine. For further information on the migration to New Russia and Mennonite settlements in this specific area, see C. Dyck (1967); F. H. Epp (1974); Huebert (2005); Kraybill (2010); Schroeder and Huebert (1996).

I agree with Tiessen that an essentialist understanding of Mennonite writing impedes our insight into the creative potential and aesthetic value of Mennonite literature on the one hand, and leads us to prematurely arrive at a static understanding of Mennonite identities, on the other hand. By dividing the field of Mennonite writing into static binaries, scholars take the risk of drawing and repeating a one-dimensional picture of Mennonite literature and identities. However, as I will show below, Mennonite writing is anything but marginal, and I agree with Tiessen that these binary constructions need to be and partly already have been overcome via creative writing.

> [I]t is in Mennonite writers' creative work – not in their own and others' critical observations – that they have in fact escaped not only the binary categories that support the assumption that the center is fixed and unified but also the politics of the margins. (ibid. 497)

Müller-Funk argues a very similar point when he notes that "[i]t is literature that makes it possible to overcome binary oppositions and that shows how they are fitted together or broken in the narrative process itself" (2012: 201). It is therefore essential to explore literary narratives as a circumvention of stable and static notions of Mennonite identities that have relied on notions of ethnicity, history, and faith. Conceptualising Mennonites as a *narrating community* helps to avoid fixed binaries and static categories in a discussion of Mennonite identities and allows for a consideration of the importance of storytelling among Mennonites.

1.2   Approaching Mennonite Storytellers and their Stories

In order to approach Mennonites' stories and storytelling in its multiplicity, it is necessary to clarify the use of the terms "Mennonite" and "Mennonite writing." I will provide several approaches to definitions of "Mennonite" and "Mennonite writing" that are useful in the critical framework of my thesis, which operates on the following premises: First, I always understand definitions to be in flux and subject to change. The term "Mennonite" means something different in contemporary North America than it did in 16th century Europe. Second, the definitions that I am going to work with in my thesis need to be thought of as critically contextualized. Taken out of their particular context, they have to be questioned and developed before we go on working with them. Third, true to the underlying understanding that definitions of "Mennonite" and "Mennonite writing" are subject to change, readers will find that, in the course of this thesis, the aspects that are discussed – such as cultural memories, gender and sexuality – question or challenge traditional definitions of Mennonite identities. However, it is these challenges that I believe are productive for the investigation of any literature because they lead us to innovative questions, which in turn allow us a closer examination of the texts at hand and provide us with the tools to acknowledge and study the multiplicity and diversity of any community's literary production.

Underlying the following approaches to the term "Mennonite" as a critical concept is an understanding of identities as subject to change.[21]

> [I]dentities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation. (Hall 1996b: 4)

Hall stresses that identities are always incomplete and in flux, "always constituted within, not outside, representation" (1996a: 210). With this in mind, I want to draw the following conclusions in the framework of this thesis: First, the focus on the relationship between identities and narratives represents not only one among several options to explore identity processes in the framework of my thesis, but it is in fact the most important one. Storytelling, as stressed above, is a key practice in identity-building processes. Second, it urges us to consider

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[21] The scholarly discourse around the concept of identity will be familiar to the readers of this thesis, and I will refrain from any extensive attempt to define it or trace the various positions in this discourse.

the wider context of narrative production. When comparing the writing of Mennonite authors in Russia to contemporary Canadian Mennonite writing, we have to adapt our analytical approach to the geographical and socio-political contexts of their production. The Canadian context especially demands scholars and writers to think about identities as fragmented due to its self-construction as a multicultural society. Mennonites' constant migration, the aversion of other communities for a large part of their history, and the lack of a homeland provide a particular background against which to read their narratives.[22] In addition, the Canadian experience[23] naturally provides another angle against which to read and interpret Mennonite writing.

The discourse on the term "Mennonite" has been ongoing for several decades; given that Mennonitism as a religious movement has been fractured from its very beginning during the Reformation, this is not surprising. Affected by migration – first throughout Europe and eventually to North America – the group has been pluralised culturally and in terms of faith. Canada's Mennonite population today is comprised of at least three major groups, who came to Canada in different waves of migration. Their specific migratory histories are accompanied by various uses of Low and High German,[24] various cultural elements such as different culinary specialities, as well as group-specific narratives. While there are dozens of different

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[22] The writing about one's own ethnic background is especially prevalent in Canada as a settler nation. Kuester and Keller point out that the ethnic origin of authors and the "theme of ethnicity in literature" are among the most central topics in contemporary Canadian writing (2002: 9).

[23] In the first half of the 20th century the idea of Canada as a cultural mosaic was introduced in John Murray Gibbon's publication *The Canadian Mosaic: The Making of a Northern Nation* (1939). The policy of multiculturalism resulted from a report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (1963-69). Pierre Elliott Trudeau, the prime minister at the time, introduced the multiculturalism policy in 1971 and included it in the "Charter of Rights and Freedoms" of the 1982 Canadian Constitution Act. The Canadian Multiculturalism Act was passed six years later in 1988. The act was meant to allow for the full participation of all Canadian citizens, independent of their ethnic origin. There are two essential positions about Canada's multicultural policy. The supporters claim that it leads to a better integration of immigrants and minority groups because it removes barriers and encourages newcomers to preserve their cultural and ethnic identities. However, critics argue that multiculturalism leads to a stereotyping of ethnic groups and thus emphasizes cultural boundaries instead of offering means to overcome them. Moreover, Quebeckers and other non-Anglo-Canadian groups criticize the policy of multiculturalism as a means to promote and expand the influence of the Anglophone culture. Neil Bissoondath (1994) and George Elliott Clarke (1997) criticize multiculturalism for its potential to compartmentalize ethnic identities and they argue that multiculturalism renders people of colour invisible. In his recent publication, *Contemporary Achievements* (2015), German scholar Hartmut Lutz points towards the continuing failure to recognize the artistic work of people of colour and the lack of attention paid to the literary achievements of Aboriginal writers in Canada under the auspices of multiculturalism (2015: 80–81).

[24] For more information on the use of different German dialects in the writing of Canadian Mennonites, see Kroeker (2003), Kuester (2003), and Tiessen (1988).

denominations, there are three major groups. In general, we distinguish the so-called *Russländer* and *Kanadier* Mennonites who both migrated from the area that now is Ukraine and the Pennsylvania-Dutch Mennonites who migrated from Switzerland and southern Germany. The *Russländer* came to Canada during the 1920s. They often brought traumatic stories of loss, violence and near-starvation, suffered during and after the Russian revolution, to Canada. The *Kanadier* Mennonites migrated from the same geographical area to Canada about 50 years earlier. Appalled by the process of Russification[25] several Mennonite leaders saw migration as their only chance to preserve the secluded way of life. More than 50,000 Mennonites decided to migrate to Canada at the end of the 19th century. Canada's government had just issued an invitation to Europeans to settle its newly acquired regions.[26] The third group, the so-called Swiss German Mennonites, came as early as the 18th and 19th centuries to North America, where they settled mainly in Pennsylvania and are therefore often referred to as Pennsylvania-Dutch Mennonites. Migration has been an ongoing process and apart from these larger waves of migration, there have always been smaller numbers of Mennonites leaving Canada for Mexico and South America or returning from there. Keeping this in mind, it becomes obvious why an essentialized understanding of Mennonite narrative identities can only prevent an insight into the relationship between identities and narratives.

Given this multiplicity of migratory experiences and the resulting differences in language, faith, and cultural expressions, the term "Mennonite" has been discussed from a variety of perspectives that I want to draw on to come up with a working definition for my own project. "In its most immediate use," Zacharias points out, "the title 'Mennonite' is a religious designation referring to the roughly 1.5 million baptized adult members of the Mennonite churches around the globe" (2013: 5). In the introduction to *Why I am a Mennonite*, a collection of essays on Mennonite identities, Harry Loewen points out that a faith-only Mennonitism is indeed common among many Mennonites (1988: 14). Although the religious aspect of Mennonite identities is central for many Mennonites, they have also been perceived as an ethnic

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[25] During the 1860s, the Russian government launched their program of "Russification," which was meant to secure Russian as language of instruction in schools. It also contained a decree that withdrew the Mennonite Privilegium in respect to the exemption of Mennonites from military service. This caused a major debate within the Mennonite colonies in Russia and initiated the first large wave of migration to Canada (cf. Epp 1974).

[26] These newly acquired lands have been obtained at the price of displacing the Indigenous and Métis population, a process that was part of a larger colonization scheme. The (unconscious) participation of Mennonites in that program will be discussed in detail in chapter two.

group, a categorization that carries a variety of problems,[27] as American writer and scholar Julia Spicher Kasdorf emphasizes.

> What began as a free movement of the Spirit has become a denomination bound by memory and blood, although how deep that blood flows remains to be seen. In a global demographic view of the denomination, the most representative Mennonite at the beginning of the twenty-first century is an African woman. Nonetheless, in North American communities with European roots, physical experience and the ancient and powerful body metaphor shape perceptions of the religious community. Paradoxically, this metaphor may thwart the community's deepest desire, which is to love others. (2001: 80)

Spicher Kasdorf's argument emphasizes that a categorization of Mennonites as ethnic community reduces their attractiveness and availability to non-Mennonites. In addition, Linda Hutcheon confirms that "Mennonites, as proselytizing churches […] have spread all over the world and now there are more Indian Mennonites in India, and African Mennonites, and certainly Indonesian Mennonites than there are, say Low-German speaking Canadian Mennonites" (Hutcheon 1990: 81). A focus on a shared ethnic and historical background ignores these developments. Yet, the sense of a shared history is important, as John Friesen argues: "I did not begin from a neutral position. I am already in a stream of history, with my roots in a particular community" (1988: 91). However, as shown above, it is not easy to refer to a shared historical background, even for Mennonites in Canada.

It is not surprising that none of these individual features – ethnicity, faith, and history – can provide a definitive answer to the question "who is Mennonite?" Magdalene Redekop approaches the discussion of Mennonite identities with a sense of vagueness.

> I see 'identity' as being in motion; not a noun, but a verb – as in 'to identify with.' […] When I picked up my Mennonite looking glass, intending to record the image reflected in it, I found that it was blurred and fractured. Identity, I remind myself, will be found only when the mirror becomes an open window. (1988: 228)

The image of a window providing a view of a variety of expressions that can be referred to as "Mennonite" affords not only seeing Mennonite identities as flexible and constantly changing. It also requires scholars and writers to think beyond the established binaries of insider/outsider

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[27] In "Mother Tongue in Cyberspace" M. Redekop outlines the discourse on Mennonite writing as ethnic writing and concludes that writers should not be under any "obligation to stay within an ethnic ghetto or to speak 'for' any particular group," but she concedes that "[t]he reality of the market place, however, is another story" (2009: n.p.)

that are emphasized when taking ethnicity, religion, or history as primary categories of identity constructions into account.

In order to find answers to the question of "who is Mennonite?" I propose to return to the basic subject of this thesis: Mennonite narratives.

> To survive as immigrants in this brave new world, we have to find patterns of living that work. I found these patterns for myself in [my father's] stories, in the stories of the Mennonite Brethren, of the Mennonites, of the Anabaptists, and of God's people in Scripture. […] I am a Mennonite because someone told me a story and told me that it was also my story. And if I tell this story often enough to others, they can also accept it as theirs whether or not they are biologically part of it. (Funk Wiebe 1988: 336)

This statement by Canadian Mennonite writer Katie Funk Wiebe emphasizes the importance of narratives for Mennonites and it indicates the intricate connection between storytelling and processes of identity construction.

Because I approach Mennonite identities via the concept of *narrating communities*, explorations of the term "Mennonite" can only lead to an analysis of Mennonite literary texts. I will arrive at constructions of and challenges to Mennonite identities by analysing Mennonite narratives. However, I can only analyze a small fraction of Mennonite Canadian writing. Therefore, I will arrive at working definitions that are valid for the contexts I am using them in; yet other contexts may require adaptations and a rethinking of Mennonite identities. Furthermore, I can only present a small part of Mennonite literary texts, and I do not intend to make statements about Mennonite Canadian writing as a whole. I understand the small segment of Mennonite Canadian writing that I present here as embedded in a complex web of stories that displays a great range of topics and perspectives, as well as narrative strategies.

Similar to the discussion of Mennonite identities, the scholarly discourse on "Mennonite writing" is characterized by a range of definitions and terms. The number of different approaches need to be understood against the historical background of Mennonite literature and scholarship. Canadian Mennonite writing in English is a rather recent phenomenon, dating back roughly to the middle of the 20th century. At the time fictional writing by Mennonites was embraced rather hesitantly. Although there have been writers like Arnold Dyck and Jacob Janzen who published their work in German in the first half of the 20th century, the reception by their almost exclusively Mennonite audience was already ambivalent. In the introduction to

her collection of Mennonite stories, distinctively called *Liars and Rascals*, Tiessen points out that "Mennonites showed themselves to be reluctant to embrace arts because they believed all fiction to be lies and thus sinful" (1989: xi–xii). The publication of Rudy Wiebe's first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962), which has often been characterized as the advent of Canadian Mennonite writing in English,[28] was received with a surprising degree of hostility.

> This antipathy (at best) or (at worst) antagonism towards indigenous fiction in particular was revealed most forcefully in 1962, when Rudy Wiebe's first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, was published by McClelland and Stewart. […] Wiebe's novel represented the first critical, contemporary view of Mennonite life on the Canadian prairies; moreover, it was published in English and drew its audiences from across the country.
> The unprecedented furore that followed the publication of a novel in which Wiebe opened a private people's affairs to public scrutiny resulted in the author's leaving his editorial post with a Mennonite magazine in Winnipeg and seeking sanctuary, at least temporarily, in the U.S.A. (Tiessen 1989: xii–xiii)

Despite its critical reception, Wiebe's novel initiated a wave of fictional writings by Canadian Mennonites. Yet the reaction to Wiebe's publication also made subsequent writers anxious about publishing their work. Spicher Kasdorf explores her initial hesitation to publish her first book of poetry, *Sleeping Preacher* (1992a), in her collection of essays and poems *The Body and the Book* (2001). She devotes a whole chapter to the difficulty of introducing her own family and community to her ambivalent notions about the Amish Mennonite community she grew up in (ibid. 39–47). "Cultural minorities like Mennonites, who carry a memory of persecution and feel their identity to be always endangered," she explains, "see in the voices of imaginative writers like me the promise of preservation as well as the threat of misrepresentation" (ibid.). Canadian Mennonite writer Sandra Birdsell also reports a strong resistance to storytelling:

> [M]y mother had taught me that telling stories was tantamount to telling lies. […] The question of whether telling stories was an honorable, or even a moral, thing to do haunted me. When we talked about writing, Mennonite writers immediately understood the very real risk of being ostracized by their family and community. […] The urge to write stories eventually took precedence over my fear, and I convinced myself that honesty meant no subject could be taboo. (2008b: 19)

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[28] Although several scholars and writers have referred to Rudy Wiebe's novel as marking the beginning of Canadian Mennonite writing in English (cf. Kroeker 2001; Tiessen 1989; 2004a; 2004b; 2008) this is only true when we look at the massive attention Wiebe's novel received among Mennonites as well as among a larger reading public. The first novel in English published by a Canadian Mennonite writer is Mabel Dunham's *The Trail of the Conestoga* (1925) which was published nearly 40 years prior to *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962). It tells the story of Mennonite families in Pennsylvania, who, at the outbreak of the American revolution emigrate to Waterloo County.

Given these resentments it is no surprise that the first anthology of Mennonite Canadian writing was published as late as 1974. The editor, William De Fehr, made an effort to collect all the writings by Canadian Mennonites – essays, poems and short stories in both English and German – that became available between 1874 and 1974. G.K. Epp, who provides a concise introduction to the volume, emphasizes his hope that after years of hardship and migration, Canadian Mennonites have "reached the level of prosperity at which more time might have been devoted to such 'luxury' as literature" (1974: viii). In order to be able to work creatively, Epp claims, Mennonites need a sense of home, a prerequisite that he sees fulfilled for Mennonites in Canada who have, as he predicted, finally reached the "land of final destination" (ibid.). Although Mennonites have continued to migrate in smaller numbers to other parts of the world, Epp proved to be right when he foresaw that in Canada they will eventually produce "literature of the first rank" (ibid.).

A look at the contemporary state of Mennonite writing in Canada reveals a large number of creative writers, a phenomenon also referred to as the "'Mennonite miracle'" (Tiessen 2008: 43). Tiessen is careful to point out that this increase in authors and stories is met by a large readership. Mennonite writing has become an integral part of the Canadian literary landscape and some writers are successful across the borders,[29] which leads Tiessen to conclude that by now "'Mennonite sells'" (ibid. 43).

Despite the growing popularity of Mennonite fiction, Mennonite scholarship continues to struggle with an ambivalent terminology (ibid. 47). In order to approach Mennonite writing systematically, Jeff Gundy introduced the distinction between "Mennonite literature" and "Mennonites writing." The former signifies the large body of works that "seeks self-consciously and more or less directly to promote Anabaptist faith and practice" while the latter "often resists taking doctrine and official narrative as either their starting or ending points" (Gundy 2005: 31–32). Authors whom Gundy characterizes as "Mennonites writing" try to

> deal with their own deepest questions, obsessions, and ambivalences, in ways which make the outcomes unpredictable. Their work is sometimes deeply celebratory of this or that aspect of Mennonite identity, sometimes just as deeply critical, sometimes thoroughly ambivalent. (ibid. 31–32)

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[29] The internationally most successful Canadian Mennonite writers are Rudy Wiebe and Miriam Toews. Both writers also publish in Germany. The former with a small press called Tweeback Verlag, and earlier with Eichborn Verlag, and the latter with the Berlin Verlag.

The term "Mennonites writing" has left its mark on Canadian Mennonite Studies. Tiessen has been using the term, albeit in another form, as "Mennonite/s Writing," which is intended to express the inherent ambivalence of Mennonite writers towards their own communities and subjects of writing.[30]

In my thesis I want to use the term "Mennonite/s Writing" as a critical concept instead of a literary one, because, as I have pointed out above and as Zacharias argues, Mennonite literature in Canada cannot be understood as a "clearly bounded collection of texts" (Zacharias 2013: 7). The construction of Mennonite Canadian literature as a critical concept has several assets over its construction as a literary one. First, it gives credit to the fact that the denominator "Mennonite" itself is highly contested. Second and following from this, "Mennonite/s Writing" in Canada can only be explored by considering its specific and multiple histories and developments in the 20th and 21st centuries. Zacharias emphasizes that Mennonite/s Writing understood as "critical frame of emphasis with its own history and its own set of assumptions" (ibid. 7) can be much more productive in the framework of any literary analysis. Framing Mennonite Canadian writing in terms of a *narrating community* in the context of my thesis serves this particular purpose. A third asset is that it allows for a conceptualization of Mennonite identities as multiplied and in flux. Therefore, I arrive at a rather wide definition of "Mennonite/s Writing" for my thesis that encompasses the writing of authors who self-identify as Mennonite, market their fiction as Mennonite and/or whose texts share certain formal characteristics and topics that are typical for the Mennonite *narrating community*. It is these topics and narrative techniques that I will explore throughout the analyses below.

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[30] Canadian Mennonite writer Patrick Friesen exposes his ambivalence towards Mennonites in an essay on Mennonite identity: "I have been ashamed of my heritage. I have been proud. I have been confused by this heritage. What is it? What was it? Why, given their spiritual and social heritage, do most North American Mennonites appear to be socially conservative, materialistic, and nonpacifist?" (1988: 105).

1.3 Research as Storytelling: Methodological Approaches to Mennonite Canadian Writing

At the 2014 annual Canadian Studies conference of the Association of Canadian Studies in German-speaking countries, Aboriginal scholar and writer Margaret Kovach referred to research as a form of re-storying. Kovach argued that an approach which explores the reciprocity of storytelling and research opens up new ways of understanding the structure and meaning of stories as well as the storied nature of research (Kovach 2014).[31] I propose that an exploration of the intersections between these areas of knowledge production will ultimately foster a deeper understanding of both my research object – the writing of Mennonite Canadians – and my theoretical approach to it via the concept of *narrating community*. In order to tease out the interfaces on a structural level I will analyze the corpus of Mennonite narratives in my thesis in close relation with the concepts that I am using. The theoretical part and the analysis are understood as intricately related in my thesis, which is why I am using a concept-based methodology (Bal 2002). Practically speaking, the concepts that I am working with are extracted from my primary texts and will be developed further. With such a bottom-up approach, it is inevitable to connect the concepts and my primary sources on a structural level, as well. It is therefore no surprise that the discussions of theoretical approaches and concepts are not isolated in a single chapter, but are explored in close relationship with Mennonite literary texts.

In my thesis, I will approach Mennonite Canadian texts by primarily using concepts instead of theories. Mieke Bal defines concepts as

> the tools of intersubjectivity: They facilitate discussion on the basis of a common language. Mostly, they are considered abstract representations of an object. But, like all representations, they are neither simple nor adequate in themselves. They distort, unfix and inflect the object. […] In fact, concepts are, or rather do, much more. If well thought through, they offer miniature theories, and in that guise, help in the analysis of objects, situations, states and other theories. (2009: 18–19)

Concepts' ability to approach research objects as unstable, as well as the use of a bottom-up approach to Mennonite/s Writing in my thesis, which in turn necessitates the use of specific concepts – such as cultural memory, gender, and sexuality – that are directly extracted from the

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[31] A. Nünning and V. Nünning make a very similar argument about the constructivist nature of academic disciplines, that can, they emphasize, "be conceived of as particular ways of worldmaking" (2010: 15).

texts and that will be conceptualized according to their use in different disciplines before they are again applied to and developed in close relation to the primary texts, are among the reasons for using concepts instead of theories. This way my research object – the relationship between Mennonite narratives in Canada and Mennonite identities – can be centralized. This centralization of my research object necessitates a close reading of the texts, which is in turn a prerequisite for working with concepts (Bal 2002: 10). My use of a diversity of primary texts is another important reason to work with concepts. Compared to theories, concepts are smaller units of meaning that show a greater flexibility. As I am using contemporary texts that deal with a variety of aspects, I use concepts that originate in different disciplines such as narratology, gender studies, queer studies, and memory studies. This interdisciplinary approach to my research object necessitates a flexible research method (ibid. 5). When Bal refers to a phenomenon she calls "cultural analysis," a way of questioning a research object, she calls attention to the fact that in order to be able to conduct research at the intersections of different disciplines we need to use concepts.

In her case study on "culture as text," Doris Bachmann-Medick criticizes contemporary literary scholars for reducing their analysis to thematic approaches and for forgetting to consider the "intrinsic aesthetic value" of any given text (2012: 108–09). "For not only are cultural contents, reflected through literature, the object of a culturally informed interpretation, but also through the structures and patterns of aesthetic representation as such" (ibid. 108–09). The following thesis reacts to this criticism and should be understood as a "cultural narratology," according to Gabriele Helms who argues that a "cultural narratology" requires an analysis that conceptualizes content and form as intricately related (2003). With reference to Lanser (1992) and A. Nünning (1992), Helms explores narrative techniques within their distinct historical and cultural contexts, which they are influenced by and that they in turn also influence (Helms 2003: 14). Bearing this reciprocal conceptualization of narratives in mind, it is essential to carefully consider the narrative techniques that are used in any of the texts analyzed in my thesis, because there are no "timeless ideal types [of narrative techniques] that have been handed down to narratologists in ready-to-use systems" (ibid. 14). Helms' method relies on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism and its relation to narratology, which ultimately "allow[s] the analysis of formal structures to be combined with a consideration of their ideological implications" (ibid. 10). It is in this vein that my own analysis of Mennonite/s Writing will be conducted because

an understanding of any literary text can only be achieved by looking both at the content and the formal level.

In his seminal publication, *The Political Unconscious* (first published in 1981) Fredric Jameson argues that the form of any given text also carries an ideological meaning, a phenomenon that he refers to as the "ideology of form."

> What must be stressed is that at this level "form" is apprehended as content. The study of the ideology of form is no doubt grounded on a technical and formalistic analysis in the narrower sense, even though, unlike much traditional formal analysis, it seeks to reveal the active presence within the text of a number of discontinuous and heterogeneous formal processes. But at the level of analysis in question here, a dialectic reversal has taken place in which it has become possible to grasp such formal processes as sedimented content in their own right, as carrying ideological messages of their own, distinct from the ostensible or manifest content of the works. (Jameson 1982: 99)

Instead of composing form and content as unrelated analytical processes, I want to find the many intersections between these forms of analysis.

To approach my corpus, I will additionally use a close reading method in order to complement my cultural narratological analysis of the novels, poems, and short stories. In combination with a cultural narratology this allows for an in-depth analysis of the individual narratives and their textual and formal particularities, as well as an analysis of the context these works have been produced in.[32]

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[32] This combination has also been referred to as "wide reading." For more information on wide reading see e.g. Hallet and Königs (2010) and Marzano (2004).

1.4   Choosing Stories: Corpus Selection

For a close reading combined with a cultural narratology, I chose eight literary texts by eight Canadian Mennonite authors. To become acquainted with Mennonite/s Writing and to explore the relationship between narratives and identities via the concept of the *narrating community*, the texts vary in terms of genre, theme, and in the time frames they are portraying. The first four texts revolve around narrative identities in recourse to Mennonites' past. They explore constructions of cultural memories of the Mennonite movements' very beginnings in the aftermath of the Reformation, on the one hand. On the other hand, they focus on Mennonites' migration to Canada and their responsibility in the colonization of North America's Indigenous peoples. The following four analyses approach Mennonite narrative identities as challenged by contemporary debates around gender and sexuality, exploring the paradoxes that seemingly develop when bringing feminism and homosexuality together with Mennonite identities. In order to explore Mennonite narratives as part of a corpus of a *narrating community* I have deliberately chosen three different genres. I will analyze three poetry collections, four novels and one collection of short stories. Across these generic differences I will explore the usefulness of the conceptualization of Mennonites as a *narrating community* that uses specific textual and formal means of storytelling.

All my primary sources are written by different Mennonite Canadian authors who more or less self-identify with the Mennonite community and market their works as either Mennonite writing or Canadian writing.[33] Five of the writers I am discussing in detail – Sandra Birdsell, Di Brandt, Sarah Klassen, Miriam Toews, and Rudy Wiebe – have become well-known writers on a national and, some of them, international level.[34] Several of them have won prestigious literary awards. Wes Funk, Lynnette D'anna, and Audrey Poetker-Thiessen are less well-known among a general Canadian readership and their sales on books are considerably lower than those of the

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[33] Sandra Birdsell is rather critical of being referred to as a "Mennonite writer" as two lectures, published in the *Conrad Grebel Review* – a peer-reviewed Christian journal with a focus on Mennonite/Anabaptist concerns – show (Birdsell 2008a; 2008b). Writer Lynnette D'anna has been using D'anna as pen name after the publication of her first novel, *sing me no more* (1992), which was still published under the name of Dueck, a very typical Mennonite last name that we often find among Mennonites on the Canadian prairies. The transition demarcated her decision to distance her writing formally from her Mennonite background. Although D'anna belongs to the lesser known writers among Canadian Mennonites, her work has been acknowledged in the *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada* in an article by Tiessen who identifies her as a Mennonite writer (2002).

[34] Especially Birdsell, Toews and Wiebe have been successful outside of Canada and published their novels and short story collections in various languages and, particularly Toews and Wiebe, outside of the North-American context.

above-mentioned authors. However, all of them have become well-known among a Canadian Mennonite readership, particularly among scholars of Mennonite literature. Poetker-Thiessen has been an acclaimed poet for decades and well-liked by Mennonite readers from the Canadian prairies. D'anna and Funk have published novels that focus particularly on queer (Mennonite) characters. Thus, their novels have gained traction within the North-American queer community, who read them not necessarily because of the Mennonite context, but because of their construction of queer identities and the challenges to heteronormative ideals.

The fact that some of the writers have received world-wide attention while others are less well known, has been an important aspect in the choice of this corpus, as I want to incorporate narratives by Mennonite writers that have been negated, neglected, forgotten and/or rejected in the critical reception of Mennonite literature. Thus, I will follow Müller-Funk's invitation to look at "the uncomfortableness and the life with stories that do not only permit insecurity and uncanniness, but make them liveable" (Müller-Funk 2008: 129; my translation).[35] The texts I will be dealing with are composed of narratives that I believe allow us to draw inferences about the "culturally sanctioned systems of ideas, beliefs, presuppositions, and convictions which constitute collective mentalities and identities" (Neumann and A. Nünning 2008: 9). Therefore, I believe it is important not only to look at those texts that are popular among readers and scholars, but also at those texts that have raised less attention and/or that have raised critical questions about traditional constructions of Mennonite identities.

In chapter two I will discuss the constructions of identities on the basis of cultural memories of martyrdom and colonization. The latter has been far less discussed and focused on, although it belongs to a more recent past and can be accessed more easily than the far removed memories of the early Anabaptist martyrs. An exploration of the cultural memory of the 16th century martyrs, whose lives and deaths have been described in the *Martyrs Mirror* is presented in the poetry collections of Sarah Klassen and Audrey Poetker-Thiessen. Both of them focus on the legacy of the martyrs and constructions of cultural identities founded on their stories. Both poetry collections challenge the interpretation of martyr narratives as victim narratives and the martyrs as "cultural icons" (Beachy 2010: 26) of contemporary cultural memories. Klassen and

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[35] "Was hier vorgeschlagen wird, ist Einübung in die Ungemütlichkeit und das Leben mit Geschichten, die Unsicherheit und Unheimlichkeit nicht nur gestatten, sondern lebbar machen" (Müller-Funk 2008: 129).

Poetker-Thiessen suggest alternative interpretations of martyrdom that can be translated into meaningful cultural memories for contemporary Canadian Mennonites. The poets try to establish a connection between martyr stories and their own contemporary context. They deconstruct Mennonites' cultural memories of victimization and suggest new cultural memories around martyrdom that focus on individual martyrs in their roles as ordinary people, who were making conscious decisions to die for their faith. In Klassen's *Dangerous Elements* (1998) speakers are frequently irritated by the focus on the mechanics of death presented in martyr stories and they are critical of the construction of martyrs as powerless victims. Similarly, Poetker-Thiessen's poetry collection *standing all night through* (1992) displays critical speakers, who explore ways of translating martyrdom for a contemporary readership and who directly address the movement's eponym Menno Simons.

In Rudy Wiebe's novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962), and in Sandra Birdsell's short story collection *Agassiz Stories* (1987), I focus on the narrativization of a much more recent past: the colonization of the Aboriginal peoples in Canada, Mennonites' responsibility in that process, and the repercussions of this attempted elimination of Indigenous cultures, languages and stories. Wiebe's novel challenges the construction of Mennonites as peaceful Christian sufferers by exploring conflicts both within the fictional Mennonite community and among Mennonites and the Métis families that live nearby. Wiebe manages to deconstruct the notion of Mennonites as victims by incorporating an implicit as well as explicit criticism of his fictional Mennonites' aversion for the Aboriginal community. Birdsell's stories allow for various perspectives and cultural memories to surface and challenge each other, contrasting Mennonite and Indigenous characters' cultural narratives. The lack of useful cultural memories for the Métis character challenges the cultural memories of the Mennonite characters. Yet both fail to construct cultural identities, a failure that is shown to affect future generations.

In chapter three I will explore contemporary aspects of Mennonite identity constructions that circle around gender and sexuality. Miriam Toews and Di Brandt focus on the role of women in Mennonite communities. Toews' novel *Irma Voth* (2011), explores the development of a young witty Mennonite woman, trapped in a Mennonite tradition that denies women a voice, agency over their bodies, and access to the public sphere. The novel focusses on the female first-person narrator, who challenges patriarchal norms and rigid traditions on a textual and formal level. Brandt's collection of poems, *mother, not mother* (1992) approaches gender from

the perspective of the mother. The speakers challenge traditional myths about the (Mennonite) mother and they explore non-traditional narratives of the mother that show her as sexual, creative, and angry.

When we look at the exploration of queer (Mennonite) identities in Mennonite Canadian literature and scholarship, we quickly discover that only few narratives are available and that scholarly discourses on the topic are equally rare as yet. My exploration of queer sexualities in two novels by two writers from a Mennonite background tries to fill this gap. Wes Funk's novel *Dead Rock Stars* (2011) explores what has been described as a paradox: being Mennonite and queer (cf. J. G. Braun 2013a). In Funk's novel I am focusing on the intricate relationship between norms of masculinity and heterosexuality. The protagonist in Funk's novel adheres to and reconstructs a hetero-masculine norm that restricts the possibilities of identity constructions for homosexual Mennonite men. Lynnette D'anna's novel *Vixen* (2001) expands the scope of topics and settings by focusing on queer identities in general. The novel presents the most challenging narrative in my primary corpus, because it explores heteronormative ideals in connection with norms of mental health. Additionally, the narrative presents us with the narrator's own subversive sexuality that includes bisexuality, as well as taboo topics, such as incest, and abuse. I have deliberately chosen one narrative that focuses on male and one that focuses on female queer identities to undermine that homosexuality carries very different implications for lesbians and gays.[36]

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[36] The connection between gender norms and sexuality is much stronger for male homosexuals as Falomir-Pichastor and Mugny (2009) explore in their study.

1.5   How this Story is Told

My thesis will be structured along a temporal axis, starting with an exploration of the past and constructions of cultural memories in Mennonite narratives of martyrdom and colonization. Following this analysis of contemporary challenges for Mennonites *narrating communities* are presented by the exploration of gender and sexuality. The main focus of all chapters lies on the exploration of the Canadian Mennonites as a *narrating community* on the level of form and context.

To substantiate my argument that it is not only useful, but also necessary to move beyond narrow definitions of Mennonites as an ethnic or religious community, I argue that it is important to look at constructions of identities in narratives that deal with Mennonites' past. A look at the corpus of narratives reveals that Canadian Mennonite authors were particularly preoccupied with narrativizations of martyrdom during the sixteenth century. Contemporary socio-political circumstances for Mennonites all over the world, and especially for those living in North America, have significantly changed. Yet, authors have continued to engage with their ancestors of many generations and have thus created a continued sense of victimhood that does not accord with reality. Additionally, we find a number of narratives that focus not on the construction of Mennonite identities as centred in martyrdom and victimization, but on explorations of Mennonite identities as intricately connected to the historical and political involvement in the colonialization of the Indigenous peoples in North America. While the aspect of victimization seems to be an easily accepted and acceptable narrative among Mennonites, the construction of Mennonites as colonists in the North American context, seems to be more challenging. It is these two foci that I want to explore in further detail using two works of poetry, a collection of short stories and a novel in chapter two.

For my exploration of contemporary constructions of and challenges to Mennonite identities, I have chosen to focus on aspects of gender and sexuality. While the former has been discussed among scholars in Mennonite Studies and explored in fictional narratives, the latter has been a more difficult topic. However, despite the comparably established discourse on constructions of gendered Mennonite identities, comprehensive studies are still missing. In my two analyses of female Mennonite narratives I investigate particularly important foci and narrative devices in the construction of Mennonite female identities that explore traditional patriarchal narratives

and that challenge the narrative of submissive Mennonite women, bound to the house by a multiplicity of children and without a voice in public. My discussion of sexualities in Mennonite narratives revolves around two novels, one dealing explicitly with the narrativization of Mennonite gay identities, while the other explores sexual identities and the bounds of heteronormativity in a more general way.

As in any study there are limitations to the following thesis – aspects that cannot be discussed, because they are not significant to my focus on Mennonite narrative identities. At no point do I claim to discuss Mennonite/s Writing in its entirety. My choice of primary works as well as the aspects that I chose for an in-depth-analysis are linked primarily to my conceptualization of Mennonites as a *narrating community*. Therefore, other possible analyses of Mennonite fiction – as e.g. ethnic, historical, or religious fiction – are exceeding my focus. While I do not deny that they are important to Mennonite identity constructions in many contexts, I claim that storytelling has so far been overlooked in its significance for contemporary Canadian Mennonites. My conceptualization of Mennonites as a *narrating community* intends to close that research gap. Additionally, I limit the exploration of Mennonites as a *narrating community* to only some aspects – Anabaptist martyrdom, colonialism, gender, and sexuality – while being aware that they only represent a small number of possible foci. Nevertheless, I argue that these particular aspects are the most informative in the analysis of Mennonites as a *narrating community*. Martyrdom stories have been fundamental in the construction of Mennonite identities and its continued presence in the form of contemporary fiction and the *Martyrs Mirror* that can be found in the book shelves of many contemporary Mennonites, emphasizes their importance as cultural memories. Contrasting these stories of victimhood are stories of Mennonites' implicit and explicit involvement in the colonization process. While biographical accounts and church papers often stress the beneficial role of Mennonites in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Mennonites' involvement in the colonization process in Canada is undeniable as several fictional narratives and historical sources indicate. The connection between the victim and the colonizer narratives challenge any simple definitions of Mennonite identities and show a complexity that is difficult to grasp in reference to aspects such as religion, ethnicity, and history. Looking at contemporary discussions that also further an understanding of Mennonite identities as complex, multiplied and challenging, the aspects of gender and sexuality are excellent points of departures. Their

exploration in Mennonite narratives provide for a complex discussion of Mennonite identities that are affected by traditional notions of stable identities and simple binaries and contemporary discourses of identities as flexible and changing. Because of the diversity of aspects and approaches to Mennonite narrative identities, we eventually arrive at a comprehensive list of characteristics of Mennonite Canadian literature and can therefore make valid assumptions about Mennonites as a *narrating community*.

2. Stories of the Past: Constructing and Challenging Mennonite Narratives of Martyrdom and Colonialism

In order to explore the construction of Mennonite identities in narratives and thus be able to analyze Canadian Mennonites as a *narrating community*, I want to begin with an analysis of those narratives that deal with Mennonite history, particularly with the aspects of martyrdom and colonization, as they offer various challenges that are expressed by a multiplicity of stories. Therefore, I will explore the triangular relationship between identities, narratives and memory. However, as this relationship has already been thoroughly explored on the one hand, and an overall exploration exceeds the limits of this thesis, I will limit my focus as follows: In the context of Mennonite narrativization of the past and its prevailing influence on constructions of contemporary Mennonite identities, I will focus on *collective* Mennonite memories and identities. In order to be influential within a larger context, narratives have to resonate with the experience of a large part of the group and be repeated over the course of several generations.[37] Thus, they become master narratives, or, as I will refer to them, cultural memories.[38] Additionally, I understand memory as not only pertaining to a given historical event, but as pertaining to the person or community who narrates this event in the present.[39] I interpret all three concepts as unstable and changing. Müller-Funk, whose concept of "Erzählgemeinschaft" serves as a vantage point for my conceptualization of *narrating communities*, argues that all forms of memory are either explicitly or implicitly based on retrospectives – narratives of the past, which try to bridge the gap between narrative time and narrating time (Müller-Funk 2008: 251).[40] Consequently, narrative texts serve as important memory media and are crucial for developing and sustaining collective identities.

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[37] The epistemological framework that is implied here goes back to Paul Ricoeur. In his two volumes of *Time and Narrative* he argues that identities and narratives are always already related and themselves embedded in a temporal structure (Ricoeur 1983-1985).

[38] The terms master or grand narrative was introduced in Lyotard's 1979 study *The Postmodern Condition*.

[39] In *The Strange, Familiar, and Forgotten* (1992) neuroscientist Israel Rosenfield points out that the relationship between memory and self is an essential characteristic "of all human […] memories: *Every recollection refers not only to the remembered event or person or object but to the person who is remembering*. The very essence of memory is subjective, not mechanical reproduction; and essential to that subjective psychology is that every remembered image of a person, place, idea, or object inevitably contains, whether explicitly or implicitly, a basic reference to the person who is remembering" (1992: 42; emphasis in original).

[40] "[A]lle Formen des Gedächtnisses [basieren] explizit oder implizit auf Retrospektiven, das heißt zeitverschobenen Narrativen […], die den unüberbrückbaren Zwiespalt zwischen Erzählzeit (Zeit der Erzählung) und erzählter Zeit (Zeit der Handlung) zu überwinden trachten" (Müller-Funk 2008: 251).

Mennonites' history of migration provides the basis for my foci on martyrdom and colonization in Mennonite narratives of the past. The Russian experience – the story of *Russländer* Mennonites who witnessed a socio-political change in Russia and were subjected to looting, torture and subsequent starvation during and after the Russian Revolution – has become one of the most important experiences in the collective memory of Canadian Mennonites. Consequently, it has been referred to as master narrative (Kroetsch in Tiessen and Hinchcliffe 1992: 224–25), break event or larger collective myth (Zacharias 2013). In the following chapters, I argue first, that the importance of the Russian experience results from Mennonites' general devotedness to martyr narratives. I will show how narratives of suffering have become a constituent element for creating and sustaining Mennonite collective identities. Second, I agree with Zacharias that the reproduction of one cultural memory has been overshadowing "the complexity of [the] community's larger migration history" (ibid. 14). Mennonites' migration throughout Europe and, among other places, to North America entails stories of persecution and suffering, as well as stories of governments' invitations and subsequent political advantages. Neufeld points out that "extensive land grants and favourable tax and service agreements" were granted to Mennonite settlers in North America, which constituted "advantages not extended to indigenous populations" (Neufeld 2001: 172). These advantages have often translated into stories of colonization and the continued displacement of Aboriginal peoples.

I will explore one defining narrative – Anabaptist martyrdom – that has been characterized as particularly important in the construction of identities within Mennonite literature and scholarship, on the one hand. On the other hand, I want to challenge the process of reproducing one story to the detriment of a multiplicity of other stories. Müller-Funk argues that the very act of storytelling necessitates a decision on what aspects to include and what to exclude (Müller-Funk 2008: 91).[41] When Mennonites predominantly embrace one master narrative this leaves a multitude of stories unnoticed (at best) or (deliberately) suppressed (at worst). This

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[41] "Erzählen bedeutet immer auch, das zu unterschlagen, was nicht erzählt wird, was besser vergessen oder verheimlicht werden soll. Man erzählt eine Geschichte, um womöglich eine andere Geschichte nicht erzählen zu müssen. So legt das manifest, literarisch oder unliterarisch Erzählte den Grundstein für das Vergessen" (ibid. 91). A similar line of thought can be found in Goodman's *Ways of Worldmaking* (1985).

predominance results from the particular cultural codes for dealing with cultural memories among Mennonites.

With the use of four Mennonite narratives, I want to explore the development of the master narrative and unearth the unnoticed stories that challenge it. All of the narratives in chapter two present challenges and paradoxes and can thus, I argue, be interpreted as exemplary narratives that are part of the web that is Mennonite literary fiction in Canada. On the one hand, I will critically examine the development of the collective martyr myth among Mennonites, using two collections of poetry. On the other hand, I will debate why a discourse on the narrativization of Mennonites' responsibility in the colonization process in North America leads to a better understanding of the way Mennonite identities are constructed.

2.1 Introducing Discourses on Martyrdom and Colonialism in Mennonite Scholarship

Communal identities have always been liable to constructions of a communal past, as Jerome Bruner (1998) implies. The one important aspect that I am interested in is the process of constructing identities via storytelling, which I understand "not so much [as] a simple documentation of past events but [as] a positing of possible beginnings in light of the present" (Neumann and A. Nünning 2008: 7). The focus on certain aspects of the past and their repeated narrativization does not necessarily signify the historical importance of these particular events. However, it reveals how a particular *narrating community* interprets the event and simultaneously demonstrates how important the event becomes in the cultural construction of the community itself. Mennonite fiction and scholarship show a clear tendency to repeat narratives of martyrdom and victimization in general, to the detriment of other narratives.

The memory of the 16th century martyrdom has frequently been constructed as culturally specific marker of Mennonite identities. This memory is most prominently manifested in a collection of martyr stories, referred to as *Martyrs Mirror*, collected and published in 1660 by the Dutch Mennonite elder Thielemann Jan van Braght.[42] The book, which contains the stories of 4.011 martyrs in the form of letters, court reports, and testimonies, has been republished in 1685, after van Braght's death. An early second edition was complemented by 104 engravings by Mennonite artist Jan Luyken,[43] "each of which captured a dramatic moment in a particular story" (Roth 2013: 289). The engravings led to an increase of the book's popularity, which, because of its chronological order that displays only a "minimal narrative structure" (ibid. 289), is rather tedious to read up to the point of being almost inaccessible. The book went through several editions and republications during the centuries,[44] it remains, as Spicher Kasdorf notes, "a treasured, if unread, object in mainstream Mennonite culture" (2013a: 44). The book is

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[42] As son of a cloth merchant, van Braght was born in 1625 in Dordrecht, and died 1664. He served as a preacher in his home town and defended Mennonite principles, such as a conscious baptism. For more information on van Braght see also Bergen (2013) and Spicher Kasdorf (2001).

[43] Jan Luyken himself joined the Mennonite Doopsgezinde Lamb and Tower church rather late in his life. Prior he was an artist and writer (Covington 2011: 442).

[44] Roth points out that "various Anabaptist groups in the United States published no fewer than five different editions of the *Martyrs Mirror* – three in German […] and two in English" during the 19th century (2013: 279). Furthermore, he argues, it speaks to the popularity of the book that the 1886 English edition "has been reprinted more than thirty times in the past [20th] century and continues to enjoy annual sales of more than a thousand copies" (ibid. 292–93).

displayed in the shelves of many Mennonites households.[45] Although the stories in the *Martyrs Mirror* are in most cases not entirely read, they are frequently constructed as a "lynchpin of Mennonite identity" (Krehbiel 2010: 134) and the martyr has become a "central archetype in collective Mennonite identity" (ibid. 140).

The *Martyrs Mirror*, full title *The Bloody Theatre or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians Who Baptized Only Upon Confession of Faith, and Who Suffered and Died for the Testimony of Jesus, Their Savior, from the Time of Christ to the Year A. D. 1660*,[46] is a massive volume of more than 1.000 pages (depending on the edition) that displays the narrative of early martyrs in two sections that cover, first, the "holy baptism" and, second, the "historical account of the holy martyrs" (van Braght 1938: 15). Van Braght intended the collection of stories to "serve as a shared point of reference and a source of unity within a fractious church" (Roth 2013: 287).[47]

Victimization has become a critical trope in the cultural memory of Mennonites and remains a crucial aspect for identification for contemporary Mennonites in Canada. However, there are several reasons, why this is a paradox. First, the victim narrative is, of course, in no way unique to Mennonite history. After all, "Anabaptists are not the only people who have been oppressed, not the only religious martyrs" (Beachy 2010: 23). Beachy explains that "Mennonites tend to be essentialist; we take pride in our traditions and habits" (ibid. 23).[48] Second, during past decades the cultural memories of martyrdom and the victim narratives they imply, have been fiercely criticized for offering no vision for contemporary Mennonites and for promoting an exclusiveness that is more damaging to contemporary Mennonite identities than helpful. In reference to the victimization of the Mennonites in Russia, Sawatsky proposes that the "story of suffering is the quite narrow and idealized reference to Anabaptist martyrs" (Sawatsky 2000: 31). He points out that suffering has been a reality for Mennonites in Europe, yet contemporary

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[45] In her article on Luyken's engravings in the *Martyrs Mirror*, Sarah Covington notes that it is rather "ironic that a tradition noted for spurning the culture of worldly materialism would be responsible for one of the greatest and most assertively material artefacts of early modern print culture" and has indeed become "one of the supreme products of Dutch Golden Age prosperity" (2011: 441).

[46] A critical discussion of the full title can be found in M. Bergen (2013), Roth (2013), Sawatsky (2000), and Wiebe (1998).

[47] Roth presents earlier publications on martyrdom that have, however, never reached the same popularity (2013: 285).

[48] This notion is mirrored in Krehbiel's essay (2010: 138).

North American Mennonites have trouble translating these particular cultural memories to their own reality (ibid.). Krehbiel argues that cultural memories of victimization and martyrdom contradict Mennonites' social status in North America. They are therefore confusing in terms of their contemporary relevance.

> On the one hand, I knew my white skin and mainstream appearance gave me protection all too easy to take for granted, and in fact I'd been plenty critical in the past of middle-class, white Mennonites who played at being persecuted minorities. On the other hand, I had the martyrs, who I'd been encouraged, through methods both overt and subtle, to regard as my spiritual forbears. (Krehbiel 2010: 135)

She ultimately calls for contemporary Mennonites in North America "to claim [their] power, to stop thinking of [themselves] as defenseless Christians" (ibid. 144). A third reason, why the recourse on martyr stories can prove problematic for contemporary Mennonites, is its simplistic and dialogic nature of victim/perpetrator that has all too often been perceived as a reality. Spicher Kasdorf suggests that in order "[t]o break beyond the victim/perpetrator introject, one must integrate both identities within the self" (2001: 183–84). Furthermore, she argues that "the production of art is one means of escaping the scripted, narrow roles of victim and perpetrator" because an artwork can "express ambiguity and paradox" and thus lead the "individual to recognize that she is capable of playing both roles" (ibid. 184). More recently, Spicher Kasdorf pointed out the ambiguousness of Mennonite identities who refer to nonresistance as one of their major principles while worshipping the memory of martyrs.

> Have Mennonites, a people committed to nonviolence, embedded an identity in the necessity of certain kinds of violence, including not only persecution and martyrdom but also exclusions, refusals, and dismissals of others in order to keep the community strong? Is esteem for martyr heroes much different from esteem for military heroes? (2013a: 67)

The exploration of Spicher Kasdorf's argument that the pursuit of a nonviolent lifestyle challenges the reference to martyrdom – interpreted as stories of victimization – as central to the cultural memories of Mennonites underlies the following two analyses. Both Poetker-Thiessen and Klassen explore martyrdom as a cultural memory to draw upon for contemporary identity constructions. The application of a 16th-century martyr memory to a late 20th century context – both poetry collections have been published in the early 1990s – is accompanied by several challenges to its usefulness to contemporary Mennonites.

In reference to a contemporary play on the martyr Dirk Willems, Melvin Goering argues that it is important to create narratives that are "authentic to the heritage" (1992: 14–15), on the one hand. On the other hand, he claims that "[t]he theological assumptions and social context of Mennonites at the end of the 20th century are so different from the world of Dirk Willems, [that] a comparison raises doubts whether the martyr stories can provide guidance for the 21st century" (ibid. 9). Similarly, Krehbiel criticizes that martyr stories are not adequate as a means of identification for contemporary Mennonites. The martyr achetype's "sights are set so fervently on the next world that she gives me few clues about how to deal with this one" (2010: 140). Additionally, the cultural memories of martyrdom are complicated by several critical aspects in the *Martyrs Mirror* itself. First, as Goering points out, the stories are rather simplistic in terms of who is seen as good and who as evil, which results in a perpetuation of simple binaries. Second, Goering explains that this simplistic construction of martyr stories results in the perception of the Anabaptist martyrs as morally superior (1992: 12–14).

While there has been a strong emphasis on suffering and victimization, other narratives have been neglected, among them narratives of colonization. Yet, there are several reasons why they should be explored more carefully. First, the non-Aboriginal part of Canadian society has started to explore its responsibility in the displacement of Indigenous people(s) and the near-extinction of Aboriginal cultural and linguistic practices. Second, Mennonites have shown a strong interest in the narration of Indigenous experiences. It is high time that this literary interest in Aboriginal stories is followed by a scholarly discourse on Mennonites' own responsibility in the process of colonization.

While there has been a discourse on Mennonites' relationship with Indigenous people in Canada, which acknowledges their participation in the colonization process, it focuses mainly on Mennonites' seemingly charitable role towards Indigenous peoples in the context of missions and support programs by the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and its local branches.[49] Donovan Giesbrecht explains that

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[49] Some examples of essays on specific programs by the MCC Canada can be found in the 2001 special issue of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* that revolves around the "History of Aboriginal-Mennonite Relations" (e.g. Funk Unrau, Harms, Neufeld). Furthermore, Doell (2007) and Funk-Unrau (2011) have published articles on the relationship between Aboriginals and Mennonites.

> [i]t is quite common for Mennonites to perceive themselves as being both compassionate and generous towards Canada's Aboriginal people. In Manitoba, Mennonite Central Committee's recent solidarity with the Cree people of Cross Lake provides further evidence of Mennonites being a people willing to speak out on behalf of the oppressed. (2001: 103)

However, D. Giesbrecht argues that Mennonites' position in the discourse on colonization needs to be critically evaluated and he calls for a reconsideration of Mennonites as beneficiaries only. "While socially concerned Mennonites may readily acknowledge the devastating impact western colonialism has had on Aboriginal people in Canada, they seem to be less aware of the historical impact of their own arrival in Manitoba" (ibid. 103). He also accuses Mennonites of "routinely overlooking the issue of whether the Mennonite arrival in Manitoba worsened the plight of Aboriginal people" (ibid.). Furthermore, he points out that some historical accounts of Mennonite settlements, such as Abe Warkentin's narrative on Manitoba's rural municipality of Hanover, completely ignore Mennonites' participation in the displacement of Aboriginal people in the area (ibid.). Interestingly, he not only calls for a reconsideration of the historical facts, but he argues that the very stories that have been told about Mennonites' arrival in a supposedly empty space need to be questioned.

> While Mennonites may be perceived as spokespeople for the oppressed, the story told above [of fifteen Métis families who claim to have lost their land to the first Mennonites arriving in Manitoba toward the last third of the 19th century] suggests that Mennonites have also played a part in oppressing Manitoba's Native people. It requires Mennonites to realize that along with hydro corporations, the Canadian government and the early British\French [sic] settlers, they too have benefitted from the injustices done to Native people. Historically speaking, Mennonites would be well advised to consider themselves not only as a voice for the oppressed but also in some cases as a cause of oppression. (ibid. 109)

In *Rewriting the Break Event* Zacharias argues in a very similar vein, when he points out that scholarship which posits Mennonites as ethnic others and repressed often ignores the fact that Mennonites have continually been granted privileges within the Canadian multicultural context (Zacharias 2013: 44–45). As white and agriculturally skilled settlers, Mennonites have been welcome in Canada and elsewhere. Zacharias cautions to rely solely on the early history of martyrdom and the experience of Mennonites in Russia after the first World War as providing a communal past (ibid.). Additionally, he points to Mennonites' "long history of functioning as 'settler-invaders' – first on the Russian steppes, then on the Canadian Prairies, and again in South America" and therefore encourages a reading of Mennonite narratives as (post)colonial (ibid. 55).

As with any nation, community, or group, Mennonites' history is very complex and should be explored in its different facets, acknowledging inconsistencies and contradictions. Yet these approaches to Mennonite history, culture and literature are rare, as a close inspection of Mennonite fiction and its discussion among scholars reveals. One aspect that is particularly striking is the (sometimes exclusive) focus on the writing of *Russländer* Mennonites,[50] whose work is approached under the broad umbrella term of Mennonite/s Writing.[51] There are two reasons why this has become common practice. First, Mennonite writers with ancestors from the 1920s' wave of migration to Canada have early on become significantly more active in terms of creative writing. Therefore, their stories have become more prominent within and outside of Mennonite communities. Second, as Kuester (1998) argues, the general tendency to search for master narratives in Canada during the 1960s and 1970s, bears an influence on Mennonites' focus on only one important aspect in their development.

Gundy explains that the martyr story has become the "Ur-myth of the modern Mennonite writer," because it portrays the "agonistic story of how the most visible and prominent cried out against communal repression and endured the costs" (Gundy 2005: 25–26). However, although the martyr story in its different guises has provided "a powerful reservoir of images and tropes" (Zacharias 2013: 12), I agree with Mennonite poet and literary critic Di Brandt (2014) that there are other stories, which have not yet received the appropriate attention, but are nevertheless important in the construction of Mennonite identities.

M. Redekop's most recent essay on Mennonite writing includes her suggestion to "see what happens […] if we look at the literary phenomenon going on in Manitoba not as defined only by trauma experienced by the *Russländer*" (2015: 199; emphasis in original). She challenges scholars to look beyond the traumatic experience of Mennonites and to "concentrate instead on the aesthetic tricks of the crafty [writers] – from all the groups" (ibid.). In the analyses below I follow her invitation and explore what Al Reimer referred to as the "dark side" that every

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[50] In her 2008 article on the "State of the Art" of Mennonite/s Writing, Tiessen demonstrates that "[a] quick survey of the past several years' worth of Mennonite periodicals, both popular and scholarly, will reveal that Russian Mennonites in particular have begun to memorialize – with cairns and other physical monuments – their experience in the former Soviet Union" (2008: 47).

[51] On this aspect see also the short discussion on Russian and Swiss Canadian Mennonite writing in Zacharias (2013: 33).

community has (2005: n.p.).[52] As I have shown earlier, Mennonites' self-narration as martyrs and therefore as victims has become so dominant that the "dark side" in their history of migration – here interpreted as their involvement in the displacement of Indigenous peoples – has become a minor concern. However, A. Reimer cautions that "[t]o deny that such a negative side exists in our Mennonite world is to endorse [a] repressive good or evil orthodoxy" (ibid. n.p.).

Let me consider Reimer's last argument in more detail, as he is implying what I consider to lie at the heart of Mennonites' focus on cultural memories of martyrdom and victimization: the persistence on binary constructions of communal identities. I argue that the continued importance of the martyr narrative in its different forms relies on the perception of a stable and singular identity, on the one hand. On the other hand, it also relies on stable binaries, such as outsider vs. insider, non-Mennonite vs. Mennonite. In addition, Mennonites' sense of suffering as particular Mennonite experience overshadows an acknowledgement of their own participation in processes of colonization. Di Brandt is particularly critical of Mennonite narratives of otherness.

> We were sent into exile from our homelands? So were millions of others. We suffered large-scale traumas in our past? So did most of the peoples of the world. We worked hard to hold on to a local sense of communal and spiritual practices and some semblance of family and tradition, despite volatile geographically and economically displaced and rapidly changing lives? So did everyone. It was all a terrible loss, a tragic falling away of the cultural treasures of our inheritance, but it was also – let's admit it – a wonderful setting free, a wonderful adventure, a trip into never before imagined possibilities of what it means to be human. (2015: 127)

Brandt thus urges Mennonites to see beyond the suffering and to acknowledge the opportunities they had been given. Additionally, she argues that Mennonites need to deconstruct their narratives of exclusiveness in suffering.

A more direct focus on Mennonites' settler/invader history can be found in Jan Guenther Braun (2013b) and Leo Driedger (1972). Both argue that Mennonites have more work to do in acknowledging their participation in the colonization of North America's Indigenous people.

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[52] While Reimer here reflects on the reaction to Miriam Toews' novel *A Complicated Kindness* from members of the Mennonite community in Canada, who complained that the author exposed their way of living and portrayed them as cruel and hard-hearted, his insight can easily be adopted to Mennonite storytelling in general.

Driedger focuses on the complexity of Mennonites' migration to the Canadian prairies and the subsequent displacement of Aboriginal peoples. He argues that this historically important aspect ultimately challenges Mennonites' fundamental beliefs in three ways. First, the agricultural invasion and the destruction of Indigenous' ways of life conflicts Mennonites' concern with love. Second, the very act of cooperating and negotiating with the Canadian government for land calls Mennonites' belief in a separation of church and government into question. Third, Driedger notes, the principle of nonviolence is compromised as soon as Mennonites accepted land that was in turn gained through the use of violence (ibid. 300). J. G. Braun's criticism is more explicit. She calls for Mennonites' acknowledgement of their "participation in the colonization of Canada, which resulted in the cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples" (2013b: 107). She invokes scholars to initiate a discourse on the convoluted history of Mennonites.

> It gets messy, to say the least, when people escaping persecution and who are pacifists become participants in erasing entire other nations of people. […] In seeking justice for ourselves, there can be unforeseen consequences that can disrupt and impair justice for others. (ibid. 107)

Despite her criticism of the Mennonite community, she acknowledges the fact that the Canadian government "was simultaneously using Mennonites who were seeking safety and religious freedom and had proven capabilities as farmers, to advance their project of colonialism" (ibid. 109). It is certainly fair to assume that the majority of the Mennonite settlers were ignorant of the displacement of Indigenous peoples from the land they received from the Canadian government.

As these scholarly approaches to Mennonite history and identity constructions show, there is no simple way of defining Mennonite collective identities. In the following analyses I do not want to provide final answers to Mennonite narratives of the past and the subsequent reliance on these narratives for the construction of identities. However, I want to widen the current focus within Mennonite Studies by approaching narratives of colonization next to narratives of martyrdom. While I will be analyzing two narratives that deal with Mennonites' history of martyrdom and suffering, I approach them from a critical perspective: my objective is not only to explore their importance for Mennonite identifications. With the in-depth analysis of two collections of poetry I will explore how martyr identities are constructed, which stories are repeated and how they are at times challenging the idea that martyrdom can still provide useful

cultural memories for contemporary Canadian Mennonites. Additionally, I will explore the formal construction of identities and focus on the aesthetic dimension of these martyr poems. Furthermore, I will be looking at narratives dealing with Mennonites' responsibility in the colonization of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Yet, my objective is not to shed blame on Mennonites, but to unearth narratives that explore the "dark side" (Reimer 2005: n.p.) of Mennonite history as an important aspect of Mennonite identity constructions and as an essential aspect of the Mennonite *narrating community*.

2.2 Martyrdom and Colonialism in Mennonite Literature

The aspect of colonization has only rarely been discussed in the context of Mennonite literature. And yet, there are several examples of fictional narratives that focus on aspects of Aboriginal histories, cultural practices and identities. Only few scholars have chosen to discuss Mennonite writing in the context of a postcolonial criticism. In Laura Moss' (2003) collection of writings around the question whether Canada is postcolonial, we find two essays that explore Mennonite Canadian fiction from a postcolonial perspective. However, only Manina Jones' essay on "*Stolen Life*? Reading Through Two I's in Postcolonial Collaborative Autobiography" approaches questions of appropriation – cultural as well as economic. The essay written by Amy Kroeker, "A 'Place' through Language: Postcolonial Implications of Mennonite/s Writing," approaches the writing of Mennonites in Western Canada as itself subjected to postcolonial forces of the English-speaking majority that has ultimately forced Mennonites to attend public schools and consequently learn English. "In one sense" Kroeker argues, "Mennonite writing in Western Canada submits to the power of colonial discourse as it moves to the use of English as a system of meaning over the German of the Mennonites' cultural heritage" (ibid. 240). Her argument for Mennonites as colonial subjects in Western Canada rests upon the fact that they have been living "'between' worlds" and have been pressured to assimilate (ibid. 250). While this last aspect is certainly truthful, I strongly reject her interpretation of Mennonite literature and culture as subject to postcolonialism in the same sense that Aboriginal cultures and identities have been subjected to colonial powers. In the Canadian context Mennonites have had the economic means and political freedom to preserve their own cultural identities in a way that was denied to Aboriginal peoples who were forced to assimilate by a residential school system that disrupted families for several generations and punished the use of Aboriginal languages and cultural practices altogether.

Jones' approach is more directly concerned with the postcolonial implications of the creative collaboration between Yvonne Johnson and Rudy Wiebe in Johnson's autobiography, *Stolen Life*. In reference to David Murray, Jones argues that the economic inequality between these two cultures that both authors represent is mirrored and manifested by the fact that Wiebe served as the editor of Johnson's own story. In order to authorize her life's narrative, which is characterized by multiple incidents of abuse and violence, Johnson needed a recognized white (male) writer. "Wiebe's signature [...] authorizes this book: his name comes first on the cover"

(Jones 2003: 209). However, Jones points out that even while "Wiebe seems a perverse choice of collaborator" (ibid. 208) because he is part of the colonial system that caused Johnson's misfortune,[53] he is at the same time partly responsible for Johnson's story to become heard and successful. She argues that *Stolen Life* needs to be read as a postcolonial text "in the sense that it represents and responds to the conflicts that arise from [a colonial] history" (ibid. 210). Following Mary Louise Pratt's definition of the contact zone, Jones describes the collaborative work of Johnson and Wiebe as "textual version" of a "*post*colonial encounter" (ibid. 211; emphasis in original).

The discourse on appropriation that has been going on within Canada includes several Mennonite writers. Most prominently Rudy and Armin Wiebe, Di Brandt, and David Bergen have shown an interest in the stories of Indigenous peoples in North America and published short stories and novels on the topic. The most prominent Mennonite writer in that respect is Rudy Wiebe, whose novel *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973) won the Governor General's Award and received much attention within and outside of Canada. Wiebe's novel about the Plains Cree chief Mistahimaskwa (Big Bear) who refuses to choose a reserve for the Cree people according to the conditions of Treaty No 6 (1876), has raised the attention of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal scholars and writers. Therefore, and because of his continued interest in Indigenous stories, documented by subsequent publications,[54] Wiebe's literary oeuvre has come under inspection in the discourse on appropriation.[55]

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[53] In her monograph on the implications of *Gender, Race, and Culture in Courtrooms and Classrooms* (1998), Sherene Razack explores contemporary violence against Aboriginal women as a consequence of the colonial system. She argues that a systemic violence, as well as racist and sexist notions have become part of the educational and judicial system and continue to work to the detriment of Aboriginal people (ibid. 64).

[54] Rudy Wiebe's publication on Indigenous peoples and their stories include, *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973), *The Scorched-Wood People* (1977), *A Discovery of Strangers* (1995), and, together with Yvonne Johnson, *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman* (1998).

[55] As there has been a intense discussion on appropriation, predominantly in literary American and Canadian Studies, and because this discourse exceeds the focus of my dissertation, I will refrain from a detailed exploration here. However, interested readers will find that the following sources provide a useful introduction: Armstrong (1990); Baker (1990); Dandie (1990); Draine (1989); Hryniuk (1990); Johnson, Brian D., et al. (1990); Keeshig-Tobias (1990); Maracle (1989); and Todd (1990). I understand appropriation in the sense of cultural appropriation, which, according to Todd, "occurs when someone else speaks for, tells, defines, describes, represents, uses or recruits the images, stories, experiences, dreams of others for their own" (ibid. 24). This broad definition needs to be further specified by the fact that a cultural appropriation as I define it always occurs within a hegemonial context, a (post)colonial structure "where one culture is dominant politically and economically over the other, and rules and exploits it" (Ha. Lutz 1990: 168).

While there has been a controversial debate about whether Wiebe's writing about Aboriginal people counts as an act of appropriation,[56] I am proposing a different approach in my analyses. Instead of debating whether certain aspects of Mennonite/s Writing may or may not be defined as appropriation, the more interesting debate in the context of my dissertation is the exploration of Mennonite narratives according to the representation of Indigenous people. How are Aboriginal people described? Who is representing them? How are encounters and relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people narrated? In a personal essay on her own relationship with Mennonites, historian and Native Studies' scholar Emma LaRocque notes that several missionary reports by Mennonites in Canada indeed present a colonial gaze (LaRocque 2012). It remains to be seen in the analyses below whether this is true for fictional accounts as well.

In contrast to the colonization aspect that has rarely been discussed in relation to Mennonite literature in Canada, the exploration of Mennonites' role as martyrs finds a wider appeal. Next to frequent academic conferences (Roth 2013: 295), the martyrs' experiences continue to inspire the field of literary fictions. The collection of poems, short stories, and essays *Tongue Screws and Testimonies* (2010a), edited by Kirsten Beachy, verifies contemporary authors' interest in martyrdom. It compiles the work of 48 Canadian and U.S. American authors. Most of them take a rather critical distance to the martyr stories, "challenging the moralistic and seemingly sentimentalized appropriation of Anabaptist martyrs as two-dimensional heroes and heroines" (Roth 2013: 297). Despite the ironic tone in several of the contributions, this young generation of writers from a Mennonite background "continues to find creative inspiration in the stories of the Anabaptist martyrs" (ibid. 297). Spicher Kasdorf believes that the

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[56] I will only name a few examples from this debate that show the extreme positions of the spectrum: In a 2011 article on migration and its implication on literary productions by contemporary Mennonite writers, Kuester argues that Mennonite texts can "in no way be accused of being an act of 'appropriation of voice' of other ethnic groups" (2011: 42). Quite the contrary, Kuester points out, that Wiebe's own representation of Big Bear has been appropriated itself "'by an alien interpretative community' of Mennonites" (ibid.). He proposes to focus not on whether or how Mennonite writers may be involved in processes of cultural appropriation, but rather on the exploration of similarities between these two minority groups (ibid.). Davis Sheremata, on the other hand, accuses Wiebe of romanticising Indigenous people and of directly appropriating their stories for his own success as a writer (1998). A very similar concern is expressed by Lutz, who cautions that non-Native writers in general have been "cashing in on Indian culture and reaping publicity and recognition Native authors feel they ought to enjoy themselves" (Lutz 2002: 90). The debate on *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman* (1998), which tells the story of Yvonne Johnson, great-great-granddaughter of Mistahimaskwa (Big Bear), has been particularly heated, due partly to the fact that Wiebe's name appears first on the cover and thus distorts the fact that he has served as the mediator of Johnson's own story (see also Fee 2000).

responsiveness to Beachy's call for contributions is symptomatic for "a growing body of artistic responses to *Martyrs Mirror*" in general (2013a: 68–69). In reference to an earlier collection of Mennonite stories, essays and poems that touch upon martyrdom, *Visions and Realities* (1985), published by Loewen and Reimer, M. Redekop argues that the "image of martyrdom [indicated by the collections' cover that displays an engraving of the *Martyrs Mirror*] in our literature" continues to be central (1993: 13). M. Redekop explains that there has been a tension between stories of martyrdom and stories of survival, the latter much more popular among Canadian *Russländer* Mennonites.[57]

"Martyrological storytelling," Kehler explains, has a long tradition among Mennonites and "involves epistolary, confessional, poetic, theological, and, more recently, academic writing" (2011: 169). M. Redekop suggests that the literary explosion among *Russländer* Mennonites in Manitoba that frequently covers aspects of survival can be traced back to the martyrology theme. "Maybe the pattern of the Mennonite exodus is a way of responding to the fact that the refugee story runs away from the martyrdom story" (M. Redekop 1993: 11). Pointing to the large number of publications that revolve around martyrdom in one way or another, M. Redekop argues that the motif remains important in Mennonite fiction.

> Are these old stories irrelevant to the stories we are making today? I think not. Stauffer talks about the "*via dolorosa*" or the path of suffering and this mournful tone can surely be heard in the very titles of our books: *is* [sic] *sing for my dead in german; My Harp is Turned to Mourning*. (ibid. 13)

The centrality of martyrdom in contemporary narratives speaks to Mennonites' memory practices. As Kansteiner argues, all "memories, even the memories of eyewitnesses, only assume collective relevance when they are structured, represented, and used in a social setting" (2002: 190). The narrativization of martyrdom therefore provides us with "the best information about the evolution of collective memories" (ibid.) among Canadian Mennonites.

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[57] It is not my objective to explore whether the cultural memories purported by the martyr stories that ultimately stress victimization are useful or not. The fact that contemporary Mennonite authors continue to be inspired by these stories already implies an answer to this question. Furthermore, in his essay on the legacy of the *Martyrs Mirror* R. Wiebe argues that the cultural memories of the early Anabaptist martyrs are indeed important for our contemporary experience of violence and may serve both Mennonites and non-Mennonites as one means of dealing with "contemporary martyrs from all creeds and religions" (Wiebe 1998: 111). However, I am more interested in the literary construction of cultural identities in the martyr stories, both on the level of form and content.

2.3   Concepts and Methods

In order to approach my primary texts that deal with narrativizations of the past and their impacts on Mennonite constructions and perpetuations of identities, I want to come back to my exploration of the relationship between identities and narratives and complement this relationship by adding memories as a crucial focus for this chapter. Over the last decade this triangular relationship has gained considerable attention across disciplinary and national borders (Erll 2010: 8).[58] Yet, as Neumann points out in her monograph on the relationship of memory, identities, and narratives in Canadian literature, a theoretical conceptualization that explores fictional texts' formal as well as cultural dimensions has been widely neglected (2005: 3). To fill this research gap, Neumann carefully explores how literature "offers an imaginative and aesthetic space for exploring the relationship between memory, identity, and narrative" using aesthetic forms to "test new models of the past" (ibid. 118; my translation).[59] Because of my cultural narratological approach to Canadian Mennonite literary texts, I will explore Mennonite narratives of the past both in their cultural dimension – the ways that narratives provide, construct, perpetuate, and challenge collective identities – and in relation to their form – the aesthetic devices used to provide, construct, perpetuate, and challenge collective identities.

To arrive at a feasible methodological approach to Mennonite narratives of the past, which have served as sites of identification for contemporary Mennonites, it is crucial to provide a working definition of memory. As Jan Assmann pointed out in his monograph *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* (1992), memory has become a new paradigm in cultural studies, which "brings together different cultural phenomena and areas – art and literature, politics and society, religion and law – within a new context" (ibid. 11; my translation).[60] The rate of publications on the topic of memory in a variety of disciplines – covering, among others, sociology, psychology, literary studies, cognitive and neuroscience, history, philosophy and media studies – has proven

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[58] The following compilations and monographs provide an exhaustive first introduction into the relationship between memory, storytelling, and identities: Gymnich and A. Nünning (2005); Erll (2003; 2011); Erll, Gymnich and A. Nünning (2003); Erll and A. Nünning (2010b); Neumann (2005); Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi and Levy (2008).

[59] "Literatur, so die These, die in den folgenden Kapiteln entfaltet wird, bietet einen imaginativen Explorationsraum, in dem der Zusammenhang von Erinnerung, Identität und Narration ästhetisch verdichtet inszeniert wird und in dem neue Vergangenheitsmodelle erprobt werden" (ibid. 118).

[60] "Alles spricht dafür, daß sich um den Begriff der Erinnerung ein neues Paradigma der Kulturwissenschaften aufbaut, das die verschiedenen kulturellen Phänomene und Felder – Kunst und Literatur, Politik und Gesellschaft, Religion und Recht – in neuen Zusammenhängen sehen läßt" (J. Assmann 1992: 11).

Assmann right. Given the fact that the debate has been going on for decades within the context of cultural studies on the one hand, and my specific focus on the constructions and challenges of Mennonite identities, on the other, I cannot provide an exhaustive introduction to memory studies here, but will only provide a sketch of the most important developments, concepts, and methodologies that are useful in a discussion of Mennonite/s Writing.

The discourse on memory and its increasing importance for cultural studies leads us first to Maurice Halbwachs' work on the topic of collective memory that initiated the theoretical debate. Halbwachs' publication *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1925)[61] laid the foundation for the contemporary debate on memory, since it provided the first important discussion of memory as a social phenomena. In his work, the French sociologist and philosopher argues that individual memory always has a social component. This means that memory can only be constructed and perpetuated in relationships, because people are social beings and their ability to remember is intricately related to their own integration into social groups, which he terms *cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (social frames of reference). The *cadres sociaux* provide the individual with access to all kinds of cultural specifics of a given community – such as rites, morals, and customs – as well as their own memory. It is by participating in the collective cultural codes of a community that the individual is able to apply meaning to memories, which can then be stored in the individual's memory, to which the individual later gains access via social interactions with others again.

According to Halbwachs there are three basic aspects of social memory: First, social memory is always reconstructed. Along with Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud, Halbwachs believed that memory is not a stable entity that can be stored and later produced in the same form. He proposes that memory is always reconstructed according to the needs of the present (Halbwachs 1985a: 22 and 1985b: 55–56). Second, social memory is based on interaction. Different from his mentor Henri Bergson who believed that the ability to remember lies only within the individual, Halbwachs argues that people need a group that provides the social framework for acts of remembering. In reference to Emile Durkheim, Halbwachs proposes that

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[61] Although already published in the 1920s, Halbwachs' study gained attention only by the late 20th century and translations of his work appeared post mortem. *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* was published in German as late as 1985 under the title of *Das Gedächtnis und seine sozialen Bedingungen*.

social groups develop a "collective consciousness" (1985a: 387).[62] People of the same group, Halbwachs argues, share the same frames of reference (1985a: 183) and thus even individual acts of remembering are highly social or collective processes. The *cadres sociaux* therefore serve as the fundamental basis for collective memory because they include individual memories and connect them with each other (1985a: 201). Third, social memory always has a specific function, because it serves as a site of identification for a group.

Given these characteristic features, Halbwachs concludes that it is more appropriate to speak of a collective memory than an individual memory. The notion of a collective memory has been explored in Halbwach's second publication *La mémoire collective* (published post mortem in 1950).[63] To distinguish between individual and collective memory, Halbwachs explains that all our "memories are collective and are recalled with the help of other people – even when they concern events that we have experienced alone or objects that only we saw" (Halbwachs 1985b: 2; my translation).[64] However, he points out that the individual is still the remembering subject, who is itself part of a particular group and thus shaped by that group's particular norms (ibid. 31).

Halbwachs' studies on social and collective memory have become a major influence within memory studies from the late 20th century onwards. Both Aleida and Jan Assmann's reflections on memory are based on Halbwachs' work. In several articles and monographs Jan Assmann draws on Halbwachs' notion of a social and collective memory. While he agrees with Halbwachs on the basic characteristics of memory, he argues that the term collective memory as proposed by Halbwachs, falls short of accounting for memories with a longer temporal horizon. J. Assmann distinguishes two different forms of collective memory: communicative and cultural memory. While the first covers Halbwachs' definition of a collective memory,[65] the second is characterized by its temporal transcendence and its objectification of culture.

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[62] "Kollektivbewusstsein" (1985a: 387)

[63] Translated into German and published as *Das kollektive Gedächtnis* in 1985.

[64] "Aber unsere Erinnerungen bleiben kollektiv und werden uns von anderen Menschen ins Gedächtnis zurückgerufen – selbst dann, wenn es sich um Ereignisse handelt, die allein wir durchlebt und um Gegenstände, die allein wir gesehen haben" (Halbwachs 1985b: 2).

[65] Jan Assmann agrees that collective memories have a restricted temporal horizon (three generations or 80 years) and are often arbitrary in form. This particular kind of collective memory is based on and represented by the everyday communication and thus is referred to as everyday or communicative memory ("kommunikatives" or "Alltagsgedächtnis") (1988: 10–11).

Cultural memory begins where Halbwachs' conception of collective memory leaves off: the objectified culture that manifests itself in texts, images, buildings, monuments, cities, or landscapes (J. Assmann 1988: 11). The connection to a specific group and the importance of the present are central in J. Assmann's conceptualization of cultural memory.

> When we talk about objectified culture and organised or ceremonial communication we find very similar connections to groups and collective identities that also characterize communicative memory. The structural knowledge is also "identity-specific." This means that a group bases its awareness of its unity and particular nature on this knowledge and relies on it to provide the formative and normative power to reproduce its identity. (ibid. 12; my translation)[66]

In contrast to communicative memory, cultural memory has the potential to sustain identities for longer periods of time.[67] J. Assmann argues that cultural memory transcends the everyday sphere because it has consistent benchmarks, which he describes as "fateful events of the past" remembered in "cultural manifestations" and institutionalized communication, which he terms "figures of memory"[68] (ibid. 12). It is because of its focus on these fateful events that become important in the construction and perpetuation of collective identities[69] that J. Assmann's term becomes useful for my own study. Mennonites have been focusing on martyrdom history so intensely that the narrativization of this historical period has turned into a "larger collective myth" (Zacharias 2013: 14). Naturally, this focus has led to the displacement or overshadowing of other aspects in Mennonites' history (ibid.). At the same time forgetting is an essential part of remembering, as Aleida Assmann explains.[70]

> When thinking about memory, we must start with forgetting. The dynamics of individual memory consists in a perpetual interaction between remembering and forgetting […]. […]

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[66] "Im Bereich der objektivierten Kultur und organisierten bzw. zeremonialisierten Kommunikation lassen sich ganz ähnliche Bindungen an Gruppen und Gruppenidentitäten beobachten, wie sie auch das Alltagsgedächtnis kennzeichnen. Wir haben es auch hier mit einer Wissensstruktur zu tun, die wir 'identitätskonkret' nennen. Damit meinen wir, daß eine Gruppe ein Bewußtsein ihrer Einheit und Eigenart auf dieses Wissen stützt und aus diesem Wissen die formativen und normativen Kräfte bezieht, um ihre Identität zu reproduzieren" (ibid. 12).

[67] In her article on "Canon and Archive" Aleida Assmann compares the importance of cultural memory for the bridging of a temporal dimension to the importance of the internet for bridging a spatial dimension (A. Assmann 2010: 97).

[68] "Erinnerungsfiguren" (J. Assmann 1988: 12)

[69] A full list the characteristics of cultural memory according to J. Assmann include identity specific, reconstructed, objectified, organised, binding, and reflexive (1988: 13–15).

[70] A very similar notion can be found in Müller-Funk and Neumann who argue that a process of remembering becomes possible only by forgetting (Müller-Funk 2008: 91, 259, 263; Neumann 2005: 105).

On the level of cultural memory, there is a similar dynamic at work. The continuous process of forgetting is part of social normality. As in the head of the individual, also in the communication of society much must be continuously forgotten to make place for new information, new challenges, and new ideas to face the present and future. (2010: 97)

The fact that remembering and forgetting are so closely interlinked, brings me to a discussion of related key characteristics of memory that I will be working with throughout chapter two. The following two features will serve as epistemological framework for my discussion of memory and its representation in Canadian Mennonite fiction: First, I understand memory to be always reconstructed. As a result, memory is not a fixed entity, stored safely to be reproduced in any situation (cf. Müller-Funk 2008: 251–52). The past, which is memory's content, cannot be preserved as such, but will always be modeled according to the needs of the present (J. Assmann 1992: 41–42).[71] Memory is therefore not about facts of the past that are presented in their entirety or that are true to the historical circumstances.[72] Therefore, memory serves as an important feature in the development and maintenance of a group's identities. Fictional texts present one option of objectifying memory and identities. Müller-Funk connects identities, memories, and narratives by arguing that

> all forms of memories are based explicitly or implicitly on retrospectives and thus on asynchronous narratives […] that try to bridge the insurmountable distance between narrating time (time of narration) and narrative time (time of event). If remembering and commemorating[73] serve as keys to understanding the self, then identity causes and generates the impossible. It bridges the gap between the act of remembering and the remembered event, feeling, or impression. (2008: 251; my translation)[74]

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[71] "Das Gedächtnis verfährt also rekonstruktiv. Die Vergangenheit vermag sich in ihm nicht als solche zu bewahren. Sie wird fortwährend von den sich wandelnden Bezugsrahmen der fortschreitenden Gegenwart her reorganisiert" (J. Assmann 1992: 41–42).

[72] "Für das kulturelle Gedächtnis zählt nicht faktische, sondern nur erinnerte Geschichte" writes Jan Assmann (1992: 52). Similarly, Neumann argues that the facticity of any given memory is far less important than narratives' ability to relate to contemporary horizons of meaning (2005: 103).

[73] Müller-Funk here distinguishes between the German "Gedächtnis" and "Erinnerung," a distinction comprehensively explained by Aleida Assmann (2012: 168).

[74] "[A]lle Formen des Gedächtnisses [basieren] explizit oder implizit auf Retrospektiven, das heißt zeitverschobenen Narrativen […], die den unüberbrückbaren Zwiespalt zwischen Erzählzeit (Zeit der Erzählung) und erzählter Zeit (Zeit der Handlung) zu überwinden trachten. Wenn Gedächtnis und Erinnerung Schlüssel zum Verständnis des Selbst darstellen, dann bewirkt und erzeugt jedwede Form von Identität das Unmögliche. Sie überbrückt die Differenz zwischen dem Akt der Erinnerung und den erinnerten Ereignissen, Empfindungen und Eindrücken" (Müller-Funk 2008: 251).

A second key characteristic of memory, closely related to the first, is its unreliability and artificiality. Reflecting upon individual memories from a psychoanalytical angle, A. Assmann argues that

> [o]ur memories, we are assured by psychologists, are anything but reliable. They are not an exact reflection of a past event but are always distorted by the limitations of our perspective, our perception, our needs and our emotions. As if that wasn't enough, they also change in the course of time through new **reconstructions** which adapt our self-image to the requirements of the present. (2012: 169; emphasis in original)

What is true for the individual memory, extends to collective memories. Social groups, such as ethnic communities, nations, or states "do not *have* a collective memory, but *make* one with the aid of various symbolic media such as texts, images, monuments, anniversaries and commemorative festivals" (ibid. 175; emphasis in original). The description of Mennonite martyrs' stories as master narratives in Mennonite fiction neither reflects the historical importance of this particular period for all contemporary Mennonites, nor does it naturalize that importance. However, its repeated narrativization tells us something about the ways contemporary Mennonites identify with this historical period and continue to draw on it for establishing and perpetuating their cultural identities in the present. With this particular example we can observe how narratives are not only (subjectively) reflecting a pre-existing event or historical period, but also how they actively contribute in *shaping* the world "they purported merely to reflect" (V. Nünning and A. Nünning 1996: 17).[75] Neumann and others[76] are careful to point out that this particular function of literature to produce meaning and worlds[77] is not shared by other cultural discourses. Due to its imaginative leeway and the high frequency of aesthetic forms of representation, literary fiction is particularly suitable in constructing and offering new meanings (cf. Erll 2003b: 85; Neumann 2005: 131, 135). Because processes of meaning making are intricately related to narrative structures in general, the development and

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[75] In their introduction to a special issue on *Intercultural Studies*, Vera and Ansgar Nünning (1996) demonstrate how literary texts (so-called "fictions of empire") have been at least as influential in producing and seemingly naturalizing hegemonic power structures in the British Empire as they have been in describing them.

[76] Erll (2003; 2009; 2011); Erll, Gymnich and A. Nünning (2003), Erll and A. Nünning (2010b); Gymnich and A. Nünning (2005); Neumann, A. Nünning and Petterson (2008), A. Nünning (2010), V. Nünning and A. Nünning (1996b; 2010c).

[77] See also Goodman (1985) and the discussion on worldmaking via narrative in the introduction.

perpetuation of cultural memories is virtually impossible without them as well, as Neumann continues to explain (ibid. 101).[78]

J. Assmann argues that a group that is successful in establishing collective memories can be referred to as "memory cultures" (J. Assmann 1992: 31).[79] Memory cultures, he explains, draw on the past for processes of meaning making in the present. Erll's use of the term relies on two basic assumptions: First, memory cultures need to be thought of in the plural, because they always exhibit various different, sometimes challenging memories. Second, with reference to the distinction between *Gedächtnis* (organic memory, which provides the precondition to remembering) and *Erinnerung* (act of remembering), Erll emphasizes that the collective memory becomes analytically manageable only via acts of remembering (2003b: 36), which are, among other options, realised via narratives in general and literary fictions in particular.

A generic approach to fictional texts that focus on a group's or nation's collective memories has resulted in a wide variety of terms,[80] from which I want to discuss only three, as they will be most valuable in a discussion of Mennonite/s Writing. Erll's use of *Gedächtnisromane* reflects her focus on the distinction between acts of remembering, which, as pointed out earlier, become viable via narratives. To approach the latter, an analysis of the former is necessary. She argues that literature can serve as a medium of collective memory in the sense of providing meaning and identity for a culture, on the one hand. On the other hand, literature is a medium for the communicative memory, in the sense of a collective construction and mediation of meaning on a daily basis (Erll 2003b: 65). In contrast to the terms "historical novel" and "historiographic metafiction," which focus on questions of reliability and objectivity, Neumann explores the term *Erinnerungsroman* as productive for novels that focus on the relationship between identities and memories (Neumann 2005: 6). The generic term *Erinnerungsroman* is particularly useful, because it expresses how memories are staged and how they "enter a dialogic relationship between form and content of an extra-textual memory culture as well as

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[78] This notion is shared by Erll (2003), who explores questions of cultural identities in literary texts about World War I by bringing together concepts of literary and cultural theory. Ann Rigney also provides a valuable insight into the importance of literary texts in the construction of memories and identities (Erll and Rigney; 2004). Additionally, with a wider focus on media in general, Müller-Funk emphasizes that different media do not only reflect, but also produce meanings (2008: 252).

[79] "Erinnerungskulturen" (J. Assmann 1992: 31)

[80] To learn more about some of the terms that have been used, see the overview in Erll (2005) or Neumann (2005: 7).

theoretical discourses on memory" (ibid. 7; my translation).[81] Neumann deems it particularly important to establish a new genre for novels, which are concerned with identity constructions and collective or individual memories, because they actively and openly participate in the construction of realities in the present while bridging a temporal gap to the past. The term *Erinnerungsroman* allows for an analysis of the "diachronic changes" within the past that are processed to fit the present needs of a group (ibid.).

Another term popular in literary and cultural memory studies for this particular genre is *fictions of memory*.[82] The generic term designates narratives that portray the "constitutive interdependency of memories and identity – individual as well as collective" (ibid. 7–8; my translation).[83] Neumann points out that there are two basic advantages of the use of *fictions of memory*. First, it allows us to approach memories and identities in their relationship to each other without narrowing down the research foci on particular questions and aspects, as is the case with the terms family chronicle or fictional autobiography (ibid. 7–8). Second, its definition of fiction allows for an analysis of aesthetic elements of narratives as well as of the relationship between fictional texts and extra-textual constructions of the past (ibid. 8). With a reference to British *fictions of memory* A. Nünning illustrates that

> [i]n their entirety these fictions constitute that culturally sanctioned system of ideas, beliefs, presuppositions, and convictions which constitutes British mentalities. Such ideological fictions are closely connected with literary fictions because they find their most succinct expression in conventional plot-lines, myths, and metaphors that support and legitimize cherished notions of Englishness and Britishness. (2003: 5)

The fact that *fictions of memory* is linguistically more appropriate than *Erinnerungs-* or *Gedächtnisromane* on the one hand and easily adaptable to the context of Mennonite narratives, on the other, makes it an appropriate choice for my primary corpus. Another reason, for my

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[81] "Während allerdings historische Romane auf den 'Diskurs und die Erkenntnisse der zeitgenössischen Geschichtstheorie' […] bezogen sind und Fragen nach der Zuverlässigkeit, Objektivität und Textualität der rekonstruierten Vergangenheit stellen, stehen Romane, die Erinnerungen inszenieren, in einem dialogischen Verhältnis zu Formen und Inhalten der extraliterarischen Erinnerungskultur sowie zu gedächtnistheoretischen Diskursen" (ibid. 7).

[82] The term resonates with Eakin's expression of a "fiction of memory" (1999: 95) in reference to the common (mis-)conception of memory as coherent and stable.

[83] "Der Terminus *fictions of memory* wird in dieser Studie als übergreifender Gattungsbegriff zur Bezeichnung von Romanen aufgegriffen, die die konstitutive Interdependenz von Erinnerungen und Identitäten — sei es in der individuellen oder kollektiven Dimension – inszenieren" (Neumann 2005: 7–8).

choice of *fictions of memory* over the other terms, is its flexibility[84] in regard to the literary forms that can be addressed. Although the term *fictions of memory* has mostly been used in reference to novels, Neumann claims that other forms of narration need to be considered as well when exploring the relationship between identities and memories (2010: 340). With the inclusion of short stories and poems in my corpus, my thesis directly reacts to this request. Given this extension of *fictions of memory* to poetic forms and short stories, I understand and use it to approach and analyze the intricate relationships between collective memories and the establishment and perpetuation of identities across different generic forms. I suggest looking at the ways that representations of memories in Mennonite *fictions of memory* have been constructed aesthetically. A second focus lies on the new "models of memory" (ibid. 334–35) that are created in that process.

I take the following assumptions as the basis for the analysis of my primary texts: Memories are unstable and reconstructed and thus serve the need of the community in the present. They are therefore important means of constructing and perpetuating collective identities. In order to stabilize collective identities in light of contemporary needs, it is essential to select only some events – out of a wide selection – of the past and neglect or forget others. Moreover, narratives serve as important media for this process. However, different from the common belief in narratives' mimetic quality, I argue that they also take part in shaping memories and are instrumental in the construction of memories and identities. Furthermore, the continuous repetition of some narratives of the past leads to them assuming the status of collective myths, which again help to stabilize collective identities. The generic term *fictions of memory* encompasses these general assumptions. It also allows for an analysis of the intricate and complex relationship between memories and identities and an approach to collective memories in their semanticized form. Another important assumption I am working with and that connects Mennonite literary texts about the past to my framing concept *narrating community* is that ways of remembering are always culturally specific. "Different cultures develop different modes and concepts, or ways of describing and reflecting themselves, expressed in various symbolic

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[84] Moreover, the term's double meaning – describing fictional texts that deal with memories on the one hand, while reflecting on the fictionality of memories, on the other hand, matches my understanding of processes of reconstruction of memories in order to construct and stabilize identities in the present.

patterns and markers (Müller-Funk 2008: 253; my translation).[85] Therefore, my analysis of Mennonite literary representations will not only reflect on ways of remembering and constructing collective identities in general, but it will particularly show how memories and identities are interlinked in Mennonite/s Writing and how these literary representations provide new ways of thinking about Mennonite identities and memories.

Having laid out the general terminology and determined the generic conditions of my analysis, let me briefly discuss the methodological approach to Mennonite literary texts that explore the constructions of and challenges to collective identities in Mennonite short stories, poems and novels dealing with the past. As my overall approach to Mennonite narrative identities throughout my thesis implies, the methodological point of access is, and indeed needs to be sensitive to the socio-historical and -political properties of my subject: Mennonite/s Writing. As stated earlier, literature does not only draw on extra-textual realities, but it also shapes and creates them.[86] Therefore, my literary analysis will combine the aesthetic-narratological analysis of the representation of collective memories with an analysis of the collective identities that are established, perpetuated or questioned. To bring both aspects together, I need to be aware of the ways in which concepts from memory studies can be integrated and analyzed narratologically. In addition, I will be analysing the use of narrative forms in their socio-historical context and thus avoid establishing narrative forms as stable and unchanging over time (cf. Erll 2009: 222–25). There are several narrative devices that will become important points for discussion, such as focalization, the connection between different temporal levels, the representation of space as well as multiple, and sometimes conflicting, memories. With some of my examples I will also refer to concepts used in (post)colonial criticism to do justice to the hegemonic patterns that have developed in Mennonite narratives and which are expressed in forms of stereotypes, or a belief in the inherent superiority of Mennonite settlers in Canada.

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[85] "Verschiedene Kulturen entwickeln also unterschiedliche Modi und Konzepte oder Selbstbeschreibung, Selbstreflexion, verschiedene symbolische Muster und Markierungen" (Müller-Funk 2008: 253).

[86] This quality of literature has been referred to as "mimesis of memory" (Neumann 2010: 334), which relates to Ricoeur's threefold model of mimesis: prefiguration (mimesis 1), configuration (mimesis 2), and refiguration (mimesis 3) (Ricoeur 1983-1985). For a closer inspection of Ricoeur's model in the context of literary and memory studies see Erll (2005: 149ff).

2.4.   De- and Reconstructing Narratives of Martyrdom as Cultural Memories

Despite the fact that Mennonites' stories of martyrdom are by far not exclusive (cf. Beachy 2010: 23), they have been popular narratives, referenced in both literary and non-literary contexts and genres (cf. Spicher Kasdorf 2013a). A discussion of martyrdom from a contemporary perspective certainly involves a distinction between the 16th-century martyrdom frequently alluded to in the writing of Canadian Mennonites and the instrumentalization of the term by contemporary fundamentalist groups.[87] "One community's 'martyr' is another's 'terrorist'; one person's 'martyrdom operation' is another's 'suicide bombing,'" writes Jolyon Mitchell (2012: 2), alluding to the term's ambiguous definition that allows for such a wide range of interpretations. Martyrdom is not a stable term, its meaning rather in flux and it has been controversially discussed in the recent past. However, to demarcate my use of the term, let me point out three characteristics of the martyr stories I will discuss in the following analyses: Firstly, Mennonite martyrdom narratives all draw on the deaths of historic figures from the 16th century, most of them reported in further detail in van Braght's *Martyrs Mirror*. Secondly, martyrdom has been used as a point of discussion in the narratives that I am looking at. None of the poems that I am analyzing unquestioningly worships the Anabaptist martyrs or calls for its audiences to follow their example. Thirdly, my use of the term martyrdom extends to the literary context only. Different from the religious and political uses the term has been put to in its history,[88] I will exclusive focus on the creative exploration of the term in poems by Mennonite writers.

Martyrdom as explored in the poetry collections of Sarah Klassen and Audrey Poetker-Thiessen becomes a question and a challenge for the contemporary community. Although the *Martyrs Mirror* continues to wield its influence among contemporary Canadian Mennonites, its direct impact is rather unclear. While the cultural memories of Mennonites have been shaped by stories of individual martyrs and their suffering, both authors approach the age-old stories with an implied question to their usefulness in a contemporary context when martyrdom is primarily interpreted as victimization, suffering, and death. As I will discuss below, the

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[87]   The exploration of martyrdom has received more attention after the 9/11 attacks in New York. To distinguish between different forms of martyrdom, Mitchell suggests speaking of either "predatory and peaceful martyrdoms, military and non-violent martyrdoms, or active and passive martyrdoms" (2012: 2).

[88]   For more information on the origin of the term martyrdom and its history, see Middleton (2011) and Mitchell (2012).

speakers show a range of reactions to the subject of martyrdom that include confusion, fascination, rage, and paralysis. These multiple feelings are mirrored by the use of poetry as a genre. While novels and short stories traditionally follow a linear outline to create coherence, collections of poems allow for a wider variety of creative approaches. Additionally, individual poems provide the space to construct new narratives based on alternative interpretations of martyrdom.

In her introduction to *Tongue Screws and Testimonies*, Beachy explains that the there are four different approaches to martyrdom: First, there are the retellings that are meant to provide an access to the martyr stories. Second, there are aesthetic approaches that are themselves creating a contemporary story or image that is related to the stories from centuries ago. A third approach is the creation of a cultural icon; here the martyr serves as figure of identification. In a fourth approach to martyrdom, the authors or artists seek to create meaning in their contemporary experiences by going back to the stories of the past (Beachy 2010: 25–26). These last two approaches are most explicitly linked to the contemporary construction of identities. For the analyses below, I have chosen mostly those poems that are intricately linked to the construction and deconstruction of contemporary identities. However, the construction of contemporary identities on the basis of stories of martyrdom is presented as challenging. Both authors are questioning the usefulness of martyrdom as a site of identification for contemporary Mennonites in their poems. Thus, the cultural narratives of martyrdom that are perpetuated by the poems' focus on the subject, are at the same time challenged and new narratives are constructed.

The literary development of the martyr theme in Klassen's poems is characteristic of a general fascination with martyrdom that spans religious and ethnic communities. However, as the contemporary discussion of suicide killings in the media shows the terminology of martyrdom raises widespread attention and induces a discussion in all fields of contemporary life, from media and the classroom to the academic sphere. It should thus not be surprising to find that Klassen's treatment of the subject – albeit in a context limited to Mennonites and preceding the 9/11 attacks – proves difficult and provides no clear answers as to the usage of the stories today. Thus, we find some of her speakers to be fascinated by the martyr stories, while others ask whether the focus on torture and death can provide a meaningful answer to the

question about contemporary Mennonite identities. Her speakers suggest different interpretations of martyrdom that ultimately demythologize the martyr as victim.

Poetker-Thiessen's speakers are rather explicit in their challenge to martyrdom as useful cultural memory. They provocatively approach their subject, trying to find answers in their quest for identification. Many of the poems use distinctive cultural markers, such as Mennonite last names and references to Menno Simons. However, the poems do not condemn martyrdom as an important phase in the history of Mennonites. At the same time, the continuous connection between past and present, the narrativization of historical figures in a contemporary context, and the use of a direct address of Menno Simons serve as means of a process of translating martyrdom stories into a contemporary context.

2.4.1   Demythologizing Stories of Martyrdom as Narratives of Victimization in
         Sarah Klassen's *Dangerous Elements*

> Martyrdom like radiance of a clear night sky
> can leave you baffled.
> (Klassen 1998: 96)

Sarah Klassen's poetry collection *Dangerous Elements* contains a section with 23 poems that focus on the stories of the Anabaptist martyrs.[89] The section is called "Singing at the Fire" and is introduced by the following statement: "[a]fter the engravings of Dutch artist Jan Luyken, 1649-1712." This additional information, added in parenthesis, directly connects the poems to the *Martyrs Mirror*, where Luyken's engravings were first published. Most of the poems in "Singing at the Fire" are dedicated either to the artist (ibid. 96, 107) or to one or several of the martyrs depicted by Luyken (ibid. 97, 98, 99, 100, 103, 104, 106, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112–113, 114, 115, 116, 118, 119); only three of the poems are without dedication (ibid. 101; 105; 117). All of the latter poems are reflections on the martyrs' stories that explore and question the narrative that martyrdom needs to be interpreted as or equated with suffering and victimization in a contemporary context. It is particularly those poems without any dedication and their interconnection with those dedicated to one or several of the martyrs that are most interesting in the exploration of cultural memories of martyrdom in Klassen's collection. The following analysis explores the construction of the martyrdom memories in the past and its relationship to a contemporary context. I argue that despite the poems' focus on martyrdom, the emphasis on individual martyrs before they were caught, tortured and killed, reveals an attempt to demythologize martyrdom as a story of victimization as such and to deconstruct martyrs as "cultural icon[s]" (Beachy 2010: 26) in Mennonite history. The analysis will focus on the juxtaposition of contrasts, the use of diction, the second person singular pronoun and the relationship between the past and the present. Furthermore, I will explore how the poems de- and reconstruct the martyrdom narrative by approaching it via the medium of art.

The first of the section's poems is dedicated to the memory of Jan Luyken. In "Artist and medium" readers are introduced to Luyken's artwork. The speaker reflects on the fact that

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[89] It should be noted that the poems in the remainder of the collection are not limited to a martyr or Mennonite context. Klassen's poetry collection is comprised of six sections, dealing with a variety of topics, with martyrdom as only one aspect among others.

Luyken has been more popular as a writer and yet chose a pictorial approach to the martyr stories.

> [1] Martyrdom like radiance of a clear night sky
> can leave you baffled. Jan Luyken finds no words for it
> although he's written love lyrics, painted
> morning and evening in pale tones. (Klassen 1998: 96)

The persona suggests that the martyr stories themselves were too overpowering for Luyken to write about. Therefore, against his primary profession as a writer, he chose another method of artistic interaction that allowed him to express the severity and brutality of the martyr's decision to die. A similar approach is true for Klassen's collection of martyr poems in *Dangerous Elements*: the martyr stories are explored via Luyken's engravings and therefore removed from the original stories collected in van Braght.[90] These different levels of mediation result in a refocusing of the martyr stories in Klassen's poems.

In the first poem of the section "Singing at the Fire" the speaker reminisces on the aspect of a mediated approach to the martyrs. In "Artist and medium" the persona argues that Luyken used a pictorial approach to martyrdom because the stories "can leave you baffled" (ibid. 96). The approach to martyrdom via Luyken's engravings is another form of mediating the narratives that ultimately comes full circle: from events in the past to stories mediated via documents and letters to engravings to short narrative sequences in the form of poems.

The second stanza continues the persona's attempt at understanding Luyken's artistic approach to individual martyr stories in engravings rather than in stories.[91] Ultimately, the speaker concludes that "[Luyken] knows

> [2] delicate brush strokes can't take hold of this
> triumphant dying: a song torn from between charred lips
> the way a sword's torn from the heart.
> Jan chooses a needle and begins. (ibid. 96)

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[90] Van Braght's account of the martyr's stories is also mediated. As he was no contemporary to the martyrs he used official documents and letters to approach them.

[91] The fact that Luyken had been influenced by van Braght's martyr accounts, of course, left Luyken with a decision to either write his own accounts or add to the ones already in printing. Therefore, the decision to take up the visual medium instead of writing may be influenced by the simple fact that van Braght already wrote those stories down.

To do justice to the martyrs' memory, it needs the creation of an engraving that requires the artist to "dribbl[e] acid on a copper plate." This act of creation symbolizes the "agony and exultation, | […] silence and breath" (ibid. 96) that are witnessed in van Braght's account of the individual martyrs. The fourth stanza lists possible frames of interpretation of martyrdom that the speaker explores in her reading of Luyken's etchings. The artist had to decide whether to picture the martyrs as "modest or bold, | reasonable, fervent, fanatical" (ibid. 96). However, the speaker finds no answer to the question of how to interpret the engravings, because Luyken attended to the details of the body disintegrated by burning, or to

[4]   bound hands
        and feet, a stretched wrist, bones stripped clean

[5]   the raw texture of freshly seared skin. (ibid. 96)

This morbid attention to the dying body circumvents an interpretation of the martyr's death as either triumphant and heroic, or fanatical. In the sixth and last stanza the persona approaches an interpretation of these deaths in a similar fashion: with a praise to Luyken's talent in depicting death and a focus on his mastery of presenting an interaction between the martyr and the burning flames.

[6]   He's mastered the way the greedy flames reach out
        for flesh, a child's hand
        for it's doomed mother, the impatient soul
        ecstatically for God. (ibid. 96)

Klassen's implicit connection between modes of remembering is striking in this first poem of the section "Singing at the Fire." While the speaker reasons that it was too "baff[ling]" for Luyken to construct stories on the martyrs, the temporal detachment allows her to do so: reflecting on the stories of van Braght as interpreted and constructed in Luyken's artwork, which are then de- and reconstructed from a contemporary point of view. Instead of turning to van Braght's text as resource, she uses the engravings in the *Martyrs Mirror* as a source of inspiration to arrive at her own poetical interpretations.

The poem "Artist and medium" serves as an introduction to the subject of martyrdom in Klassen's collection. Approaching the stories of martyrdom as removed both on a temporal and material level, the persona explores cultural memories without running the risk of becoming too "baffled" (ibid. 96). The assessment that "Luyken finds no words for it [martyrdom]" serves

as a description for a sense of helplessness and disorientation in the face of cultural memories that are characterized by brutality, suffering, and death, and that seem to leave more questions than answers about how to identify with the martyr memory from a contemporary point of view. Krehbiel arrives at a more definitive evaluation of the usefulness of martyrdom arguing that while "[t]he martyrs' stories are based on fact, [...] the dominant role they play in Mennonite faith and culture has elevated them to the level of folklore and myth" (2010: 140). It seems that Klassen's poems circle around the narratives of martyrdom more than they focus on martyrdom itself. Her mediated approach to the martyr stories ultimately results in a demythologizing of traditional narratives connected with martyrdom. This way the poem's speakers create new meanings, which is an important function in Mennonite narratives of martyrdom, according to Beachy (2010: 26).

Müller-Funk points out that myths provide meaning not only because they are repeatedly communicated but also because they follow a certain structure (Müller-Funk 2008: 113). Martyrdom follows a clear sequence of events: the individual's aversion to Catholic traditions and their practice of what came to be recognized as heretic deeds, the subsequent persecution and arrest of the martyrs, which was followed by an interrogation and the attempt to induce them to give up their fellow believers and to publicly renounce Anabaptist practices, which was upon denial followed by a public execution, often accompanied by the martyr's singing or preaching. The narrative repetition of this ritual ultimately protects the stories of martyrdom against forgetting (ibid. 113). Myths, J. Assmann explains, are important for our identities because "they provide answers to the question who 'we' are, where 'we' come from, and where 'we' stand in relation to the world" (1992: 142; my translation).[92] Yet, in order to answer these questions and to construct a myth that attends to them, experiences of the past need to be interpreted first. If martyrdom is interpreted in terms of suffering and victimization, Mennonite stories of martyrdom ultimately become stories of victimization; these stories then provide the means for identification for contemporary Mennonites. However, contemporary Canadian Mennonites are neither prosecuted nor socially outcast as several scholars emphasize (cf. Beachy 2010: 23; Sawatsky 2000: 31). Therefore, the myth of martyrdom as victimization is outdated. Klassen's focus on martyrdom in her poems ultimately implies the importance of

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[92] "Mythen haben es mit Identität zu tun, sie geben Antwort auf die Frage, wer 'wir' sind, woher 'wir' kommen und wo im Kosmos 'wir' stehen" (J. Assmann 1992: 142).

narratives of suffering for contemporary Mennonites because they demarcate the early beginning of the Anabaptist movement. Therefore, a retelling of these stories instils a sense of history and belonging, because it answers the questions raised by J. Assmann. However, her focus on the individual martyrs deconstructs what Krehbiel referred to as archetype (Krehbiel 2010: 140) that can paralyze the contemporary readers and often fails to provide meaning in a contemporary context, which bears little to no resemblance to the past.

The second poem dedicated to Jan Luyken, again emphasizes the aspect of identification in relation to the martyr stories. "Foreground['s]" focus lies on the depiction of animals in the background of Luyken's engravings.[93] In order to avoid comprehending the full severity of suffering that "a victim[…] tied | to the stake, flames leaping | and leaping higher," or a "woman stretched to breaking on the rack" or a "man bound hand and foot before he's forced | to drown in a barrel" (Klassen 1998: 107), experiences, the speaker chooses to focus on the small details of Luyken's art. As is explained in stanzas three and four, "[f]or me the dogs mean mercy" because they

[3]   guard against Jan Luyken's acid

[4]   sharp engravings. Against the cold canal
        the whip, the rope
        twisted in hard knots, blood-hungry people
        ogling the cruel wheel, smoke
        rising black from the fires in Amsterdam, Antwerp
        or curling tenderly from warm homes
        huddled in the narrow
        streets of Rotterdam. (ibid. 107)

This last part of the poem expresses the speaker's motivation of approaching the martyr stories via Luyken's art: it eases the approach to martyrdom. Although a scene of martyrdom is in the foreground of the engraving, the composition of the pictures allows the viewer to focus on other aspects. However, the last line of the third and the first line of the fourth stanza are critical of Luyken's engravings, their detailed portrayal of the brutality and enthusiasm of the crowd. This conflict between the speaker's own fascination with martyrdom and the abhorrence of the same, is repeatedly expressed throughout this section, taking shape in the juxtaposition of contrasts.

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[93] Several of Jan Luyken's engravings contain animals, such as horses and dogs, the latter represented most clearly in the etchings of Jakob Dirks (van Braght 1938: 725) and Georg Wanger (ibid. 1081).

The poem "Non-resistance" explores the juxtaposition of faith and a martyr's will to die as contrast that ultimately leads to the death of Mattheus Mair, to whom the poem is dedicated. In the four stanzas the speaker challenges Mair's decision to die for his faith while drowning.

[1]   First time they haul you up
dripping like a half-drowned rat
and demand you recant
you consider it: you've come close
to the edge of something absolute
the abrupt light startles you
with its beauty
your throat raw, lungs ache for air.
And you really want to live. (ibid. 118)

The speaker directly addresses Mair, creating a sense of intimacy and closeness in order to comprehend a faith that ultimately results in death. In the poem "the abrupt light['s] […] beauty" is contrasted with Mair's pain as his lungs fill with water. Additionally, his wish to continue to live and his decision to submit to the "river that received [him]" presents yet another paradox. Next to these explicit contrasts the speaker implies more subtle contradictions. First, the title of the poem, "Non-resistance," draws a connection to the Mennonite cultural practice of refusing to engage in violent activity. Yet, by focusing on the moment of death by torture, the speaker evokes the violence the title denies. In the last stanza the speaker engages with non-resistance again.

[4]   The third time? What does it matter.
Maybe the river that received you
twice so urgently
is familiar now
your limbs numb and you
slip back
into this baptism, this
bitter immersion
unresisting. (ibid. 118)

Non-resistance historically implied a confrontation with state-authorities that demand military participation from Mennonites, which the latter denied. While the act of handing himself over to the authorities – an act never directly referred to in the poem itself[94] – can be read as an act

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[94]   The apprehension of Mattheus Mair can be found in van Braght's account. Van Braght writes that Mair has been fooled by a local priest in Wier who suspected the former to indulge in heretic meetings and who "sent

of nonresistance, Mair's unresistance referred to in the last line, is not directed at the authorities, but at death. Mair is ultimately sentenced to death *because* of his belief in a conscious baptism. However, his death sentence seems paradoxical, because it simultaneously symbolizes the performance of an adult baptism.

"Hands" is yet another poem that works with several contrasts. It is dedicated to Anneken Hendriks[95] who was burned in Amsterdam in 1571 (van Braght 1938: 872ff). As the title suggests, the speaker focuses on Hendriks' hands, which at the moment of death "cast fanatic shadows" (Klassen 1998: 112). Using "fanatic" the speaker clearly adopts a critical position towards this particular martyr, especially compared to "Artist and medium" that at one point emphasizes the "triumphant dying" (ibid. 96) of the martyrs. The diction in "Hands" implies that the wilful death chosen by Hendriks in order to illustrate her religious convictions is not an act of bravery, but expresses her stubborn obsession. This criticism extends to the narrativization of martyrdom in van Braght and Luyken who create cultural memories of worship with their stories and engravings. The speakers in Klassen's poems also participate in perpetuating the cultural memories of martyrdom, and yet they try to explore the martyrs as individuals with a story other than that of their suffering. In the poem the exploration of Hendrik's hands initiates an investigation into her past.

[1]   […] Your hands
      that wove fine linen, smoothed a child's sleep-tumbled hair
      bound at the wrist with rope, as if in prayer. (ibid. 112)

Similar to "Non-resistance" the speaker in "Hands" juxtaposes contradictions by evoking the role of the mother and connecting it with the religious fanatic who gives up her life. While both roles seem contradictory, the use of enjambment between lines two and three connects them structurally, implicitly arguing for their intricate connection. Stanza four also presents a

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his servant maid after him, to see whether he should leave the village" (ibid. 1089). Instructed to make Mair believe that she wants to join the Anabaptist community, the servant ultimately contributed to his arrest.

[95] In the original story in the *Martyrs Mirror*, Hendriks' last name is spelled slightly differently as Heyndricks (van Braght 1938: 872). However, the subtitle of Luyken's engraving also uses the spelling we find in Klassen's poems (ibid. 873).

juxtaposition of contrasts, using male and female images and stereotypes that underline the speaker's hesitation on how to interpret Hendriks' death.[96]

[5]   Mothers, wives
daughters of wood-gatherers
fire-lighters, magistrates
the tireless executioner
bend over safe [sic] home fires
kneading bread
brushing tears from a child's cheek
smoothing a rumpled shawl. They fold
their work-worn hands in prayer
for father, son
beloved husband
priest. (ibid. 112)

The stanza constructs women as caregivers and men as politically and judicially influential, presiding over the fate of other men and women. The repeated combination of everyday tasks with martyrdom demystifies the martyr and makes her knowable as a person for a contemporary readership, thus turning the attention away from the martyr as a victim. The poem constructs a new narrative of the martyr as a regular individual.

In the last stanza of "Hands," written in parentheses, the speaker directly addresses Hendriks.

[6]   (And even for you Anneken.
I want to believe
women's hands are clasped
knees bent
tongues and appalled hearts pleading
for you). (ibid. 113; indentation and parentheses in original)

The use of parenthesis creates a sense of detachment – a reader may be tempted to read the stanza as an afterthought or an expression of hesitation. However, it can also be read as a side note to Hendriks – part of a conversation between the persona and the martyr – that the reader is allowed to witness. The focus on Hendriks hands, the use of her first name and the direct address serve as narrative means of establishing closeness, of deconstructing the martyr as cultural icon. The persona's wish for a compassionate female audience may be both directed at

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[96] In van Braght's account on Hendriks, she is arrested by a neighbour and tortured to induce her to name fellow believers. Yet as van Braght reports, she remained silent. The account is one among the few to directly refer to "Mennonists" (1938: 873).

the past – indicating bystanders during the execution – or at the present – addressing a compassionate readership that continues to engage with stories of the past in meaningful ways. By suggesting ways of connecting the past with the present, the poem surpasses the limits of approaching martyrdom via Luyken's engravings. It establishes a direct connection between persona, martyr, and reader by the use of the present tense and a direct address.

Other poems that establish a connection between different temporal levels are the ones without a dedication (ibid. 101; 105; 117). The title poem "Dangerous elements: a warning" displays a dark mood and opens with a foreboding.

[1]   This too is dangerous: women and men
        in secret in the evening breaking bread,
        pouring clandestine wine. Wind
        assaulting the leaves, the darkness raw and terrible. (ibid. 105)

This first part of the stanza explores the danger of forming a religious movement. The use of phrases such as "breaking bread" and "clandestine wine" emphasize the Christian context. The wind that "assaults" the leaves and the darkness symbolize change. The first word of the stanza additionally implies a sense of continuity with the previous poems. Moreover, because the poem is directed at a contemporary readership who interprets change and danger differently, the use of the present tense and the word "too" emphasizes the connection between past and present. While the speaker focuses on past events, her use of the present tense indicates the importance of martyrdom stories. The poem continues with a parable in the second stanza.

[2]   Hungry enough you take and eat. Thirsty
        these dissidents lift the forbidden
        cup to their lips, pass it from mouth to mouth.
        Each sip an unmeasured risk. Under the whispering trees
        each supper guest thinks: *who is worthy?*
        Somewhere a prince or priest growls: *guilty*
        of infidelity. […] (ibid. 105; emphasis in original)

This particular scene cannot be found in Luyken's engravings, but represents the persona's own reflection on the establishment of the Anabaptist movement. With this image of the Anabaptist community established by night and in secrecy, the poem represents a turn from an analysis of martyrdom itself to an exploration of the development of the movement. Earlier poems approach martyrdom via Luyken's engravings; "Dangerous elements: a warning" actively constructs the past and, different from van Braght's and Luyken's narratives, focuses on the

moment of the Anabaptist movement's emergence, not on the attempts to terminate it. The poem thus suggests refocusing attention away from martyrdom as a myth that circles around suffering and death, to the Anabaptist movement's early beginnings, the sense of a common understanding of Christianity that, although "forbidden," was passed on from "mouth to mouth." The speaker in Klassen's poem argues that right in the beginning of the movement, there was a strong wish for the formation of a community that is different from the outside world, as the question "*who is worthy*?" indicates. This construction of meaning by refocusing on another aspect of the past in order to create meaning in the present correlates with the phenomenon of memory cultures, as Erll describes them (2003b: 36). Instead of dealing with one collective memory that becomes important to the whole group, there are "a variety of coexisting and competing collective memories" (ibid.; my translation).[97] "Dangerous Elements: a warning" emphasizes the very process of actively "making" cultural memories via narratives (cf. A. Assmann 2012: 175; A. Nünning 2003: 5).

The direct address in the poem that is, unlike in previously discussed poems, not directed at the martyr serves to build a structural connection with a contemporary readership. The sense of danger and mistrust that is created in stanza one is increased by the detailed description of the scene and the use of the words "forbidden," "risk," and "whispering trees." The line break at the end of line six of the second stanza allows for a reading of "*guilty*" on its own.[98] The final stanza ultimately questions the usefulness of a sole focus on martyrdom from a contemporary perspective.

> [3] Is it better to deny hunger
>   foreswear thirst and live?
>   Is nourishment without death possible?
>   Is earth more fecund soaked with blood? (Klassen 1998: 105)

The questions posed by the speaker are directed at a contemporary readership. Different from "Hands" where the speaker tries to engage Hendriks, "Dangerous elements" challenges a

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[97] "[…] Erinnerungskulturen weisen eine Vielzahl koexistenter, häufig konkurrierender kollektiver Gedächtnisse auf" (Erll 2003: 36).

[98] Historically, the martyrs were certainly perceived as guilty of heresy. Paul Schowalter explains in his article on Mennonite martyrs that among the most common charges against Anabaptists were "neglect of public church attendance and confession, communion, participation in Mennonite services, adult baptism and communion 'in the Mennonite manner,' [Mennonites traditionally refused to honour communion as a sacrament] marriage within the brotherhood, and stubborn resistance toward conversion attempts" (1953: n.p.).

contemporary worship of the martyrdom aspect. The last question, "[i]s earth more fecund soaked with blood?" emphasizes the speaker's own critical assessment of martyrdom as narrative of suffering and victimization.[99]

In "Confession," another poem without dedication, the persona reminisces about the very act of confessing to the authorities. Written from a first-person perspective, readers are addressed by an unnamed martyr. Contradictory to the title, the speaker describes the refusal to confess and name fellow believers.

[3] Mine [mouth] refused
     to confess, mentioned neither time nor place.
     It could have opened like a bursting cloud,
     poured out cold evidence
     in torrents, it held power to crucify or burn or drown. (ibid. 101)

The stanza emphasizes the individual martyr's power to decide over her own and others' fate. Her silence can be read as protective and heroic. Moreover, the emphasis on power deconstructs the martyr as a victim and allows for the whole debate of Mennonites as constant victims to be challenged. The martyr is presented as willful and strong in the decision to be silent. This silence expresses a power over the authorities and deconstructs the martyr as a victim.

The third poem that is left without dedication is called "Repenting." It challenges one martyr's conviction to die just moments before death.

[1] If
     at the last minute
     (lascivious tongues of flame
     licking your skin
     caressing your quivering arms and legs)

[2] you suddenly want to live
     not die
     not for the whole world
     not even for Almighty God's
     truth, what for God's sake can you do. (ibid. 117; parentheses in original)

The use of the second person pronoun implies a dialogic situation between the speaker and the martyr. Therefore, the focus is on the past; the persona tries to comprehend the martyr's decision

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[99] This question relates to contemporary debates on terrorism and the connection extremist groups try to draw between what Mitchell calls "predatory martyrdom" and acts of terrorism (2012: 2).

to die in light of the enormous pain s/he suffers during death. The conditional "if" signifies the speaker's doubts at the unnamed martyr's resolution to die. The repeated use of the negating form in the second to fourth line of stanza two demarcate another strategy to express the speaker's challenge of the martyr's wish to die. The use of the idiom "for God's sake" has two functions in this context. First, it emphasizes the martyr's religious feelings. Second, it's contemporary use as an expression of annoyance or surprise, indicates the speaker's impatience with the martyr who claims to be willing to die. The persona questions the usefulness of martyrdom altogether by asking whether an individual death can become important for future generations. Consequently, these first two stanzas are most explicit in the whole section of *Dangerous Elements*, because they challenge a construction of death by martyrdom as a useful cultural memory that can serve as a site of identification. Although the speaker in "Repenting" never directly relates the martyr's individual death to a contemporary context, the fourth stanza again undermines the effects of the martyr's death as minimal.

[4]   Blades of grass shudder
      Trees dissolve in smoke. Above you
      the birdwings' muffled drumbeat
      whispers the dirge: too late
      too late   it's
      too late. (ibid. 117; ellipsis in original)

The speaker returns to her question, already posed in the title poem, "Dangerous elements: a warning" of whether anyone is served by the violent deaths of Anabaptists. In "Repenting" the answer is negative, assuming that the martyr's own insight into the futility of their death comes only at the end of their lives when they are already "lashed to the stake" with their "mouth aching screwed shut," and their "blood pounding" (ibid. 117). The repetition of the phrase "too late" seems almost like a mockery, considering that the previous lines express the persona's belief that the death of the martyrs had an effect only on their direct environment: the grass that is trampled by the crowd watching the execution or the trees that are momentarily blurred from sight by the smoke of the fire.

The poem "Live Burial" continues to express the persona's disbelief in the self-sacrifice of the Anabaptist martyrs. The poem is dedicated to Anneken van den Hove[100] who was buried

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[100] In Klassen's poem the date is given as 1592. However, the story can only be found in the listings of 1597 in the *Martyrs Mirror* (van Bracht 1938: 1093ff).

alive after her refusal to recant. In the first stanza the speaker reconstructs van den Hove's decision to remain steadfast in her belief. The second and third stanzas express the speaker's astonishment at the martyr's will to die.

> [2] […]
>   I find you too adamant, Anneken.
>   Incomprehensible.
>
> [3]   Aren't you afraid
>   when the earth closes its cold arms
>   around you, cradles you
>   clogging your nostrils, clamping
>   its weight on your warm limbs? (ibid. 115; indentation in original)

As in other poems the speaker directly addresses van den Hove with the second person singular pronoun, creating a sense of closeness and intimacy, which is not provided by the original engraving that shows van den Hove's burial – her head barely over the ground, priests and a crowd of curious people standing around her (van Braght 1938: 1094). The question about van den Hove's emotional state at the moment of death sounds almost cynical in its detailed description of her suffocation. Stanzas five to seven assume an almost aggressive tone, confronting van den Hove with a direct question.

> [5] Or do you really believe
>
> [6] your song, a silver bell
>   will rise
>   glide through the stubborn sod
>   immortal
>   irresistible
>
> [7] a melodious witness
>   an echo
>   a sharp mercurial flame
>   searing with its razor edge
>   the whole penitent earth? (Klassen 1998: 115)

Similar to "Repenting" the persona questions the usefulness of the individual's death, ascertaining that there will be no more than an echo left after generations have past. Additionally, the speaker's evaluation of van den Hove as "too adamant" and "incomprehensible" in stanza two, denies this particular martyr's death any lasting meaning.

Taken together Klassen's martyr poems vary in their approach to the subject. While several of them focus on small details of the individual martyrs' lives, they deconstruct them as cultural icons and emphasize their roles as mothers or wives. In this way the poems turn a cultural myth into a story that can be translated into a contemporary context. The aspect of continuity is important in many of the poems, emphasized by the use of contrasts, direct address of the reader or the martyr, and the frequent use of the word "too." In some of the poems the tone becomes almost sarcastic, seemingly mocking the individual martyrs decision to die for their faith. This challenge to the martyrs' memory is expressed by the use of relative clauses, questions, and negations that ultimately present the martyr as fanatic or foolish idealist. However, as the 23 poems in *Dangerous Elements* indicate, there are narratives beyond victimization that gain importance for the contemporary Mennonite readership. Stories of the early beginnings of the movement are important, and yet the focus on martyrdom and suffering might not offer the most important aspect in the history of Mennonites. As the title poem "Dangerous elements: a warning" suggests, a sense of stability and community can also be claimed when focusing on the development of the movement, instead of its attempted destruction.

2.4.2 Translating Martyrdom for Contemporary Readers in Audrey Poetker-Thiessen's *standing all night through*

> out of so many martyrs
> how do we live
> (Poetker-Thiessen 1992: 15)

Audrey Poetker-Thiessen's poetry collection *standing all night through*, published in 1992 by the Winnipeg-based publisher Turnstone Press,[101] contains 38 poems in three sections. It displays Frederick Stephen Gouthro's painting *Near the Forks* on the cover. The painting was used as a motif on the Manitoba stamp for the Canada Post issue "Canada, Our Home and Native Land" in 1992, commemorating Canada's 125th anniversary. It portrays a woman in the foreground watching a gathering of people across the river in the middle of the picture and a church, several houses and a mill in the background of the picture.[102] The use of this commemoration picture, next to the choice of publisher, implies a deep embeddedness of the collection of poems in the local prairie Manitoba culture. Furthermore, there is a religious connotation indicated by the cover picture on the one hand – two people in the crowd across the river wear angles wings and seemingly baptize or preach – and the epigraph, on the other. The latter contains three short referential quotes, one from the Song of Solomon, the second from John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) and the third from C.S. Lewis' *The Pilgrim's Regress* (1933), the latter a response to Bunyan's work. In varying degrees all of them focus on a character seeking guidance on a pilgrimage. Therefore, we can interpret the use of Gouthro' painting and the epigraph as an implication of the poems' quest for orientation.

The poems address central questions of belonging in reference to Mennonite martyrdom. There are nine poems that directly or indirectly reference martyrdom throughout the whole collection (Poetker-Thiessen 1992: 11, 12, 15, 19, 34, 48, 52, 80, 83). Covington argues that there is no question that the martyr stories remain important elements of Mennonite cultural identities (2011: 476). Yet it often remains unclear, how they can be translated into a contemporary context. One of the most pressing questions addressed in Poetker-Thiessen is

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[101] Turnstone Press has since its establishment in 1976 been known for publishing primarily authors from Manitoba. Because of the high frequency of Mennonite writers in southern Manitoba, many of them have published with Turnstone.

[102] As we see the woman only from behind, it is not entirely clear whether she is merely watching the crowd or whether she is praying, as the position of her right hand might suggest. The perspective allows the spectator to identify with the woman in the foreground, while the focus remains on the crowd in the middle of the picture.

how to create meaning out of the martyrdom stories. In one of the first poems in *standing all night through* a speaker asks "out of so many martyrs | how do we live," a question that becomes a central theme throughout the poems. The direct translation of past events into a contemporary context, the use of the present tense, the frequent use of enjambment without any punctuation or capitalization are characteristic of Poetker-Thiessen's style and serve to emphasize the speakers' attempts at creating new meanings out of stories of the past. Additionally, none of the individual poems carries a title, which allows for a reading of them as interconnected.[103]

One of the most important questions that will pervade throughout the following analysis is raised in the poem "*who is this*." The poem marks the beginning of a cycle of poems within the first section.[104] In an exploration of the past the persona stumbles across the martyr history and asks

[9] out of so many martyrs
     how do we live (Poetker-Thiessen 1992: 15)

These last lines in the poem emphasize the persona's confusion about martyrdom and its integration into a contemporary context. The use of the present tense and the reflection on martyrdom indicate the persona's temporal detachment from martyrdom itself. In the previous stanza, the speaker determines that

[8] we have reached light
         have not reached day
         follow foxfire
         find graveyards. (ibid.; indentation in original)

The lines describe the exploration of the past, granting that the long journey has brought light, which can be translated into knowledge, wisdom, or orientation, but has also led astray.[105] Stanza eight implies that a community addressed in the first-person plural has eventually chosen a wrong direction indicating that the Anabaptist movement and the following generations of Mennonites have not always made productive decisions or may have followed advice that was

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[103] To make it easier for the reader to retrieve the poems under discussion, I will refer to the poems by using the first (words of the first) line.

[104] All of the 26 poems in this cycle are connected by the use of letters of the alphabet prior to the individual poems.

[105] The term foxfire describes a bioluminescence that is created by some species of fungi that are attached to decaying wood.

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not sustainable. Furthermore, the subtle criticism indicates a historical development of the community that began with martyrdom and that continually returns to the stories of that period, which are intricately connected with death. Yet pertaining to the collection's central question of how to deal with narratives of the past that emphasize death and suffering, the speaker ascertains that the community has not "reached day," thereby criticizing the very interpretations of martyrdom stories.

In the poem's second stanza the persona explores meaning more generally.

[2]   meaning in the beginning
      it was a thought
      thought hard
      almost a vision (ibid. 14)

The transition from meaning to vision mirrors the transition from the use of "thought" as noun to its use as a verb. The stanza does not provide us with a timeline – "the beginning" could both signify the beginning of the persona's own thought process on meaning, the beginning of an era, or the development of a community. Yet a biblical reference provides the context against which to interpret meaning in "*who is this*." The poem is introduced, interspersed and completed by stanzas written in italics that, read together, form the following questions and statements.

[1]   *who is this coming from the wilderness*
      leaning on her love?

[3]   *there is a light up ahead*

[7]   *not a star but a light anyway*

[9]   *death cannot celebrate thee*
      the grave cannot praise thee (ibid. 14–15; emphasis in original)

Stanzas one and nine are direct references to the Bible's Song of Solomon (8: 5) and the Book of Isaiah (38: 18) respectively. Stanzas three and seven, while not being direct references to biblical passages, imply a biblical context. Connecting these biblical passages with stanza two's quest for "meaning in the beginning," we can interpret the beginning as that defined in the New Testament, a connection that is validated by Poetker-Thiessen's epigraph to *standing all night through*. The use of "meaning in the beginning" in stanza two may relate to Jesus' birth, a story that is strongly related to the image of a light that guides the three kings to the birth place.

One aspect that is striking in connection with the collection's first section [106] is the relationship to the past that is suggested by the use of "&" in "& i want to hear menno." The connector "&" suggests that the section adds an aspect to something that was said earlier, which is not true textually, because the section marks the beginning of the whole collection. However, the use of the Mennonite community's eponym evokes a historical frame of reference that allows for an interpretation of "&" as a connector to moments in history, from the biblical story of Jesus' birth to the influence of Menno Simons for the early Anabaptist community.

The first poem in the collection, called "this is the road," has only one stanza with 16 lines. It discusses migration by exploring the image of the road that "waters carved | out of granite" (ibid. 3). The persona observes that "this is the road | we travelled on" (ibid. 3), an image that provides a sense of community, first, by using the image of a road that serves as a connector between different places. Second, the use of the first person plural pronoun links the persona to a community. On the road the persona acknowledges cultural memories of ancestors, symbolized by "stones" and "pebbles | they left behind" (ibid. 3). However, the cultural memories of the ancestors that travelled the same road become a stumbling block.

[1] they trip our feet
send us sprawling
stuttering on
the essential road
the way our words
catching on each sharp
edged rock our torn
skin our bruises (ibid. 3)

This last passage of the initial short poem is symptomatic for the following poems in the first section. It expresses the persona's distrust of and confusion by the cultural memories of her ancestors that cannot provide distinct cultural identities. On the contrary, the cultural memories are felt to be a burden that prevents the speaker from moving forward, and they mark a path that is complicated by "sharp| edged rocks." However, as line twelve expresses, the road of the

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[106] I will mainly focus on an analysis of poems in the first section of Poetker-Thiessen's collection, since it offers the most intriguing questions and aspects for discussion in connection to my focus on cultural memories of martyrdom.

ancestors is the "essential road," the word "essential" emphasizing that despite the cultural memories' destructive nature, the persona acknowledges that they are central to the community.

A very specific Mennonite context is evoked in the second poem, "here is abram paetkau's place." The "we" that remains ambiguous in the previous poem translates into a Mennonite community in this one, because the name "Paetkau" is a frequently used family name among Mennonites from Europe. In addition, the poem references "abraham toews" and "p froese," again typical Mennonite last names.[107] Additionally, it talks about a "mennonite church | in nikolaipol" (ibid. 4). Apart from these direct references to a "Mennonite"[108] context, the place name serves as a reference to a Mennonite settlement in Russia.[109] Different from Klassen's implicit references to the Mennonite community, Poetker-Thiessen explicitly connects her personas' exploration of the past with the Mennonite community. The poem "here is abram" not only evokes Russia as a former Mennonite settlement, but also Canada.

[2]   abram went north
        & froze to death
        his son stepped
        on a bomb & died
        in Leningrad
        his wife came to canada
        & fell & broke her hip
        & walked with a cane
        & died in Winnipeg (ibid. 4)

This second stanza shows individual Mennonites' efforts to survive, while contrasting the tragic death of Abram and his son in Russia during the war with Abram's wife's mundane experience of slipping on the frozen ground in Winnipeg. The persona thereby links the different experiences of suffering across various contexts and places. She thereby establishes suffering as important means of identification for Mennonites, whether induced by socio-political circumstances or critical weather conditions. The topic of suffering is consistent throughout the poem, which continues to focus on "peter & meta schierling" whose children "live in uruguay"

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[107] More information on the frequency of family names among Mennonites can be found on the website of the *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (Krahn 1957).

[108] Other direct references can be found four times throughout the volume (Poetker-Thiessen 1992: 6; 13; 19; 36).

[109] For more information on Nikolaipol and other Mennonite villages in Russia, see Dirks (1906).

(ibid. 4), which was another destination for European Mennonites during the middle of the 20th century. Their migration story is likewise marked by tragedy as stanza seven shows.

[7]   julius died of typhoid fever
peter died of typhoid fever
anna died young
anna the second went into exile
jakob disappeared
david disappeared
katharina went west
justina went west
they didn't make it west. (ibid. 5)

This list of people, who either died or went missing, symbolizes Mennonites' history that was characterized by migration throughout the world in order to find a place and political system that would allow religious freedom and exemption from military service. None of the lines rhyme and yet the repetitive line structure creates a uniform metre, broken only by different grammatical structures indicating yet again the connection between past and present.

The narrative form of "here is abram" can also be witnessed in the poem "not with prayers to the dead." Here we find the names of eleven martyrs[110] – the apostles of Jesus (excluding Judas) and an account of their deaths. Stanza five simply lists the names of the apostles, shortly referencing the torture methods used on them, which creates a morbid rhythm. The persona uses a reference to the earliest martyrs and thereby connects the cultural memories of Mennonites to that of Christians in general. The twice-repeated statement "*the just live by faith*" (ibid. 11; emphasis in original) and the negation of cultural symbols' meanings for contemporary individuals in the first stanza[111] imply a challenge to the cultural memories of martyrdom as useful for contemporary Mennonites.

[6]   not the first or the last
to die before the world
is redeemed
those who live here
walk in light
& cast long shadows
we have no prophets

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[110] The names referenced in the poem are the same as the names of the apostles.

[111] The stanza begins with a list of cultural practices that the speaker denies have any meaning, such as "prayers to the dead" or the "flagellation of the flesh" (Poetker-Thiessen 1992: 11).

or princes
no incense or oblation (ibid. 12)

Stanza six emphasizes the present over the past as the words in line four and five illustrate. Lines seven to nine indicate the difficulty of translating markers of cultural identities in the past to a contemporary context, because their meaning has changed. The very last lines of stanza six and seven illustrate how these moments of time cannot be fixed in their meaning and importance for the contemporary community.

[6]   only a small moment

[7]   that moved on (ibid. 12)

The reflection that a community always just has "a small moment in time" shows how difficult it is to create cultural memories out of the death of distant generations of Mennonites. The very act of writing, of constructing, challenging and overall engaging with the past as it is done in Poetker-Thiessen's poems symbolize "cultural formations" or "figures of memory" (J. Assmann 1995: 129; 1988: 12) that ultimately serve to maintain cultural memories. Additionally, it is important that the meaning of the past is reconstructed according to the "requirements of the present" (A. Assmann 2012: 169).

The speakers in Poetker-Thiessen's poems try to adapt the cultural memories of Mennonites to a contemporary context, as one of the shortest poems in the collection, "menno is a samurai" exemplifies. The poem explores the founder and eponym of the Mennonite movement in the 16th century in war diction, referring to him as "kamikaze pilot" (Poetker-Thiessen 1992: 18). This change of historical context is an attempt at adapting the cultural memories of a leading figure in Mennonite history to a 20th-century context. However, the focus remains intact: struggle for life is the locus of existence. While this struggle was certainly central to the early Anabaptists from which the Mennonites developed, it does not comply with the contemporary conditions of Mennonite existence in Canada. Mennonites are not subject of persecution or harassment (cf. Brandt 2015: 127; Krehbiel 2010: 135).[112]

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[112]   On the contrary, their ethnicity, religion, as well as their social status allow them to merge with the largely Anglophone communities on the Canadian prairies, which have been, next to southern Ontario, a major settlement area for Mennonites since the 1870s.

In a similar fashion the speaker in "the music is elusive" reminisces directly on martyrdom as cultural site of memory, but connects it with the context of music. As the first stanza emphasizes, the music is "elusive" and "flat" (Poetker-Thiessen 1992: 19) symbolizing the elusive nature of martyrdom memories. The line breaks between lines two and four create a double meaning. The third line reveals that the music itself is not flat in the sense of being uninspired, but it may be in "flat | german," a common mistranslation of *Plautdietsch*, a dialect spoken predominantly in the north of Germany.[113] This particular poem is especially intriguing because of the use of various aesthetic markers that provide multiple meanings. Among these narrative devices are the consistent use of enjambments between stanzas, ellipses, the use of one-word stanzas (stanzas four and six) that emphasize the words "unforgiveable" and "dangerous," the repetition of the words "mercy" and "pursue" in stanza five, as well as intertextuality. The poem is the only one in the collection that directly mentions the *Martyrs Mirror*, referring to it at the end of the page in a footnote that provides concise information on the author and the content of the book. Furthermore, stanza five refers to the story of Dirk Willems, one of the best known Anabaptist martyrs among a contemporary Mennonite readership.

[5]   a parable
       in the *martyrs mirror*
       dragging mercy
       to greater mercy
       the pursued
       helping the pursuer
       who falls pursuing
       through the thin
       iced river   it is

[6]   dangerous (ibid. 19; ellipsis in original)

The reference to Willems' story provides another connection with the cultural memories of martyrdom as it is most popularly narrated among Mennonites. It therefore links the question "how do we live" (ibid. 15) to the story of a martyr that is most often interpreted as narrating

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[113] Another Mennonite author who uses this particular mistranslation is Armin Wiebe. He has become popular among Mennonites and non-Mennonites in Canada for his Gutenthal trilogy, novels that all take place in the fictional prairie town of Gutenthal, set in southern Manitoba. The trilogy consists of *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* (1984), *Murder in Gutenthal: A Schneppa Kjnals Mystery* (1991), and *The Second Coming of Yeeat Shpanst* (1995). The novels have been discussed among scholars for their inventive use of a mixture of English and German (cf. Kroeker 2001; 2003; Kuester 2009).

the key characteristics of Mennonite culture: love and forgiveness (cf. Liechty 1990). This significant story of the past is contrasted to a contemporary Mennonite context in the first stanza of the same poem.

[1]   the music is elusive
      it is flat
      german the music

[2]   is ponderous   it is

[3]   clumsy dancing
      in graveyards it is
      sun tattered wind
      worn it is a diamond
      the dirge of the bride
      sweet bitter the music
      of mennonites is
      coal in the furnace
      inside me   it is

[4]   unforgiveable (Poetker-Thiessen 1992: 19; ellipses in original)

These four stanzas work with contrasts between dancing and dying, exemplifying the strong emotions that result from the speaker's exploration of Mennonite history. The speaker tries to bring Mennonite music together with Mennonite memories of martyrdom, but in doing so fails to bridge the differences. While the music is flat and inspires clumsy dancing in graveyards it contrasts with the heroic act of saving someone's life as in the story of Willems.[114] By bringing these different contexts together – the profane act of dancing and the sublime act of saving a life – the persona emphasizes the need of finding answers to the all-pervading question "how do we live" (ibid. 15). Although the speaker pursues the answer in the same way that Willems is pursued by the prison guard in the story, the exploration of the past seems to paralyze the speaker in the quest for meaning. The focus on the past weighs heavy and does not present any guidance for living in the present. On the contrary, as the last stanza of "the music is elusive" suggests "it waits with an axe | as it calls me home" (ibid. 19). Here the persona proposes that

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[114] The story of Dirk Willems presents a man sentenced to death by torture and burning at the stake. Through circumstances unknown to the reader, Willems manages to escape from his prison cell and flees over a frozen-up lake. The guard following Willems breaks through the thin ice. At the sight of his persecutor who struggles to survive in the cold water, Willems turns around, saves the guard's life and is consequently imprisoned again, ultimately tortured and burnt (van Braght 1938: 741–42).

the cultural narratives of martyrdom may be destructive and threatening because they emphasize death and provide no guidance on how to live.

Another strategy of approaching cultural memories is presented in "all right then menno." As the tone of the poem's first line already suggests, the poem is provocative and at times aggressive, using expletives and accusations.

[1]   all right then menno
      let us speak vulgarly
      in the language of men
      you have pissed your golden arc
      of fine words
      into the gaping mouths
      of all your women (ibid. 28)

The poem offers a women's perspective on the cultural memories of "menno" and the early Anabaptist martyrs and uses a defamatory language. The persona pretends to use a diction that is, she claims, not naturally used by women and accuses Menno to have defamed women with his words. The second stanza becomes sexually explicit and more aggressive.

[3]   menno *bruder* you have held
      us up daily at the point
      of your prick before him
      whom prostitutes foretold
      who births himself of woman
      & is pulled bloody every day
      from bloody thighs messiah
      of women   emancipator
      son of woman (ibid. 28; emphasis and ellipsis in original)

The use of the German term for brother in the first line signifies the socio-cultural context of the Anabaptist brotherhood out of which Mennonites developed, whose primary languages have been Low and High German.[115] The use of German additionally emphasizes closeness between the speaker and the addressee, because they share the same cultural background and language. However, it also works as a barrier against women, since the word in its literal meaning excludes them. The poem speaks of the restricted roles of women among traditional

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[115] German is also used in other poems of *standing all night through* (Poetker-Thiessen 1992: 16; 17; 26; 29; 37; 39; 41; 42-43; 50; 56; 68; 73).

Mennonites. In stanza four the persona becomes more outspoken in her evaluation of "menno" and his failures.

[4]   come now & quit this fucking around
      car-dealer christianity
      says the daughter of menno
      let us speak comfortably together
      your sins are many
      your righteousness is the righteousness
      of the rapist   come
      menno   repent (ibid. 28; ellipses in original)

The drastic comparison between Menno and a rapist serves as a means of deconstructing Menno as a saint.[116] While it does not accuse Menno of sexual harassment, it claims that he is fallible in his sense of righteousness. Using the accusative tone and diction, the persona attempts to deconstruct the cultural memory of Menno as a saint. The connection between Menno's sexuality and women in stanza three is elaborated and stanza four shows that the sexual context is not important by itself, but serves as a means to portray Menno as human being, affected by longing and human failures. The poem serves to deconstruct the cultural memory of martyrdom itself in order to take away some of the paralyzing quality of its narration. The very last stanza of the poem undermines this aspect even more.

[6]   *komm sünder* we will talk plain
      with the wine & the *tweeback*
      under the sugar tree
      i confess i am lonely for you
      a woman lonely
      for her first lover
      i want your kiss son of man
      though your sins are scarlet
      but the harvest is past
      the summer has ended
      & we are not filled (ibid. 29; emphasis in original)

This last stanza is demarcated from the previous ones because of its gentle tone and less explicit diction. It mirrors previous stanzas in its use of German terms that again provide a sense of closeness and a clear reference to a Mennonite context, emphasized by the word "*tweeback*" –

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[116] This aspect is particularly emphasized in the poem's last stanza. Here the speaker affirms that Menno's "sins are scarlet" (ibid. 29) and must therefore not be ignored. This allows the contemporary individual to relate to Menno more closely, now that he has been deconstructed as a cultural icon and narrated as an ordinary human being.

a common Mennonite bread roll that is often served at special occasions[117] – and a general biblical connotation emphasized by the reference to bread and wine. Yet the following and completing lines of the stanza reverberate with earlier poems in that they refer to the past, in this poem symbolized by the fading summer. The exploration of the question "how do we live" (ibid. 15) is translated into a love story. The poem's final line tries to provide an answer to the question by claiming "we are not filled" (ibid. 29), indicating the lack of orientation and meaning that the speaker derives from the quest into Mennonites' martyrdom stories.

The poem "for a long time" is the first one in the collection to offer a meaningful use of the cultural memories of martyrdom. It consists of only one stanza with 26 lines. The tone is characterized by an urgency that is in turn established by a fast rhythm.

[1]   i will make a legend
      out of cabbage soup
      & history out of crockinole
      i will spin folk dances
      from the catechism
      when i gather the scattered
      when i remove the *eltesta* (ibid. 34; emphasis in original)

This making of legend can be translated into the construction of cultural memories. It emphasizes the importance of the contemporary context, because, as A. Assmann argues, memories, like legends, are reconstructed from a contemporary context, designed to meet the needs of a community in the present (2012: 169). The means that the speaker intends to use in order to create something new are culturally relevant to Mennonites – cabbage soup, the children's play crockinole,[118] folk dances, the catechism, and the reference to the church elder are, if not unique to Mennonites, culturally characteristic. It is particularly relevant for this poem to consider the female gender of the persona. She claims to deconstruct the traditionally male-centred cultural memories of Mennonites. In addition, her claim to replace the church elder "by [her]self" as she announces in line 14, emphasizes a deconstruction of the traditional male power structures among Mennonites that revolve around male historical figures, such as

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[117] The connection between *tweeback* and the Mennonite context can be easily drawn when considering the fact that a German publisher, Heinrich Siemens, who specialises in Mennonite literature, uses the name *Tweeback Verlag* for his company.

[118] On their website, the company references the fact that crockinole – spelled crokinole – has been particularly popular among Mennonites and Amish. It even has been rumoured that the game was invented by Amish or Mennonites (Kelly, Wayne & Mr. Crokinole 1998).

Menno Simons and popular male martyrs.[119] Her own way of leading the community emphasizes dance and love and therefore challenges the traditional martyr stories of suffering and death.

> [1] i will lead you
>   in the dance o my people
>   i will teach you
>   when we dance the legend
>   the geography of our love
>   & you will buffet the grave
>   with your laughter
>   when i annul your covenant
>   with death when i abolish
>   the ban when i make
>   the argument with the grave
>   of no account (Poetker-Thiessen 1992: 34)

The speaker deconstructs the cultural narratives of death that she claims lay like a ban over the community. The deconstruction of martyr stories is however only one step. Instead of leaving the community in limbo, the speaker proposes to lead it and teach it the meaning of compassion. Similar to the first part of the poem, the persona suggests keeping the cultural memories of artefacts, but to discard of the narratives of death, solemn memories, which need to be supplemented by compassion and lightheartedness in order to create meaningful cultural identities in a contemporary context.

The poem "then i will proclaim" directly picks up where the previous one leaves off. The connection between the poems is both on the level of content, but also on a formal level, the latter demarcated by the temporal adverb "then" at the beginning of the poem. The speaker worships "menno [a]s a joyful singer" proclaiming that "his song is a ship | on the sea of death" (ibid. 35). The second stanza praises Menno's words for their potential to become meaningful for the community and to establish cultural memories. This aspect of continuity is emphasized by the repetition in the fifth stanza that appears like a prayer.

> [5] menno repeats himself   we repeat ourselves

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[119] There are several female martyrs in the *Martyrs Mirror* whose stories were also recorded, as the collection by Snyder and Huebert Hecht on *Profiles of Anabaptist Women* (1996c) shows. "In total, 270 of the 930 martyrs, or 30 percent were female" in the *Martyrs Mirror*, which is "a high proportion in comparison to Calvinist female martyrs" (ibid. 407). Despite these numbers, it is certainly true that the most popular stories for the contemporary Mennonite community in North America focus on male martyrs.

chews his cabbage twice	we chew our cabbage twice
he does he does	we do we do (ibid. 35)

This repetitive rhythm is mirrored throughout the whole poem. The repetition appears chorus-like. While the column on the left describes Menno's actions, the one on the right repeats them prayer-like in first-person plural. However, the stanza may also be read as ironic. The words in the first line express that Menno repeats himself, the same way that the chorus repeats what has been said. Additionally, the reference to the twice-chewed cabbage satirizes the practice of repetition. This could be interpreted as a reference not only to a single utterance, but more globally to cultural memories that are repeated by and about Menno and that become monotone and meaningless as the last line indicates.

The concluding poem of the first section, "remember our generations," argues that the cultural memories of Mennonites need to be preserved, albeit in a different form and by different means. The first lines reference the martyr experience and urges the reader to

[1]   remember our generations
      remember when we burned
      & where we buried (ibid. 52)

The speaker is careful to point out the importance of shared cultural memories and acknowledges memories of the martyrs as important for the community. However, as the poem continues the persona points to other sites of identification, such as settlements, farming, the seasons, images of food, and flowers. In the second half of the poem the speaker turns to individual memories of intimacy and closeness, which are intersected by images of farming.

[1]   […] remember the old woman's
      hands the spots the tender skin
      the needing wanting remember
      the one face only that you
      long for the grains of corn
      dropped in the earth […] (ibid. 52)

The persona's direct address demarcates it from previously analyzed poems, not so much because of the use of the second-person pronoun, but because it does not directly address Menno, but appears to speak to the reader. This last poem of the first section turns its focus away from Menno as addressee and martyrdom history as primary site of identification and provides alternatives to the cultural memories of the martyrs. The orientation towards

something new is also witnessed by the reference to a new generation in the last third of the poem: "the children | remember the child's crying | by the green tree" (ibid. 52). However, the persona believes that the past will be important, as the last three lines show.

[1]   […] the low
      german tongue the love that forgives
      remember. (ibid. 52)

The poem shows how memory is always reconstructed and modeled according to the needs of the present (J. Assmann 1992: 41–42) and how literature itself takes part in the formation of cultural memories (cf. V. Nünning and A. Nünning 1996).

The German language, the use of names typical among Mennonites and important migratory sites in Mennonite history are identified as specific markers of Mennonite cultural identities in Poetker-Thiessen's poems. They provide meaningful connections between contemporary Mennonites and Mennonites in the past. The poems in the first section of Poetker-Thiessen's collection explore the question of how to live with the past. The final poem in this section suggests looking at the present when defining needs for cultural memories and narratives that become meaningful for contemporary Mennonites. Other poems lament that the focus on martyrdom offers no answer to the question for the contemporary community, but only paralyzes. Poetker-Thiessen's poems are more explicit than Klassen's in exploring the connection between past and present, which brings forth various results. Formally, we encounter a run-on style, that forgoes any capitalization. Furthermore, the direct address of Menno or, as in the final poem, of the reader, serves as another means to connect both past and present – the past of the martyrs with the present of the speakers and that of the readers. A frequent use of repetition also evokes the past and creates a sense of continuity, while the use of ellipsis creates a metaphorical space to demarcate the differences between the martyr past and the 20th-century reality of contemporary Mennonites. In terms of context, many poems display a high degree of confusion, alternated by anger and the need to seek out different ways of dealing with the martyr past. The contrasting of different historical contexts in poems such "menno is a samurai" and "all right then menno" serves as another indication of the speakers' various attempts at creating new meaning in reflecting stories of the past.

2.5.   Cultural Memories and (Post-) Colonial Realities

While the cultural memory of martyrdom and victimhood is vivid, even if contested in its meaning for contemporary Mennonites, the narrativization of Mennonites' colonial past has received less attention. As pointed out above, scholars in the field of Mennonite Studies rarely focus on this aspect of Mennonite history, with only a few exceptions, of which even fewer explore Mennonites' responsibility as settler-invaders in Canada (cf. J. G. Braun 2013b; Driedger 1972; D. Giesbrecht 2001). At the same time, we find a number of fictional texts that focus on this aspect of Mennonite history. In the following analyses, I will explore the imperialist structure that exists in the writing of two Mennonite authors.

The discussion of literary fictions as marginal in the discourse of colonialism is eminent in Edward Said's study on *Orientalism* (1978), as Gymnich points out (2005: 121). However, literary criticism is most prolific in the postcolonial context (ibid.), because fictional writing does not primarily represent events and attitudes, but actively shapes them.

> [L]iterary texts may contribute to the construction and perpetuation of an imperialist ideology by developing ideologically charged concepts of the self and the other, by organizing the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized imaginatively, thus influencing the readers' perception of colonial expansion. (ibid. 127)

Keeping Gymnich's position on literary fictions' potential of shaping colonial ideologies in mind, the analysis of the narrativization of the relationship between Mennonites and non-Mennonites in Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many* will explore how the Mennonites' Indigenous neighbours in the novel are constructed as culturally inferior, an aspect that I will be focusing on in my analyses of Wiebe's novel and Birdsell's short stories.

> Literary representations of the relationship between colonizer and colonized […] may reproduce and even generate concepts that support the notion of an opposition between the self and the other: In the process of 'othering', the imperial 'centre' constructs the colonial 'periphery' as its opposite, creating dichotomies like 'rational' vs. 'irrational', 'civilized' vs. 'barbaric', 'developing' vs. 'static' and in that way legitimizes imperialist control. (ibid. 124)

An analysis of postcolonial fiction entails, Gymnich argues, the political dimension of the texts: the pointing out of the injustices and paradoxes created by imperialism (ibid. 133).

Apart from the political dimension, I want to explore the aesthetic value, an aspect of analysis that has received little attention in postcolonial literary criticism (ibid. 122). Birk and

Neumann suggest analyzing the relationship between different characters in fiction (2002: 123) and to look for aspects of the pluralisation of identities (ibid. 121). Both aspects are particularly prominent in the analysis of Birdsell's short stories in *Agassiz Stories*, that show how the Métis family father tries to gain access to the cultural memories of several communities. His failure ultimately results in a pluralisation of identities that turn out to be detrimental to his own personal development as well as that of his children.

Both Rudy Wiebe's novel and Sandra Birdsell's collection of short stories explore this aspect, yet from different positions. In the analyses below I will look at the process and the consequences of colonization both from the colonizer's point of view, mostly represented in Wiebe's narrative, and the point of view of the colonized. [120] The latter are presented in Birdsell's stories, some of them told by Maurice Lafrenière, a Métis character and narrator. While Wiebe's novel has primarily been discussed as a cultural testimony of Mennonite communities in Canada (H. Giesbrecht 1981: 51; Suderman 1981: 70), Birdsell's writing has been more graciously explored for its literary merit as well. Both authors share a fascination for Aboriginal history and cultures. However, Birdsell's reasons for the exploration of the relationship between Indigenous people and Mennonites in her stories can be found in her biography: As a child of a Métis father and Mennonite mother she grew up with both cultures. Her stories reflect this constellation and show a keen interest in the intricacies of relationships that are often complicated by the variety of expectations that were partly inherited via cultural narratives. The stories explore the intricacies of different cultural memories in relation to social hierarchies. The lack of shared cultural memories for the parents, is shown to be destructive over generations. Wiebe's novel works with imperialist notions that are deeply ingrained in the fictional Mennonite community.

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[120] However, there will be no discussion around the "writing back-"paradigm as discussed in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffins' seminal publication *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), which has been constructing Native writings as marginal and always in relation to the dominant centre. In his essay on "First Nations Literature in Canada: Writing Back and Writing Home" Ha. Lutz argues that Native literature should not be understood as reaction to imperialist writing. "If we are to decolonize our minds, we have to start to listen to Native people first" (1996: 129).

2.5.1 Identities in Crisis in Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many*

> [T]he basic answers were known.
> (Wiebe 1962: 16)

Rudy Wiebe's first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, published in 1962, caused a furore among Canadian Mennonites. It had been the first novel published in English by a Mennonite writer, which became successful beyond the Mennonite community and national borders.[121] However, Mennonite readers reacted strongly to it.[122] Herbert Giesbrecht, who wrote one of the early reviews that focused not on the moral or ethical value for the Mennonite community, but on the literary merit of Wiebe's first novel, reckons the criticism "both relevant and irrelevant, both just and grossly unfair. Sometimes, amusingly enough, the most stringent and ready-made criticism has come from folk who had themselves only heard of the novel or, at best, merely dipped into it here and there" (H. Giesbrecht 1981: 51).[123] A similar approach can be found in Suderman, who pleads "Wiebe's novel must be judged seriously as a novel, not as a portrait of the Mennonites that should have glossed their faults with more skill" (1981: 70).

Wiebe's novel is set at the heyday of the Second World War. The chaos of this historical event that structures the narrative on a temporal level is contrasted with what at first appears to be an amicable small Mennonite settlement on the Canadian prairies, with "the bush between them and the world" (Wiebe 1962: 48). The novel is divided into four sections, structured along the four seasons, beginning with spring. The Mennonite farming community in the fictional district of Wapiti, Saskatchewan, is represented by the third-person extradiegetic narrator Thomas Wiens, a young sober Mennonite, who is expecting his conscription daily. Apart from Thom, narrator and main locus of focalization, there are different focalizers throughout the

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[121] Canadian Studies' scholar Janne Korkka praises the novel because it initiated a "significant tradition of Mennonites writing fiction in English" (2010: 36).

[122] In her 2013 essay, Spicher Kasdorf remembers that the publication of *Peace Shall Destroy Many* with a "worldly press" was "so transgressive that Wiebe became an exile" (2013b: 7). While she clarifies that the exile story is not entirely truthful, at least in its suggested dramatism – "Really, [Wiebe] had to endure a conversation with his bosses at the *Mennonite Brethren Herald* that was so awkward for everyone in the room that, in the end, Wiebe knew what he had to do and resigned" (ibid. 7) – the story certainly reflects the turmoil that the novel's publication caused within the Mennonite community.

[123] H. Giesbrecht openly dismisses the criticism of the novel as destructive for the Mennonite community in general. In contrast to many earlier comments on *Peace Shall Destroy Many* his review focuses on the novel's strength and weaknesses (1981). In an interview, Wiebe himself said that he would like to change some of the aspects of the novel in retrospect, such as the form and the use of language, which he feels are "stilted" and "contorted" (Neuman 1981: 227).

novel. Wiebe's novel focuses on Thom Wiens' spiritual and moral development and uses aspects such as the Mennonite community's attitude towards nonresistance and their separation from the world to show how Thom's attempt at identifying with the cultural memories of the Wapiti Mennonites does not succeed, because they are archaic and do not provide him with the means to interpret his contemporary environment. I argue that the failure to adapt the cultural memories of Mennonite ancestors ultimately leads to an identity crisis among Wapiti Mennonites, triggered by the paradox that is created by their ideal of a separate life that contrasts with multiple political and cultural challenges. My analysis will show how the basic assumptions about memories and identities as stable have created a myth of tradition among the Mennonites in Wiebe's novel that stands in contrast with their contemporary living conditions and therefore fails to provide the community with cultural identities. Moreover, the attempt to barricade themselves against outside influences produces a paradox that cannot be solved and ultimately results in a crisis of identification. These thematic foci will be substantiated by an exploration of the narrative elements used to illustrate the failure of identification and the creation of cultural memories. I will therefore specifically look at the ways that notions of outside and inside challenge each other, the use of narrative devices to invoke the *other*, and the representation of individual characters and character constellations.

This chapter's preceding quote from Wiebe's novel, "the basic answers were known" (ibid. 16) provides the angle from which I start my exploration of the inside and outside forces that constantly challenge each other on a structural as well as textual level in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. Being asked by his younger brother about the reason why Thom is not taking part in the war, Thom starts to reminisce about his faith, which is deeply rooted in the cultural memories of his community. "Like his elders, he believed life's answers explainable to a child, even if the answer grew more complicated as the child grew, it could never basically change, for the basic answers were known" (ibid. 16). The passage portrays three important aspects of the community's cultural memories: Firstly, the integration of the individual in the community is structured along a hierarchy that values the knowledge of the "elders," who are responsible for providing *the* interpretation of the community's cultural memories. Secondly, their interpretation is subsequently passed on to the younger generation and thereby maintained. Thirdly, the interpretation of the specific cultural memories of the Wapiti Mennonites is constructed as stable and unchanging. These aspects of the construction of cultural memories

in *Peace Shall Destroy Many* are important in understanding the community's wish to pertain their identity as stable. The longing for a "colony of true Mennonites" (ibid. 132) is embodied by the community's Deacon Peter Block. Block is a traditionalist who rules the community with a firm hand. He is initially admired by Thom for his strength (ibid. 14), decisiveness (ibid. 59), persistent work ethic,[124] from which all other Wapiti Mennonites profited immediately after their arrival in the district (ibid. 20), and his certainty that their Mennonite ancestors in Russia have "found the *correct* way of acting" (ibid. 203; my emphasis). It is through him that the community seems to be stable and unified, "one body crying with one voice" (ibid. 50).

However, a closer inspection of the character and his motives, reveals that Block, despite being the driving force of establishing the community that closely resembles what "their fathers had known in the golden days of Russia" (ibid. 124), ends up failing to achieve his ideal. While memories of Russia reappear time and again in the novel, it is mostly with an emphasis on the hardships during the Revolution or the resulting poverty and famine (ibid. 21, 26, 46, 58, 127ff). Yet Block has a vision of building a community that relies on the "right moral and spiritual action" their fathers in Russia had determined (ibid. 203). He wants to maintain the cultural memories of his ancestors as closely as possible. This entails the Wapiti community remaining separate from the world and does not engage in the war by pleading "[i]t is against [their] conscience" to take up arms (ibid. 14). However, this apparently coherent and stable identity construction is challenged on a structural level of the text right from the beginning. Despite their efforts to shield themselves off from the outside world, the world is always already breaching their borders, as the beginning of chapter one demonstrates.

> The yellow planes passed overhead swiftly and in thunder. Thom Wiens had heard their growing roar above the scrape of the plow on stones, but the trees hedged them from sight. Then suddenly, as he twisted on the halted plow to look back, they were over the poplars, flying low and fast. (ibid. 11)

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[124] The work ethic of Mennonite settlers in Canada has become a characteristic feature recognized by both Mennonites and non-Mennonites. French Canadian author Gabrielle Roy devotes a short article on Mennonites in *Fragiles Lumières de la Terre*, originally published in 1978, a collection of stories, essays and articles. Roy reflects on an old Mennonite woman, whom she met in a hospital shortly before the woman's death. What seemed remarkable about the woman to Roy was that "she was troubled not by fear or regret at leaving her life, but by the shame of lying there in fine white sheets doing nothing, with so much work to be done back on the little farm and no one to do it" (1982: 43).

The sudden presence of Canadian war planes practically forces itself on the small farming community, which is emphasized by the passage's contrasts: Machine (the air planes) and nature (the trees that shield the community), speed (the swift motion of the plane) and slowness (the movement of the plow), as well as high and low sound levels. These contrasts mirror the dialectic relationship between inside and outside that has been characteristic for traditional Mennonite fiction (cf. Tiessen 1998: 500).

Despite Thom's firm stance that all soldiers are "[a]cclaimed murderers" (Wiebe 1962: 11), there is a debate among the young men in Wapiti whether Mennonites' insistence on nonresistance is still timely. Additionally, there are some critical voices that carefully point to the fact that the Wapiti Mennonites even profit from the war effort. Because Mennonites have been participating in the production of food and clothes for soldiers, and because the war prices are high, they have almost cleared their debts towards the Canadian government, granted to cover their travel expenses (ibid. 22, 30) and have become economically successful (ibid. 47). The paradoxical situation of the Wapiti Mennonites becomes particularly prominent through Joseph Dueck, the teacher, who urges Thom to consider the Mennonites' role in the war effort (ibid. 45–46). In a later passage Thom himself muses about his community's profits from the war.

> "The whole world is now in it [the war]. We can't avoid it. Father raises pigs because the price is high: some men charge up the Normandy beaches last Tuesday with our bacon in their stomachs. Pete Block can stay home because Mr. Block's farm is big enough to be called an essential industry. […] Alternative service is necessary to winning the War. Wars can only be won with some fighting, so we divide the job: I supply you with bacon to eat and shoes to wear and you go kill the Germans – for the good of both of us"
> Thom shuddered. […] "Only, we have the better part. We don't take any risks – and grow rich besides." (ibid. 47)

The passage elucidates how the Wapiti Mennonites are profiting economically from the war and how that creates a crisis of conscience for some of them.

Furthermore, the struggle between inside and outside is not only presented as a conflict the Mennonite community has with the non-Mennonite world. On the contrary, a dialectic dynamic is also prevalent within the community. Several of the members of the Wapiti Mennonites have fallen into disgrace. Hank Unger is part of the Canadian Air Force and thus held in contempt by many. Similarly, his older brother Herb lives as a bachelor, who picks fights and cannot

measure up in terms of work ethic – his fences are in need of repair, (ibid. 66) – and cleanliness with the standard set by other Mennonites (ibid. 27). Moreover, Herman Paetkau, due to being an illegitimate child, lives in exile (ibid. 114). Ultimately, after 14 years of living in isolation, he marries Madeleine Moosomin, a Métis neighbour, who converted to Christianity, but is not accepted within the Mennonite church (ibid. 115). Joseph Dueck, the local teacher also stirs up a controversy in the community by using English for a meeting of the Youth Committee (ibid. 55ff) and for questioning the community's position on nonresistance (ibid. 45–46). Interwoven into the main plot of the novel, these narratives indicate the high level of conflicts within the Mennonite community and they disrupt the notion that "[t]he basic answers are known." In order to salvage the ideal community, those critics and rebels are denied full membership in the community. The cultural memories that Block and the other elders cling to, do not provide the unity they are supposed to. Although forgetting is a crucial aspect of remembering (A. Assmann 2010: 97) and a "dominant collective memory tends to unify and harmonise" aspects of memory in order to arrive at a collective identity (Neumann 2005: 111; my translation), the cultural memories pertained to in Wapiti plainly ignore the contemporary living conditions and thus create a paradox that eventually leads to an identity crisis.

The outside world that is characterized by the events of the War, has entered the community in the form of radio news that frequently interrupt the narrative to report the latest developments. It therefore also breaches the "myth of the community's monovocality" (van Toorn 1995: 17).

> "The war is at last crossing the English Channel to the Germans. As I speak…" The reporter spoke almost calmly, for behind the thin film of his voice blared the sounds of war, the whining, the roars, the explosions, the splashing, the staccatos, the drones, and sometimes, far away, a scream. (Wiebe 1962: 42)

The radio news alternates with the quiet tranquility of Thom's nightly conversation with his neighbour Annamarie. They are driving a horse-drawn buggy up to the fire lookout. The description of their surroundings markedly contrasts the descriptions of the war scenario.

> For miles the trees hemmed like walls, only the narrow road over the rock-rumped earth and the wriggling path of the sky. Then, as if wiped by a cosmic hand, the bush was gone, the ground plunged away to the valley floor, the sky stretched beyond seeing, and the earth spread hugely below. Beyond a line of trees, like shrubbery in the depth, lay the immense wanness of the muddy river, emerging from nowhere under the thin north-west moon to

enfold an island prickly with spruce and faced to the north-east in the half-light as if it had never been. (ibid. 43)

The loudness of the war is set against the almost surreal quiet of the prairie scenery that seems to have become the whole world, with a "sky stretched beyond seeing," an image that implies wholeness and stability. Yet, the sounds of the war, "the roars, the explosions, the splashing, the staccatos, the drones" remind the reader that the ideal of a separate community is nothing but a myth.

Another indication for the instability of the Wapiti Mennonites' ideal of a separate life is the presence of the Métis people, who live at the margins of Wapiti. The importance of the Métis community and its connection to the Mennonites in the novel is emphasized in the epigraph of the novel that shows a "dark boy" playing in the local brook with his friend, a "fair boy" (ibid. 9). The sheer existence of the Aboriginal families threatens the narrative of a stable, nonviolent and caring Mennonite community that always knows the "basic answers" (ibid. 16). The beginning of the novel presents the Mennonites' perception of their Métis neighbours in terms of contrasts as the following passage, focalized through the teacher Joseph Dueck, shows.

> [The Métis] had no concept of farming: they ate until there was no more. Labrets, Razins, Mackenzies and Moosomins, the last the worst. Only a few Mennonites ever neared the Moosomin homestead, and they never went inside the four-walled shack or knew the mixture of common-law wives and husbands and children that were crammed there. Breeds lived as they lived: they were part of an unchangeable Canada for the Mennonites. (ibid. 31)

While the Mennonites in Wapiti are constantly engaged in their farm work, the Aboriginal people continue to rely on hunting and short-term supplies that have traditionally allowed them to be mobile. However, the fact that the mass migration from Europe has limited their mobility, they are deprived of their traditional ways of supporting themselves, while at the same time they have not gained access to the farming culture. Additionally, the use of the condescending

term "breeds"[125] reveals a deep-seated reluctance to Métis people.[126] This process of othering,[127] of constructing the Métis people as different and therefore less respectable, characterizes the Wapiti Mennonites as (post)colonial authority. I argue that the imperial discourse created throughout the novel shows a closeness between Mennonites and other European settlers, that is denied by the Mennonites in Wiebe's novel. The community in Wapiti constructs itself as unique and separated from the world, while sharing the colonial vocabulary and attitude of other European settlers. In Wiebe's text we find this expressed when Block tries to convince Thom that their ancestors have found the "correct way of acting" (ibid. 203) and in Block's plan to buy the land of the Métis people in the District (ibid. 206). Furthermore, the construction of Métis as dirty (ibid. 37, 74), criminal (ibid. 83), not "quite human" (ibid. 110), childlike (ibid. 205), in need of conversion, yet unteachable (ibid. 138), and the perception of the settlement land as empty space (ibid. 30) are indicative of a deep-seated feeling of superiority.

The examples are highly comparable to what Vera and Ansgar Nünning have referred to as "fictions of empire" (1996b). "Fictions of empire" are colonial narratives that show certain characteristics: a belief in the settlers' superiority over the Native population, the perception of the Native population as in need of elevation and/or conversion, a strong tendency to construct Native people as indistinguishable stereotypes, and the perception of the land as an empty space (1996: 13–15). By continually repeating these "fictions of empire" in "narrative fictions, patriotic poetry, boys' stories, history books, travellers' tales" they eventually have naturalized the "imperial idea" (ibid. 13). While Nünning and Nünning focus on England's cultural memory that, they argue, was prejudiced by the construction of these colonial narratives, it is easy to read a similar mechanism in Wiebe's novel. This impression can be argued even further when we look at the lack of secondary material on *Peace Shall Destroy Many* that explores the novel's colonial perspective. As implied at the beginning of this chapter, Wiebe's text, in contrast to most other primary works included in my thesis, has received much attention mostly, but not

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[125] "Breeds" is the short form for "half-breed," a derogative term that has been used to refer to people with ancestors from different ethnic backgrounds and has often been used to refer to the descendants of Aboriginal people and European settlers.

[126] It should be noted that similar attitudes towards other ethnic groups, such as Scots (Wiebe 1962: 29), Russians and Poles (ibid. 32), are displayed throughout the novel. This justifies a reference to Mennonites in Wapiti as xenophobic, an attitude that is predominantly exemplified by Peter Block who has also been referred to as carrying a "biological racist vision of his Mennonite community" (Mininger 2004: n.p.).

[127] The term became meaningful in the post-colonial discourse and "was coined by Gayatri Spivak for the process by which imperial discourse creates its 'others'" (Ashcroft et al. 2007: 156).

exclusively, in the field of Mennonite Studies. Yet, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* needs to be explored from a post-colonial perspective. While several scholars, such as Korkka (2010), and Weaver (1986) discuss the relationship between Mennonites and Aboriginals in Wiebe's novel, they ignore the imperial structure of the text and its implications for the narrative. At the same time, the examples from Wiebe's novel indicate that an analysis of Wiebe's novel as imperial text allows us to study the "construction and perpetuation of an imperialist ideology" that "develop[s] ideologically charged concepts of the self and the other, by organizing the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized imaginatively" (Gymnich 2005: 127).

On a narrative level, the imperial perspective is also expressed by the Aboriginal characters' almost exclusive reticence. The characters are mainly talked about or talked to and hardly appear as verbal subjects. Some of the Métis characters are even presented as being physically hardly present, such as "Ol' Two Poles," a Métis elder, who is "like a spirit materializing" (Wiebe 1962: 38). At a Mennonite youth meeting at the lake some Métis children are gathered around. In order to not exclude them, Joseph Dueck and the other young Mennonite men decide to use English instead of German, which is their traditional language for church services (ibid. 55). While the use of English suggests an attitude of openness, Dueck's later argument about the reasons for the choice of language emphasizes his imperial position towards the Aboriginal people, whom he finds in need of conversion and whom he believes it his mission to enlighten (ibid. 57–58). In that scene, the novel again displays what Nünning and Nünning found to be an important attitude in fictions of empire: the apparent burden of the colonizer to bring knowledge and values to a supposedly uncultured tribe. It is "the White Man's job, duty, or even mission to act as a bearer of moral and intellectual values, to bring humanity and civilization to primitive peoples, and to impose their benefits on a world of savagery" (1996: 14). Even when Dueck continues to detail his speech at the youth meeting, which was largely made up of questions around the theological and humanitarian grounds for their position on pacifism at a time of war, the fact that only he answers the questions, forecloses a true dialogue with others (Wiebe 1962: 59–60). Additionally, as the Métis listeners are not educated in Christianity and theological discussions, the whole sermon falls short of providing a space for equal partnership in discussion.

The presence of Native peoples is also more implied than physically narrated when Thom and Pete, Peter Block's son, find a buffalo skull. The process of disintegration of the skull is far

advanced – "the gnarled horn only a broken suggestion of the great blade of the skull" (ibid. 82) – which symbolizes the disintegration of the Aboriginal peoples in North America. The discovery stimulates Thom to wonder and, for a brief moment, question the "fictions of imperialism" that his own community partakes in.

> Staring at the broken skull, its heft heavy in his hands, a vista opened for Thom. Why was Canada called a "young" country? White men reckoned places young or old as they had had time to re-mould them to their own satisfaction. As often, to ruin. (ibid. 82)

Furthermore, trying to involve Pete in his thoughts about Aboriginal peoples, Thom argues that it is remarkable that European migration history rarely if ever includes the histories of Aboriginal peoples (ibid. 83). However, Pete, assuming the imperial voice of superiority, argues that by the sight of the reserve "we haven't missed much" (ibid. 83) and reminds Thom of another colonial narrative, the Aboriginal as criminal (ibid. 83). Supposedly convinced by his friend's words and reminded of his own, allegedly superior, cultural memories that need to be cultivated and protected against outsiders, Thom "hurled the skull as far as he could" (ibid. 83) and thus symbolically forecloses a dialogue between Mennonites and their Aboriginal and Métis neighbours.

One of the few non-Mennonite voices that is displayed in the novel is Madeleine Moosomin's. She is married to Herman Paetkau and on a visit, Thom is as surprised to find her with Herman, as he is about the way that her initial "silence was not really noticeable for she seemed to be taking part in their conversation" (ibid. 107). The later memory of his visit brings back Madeleine's story about her ancestors, one of them being Big Bear. "Hearing her tell of Big Bear, Louis Riel, Wandering Spirit, Thom glimpsed the vast past of Canada regarding which he was as ignorant as if it had never been: of people that had lived and acted as nobly as they knew and died without fear" (ibid. 111). The passage clearly romanticizes Aboriginal peoples[128] and again portrays Mennonites as imperialists and yet the cultural memories of the Aboriginal people in Canada that loom in the story and that Thom tries to grasp, ultimately

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[128] In his study on *Orientalism* Said clarifies that European migration during the 19th and early 20th centuries has produced a hegemonic relationship between European settlers and the native population. This relationship produced what he terms orientalism, which signifies a "mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles" (1995: 2) that in turn reinforce images of the orient as exotic and define it in terms of difference and superiority of the European settlers. Orientalism, Said argues, is a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (ibid. 3). For more information on the stereotyping of Native Americans as "noble savages" see Berkhofer (1979), Deloria (1998), Fairchild (1961), and Ha. Lutz (1985).

work to make him and others question their own positions as good Christian neighbours to the Métis. In consequence, the cultural memories of the Aboriginal Canadians that are only hinted at on the narrative level of the novel constitute a challenge to the monologic order of the Mennonite community on a structural level.

Throughout the novel, Thom begins to question the very basis for rules of the Wapiti community and starts to explore different cultural memories. While he is angry at his friend Pete, he remembers a story from Greek mythology.

> He remembered reading, crouched in the awkward desk as the sun flashed on the snow outside, repelled yet unable to leave those blue books. There were only three, and the stories, in their gruesome fascination, made no sense to him. But now one opened into meaning. The giant, defying all Omnipotence and stealing divine fire to bring to man, still meant nothing, but the punishment: the robber crossed gigantically upon a mountain's scraggy finger and the eagle's daily ravaging of the writhing body, seemed to him, suddenly like his anger forever tearing his own Christianity that was chained at its mercy. (ibid. 84–85)

This Greek myth of Prometheus' theft of fire from Mt. Olympus is used here as a frame of reference: an ancient knowledge that, similar to Mennonites' belief in their cultural identities as separate, nonresistant and hard working, is designed to provide meaning and to make sense out of individual and communal experiences. The fact that Thom thinks about an ancient myth when struggling with the cultural memories of his own ancestors, reveals how these two are intricately related and it elevates Mennonites' cultural memories to the status of a collective myth. Both provide meanings necessary for a culture to develop and pertain a stable identity (cf. J. Assmann 1992: 142; Müller-Funk 2008: 113). Both rely on deletions of narratives in order to become important points of reference for a group (cf. A. Assmann 2010: 97). Furthermore, there is a need for reducing the complexity of cultural narratives in order to render them relevant for the particular Mennonite context in Wiebe's novel (cf. Neumann 2005: 111). However, the harmony about various interpretations of cultural memories is disrupted throughout *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, because the cultural memories of the Wapiti Mennonites' ancestors are not translated to the new geo-political and -cultural setting of the Canadian prairies. The novel ultimately shows how cultural memories can become destructive when they are not related to the current needs of a community. In reference to Jan and Aleida Assmann, Halbwachs and Neumann, I have argued above that cultural memories are predominantly useful when adapted to contemporary needs. The community's, and specifically Deacon Block's, strict adherence to the traditions of their ancestors in Russia disturbs this

adaption, and consequently causes confusion among some of the younger members and disrupts the process of identification. The novel ultimately exemplifies how an exaggerated fear of change and an adherence to rules that are not in tune with the contemporary needs of a community, can cause problems for that community and lead to a failure of creating new cultural memories that, in turn, provide the basis for identification.

This fixation on stable cultural memories, can be seen with Block's obsession with Russia.

> In the unmolested prosperity they had enjoyed in Wapiti, he had almost forgotten the fury that in 1927 drove him to the wilds of Saskatchewan, or why he had begged the first Mennonites to join him there in the desperate hope of perhaps again building a community such as their fathers had known in the golden days of Russia. (Wiebe 1962: 124)

Russia has become a consistent benchmark (J. Assmann 1988: 12) in Block's memory. According to him the Mennonites in Wapiti should try to claim the same social and economic status they once had in Russia before the First World War.[129] In the short passage quoted above, Russia has been stylized as an ideal that Block has preserved and wants to recreate in Wapiti. The commonwealth that the Mennonites had established in Russia is not only a benchmark that serves as point of reference for the Wapiti Mennonites. Its recreation has become the ultimate objective of the community. However, as I have shown earlier, the conditions are quite different. The Canadian prairies do not provide them with acres of farming land that is ready for their use. Other migrants have already settled the land, and the Aboriginal population, deprived by the settlers of land and their own traditions of hunting, lives close by and is hard to ignore in their poverty and plight.

Confronted with a new non-Mennonite teacher, the question of Mennonite identities, becomes even more challenging. Razia Tantamont, the young replacement teacher for Joseph Dueck, who joined the medical service (Wiebe 1962: 63), is attractive and desired.[130] Different

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[129] Zacharias points out that the connection to the "past Commonwealth" in Russia in contemporary Mennonite Canadian narratives written by descendants of the 1920s' wave of migration is rather typical (2013: 10–11). In his lecture on "Time and Memory," Mennonite historian James Urry argues that Mennonites in Russia had prospered in such a way after the turn of the century, that they were able to set up "social welfare services" as well as "[c]o-operatives, credit unions, and even a bank" (2007: 15). These developments "creat[ed] almost a state within a state more generally referred to as 'the Mennonite Commonwealth'" (ibid. 15).

[130] Both Pete Block and Herb Unger are attracted to the young teacher. The latter, living in isolation from the Mennonite community himself, makes crude advances towards her at one point in the novel (Wiebe 1962: 172–74).

from the Wapiti women she is well-read and independent.[131] On her first day in school, she is admired by the girls and idolized as "the most beautiful lady they had ever seen" (ibid. 119). For Razia, the Mennonites are alien territory and "[c]ompetent as she felt herself, Razia sensed, very strangely for her, that she had few resources to cope with the oddness of the community" (ibid. 120–21). The Mennonites largely keep away from her and, because the church services are held in German, she cannot participate in one of their most important social events. Her isolation is only increased by the fact that she lives in the school house, which stands isolated from the Mennonite farms. However, during the winter, when Thom starts Sunday school sessions for the Métis children in Wapiti District, he visits her to discuss aspects of his teaching. During one of their discussions, Razia raises the question of Mennonite identities. "'I've lived here for three months and I don't really know. Who is Mennonite?'" (ibid. 178). While Thom feels that he should be able to pinpoint the characteristic features of Mennonitism as it was practiced in his community, his recent inner conflicts with the question of how to live his faith and his increasing cynicism about the interpretation of the Wapiti Mennonites' cultural identities are displayed in his answer. "'I doubt you'll get an answer in Wapiti – or anywhere'" (ibid. 178). However, his evasive initial answer is followed by an attempt to explain the basis of his culture not only to Razia, but to himself. "'Some say only church members are Mennonites, others that we're actually a race of people. Most who are born with Mennonite names but refuse to join the Mennonite church don't want to be known as Mennonites – guess they feel somehow it commits them'" (ibid. 178). The way Thom phrases his answer, using the second-person plural, reveals his own lack of commitment to it. Instead of stating his own belief about who is Mennonite, he reproduces aspects of Mennonitism, such as religiosity and ethnicity. It is crucial to see that the most critical aspects that are under discussion in his community – nonresistance and a separation from the world – are never mentioned in his answer. This may be because his Mennonite upbringing has taught him that inner conflicts cannot be discussed with outsiders. However, I would argue that his reflection on these basic elements of Mennonite identities shows his increasing awareness that the "basic answers were [not] known" (ibid. 16) and that his community necessarily has to undergo change in order to aspire to identities that are not only true to their ancestors' cultural memories, but that also meet the requirements of their contemporary environment. I argue that Thom's answer symbolizes

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[131] We never hear anything about her family, which marks a strong contrast to the Wapiti Mennonite women in general who are closely connected with their families.

his personal development. While he is able to criticize the rigid adherence to norms and memories of the past in front of a non-Mennonite, he yet has to translate this challenge to members of his own community.

For Thom the realization of his own path to faith comes close before the end of the novel. During a Christmas play of the school children that is presented to the Mennonite and Métis communities alike, Hank Unger attends the play on his vacation from military service. Razia and Hank have had an affair at his training base (ibid. 224–25); seeing each other in Wapiti, they leave after the play to be alone. When they are found by Hank's brother Herb, the situation escalates and soon everyone surrounds them in the barn, witnessing the fight that breaks out between the brothers and later between Herb and Thom (ibid. 235). Desperate about the upheaval and the realization of the failure of his ideal community, Peter Block suffers from a nervous breakdown and leaves his community "terrified" (ibid. 237). Block's breakdown results in the loss of the moral and religious pillar of the community, leaving Thom with finally enough space to sort his thoughts about Mennonite identities and his own faith.

> Not the path of conscienceless violence or one man's misguided interpretation of tradition. They brought chaos. But the path of God's revelation. Christ's teachings stood clear in the Scriptures; could he but scrape them bare of all their acquired meanings and see them as those first disciples had done, their feet in the dust of Galilee. (ibid. 237)

Despite its didactic and proselytizing tone, the passage reveals how Thom becomes independent from the cultural memories provided by Block that ultimately fail to provide him with a meaningful vision of Mennonite identities in the present. However, the memory discourse he seeks out – the writing in the Scriptures – is by far no new cultural memory, but the most basic Christian cultural narrative that has provided meaning for millions of people, non-Mennonite as well as Mennonite. In addition, Thom relies on the meaning of a symbol – the "brightest star in the heavens" (ibid. 239) – and interprets it as an assurance of his newly-discovered inspiration in the Bible in order to define his own Mennonite ethic. The star, which has been presented earlier in the children's play as the star of Bethlehem, symbolizes a basic Christian conviction of being led to a source of knowledge.

The Wapiti Mennonites fail to adapt the cultural memories of their Russian ancestors to the contemporary geo-political and social environment of the Canadian prairies. They suffer from a paradox they cannot resolve: On the one hand, they adhere to a tradition that asks them to stay

separated from the rest of the world. On the other hand, their belief in Christian principles of helping their neighbours causes an identity crisis among them. The crisis announces itself throughout the novel, both from within the community – in the form of suppressed criticism and the exclusion of disagreeable Mennonites – and from the outside – the noises of the war planes and the news on the radio, as well as the presence of their Métis neighbours. Ultimately, this paradox implodes the fictitious stability of the Wapiti community's narrative of stable cultural memories and identities.

2.5.2 Unavailable Cultural Memories in Sandra Birdsell's *Agassiz Stories*

> He'd used words to build an image, not to express himself.
> (Birdsell 1987: 152)

In contrast to Wiebe's novel, Sandra Birdsell's short story collection *Agassiz Stories* approaches memories of the Mennonite migration to Canada and their responsibility in the colonization of the Indigenous peoples quite differently. The protagonists in Birdsell's stories, the Lafrenière family, combine different cultural heritages: the Mennonite heritage, embodied by Mika and the Métis heritage, which is embodied by her husband Maurice. The family is socially on the margins of the small-town Agassiz. They have six children and barely make enough money with Maurice's job as a barber to support themselves. Additionally, Mika's marriage to Maurice is suspicious to the Mennonite community in Agassiz, which she feels does not accept her as a full member (ibid. 80). The stories are narrated from various perspectives and by different narrators, predominantly Mika, Maurice and their eldest daughter Betty. They alternate between first-person and third-person narration. The short stories explore different ways of dealing with cultural memories, seeking them out, trying to avoid them, and creating new ones. Mika, Maurice and Betty suffer from loneliness and isolation, because they have failed to become integrated into a community and lack cultural memories that provide them with narratives to draw upon for identification. Throughout the stories all three characters are struggling with the past, either because they have never managed to acquire meaningful cultural memories, or because their cultural memories have failed to become meaningful in their contemporary context. The stories they tell reveal their quest for meaning and produce more questions than answers, because they have not been integrated into a *narrating community* that provides them with the stories to "express [themselves]" as Maurice suggests in the story "Journey to the Lake" (ibid. 152). The following analysis will look at the difficulties characters express because meaningful cultural memories are unavailable to them. Furthermore, I will explore how their stories are semanticized. Next to changing focalizers, there are a number of material memories that impinge upon the narrators' stories.

The short stories contain several references to the Mennonite history in Russia, which are evoked as memories in different forms. In several stories memories are triggered by material traces of the past, or objectifications of cultural memories (cf. J. Assmann 1988: 11). In "The Bride Doll" Maurice's attempt to level the house results in the destruction of a cupboard

containing the china dish set Mika brought from Russia, which was "all [Mika] had left" to remind her of her Mennonite heritage (Birdsell 1987: 196–97). In the last story, "Keepsakes," a photograph of a stone monument reminds Mika of a story that she used to hear from her grandmother about a woman buried alive. "The Wednesday Circle," on the other hand, shows how the integration into a community where all members share certain *cadres sociaux* (Halbwachs 1985a) provides the framework for cultural memories. The story is told from Betty's perspective. The first part of "The Wednesday Circle" focuses on one of her trips to the Joys, a married farmers' couple from whom the Lafrenière family gets their eggs. On several occasions, Betty has become the target of Mr. Joy's sexual assaults (Birdsell 1987: 47ff). Since Betty has recently become an accepted member of her mother's Wednesday circle of Mennonite women, she deems her secret about Mr. Joy's unwanted advances safe with them and intends to tell the women and to be protected. "The Wednesday Circle women are strong and mighty. […] She'll just go to them and say, Mr. Joy feels me up, and that will be the end of it" (ibid. 49–50).

The second part of the story shows a group of Mennonite women who meet every other Wednesday to share thoughts and gossip, knit and crochet, have tea, and read the Bible together. When Betty enters the room, the women are deep in a discussion about Mrs. Joy's obesity and the unpardonable sin of suicide. One of the older women, who is rumoured to have suffered from sexual assaults herself in Russia (ibid. 54), begins a story of an incident in Russia, where a young girl was repeatedly raped by several soldiers. "'She was only thirteen. The men had their way with her many times, each one taking their turn, every single night. In the end she shot herself. What about her'" (ibid. 55)? The last question, provocatively posed to the circle of women, who had just condemned suicide as unpardonable, is met with an attempt to silence the memory. Mika claims, "'I've never heard of such a case'" (ibid. 55). This attempt to silence the whole story and Betty's impression that her mother "sounds as though she resents hearing of it now" (ibid.), provides a hostile environment for Betty, who had meant to tell on Mr. Joy, but eventually decides not to (ibid. 57). The incident shows how certain aspects or "fateful events of the past" (J. Assmann 1988: 12; my translation) become characteristic for the cultural memory of a group, on the one hand. On the other hand, it indicates how memories are always reconstructed to serve the present needs of the community. Apart from the old woman, who tells the story of the girl's suicide, all the women in the Wednesday circle agree that "'[s]uicide

is unpardonable'" because the belief in this stable rule is what "'keeps [them] going'" (Birdsell 1987: 56). The belief in suffering and the subsequent silence about it identifies these women to themselves and ensures the continued existence of their meetings and their stability as a community. The narrative of suffering is questioned by the old woman's story and the circle of women shows itself reluctant to have its cultural memories and identities challenged. The women's shared belief in and alleged knowledge about the sinfulness of suicide must not be disturbed by challenging memories of the past. In order to attain this stabilization, the past needs to be altered or silenced. The story exemplifies how memories are always already social or collective (Halbwachs 1985b), reproduced in the social framework of the Agassiz Mennonite women, who form a *narrating community*, with similar cultural narratives that are maintained by frequent retellings. The story also indicates the intricate relationship between remembering and forgetting. In order to maintain meaningful cultural memories, the Mennonite women in "The Wednesday Circle" have integrated that "continuous process of forgetting" as part of their "social normality" (A. Assmann 2010: 97). As a result, incidents of sexual assault are perceived as threats to Mennonite cultural identities and are consequently silenced. Yet, the cultural narratives of silent suffering provide no valuable stories for Betty to reveal her secret of abuse. On the contrary, it denies her the very words to "express [herself]" (Birdsell 1987: 152).

The story "Keepsakes" approaches memory both as a social construct in Halbwachs' sense and in its objectified dimension. This last of the whole collection's stories shows an elderly Mika surrounded by all of her children and grandchildren. While they exchange funny stories about their childhoods, Mika is looking through her keepsake chest, jumping from one memory to another at the sight of letters, photographs, and locks of hair. Picking up a photograph of a stone monument, Mika remembers one of her grandmother's stories.

> The picture had been taken in the village in Russia where she'd been born. She couldn't remember the place clearly, but remembered instead the stories her parents had told her. As she began to be absorbed by the day, her children, the stories grew pale until she could no longer remember any of them except the one her grandmother had told her, that strange frightening story about the woman they buried alive. (ibid. 349)

Although Mika was born in Russia and only came to Canada later with her parents, her own memory of the place is blurred. The passage exemplifies how narratives of the past have become an important means of identifying with a collective past, how they provided the group with a sense of unity and individualism that is necessary in the reproduction of identities (cf. J.

Assmann 1988: 12). As a larger collective myth, the stories have promised stability (Müller-Funk 2008: 113) and continuity in Mika's early life. However, as Mika reflects on the stories years later, she acknowledges that her routine as mother and wife have alienated her from these stories. Although she claims that she remembers her grandmother's story about the woman buried alive, the following excerpt shows how she actively remodels it.

> She imagines a woman sitting on a chair with black skirts and a black shawl covering her white head. She's knitting there beside the monument, her jaw collapsed because her teeth are gone. Her hands are folded neatly in her lap and she is listening for the muffled sound of a woman's voice coming from the ground. It didn't happen that way. That's not the way the story goes. But she sees it in her mind, how the woman on the chair sits there listening and can't do anything about it. (Birdsell 1987: 349)

Instead of retelling the story as she has heard it, Mika reconstructs the story of the woman buried alive according to her own associations with womanhood. Because her own life has been structured by being a wife and mother of six children, and she perceives of herself as powerless and passive, the reconstruction of the story meets her own evaluation of a traditional woman's life, more than it reflects the actual story of the woman in Russia. The last three sentences of the above quote indicate how Mika herself is aware that this particular narrative is not reflecting the past as it happened, but only how she imagines it. Mika's story includes two women: One talking, crying, and screaming underneath the earth, trying to make herself known. The other sitting passively above by the monument, listening to the "muffled sounds" (ibid. 349). The two women symbolize a dialectic relationship that has been popular in Mennonite narratives (cf. Tiessen 1998: 500), but it reverses the meaning attached to the categories of outside and inside: the woman inside, or in this case beneath the earth, tries desperately to get out, while the woman on the outside seems to be oblivious to her attempts. Translated to Mika's own situation, I suggest reading her interpretation of the story as an attempt to leave her community, the small-town atmosphere of Agassiz, where she is looked down upon for having married a Métis man and for raising a large family with limited financial means.

The story "Night Travellers" adds an explicitly feminist perspective[132] to Mika's meditation on the past.

> "When a woman has intercourse," Mika told herself "she thinks of what might happen." […]

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[132] For an exploration of "Judgement," one of Birdsell's stories in *Agassiz Stories*, as a feminist text, see Quennet (2004).

Men, she was certain, thinking both of [her lover] James and Maurice, didn't think of such things as a seed piercing another seed and a baby growing instantly, latching itself fast to the sides of her life. (Birdsell 1987: 77)

Mika feels weak and powerless in the face of her own as well as her husband's and lover's desires, which ultimately leave her committed to the house with yet another baby. Her short affair with James serves as an escape from her daily routines. Yet when her father confronts her about the affair one evening, trying to induce her to end it by reminding her of her responsibility towards her Mennonite community, Mika's anger and frustration break lose.

"I'm not part of that family," Mika said. "I don't belong anywhere."
[…]
"Oh, they welcome me, all right. I'm to be pitied, prayed for. It gives them something to do."
[…] "Look, Papa. You know they don't accept Maurice. Even if he wanted to go, they don't invite him into their homes. They don't really accept me, either." (ibid. 80)

Despite Mika's meetings with other Mennonite women, she stands at the margins of the community of Mennonites, because of her marriage to a non-Mennonite.

Furthermore, the stone monument that serves as a burial site for the woman, is mirrored by Mika's attempt to build a rock garden. As a redemption for, or reminder of the extramarital affair with James, Mika gathers large rocks that she eventually arranges into a rock garden in her yard (ibid. 61ff), creating yet another monument that symbolizes suppressed feelings and materializes her attempt at burying unwanted emotions. The reconstruction of the story of the woman buried alive in Russia thus becomes symbolic for Mika's self-perception. Being buried underneath mountains of dirty clothes and facing a draining daily routine of feeding, cleaning, and taking care of her children (ibid. 80), Mika's version of the story reveals her own sense of helplessness, passivity and her frustration about her social position. Her grandmother's narrative of suffering in Russia thus becomes her own narrative of suffering, which ultimately reconnects her with the cultural memories of Mennonites. It is therefore not surprising that she advocates this narrative of suffering and in the process silences both her own daughter's experience and the old women's stories of sexual assault in "The Wednesday Circle," because what is "[m]ost important for a group's memory is the process of remembering events and

experiences that can be shared by and that are relevant to the majority of the group" (Halbwachs 1985b: 25; my translation).[133]

The cultural memories of suffering that serve as an important means of identification for the Mennonites in Birdsell's stories, resurface in the story "The Wild Plum Tree," narrated by Betty. The story starts with an excerpt from Betty's essay for her English teacher and continues to alternate between her essay, written from a first-person perspective, and the core text of the short story, written in third person. In her essay, Betty revives her grandfather's story of the Mennonite attempt to escape from Russia, which he compares to the exodus of the Israelites.

> **The lesson for today, Opah says, is HOW GOD LED HIS PEOPLE OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT. But then he forgets and his sky-blue eyes melt into the horizon and he speaks of hundreds of people gathering around twenty-eight train cars in Russia. They are coming, these people, like the dog mustard, only a year later, to spread out across the fields of southern Manitoba. Faith is the Victory, Faith is the Victory, Opah hums, wiping tears from his face […]**. (Birdsell 1987: 118–19; emphasis in original)

The grandfather's memories relate to the narrative of suffering that has become an important cultural narrative for the Mennonites in *Agassiz Stories*. The comparison of the escape of Mennonites in Russia and their settlement on the Canadian Prairies to the biblical story of the Israelites, who were led out of Egypt, in addition to the grandfather's emotional chant that "[f]aith is the victory" (ibid. 118), implies that the Mennonites' flight from Russia has indeed become a holy narrative and the Mennonite people a divine people led out of their suffering by a higher power. Betty's later comment that her grandparents "**still dream of thieves and Bolshevik murderers**" (ibid. 119; emphasis in original) illustrates the ongoing influence of their traumatic experience in Russia. Additionally, it also explains why narratives of suffering and escape have become important in the first place: "Narrative is a conduit for emotion and a means through which embodied distress is expressed. Language gives access to a world of experience insofar as experience is brought to language" (Becker 1997: 14). The narrativization of the traumatic experiences thus helps to achieve "coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure" (ibid. 12). In short, this particular cultural memory constructs and perpetuates Mennonite identities in *Agassiz Stories*. Suffering as a symbol for Mennonite identities helps to bridge the gap between different generations of Mennonites in Canada on the level of time and space.

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[133] "Im Vordergrund des Gedächtnisses einer Gruppe stehen die Erinnerungen an Ereignisse und Erfahrungen, die die größte Anzahl ihrer Mitglieder betreffen" (Halbwachs 1985b: 25).

Furthermore, the first generation of Mennonites born in Canada, exemplified by Betty, acknowledges this story as part of her own heritage, and accepts it as narrative to draw upon for her own identification as Mennonite.

Betty is also the only one to acknowledge that stories of migration to Canada are connected to stories of colonization.

> **[Grandfather] makes you learn the ten commandments even though you know Emily, who lives across the road, whose father is a doctor and drives a Lincoln and with his money has built the gingerbread house that now has a patio and one more child added, which looks out over another row of houses where a coulee once was, this girl, whose father's building also destroyed an Indian burial ground […].** (Birdsell 1987: 119; emphasis in original)

Betty implicitly criticizes European colonization in North America. However, her reference to her friend's family, a non-Mennonite family, reveals that she fails to draw the connection between the colonization process and the emigration of Mennonites. The cultural memory of Mennonite suffering has been deeply ingrained in her own narrative. Consequently, she cannot see the Mennonites' own responsibility for the destruction of Indian burial grounds. In reference to Marc Bloch's terminology of a monologic remembering, which emphasizes a group's or nation's own suffering, A. Assmann introduces the term dialogic remembering, which she defines as one model of dealing with a traumatic past that integrates self-induced trauma with a group's own suffering (2013: 195ff) and that is, I argue, largely missing in Mennonite literary scholarship.

However, looking at Birdsell's stories from Maurice's perspective allows us to directly reflect on results of the colonization process and Mennonites' own responsibility, because it sets the Métis experience of dispossession next to the cultural memories of Mennonite suffering and migration. Different from Mika, who is, however problematically, somehow embedded within her Mennonite culture and family, Maurice's life-course left him deprived of a family from a young age onwards. Both his parents died early: "First, his father; a railroad accident. And there had been no town clamouring to rescue the widow. She'd been ignored. Left alone to feed three kids with the money she made sewing and from her baskets. And a month later, they buried her. Dead drunk" (Birdsell 1987: 10). Maurice's frustration about the isolation of

his mother and her escape into alcoholism,[134] which ultimately resulted in her death is directed at the town's people, whom he suspects of not having helped her, because of her Métis heritage. After his parents' death, his brothers were sent to a convent, while he was taken in by the priest and local hotel-owner Henry Roy (ibid. 16). This early alienation from his family and culture left him deprived of cultural narratives. While he was thriving under the tutelage of Roy, the alienation from his family's culture, in addition to the fact that he was never completely accepted within the non-Aboriginal culture either, results in a strong sense of confusion about belonging. The few stories he remembers are alienating him ever more from his Aboriginal culture. His mother once warned him not to get too close to her side of the family because they are "more Indian than French" (ibid. 23). This social hierarchy that his mother warned him to observe ultimately left him without positive associations with his own heritage. Indeed, he even keeps his mother's ethnic background a secret from Mika to "let her think that both parents were French" (ibid. 24). The stories he was told refer to Aboriginals as drunkards, whom Maurice himself wants nothing to do with.[135] Another reason for the problematic relationship to his Métis background lies in the fact that until 1982s' *Canadian Constitution Act*, Métis people were not officially recognized. "Since then," Lutz argues, "the legal question 'who is Métis?' has absorbed much time and energy for thousands of Indigenous Canadians of First Nations and European descent" (2015: 207). The story "Boundary Lines," which includes the passages quoted above is set before the implementation of the 1982 *Canadian Constitution Act*. Therefore, Maurice's confusion about his Métis background can also be explained by the lack of legal recognition of the status of Métis people at the time.

When workers find human bones while building a dyke around Agassiz, Maurice ponders the possibility of those being "the remains of one of his mother's people. One of his own people" (Birdsell 1987: 25). Despite his lack of (positive) cultural memories, Maurice seeks out an identification with the Aboriginal culture and regrets its loss to him. "He wished he knew something, anything, of his mother's people. He felt his loss in his fingertips; something important had slipped away from him like water through fingers, and he would never get it

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[134] The storyline resonates with a multitude of studies that show how Aboriginals in Canada are significantly more prone to suffer from alcoholism as a result of the colonization process (cf. Chansonneuve 2007; Kirmayer 1994).

[135] Upon arrival of his uncle Norbert Desmarais in his barber shop, Maurice is repelled by the look of the man and silently wonders, "[w]hy didn't these people stay on the reservation where they belonged" (Birdsell 1987: 21).

back" (ibid. 25). The diffuse feeling of loss that is described in this passage materializes in others. When his uncle Desmarais comes to see him about the dyke that is being built using the earth that once belonged to the Aboriginal people, Maurice is reminded that the loss of his parents and his subsequent education among non-Aboriginal people in town has left him deprived of his mother tongue and a connection to the Aboriginal land.

> "They're bringing the earth [for building a dyke around Agassiz against the flood] from Grande Pointe. Land that belonged to your family. Something should be done about it."
> […]
> "Well, Uncle, I don't know about any land. But even if what you say is the case, then that was well before my time. There are no records. The land belongs to the municipality now. What can I do?"
> "And your tongue? That too was taken away long ago?"
> "My tongue is rusty, to be sure. But it's there when I need it." (ibid. 21–22)

Being confronted by his uncle and required to take a stance for the rights of Aboriginal people in order to preserve parts of the Aboriginal land, Maurice's reaction shows how deeply he has internalized the colonial narrative, maintained by several "fictions of empire" (cf. V. Nünning and A. Nünning 1996) that were handed down to him in stories. Additionally, Maurice is also complicit in the belief that as long as there are no records proving Aboriginal land rights, then there are no legal rights of Aboriginal peoples to the land. Asked about his French language, Maurice becomes evasive[136] and his uncle finally realises that he cannot get him to stake a political claim to his ancestors' land and culture. Much to Maurice's despair Desmarais accuses him of being blind to the town's rejection and hostility against his cultural memories: "'You're useless. You allow people to hang their hats on you. They take away your land and it was your idea'" (Birdsell 1987: 23).

The problematic relationship between the town's non-Aboriginal population and Maurice is furthermore illustrated in the collection's first short story, "The Flood." Some of the town's men try to evacuate Agassiz under Maurice's instructions after the local river burst its banks and flooded the whole town. Maurice takes pride in being referred to as "Old Man River," the

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[136] His evasiveness partly results from his wife's reaction to his family and their use of French at visits. In an outburst, Mika forbids Maurice to bring his brothers to their house again because the "worst of it, she said, standing there at the door with her hands on her hips, was that they[…] sp[ea]k[…] French the whole time" (ibid. 20). While her reaction is as absurd as it is xenophobic, it exemplifies the non-Aboriginal inhabitants of Agassiz' general rejection of the French language that they ultimately connect with the Métis culture, which is perceived as inferior.

name "they'd given to him since his prediction of the flood had come true" (ibid. 9). He had been perceived of as inferior by the town after his mother was found dead, yet his expertise in the management of the flood crisis provides an opportunity to be embraced by the non-Aboriginal community, which is why he takes the risk of staying in Agassiz during the flood, "for once he didn't want to be on the outside, left out, but dead centre" (ibid. 9) Although his knowledge and support during the crisis are important, he ultimately realizes that the town's mayor treats him with contempt, getting his name wrong (ibid. 13) and referring to him as "boy" (ibid. 10), indicating his alleged superiority towards Maurice. Despite his desperate wish to be "dead centre" and the town's general acknowledgement that he "kept everything going straight in this crooked place" (ibid. 22), he nevertheless finds no access to the community and fails in his search for cultural memories and a *narrating community* that provide him with the means to make sense of his own experiences.

Because Maurice fails to relate to either the cultural memories of his Aboriginal family or that of the non-Aboriginal people in Agassiz, his adult life is characterized by loneliness, alcoholism, and a suicide attempt. His failure can be read as a direct result of the continuing effects of colonization. The mass migration of Europeans to North America – including Mennonites –completely altered Indigenous ways of living, as Chansonneuve's study for the Aboriginal Healing Foundation demonstrates.

> Reviewed from an Aboriginal perspective, the history of European contact is a chilling account of unrelenting destruction on a massive scale. Prior to European arrival, estimates show a thriving Indigenous population of over seven million people in what is now North America. Ninety per cent of this population was decimated through diseases such as smallpox and influenza, war, displacement, and theft of lands and resources causing poverty and starvation. (Chansonneuve 2007: 6–7)

Chansonneuve argues that the colonial process has left indelible scars on the cultural memories of Aboriginal peoples.

> Federal policies such as the *Act for the gradual enfranchisement of Indians* (1869), the *Indian Act* (1876) and the creation of residential schools (1892) were deliberate attempts by the Government of Canada to wipe out all traces of Aboriginal cultures including languages, beliefs, customs, and spiritual traditions. The actions carried out under these policies continue to profoundly affect all Inuit, Métis, and First Nation people. (ibid. 7)

In light of these findings, I argue that Maurice's and the Aboriginal community's failure to "*make* a cultural memory" (A. Assmann 2012: 175; emphasis in original) is a result of the

longstanding processes of colonization, which deprived Indigenous peoples of their languages, customs and narratives and that produced a broken *narrating community*, troubled by poverty and isolation, and ultimately unable to effectively pass on positive cultural narratives.

Maurice's confusion and loneliness are most tangible towards the end of his life. In "Journey to the Lake," Maurice attempts suicide,[137] using the only reminder of his father, a .22 rifle. The rifle symbolizes the memory of his ancestors. The fact that he plans to kill himself with the only material reminder of his father emphasizes the negative impact of his troubled connection with his heritage. However, just before he is about to pull the trigger, he is interrupted by one of his children (Birdsell 1987: 140). Maurice's increasing alienation from his social environment slowly becomes a physical condition: "His body had become awkward, did not respond the way it should. He dropped things, walked into walls, felt like a drunk man" (ibid. 141). The lack of positive cultural memories and integration into an intact *narrating community*, in addition to Maurice's failure to assimilate with the non-Aboriginal culture, ultimately leaves him to become alienated not only in spirit but also in body, without a companion or community to relate to and explore his own (hi)stories with. Thus, the colonization process which dispossessed and alienated millions of Aboriginals from their land, their language and their cultural traditions, is shown to have alienated the individual from himself. This ultimate alienation leaves Maurice a passive observer of his own children, whose problems he senses but does nothing to interfere or help with (ibid. 144). Because of the emotional distance to his own children, he passes on a sense of loneliness to them that is accompanied and emphasized by the lack of cultural memories.

The isolation and confusion can best be seen with his daughter Betty, who has been her mother's "favourite child," as her sister Lureen remarks (ibid. 63). However, Betty becomes rebellious in her youth – a process likely reinforced by her parents' ignorance of her sexual abuse. She starts drinking, takes part in harassing social outsiders of Agassiz (ibid. 238), and becomes friends with other teenagers who are disoriented and bored. At 17 she becomes

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[137] Kirmayer argues that the rates of suicides among young Aboriginal men is significantly higher than among other groups (1994). Early separations from the family (ibid. 19), the Aboriginal family systems' breakdown through the introduction of the residential school system in Canada (ibid. 20), as well as the high rates of poverty among Aboriginal peoples (ibid. 23) are among the reasons for this circumstance. Another interesting aspect in Kirmayer's study is that Aboriginals with a higher level of education than most other people from their community, but who are less educated than non-Aboriginal peers, suffer significantly more from isolation and are thus again more likely to commit suicide (ibid. 30).

pregnant without knowing who the father is (ibid. 165), and is induced by her parents to give up the child after she has been sent away for the pregnancy and birth (ibid. 109ff). Having thus been cut off by her parents, Betty makes a living for herself in Winnipeg, trying to save enough money from her two jobs to leave the city and start over somewhere else (ibid. 158ff). However, she loses her savings to a friend's lover, again experiences sexual abuse (ibid. 165–66) and never manages to leave the city. The radical break with her family and life in Agassiz irrevocably cuts Betty off from the possibility of claiming the cultural memories of her parents. The betrayal of her mother and the women from the Wednesday circle regarding her traumatic experience of sexual abuse, in addition to her father's ineffectiveness and passivity towards his own children,[138] leave her isolated and without any means to support herself. In "Moonlight Sonata," Betty returned to Agassiz years later and started a family. Yet her eldest son's life is characterized by alcohol, drugs and petty crimes (ibid. 236–37). Because disorientation and isolation run through the family and can ultimately be traced back, at least partly, to the effects of the European migration to what is now Canada, Betty's story exemplifies the dire consequences of the colonization process.

The stories in Birdsell's collection indicate the importance of intact and positive cultural memories and an integration into intact *narrating communities*. All of the above discussed characters in *Agassiz Stories* suffer from the unavailability of cultural memories and none of them is completely integrated into intact *narrating communities*. As a result, they are left without any narratives they may draw upon for support and direction. Their lack of integration has left them with not enough means of creating a sense of belonging and they struggle to create meaning out their experiences. The stories they tell are ultimately without a history; they can only use them to "build an image, not to express [themselves] (ibid. 152). Birdsell's stories show the effects of a disrupted access to memory communities. Maurice's early alienation from his Aboriginal family and community in addition to the town's alleged superiority, left him with a sense of self-rejection. He has become a colonial subject in the sense of being both deprived of and irritated by his own culture. At the same time, the non-Aboriginal community, who has taught him to reject his heritage, is not accepting him as a full member. The resulting isolation leaves him unable to relate to his own children, who in turn, also suffer from this lack

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[138] While Betty is at a girls' home for her pregnancy, Maurice visits her to make sure that Betty knows that she has to give away her baby after birth. "'On that score your mother and I agree. You can't bring the bastard home'" (Birdsell 1987: 118).

of cultural memories themselves, a process that, as "Moonlight Sonata" suggests, spans several generations.

2.6 Conclusions

In the previous analyses I have shown how the construction of cultural identities in Canadian Mennonite narratives has been structured along stories of martyrdom and Mennonites' colonial history in the North American context. Let me briefly summarize here that history and memory have always been and continue to be important aspects in the construction of cultural identities for any community. If the cultural memories are obscured or lost, as in the case of Maurice and Betty in Birdsell's short stories, this results in a failure to construct cultural identities that provide meaning. Yet even when cultural memories seem to be clearly set out and available as in Wiebe's novel, constructions of identities can fail, if the community finds them to lack a connection to their reality and the circumstances they are facing. After all, Kansteiner reminds us that

> [a]ll memories, even the memories of eyewitnesses, only assume collective relevance when they are structured, represented, and used in a social setting. As a result, the means of representation that facilitate this process provide the best information about the evolution of collective memories, especially as we try to reconstruct them after the fact. (2002: 190)

In Birdsell's stories, both Mika and Maurice lack a full integration into *narrating communities* that provide them with meaning and a sense of belonging, which ultimately leads them to fail in the process of creating cultural identities via stories. Wiebe's dominant character Block likewise fails to create meaningful cultural identities for the Wapiti Mennonites, because he tries to force an adherence to traditions of their Mennonite ancestors in Russia. However, the living conditions on the Canadian Prairies are different from those in Russia and they lack suggestions on how to deal with the influences of the outside world in the form of the World War and the presence of the Métis population.

Birdsell has written two other books that focus on the relationship between Métis and Mennonites. Her novel *Children of the Day* (2005) again revolves around aspects of class and ethnicity that are often shown to be intertwined. The relationship between Métis and Mennonites is explored on the microcosm of the family and Mennonite history is related to colonization history (ibid. 212, 217, 226, 394, 401). Similarly, her short story collection *The Two-Headed Calf* (1997) explores the juxtaposition of different cultures and generations. As the title suggests there are different cultural identities brought together in some of the characters, who find themselves struggling with their inherent differences. Wiebe is also known

as an avid writer about Indigenous history. His most famous novel, *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973) that focused on Treaty No. 6 and the contrast of cultural perceptions of land between Aboriginal peoples and European settlers, was later followed by a non-fictional study, called *Big Bear* (2008). Apart from these two books, Wiebe also showed an interest in the North West Rebellion and the historical figures of Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont in his novel *The Scorched-Wood People* (1977).

Moreover, there are also other writers from the Mennonite community, who have taken an interest in the histories and cultural traditions of the Canadian Aboriginal peoples. David Bergen's novel *The Retreat* (2008) focuses on the Ojibway occupation of the Anicinabe Park in Kenora – a historical event that is explored in the context of a love story between a young couple from different cultures. Additionally, Armin Wiebe's novel *Tatsea* (2003) looks at the Dogrib people in the late 18th century in Northern Canada, who struggle with the ongoing raids of their camps.[139] The novel explores the cultural and linguistic clash of different traditions. In terms of a poetic adaptation of Aboriginal history, Walter Hildebrandt's collection *Where the Land Gets Broken* (2004) needs to be mentioned.[140] The poems all focus on the region of the Cypress Hills and many of them refer to an Indigenous knowledge that is increasingly lost due to the effects of European colonization.

Another important and at the same time complex and complicated aspect of Mennonites' cultural memories is the martyrdom period with its individual stories that are captured in van Braght's *Martyrs Mirror* and accompanied by Luyken's engravings. These stories have left a stock of narratives that continue to engage Canadian Mennonite writers and poets. Today we are facing a surplus of mainly poetic attempts to capture, explore, understand, and use the particular memories of the early Anabaptists.[141] While Klassen uses Luyken's engravings rather than van Braght's stories to approach this bloody heritage, Poetker-Thiessen's speakers are more directly trying to connect the distant memories of martyrdom with aspects of contemporary life. In both collections we detect a sense of wonder and fascination with the

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[139] A. Wiebe himself used to teach among the Dogrib people for 20 years and has not only developed an interest in their history and culture, but also learned their traditional language.

[140] Hildebrandt used to work as a historian for Parks Canada and is thus familiar with the landscape he describes in his collection of poems.

[141] This aspect should come at no surprise given that the Herald Press publishes 2.500 copies of the *Martyrs Mirror* every year (cf. Weaver-Zercher 2016: 255).

martyrs' convictions. However, Poetker-Thiessen's speakers clearly display a helplessness and, at times, rage, at the brutal memories that are difficult to relate to the contemporary needs of the Mennonite community. Poetker-Thiessen is also more forthcoming in her attempts to adapt this cultural memory to a contemporary context, while Klassen speakers rather imply a connection to the present. Their different positions may also be the result of a general confusion about the cultural memories of the martyr stories.[142] Historian Weaver-Zercher concludes that "sixteenth-century martyrs deserve our sympathy, and their persecutors deserve our censor," but he also warns that this should not lead "present-day Mennonites […] to stand in as victims" (Weaver-Zercher 2016: 247). The deconstruction of martyr narratives as victim narratives is a predominant aspect in Klassen's poems. Her speakers suggest different interpretations of martyrdom that result in new cultural memories.

Poetker-Thiessen and Klassen are by no means the only writers with a Mennonite background that are fascinated by this stock of stories that is shocking and fascinating at the same time. The anthologies by Beachy (2010a) as well as Loewen and Reimer (1985) collect a large number of essays, poems, and short stories around the topic of martyrdom. Although Loewen and Reimer's *Visions and Realities* is not solely about martyrdom, but conceptualized around "Mennonite Issues" in general, as the subtitle tells us, the cover picture as well as all of the six remaining pictures in the collection portray Luyken's engravings. Additionally, the collection contains a cycle of eleven poems by Mennonite writer Maurice Mierau, called "The Martyrdom Method." The first half of the poems circles around the experiences of individual martyrs and, three of them, directly retell stories than can be found in van Braght's collection. The second half of the poems, however, focuses on the experiences of individuals during the second World War and the migration to and acculturation of Mennonite individuals in Canada. The poem "The Flower" tells the story of the speaker's father who was sent to a Siberian work camp, suffering from malnutrition and the loss of friends whose death he witnessed. The experience leaves him "a strange sort of adult," scarred for life by the inhuman conditions under which he had suffered for nine years in the camp. Even in old age the father suffers from the

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[142] Weaver-Zercher explains that the role of the *Martyrs Mirror* is especially complicated in communities that are assimilated to the North-American mainstream society. "In some assimilated congregations, hardly anyone has heard of the book, let alone pondered its contents. […] Indeed, unlike their counterparts in traditional Anabaptist circles, who may not often read *Martyrs Mirror* but who uniformly trumpet its benefits, assimilated Mennonites sometimes part ways on the book's value for today. In that sense, *Martyrs Mirror* remains a mirror, reflecting the diversity of viewpoints within the assimilated Mennonite world" (ibid. 239).

psychological burden. The fact that this poem is included in a cycle of poems around martyrdom shows Mierau's attempt to relate Mennonites early experience of suffering during the Reformation period to their later experiences of suffering. Consequently, this parallel implies that cultural identities of suffering are characteristic for Mennonites. Writer Di Brandt points out that

> [i]t's hard to give up a narrow minority martyr identity if it has been held onto for a very long time. It was valuable for us in the past, perhaps, in helping us to think through the social and psychic foundations of violence and non-violence experientially, in our chosen project of trying to learn how to live for and in peace. (Brandt 2015: 139)

Mierau's poems exemplify that it is apparently easier to relate an experience of suffering to cultural memories of martyrdom that are already available for Mennonites. However, as Brandt warns and as both Klassen's and Poetker-Thiessen's poems emphasize, it is important to let go of this particular aspect of victimization as characteristic for Mennonites, because "it risks becoming an inverted argument for the very violence we are trying to avoid by investing in dynamics that will ensure its repetition, rather than moving beyond them into greater health and joy" (ibid. 139). Similarly, M. Redekop cautions that the martyr story has become the groundwork for a myth of suffering among Mennonites, who experienced the downfall of the Mennonite commonwealth in Russia (2015: 199). She prefers to "see what happens, […] if we look at the literary phenomenon going on in Manitoba not as defined only by trauma experienced by the *Russländer*. What if we try not to collapse that story into the martyrdom story and concentrate instead on the aesthetic tricks of the crafty ones – from all the groups – who got away" (ibid. 199). Additionally, as mentioned earlier, it is important to acknowledge the fact the narratives of martyrdom and suffering are not exclusive to Mennonites (Beachy 2010: 23). Yet as Spicher Kasdorf argues, it is also important to preserve the past in stories, because they "teach us how to live in the world today" and because future generations "will feel bound to a long line of narration that reaches back to Amsterdam, to Zurich, to Jerusalem, to Babylon, to Egypt, to Eden" (1992b: 27). I would strongly agree with Spicher Kasdorf's argument that stories of the past need to be preserved in order to provide a sense of belonging. However, I believe that this sense of identification is not only strengthened by the content of the individual stories that are constantly repeated, but by the particular tradition of storytelling itself that entails particular modes of narrativization that are as important as sites of identification as the content of the stories themselves. Constructing identities via a tradition of

storytelling, next to other modes of identity construction, thus allows for a broader spectrum of stories to be considered and discussed as central to Mennonite narrative identities in the present. The martyr narratives do not, as the analyses of Poetker-Thiessen's and Klassen's poems emphasized, have to be interpreted as stories of victimization. The focus can be put on the establishment of the movement, the individual martyrs, who refused to recant and who showed a powerful stance against authority, or on the connection between past and present. This way the martyr stories are demythologized and translated to a contemporary context, both aspects are crucial for the establishment of meaningful cultural memories. Furthermore, martyr stories should be analyzed in terms of the narrative devices and their relationship to other Mennonite narratives. As I have pointed out above, among these narrative devices are the direct address both Poetker-Thiessen and Klassen use in order to establish a connection between past and present, the focus on individual martyrs in Klassen as a means to deconstruct them as cultural icons and therefore make them available to a contemporary readership. The same result is achieved in Poetker-Thiessen's poems when her speakers relate historical figures to a contemporary context.

3.	Stories of the Present: Constructing and Challenging Mennonite Narratives of Gender and Sexuality

Similar to the narratives that draw on historical aspects of Mennonite identities, the focus in this chapter lies on the multiplicity of stories and ways of storytelling. The primary sources that I will analyze below challenge a monolithic definition of Mennonite identities. I will continue to argue that Mennonite Canadian narratives can be best understood as a complex web of stories. Conceptualized as the stories by a *narrating community*, the fiction by Canadian Mennonites presents no monothematic entity that can be easily grasped by reading a certain set of (popular) texts.

Based on Müller-Funk's assumption that fractures and challenges are not only a by-product of an "Erzählgemeinschaft," but an important and indeed desirable element (Müller-Funk 2008: 129), I would like to continue the discussion of Mennonites as a *narrating community* by focusing on these challenges in contemporary Mennonite fiction and poetry around the aspects of gender and sexuality. Especially in the case of a migrant community that relies on storytelling as a surrogate for a homeland as shared reference for identification, it is crucial to consider the importance of stories and storytelling. Looking at contemporary topics in Mennonite fictional texts that present challenges to an essentialized understanding of Mennonite identities, we quickly discover narratives of gender and sexuality. Both aspects allow us to dismantle the myth of a singular and essentialized Mennonite identity because they deconstruct central ideals of community and belonging, public voice, the representation of the female (maternal, sexual) body, storytelling, and reliability. I argue that it is crucial to explore narratives of sexuality and gender because they provide the opportunity to develop and sharpen my understanding of Mennonites as a *narrating community*.

Queer and feminist Mennonite narratives are often perceived to present an oxymoron, because they challenge male heterosexual power structures that have been the basis of traditional Mennonite communities. Nevertheless, since the end of the 20th century we have found an increase of female Mennonite narratives that address the issue of patriarchy in Mennonite communities. In addition, yet much more recently, there has been a small number of Mennonite novels that focus on queerness and homosexualities, a topic that has been debated critically within Mennonite communities around Canada. I argue that these feminist and queer

Mennonite narratives present a challenge to established narratives of male dominance and heteronormativity embedded in a large variety of Mennonite narratives. In her study on Mennonite sexual identities, sociologist Alicia Dueck criticizes the lack of research on queer identities within the Mennonite context (2012: 22–23). Although the comparable wealth of narratives from Mennonite women suggests a vibrant scholarly discourse on feminist topics, we still lack comprehensive studies on topics such as female agency, the female body, mothers, and the subversion of gender roles in Mennonite/s Writing. This chapter is an attempt to begin to fill these research gaps and it suggests productive discussions around sexuality and gender in Mennonite literature. I will discuss Mennonite texts that portray a variety of identity expressions, which defy traditional notions of sexuality and gender. As Mennonite narratives have been criticized for perpetuating an either/or attitude, we will find that the narratives under discussion break with this pattern and suggest queer Mennonite identities that allow for non-normative expressions of sexuality, next to the presentation of women in their roles of mothers, daughters, sisters, and lovers that question and exceed normative gender roles for women.

One conclusion that will be drawn from the analyses, is that via some of the narratives that redirect attention away from binaries and towards an understanding of Mennonite identities as fragmented and multiplied, new worlds in the sense of Nelson Goodman (1985) are created. The writing about sexualities and gender using progressive narrative forms and foci enables writers and readers to explore identities that defy traditionalist notions of fixed Mennonite identities. This chapter will focus on the different moral, ethic and aesthetic ways of worldmaking in Mennonite contemporary writing. I argue that the authors succeed in deconstructing binaries and in challenging interpretations of queer and feminist Mennonite narratives as oxymoronic by constructing those very contrasts as essential to contemporary Mennonite experiences.

3.1   Introducing Gender and Sexualities in Mennonite Scholarship

By now it has become clear that my interpretation of identities in general and Mennonite identities in particular contradicts conservative notions of Mennonite identity as singular, stable, and fixed. I share this conviction with scholars in the developing field of queer Mennonite Studies. A. Dueck criticizes an essentialized understanding of identities in Mennonite scholarship in general and points out that we are confronted with a particularly simplistic interpretation of Mennonite identities in relation to the categories of gender and sexuality. She argues that

> heterosexual identification and curtailed sexual practices are central in order to self-identify and be recognized as persons belonging to Mennonite and that under the cloak of euphemism, there is a community that celebrates unity rather than diversity; this is a community that continues to perpetrate a great violence upon persons holding diverse sexual and gender identities. (ibid. 82)

Daniel Shank Cruz makes a similar argument in his research on queer Mennonite literature in North America. He points out that the relation "between those two identities [Mennonite and queer]" needs to be explored in the field of literary criticism in order to be able to perceive Mennonite identities and Mennonite/s Writing as pluralistic and contemporary phenomena. Moreover, he concludes that such a discourse is meaningful well beyond the realm of Mennonite Studies and can serve as a catalyst for debates on sexuality in general (2015: 143).

Homosexuality has been a delicate topic in Mennonite history throughout the 20th century and beyond.[143] The history of homosexuality and the Mennonite church in North America shows several conflicts and struggles between the church's main bodies and individual congregations. Loren Johns affirms that,

> [h]omosexuality has proved to be one of the more contentious and difficult issues the Mennonite Church has faced in recent years. Congregations have been excommunicated and pastors' credentials have been revoked over the issue. Some congregations and conferences have spent significant time and emotional energy in dialogue about the issue over the last

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[143] An anecdotal reference that stands for a variety of narratives with a very similar thrust is Calvin Redekop's essay on his membership in the Mennonite church. His essay contains a passage in which he talks about an incident in his youth where he, a male friend and two women made a trip to a secluded lane to have some private time. What is remarkable in his narration of the event is how careful he is to point out that his lack of interest in the girl he felt pressured to make sexual advances for did not result from any homoerotic feelings. "Lest anyone be offended that I did not respond to the *normal* opportunities of sexual intimacies, however benign, let me comfort them by assuring them that I had and have the *normal* sexual urges and am attracted to females" (C. Redekop 1988: 206; my emphasis).

twenty-five years – especially on the ethical propriety of covenanted homosexual relationships. Some congregations have been expelled for accepting noncelibate gay and lesbian persons; more have withdrawn from conferences perceived as too lax on the issue. (2007: 149)[144]

While homosexuality has been a point of debate from 1976 onwards when the Brethren and Mennonite Council for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered Interests was established to foster a dialogue within North American Mennonite churches, the struggle continues to date (J. G. Braun 2008a: 72). From 1999 onwards, several congregations have been expelled from the main church body because they showed too much acceptance of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) people as members of the Mennonite church community.

The North American Mennonite churches often reference the *Confession of Faith*, a crucial document that provides a guideline for members of the Mennonite church in terms of faith and religious practices, especially when it concerns the question about homosexualities. Article nineteen has been repeatedly consulted to substantiate the church's position on marriage and homosexuality. It states the "belie[f] that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life" (Mennonite Church Canada 1995: n.p.). Relying on this article, a broad range of Canadian Mennonite churches do not accept members who live in a same-sex relationship[145] and pronounce heterosexual marriages as the norm (cf. A. Dueck 2012; P. B. Reimer 2009), albeit many have set up specific task forces to provide opportunities for a continued dialogue on homosexuality in the Mennonite church.

While this ongoing debate may partly account for the lack of an extended discourse on homosexualities in Mennonite scholarship – after all most scholars in the field identify with the Mennonite community themselves – the need for such a debate has been acknowledged. Spicher Kasdorf emphasized the need for a critical contextualization of queer Mennonite writings in 2001.

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[144] A very similar assessment of the explosive nature of the theme of homosexuality in North American Mennonite churches can be found in David Eagle's essay on "Pneumatological Ecclesiology and Same-Sex Marriage" (2010).

[145] In some church documents and statements the expression "members who practice homosexuality" is used. The phrase allows churches to accept members who self-identify as homosexual but agree to practice celibacy in order to continue their membership with the church. Priscilla Beth Reimer reports an incident in her own Mennonite church where a gay couple was allowed to continue their membership in church but could not be accepted to marry in the church because of article 19 in the *Confession of Faith* (2009: 217).

This summer, everywhere I go Mennonite people are talking about unity and fragmentation, often at the same time. […] The troublesome issue is the status of gay and lesbian members. As a painful war is waged over the bodies of homosexual people, I believe that this trouble expresses deeper anxieties about gender and the nature of family and sex. (2001: 161)

Debating the relation between queer and Mennonite, J. G. Braun claims that "we are at the ground floor, so to speak, of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered academic Mennonite history" (2008a: 70). More recently, Shank Cruz illustrates that there is still much work to do in the field of Mennonite criticism when it comes to first, acknowledging works by queer Mennonite writers and second, the critical analysis of queer characters in Mennonite fictional texts (2015: 143).

I argue that the hesitation to deal with homosexuality goes beyond considerations for gender, sex and the stabilization of family and community, as Spicher Kasdorf suggests. The problem is manifested in the binary perception of Mennonite identities with its simplistic equation that anyone who does not conform to the heterosexual norm, is by definition not a Mennonite.[146] It is therefore only by deconstructing the either/or binary and acknowledging a multiplicity of different and at times contradictory identity expressions that we will be able to start a fruitful scholarly discussion. In her presentation on queerness among Mennonites, Anne Breckbill, vice president of the Brethren Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Interests, identifies Mennonites' fear of difference and deviance from traditional norms as the main incentive to hold on to destructive cultural practices (2007: n.p.). This fear, A. Dueck explains, has ultimately led to an equation of Mennonite community "with sameness" (2012: 108). In order to recognize the variety of Mennonite identity expressions in Mennonite fiction, it is necessary to question essentialized understandings of Mennonite identities. The perspective of queer studies will serve as tool to extend the definition of Mennonite community. It is particularly useful because of its radical openness, as Shank Cruz emphasizes (2015: 145–46).

While Mennonite scholarship on sexuality and queerness shows only a very small number of scholars, who in turn reveal a variety of research gaps, the situation is rather different when we turn our attention to the aspect of gender. In her essay on Mennonite women's identity, M.

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[146] The phenomenon of an essentialized identity is certainly not unique to Mennonites. However, Heike Gerds explains in the introduction to her dissertation on gender and sexuality (2004) that religious communities are more likely to emphasize their common ground in order to set themselves apart from other communities, thereby risking to become exclusive and intolerant towards those members who do not fit in.

Redekop points out that aspects of community and belonging can also be found in reference to gender in Mennonite Studies. However, in the following provocative quote M. Redekop questions traditional Mennonite gender roles.

> Women did not participate in the forging of the Anabaptist vision. It was not women who had to think about being conscientious objectors during the war. My father did not quiz prospective daughters-in law on their attitudes to pacifism. In what sense, then, can a woman be a Mennonite? (1988: 239)

There is no doubt that Redekop's argument needs to be qualified by a heightened sensibility for Mennonite (or, for that matter, any) women's lack of representation in historical sources.[147] Women have always played an important part in Mennonite history, but their achievements and their influence have been widely ignored in the records.[148] Contrary to Redekop, Hedy Martens argues that women's contribution to the development of the Mennonite community was indeed equal to men's. Her study of early Anabaptist history shows that both men and women took part in the public defense of their faith. She continues to explain that "Mennonite women, unlike most other women during the persecutions of the Reformation period, argued and died side by side with men in defense of their faith" (Martens 1988: 171).[149]

If we turn our attention to Mennonite women writing fiction, the importance of women's literary contributions in Canada, especially since the late 1980s becomes obvious and there is a good number of essays and papers reflecting on this development.[150] However, given this variety of female voices in fiction and poetry, it is surprising to find no comprehensive study on feminism in Mennonite Canadian writing. Despite M. Redekop's questioning of Mennonite

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[147] Funk Wiebe points out a number of reasons for the traditionally low representation of women in historical sources, such as the large number of male theologians and historians compared to a rather small number of female researchers in these areas (1999: 11–18).

[148] For a historical exploration of the roles of Mennonite women and their participation (or lack of it) in the contexts of church, education, work, and others, see Marlene Epp's study *Mennonite Women in Canada* (2008) and her earlier essay "Women in Canadian Mennonite History: Uncovering the 'Underside'" published in the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* in 1987.

[149] Stephen Boyd argues in a similar way that inequality between women and men among the early Anabaptists was rather uncommon (1999). As I have pointed out in chapter two and as Snyder and Huebert Hecht emphasize in their publication on Anabaptist women (1996c), the number of female martyrs among the Anabaptists was considerably higher than among other religious groups.

[150] Some examples of scholarship on Mennonite women writers and the representation of women in Mennonite fiction will be discussed in chapter 3.4. However, a concise collection of research on the topic of Mennonite women's writing in general includes Brandt (1993; 2002; 2007); Cisar (1996); M. Epp (1987; 2008); Funk Wiebe (1981; 1985; 1999); Kuester (2008), Kuester and Michael (2013); and M. Redekop (1988; 1992).

women's belonging to the Mennonite community, she observes that although women have traditionally lacked political power, their cultural contributions have rooted them deeply within the Mennonite experience.

> The women were Mennonite, not because they held passionate opinions, but because they made the quilts, they made the borscht, they made the varenike. It was my father who made the decision to offer hospitality to the Indians, but it was my mother, my sisters, and I who served the food and made the beds. While the *Bruderschaft* was making the important decisions in the main body of the church, the *Frauenverein* was in the basement, getting the food ready. (M. Redekop 1988: 240)

Apart from those traditional female cultural contributions, M. Redekop cautions that Mennonite women's creative potential as writers needs to be recognized and supported.

> Even within the community, a woman with a practical nature could still make a very significant contribution. But what about the woman with an exceptional creative talent? What about the woman who has the ability to envision an ideal church? What happens to that power if the woman is not allowed to give voice to it in ways that could change the real church? Such talent, turned inward, causes guilt and depression. The single most significant cause of neurosis in the Mennonite community is the stifling of the imagination. (ibid. 240)

While M. Redekop focuses on women's cultural contributions and their potential participation in the theological development of the Mennonite community, I focus on Mennonite women's fictional writing that envisions new identities, which often entail a subversion of communal stories and norms of storytelling. However, narratives by Mennonite women have been characterized by their dependency on male characters, as Funk Wiebe observes (1999: 10). To explain her observation, Funk Wiebe argues that the voice of authority for Mennonites has been the voice of God, which has traditionally been interpreted as male (ibid. 10). These circumstances – the lack of women among historians and theologians, their absence from public spaces and thus from decision making processes, next to the construction of the male voice as authoritative[151] – impeded women's access to writing and taught them that first, they had no right to speak about non-domestic matters and second, that they ought to perceive themselves in relation to men, only.

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[151] Additionally, let me allude to the fact that traditional Mennonite communities have rejected higher education. Di Brandt recounts a saying within her community, which sums up traditional Mennonites' disposition towards education in her essay "Je jelieda, je vechieda. Canadian Mennonite Alteridentifications." The Low German expression translates into "the more educated, the more corrupt" (Brandt 2004: 153). This rejection of formal higher education certainly also accounts for Mennonites' long absence from literary fiction in general and adds to the list of impediments for women writers among Mennonites.

3.2 Writing from the Center? Gender and Sexualities in Contemporary Mennonite Narratives

Despite the impediments to fiction writing, a contemporary assessment of women's contribution to Mennonite literature in Canada shows a strong and, according to Hostetler (2005: 138) and Kuester (2012: 129), continual increase. In a recent article on Mennonite/s Writing in North America, U.S. American scholar Ann Hostetler argues that it is not despite, but because of women's absence from decision-making processes that they started to enter the literary scene as writers.

> [W]omen writers have made major contributions to the recent development of Mennonite literature and literary studies in North America, perhaps partly because their marginal status within the religious hierarchy allowed them more freedom to explore avenues for literary production as their opportunities for higher education expanded. (Hostetler 2015: 87)

Hostetler continues to explore women writers' narratives for their potential to "offer counter-narratives and critiques that can renew and revise the ways that people within and without the subgroup encounter and experience it" (ibid. 89). Thus, "[w]omen writers from Mennonite contexts might be triply othered" (ibid. 89), but it is this marginal position which allows them to deconstruct master narratives and offer new narratives. Similarly, Cisar, who investigates Mennonite women's autobiographies, argues that "[i]nside-outside considerations […] apply in interesting ways to Mennonite women's autobiography" (1996: 142).

Next to narratives by women writers and narratives about women's experiences, sexualities in general and homosexualities in particular have led a shadowy existence in Mennonite Studies and Mennonite fiction. The 2013 issue of the Mennonite magazine *Rhubarb* on "Mennonite Sex" presents an exception to the absence of sexuality in Mennonite culture and literature. Despite the intriguing collection of poems, fictional and non-fictional narratives by Mennonite artists and writers, the publisher Victor Enns, points out that he was astonished by the number of poems that the magazine received. Similarly, he was also surprised to find a "much lesser interest of fiction and nonfiction writers, and the almost complete lack of visual representation of manly or lady parts, especially of anything they might do together" (Enns 2013: 2). Thus, despite several efforts by writers and artists to break the taboo of Mennonite sexuality, fictional and non-fictional examples are rare. D. Reimer traced this lack of a discourse on sexualities back to the traditional "mind-body split" in Mennonite culture (2002: 181). The (sexualized)

body has been a challenging topic for other religiously identified communities, as well. In addition, given (North American) Mennonites' ongoing struggle with homosexuality, it is no surprise that narratives on the topic are scarce.

This lack of attention is regrettable, because, as particularly queer studies scholars point out, sexuality is an important research object. [152] It is central to everyone's life because it is "thoroughly related to social existence" (Hall 2003: 2). The interconnectedness of sexuality with other areas of human existence, such as "religion, economics, prevailing scientific paradigms, the social sciences, aesthetics, and other flows of cultural expression and social valuation" should indeed make sexuality an important factor in the study of any community (ibid. 2). Gender and queer studies' scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick goes one step further: In her seminal book *Epistemology of the Closet* (2008), she argues that

> an understanding of virtually any aspect of Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition; and [the book] will assume that the appropriate place for that critical analysis to begin is from the relatively decentered perspective of modern gay and antihomophobic theory. (ibid. 1)

Both queers and women share a decentred position and perspective from which to construct new identities, while deconstructing established ones. Therefore, I deliberately chose to focus on Mennonite narratives of (homo)sexualities and gender to gain a better understanding of Mennonites as a *narrating community*. As I have pointed out repeatedly throughout my thesis, the challenges to master narratives that are presented are central in understanding Mennonites as *narrating community*. Texts that present women in different roles and/ or deconstruct a heterosexual marriage norm are not important to the corpus of Mennonite literature despite their questioning of the norm, but because of it.

With this in mind, let me briefly discuss the chapter title, "Writing from the Center? Gender and Sexuality in Mennonite Narratives," which may seem conflicting at first glance because Mennonite Studies still lack an elaborate debate on feminism and we are only at the beginning of starting a discourse on (homo)sexualities, as I have shown earlier. However, I argue that for a conceptualization of Mennonites as *narrating community* it is vital to avoid constructing what

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[152] There is a high number of scholars in the larger field of cultural studies and sociology, to name only two, that are equally interested in sexuality as an important aspect in people's lives.

I have referred to as challenging narratives as marginal. In fact, I believe that conceiving of Mennonites as *narrating community* entails deconstructing the very binary of margin and center altogether, because this binary enforces the perception of some narratives as more important than others. While this approach to Mennonite writing has been popular, as I have shown in the introduction, I like to challenge this practice as being part of a problem in Mennonite Studies: the outside-inside mentality that is supported by posing some stories as master narratives while ignoring others. Perceiving of Mennonites as a *narrating community* allows us to overcome this problematic approach. The question mark in my title thus does not signify a question to whether gender and sexuality are central in Mennonite narratives. Rather, it expresses the challenge to the very category of centrality/ marginality itself.

3.3   Concepts and Methods

Before I start to analyze my primary texts, let me introduce the basic concepts and methods that I will be using. Beginning with the most essential terms, sexuality and gender, I first of all want to point out that there can be no thorough investigation of those concepts in my thesis as they have a long history and travelled several disciplines and an exploration of all of these approaches would exceed my focus. In short, I will use gender to denote certain behaviours and acts that have been marked as either masculine or feminine. Although this use has been criticized for perpetuating gender as a social construct and sex as a biological given,[153] it serves my purposes in the following analyses best to look at gender as constructed within a particular socio-cultural environment. With the use of sexualities as a concept we often confront a heterosexual marriage norm within the context of Mennonite scholarship and fictional writing. The primary examples I am using below are challenging this very norm, introducing non-normative sexualities to the discussion.

In my analysis of gender in Mennonite narratives, I examine various feminist elements and aspects on a formal as well as contextual level of narratives written by women. This entails analysing the ways in which the female narrator in Miriam Toews' novel *Irma Voth* finds a (public) voice, how she narrates female agency, and how she problematizes the invisibility of women in public. In the poems of Di Brandt I will be looking at the narrativization of women in their roles of mothers, daughter, lovers and sisters. Her poems work on deconstructing idealizations of mothers that have worked to their detriment, e.g. by foreclosing female bonding, and by keeping them bound to a private sphere. The new identities Brandt and Toews create in their writing are intricately related to their particular writing styles that I will be exploring as Mennonite feminist strategies of narrativization.

Although I cannot present a comprehensive discussion of gender and feminism due to the spatial limitations of my thesis, let me introduce the particular assumptions that constitute my epistemological framework. Consistent with my overall approach to identities as multiplied, I

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[153] There is a large variety of research that explicitly focuses on definitions and discussion of gender and sex, categories which have often been taken as complementary to each other (sex denoting a presumed factual biology and gender denoting a presumed socio-cultural behaviour). However, as Butler (1993a) and French feminists show, there is a debate about the apparent facticity of sex as a category, which argues that both sex and gender are social constructs and only derive their meaning through repeated performances in a certain socio-cultural context.

agree with scholars such as Hélène Cixous and Judith Butler that all-inclusive interpretations of women are neither realistic nor useful. Instead I assume that female and male narrators, characters and personas in my corpus are always subject to particular socio-cultural environments that shape their perceptions of gender and sexualities. Cixous points out that "there is no general woman" (Cixous 1976: 876). For her, as for many other feminist (and other) scholars, it is ultimately fascinating to explore identities in their plurality and to grasp women in the "infinite richness of their individual constitutions" (ibid. 876). Another critical voice in this context is Butler. In her monograph *Gender Trouble* she asserts that

> [f]or the most part, feminist theory has assumed that there is some existing identity, understood through the category of woman, who not only initiates feminist interest and goals within discourse, but constitutes the subject for whom political representation is pursued. (1990: 1)

This essentialist notion, Butler explains, leads to a political disadvantage, because the identity category of "woman" is only one of many subject positions (ibid. 3). Another important aspect that resonates in my analyses is Butler's argument that gender is always performed – "a doing" (ibid. 25) – and naturalised in a given socio-cultural context by the repetition of its performance.

> Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. (ibid. 33)

The feminist texts I will be working with challenge these notions of sexuality and gender as stable and they question idealizations of women, which ultimately work to suppress them. The French feminist scholar Monique Wittig, who argues that the idealization of women is another patriarchal tool, has explored this latter aspect in detail in her study *One Is Not Born a Woman* (1993).

> What the concept 'woman is wonderful' accomplishes is that it retains for defining women the best features (best according to whom?) which oppression has granted us, and it does not radically question the categories 'man' and 'woman,' which are political categories and not natural givens. (ibid. 105)

Brandt's demythification of the mother in her poems takes this theoretical thread up to exemplify how the idealization of mothers has emphasized a gender divide.

In the texts by queer Mennonite writers that explore non-normative sexualities, we also encounter idealizations of gender norms. Especially in Wes Funk's novel sexuality and

masculinity are intricately linked and the narrator challenges his community's, but also his own perceptions of masculinity in relation to his homosexuality. Funk's inclusion of rock music in his narrative provides a space for subverting socio-cultural norms. In addition, the novel's narrator challenges normative interpretations of community as sameness and presents subtle reinterpretations of (Mennonite) community. Reinterpretations of community are also central in Lynnette D'anna's novel. Her narrative completely deconstructs belonging and offers interpretations that defy homogeneity. Being the most challenging of my primary texts, D'anna's novel also questions non-normative sexualities and introduces readers to BDSM and physical and mental abuse. Next to that, D'anna pointedly criticizes the connection that is being made between mental health and (hetero)sexuality. A discussion of sexual identities in both novels exceeds the mere representation of queer characters and their potential struggles in a homophobic social environment. Both authors offer an extended social criticism that exceed a particular Mennonite focus, and that pertains to Western cultures' homophobia in general.

As with gender and feminism, my exploration of sexualities in the context of queer Mennonite narratives forecloses a comprehensive discussion of sexualities in general. However, there are discourses upon which my analyses draw and that serve as an epistemological framework. Nikki Sullivan points out that sexuality is a social construct. Furthermore, she criticizes the naturalization of heterosexuality, which has, she argues, "in contemporary Western culture at least, attained the status of the natural, the taken for granted" (2003: 119). The construction of (hetero)sexuality has been most comprehensively explored by Michel Foucault, who in his three-volume study of *The History of Sexuality* (1978), argues that sexuality is a discursive construct that pertains to certain historical, social, and cultural environments. Similar to gender, sexualities are a product of socio-cultural construction and become naturalized by repeated performances, which in Western cultures lead to a "compulsory heterosexuality," as Butler refers to it.

> Compulsory heterosexuality sets itself up as the original, the true, the authentic; the norm that determines the real that implies that 'being' lesbian is always a kind of miming, a vain effort to participate in the phantasmatic plenitude of naturalized heterosexuality which will always and only fail. […] In other words, the naturalistic effects of heterosexualized genders are produced through imitative strategies; what they imitate is a phantasmatic ideal of heterosexual identity, one that is produced by the imitation as its effect. In this sense, the 'reality' of heterosexual identities is performatively constituted through an imitation that sets itself up as the origin and the ground of all imitations. In other words, heterosexuality is

always the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmatic idealization of itself
– *and failing*. (1993b: 312–13)

However, sexual identities are far from being limited in meaning, as becomes very clear when we look at the multitude of elements that Kosofsky Sedgwick lists under the term in her article "Queer and Now." She explains that sexual identities, contrary to an everyday understanding, are constructed by a latitude of elements, such as the biological sex, the "self-perceived gender-assignment" and the biological sex of a preferred partner (Kosofsky Sedgwick 2013: 7–8). Other elements, however, are less commonly discussed, such as a person's procreative choice, and the identification of their "main locus of emotional bonds," which as Kosofsky Sedgwick adds, is supposed to cohere with the preferred sexual partner (ibid. 7–8).[154] In conclusion and in accordance with my understanding of identities in general, sexual identities present social constructs that can by no means be understood as monoliths, but need to be explored as a combination of a variety of different and sometimes contradictory elements that are "culturally and historically […] specific" (Sullivan 2003: 1).

To deconstruct a monolithic and stable definition of sexualities and to challenge a compulsory heterosexuality, my analyses are shaped by understanding sexualities from the point of view of queer theories.[155] Considering the short history of the term queer[156] that only became popular in the late 1980s and early 1990s,[157] it is surprising to find such a great variety of scholarly work on the subject. Hall explains queer in its multiple meanings as adjective, noun and verb in his short study on *Queer Theories* (2003: 12–15). The grammatical use of queer is also a question explored by Sullivan who concludes that the term is most productively used as set of actions. The former then allows the use of queer as deconstructive practice itself, which is its most productive capacity, as Sullivan claims (2003: 50). One aspect that scholars easily agree on and that has often given rise to both productive questions and critical comments, is the

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[154] In fact Kosofsky Sedgwick is careful to notice that a person's sexuality does not have to be oriented towards another person at all, but can be autoerotic (2013: 7–8).

[155] I use queer theories in the plural, because the term "queer" itself already emphasizes a plurality of identity expressions and performances. Thus, I agree with D. Hall that the use of queer theory (singular) would be presenting a monolith that defies the very idea of the term queer (2003: 5).

[156] Although the majority of queer theories' scholars would agree that "queer" exceeds the context of sexual identities, it has most often been used in this particular context. In order to tease out those aspects of Mennonite/s Writing that have as yet received too little attention and in order to stay within the limits of this thesis on Mennonites as *narrating community*, I will use "queer" to refer to sexual identities.

[157] For a very concise introduction to the history of queer and queer studies see Hall (2003), and Warner (1993). For a collection of very basic texts in the field of queer studies see Hall and Jagose (2013).

"almost inevitable definitional elasticity" (Dickinson 1999: 5) of queer that leaves ample room for deconstructing a status quo.[158] Kosofsky Sedgwick emphasizes the term's vagueness as a positive aspect because queer can refer to "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (2013: 8).

However, it is certainly naïve to claim that queer can grasp every kind of marginalization. Indeed, especially when we think of the intersections of gender and sexuality, queer may at times even gloss over some differences and thus prevent us from seeing some marginalizations.[159] Rich is certainly one of the most verbal scholars to point out that lesbian women and gay men must not be put together under the umbrella terms homosexual or queer because it ultimately harms the feminist cause (2003: 13; 17). In order not to lose sight of the gender trajectory and its possible implications, I will dedicate an analysis to one female queer narrative as well as to one male queer text.

In my thesis I have constantly emphasized the necessity to acknowledge Canadian Mennonite writing in its complexity. However, it may seem paradoxical to acknowledge the complexity while at the same time focusing on two very distinct identity categories: sexuality and gender. I am fully aware that both categories do not exist independently of each other, or of additional categories that are underrepresented in my approach to Mennonite/s Writing (e.g. religion, class, ethnicity, level of education).[160] Although I focus on sexuality and gender, let me stress that I understand these two categories to represent only a fraction of the various categories and their interconnections, which are relevant in describing the complexity of any given society or community. Thus, intersectionality – the assumption that identity categories

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[158] This has often led queer studies scholars' to question their own theories and concepts. A good example of permanent questioning is presented in Hall's *Queer Theories* (2003) where we find so-called "queries" at the end of each chapter, which serve to "'queer' the flow of [his] discussion with asides, personal intrusions, theoretical provocations, and sometimes unanswerable complications" (ibid. 7).

[159] On this aspect and on a thorough criticism on queer theories in general (e.g. queer theories' inability to deconstruct the humanist understanding of the subject) see Sullivan (2003: 44; 48) as well as D. Hall who questions queer studies' implications for political action as well as the academic jargon that tends to be inaccessible (2003: 79–80).

[160] Falko Schnicke points out that "race-class-gender" have been the central categories in intersectional analyses and that there are only few attempts to broaden this range of productive categories (2014: 22). A very conclusive overview of the variety of categories that are available for an intersectional analysis can be found in Helma Lutz (2001).

such as gender, ethnicity and sexuality are always already related and work towards an individual's benefit or disadvantage due to power relations [161] that are attached to these categories in a given context – should be perceived of as an epistemological framework in my thesis.[162] I am aware that the complexity of a text cannot be done justice to by a focus on only two individual categories. However, it has been an accepted and even necessary practice[163] among scholars who work with intersectionality, to focus only on those aspects and their connectedness that are relevant to their particular research questions.[164] In addition, gender and sexuality are widely accepted as categories when exploring the socialization into a given cultural context (cf. Eakin 2008: 16).

In order to gain an insight into the formal aspects of queer and feminist Mennonite/s Writing, I will make use of what has become known as queer narratology and feminist or gendered narratology. While feminist criticism and narratology had been opposing forces for a long time, Lanser's essay "Toward a Feminist Narratology" (1986) proved to be a breakthrough for exploring possible pathways for a useful combination of these two theories.[165] The inclusion of

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[161] Judith Butler points out that although it is "incontrovertibly important" to think "contemporary power in its complexity and interarticulations," it is at the same time impossible (1993a: 19).

[162] The term intersectionality was introduced into academic discourse by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a lawyer, who argued that the recruiting politics of American businesses are deeply discriminatory and work toward the disadvantage of colored women (Crenshaw 1991). After the publication of her article in the *Stanford Law Review*, the term has been adopted within Gender Studies, especially in the German context, in the field of sociology. In the recently published collection of essays on intersectionality and narratology, the editor Schnicke provides an excellent overview of the debates around the term. He points out that by now intersectionality has become a buzzword in many disciplines. Schnicke critically discusses this development and guides his readers' attention to the fact that, despite intersectionality's popularity, we still lack a precise definition of the term. In addition, scholars have not yet clearly defined whether intersectionality designates a theory, a method or a heuristic concept (Schnicke 2014: 2). However, there have been attempts at developing different methodological approaches. An overview can be found in McCall (2005), Rommelspacher (2009), and Winker and Degele (2011). An alternative to the term intersectionality, which has been widely criticized because it proposes rather rigid identity categories, which only intersect at certain points, is offered by German sociologist Katharina Walgenbach who introduces the term "Interdependenzen" ("interdependencies") (2005; 2012), Walgenbach and Grohs (2006), Walgenbach et al. (2007). "Interdependenzen" positions the inequalities within identities and proposes that identity categories do not intersect at certain moments, but must be thought of as always already related to each other.

[163] Haschemi Yekani et al. emphasize the near-impossibility of analyzing all given identity categories in any scholarly paper because of "the inherent complexity of the concept" (2008: 20).

[164] The choice of categories is made in relation with the particular research interest, as Haschemi Yekani and Michaelis emphasized in a presentation on the usefulness of intersectionality in the field of literary and cultural studies (2009: n.p.). Walgenbach supports this proposition and adds that the choice of categories is influenced by historical, political, cultural as well as geographical dimensions and the general interest of a researcher (cf. Walgenbach and Grohs 2006: 8; Walgenbach 2012: 22)

[165] Lanser's essay initiated a debate about narratology's potential to be combined with feminist criticism. Feminist scholars have been opposing the categorization of a structuralist-formalist narratology, while the narratologists

gender and sexuality into the framework of a narratological analysis and thus the contextualization and historicisation of narratological categories, next to a semanticisation of a feminist and queer literary analysis, provide the basis for my analysis of gender and sexuality in Mennonite narratives. Therefore, I take Lanser's exploration into the reciprocal relationship and intellectual as well as methodological fertilization of feminist and queer literary criticism and narratology as point of departure.

Some facts about the historical development of feminist narratology will help to understand my preference for the use of the terms "gendered narratology" over "feminist narratology" and queer narratology. While Lanser was at first particularly interested in women's specific style of writing (in contrast to men's writing),[166] this research focus has been considerably widened. On the one hand, scholars tended to see a sole focus on women's and men's particularities in writing as perpetuating a traditional binary and have consequently opened up their research foci to other analyses that look beyond binary compositions and structures. On the other hand, several scholars, among them Lanser herself, acknowledged the importance of other categories, apart from gender, for a post-classical narratology. Thus, especially the aspect of sexuality entered the field of narratology. In light of these developments, Allrath and Gymnich (2002) as well as Nieberle and Strowick (2006) began to question the appropriateness of the term "feminist narratology." Allrath and Gymnich stress that feminist narratology expresses and repeats traditional gender binaries and has traditionally solely focused on the analysis of narratives by women writers. I therefore, follow their suggestion to use the more inclusive term "gendered narratology" (Allrath and Gymnich 2002: 66).[167] The authors go on to suggest that a gendered narratology also enables us to think about sexuality as one element of analysis in narratology. However, instead of subsuming the study of sexualities and gender under the general heading

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criticized feminist literary analysis for its lack of attention to formal aspects of a text. Because the whole debate lies outside of the realms of my own thesis on the one hand and has been extensively reflected upon in various scholarly works (e.g Allrath and Gymnich (2002); Mezei (1996); V. Nünning and A. Nünning (2004; 2006); Page (2006) to name just a few of the most important works) on the other hand, I will not provide a comprehensive overview.

[166] This focus can be traced back to the fact that Lanser's early work on the subject is deeply connected with second-wave feminism and thus strengthens the idea of clear distinctions between male and female aspects of narrativization.

[167] "Eine *gender(ed) narratology* geht insofern über feministisch-narratologische Fragestellungen hinaus, als unter diesem Begriff auch die Analyse der in Texten männlicher Autoren eingesetzen Formen und Strukturen unter dem Fokus *gender* subsumiert werden kann" (Allrath and Gymnich 2002: 66; emphasis in original). We find a similar line of argumentation in V. Nünning and A. Nünning (2004) who propose to use "gender-orientierte Erzähltextanalyse" in the German-language discourse.

of a gendered narratology, Allrath and Gymnich point out that a queer narratology provides a more adequate methodology for the analysis of sexualities in narratives.

As hinted at above, Lanser has been open to the inclusion of other elements, such as sex and sexuality into a feminist narratology towards the end of the 20th century.[168]

> I will argue that the categories of sex/ gender/ sexuality interact with other narratological elements from narrative person to paralipsis to reliability in ways that I will only begin to suggest. At the same time, the 'application' of the categories sex, gender, and sexuality to actual texts calls profoundly into question the separation of text from context and grammar from culture and threatens the viability of binary systems on which narratology 'proper' tends to insist. (1996: 251)

Her efforts are directed at transforming structuralist-formalist narratology altogether so that well-established categories and binaries become historicized and contextualized. This suggestion and the continuing efforts to challenge binaries and to perceive of narratological categories as embedded and used in particular historical, cultural, and social contexts that need to be explored and addressed in a narratological study render a gendered and queer narratology highly appropriate for the study of sexualities and gender in contemporary Mennonite Canadian literature. I believe that the use of queer and gendered narratology offers the opportunity to close a research gap in Mennonite Studies when it comes to sexuality on the one hand. On the other hand, its use also enables us to subvert the binary construction that have been problematic within Mennonite scholarship. The use of queer and gendered narratology will ultimately provide the methodological framework for answering the following questions: What are important structural aspects and narratological forms that deconstruct and subvert master narratives in the context of queer and feminist Mennonite literature? How are sexuality and gender expressed by narratological categories? How are binary structures of gender and sexuality undermined, transformed, or perpetuated in Mennonite narratives?

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[168] In 1995 Lanser published an essay, the title of which, "Sexing the Narrative: Propriety, Desire, and the Engendering of Narratology" already reveals her purpose to provide more room for the inclusion of sex and sexualities in narrative analyses. Subsequent publications, such as "Queering Narratology" (1996) and "Toward (a Queerer and) More (Feminist) Narratology" (2015) show her sustained interest in a post-classical narratology.

3.4. Narrating Women in Mennonite Women's Writing

As I have briefly alluded to above, women's voices have been silenced within traditional patriarchal Mennonite communities. Yet, Mennonite women's writing has become an integral and important part of Canadian literature since the 1990s and continues to be influential. Despite traditional expectations for women to be mothers and caretakers, Mennonite women have established themselves as fiction writers. Kuester argues that Mennonite women writers have always been fighting against the grain, because "in the largely patriarchally structured Mennonite community, women seem to have played a minor role, at least outside of home and family" (2008: 15). However, once Mennonite women had overcome the most important hurdles on their way to fiction writing, they were facing an amalgam of stories, written by male Mennonite authors, which either did not include them or designated them a space only as caretakers and silent wives, daughters, mothers and sisters.

Given their late entry into the literary world, it is not surprising to discover that contemporary Mennonite women's writing is very much concerned with second wave feminist issues, such as finding a voice, and deconstructing male master narratives. In Hostetler's recent overview and evaluation of women's writing in the North American context, she concludes that over the past two decades

> [w]omen writers from Mennonite contexts might be triply othered, but their significant contributions in the literary sphere offer counter-narratives and critiques that can renew and revise the ways that people within and without the subgroup encounter and experience it. (2015: 89)

The rewriting of patriarchal master narratives that circle around migration, has taken very particular forms in the writing of Di Brandt and Miriam Toews, whom I will focus on in my analyses below.

The analyses of Brandt's collection of poems and Toews' novel will focus on the roles of women in fiction written by Mennonite women. I have explicitly decided not to include any analysis of women in narratives by male writers, because I argue that Brandt's and Toews' writings are particularly revealing in terms of the challenges they present to traditional gender roles within patriarchal Mennonite communities. Their subversive potential renders them highly appropriate for a discussion of Mennonites as a *narrating community*. Furthermore, I will show how the specific marginalization of Mennonite women writers, as Hostetler (2015)

and Kuester (2008) describe it, inevitably results in a particularly reflective and challenging style in Brandt's and Toews' writing. Additionally, I agree with Josephine Donovan's argument that the analysis of women's writing requires a knowledge of women's experiences (Donovan 1987: 98). Consequently, I believe that the representation of women in narratives of female writers present a more challenging discourse around patriarchy and gender-power relations than male authors' narratives are likely to do.

The act of storytelling itself is an important element in Toews' novel. The narrator explores her own community, the story of her father, his use of violence to dominate his family and she rewrites the master narratives she has been taught to silently accept. The most important aspect in her account is finding her own voice and emancipating herself from the rule of her father and God. In my exploration of the narrator's voice, I will rely on Lanser's study of female voice in *Fictions of Authority* (1992). Lanser is careful to point out that she uses "female voice" to indicate "a site of ideological tension made visible in textual practices" (ibid. 6). She also clarifies that, although the "causes, ideologies, or social implications of particular narratives" – the main interest of feminist criticism – are an important part in her study of voice, she uses voice as "a narratological term," that "attends to the specific forms of textual practice and avoids the essentializing tendencies of its more casual feminist usages" (ibid. 4–5). Toews' novel works with an autodiegetic narrator desperately trying to claim authority over her own story, which she narrates using different media and modes. Because of gender norms that work to their disadvantage, women's claim to narrative authority has often been a struggle. Lanser refers to the authority of narrators as "discursive" and explains that

> [i]n western literary systems for the past two centuries […] discursive authority has, with varying degrees of intensity, attached itself most readily to white, educated men of hegemonic ideology. One major constituent of narrative authority, therefore, is the extent to which a narrator's status conforms to this dominant social power. At the same time, narrative authority is also constituted through (historically changing) textual strategies that even socially unauthorized writers can appropriate. Since such appropriations may of course backfire, nonhegemonic writers and narrators may need to strike a delicate balance in accommodating and subverting dominant rhetorical practices. (ibid. 6–7)

Toews' narrator's use of language and narrative practices imitates that of male authorities in the beginning of the novel and the narrator eventually explores her own voice and style of narration.

Apart from a discourse on voice, I will also discuss the importance of agency and space, which have been identified as important categories in a gendered narratology (cf. Gymnich 2010; A. Nünning 1994; V. Nünning and A. Nünning 2004). *Irma Voth* presents women in the traditional Mennonite context to lack agency over their own bodies and thereby, against their will, becoming pregnant and having to raise more children than they feel capable of doing. Furthermore, the exploration of the tension between private and public, and urban and metropolitan space will show how intricately these spatial categories are related to gender norms in the novel. Subverting gender norms, and exploring the public space serves as means of female emancipation.

Finding a voice and claiming agency of the female body also play an important role in Brandt's poems, which focus on the role of the mother. Brandt has been exploring the mother both in her poems as well as in her research. In her dissertation *Wild Mother Dancing* (1993) she criticizes the absence of the mother in literature and discusses different types of representations in Canadian novels. This largely pertains to Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1997), who argues that women and their complex relationships, especially the relationship between mothers and daughters, have been neglected in scholarly and fictional writings. Yet, Rich points out, "[t]he loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy" (ibid. 237). Brandt's collection of poems, *mother, not mother*, writes the mother into existence. Additionally, it also challenges the "myth of motherhood," which Rich describes as an idealization of mothers in Western civilization. The idealization of motherhood has become naturalised by persistent repetition and thus finally became an institution that works against the real-life needs of women as mothers (ibid. 22–23). The myth of a mother's unconditional love is a basic assumption of motherhood. Brandt's poems challenge and contradict this myth by showing the mother as neglecting, fearful, bored by ordinary tasks of mothering, and raging at the wants of her children. Brandt also presents new identities for women and mothers who struggle with the implications of their different roles and who long for female relationships and bonding. Brandt also tackles the female body, that, in pregnancy and old age, has become silenced in Western culture and literature. Cixous claims that women writers have to "write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes" (1976: 886). The idealization of women as

mothers additionally renders the body of mothers invisible. Brandt challenges this invisibility and thus reconstructs mothers as human beings, with bodily needs and desires.

3.4.1 Voice, Space and Agency as Feminist Narrative Practices in Miriam Toews' *Irma Voth*[169]

> Sometimes I feel my life is an invention.
> (Toews 2011: 110)

Miriam Toews' fourth novel, *Irma Voth*, presents a fictional Mennonite family, who, after the tragic death of the eldest daughter, migrated from the Canadian Prairies to the Mexican desert. Trying to come to terms with the traumatic experience, the father enforces a strict adherence to Mennonite traditions: clearly defined gender norms and a life in the desert undisturbed by worldly influences. The novel is narrated from the perspective of the 19-year-old daughter Irma, and the reader perceives the events through her point of view. Her narrative focuses on the role of women in her community and family and she addresses the oppression of women by men that becomes tangible in the silencing of women's voices, their invisibility in public, and a denial of sovereignty over their own bodies. This patriarchal master narrative is embedded in the cultural, religious, and linguistic practices that are explored and subverted throughout the novel.

The introductory quote to this chapter indicates two of my three research foci for the analysis of *Irma Voth*. First, the statement, "[s]ometimes I feel my life is an invention" (ibid. 110) uttered by a female character in the novel, reveals how the speaker perceives she lacks a voice in the narration of her own life. The speaker positions herself as passive actor in the invention of her life, which leads to the second aspect: the lack of agency. Somebody else seems to hold the authority of the speaker's life's narrative. The statement also provides an insight into the intricate connection between life and storytelling in the novel, which will become more prominent in the analysis below. Voice and agency are central aspects in the patriarchal master narrative that Irma describes and tries to subvert throughout the novel.

Irma Voth shows a variety of techniques of how women are silenced within the fictional Mennonite community; a very important one is the denial of authority. Early on in the novel, Irma tells the story of her marriage to a local Mexican boy, Jorge. The marriage to a non-Mennonite, and therefore outsider of the close-knit community, is perceived to be a serious defiance of authority and male superiority by Irma's father, Julius. When, after the secret

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[169] Some of the aspects discussed in this chapter have been explored in Michael (2014; 2015).

wedding, Irma and Jorge visit Irma's parents and tell them about their marriage, the breach of traditional gender norms becomes visible in the different reactions of her parents. While her mother immediately "went to her bedroom [closing] the door softly," her father's first reaction is a slap to his daughter's face (ibid. 9). The mother's retreat to the bedroom indicates her awareness of and abiding by gender-normative behaviours. Knowing that, as a woman, she is not granted any authority to speak about her daughter's non-sanctioned marriage, she chooses to show her obedience by leaving her husband completely in charge. Enraged and helpless himself, Julius' violent reaction speaks more to an acting out of Western ideas of masculinity via showing aggression and violence than to a Mennonite tradition.[170] Even more intriguing than Julius' first reaction to his daughter's marriage, is his subsequent negotiation about her and Jorge's future. True to gender norms he talks to Jorge only and offers him an empty house he owns near his own house, on the condition that Jorge and Irma would take care of his livestock. Although Irma and Jorge earlier decided to move to Chihuahua city to live with his mother, Julius' position as the family patriarch provides him with the authority to ignore and alter their plans. The example shows how "[f]or several centuries of Mennonite history, the voice of authority, of reason, yes, even of God, was always male" (Funk Wiebe 1999: 10).

To emphasize traditional gender norms and to punish his daughter, Julius decides to excommunicate Irma, which entails a general restraint of members of the family and community to talk to her.[171] Added to the fact that Jorge leaves the Campo to do business with local drug dealers soon after their marriage, Irma finds herself completely isolated in a rundown house without any power, company, or support from her family. Although her isolation causes her emotional stress, it also provides the opportunity for Irma's emancipation and marks a turning point in her life. First, Irma seeks support in religion and prayer. However, as she fails to find

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[170] It should be noted that Julius' use of physical violence does not conform to Mennonite cultural practices and tradition. Quite the opposite, the Mennonite tradition calls for a complete renunciation of violence, which has been discussed from early Mennonite history onwards, most often in the context of a refusal to take part in military service.

[171] The practice of excommunication as performed by conservative religious communities, including conservative Mennonites, has been widely criticized within the Mennonite context. Often referred to as "shunning," the excommunication is accompanied by a ban from social interaction with members of the community and family. In *Irma Voth* we read about several suicides and suicide attempts (Toews 2011: 13, 18) that result from this isolating practice. In Toews' earlier novel, *A Complicated Kindness* (2005), the narrator refers to the excommunicated people in her town as ghosts, because nobody would even acknowledge their existence, which ultimately results in high rates of depression (ibid. 134). Patrick Friesen's play *The Shunning* (1980) also focuses on the consequences of an excommunication in an isolated Mennonite community.

appropriate words for a prayer – praying for her is deeply embedded in the patriarchal system she begins to doubt – she starts to focus on herself: "What difference did it make what my father said? I posed another question to myself. How do I behave in this world without following the directions of my father, my husband or God" (Toews 2011: 21)? Her reliance on male authority and guidance are deeply embedded in her gender education. It is therefore not surprising that she struggles to overcome the silence that her Mennonite upbringing prescribes to her as a woman.

Her first attempts at finding a public voice are rather indirect when she works as a translator for a film crew who visits the rural Mennonite campo to produce a movie on Mennonite life in the Mexican desert.[172] Irma is ultimately the only one on set who can speak German, Spanish and English and is thus well equipped for translating the directions to the German lead actor Marijke, who speaks neither Spanish nor English. Gradually, Irma starts to question and challenge the directions for Marijke's character as they pertain to traditional gender norms. Given the safe position of having her own words spoken by somebody else – Marijke's movie character – Irma starts to interfere in the production process of the film by mistranslating parts the script. One of the first scenes shows the central male character, played by Irma's uncle Alfredo, who tells his wife, played by Marijke, that he has to go on a business trip, which he makes up as an excuse to see his lover. According to the directions, the female character is supposed to indicate her doubt, but to convey that she will support her husband nevertheless (ibid. 50). However, Irma decides that she will not have Marijke's character conform to traditional gender roles, which render her silent. Therefore, she tells her to "smile a little sadly and put [her] hand softly on his hand and tell him quietly that [she is] tired of his bullshit. In fact, no, not tired, but very close to being *defeated* by his bullshit" (ibid. 50; emphasis in original). Irma's transformation of the lines render the female character assertive and confident towards her husband, therefore breaching traditional gender norms.

The criticism of gender roles becomes more pronounced in a later scene: Alfredo is supposed to tell his film wife that he loves another woman and wants to leave her. Frustrated by the

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[172] The fictional film resonates with the movie *Stellet Licht* (Reygadas 2007) that portrays a Mennonite family and community close to Cuauhtémoc in Mexico. Miriam Toews herself took part in the production of the film as one of the main characters.

original script, which directs Marijke to stare silently and sadly at her husband, Irma becomes more aggressive in her re-writing.

> And then, I [Irma] said, ask is it because my vagina is so big after having all these babies?
>   This time I had gone too far. Marijke smiled and said I must be joking. Diego [the director] wouldn't have written that. Was it for real? Okay, well, no, I said, but it's more interesting and don't you think it's kind of the truth?
>   We can't wreck this movie with things like that, said Marijke.
>   Nobody seeing the movie will understand, I said. So what difference does it make?
>   It's not true to my character, said Marijke. I mean her character.
>   What character? I said. She's a prop […]. She's barely breathing. (ibid. 120)

The example indicates several aspects of Irma's feminist criticism in the portrayal of women in the film, which stands for a more global criticism of gender norms within the fictional Mennonite setting in the novel. Irma argues that instead of a real character, Marijke's role resembles a "prop" that is supposed to endure the hardships of multiple pregnancies and births, next to her husband's admission that he fell in love with somebody else, by falling back on the one female gender conforming strategy she has been taught: silence. The criticism is not only directed at women's presentation as silent sufferers, but it challenges the institution of patriarchy, as presented in Diego's movie, by arguing that it denies women's humanity. The fact that Irma uses the film as a medium for her own emancipation indicates that, grown up in a conservative Mennonite community, she has to stake her claim to authority by appropriating male strategies of narration (cf. Lanser 1992: 6–7). This attempt at using a medium that to her is initially foreclosed to criticize and undermine the very narrative representations and practices that she herself uses (and perpetuates with her use), means for Irma "to strike a delicate balance between accommodating and subverting dominant rhetorical practices" (ibid. 7). Lanser warns that this particular strategy "may of course backfire" (ibid. 7). However, once Irma has started to seek out her voice and have it heard publicly, she takes the risk.

Indeed, throughout the novel, the narrator increasingly intensifies her search for her own voice. Apart from rewriting parts of the film script, in which she undermines someone else's narrative, she also begins to create her own narrative. Irma starts this process by "embroidering dangerous words onto the insides of [her] dresses, words like *lust* and *agony* and *Jorge*" (Toews 2011: 29; emphasis in original). Although these shy and fragmented attempts at storytelling are taking place in private and do not lead to a confrontation of the values she is trying to undermine, they are important to the development of the narrator's sense of emancipation from

her father's rule. However, her writing enters a less secretive stage when she is given a journal by the film director Diego, who provides her with another chance at taking part in a male dominated discourse of meaning making. In her first entry she relies on a supposedly undermining narrative, a motto Diego wants his film crew to abide by during the production: "YOU MUST BE PREPARED TO DIE!" (ibid. 43; emphasis in original).[173] Although the narrative is in a way defying the Mennonite master narrative she grew up with, it still does not express Irma's own meaning. This problem of using narratives, narrative structures, and individual words that are do not express the female writer's or narrator's meaning has been explored by several feminists. In *Man Made Language* (1980) Dale Spender argues that language itself and the very words which we use to describe the world are never neutral, but made by men. Similarly, Virginia Woolf contemplated the use of language for female writers. As language is always already gendered, mostly to the detriment of women, Woolf laments that a woman writer finds "no common sentence ready for her use" (Woolf 1984: 73).[174]

Irma's rephrasing of the motto indicates her awareness of her own difficulties with meaning making without relying on male narratives. The following passage shows the effort that goes into the deconstruction of traditional narratives by rephrasing it first – "YOU MUST BE PREPARED TO LIVE" (Toews 2011: 251; emphasis in original) – and challenging the entire narrative in a subsequent step:

> I scratched out the word DIE and wrote LIVE. Then that seemed cheesy and too uncool emphatic so I added the words SORT OF. AT LEAST TRY. Even that seemed bossy so I added, in parentheses, a joke: OR DIE TRYING. Then I told myself that it wasn't funny and crossed it all, every word of it, out and started again. (ibid. 251–52; emphasis in original)

This passage emphasizes Irma's increasing sense of ownership of her narrative. Furthermore, she realizes that changing the motto into its opposite alone, only serves to replicate the binaries

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[173] Copying Diego's motto to begin her own narrative, exemplifies what Funk Wiebe refers to as traditional Mennonite women's tendency to rely on men when telling their own stories (Funk Wiebe 1999: 10).

[174] A very similar argument is also explored in Audre Lorde's essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." Here she argues against the use of patriarchy in feminist efforts at women's emancipation and laments feminists' ignorance of differences between women that result in a degradation of poor, lesbian, uneducated and black women. As these exclusionary practices pertain to the very system of male power that feminists set out to deconstruct, the result will be a strengthening and naturalization of male dominance (Lorde 1984).

– death and life, outside and inside, female and male, private and public – that have rendered her silent in the first place.

Irma's writing, either the embroidering of clothes or the journal writing are both private narrations, as Lanser (1986) defined them, which means that they are designated for a narratee who exists only inside of the fictional text. Lanser explains that private narration, is an important field of study in the context of a gendered analysis. Historically women often have (had) easier access to private narrations, such as the writing of journals than to public narratives (designed with an external narratee in mind). Letters have been more likely used by hegemonic subjects, often defined as white, male, well-educated and with sufficient financial means at their disposal (ibid.). The different modes of narration, however, have been differently allocated with authority: Public narratives often utilize an extradiegetic, omniscient narrator and thus have been more easily read as having a high degree of authority. Private narratives, such as Irma's journal writing, or her autodiegetic narrative function in the novel, have been perceived as having a low degree of authority.

However, as the narrative continues, Irma starts to realize that her narrative voice exceeds the private sphere and could ultimately initiate change.

> I was beginning to understand something I couldn't articulate. It was a jazzy feeling in my chest, a fluttering, a kind of buzzing in my brain. Warmth. Life. The circulation of blood. Sanguinity. I don't know. I understood the enormous risk of telling the truth, how the telling could result in every level of hell reigning down on you, your skin scorched to the bone and then bone to ash and then nothing but a lingering odour of shame and decomposition. (Toews 2011: 171)

Irma's fascination with storytelling is expressed by her mixed feelings about it: the sanguinity that comes with telling her own story is accompanied by a mortal agony that telling her own truth may result in her demise. The passage indicates Irma's development from questioning binary constructions in the earlier examples, to deconstructing simplistic idealizations of identities. She realizes that her narrative will present one story, albeit an important one and that her world is far more complex than the narratives she grew up with made her believe. Irma ultimately "destabilizes fact and fictions, inside and outside, us and them, friend and enemy" (Spicher Kasdorf 2015: 32). In her attempt to deconstruct gender norms and regulations, she eventually also deconstructs cultural and social binaries and the notion of stable identities altogether.

Considering the form of Irma's narrative, we encounter a high degree of fragmentation indicated by the frequent use of ellipsis and corrections. There are several passages where ellipses occurs in direct speech. While it is fair to assume that oral conversations tend to show a higher degree of unfinished and grammatically flawed utterances than a written text, I argue that the use of ellipses in *Irma Voth* reveals more than conversational hesitancy. Their analysis shows how gender norms and storytelling are intricately related.

> Do you want to kick a ball around sometime? said Wilson.
> Well … I don't know, I said. I'm a married women now.
> So? said Wilson. (Toews 2011: 56)

Being educated within a traditional Mennonite community, Irma is perplexed by one of the film crew members' question to play soccer. Her education taught her to stay away from strangers, especially if they were men outside her own community. As Irma is trying to deconstruct the master narratives she grew up with, we see her searching for the right words, expressed by the use of ellipses. Later on in the novel, Irma has matured as storyteller. However, as she tries to explain her father's violence towards his daughters, she again hesitates to find the right words. "My father doesn't like us, I said. He doesn't like girls. He doesn't like it when we get older and … there's something about his daughters that makes him crazy and … that's all" (ibid. 204–05). The narrator acknowledges her father's mental confinement by his own education that taught him to perceive of women as humble and silent servants to their fathers and husbands. Anticipating her father's narrative in this particular scene, the ellipses in the previous example express not so much Irma's own hesitancy, but mirror the narrative that her father would continue to perpetuate.

The fragmented nature of storytelling also becomes tangible when analysing her frequent use of self-corrections, such as in the following passage. "Then the door opened on its own, well, not on its own but from the inside and all the shouting stopped" (ibid. 32). The example is taken from Irma's first visit to the house of the film crew in her campo. Educated to stay away from outsiders of the community, Irma's representation of how the door opened, "on its own" which implies an act of providence or god, shows how she tries to create a narrative that would conform to gender norms. If the door has not been opened by an outsider of the community, but just happens to be open, she does not breach those norms. Even her subsequent correction "well, not on its own but from the inside" leaves the agent of the opening in the dark.

Irma's emancipation from the master narratives is mirrored by her deconstruction of the relationship between space and gender. The private and public spheres that I have hinted at earlier are not the only ones important in the context of the novel. Irma explains that Mennonites in Mexico live according to a motto from the "'rebuke of worldliness' which is from the Biblical book of James: *Whosoever will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God*" (ibid. 12, emphasis in original). Thus, the spatial isolation of the whole community in the desert in Mexico is embedded in another master narrative of the traditional Mennonite community, which in turn perpetuates the binary of rural and urban spaces. The secluded location of the campo with its three houses in total – one of Voth family, another one that Julius owns and offers Irma and Jorge, and one that stands empty after an aunt and uncle left – indicates Julius' attempt to keep the binaries stable. The different spaces are clearly demarcated according to gender: Women preside over the domestic sphere, taking care of the house and tending to the children. Men preside over the public sphere, traveling to visit other Mennonite communities and to negotiate with national governments to ensure the continuation of their secluded life-style. Irma describes her campo as a "very dark, pitch-black part of the world" (ibid. 2). Similarly, the house that she and Jorge received from her father, is a depressing space, described as a "shadowy assortment of metal and concrete that housed [her] belongings" (ibid. 25). The description of the campo and the house – the available spaces for women in the community – as dark, unhomely and confined, contrasts with the options of male characters in the novel. Julius Voth can travel, meet other Mennonites and indulge in socio-political negotiations. Thus, his spatial perception, although never directly described in the novel, is likely to be different.

To keep these gender roles in relation to space stable, Julius uses different strategies. The choice of location of the campo is one. Another important one is his ban on speaking the local language and a third one is the waiver of birth control, which, given women's responsibility for children, ties them to the domestic sphere. While I want to discuss the latter strategy in connection with women's lack of sovereignty over their bodies below, let me come back to the connection between space and language in the novel and explain how they are used to undermine and transform gender ideologies. In one of her memories of Canada, Irma reports how she and her sister Katie, who later dies, secretly used English. Because of the national requirements to send their children to school, the Voth children ultimately learned English.

However, their father insisted on the use of Low German at home to impede an assimilation with the local population.

> I […] started off speaking Plattdeutsch and then I went to school and learned English and loved it and never spoke Plattdeutsch if I could help it except with my dad who insisted on it. I told her [Noehmi, a young woman she meets after leaving the campo] that after school, if my dad was out, I'd teach my mom English words like *hula hoop* and *keep on trucking*. I told her I had a sister, Katie, and that we had whispered together all night long in English like other kids sneak smokes. I told her that when I was thirteen we moved to Mexico, to Chihuahua, and I started to learn Spanish even though my father had disapproved of that too.
> Why? said Noehmi.
> Girls weren't supposed to, I said.
> Why? said Noehmi.
> I don't know, I said. The usual reasons. (ibid. 170; emphasis in original)

On the one hand, Katie and Irma admired speaking the local language, because that way they fit in better with the non-Mennonite children in school. On the other hand, the secrecy of teaching their mother individual words and of whispering together at night are accompanied by a sense of emancipation from the patriarchal rule of their father. It provides them with the means to communicate with the local population and thus to undermine their mandatory isolation. Additionally it serves Irma and her sister Katie as a means of transcending male power by using their linguistic superiority over their father, who struggles with language learning (ibid. 125). Learning the Spanish language also provides Irma with the essential requirements to leave the confines of the campo and become independent of her father. When Irma nonchalantly refers to "the usual reasons" for her father's ban on language learning for women, she indicates the connection between language, space, and gender. Living in a secluded location, with no knowledge of the local language or connection to the local population ties women more closely to the private space.[175]

Irma's ability of speaking English and Spanish are instrumental in her emancipation from her father. First, she manages to support herself by working as a translator for the film crew. Second, she is able to leave the campo towards the last third of the novel, taking her 13-year old sister Aggie and her newborn sister Ximena with her. The three of them ultimately arrive

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[175] As a fourth function I argue that Irma's creative talent and her fascination with storytelling partly derive from her knowledge of three different languages, which can serve as incentives for writing, as Kuester observes in reference to the development of Mennonite literature in Canada. "The availability of multiple languages made it easier for Canadian Mennonites – who for the most part were able to speak High German, next to Low German and English – to start writing in such large numbers in the second half of the 20th century" (2008: 15).

in Mexico City, where Irma presumes her father would not find them. This transition from the rural to the metropolitan space is accompanied by a transition of Irma's frames of reference in her storytelling. Irma and her sisters arrive in Mexico City during a political protest, which fills the Zócalo – the Plaza de la Constitución – with thousands of people. Struck by the number of people, Irma first compares the scene to a "large field of corn, every stalk a human being, or a desert night sky packed with stars"(ibid. 164). These comparisons resonate with her own rural upbringing, which influenced her use of metaphors. However, another metaphor she uses – "or a page in a notebook where every page is filled with ink, words, letters and parts of letters" (ibid. 164)" – shows how she transitions from master narratives to creating new metaphors that challenge male dominated processes of meaning making. The comparison to a notebook indicates her increasing awareness of the omnipresence of storytelling and its importance within her own life. Entering the urban space marks an important step in her emancipation. The metropolitan space of Mexico City provides many opportunities for challenging traditional master narratives and re-creating new identities.[176]

Another opportunity for the deconstruction of master narratives is presented to Aggie when she enters a state educational program in Mexico City and discovers her artistic talent. Local artist Diego Rivera, famous for his murals, eventually inspires Aggie's entrance to the art scene.

> Aggie's murals are almost all of our family. But they're conceptual, she says. Katie is a ghost that hovers over every scene and sometimes takes the shape of a crow or a breeze and Aggie is a rabbit. Our little brothers appear, when they appear as raindrops. Our mother is a barn and I'm a tractor and our father is a big bell or the wreckage of the broken crop-duster. Aggie paints murals with these figures in different positions and doing different things. (ibid. 212)

Aggie's murals, portraying family members as various objects, phenomena or animals, leave enough space to both reflect her own experience and disguise it to the outsider – after all, she and her sister Ximena are underage and would have to be returned to their parents, if discovered. Most notably, the women in the family are always in some shape or form represented and therefore narrated. The men, on the other hand, are either left out completely as in the case of

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[176] It is interesting to note that the transition from the rural campo to Mexico city is narrated as a dreamlike state by Irma who reflects upon arrival in Mexico City, "[w]hen we landed the three of us moved dreamlike through the artificial word of the airport and then out and into the real world of Mexico City and for the first time in a million years it occurred to me that my chest wasn't hurting and it was as though I were experiencing a strange, foreign feeling like bliss or something which meant that either I had died in my sleep on the plane or I don't know what" (Toews 2011: 159). The arrival is clearly marked by an improvement in health – Irma has been suffering from chronic chest pain due to the traumatic death of her sister.

her brothers, or are narrated as broken agricultural machinery. The metaphor for the father may be translated in terms of female emancipation again. The broken crop-duster represents the father's disconnection to his daughters and his failure to support their education and growth.

Irma also gains access to the artistic community in Mexico City and befriends the young playwright Noehmi who wants Irma to lend her her voice for a play she is about to produce.

> It's a one-man show, [Noehmi] said, It takes place in total darkness until the very end. The audience hears voices and sounds but they don't see anything. […] At the end of the play the lights come on for the first time and we see a man in a glass duct on the stage. That's all. There's no sound. No more voices. (ibid. 215)

The short play completely subverts the traditional gender roles Irma grew up with, because, here the confined space is inhabited by the man, who is trapped in a glass duct. Moreover, contradictory to traditional gender norms, as long as there are voices, these voices are female. Thus, the public discourse is characterized by female voices – one of them spoken by Irma, who, in that particular moment subverts the ban on female silence in public and completely inhabits the free (artistic, social, cultural, political) space the city provides her with. In another scene, Irma strolls the neighbourhood and discovers a center for exiled writers (ibid. 213–14). Talking to an employee, she learns that some of the writers-in-residence had to leave their countries in order (to continue) to write. In this moment she realizes that "[f]reedom has its price" (ibid. 214). The freedom she gained with the transition to Mexico City allows her and Aggie the liberty to gain an education, to produce art, to form friendships. However, she and Aggie have to forgo the protection of their mother, whom they start to miss and they have to take care of their baby sister.

The third aspect in the patriarchal master narrative Irma is working to transform is the male sovereignty of the female body, which is expressed in the multiple pregnancies of women in the campo. Irma's mother gave birth to seven children and is shown to be physically and mentally exhausted early on in the novel.[177] Her exhaustion becomes especially prominent when she induces Irma to take her newborn sister along with her to Mexico City, lying to her husband that the baby had died and needed to be buried fast. Irma's husband also tries to control and

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[177] Pregnancies have become such an ordinary event within the Voth family that, thinking back of a particular situation in which her mother sent all the children out of the house, Irma is not sure whether her mother was pregnant again at the time or may have "just lost the baby" (ibid. 3).

manipulate his wife's body. When he comes home for a short visit he tries to teach Irma a sensual dance. Irma fails to perform the dance according to the instructions. While Jorge soon becomes frustrated and laments that he is "trying to improve [their] lives," Irma is alienated by her husband's wish and subsequent frustration (ibid. 81).

Similarly, the availability of women's bodies and sexualities to men is being implied when two film crew members joke about drugging women in order to sleep with them (ibid. 94), and when Diego ridicules Marijke's reaction to Alfredo's advances towards her.

> Well, said Diego, from Marijke's body language I think that Alfredo made a pass at her in his truck. I spoke to him about it and he said it was nothing. He put his hand on her leg, like this, she could have been his sister, but she became inordinately angry. She said she wanted to break the truck's side-view mirror and use the shards to slice Alfredo's hand off and throw his hand out of the window for the condors to feed on.
> But she didn't, I said.
> No, said Diego. She hit him in the face. Now he's mad and I'm a little frustrated with her, but don't tell her because I'm afraid she'll leave. European women are difficult, he said. They overreact. (ibid. 87–88)

Although Diego senses from Marijke "body language" that she has been sexually harassed, he decides to talk to Alfredo, thus implying his reliance on male authority in the situation. Furthermore, his classification of Marijke's reaction as "inordinately angry" indicates his own sense of authority on the (in)appropriateness of her reaction. In addition, he blames her for Alfredo's sulkiness. In his narrative, Marijke's experience of sexual harassment is reversed to make her the aggressor. His discrediting of her reaction as a characteristic reaction of European women concludes his narrative and leaves Marijke ridiculed. The passage and the earlier example of the failed dance show how the female body is turned into a commodity in male narratives. This dispossession of the female body results in a disconnection of female characters from their own bodies in the novel, which results in them forgetting about their bodies (ibid. 30), feeling dead (ibid. 14-16), fearing they might disappear (ibid. 131), and in their perception of their bodies as deficient (ibid. 80-81; 153) or sexualized (ibid. 87; 94; 126-127).

Some of the challenging strategies that explore the lack of agency over women's bodies can be seen towards the last third of the novel. Irma and Aggie's transition to the urban space is accompanied by their change of clothes – they buy "jeans, T-shirts and hooded sweatshirts for warmth *and* style" (ibid. 162; emphasis in original). As their traditional Mennonite clothing is closely affiliated with traditional gender norms, the change of attire marks a subversion of these

roles. Other small indications of Irma's reclaiming of the female body are her lack of sexual relationships. After she left the campo, she never sees Jorge again and indeed learns by chance that he has probably been killed (ibid. 244). In relation to the fact that Irma is more concerned in developing friendships in Mexico, I would argue that, although she never actively reclaims her own body, she also makes sure that others are not taking sovereignty over it again.

In my analysis of the feminist narrative strategies in *Irma Voth* I have emphasized the connection of voice, space, and agency to gender norms. Irma's exploration of her own voice, first as a translator for a film, and later in her own journal writing, indicate her subversion and rewriting of the patriarchal master narrative on three levels. Firstly, the fact that she takes up creative writing undermines the Mennonite rejection of fiction, after all her father determines that "art is a lie" (ibid. 18). Secondly, her writing constitutes a female perspective and adds a woman's voice to a solely male discourse. Thirdly, storytelling provides the opportunity to explore established meanings and to challenge and undermine them. Moreover, her transition from the rural to the urban space shows how language, space and gender intersect in this particular narrative. The urban space ultimately allows Irma and her sister to explore their own creativity and to tell their stories, via art in the case of Aggie, or via storytelling in the case of Irma. The latter also succeeds to subvert the lack of agency of the female body by deconstructing male narrative strategies of ownership and authority.

3.4.2 Deconstructing Images of Motherhood in Di Brandt's *mother, not mother*

> i am the mother
> (Brandt 1992: 9)

Similar to Toews' *Irma Voth* Brandt's poetry collection *mother, not mother* focuses on women and the deconstruction of (male) master narratives. However, Brandt's poems exceed a particularly Mennonite setting since they draw on Western notions of femininity and motherhood in general. Her poems try to uncover and rewrite idea(l)s of motherhood. [*M]other, not mother* is Di Brandt's third poetry collection;[178] it contains 37 poems, none of them carries a title,[179] which signifies their intricate connection with each other. The whole collection as well as ten individual poems are dedicated and it speaks to Brandt's focus on women that all but one (ibid. 54–55)[180] are addressed to women. Additionally, it is also crucial that three of the dedicated poems only provide the first names (ibid. 36-37, 66, 70), a strategy which implies an intimacy among women on a formal level, which becomes more tangible on the contextual level in many of the collection's poems. One of the most important aspects about the poems in *mother, not mother* is the depiction of women as mothers and daughters and the complex and often complicated relationships between women. It is these two aspects that present the focus of the following analysis.

In other contexts, Brandt continually stresses that the experiences of women and mothers have been silenced and thus are often unavailable to new generations of women.[181] Given the patriarchal social structure of traditional (Mennonite) communities Brandt is referring to, the suppression of women's voices and experiences is no surprising result and yet remains part of the "female tragedy" as Rich describes it (1997: 237). Brandt's writing questions myths of

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[178] Her first collection, *questions i asked my mother*, which has been discussed as a breakthrough within Mennonite Canadian literature, was published in 1987 and has clear autobiographical references. It pinpoints Brandt's perception of conservative Mennonite communities as inherently abusive and patriarchal. Her second collection, *Agnes in the Sky* (1990) also explores the destructive nature of traditional Mennonite communities, but does so from a conciliatory angle and with a focus on personal development and healing.

[179] In the following I will refer to individual poems by using the first words of the first line.

[180] "[S]ometimes i hate" (Brandt 1992: 54–55) is dedicated to Canadian novelist and screenplay writer Lee Gowan.

[181] While I will be referencing some of her essays on the topic in the framework of my own thesis, a complete overview of Brandt's critical analysis of women and mothers can be found in the following publications: *Wild Mother Dancing* (1993) is founded on Brandt's dissertation about the absence and recovery of the voices of mothers in Canadian novels. The collections of essays *Dancing Naked* (1996a), and *So this is the World & here I am in it* (2007) are by no means reduced to a discussion of mothers and women. However, they provide an insight into Brandt's later attempts at relating her feminist ideas with more holistic approaches to humanity, nature, and ecology.

motherhood and suggests broadening our understanding of motherhood so that it accounts for the individual and subjective experiences of women and exceeds its idealization as an institution. In her contemplation of the poems in *mother, not mother* Brandt confirms that she took pleasure in destabilizing the male perspective (1996d: 12). To discover a version of the mother, which has been silenced she had to

> get rid of history, the weight of the old language, to sweep away the old metaphors which so effectively blanked out the mother as human speaking subject: the mother as vessel, matrix, holding ground, earth, womb, tomb. So I could excavate the many painful layers of maternal absence to find the mother as voice, as body, as presence, as consciousness, as human agent again. (1996b: 149)

Brandt aims at examining, questioning, and challenging myths about motherhood. Furthermore, she rewrites stories of mothering from a subjective angle, which ultimately provides her with the opportunity to present identities of mothers as pluralised, complex, challenging, and sometimes downright contradictory.

One aspect of Brandt's deconstruction of the mother myth is the representation of the maternal body, which is often wrapped in silence.[182] The first poem in Brandt's collection, "why she can't write *the mother*," starts with a paradox: the persona's experience of being a mother, which seems to result in her inability to write herself as such. In the beginning of the poem we learn about the speaker's everyday tasks of being a mother, how she

> [2]   spends half her day feeding clothing
>   sheltering them [her two children],
>
> [3]   picking up dirty rolled up socks
>   cooking macaroni. (Brandt 1992: 9)

These everyday tasks of child-raising are presented in a neutral, descriptive tone. However, in the following two stanzas, diction, tone and focus change radically:

> [4]   though she has stretched herself thin,

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[182] The maternal body is both a subject in many of Brandt's writings as well as a source of creativity. In her essay "The Creator Mother's Song" Brandt explains how writing from the maternal body has become an holistic approach to living. "Writing from the maternal body means remembering our connection to the earth as a living, sentient body, filled with sensation and feeling: it means honouring and protecting our mothers, humans and plants and animals and trees, against wastefulness and torture, it means challenging all people, men and women, mothers and non-mothers, to adopt a specific, detailed, caring attitude toward the vulnerable living world around us, and in us" (1996e: 133).

        scarred skin all over bloated belly,

[5]   watched leftover blood shoot clotted
       like fists from her emptied womb. (ibid. 9)

The first stanzas of the poem provide a sense of profanity connected to mothering, which is then interrupted by a description of the maternal body, which is showing the signs of pregnancy: "the bloated belly," the "scarred skin," and the "leftover blood." The unexpected alternation of the ordinary tasks of mothering with the description of the female body after birth is one of the characteristic features of Brandt's poetry. It shows the complexity and inevitable inconsistency of identities, using the mother as an example. The value of Brandt's poetry lies in her direct address and exploration of the female body – its scars, imperfections and blemishes.

The intricate and conflicted relationship between writing the mother and being the mother is presented as a question in the introductory poem of the collection, which is followed up on in later poems. The first poem ends with the speaker's lament of her inability to "put down simply, | *i am the mother*, | & leave it like that" (ibid. 9; emphasis in original). Similar to the first line in the poem, the words "*the mother*" are highlighted again by the use of italics, which provide a sense of subjectivity and closeness. The poem names and questions the myth of two spheres that cannot be inhabited at once: the maternal sphere, with its ordinary tasks of childcare and the artistic or sublime sphere of writing. A look at the form of the poem as a whole reveals how the disruption is not only created by the change of tone and diction, but also by a change of rhythm: the poem is made up of ten stanzas, eight in couplet form, broken and completed by the seventh and the tenth stanza, which consist of one line only. Additionally, the seventh stanza is demarcated from the rest of the poem because of its different diction and the use of expletives that sets it apart from the rest of the poem: "mothering the goddam fucking world" (ibid. 9). As mentioned earlier, the poem works with several contrasts that it tries to reconcile with mothering. The use of rhythmic breaks, changes in tone, and diction shows how the persona struggles at integrating her different subjectivities.

While the first poems in the collection explore the ordinary tasks of mothering and the process of giving birth, the speaker in "what can i say" takes a more holistic approach to mothering:

[1]   what can i say

in the voice of the mother

[2]   to make you feel safe
       in the dangerous world?

[3]   hard to make a song
       out of nothing,

[4]   baby woman,
       how to shape my mouth

[5]   around it,
       i just don't know. (ibid. 69)

The first stanza resonates with the first stanza of "why she can't write *the mother*" (ibid. 9). However, the context and form of the two poems are significantly different. The speaker in "what can i say" uses the first-person singular and thus grammatically inhabits the mother, whereby the third-person singular in the first poem suggests an alienation from the role of the mother. Although the speaker in "what can i say" is unsure of how to mother her children in order for them to feel safe, she is able to name herself as the mother.

I have chosen the first stanza of "what can i say" to precede this chapter, because it indicates the central question of mothering addressed in many of the collection's poems: how to be(come) the mother, when mothering has been fraught with idea(l)s that do not match the poems' personas' experience of being the mother? If we consider the line break in the first stanza, I argue that it provides a discussion of the poem in a wider feminist framework. The break between the first and second line allows an independent reading of the first line, which, as a result, shows the speaker to struggle for words and meanings in general. Additionally, the line break evokes a tradition of women's silences in general. Reading the second line in conjunction, of course, reduces the silence to the mother, who, in her role as (primary) caretaker struggles with the high demands on her. As in poems that I will analyze below, the persona distinguishes between her subjectivities as mother and as woman. Therefore, her mothering voice is differentiated from other voices she may inhabit. She reflects upon her subjectivities and thus opens up a space for deconstructing the mother as an overall identity. As Rich explains there are "unexamined assumptions" about motherhood that hold that "a 'natural' mother is a person without further identity" (1997: 22–23). While this myth of motherhood is instrumental in the commitment of mothers as primary providers for children and thus in their commitment to the

private sphere, Brandt reworks this myth by broadening the scope of her poem. In the second half, the speaker smoothly turns her attention away from the child.

[18] […] everything needs
      saving, again,

[19] this time for real,
      this is our last chance.

[20] just stop once in a while
      in your screaming

[21] & listen, your armoured
      anger against bombs

[22] & pollution & plastic,
      against me. (Brandt 1992: 70)

The speaker asks the addressee to focus her own attention on larger issues, such as the environment or political tensions. The poem is dedicated to Lisa, which is also the name of one of Brandt's daughters, but could easily be read as a request to a whole generation. The poem exceeds an interpretation of mothering as biologically based process and it exemplifies Brandt's claim in *Dancing Naked* (1996a) that all women can be mothers.

In "you felt it in December," the speaker again tries to combine the sublime with the ordinary, now on the level of narrativization. The poem starts with two stanzas announcing the birth of Jesus:

[1] you felt it in December
     as annunciation,

[2] the birth that would change
     the world. (1992: 14)

The reference to the Bible story evokes a context informed by male authority – the Bible as the word of a (male) God, which, in traditional (Mennonite) congregations is interpreted by male preachers. However, as the poem continues, we see how the speaker draws the focus away from a male-centred master narrative towards the female experience of pregnancy and birth:

[3] the wonder of new bones
     & skin inside you,

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[4]   flattering miraculously,
       in your womb. (ibid. 14)

Taking into account that women in Mennonite fiction have often been represented by male writers, and, eventually, as readers, have become accustomed to their representation as *other* (cf. M. Redekop 1992: 116), Brandt's focus on mothers, next to the poem's direct address of mothers become particularly relevant.

The first four stanzas of "you felt it in December" quoted above combine different narrative perspectives and the speaker is acutely aware of the contradictions that result from their juxtaposition. The following stanzas portray the difficulty of merging these contexts. The speaker addresses the presence of the mother as passive, as holy vessel in the master narrative of the Bible. She points out that

[5]   (no one was there to anoint
       you, white robed,

[6]   with perfume and flowers). (1992: 14; parentheses in original)

The direct address serves two purposes. First, it deconstructs the master narrative, which revolves around the birth of the male child. Second, it (re-)discovers the mother in that narrative, who has been silenced and marginal before. The poem challenges a simple dialectic in women's representation as either invisible and pure or visible and impure. Funk Wiebe argues that women in Mennonite fiction have been absent or represented as stereotypes: The myth of the "Great Mother Earth" leaves her to be represented in the role of "Eve before the Fall, passive, gentle, subdued" (Funk Wiebe 1985: 241) or "Eve after the Fall." The latter presents woman from "[h]er less attractive, dark side as Great Earth Mother." Funk Wiebe argues that this representation often "repulses the reader, for it strains to show the Mennonite woman's lower nature as her dominant feature, controlled solely by womb and hands, not head and heart" (ibid. 241–42).

Towards the last third of the poem, the persona becomes more pronounced in her deconstruction of the myth of mothers or "Eves before the Fall:"

[13] screaming at night in
      the apartment,

[14] stifling hot in July, you
      weren't big

[15] or pure, or beautiful
      enough

[16] to change things, you
      weren't

[17] the perfect mother. (Brandt 1992: 15)

Although her focus on the mother's imperfection in spirit and body in these lines may be interpreted as implying what Funk Wiebe calls "Eve after the Fall" (1985: 241–42), I read the lines as hinting at a complexity that by far exceeds this rather simplistic categorization of women. Similar to Toews' novel, Brandt's poem works with the implications of space, which ultimately serve to create a sense of complexity. Looking back at the beginning of the poem, we realize that the reference to the master narrative of Jesus' birth does not contain a spatial dimension. Yet, the later stanzas, which focus on the subjective experiences of the mother, use the stifling and overheated space of her apartment. The connection of space and the demands of the mother's body serve to disclose idealized demands on the mother: to be "pure," "beautiful," and "perfect."

In the last third of the poem the persona reconstructs mothering and introduces a crucial aspect of being a mother: the relationships with other women, predominantly with the mother, a connection that is presented as providing the strength necessary for mothering.

[18] in your heart's cry
      you wanted

[19] a woman holding you,
      crooning

[20] a child's lullaby. (Brandt 1992: 15)

The persona laments the lack of a woman's community, which, as Rich argues "has been crushed, invalidated, forced into hiding and disguise" in Western societies (2003: 13).[183]

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[183] Rich argues for a *lesbian continuum* – which she defines as a range of "women-identified experience" (2003: 27). However, her critical stance towards the lack of women's community fits particularly well into the context of Brandt's poems, although they do not focus on lesbian experiences in terms of sexual experiences.

Similarly, Lorde debates the importance of a tight connection between women who support each other. "For women" she contends, "the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power is rediscovered" (1984: 111).

The very last stanzas in Brandt's poem introduce another aspect into this discourse of a woman's community, by recounting the verses of a children's song.

[21] *Fuchs du hast die Gans*
gestohlen,

[22] *gib sie wieder her,*
gib sie wieder her. (Brandt 1992: 15; emphasis in original)[184]

The inclusion of these lyrics indicates the persona's German cultural background. However, more important than the heritage of the speaker itself is that it evokes the idea of wholeness. The community of women has a clear intergenerational dimension. It entails women seeking out other women's support and nurturing, including their mothers', grandmothers', sisters', and daughters'. The poem clearly shows the persona's intent to go beyond a mere criticism of mothering myths. It also suggests that an intergenerational community of women could support each other in narrating their subjective positions on mothering and thus deconstruct master narratives. The poem proposes to start with the exploration of the mothers – their stories and experiences – in order to find the female voice.

Although the previously discussed poem suggests a community of women as healthy, later poems explore the relationships between women, especially those between daughters and mothers, as complex and challenging. The poem "you touch my feet" revolves around the sensation of a touch that sets a wave of memories in motion. Throughout the first five stanzas, the speaker muses on her intense feelings, expressed by a metaphor of lightening in stanza four and one of a flower in bloom in stanza five. The speaker is transported back into her childhood, as stanzas six to nine show.

[6] & i'm a child again,
seeing everything.

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[184] The German song has been translated at the end of the poem, which shows that the targeted readership for Brandt's poetry exceeds the Mennonite community in Canada.

[7]   i've not been loved
     enough

[8]   my arms when
     you touch them,

[9]   cry out to be held. (ibid. 27)

The touch provokes the memories of lack and result in an indirect accusation, uttered in stanza seven. The indirect blame of the mother is followed by memories of violence, which left the speaker traumatized.

[14]   my back is full
      of terror still,

[15]   remembering
      the hand,

[16]   the belt across
      my spine,

[17]   the whole between
      my shoulder blades

[18]   where i quiver
      & taste dirt. (ibid. 28)

As in earlier poems, tone and diction contrast between stanzas. While the persona in the beginning laments the lack of love she received from the addressee, the second half of the poem tangibly portrays the physical violence she suffered from during childhood. However, the tension that is built up in stanzas 14 to 18 is released again towards the end of the poem, when the persona refocuses on the physical connection with the addressee and the healing that results from it.

[22]   you touch my body
      & i am held

[23]   like a sea, fronds
      waving in slow

[24]   motion, waves
      lapping shore.

[25] the sun in our
      faces,

[26] dazzling. (ibid. 28–29)

The narrativization of the touch has several functions in the poem. In the early stanzas it sets a childhood memory of wanting in motion, which is followed by a memory of violence and betrayal, which precedes the persona's reconnection with the addressee in the discourse time of the poem. The different functions are accompanied by various metaphors: the lightning and rain in the beginning signify the speaker's upset state of mind, while the gentle waves of the sea that touch upon the shore speak to the persona's peacefulness towards the end of the poem. Additionally, readers also witness a grammatical shift throughout the poem: the isolated subjects of "i" and "you" become unified towards the end and form the possessive pronoun "our." The connection between the persona and the addressee, ignited by a simple touch, is extended to an emotional and grammatical level.

The reconciliatory note on which "you touch my feet" ends, cannot be found in all of the poems in *mother, not mother*. "[F]rom now on" similarly addresses the betrayal of the mother.

[3] what are mothers
     for, if not

[4] to defend their
     daughters.

[5] & when did
     you ever

[6] defend me? (ibid. 46)

Although stanzas three and four present a question, the grammatical signifier is missing, which turns it into a statement. This large-scale statement is followed by a direct challenge to the addressee's mothering abilities. However, a close analysis at the grammatical construction of these four stanzas allows to be interpreted as a deconstruction of the very demands on mothers to protect their daughters. The use of the conditional and the lack of a question mark at the end of stanza four signify the speaker's uncertainty towards mothering qualities in general. The persona realizes the complex nature of mothering, which leaves her with blaming her own mother, while being insecure whether that blame is justified. This questioning stance results in

the denial of the mother in general and the construction of the "not-mother," as introduced in stanza seven.

> [7] not-mother
>   the world is big,

> [8] & full of tigers.
>   i have felt

> [9] the teeth of some,
>   & they were sharp.

> [10] (like yours). (ibid. 46; parentheses in original)

The "not-mother" is not only a negation of the mother, but the expression provides a different angle from which to read her. As Rich reminds us, "[m]otherhood, in the sense of an intense, reciprocal relationship with a particular child, or children, is one part of the female process; it is not an identity for all time" (1997: 37). The "not-mother," emphasized in the title of Brandt's collection, problematizes and challenges the myth of motherhood as an overall and stable identity for women. In the final stanzas of "from now on" the persona gives in to lamenting the "hole in [herself] | the size of [the mother]" (Brandt 1992: 47). The speaker's recognition of her mother's failure to nurture her initiates the healing process.

> [18] i'll sing to it [the hole that is left by the mother],
>   till it's gone.

> [19] until you're only
>   a shadow-mother,

> [20] not-mother,
>   a half memory,

> [21] a yawn. (ibid. 47)

It is important to recognize the speaker's intent to take care of the memories and to nurture instead of forgetting or silencing them. Brandt thus succeeds in exploring the stories of the mother that have not been spoken and she manages to present the mother in her complexity, as woman, mother and not-mother.

Furthermore, the poem gains a more gendered perspective, considering the spatial dimension of stanzas three to ten, which are constructed around gendered binaries: the (not-) mother and the world.

> The image of the mother in the home, however unrealistic, has haunted and reproached the lives of wage-earning mothers. But it has also become, and for men as well as women, a dangerous archetype: the Mother, source of angelic love and forgiveness in a world increasingly ruthless and impersonal; the feminine, leavening, emotional element in a society ruled by male logic and male claims to 'objectivity,' 'rational' judgment; the symbol and residue of moral values and tenderness in a world of wars, brutal competition, and contempt for human weakness. (Rich 1997: 52)

The domestic and the public sphere imply gender traditions within the Mennonite context. By indicating this spatial frame of reference the poems become especially interesting for a discussion of gender and an analysis of the narratological forms that express gender.

There is another dimension to the "not-mother" in "sometimes i hate," where the speaker herself becomes the (not-) mother. The poem begins with an emotional outburst:

[1]   sometimes i hate
      the mother.

[2]   sometimes the not
      mother. (Brandt 1992: 54)

As the poem progresses the speaker struggles with the integration of both aspects of her female self.

[3]   here we are looking
      at each other,

[4]   the same body,
      the same face. (ibid. 54)

Her different subjectivities seem inconsolable in one body. How can she be the one – the mother – while being the other – the not mother – at the same time? The paradox of these subjectivities is created by the idealization of motherhood as essential and stable, which ultimately disguises her to herself, leaving her paralysed in light of her various subjectivities. The struggle of bringing seemingly conflicting sites of identification together runs through *mother, not mother*. The speaker in "sometimes i hate" realizes that she cannot start the healing process without integrating her different subject positions.

[16] i want you to look
      at the hole in me.

[17] i want you to hold
      your hand against

[18] the sun, until every
      muscle screams. (ibid. 55)

Although the feelings of betrayal are strong enough for the speaker to state "*i hate you, i hate you*" (ibid. 54; emphasis in original) towards the beginning, the persona nevertheless acknowledges her own need for the mother/ not-mother. Rich argues that the institutionalization of women as mothers "finds all mothers more or less guilty of having failed their children" (1997: 223) because of its unattainable demands on mothers. This realization can turn to frustration, hurt, and anger, which we find expressed quite verbally in "sometimes i hate." The anger that seizes the persona's body and makes her "muscles scream[…]" can also be used creatively, as Brandt explains in her essay "Creative Conflict in the Family" (1996c: 137).[185]

Creativity is also what connects the two foci of my analysis: it is used to deconstruct motherhood as an institution, while exploring other aspects of the (not-) mother. Additionally, Brandt's creative approach to mothering in her poetry serves to unravel the intricate, complex and complicated relationships between women. As the latter have been treated as negligible in Western culture and literature (cf. Rich 1997: 237) or even presented as a taboo (cf. ibid. 255), Brandt's representation of women's connection serves to narrate women into existence as mothers.

> Trying to remember the voice of the mother, the mothers. Writing myself back into that other story, the one that kept being silenced one way or another, forgotten, set aside. Unwritten. (Not just by the Mennonites, by everyone, all the textbooks and teachers, employers, university professors). (Brandt 1996d: 12)

The community of women Brandt's speakers seek out always includes the mother. "The first knowledge any woman has of warmth, nourishment, tenderness, security, sensuality, mutuality, comes from her mother" (Rich 1997: 218–19). However, the closeness between mother and

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[185] In her exploration of the mother, Rich confirms that anger, often interpreted as negative emotion in mothers, can coexist with love. She continues explaining that the negation of these feelings only stabilizes the myth of motherhood, which in turn produces the powerful feeling of guilt (Rich 1997: 52).

daughter that goes back to the one inhabiting the other throughout pregnancy,[186] is followed by an estrangement that, as Rich explains, takes a variety of forms. "That earliest enwrapment of one female body with another can sooner or later be denied or rejected, felt as choking possessiveness, as rejection, trap, or taboo; but it is, at the beginning, the whole world" (ibid. 218–19).

The paradox of needing and rejecting the mother at the same time is particularly well narrated in "sometimes i hate," which at first shows the persona to strongly reject the mother in herself and/ or her own mother. However, if we look at later stanzas more closely, we see a more complex picture. Although the words of the fifth stanza – "*i hate you, i hate you*" – express a rejection of the mother again, the use of italics suggests otherwise. Italics are most often used in *mother, not mother* to identify direct speech and thus emphasize the subjective position of the speaker. I argue that in this poem the use of italics demarcates a statement made in the past, now evoked as a memory. In addition the tone changes drastically throughout the poem, from accusative to light, ending with a peaceable tone.

[21] […] i want
      to start over,

[22] with you, with me,
      i want to be born

[23] again, under a tree,
      in tall grass,

[24] like lovers.
      mummy. (Brandt 1992: 55; emphasis in original)

The metaphor of a rebirth has two different functions here: It evokes the biological process of giving birth. Figuratively, it also evokes a new beginning, a relationship starting over. This is made very explicit in last stanza. The speaker suggests a new exploration of the relationship

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[186] The idea of a mother that Rich represents in her study *Of Woman Born* is, as the statement indicates, clearly connected with biological mothering. While the statement works well in the context of the current poem, I want to acknowledge the possibility of mothering without a preceding pregnancy and birth. Brandt's "What if" is an example of a more open interpretation of mothering. Here, the author claims that mothering does not necessitate pregnancy and giving birth, but it presents an experience that can be made by all women (1996a).

altogether, outside of their constraining roles of mother and daughter, "like lovers." The poem indicates that challenging emotions can exist concurrently.

The last poem in the collection takes up that thread of mothering and settles on a tone of appreciation for the self and the body. Now that the memories of wounds have been tended to by the speaker(s) of previous poems and a (re)connection with the mother has initiated a process of healing, the speakers of later poems have been able to focus their gaze on the present: their own ways of being the mother, as well as the world that surrounds them and their children. The speaker in "this body, this skin" completely rests in herself. The tone of the whole poem and the speaker's naming of her aging body, parts of which she describes throughout the first twelve stanzas,[187] reveal how she is at peace with herself. Stanzas 14-16 recount the changes her body went through in her life.

[14] this flowering
      past the appointed

[15] time of death,
      this unravelling

[16] toward conception,
      rebirth. (ibid. 82)

In relation to some of the previous poems that describe the speaker's sexual assault and her resulting death wish (ibid. 76–77), stanzas 14 and 15 can be interpreted to celebrate the speaker's survival of a life-threatening event. Stanza 16 then turns the attention to a rebirth she experienced through pregnancy and mothering herself. Although it works with contrasts of death and rebirth the poem is far less controversial in theme and tone than previously discussed ones. The rhythm, in earlier poems often broken by the inclusion of one-line stanzas, parentheses, italics or expletives, is carried on very evenly by the use of couplets only. Thus, the struggle between the self and the mother and the self as mother seems to be resolved towards the end of the collection.

As I have shown in my analysis of some of the poems in *mother, not mother*, there are several formal devices that speak to a very specific way of narration in Brandt's earlier poetry

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[187] The naming of the aging female body and the appreciation of its beauty finally deconstructs another myth about femininity, which circles around beauty and youth.

collections: the abandonment of capitalization with the first person pronoun, enjambment with little or no punctuation, use of colloquial expressions and expletives, as well as the use of couplets as basic structure for all poems. A large variety can also be found in terms of diction, which changes in many poems several times, thus affecting the overall tone and rhythm of individual poems.

Brandt's style and topic are very particular in my corpus of Mennonite texts. However, the poems share an important feature with other Mennonite narratives: she challenges established binaries by, first, pointing them out, and second exploring multiple notions of female identities. Her poems question an ideal of motherhood as institution and individual poems offer notions of subjectivity that ultimately reveal the mother as embedded in other contexts and roles. Her female personas explore the silenced stories of women: the female body in pregnancy and birth, the mother as loving and hating herself in the role of the mother, the daughter rejecting, accepting and needing the mother. With the poems from *mother, not mother* Brandt presents a challenge to the patriarchal system that denies women visibility and nurturing relationships with each other, while placing them on a pedestal of motherhood[188] at the same time. In her poems she successfully deconstructs binaries[189] and myths about motherhood and women's roles in general.

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[188] The idealization of motherhood and the worship of mothers is not unique to Mennonite culture, as Redekop points out (1992: 105). However, Mennonites "have taken longer than some other cultures to begin to detach [themselves] from the sentimental pseudo-religiosity of the Victorian Madonna" (ibid. 105).

[189] However, the poems do not succeed in deconstructing and challenging the binary female/male. If men are presented, it is as absent or failing fathers (Brandt 1992: 10; 12-13; 33-35; 42-43; 51-52) and sexual assaulters (ibid.: 71-73; 76-77). Consequently, men remain one-dimensional antagonists of women.

3.5.   Modes of Identification as Narrative Practices in Queer Mennonite Novels

Mennonite writing and scholarship have been characterized by a taboo on sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular (cf. Enns 2013; D. Reimer 2002; Shank Cruz 2015). This lack of representation has ultimately led to a fragmentation among scholars in the field of Mennonite Studies (cf. Spicher Kasdorf 2001: 161). As I argued above and as I will be exploring in the two analyses below, this fragmentation has been caused by the binary construction of community that focuses on outsiders and insiders. This limited focus ultimately leads to a troublesome relationship between Mennonites and (homo)sexualities. This strained relationship was partly also caused by rigid interpretations of community (A. Dueck 2012: 108). If community is understood in the sense and sameness, many individuals will be finding themselves outside of belonging to that community. [190] Gundy claims that the binary community/ individual has provided a long-lasting tension in Mennonite Canadian writing, which justifies being referred to as the "Ur-Myth of the modern Mennonite writer" (Gundy 2005: 25), a term that has since been used by a number of Mennonite Studies' scholars (cf. Zacharias 2013: 133; Shank Cruz 2015: 7). However, the tension itself is far from self-evident. To understand it, it is important to understand the dynamics of community in Mennonite fiction. What we discover is that the tension is caused by an essentialized understanding of community that I have critically discussed repeatedly above. In the queer Mennonite texts that I am going to discuss below, we find that the essentialism is mostly countered by the protagonists' reinterpretation of community altogether.

In Wes Funk's novel *Dead Rock Stars* the aspect of belonging is particularly relevant, as the young homosexual narrator tries to avoid his family and hometown community for fear of finding himself the odd one out. The first person narrator tells the story of a small-town community that is unable to comprehend his homosexuality. However, the narrator himself is substantially involved in upholding the traditional norms of heterosexuality and masculinity and therefore failing to deconstruct the very binaries that work toward his detriment.

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[190] The focus on community in discussions of queer texts mirrors debates among Queer Studies' scholars. In her exploration of the field, Sullivan demonstrates how community has frequently been misunderstood as being "based on commonality – common identity, a common political goal, or a set of commonly held beliefs and practices" (2003: 142). Furthermore, she criticizes that this limited interpretation "makes for all sorts of problems, divisions, and exclusions because such a notion of community cannot really tolerate difference" (ibid. 142).

Nevertheless, the novel is particularly strong in suggesting reinterpretations of community, deconstructing the term to make it available to the queer narrator.

D'anna's novel *Vixen* goes one step further and suggests a complete deconstruction of a number of critical terms in a contemporary Western context. The female narrator challenges interpretations of sexuality, health, and community altogether and explores several taboos, such as incest, triangular relationships, or child prostitution, presenting her readers with a variety of paradoxes in the process. *Vixen* is an important text for the Mennonite *narrating community* not despite its paradoxes and challenges to traditionally defined Mennonite identities, but because of them. In Müller-Funk's terms, the novel fits the category of a postmodern "Erzählgemeinschaft" best, as it is made up of a network of narratives that display fragmented and multiple identities (Müller-Funk 2008: 101–02).[191] *Vixen* explores identities that are conflicted and fragmented, as well as narrative sequences that question several Western norms. It is therefore an excellent example of a contemporary Mennonite narrative, because, first, it shows that the writing of contemporary Canadian Mennonites involves global critical subjects, instead of focusing on itself. Second, it provides an opportunity for Mennonite scholarship to discuss texts that are "in the world *and* of it" and ultimately "non-Mennonite readers and critics see why Mennonite literature is worth reading" (Shank Cruz 2015: 2).

My focus in the analyses of two novels lies on the exploration of queer identities in Mennonite texts. I will study the narrativization of communities and explore moments of conflict over non-conforming sexualities. Moreover, I am interested in the characters' handling of this discrimination in their own narratives. Aspects of reliability, deconstructions of terms such as community, sexuality, and explorations of alternative stories that defy heteronormative ideals will be at the heart of both analyses.

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[191] While Müller-Funk proposes that this form of an "Erzählgemeinschaft" can be mostly found in video games' and internet narratives, I suggest that novels such as those by D'anna fit just as well into that category.

3.5.1   Hetero-Masculinity in Wes Funk's *Dead Rock Stars*[192]

> [A]t least I didn't get the girly name
> (Funk 2011: 42)

Wes Funk's novel *Dead Rock Stars* is told by Jackson Hill, the autodiegetic narrator, who enjoys his single life in Saskatoon, busy with the maintenance of his business, a record shop. Jackson lives a day's drive away from his hometown and avoids regular visits with his family, because "life never seemed easy for [him] there in that little prairie town" (ibid. 3). Right at the beginning of the novel Jackson self-identifies as queer and throughout the story he is transgressing the heteronormative marriage ideal, which has been dominant within Mennonite narratives. The connection between gender and sexuality is particularly important in discussions around homosexual men, as sociologist Michael Kimmel[193] points out.

> Indeed, our commonsense assumption is that gay men and lesbians are gender nonconformist – lesbians are 'masculine' women; gay men are 'feminine' men. But such commonsense thinking has one deep logical flaw – it assumes that the gender of your partner is more important, and more decisive in your life than your own gender. But our own gender – the collections of behaviors, attitudes, attributes, and assumptions about what it means to be a man or a woman – is far more important than the gender of the people with whom we interact, sexually or otherwise. Sexual behavior, gay or straight, confirms gender identity. (Kimmel 2005a: 16)

Set against the background of these commonsense assumptions I will analyze the intricate connection between norms of sexuality and gender in Funk's novel.[194] I will argue throughout this chapter that self-descriptions such as "estranged family fag" (Funk 2011: 3) point toward an internalized gender-normativity, which in turn prevents the narrator from fully identifying as a gay man. I argue that the novel only offers a discussion of homosexuality in a small-town context on the surface. A more careful reading reveals that it provides a variety of narrative and contextual elements that speak to an intricate relation between what Kimmel calls "hegemonic

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[192] Parts of this chapter have been presented at the "Anabaptist Roots" conference at the University of Lüneburg in July 2015 together with Martin Kuester. I am grateful for his comments and the feedback from members of the audience. A subsequent publication can be found in the *American Studies Journal* (2017).

[193] Michael Kimmel was fundamental in the establishment of the Center for the Study of Men and Masculinities at Stony Brook University in 2013. He is a distinguished professor in gender studies, as well as founder and editor of *Men and Masculinities*.

[194] While there is no direct reference to the Mennonite context and the word "Mennonite" is never used in *Dead Rock Stars*, there are some references that allow us to read the novel as set in a Mennonite community, such as the setting: a prairie small-town farming community in Saskatchewan, that is home to a multiplicity of different Mennonite denominations. Funk's earlier novel *Baggage* (2010) directly references the protagonist's Mennonite family.

masculinity" (2005b: 30)[195] and homosexuality, a connection that I will analyze as hetero-masculinity, a term used by Thomas Waugh (2011) to demonstrate the reciprocity of heterosexuality and male gender norms.

On one of his rare visits to the family farm for the funeral of his father, Jackson gets into a fight with his older brother Noel, the family patriarch. Noel takes issue with the appearance of Jackson's lover Frank – a farmer, whom Jackson met on his way to his parents' house (Funk 2011: 11ff) – at their father's funeral. Threatened by his brother's queer life style Noel attacks Jackson by using derogatory terms, such as "girly boys," "sissy-ass," "daisy-boy," and "gearbox[…]" (Funk 2011: 41-42). The use of pejorative terms is characteristic of a strategic threatening of masculinity, as Kimmel points out (2005b: 31). A key element of denying masculinity, Kimmel argues, is to attribute female qualities to a man.

> Whatever the variations by race, class, age, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, being a man means 'not being like women.' This notion of antifemininity lies at the heart of contemporary and historical conceptions of manhood […]. (2005b: 31)

> Masculine identity is born in the renunciation of the feminine, not in the direct affirmation of the masculine, which leaves masculine gender identity tenuous and fragile. (ibid. 32)

Noel's characterization of his brother and Frank as unmanly exemplifies this very notion of hetero-masculinity, which defines manhood as a negation of traditional female qualities. Any deviation from a rigid definition of manhood in Funk's novel lessens the likelihood of being recognized as 'a real man.' To display stereotypical female qualities is then perceived as a failure, source of ridicule, and, most importantly, it denies Jackson access to power.[196] The fight between Noel and Jackson exemplifies Kimmel's proposition that only a man can ever threaten

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[195] In his essay on "Masculinity as Homophobia" Kimmel, in reference to Erving Goffman, argues that there are certain criteria men need to fulfill in order to have their manhood recognized. This includes being a "'young, married, white, urban, northern heterosexual, Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports'" (Kimmel 2005b: 30). These elements are ultimately defined by Kimmel as "hegemonic masculinity," (ibid. 30), a term that indicates an accepted norm for masculinity. "One definition of manhood continues to remain the standard against which other forms of manhood are measured and evaluated. Within the dominant culture, the masculinity that defines white, middle-class, early middle-aged heterosexual men is the masculinity that sets the standards for other men, against which other men are measured and, more often than not, found wanting" (ibid. 30).

[196] Kimmel argues with Freud's theory of a boy's desire for the mother, his fear of castration by the father and his ultimate identification with the father, when proposing that the development of manly qualities (as they are defined in the North-American context) and sexism go hand in hand (2005b: 32).

another man's claim to masculinity (ibid. 33). [197] However, more interesting than Noel's accusation, is Jackson's immediate reaction. He defends Frank's manhood by arguing that "'Frank is a hundred times the man you are'" (Funk 2011: 41). This response indicates three aspects: First, Jackson is agitated because of the derogatory way his brother challenges gay men's masculinity. Despite his dismissal of his brother's statements he uses the very same mechanism to defend Frank's masculinity – his argument is supposed to counter Noel's offence, but ultimately serves to support the very connection between gay sexualities and masculinities. Second, by punching his brother in the face (ibid. 42), he ultimately uses "the single most evident marker of manhood:" violence, to refute his brother's statements (Kimmel 2005b: 36). The use of violence and the very "willingness to fight, the desire to fight" are deeply embedded in North American definitions of masculinity (ibid. 36). Jackson's use of it marks not only an expression of emotional agitation and frustration, but, more importantly, expresses and emphasizes his own notion of masculinity that is tied in with physical violence. Third, instead of deconstructing Noel's strategy of emasculation, Jackson perpetuates the norms of hetero-masculinity by counterattacking his brother with the same means by claiming: "you know what, Noel, at least I didn't get the girly name" (Funk 2011: 42), an attempt to emasculate his brother in return. The whole scene shows how the narrator paradoxically perpetuates the very power system that denies him access and which he claims to reject. In this particular scene the narrator fails in undermining norms of sexuality and gender within his family and ultimately repeats internalized notions of "hegemonic masculinity" (Kimmel 2005b: 30).

Another scene that portrays Jackson's failure to exceed traditional notions of hetero-masculinity is the moment when he first settles in with his whole family after his arrival at the family farm. When his brother asks him what goes on in his life, Jackson choses to answer the question "quite properly" by referring exclusively to his business, the record store, which keeps him so busy that he does not "have time for much else" (Funk 2011: 21). Jackson's strategy of

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[197] Kimmel goes so far as to claim that a man's behaviour is predominantly guided by fear of other men. Furthermore, he explains that homophobia is not essentially about an "irrational fear of gay men." Quite the contrary, homophobia describes the fear that one will be unmasked as gay. "Homophobia is a central organizing principle of our cultural definition of manhood" (ibid. 35). A similar connection has been made in a study by Falomir-Pichastor and Mugny (2009). They suggest that "homophobia is not a 'mere' prejudice against homosexuals but a consequence of the social construction of gender identity" (2009: 1233). Other studies that explore the link between homophobia and Western traditional definitions of manhood include Kelley and Gruenewald (2015) who looked at the ways to "Accomplish Masculinity through Anti-Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Homicide," and Shyminski (2011) who analysed the gay sidekicks of superheroes in comic books.

answering the question is twofold: First, he avoids talking about anything personal and thus forecloses any conversation about his life as a gay man from the beginning. This underreporting, or ellipsis, is a very significant strategical and narratological[198] method to circumvent questions and judgements the narrator fears his family would have. Second, circumventing the question by focusing on business also reveals the need to prove his manliness, because "[m]asculinity is measured by power, success, wealth, and status" (Kimmel 2005b: 30–31). Anticipating his brother's accusation that his (homo)sexuality is emasculating, he tries to prove his manhood by referencing his success in business. Consequently, Jackson's attempt to deconstruct his family's perceived homophobia ultimately fails, because his strategy perpetuates norms of male hetero-masculinity.

An analysis of Jackson's dream fantasy leads us to a more complex exploration of heteronormative gender ideals. Talking to his lover Frank on the phone, the latter suggests that Jackson visits him on his farm and they go out for a ride with his horses. Jackson later dreams about "riding horseback with Frank, perched high on top of Cherry and Chestnut" (Funk 2011: 29). With the narration of this fantasy the narrator evokes a traditional Western narrative directed at women about a prince on horseback coming to rescue them from their unmarried lives, a narrative that implies a multiplicity of behavioural codes on how to act feminine. It could be argued that by adapting this gender normative narrative, Jackson undermines and deconstructs narratives of masculinity, which, as I have pointed out above, necessitate a renouncing of the feminine (Kimmel 2005b: 32). This reading suggests that the novel transgresses the norms of masculinity and provides a space for Jackson to embrace the feminine – however stereotypical – instead of rejecting it. However, I argue that the feminine stereotype as it is evoked in the narrator's dream perpetuates a gender-conformist narrative of how to be feminine and thus fails to symbolize a transgression or deconstruction. The internalized notion of hetero-masculinity that the narrator previously abides by, makes this deconstruction of gender norms unlikely. When we think of Jackson's identification with the norms of gender and sexuality of his home-town community in other passages, I argue that the horse-riding dream expresses these very norms: Having internalized the notion that to be gay is to be less

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[198] In reference to Gérard Genette's characterization of paralipsis as a narratological category, Lanser proposes that it is important to analyse moments of underreporting in narratives, because "[p]aralipsis (or ellipsis in general) […] becomes one narratological category in which sex – and also gender – might figure significantly" (Lanser 1995: 88).

masculine, he associates his own love fantasy about Frank with female gendered narratives. In consequence, the narration unfortunately fails to deconstruct any given hetero-masculine stereotypes and Jackson ultimately re-identifies with the hetero-masculine norms of his family and community more than he is willing to admit.

While I have been focusing on the narrativization of hetero-masculinity in the novel so far, I also want to explore how the narrativization of female characters helps to perpetuate both female and male stereotypes. When Jackson "can't remember which one" of his sisters-in-law was urging him to stay the night at their place (Funk 2011: 44), he implies that the characters are replaceable templates. Although his criticism of the gender-normative behaviour within the small prairie town is fierce – "[w]ife's a piece of shit but she better have supper on the table at 5:00 sharp; that always seems to be the attitude in these parts" (ibid. 19) – he still partakes in the construction of normative feminine stereotypes by narrating women as constantly serving the men in their lives. With these short descriptions, Jackson supports the binary thinking – female/male – that he pretends to undermine. While men are mostly shown to work in the fields (ibid. 23, 31), dominate discussions (ibid. 31ff), women in the novel are clearly dominating the private sphere, which means taking care of their husbands and children by preparing food and keeping the house clean (ibid: 19; 31; 32; 33; 39; 43; 73; 79).

However, there are some scenes that challenge gender stereotypes in *Dead Rock Stars*. Coral, Jackson's brother Austin's wife, confides in Jackson that she thinks about leaving her husband. She points out that although Austin is a "'decent hardworking man, a good provider'" – another perpetuation of hetero-masculine norms – he is "'boring […] to death'" (ibid. 23). Her daughters' decision to leave the town to study and travel inspires her to think about her own decision as a young woman to stay in town and "'marry a nice farmer and raise some kids'" (ibid. 22). In a strict patriarchal community, the decision to travel and become independent would be likely to meet with incomprehension and outright refusal. Yet, when Coral talks about her daughters' plans, there is no indication that they will have to meet with any resistance. In another scene, Jackson shows Frank an old empty barn on the family farm. When Frank wonders why it has never been used, Jackson explains that his mother, against the will of his father, decided not to have any livestock. "Said she didn't want anything to do with butchering or milking cows or gathering eggs" (ibid. 54). A farmer's wife who makes the decision about livestock is certainly not the kind of traditional gender-conforming woman Jackson is

constantly describing. While these two examples point to a transgression of normative gender roles, they stay isolated within the novel and, more importantly, the narrator himself does not recognize them as deconstructions of traditional gender roles and binaries. Because of the narrative's compliance to norms of gender and sexuality in general and hetero-masculinity in particular, *Dead Rock Stars* exemplifies the continued importance of traditional binaries – female-male, homosexual-heterosexual – for the Mennonite *narrating community*.

Paradoxically, although the narrator for the most part pertains to traditional binaries and norms, he subtly tries to question these very norms on an aesthetic level. Although Jackson's behaviour speaks to an internalization of norms of gender and sexuality, his passion for the rock music genre challenges them. The novel contains perpetual references to rock songs and rock stars, as its title, *Dead Rock Stars*, already suggests and as is furthermore traceable within the novel's 25 chapters, each of which is headed by a rock-song title from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Furthermore, the narrator's whole life speaks to his passion for rock music – he owns a record store and named his dog "Mama Cass," after the singer of "The Mamas and the Papas" (ibid. 5). While more traditional Mennonite narratives may refer to Biblical hymns and thus evoke a religious context, the references to the rock genre evokes rather different aspects, such as rebellion and a celebration of non-mainstream art and culture. The implications first derive from the knowledge of the individual singer or band and their particular songs and lyrics that are referenced in the narrative. Second, I argue that the historical context of the songs – the 1960s to the 1980s – is also instrumental in our interpretation of the narrative as a whole.

The discussion of references to David Bowie and Freddie Mercury in the context of the novel provides another perspective on the intricate relationship between male gender norms and sexuality. Freddie Mercury, singer and songwriter of "Queen" is celebrated in *Dead Rock Stars* because he symbolizes an "anti-hero[…]" (ibid. 4) and because of his own celebration of non-normativity. The band's name challenges gender norms because all band members are male. Furthermore, Mercury's performance style has been described as theatrical and flamboyant, playing with hetero-masculine ideals. In addition to the direct reference to Mercury and his style, which, according to Jackson, was very appealing to "[h]orny teenage girls, bored housewives, and eccentric faggots"(ibid. 4), one of the novel's chapters is headed by a song title from "Queen" called "Under Pressure" (1980). The song talks about people's increasing inability to deal with the multiple responsibilities in their daily lives. The chapter in *Dead Rock*

Stars which is headed by the song title shows Jackson after his first night at his parents' house, awaking in his old bed and facing the memories that are induced by the environment (ibid. 31ff). I argue that a reading of the song as a challenge to the narrator himself is most revealing in terms of his struggle with his own attitudes towards sexuality and masculinity during his visit at home. The reference to David Bowie takes this challenge of hetero-masculine norms a step further, because the singer undermined traditional masculinity with his androgynous style and his ability to be innovative throughout his career.

The love for dead rock stars because of their rebellious temperament, and their courage to be different from the mainstream is also indicated by a reference to Mama Cass Elliot, a former member of "The Mamas and the Papas," who later started her solo career.

> How I loved her. Loved her voice, loved her clothes, loved her presence. Love how being very overweight and somewhat unattractive didn't deter her one bit from throwing herself out in front of endless audiences and belting out those fabulous hippy lyrics of John Phillips. (ibid. 5)

Jackson admires the fact that the singer's corpulence and non-conformity to the feminine beauty ideal did not stop her from entering a music career. I argue that the reference to the rock music genre in general and these three rock stars in particular provides a trajectory which speaks less to a re-identification of Jackson with his family, but more to a (subtle) counter-identification. The admiration of these particular stars and their ability and courage to challenge and defy normative ideals of beauty, gender, and sexualities, provides readers with a more transgressive interpretation of the whole narrative. While Jackson, in terms of his hetero-masculine performance and in dialogue with his family is often conforming to hetero-masculine norms, the reference to the rock music genre implies a sense of rebellion.

In addition, the reference to rock stars of that particular period emphasizes a longing for the past and the narrator's need to escape the present, in which he has to face the death of his father and the rejection of his own family. David Shumway observes that "rock stars contributed to the changes that we associate with the 1960s: the breaking down of hierarchies of race and gender; new patterns of courtship, love and marriage; the reintroduction of leftist political perspectives into popular consciousness" (2014: 205). Furthermore, he analyzes how the rock phenomenon was fueled by its radicalism and innovative potential (ibid. 212), two aspects that Jackson admires despite his failure to integrate them in his own narrative. Therefore, I presume

that the reference to the rock music of a fairly recent past, in which the narrator himself would have been a young boy, also provides another trajectory: a longing for a childhood home, a sense of community and stability. His longing for these aspects of his childhood and youth become visible when he reminisces on the décor of his parents' house:

> One thing about my parents' home, it was consistent. Nothing much ever seemed to change. The huge kitchen with the open dining room off to the side was still so welcoming. […] Ironic how a kitchen can seem so bright and sunny when you can see a blizzard taking place right outside the large window over the sink. (Funk 2011: 19)

Although he cannot feel at home with his mother and his two brothers, he still misses the stability that is provided by the structure of a home.

A longing for and continuation of traditions can also be found on the formal level of the novel. The extensive use of direct speech and colloquial expressions[199] does not only provide us with characters that are deeply embedded in a particular geographical and social environment (that in turn reminds us of a Mennonite Canadian prairie setting). Moreover, the style of writing in *Dead Rock Stars* reverberates a strong sense for oral storytelling, which has been an important element for the Mennonite *narrating community* long into the 20th century (before Mennonite fictional texts became available in English).[200] A stylistic analysis reveals how this particular narrative is part of a Mennonite tradition of simplicity in storytelling. Additionally, it is via the extensive use of dialogue that we detect that the narrator himself often fails to understand his family and therefore appears to be unreliable. While there is no indication that he consciously simplifies or falsifies his narration, there are several passages that show how the narrator's representation of his family and community collide with some of the characters' self-presentations. Part of the narrator's bad judgement can be observed when he is surprised to find out that his father left the farm to all of his sons equally, instead of, as he had assumed, to his brothers only (ibid. 33). In another scene Frank and Jackson go out for dinner in a local café where they meet Roxanne Krochuk, an old school friend who works as a waitress. Despite Jackson's self-descriptions as the odd-one-out as a child and teenager, Roxanne enthusiastically

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[199] Informal colloquial forms – such as "wanna" and "ain't" (Funk 2011: 27), "prepping a salad" (ibid. 106), "gotta" (ibid. 107) – provide us with a sense of the local prairie location.

[200] In her essay „Because, because, because" Brandt reminisces about the tradition of storytelling in her family and points out how this oral Low German tradition has been characteristic for Mennonite culture (Brandt 1996b: 145).

remembers Jackson's band: "'[T]hey were really great. The four of them. Oh, how the school and the whole town loved them'" (ibid. 46–47). This description of Jackson's involvement and acceptance is contrasted by his own memories: "Life never was easy for me there in that little prairie town I was raised in" (ibid. 3).

Coming back to the discussion of gender norms in general and norms of hetero-masculinity in particular, the fact that Jackson is an unreliable narrator provides yet another trajectory of analysis. Coral's revelation that her daughters will not continue to lead famers wives' lives is not accompanied with criticism and rejection from the family or community. On the contrary, Coral questions her own decision as a young woman to stay on the farm when she implies that the gender norms have changed over the course of another generation (ibid. 22). She thus directly confronts the narrator's construction and perpetuation of gender norms as outdated. Similarly, the narration of norms of gender and sexuality as traditional within Jackson's family are challenged by the narrator's father. Jackson refers to his father as a "very introverted man," who was mainly interested in farm work, "to be out on his tractor or puttering in his wood shop," or in being together with "the town's patriarchs in Fern's Café," taking part in discussions of "the price of the grain and the latest hockey game" (ibid. 31). With these traditional male interests, Jackson assumes him to be unfit for a conversation with his only gay son, because "what was he really supposed to say to me" (ibid. 31)? That this last assumption is misplaced becomes clear when the narrator remembers an afternoon with his father in the field. While inspecting the different varieties of flax on the field, his father draws an analogy.

> "Like people," he said. "People are like that [flax] too. Everybody's got their own little somethin' to offer the world. But every now and again, comes along someone that's just a little different. Just as good as everyone else. Hell, maybe even better. Just different." (ibid. 63)

Different from Jackson's representation, his father and the rest of his family have not cast him out as the "estranged family fag" (ibid. 3). As the frequent use of dialogue shows, Jackson is partly responsible for placing himself at the margins and he has trouble seeing the attempts of his family to include him. He narrates himself as outsider, whose apparent difficulties with his family stem from his homosexuality. While this is true for the relationship with his brother Noel, there is no indication that the rest of his family and community adhere to the same norms and traditions.

In order to find a reason why the narrator insists on traditional norms, it is again helpful to look at formal elements, such as the use of short sentences and paragraphs throughout the novel (ibid. 4; 5; 101). Ultimately, the narrator's use of short sentences and paragraphs points to his unwillingness to reveal something and can thus be read as elliptical. As with his misjudgment of his family's perception of him and the norms of sexuality and gender that he insinuates his family to perpetuate, the use of unfinished statements indicates the narrator's attempt not to reveal more of himself. This may be connected with the death of Jackson's teenage boyfriend, Anwar, for which he feels responsible. On a trip to the frozen local lake, Anwar suddenly breaks through the ice. While Anwar was slowly sinking, Jackson went into shock and was unable to help his friend (ibid. 115). This traumatic memory and the resulting guilt about Anwar's death are important aspects for the interpretation of Jackson's reluctance to spend time in his hometown and to be open about possible developments within his family. The narrator's unreliability is not constituted by his intention to misguide, but reflects his own psychological and emotional state of unresolved trauma. With this particular trajectory – a traumatic event that has led to the abandonment of a geographical home – Funk creates a narrative that resonates with a large variety of Mennonite Canadian narratives dealing with the historical trauma of Mennonites' exodus from Russia after the Russian revolution. Therefore, I argue that *Dead Rock Stars* fits very well into the corpus of the Mennonite *narrating community*, despite the fact that, first, the context of the novel is not particularly Mennonite, and second, the novel focuses on an individual instead of on a communal trauma.

In the last third of the novel, Jackson tries to overcome his trauma by telling the story to Frank, which leads him to be more susceptible to his family's actual attitudes and their very needs. After all, the death of the narrator's father, who was the sole owner of a large and successful farm business, leaves his mother feeling isolated and his brothers with an additional work load. He ultimately accepts his share of the inheritance, a decision that entails coming to the farm more frequently to be able to share the workload and to take part in decision-making processes (ibid. 78ff). While this decision shows a personal growth, I argue that it also pertains to a transgression of the traditional meaning of community in the novel, which is interpreted as uniform. Although Noel claims that he accepts Jackson's queer lifestyle, he makes very clear that it is not conforming to the community standards and thus has to be silenced when Jackson is at home. "'You wanna live your life as a queer, you just go right ahead.' […] 'All I ask, is

that you not come down here and shove it into our faces'" (ibid. 41). This statement exemplifies what A. Dueck calls the "silencing and suppression of sexual processes of identification outside of the heterosexual norm of marriage within the Mennonite community" (2012: 22–23), which in consequence excludes homosexuals from belonging to that community. Being denied full access to the farming community and family by Noel, Jackson, in order to be able to accept his father's inheritance, has to redefine community altogether. He succeeds in doing that by deconstructing the meaning of community and by breaking it down into smaller units of meaning, such as "'some unification'" and "'[s]ome real teamwork'" (Funk 2011: 79). With this new interpretation of community, he is able to take part in the family business and start a process of re-identification with his family.

Dead Rock Stars can be read as a study of prairie farming communities which undergo changes that pertain to their normative interpretations of gender and sexuality. As a traditional community that emphasizes the "unity" in community it struggles with the acceptance of non-normative sexualities. However, as I have shown, the struggle of the individual who deviates from, and, paradoxically, at the same time supports hetero-masculine ideals, is far more intriguing both on a narrative and a contextual level. Despite the fact that Funk's novel portrays a gay narrator and thus corresponds to what I have referred to as queer Mennonite/s Writing, it is premature to assume or even expect the narrative to ultimately undermine norms of gender and sexuality altogether. In the same way it would be premature to assume that homosexuality, and thus a transgression of hegemonic heterosexuality, necessarily means gender non-conformism (Kimmel 2005a: 16). As my analysis has shown, the narrator partakes in the construction of hetero-masculinity and traditional female gender norms, despite his criticism of them. Therefore, I argue that *Dead Rock Stars* is at least partly pertaining to the Mennonite master narrative on gender and sexuality in its construction and enforcement of simple binaries on the level of context.[201] However, the reference to the rock music genre and the accompanying challenges of mainstream art, culture, as well as norms of hetero-masculinity and femininity point to a deconstruction of the simplistic binaries, which, in other parts of the novel, are stabilized.

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[201] This assessment is not meant to point to a lack or a fault in the narrative per se. After all, I believe with Bruner that "[n]arrative solves no problems," but that it can help us to "locate[…] them in such a way as to make them comprehensible" (Bruner 1991: 72).

The stories that are not narrated within the novel, the gaps that open up between the narrator's assessment of his family and community and their self-descriptions, which ultimately reveal an unreliable narrator, are most intriguing, because these gaps and silences lie at the heart of storytelling itself (Müller-Funk 2008: 91). These untold and hidden stories – the story of Anwar's death, the memory of his father supporting Jackson's sexual identification – connect the novel with the overall Mennonite *narrating community*. It relates to it via its reference to trauma. However, while the historical trauma – the exodus from Russia – which has been referred to as the master narrative in Mennonite writing (Kroetsch in Tiessen and Hinchcliffe 1992: 224–25), refers to a collective trauma in the past, *Dead Rock Stars* translates trauma on the individual level and to a contemporary experience.

Consequently, a discussion of the complexity of the novel and its embeddedness in the Mennonite master narrative about loss and the identification with simple binaries that have been problematized in Mennonite scholarship can be productive when framing the narrative as a part of the Mennonite *narrating community*. The connection with other Mennonite Canadian texts is also given via the narrative's style, its use of colloquial expression and frequent dialogues that again refelct a re-identification of the narrator with his home-town community.

3.5.2 Linguistic, Narrative, and Contextual Disruptions in Lynnette D'anna's Novel *Vixen*[202]

> There is a crack in everything.
> That's how the light gets in.
> (Cohen in D'anna 2001: n.p.)

Lynnette D'anna's fifth novel, *Vixen* (2001)[203] explores a young female narrator's life narrative. The story is told by a teenaged autodiegetic narrator, who remains unnamed for two thirds of the novel and ultimately calls herself Vivica. The novel is partitioned in one- to two-page sequences that follow no chronological order and therefore appear to be randomly juxtaposed. Roughly speaking, Vivica meanders between five main plots: a love story, a story of abuse, a detective story, a family story, and a philosophical story that ultimately challenges western notions of sexuality and (mental) health. The novel begins with the love story that introduces the narrator's relationship to Ruby, her female lover whom she feels protected by (ibid. 13), but who also presents a threat.

> Ruby stretches me apart, rips open all my seams. With her fingers and her tongue she patterns me, she pins me in, she sews me tight. She reinvents me every time; every time she makes me whole. (ibid. 14)

The combination of these contradictory passages on the first two pages of the novel is symptomatic for the frequent use of paradoxes in the novel that ultimately challenge normative interpretations of everyday terms, such as health, sexuality, and community. These global topics are furthermore complicated by the fact that the narrator is a patient in a mental health hospital (ibid. 16, 35, 42, 60, 71, 85, 86, 87, 93, 115, 124, 126, 127) and ultimately undergoes a cingulotomy (ibid. 97, 188).[204] Both aspects encourage a questioning of the narrator's reliability.

One of the novel's characteristic features – its frequent use of paradoxes – is undermined by the reference to Leonhard Cohen's song "Anthem"[205] in the epigraph. The song lines challenge

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[202] Parts of this chapter have been presented at the "Anabaptist Roots" conference at the University of Lüneburg in July 2015 together with Martin Kuester. I am grateful for his comments and the feedback from members of the audience. A subsequent publication can be found in the *American Studies Journal* (2017).

[203] Her earlier novels are *sing me no more* (1992), the only novel still published under her maiden name Dueck, *RagTimeBone* (1994), *fool's bells* (1999), and *Belly Fruit* (2000).

[204] A cingulotomy is a form of neurosurgical procedure that was introduced in the middle of the 20th century as an alternative to lobotomy.

[205] Cohen's song is also referenced in Rudy Wiebe's recent novel, *Come Back* (2014). However, Wiebe's narrator, reminiscing about his son's suicide, changes the meaning to "[t]here is a crack in everything. That's how the *night* gets in" (ibid. 21; my emphasis).

each other due to the juxtaposition of the words "crack" and "light." While the first term is often negatively connotated, the latter is mostly read positively. Thus, a reading of the first song line, "[t]here is a crack in everything" may result in associations of breakage, decay, or failure, while the second line, "[t]hat's how the light gets in" challenges these negative connotations, because "light" is associated with day, brightness, and the sun. The choice of Cohen's song with its combination of paradoxes, serves as an introduction to D'anna's novel as a challenging text; challenging both on a formal level – the individual passages seem to be juxtaposed randomly – and on the level of context – D'anna's narrator constantly questions normative interpretations of health, sexuality, and community. Another challenge is presented linguistically, since the excessive use of pronouns and nicknames blurs the identification of referents in the novel.

The combination of contradictions, the juxtaposition of narrative sequences that often bear no connection to each other, next to the fact that the novel has no clear plot, results in a disrupted reading experience. Furthermore, this disruption is intensified by the narration of trauma. Throughout the novel the narrator tries to make sense of her experience of emotional and sexual abuse via storytelling. However, she only manages to relate her experience in an incoherent manner. Social scientist Gay Becker analyzes the effect of disruptive events and explains that

> [i]n all societies, the course of life is structured by expectations about each phase of life, and meaning is assigned to specific life events and the roles that accompany them. When expectations about the course of life are not met, people experience inner chaos and disruption. Such disruptions represent loss of the future. Restoring order in life necessitates reworking understandings of the self and the world, redefining the disruption and life itself. (1997: 4)

In her analysis of several interviews, Becker notes that narrativization is an important means of processing "the self and the world" after a traumatic event. "Narratives of disruption," Becker argues, "are people's efforts to integrate disruption and its aftermath with prevailing cultural sentiments" (ibid. 15). It is the narrative process itself that is important in overcoming the experience of abuse.

Vivica's traumatic experiences are predominantly narrated throughout the first half of the novel. Many of them include her mother, who either neglected her (D'anna 2001: 38) or sold her to older men.

> My lovely mother tosses back her head and brays, her diamonds spraying shards of coloured glass into my eyes. I blink and rub and look again across the party room. The man with whom she is laughing looks to where she points, at me, and he grins too. I duck, trying to avoid his eye, but it is too late. He has already set his mark on me.
>
> When Mother has a thing to sell she is very good at it. The something happens to be me. Mother tells me I am good for business. She also says she has to draw the line somewhere although she never says where somewhere is. Every buyer wants a different trick. (ibid. 53)

This appalling story of child prostitution translates into a story of the narrator's sexual assault as an adult (ibid. 51, 170). Furthermore these experiences of abuse are also part of the life of her closest friend and lover, Ruby, whose brother Adam, with whom they both lead a triangular relationship, is violent towards her (ibid. 20–21). Ultimately, both Ruby and Adam are being killed, probably a murder-suicide (ibid. 148–49), although Vivica suspects Adam's wife to have killed them out of jealousy (ibid. 181–82).

These disrupting experiences and memories are paired with the narrator's quest for her real parents. As Vivica learns from her mother's former lover, who always got "two-for-one" when he was living with them (ibid. 51), she was apparently "[c]onfiscated" from a car when she was a toddler (ibid. 69). With this information her search for her real parents begins and she gets help from a private detective, who reveals the names of her mother and grandmother, who migrated from Iceland (ibid. 140ff). With this knowledge, the narrator enters her detective narrative that leads her and the private detective Stan to the formerly New Icelandic town Gimli in Manitoba at the western shore of Lake Winnipeg in search of her mother. However, this story ends abruptly as Stan leaves Vivica alone in a motel over night, with a cryptic note and some money (ibid. 174–75). Ultimately, the narrator never continues her search alone and readers never learn whether the story of abduction is true.

In addition to the unlikely detective story and her apparent family history, the narrator challenges her own credibility by pointing out her admission to a mental health hospital (ibid. 16, 35, 42, 60, 71, 85, 86, 87, 93, 115, 124, 126, 127), from which she tells a large portion of her story. Furthermore, there are several inconsistencies in her story. First, the style of her narrative speaks to a well-educated, intellectually and emotionally mature writer, yet she characterizes herself as inexperienced and naïve young girl whose most striking experiences were those of abandonment and abuse. Her drug-addicted mother apparently used her for her own sexual satisfaction and to attract male friends and dealers (ibid. 53). Despite this neglect the narrator is able to nonchalantly refer to literary classics, quote the Bible, and to refer to

concepts and terms from psychology to history. Thus we read excerpts of and references to Edgar Allen Poe's "The Raven" (ibid. 110), Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (ibid. 132), Sappho, Socrates, US-American comedian Lenny Bruce, singer-songwriter Kurt Cobain (ibid. 136), Sigmund Freud and C.G. Jung (ibid. 166), Marx, and Canadian pop/folk singer songwriter Jane Siberry (ibid. 103). All these different texts interconnect in *Vixen* and create a metatext the narrator draws upon to develop her own individual voice and style of writing. However, the story of neglect and abuse contrasts with the narrator's broad knowledge of and interest in literature and culture.

Additionally, Vivica challenges her own story by using a lexicon that is unlikely to be available to her, if her story was completely truthful. The narrator constantly challenges her readers to question her reliability by referencing her own "bulimic memory" (ibid. 33) that she characterises further on as "rifled through and through with bullet holes" (ibid. 103). Different from unreliable narrators who try to convince their readers that their story is indeed truthful, Vivica constantly challenges her readers to doubt her story by pointing out that she is a "lunatic" (ibid. 115), whose memory is faulty.

Another textual signal for the narrator's unreliability is her use of direct reader addresses, such as when she tells the reader that she "can guess what [they] are thinking. Some people are just born to lose. Maybe that is what I am, a loser" (ibid. 171). These frequent direct addresses serve as one of the primary signals for unreliable narration (Busch 1998: 46). In the last chapter of the novel, Vivica claims to be undergoing psycho-surgery, counting down from twenty just as she has been administered the narcotics. With a final memory of Ruby she ends her narrative. Yet at the chapter's beginning the narrator again directly addresses her readers.

> I can tell you any story; I can spin it any way I choose and not one of you alive can challenge or correct me. How she sang her arias for me; how she stayed long after I outlived my reason. I have made my memory, my own; my own, whatever I decide to make of it. (D'anna 2001: 188)

This final statement questions the preceding narrative completely. The narrator takes charge of her own story, challenging her readers again to question her story. Furthermore, the statement implies that the search for reliability and truth in stories is pointless. Her indication that she is free to narrate any story emphasizes the fact that the narrator creates what David Herman calls

a *storyworld*, a "world evoked implicitly as well as explicitly by a narrative" (2009: 72).[206] Additionally, it exemplifies how narrative devices are instrumental in the construction of realities. The unreliability of the narrator in *Vixen* results from the fact that she constantly challenges expectations and therefore creates a disrupted narrative.

The disruption of Vivica's story is produced on a multiplicity of levels. Linguistically, the narrator challenges processes of identification by the intermittent use of pronouns and nicknames. While a name immediately offers a source of reference, carries a connotation, or, as the narrator puts it, "gives weight" (D'anna 2001: 132), the exclusive use of pronouns (ibid. 38, 52, 60, 81, 82) conceals this information. Vivica repeatedly uses pronouns for characters without mentioning their names or providing other identifying references. Therefore, in her own logic, she denies these characters any "weight" as they become unrecognizable and interchangeable. Next to pronouns we also find sparse descriptions for characters. These descriptions include "the boy who plays guitar" (ibid. 68), which signifies a young man Vivica sleeps with, "Sad Eyes" (ibid. 69), a former friend of her mother whom she remembers to have been abused by as a child (ibid. 51), her social worker "Gobbler" (ibid. 127), or Ruby's and Adam's father "the Judge" (ibid. 132). All of these descriptions emphasize one characteristic feature of the person.

More significantly, the narrator uses this technique when she refers to her mother simply as "she," "the woman" or "the mother" (ibid. 52), thereby linguistically distancing herself from her own mother and the abuse experience she exposed her to. In the following passage the narrator linguistically distances herself from her mother as well as from her own experience as a child.

> The baby in the bedroom is soaked and wailing up a storm. Even in my veiled dismemory, I know the mother should go to her. She should go to her and pick her up and comfort her. She should feed her milk and sing her soothing song. But the woman merely contemplates her fingernails. Another time, she thinks, not now. So baby rocks herself to sleep again. (ibid. 38)

"Language gives access to a world of experience insofar as experience is brought to language," Becker explains (1997: 14). While Vivica is open to relate the abuse experience in a story, she

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[206] This relates to Goodman's conception of worldmaking, which emphasizes the relevance of narratives for the construction of worlds, which I have discussed in more detail in my introduction.

is not yet open to claim this story as her own. This linguistic distancing of the self from her experience of neglect during infancy serves as mechanism to cope with trauma. The narrator chooses to tell the story of neglect and therefore expresses the "embodied distress" (ibid. 14). However, she denies her own full involvement as victim of abuse by the use of "the baby," or, in another scene as "the child" (D'anna 2001: 52).

Names present yet another symbol of the narrator's linguistic challenge to identities and identification. It is particularly striking that the narrator's own name remains unmentioned and apparently unknown to the narrator herself[207] for two thirds of the novel. In the beginning Vivica refers to herself only in relational terms as "Ruby's vixen" (ibid. 13) or "mother's little fox" (ibid. 132). Because Vivica links, "[t]he weight we give our names" to "the weight we give ourselves" (ibid. 132), this technique emphasizes her increasing self-awareness as the novel continues. During the first two thirds of the novel the narrator is more explicit about experiences of sexual and emotional abuse – a part of the story she does not connect with her name and her infant self. Following her narration of the disruptive events, Vivica has successfully managed to "integrate disruption and its aftermath with prevailing cultural sentiments" (Becker 1997: 15). The name is not only instrumental in the process of turning away from the disruptive experiences, but it is also a key to her ancestral past. The narrator remembers a scene from her own childhood in which her grandmother calls her by the name Vivica (D'anna 2001: 133). Instead of being burdened with trauma, the name Vivica is constructed around a positive narration. The grandmother apparently migrated from Iceland to Canada; she is narrated as gentle "older woman" with a foreign dialect and with "eyes the purest azure, hair a nest of silver curls" (ibid. 133). This story exemplifies how the narrator's claim to the name Vivica provides her with a positive ancestral narrative. The aspect of naming is therefore particularly important, because it allows the narrator to transform her story of abuse into a family (hi)story.

The narrator's challenges of processes of identification can also be analyzed on the contextual level of the novel, and becomes most prominent in the narrator's criticism of a heteronormative marriage that is connected with her criticism of the mental health system and its normative definitions of health. Being a patient in a mental health institution Vivica is asked

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[207] In her study on queer narratology, Lanser points out that paralipsis is a prominent "narratological category that interacts with sex, gender, and sexuality" (1996: 254). In an earlier publication, she argues that narratives about sexualities may entail paralipsis (1995: 88).

to be cooperative if she hopes to be discharged. Her doctors demand that she leads a "normal life," which is defined as "[m]arriage […] and children" (ibid. 152). The options are promptly dismantled by the narrator as "meagre carrots" (ibid. 152). However, she soon realizes that if she hopes to be discharged as a patient she will have to pretend to share the same values, because "[f]irst they implore, then they direct. I have no need for happy endings, I protest. *Patient resistant*, they pen upon my chart" (ibid. 152; emphasis in original). To convince her psychologist that she is "emotionally mature" (ibid. 49) she has to pretend to be heterosexual.

> So you imagine sex with girls, he says. We'll see to that. […] It's normal, he assures, forehead wrinkled, just a stage. A common adolescent phase. Once you are emotionally mature you'll want a man, you'll see. My advice, he pants, is to invert your fantasies. Replace your girls with men. And don't you worry your pretty little head, you will grow out of it. (ibid. 49)

The intricate connection between mental health and heterosexuality results in a pathologizing of homosexuality and forces the narrator into a state of childish agreement.

Because Vivica has to keep her emotions and thoughts to herself in the mental health hospital, she starts a process of storytelling. In one chapter she focuses on the medical intervention she is subjected to and describes it with the following terms.

> • captivity • torture • legal drugs • mind fucks • crossword puzzles • draughts & potions • needlework • getting fucked • electricity • bad coffee • sensory deprivation • sedations • bingo. Or in their terms: • behaviour modification • medication • anxiety management • positive reinforcement • talk therapy. (ibid. 86)

However silenced she may be by the system that denies her autonomy, she transforms meanings and thereby deconstructs and criticizes the methods that are used to cure mental health patients. Vivica transforms the terms of mental health therapy into a lexicon that mirrors her own experience. The trauma she experiences within the mental health system is translated into non-medical terms and thus becomes tangible outside of the context of expert medical terminology, which leaves her alienated from her own experience.[208] For her, the ultimate "disease [she] ha[s]

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[208] Arthur Frank investigates stories by people who suffer from illness in his study *The Wounded Storyteller* (1995). In his introduction he claims that there are always multiple stories around illness – among them the patient narrative and the medical narrative. From these two the latter has most authority and thus "becomes the one against which others are ultimately judged true or false, useful or not" (1995: 5). Frank explains that the use of "technical expertise," "complex organizations of treatment" and a highly "specialized language" often overwhelm non-expert patients and leave them alienated from their own illness (ibid. 5).

is life" (ibid. 86), and her attempts to end her life resulted in her admission to the mental health system that asks her to deny her sexual identity.

This process of reinterpretation is mirrored in Vivica's narrative exploration of community. At first we may conceive of the narrator as living outside of a community because of her non-compliance to norms of sexuality, which isolate her from the "normals" (ibid. 166). However, I argue that community and belonging are as central to *Vixen* as to many other Mennonite narratives. In the context of queer Mennonite literature and its reception I have repeatedly referred to the long-standing criticism that community has often been equated with sameness, which in terms of queer Mennonite narratives inevitably results in a conflict over belonging. Similar to Funk's *Dead Rock Stars*, D'anna's novel *Vixen*, queers a normative understanding of community by deconstructing terms and concepts such as abuse and religion.

One important aspect of Vivica's challenge to traditional conceptions of community is her questioning of the social aspect that is ultimately connected with the term.[209] The narrator redefines community by omitting this aspect altogether and, moreover, by introducing the sensitive topic of abuse into her reconstruction of community. The "abusive community," described in the narrator's story (ibid. 20-21, 51, 53, 170) deconstructs the conventional understanding of community altogether by connecting two terms with opposing meanings: First, abuse as an act or sequence of acts work toward the detriment of a(t least one) person. Second, community, which has conventionally been defined as positive and nurturing (cf. Baumann 2000). The narrator deconstructs the term community by contrasting it with its opposite, thereby challenging the notion of stability. The narrator questions traditional meanings and furthermore provides the option to transform and reinterpret the meaning of community. Vivica does not suggest disposing of community as an important element in other people's and her own life. On the contrary, she argues that every coming together of people who share certain beliefs, cultural practices or who simply live in close proximity is necessarily influential.

> Family forms you first. Teaches you how to bend before the world gets at you. Family shows you how it's done. Mother was my training ground. […]

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[209] In his study on community, Zygmunt Baumann (2000) argues that people mostly connect positive aspects with the term community, that is often associated with shelter and comfort.

> Mother sashays by, giving me that silence, that grim wall I cannot penetrate. How well she knows I would enter the flaming gates of hell for her, how well she knows that. (D'anna 2001: 62)

The narrator's challenge to community – exemplified as family in the above passage – is a challenge to normative understandings of how community and belonging function in our everyday social life. As Vivica's narrative indicates, communities and families cannot always be interpreted as nurturing. On the contrary, some of them may even be detrimental to the physical and/or mental development of the individual. A. Dueck's study on sexual identities demonstrates that narrow definitions of community and belonging among many Mennonites in North America work toward a "silencing and suppression of sexual processes of identification outside the heterosexual norm of marriage" (A. Dueck 2012: 22–23). This rejection becomes viable in D'anna's novel. While the narrator questions the use of fixed interpretations of community, her deconstruction of abuse is as intriguing as it is unconventional. Her narrative of abuse frequently entails aspects of belonging and connection: her sexual encounter with Sad Eyes serves as a key to the memory of her biological mother (D'anna 2001: 51).

One last paradox explored in the novel is the frequent use of Christian terminology and references to the Bible that express the narrator's longing for community.

> In the predark hours I want religion more. A god in which to trust, to take directions from, to fear. Something to believe in is what I ache for then. Something to release me from the limbo of my life, from slogging on without apparent purpose; something to give logic to. Something else to hold responsible. (ibid. 117)

Although the narrator is rather critical of some aspects of Christian tradition, she seeks to belong to a community to receive guidance and protection. The need for community that has been denied to her resurfaces in a passage she adopts from Mathew 25:35-36 (ibid. 143). Here the narrator contradicts the original message by lamenting "I have been alone all my life. Have been cold and was not clothed; hungry and not fed" (ibid. 143). This adaptation of the Biblical passage emphasizes her own perception of herself as outside of community and belonging.

Furthermore, the importance of the Bible as source of inspiration for this novel is emphasized by the use of two Bible passages in the preamble: one from Revelation and one from Isaiah. Both passages refer to Babylon, the city of rebellion against god, interpreted as a symbol for defiance. Readers enter the first pages of the text with the verse "none shall save thee" in mind.

This last verse of Isaiah 47, reappears on the second last page (ibid. 187). The narrator is particularly knowledgeable on the Bible. I argue that, defying expectations, Vivica does not present herself as the rebel,[210] but rather reflects on the world that she experiences as lost and on the verge of destruction.

In another passage Vivica references Genesis 2:23, while reminiscing on her mother's abuse, how she was "feeding on [her], flesh of flesh"(ibid. 74). While the verse in Genesis talks about the making of the first woman of the flesh of the first man, the narrator in *Vixen* questions this Christian narrative in several ways. First, she implicitly criticizes the patriarchal order by constructing the story around two women. Second, the older one, the mother, is feeding on the younger one's flesh in Vivica's story, thus also turning a generational hegemony around. Third, the narrator transforms the whole context of the original Bible passage by relating it to a memory of abuse in her own story.

These references to communities and the narrator's challenge to normative interpretations of communities are indicative of her own position outside the community of healthy heterosexual western women. This position gives her the chance to criticize the standards and values of those deemed "inside," on the one hand. On the other hand, she is able to challenge the very definitions that deny her access to the circle of insiders. As an "outsider" she is more perceptive and she can be more critical of the values of the system that works toward her detriment and that denies her the right to define her own sexuality as healthy. Furthermore, her frequent references to the Christian tradition and to Biblical passages express her frustration with the social system. Paradoxically, the narrator also expresses her longing for symbols of traditional community, e.g. by referencing the Bible (ibid. 117). This notion emphasizes the narrator's attempt to re-connect with the structures she has been denied access to. However, in her attempt to reconnect, she simultaneously challenges the very definitions.

The most fundamental way in which the novel deconstructs stable identities and definitions is via storytelling. The importance of stories is emphasized by one of the narrator's memories of her mother.

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[210] She could have changed verse 15 of Isaiah 47 to read "None shall save me" but instead chose to leave it as it is, therefore indicating to address somebody else.

> The wordless lullabyes my mother crooned linger in my mind. I add them to my other melodies and, late at night, write them on recovered paper. They are my lazy poems […]. (ibid. 95)

The passage exemplifies the narrator's processing of trauma via poetic language. This narrativization of what Becker characterizes as a disruptive moment, emphasizes Vivica's "desire to have life display coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure" (Becker 1997: 12), because narrativization is a tool for reorganization.[211] The memory of her mother's lullaby immediately triggers a need to write and thus to deconstruct the disruptive memory of her abusive mother via poetic language. This way the narrator integrates the traumatic events of her past with "prevailing cultural sentiments" (ibid. 15) on a linguistic and poetic level. This short passage demonstrates how Vivica creates meaning out of the chaos that surrounds her. The narrative form of the novel – its short, incoherent passages, the frequent use of pronouns and nicknames instead of proper names, the unreliable narrator, the multiplicity of storylines, narrative leaps and gaps – mirrors the severe disruption Vivica describes.

In order to overcome a disruptive event, Becker explains, individuals often go through different phases to integrate the trauma in their own life stories: "the disruption itself, a period of limbo, and a period of reorganization" (ibid. 2). *Vixen* is particularly characteristic of a transition between the second and third phase. Throughout the novel the narrative sequences vary in their length – some of them are one and a half pages long while others consist of only one sentence – thus displaying the narrator's intermittent problems to narrate the experiences.

Another important aspect in Vivica's narrative is that it allows her to voice the sentiments she has been denied because of her classification as mentally ill (D'anna 2001: 49). The criticism at the very institutions that deny her an authoritative voice can only be uttered in the form of stories. Therefore, the disrupted stories serve as vehicles to both stay in touch with her surroundings and to start a process of transformation. However, the transformation is likely to happen nowhere but on the narrative level. The use of multiple stories and the paradoxes that ultimately challenge traditional notions of identities and health also provides the link to my overall concept of *narrating communities*. One major element in the conceptualization of

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[211] In a similar manner, Neumann and A. Nünning point out that "[i]n narrative psychology, narratives are not regarded as merely literary form but as a fundamental way of organising human experience and as a tool for constructing models of reality" (2008: 4).

Mennonites as a *narrating community*, is its constant challenge to established norms and the search for inconsistencies that provide the basis for yet another deconstruction of traditional norms and values. D'anna's novel, although it does not directly reference a Mennonite context, is very indicative of these challenges on both a formal and contextual level. While the multiplicity of stories challenges readers' expectations of a coherent reading experience on the one hand, topics such as child abuse challenge taboos, on the other. Furthermore, the narrative form – the use of an autodiegetic, overt and unreliable narrator, the fragmented, disrupted narrative sequences that juxtapose multiple stories, and the use of pronouns and nicknames, as well as the exploration of taboos, such as child abduction and abuse, promiscuity, incest, triangular sexual relationships, and same-sex sexuality – is indicative for texts by the Mennonite *narrating community*.

3.6   Conclusions

The previous analyses of queer narratives by two Mennonite authors who write about gay and lesbian sexualities without so much as mentioning the term Mennonite focused on specific aspects of queer Mennonite narratives. Contextual aspects such as community, the pertaining to or undermining of binaries, and the silencing of (unwanted or inconvenient) narratives. They also share some formal elements, such as ellipsis, intertextuality, and reliability are key factors in these narratives that connect them to the Mennonite *narrating community*. It is these narrative and contextual categories that make these texts relate to a Mennonite tradition of storytelling.

There are a number of other Mennonite texts, which also deal with lesbian and gay sexualities. If we look at J. G. Braun's *Somewhere Else* (2008b) and Wes Funk's *Baggage* (2010), we discover that, different from the novels I explored above, they draw a direct connection to the Mennonite Canadian context. In Braun's and Funk's novels the protagonists grew up in rural Mennonite communities and families, who have trouble accepting their non-conforming sexualities. Jess, the autodiegetic narrator in *Somewhere Else*, discovers her attraction to women and then realizes that her family and church will not be accepting of her homosexuality (J. G. Braun 2008b: 12). Funk's novel *Baggage* portrays Sam, a 19-year old gay Mennonite, who, after his training as a cook, tries to make a living by working in a small restaurant. Apart from their direct contextualization of the narrative within a Mennonite setting, Braun's and Funk's novels share some elements that pertain to my discussion of Mennonites as a *narrating community*. First, in both narratives unwanted emotions and stories are silenced. In *Baggage* death seems to be unspeakable. Thus, Sam's twin brother's death at birth comes out only at the end of the novel (Funk 2010: 160–62) and Sam remembers that his parents "had a way of sending out a message to their children that they didn't want certain emotions expressed (ibid. 55). Silence as a coping mechanism is practiced in *Somewhere Else* as well. Jess explains that her family's "house was built with bricks of silence" after she had a fight with her parents (J. G. Braun 2008b: 17). In terms of narrative strategies that pertain to the ones found in other Mennonite texts, both Funk's and Braun's novel are written in plain style – Braun's novel also contains some Low German expressions and references that connect it to a particularly Mennonite context on a linguistic level. Furthermore, intertextuality is an important aspect in *Somewhere Else*, where we find references to a myriad of narratives and narrative genres, including biblical references, a reference to the *Martyrs Mirror*, as well as to narratives by

internationally acclaimed authors such as Whitman and Kundera, and Canadian classics by Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence. Similar to *Dead Rock Stars*, *Baggage* draws on the rock music genre as a larger frame of reference.

A look at other queer narratives by a Mennonite author who does not directly evoke a Mennonite context, reveals four more novels by D'anna. Abuse and the fragmentation of identities are central topics in all of her other novels, expressed both on the level of context as well as formally by the use of a highly fragmented structure. Her latest novel *Belly Fruit* (2000) undermines gender roles and challenges simple identifications and categorizations. George, one of the main female characters, who tries to find the murderer of her lover Nancy, is manoeuvering her life through a variety of emotional and sexual relationships with both women and men. Compared to the D'anna's earlier trilogy, which consists of *sing me no more* (1992), *RagTimeBone* (1994), and *fool's bells* (1999), her latest novel is the most conventional in style with a clear setting, identifiable characters and plot.

Another particularly interesting collection of short stories is Casey Plett's *A safe girl to love* (2014), which contains stories about young Mennonite transsexual women who are struggling with belonging in terms of gender, sexuality, and community. The stories provide an intriguing insight into non-normative sexualities and gender. Productive questions that pertain to the context of Mennonites as a *narrating community* and that are interesting in the context of Mennonite literature, include: First, a discussion of whether we should discuss transgender issues under the umbrella term of queer writing at all or whether queer as category would be too narrow to grasp the meanings of narratives about transgenderism.[212] Second, what narrative categories, apart from the ones that I have discussed in connection with Funk and D'anna become important in transgender narratives? Grammatical categories, such as pronouns, may provide a productive focus.[213] Third, how can a transgender narrative that negates gender

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[212] The inclusion of articles on transgenderism in queer studies' readers, such as Judith Halberstam's essay on "Transgender Butch" in *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader* (2013) and Heather Love's article "Transgender fiction and politics" in *The Cambridge Companion to Gay and Lesbian Writing*, suggests that transgenderism has been discussed under the umbrella term of queer studies. Nevertheless, as Love argues, transgender "offers an alternative to lesbian and gay frameworks that would read many cross-gender practices as versions of homosexuality" (Love 2011: 149) and thus may ultimately be limiting to the political scope of transgenderism.

[213] Transgender pronouns, such as *s/he*, *ze,* and the possessive pronoun *hir*, are sometimes used "to refer to people in the intersex community (people born with an anatomy that is not easily categorized as male or female) as well as for a "range of cross-cultural variance" (Love 2011: 149).

conformism ultimately provide an alternative to patriarchy, sexism and homophobia?[214] In terms of the specifically Mennonite context, which is provided in some of Plett's short stories, these transgender narratives may also provide another innovative trajectory for the analysis of the narrativization of sexualities and embodiment, which are rare in Mennonite/s Writing.

A look at *feminist* Mennonite narratives, brings forth a number of narratives that uncover a particular aspect of modern North American (Mennonite) women's lives. The primary examples by Toews and Brandt are particularly important for a discussion of Mennonites as a *narrating community*, because they portray female subject positions and explore particularly female experiences of pregnancy, birth and the female body in general. Brandt's and Toews' texts have shown how (the lack of) agency and voice in their female speaker or protagonist, initiates and fuels a process of storytelling and of deconstruction – by questioning, challenging, and rewriting the patriarchal metanarrative. These deconstructions and challenges provide new socio-cultural spaces and stories. Brandt discovers and explores the mother from various perspectives in her poems and refutes the idealization of mothers. She ultimately succeeds in writing the mother as human being – with regrets, anger, a sexuality, and a(n) (aging) body. Toews explores her narrator's moment of emancipation from a conservative patriarchal father via storytelling itself. Irma's stories allow her to explore her own voice and to deconstruct male narratives that ultimately render her invisible in public. Her stories are first told using different media and borrowing another one's voice before she claims her own voice and writes her own story. In terms of their narrative forms, Brandt's poems and Toews novel show several particular features that resonate with my other examples of Mennonite texts and thus connect them to a corpus of Mennonite authored narratives. Colloquial expressions and a plain style can be found both in Toews and Brandt. In addition, Brandt's poetry is characterized by its changing metre and diction that are artistically woven into a rather traditional couplet form. Toews' novel presents a rather hesitant narrator to begin with, marked by the frequent use of ellipsis in the beginning of the novel. Apart from that, the narrativization of space marks a specific feminist element in her novel, since Irma and her sisters move from the rural, traditional space to the

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[214] In his discussion of "Other Women," a short story in Plett's collection that portrays a transgender girl who remains open about sexual relationships with both women and men, Shank Cruz suggests that the protagonist's acceptance of her lovers as individual people, instead of as women or men, helps undermining gender binaries, as well as forms of hegemonic masculinity (Shank Cruz 2015).

metropolitan space of Mexico City; a transition of space that is accompanied by the narrator's exploration of her own voice.

Some of Toews' other novels are certainly also interesting in the context of feminist Mennonite writing, among them her breakthrough success *A Complicated Kindness* (2005), which features a teenaged female narrator, who discovers the complexity of emotion in the conservative, patriarchal setting of a fictional rural Mennonite village in Canada. Despite the effort of the community's patriarch, ironically referred to as "The Mouth," to make the inhabitants of the town adhere to the strict rules that reiterate strict binaries – "there's no room for in between. You're in or you're out. You're good or you're bad" (ibid. 10) – people in East Village fall short of living up to an idealized version of a Mennonite community. Similar to *Irma Voth, A Complicated Kindness* is narrated by a young woman, who by the end, reflects on the process of storytelling itself[215] as a means to process her whole family's departure from East Village. "I've learned, from living in this town, that stories are what matter, and that if we can believe them, I mean really believe them, we have a chance at redemption" (ibid. 10).

Other examples of female narratives that are particularly intriguing can be found in memoirs. Funk Wiebe's memoir is a good example for the exploration of the Mennonite experience in Russia, which for her is but one of many factors when it comes to defining what Mennonite means. "The Mennonite mystique," as she refers to it, is the sum of several stories or "fractured parts of the whole" that, coming of age, she comes to know as Mennonite (Funk Wiebe 1997: 42–43). There are other memoirs, such as Connie Braun's *The Steppes are the Colour of Sepia* (2008) that are similarly revealing. In one of her chapters, C. Braun tells the story of Mennonites who did not manage to migrate to Canada during the 1920s and experienced the Second World War in Russia. The memory of the traumatic events is evoked in the form of stories, which, C. Braun affirms, are "the evidence of our lives" (ibid. 18). I agree with Braun that it is safe to assume that there are dozens, if not more, memoirs written by women (and men) that have yet to be discovered and made public.

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[215] In *A Complicated Kindness* writing means recreating and deconstructing meaning. Kuester argues that the writing process in which the narrator engages in has a particularly "redemptive power." The narrator challenges "Mennonite existentialism" and thus creates new narratives that are not only inclusive to women, but that provide the possibility of creating new identities for *Mennonite* women (Kuester 2008: 18; my emphasis).

Where are these personal narratives? Perhaps these are the stories destroyed by fire long ago in Canada. If a generation's stories are extinguished, their voices, like candles, snuffed out, we forget to remember the ones, who, before us, suffered unjustly. They disappear into the mire of atrocity. (ibid. 69)

Their analyses within the framework of a *narrating community*, would most certainly provide a new space for female participation in the historical discourses on Mennonite literature and culture, discourses that have traditionally been dominated by male voices.

In terms of poetry I want to briefly refer to a collection of poems which brings together 24 writers from a Canadian and U.S. American Mennonite background. The collection *A Cappella* (2003) displays some of their most popular poems. Although topics vary, the editor, Ann Hostetler, argues that there are some themes that seem to resonate with most of the writers.

[T]he relationship of individual to community; the tension between the authority of the community and the integrity of individual experience; the longing to break free of rigid patterns; the desire to juxtapose, if not synthesize, contradictions; and an emphasis on the sensuous and sensory world. (2003: xix)

The poems are therefore particularly interesting in a discussion of Mennonites as a *narrating community* since they work with contrasts and challenges within communities. Some of Di Brandt's poems that are included in the collection again provide the basis for a feminist analysis of Mennonite fiction. Moreover, by bringing together Canadian as well as U.S. American poetic voices, the collection also allows for a comparison of these literary cultures, which have often been dealt with separately, due to their different traditions.

4.   Mennonites as *Narrating Community*: Drawing Conclusions

The analysis of eight literary texts and the construction of Mennonites as *narrating community* that inadvertently relies on storytelling as important means of identification, shows that markers like ethnicity, history, and religion alone cannot provide answers to the question about Mennonite identities anymore. The complexity of themes as well as aesthetic devices used in contemporary Canadian Mennonite literature calls for a consideration of narratives' relationship with identities when approaching the question. As binary conceptions of identities have become futile (cf. Tiessen 1998: 500), conceptualizations of Mennonite identities that can account for paradoxes and challenges are needed. My concept of a *narrating community* accounts for that. As explored throughout my thesis, it has the following advantages. First, without ignoring the constructions of Mennonites as socio-economic ethnic or religious community that produces literature, it emphasizes the narrative construction of Mennonite identities that has often been underestimated (Kuester 2008: 18). Second, the terminology allows for a clear focus on the literary texts by Mennonites both on the level of content and form. My thesis has shown that aspects such as community and belonging are central themes across Mennonite literature. Third, in all texts we encounter a multiplicity of meanings that challenge outdated binaries and traditional master narratives.

Chapter two explored the construction of narrative identities via cultural memories. As the analysis of Klassen's and Poetker-Thiessen's poems emphasize, the martyrdom memory is important for contemporary Mennonites as it provides stories of the Anabaptist movements' beginning that Mennonites grew out of. However, the traditional interpretation of martyrdom as victimization and suffering cannot provide useful stories for contemporary Canadian Mennonites, who have been economically successful and politically secure in Canada. Both poets construct new cultural memories around martyrdom, stressing the connection between past and present by a focus on the individual martyrs and their powerful positions during the martyrdom era, and by directly addressing the martyr and the movements' name sake. Similarly, Wiebe's novel and Birdsell's short stories emphasize the pluralization of narratives and narrative identities by exploring stories of Mennonites' involvement in the colonization of Indigenous peoples in Canada, suggesting that this part of Mennonites' history deconstructs the narrative of Mennonites as victims, as well. Both authors construct new Mennonite narrative identities that ultimately challenge images of a peaceful community.

In chapter three I have shown how contemporary challenges such as feminism and debates of homosexuality construct new narrative identities. Toews and Brandt focus on women trying to deconstruct patriarchal narratives via storytelling itself, creating new identities for Mennonite women in the process. Furthermore, Brandt's exploration of the mother questions rigid traditional roles of women in general. Both authors' texts emphasize the importance of storytelling for Mennonite women, as this realm allows for new constructions of female identities and a destabilization of binaries. Sexuality and the breaching of taboos are central in Funk's and D'anna's novels. Both explore communities' mechanisms that serve to silence homosexuality and that construct a heterosexual norm. Funk's novel explicitly challenges narratives of traditional male identities that exclude homosexuality. D'anna's novel goes beyond a deconstruction of heterosexual identities as the norm and explores tabooed topics, such as child abuse, BDSM, and domestic violence.

All of these different narratives revolve around communities, whether it is by references to Anabaptist communities, or the challenging of traditional community values, the falling apart of the family and small-town community, the exploration of female and feminist communities, or the homosexual community. The Mennonite *narrating community* is characterized by a focus on the communal and the tension that is created by the bounds of that community (Gundy 2005: 25–26). The conflict that develops over definitions of community and the constant tension that is created when binary constructions are challenged becomes characteristic for the Mennonite *narrating community*. Given the complexity of themes discussed and the paradoxes that are created in Mennonite narratives the *narrating community* can never be a "community of harmony" (Redekop 2009: n.p.). However, accepting challenges and continual de- and reconstructions of narrative identities as a given, the *narrating community* can be sought out and defined.

In order to define the Mennonite *narrating community* we also need to explore the aesthetic value of Mennonite/s Writing. Zacharias points out that many Mennonite authors in Canada and the U.S. invite a reading of their texts as particularly Mennonite by including specific Mennonite cultural and historical markers. However, he warns that this has limited scholars' "appreciation of the aesthetic accomplishments" (2015: 107). Some of the connecting links between all texts in my study on a narrative level include the use of a plain style. Additionally, all novels have young protagonists, some of them autodiegetic narrators. All texts use specific

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cultural markers, such as Mennonite names, references to Mennonites' migratory history, as well as to historical figures, and Low German expressions. Some of the texts make explicit references to the Bible and therefore evoke the Mennonites as religious community. The Mennonite *narrating community* is furthermore demarcated by the frequent use of ellipsis, intertextuality, questions of reliability, and the exploration of the body: the martyred body in chapter two or the female body in chapter three.

Given that the narratives analyzed in my thesis all challenge stable identity categories and suggest a host of alternative stories to identify with, the question is whether identity as a category is still useful. Tiessen argues to "not abandon identity issues in Mennonite writing altogether but to probe them vigorously" (2015: 212). Furthermore, she suggests "foreground[ing] perspectives other than those rooted in identity categories" (ibid. 212), which is what I have done with the conceptualization of Mennonites as a *narrating community*. The expression does not deny the importance of categories such as ethnicity, religion, and history and yet it suggests emphasizing the importance of identities constructed and challenged by storytelling. I would therefore agree with Tiessen that identity as a category is still useful, if it is not exclusively focusing on traditional categories, but emphasizes the importance of narrativization. Furthermore, a broadening of the interpretation for Mennonite identities also allows for an analysis of Mennonite/s Writing in a broader context, considering its importance outside of Mennonite Studies and its aesthetic value (cf. Shank Cruz 2015: 143). Ultimately, the construction of Mennonites as *narrating community* needs to be understood as changing, affected by challenges itself. However, the fact that narratives and identities are intricately related emphasizes the importance of an exploration of identities via narratives, even if we continually have to rethink identity categories and look for innovative aesthetic forms that express these changes.

5. Bibliography

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