

Private People in Public Places: Contemporary Canadian Mennonite Life Writing

by

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## Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## Abstract

This study examines the autobiographical writing of five contemporary Canadian Mennonite authors in order to show how these texts, when read collectively, work to disrupt conventional ways of thinking about life writing. Life writing scholars typically see constructed autobiographical selves as falling into one of two categories: individualistic or relational. In the case of the former, authors construct autonomous and exceptional identities that typically stand outside and above their society; in the latter case, autobiographical identities are constructed in relation to and are influenced by a significant other person or persons. Initial theories by life writing scholars such as Mary G. Mason and Susan Stanford Friedman divided these categories along gender lines, suggesting that men typically constructed themselves as autonomous individuals while women's autobiography became a space for relational identities. By the late 1990s, though, critics such as Paul John Eakin and Nancy K. Miller collapsed this binary opposition with Eakin observing that "all identity is relational" (*How Our Lives* 43). I suggest that while the claims made by Eakin and Miller were crucial, subsequent critics have perhaps too broadly applied the term relationality (or what Eakin termed the "relational paradigm") to what I consider to be a variety of extraordinarily different sorts of textual lives.

The examples of contemporary Canadian Mennonite life writing I examine, for example, contain identities that are shown not so much in a mutual dynamic with another (as relational identities are understood to be) but are, instead, frequently de-privileged in the name of other people and other stories. In these cases, I look at how dominating narratives of history as well as dominating conceptions of family and community have affected the way in which these five authors make use of the discourse of autobiography. In the case of history, I consider the significant amount of attention these authors give either to the Mennonite exile from the Soviet

Union after the Russian revolution or even earlier Mennonite or Anabaptist historical events. In the case of family, I consider how particular texts challenge the stereotypical conception of the way family operates amongst Mennonites, yet at the same time reveal its overwhelming presence in the construction of these examples of autobiographical selves. I also examine the ways that these authors focus on the importance of particular (not necessarily Mennonite) communities, such as women's rights communities or pro-environment communities, over the narrative of the self. While such texts would conventionally fall within the category of relational writing, I argue that they instead illustrate the problems of using the same terminology to describe vastly different forms of self-representation. Ultimately, I suggest that these texts work nicely together in order to showcase the validity of interrogating the relational paradigm in life writing theory.

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## Introduction

In her introduction to a 1989 collection of Mennonite short stories, *Liars and Rascals*, Hildi Froese Tiessen traces the somewhat difficult emergence of Mennonite fiction writing in Canada. The title of the collection, she notes, is a reference to the way that Mennonite authors were perceived by the Mennonite community from the nascent stages of Canadian Mennonite writing, written in German, in the 1920s through to, at least, the 1960s. Published in 1989, *Liars and Rascals* was a testament to the significant sea change in thinking about creative writing within Mennonite communities that began in the 1960s, particularly writing by authors publishing for a wider English speaking audience. Yet while Froese Tiessen argues that some of the authors collected in the short story anthology have moved away from “the beliefs and conventions of their forebears,” it is nevertheless the case that “all write out of the Mennonite ethos in which they were nurtured, an ethos which dictated that embellishment of object or word was sin. What was true was objective and clear and one-dimensional. The play of the imagination was frivolous and worldly; it was an expression of the cardinal sin of pride” (xiii). In this dissertation, I look at five examples of contemporary Canadian Mennonite life writing: Di Brandt’s *So this is the world & here I am in it*, Connie Braun’s *The Steppes Are the Colour of Sepia*, Katie Funk Wiebe’s *You Never Gave Me a Name*, Miriam Toews’s *Swing Low*, and Rudy Wiebe’s *Of This Earth*. Ultimately, I aim to show that until recently the issues that Froese Tiessen discusses above have worked, perhaps even more severely, to curb the development of secular life writing by Canadian Mennonites and that a similar “Mennonite ethos” continues to play an important role in shaping the strategies of self-construction in the cases of Canadian Mennonite life writing that I am examining.



For my purposes it will be instructive to briefly summarize the history of Mennonite writing in Canada. The first major Canadian Mennonite writers, Jacob H. Janzen and Arnold Dyck, both struggled against the historical, religious, and cultural concerns that made creative writing a less than ideal occupation in a Canadian Mennonite society. Janzen and Dyck both arrived in Canada from Russia (Janzen in 1924, Dyck in 1923) with creative ambitions. According to Harry Loewen's article "Mennonite Literature in Canadian and American Mennonite Historiography" Janzen and Dyck typically wrote humorous stories and plays, attempting to raise cultural awareness amongst Canadian Mennonites. Yet, as Al Reimer notes in his discussion of Arnold Dyck's work, "Canadian Mennonites lacked cultural aspirations and still regarded almost any kind of art as sinful" (29).

Other writers emerged from Canadian Mennonite communities throughout the 1920s and 1930s such as Peter J. Klassen, Gerhard Loewen, and Fritz Senn. Both Janzen and Dyck, though, are understood and remembered as the key figures who attempted to spearhead an artistic climate in Canada for Mennonite writers. This attempt largely functioned, as well, to preserve Mennonite culture as both Janzen and Dyck understood it. Their work promoted "the German language as a vehicle and preserver of German Mennonite values" (H. Loewen 561). Both authors found some success. Dyck, in particular, wrote for several decades and published the autobiographical fiction *Lost in the Steppe*, which, as a story that portrays the uncomfortable relationship between artist and community, in many ways establishes a key theme that pervades much of Canadian Mennonite literature<sup>1</sup>.

Nevertheless, despite these accomplishments and despite the fact that there were several Mennonite authors writing in Canada before the 1960s, the response to the works by both Janzen and Dyck was less than overwhelming. As Hildi Froese Tiessen points out in her essay "Mother

Tongue as Shibboleth in the Literature of Canadian Mennonites,” early Mennonite authors in Canada “found virtually no Canadian audience outside the Mennonite community where their works of gentle good humour were regarded as interesting by some, frivolous by others, and as threatening by few” (179). Froese Tiessen goes on to remark that the Mennonite “history of migration, as well as their Puritan disposition towards the arts (indeed, toward any form of embellishment or ornamentation), their suspicion of fiction (which consisted, after all, of the unacceptable activity of telling lies) and their state of isolation from the cultural activities of other Europeans precluded the emergence of any kind of sophisticated artistic tradition among these people” (178).

Froese Tiessen, here, points out several of the key factors that initially kept most Canadian Mennonites from writing creatively and made them suspicious of those who did. In particular, Mennonites were not only apprehensive towards anything that might be considered lies, such as “embellishment” and “fiction,” they were also adamant about keeping separate from the world outside of the Mennonite community, suspicious of what they frequently saw to be “worldliness.” As Edna Froese puts it in *To Write or to Belong*, “when one’s entire mission in life is to avoid worldliness, not much room is left for the seductive delights of creative literature” (27). For this reason, the earliest Mennonites in Canada who *did* write kept mostly within the bounds of what was acceptable to their own communities.

Janzen and Dyck largely wrote about inoffensive themes that, in the words of Froese Tiessen “tended to assert the cohesiveness and unique identity of the Canadian Mennonite community” (“Mother Tongue” 179). Even while Dyck portrays the potentially tense relationship between artist and community, Edna Froese points out how in *Lost in the Steppe* he “evades direct confrontation with Mennonite principles by presenting issues in their least

threatening guise” (“Lost in the Steppe” 147). And while *Lost in the Steppe* was written in High German, a good deal of writing by Janzen and Dyck was written in the Low German *Plautdietsch*, which had two significant effects. One was that it gave Mennonite writers an informal voice that could effectively represent the community, since Low German was, in the words of Froese Tiessen, “the language of work and village life, the intimate language of family and friendship” rather than the “language of religion and education,” which was High German (“Mother Tongue” 179). The other effect was that it largely kept these creative authors and their texts separate from the English or French speaking and reading world of Canada, thereby reaffirming the Mennonite position as outsiders. The controversy within Mennonite communities in 1962 over Rudy Wiebe’s first published novel *Peace Shall Destroy Many* was precisely a reaction to the fact that this was a novel that, because it was written in English, broke down the important border between inside and outside.

Not only was *Peace Shall Destroy Many* written in English and widely distributed by Canada’s largest publisher, McClelland and Stewart, but it was also, according to Froese Tiessen in *Liars and Rascals*, “a novel in which Wiebe opened a private people’s private affairs to public scrutiny” (xiii). What followed, she notes, was an “unprecedented furore” (xii) which “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.” (xiii). Wiebe, though, was not gone for long, and his return four years later indicates that his novel was far from a temporary aberration but rather the beginning of a new tradition of Mennonite fiction that gradually expanded throughout the decades that followed.

Recently, Hildi Froese Tiessen noted that “Mennonite literature in Canada emerged in the era of identity politics” (“Homelands” 16). Froese Tiessen, along with other scholars, suggests

that this era saw the marketability of what could ostensibly be called Mennonite literature. Similarly, Rob Zacharias refers to the marketing of what he calls “The Mennonite Exotic.” Of Turnstone Press, Zacharias writes how,

the press was deeply invested in the fascination with (and commodification of) ethnic difference in Canada – that is, in the active production of ‘the Mennonite thing.’ The socio-political contexts that encouraged a generation of Mennonite authors to write out of their experiences as ‘ethnic Canadians’ are the same contexts in which it became culturally compelling and economically viable for a small press to begin publishing book after book of and often about a rural, separatist, deeply conservative Christian community, and to be able to reasonably expect a ‘mainstream literary market’ to respond enthusiastically. (42-43)

Out of this marketability of Mennonite ethnic difference in Canada (which Zacharias suggests really began in the late 1970s) came a slew of new writers such as Sandra Birdsell, Di Brandt, Sarah Klassen, Armin Wiebe, and many others. By October 2006, Froese Tiessen remarked at the conference for Mennonite writing that “Mennonite writing is more than alive and well in Canada” (“Mennonite/s” 44) and that authors have “persisted in finding their voices and telling their stories” (42).

Yet, as Froese Tiessen would later say, Mennonite authors who write more recently have begun to question the limitations of “Mennonite literature” as a subgenre. More contemporary writers have resisted the stereotypical stories about “rural, separatist, deeply conservative Christian communities” and have instead written stories not easily classifiable as conventionally “Mennonite” if there ever indeed was such a unified and essential literary sub-genre in the first place. Froese Tiessen writes, “Many writers, for example, are less interested in origins than in

milieus; less concerned with group history than with individual becoming; less compelled by essential identity than by multifaceted identifications” (“Homelands” 15). I agree, though the writers that I examine (several of whom emerged from the earlier era of identity politics) have not fully disassociated themselves from the idea of a “group history” to which they themselves belong.

Indeed, in many cases, the writers I look at in this dissertation are more concerned with the history of a group (or at least another individual) than they are with their own “individual becoming.” This is a significant fact given that I look exclusively at life writing. What *does* hold true, though, is that none of these books can be read (nor should they) for what they tell us about what it means, definitively, to be a Mennonite or what it is like living in a general Mennonite community. Indeed, as I will show in my forthcoming chapters, these books challenge conventional conceptions of stable, unified, and conventional Mennonite families, communities, histories, and individuals. If it is the case that contemporary Mennonite authors of fiction are no longer as invested in contributing to the “Mennonite thing,” at least in conventional and stereotypical ways, then the same can be said of Mennonite authors who write autobiographically.

This brief history of Canadian Mennonite literature serves as a partial explanation for the slow development of Mennonite life writing in Canada as well as for the conditions that allowed it to flourish. However, this history certainly does not tell the whole story and does not account for the fact that Mennonite life writing in English developed far more slowly than Mennonite fiction. After all, if a central concern amongst some Mennonites in their skepticism towards creative writing was the fact that fiction contains lies, then one might expect that Mennonite life writing would far outweigh fictional writing. But, in fact, the opposite has been true. While

Froese Tiessen could easily claim in 2006 that Mennonite writing is “more than alive and well,” and had been for quite some time, the same could not have been said for Mennonite life writing in Canada, even though Canadian Mennonite life writing had always existed in one form or another.

One response to this could be that fictional texts always outnumber life writing texts. However, this is not quite the case. As early as 1980, James Olney observed in his article “Autobiography and the Cultural Moment,” that “recent publishing history offers plentiful evidence that [autobiography] is practised by almost everyone” (3). Surely, Olney is employing some hyperbole here but the point remains that autobiography has been for quite some time a popular mode of literary expression<sup>2</sup>. And it is perhaps worth noting that at a time when a major scholar of autobiography like Olney could make the admittedly exaggerated claim that autobiography was in use by “almost everyone” that very few were being published from the Mennonite literary community in Canada which itself was beginning to emerge.

The life writing texts by Canadian Mennonite writers that *did* exist typically fell into either one of two categories: spiritual or immigration narratives<sup>3</sup>. Indeed both forms of life writing indicate just what many Mennonites considered the truth to be – the individual experience in submitting to God and the experience of the migrating community as a result of centuries of persecution. However, while Rudy Wiebe’s first novel ushered in an era that witnessed the development of a more secular tradition of Mennonites writing fiction in English, the same development did not occur for life writing. As Mary Cisar noted in her article “Mennonite Women’s Autobiography,” “few examples of autobiography, ... have found their way into Mennonite archives; fewer still have been published” (143). Cisar offers some explanations as to why Mennonites have been resistant to life writing including the puzzling

observation that autobiography “requires far greater literacy, intellectual pretension, and leisure” (143) than diaries and journals which she notes *have* been archived.

Here Cisar reaffirms what was once a long held assumption in autobiography studies. As Julie Rak points out, early life writing critics “built a canon for autobiography studies that was based on literary value and on ideas about the primacy and uniqueness of the self and the creativity of the artist that originated in Romanticism” (“Are Memoirs” 307). Rak observes that critics largely took autobiography as a serious form of writing and excluded other forms of life writing, such as memoirs as well as diaries and journals for these texts were perceived by critics to be lacking in “a quality of literariness and a phenomenological approach to the recovery of the self” (308). Cisar’s analysis conveys the influence of early attempts by to categorize and study life writing. Later in my introduction, I will address this history of autobiographical criticism in more detail as well as tackle the the terminology that designates some life writing texts as autobiography and others as memoir. For now, though, I do wish to put pressure on Cisar’s comments beyond her adherence to conventional definitions. After all if it is the case, as Cisar argues, that Mennonite writers avoided life writing because such texts required “literacy, intellectual pretension, and leisure,” it would certainly not explain the explosion of creative writing that Froese Tiessen describes above, which, to my mind, requires just as much literacy, pretension, and leisure.

Another explanation from Cisar seems more likely. She observes that “Where Mennonite norms call for readers to look through individual experiences and accomplishments toward what has sustained the community, autobiography glorifies the first person singular, perhaps exposing a dark lining of ambition or conflict” (142). The point Cisar makes here is a good one. After all, if it is true indeed that from the 1920s to the 1960s Canadian Mennonites regarded their fiction

writers suspiciously because they were expressing “the cardinal sin of pride,” or the inflation of the self, as Froese Tiessen notes above, it only makes sense that they would likewise be suspicious, perhaps even more so, of Mennonite authors turning to autobiography, since autobiography conventionally requires authors to offer themselves and their lives as the central focus of the text.

Several Mennonite writers have called direct attention to this particular tension between the historical traditions of Mennonites and the autobiographical form. Katie Funk Wiebe, whose own autobiography *You Never Gave Me a Name* figures significantly in my analysis of contemporary Canadian Mennonite autobiography, has observed that “It remained difficult for Mennonite Brethren to write their own story, using the first person, about anything other than spiritual experience because it might be seen as pride” (“The Dilemma” 114)<sup>4</sup>. The difficulties that Funk Wiebe describes here reflect the anxieties of some older generations of Mennonites who would have been firmly grounded in the traditions and beliefs of the culture and the religion. The eventual emergence of autobiography authored by Mennonite writers, particularly in the twenty-first century, is certainly good evidence of the changing nature of Mennonitism since the 1960s.

Several examples illustrate the recent growing trend of Mennonite authors writing and studying secular life writing. In January 2012, the *CMW Journal – Center for Mennonite Writing*, devoted an entire issue to memoir. The issue featured memoirs, autobiographical poetry, and one autobiography/essay written by six American Mennonite authors. Meanwhile, American Swiss Mennonite scholar and author, and former president of Goshen College, Shirley Showalter created a website, 100memoirs.com (now shirleyshowalter.com), on which she posted her own reviews of life writing. Currently, Showalter uses the website to promote her recently published



memoir, *Blush: A Mennonite Girl Meets a Glittering World* and also to document the work of other contemporary Mennonite memoirists as well as the reviews of their work.

Nevertheless, the emergence of autobiographies now from Mennonite writers still does not quite match the explosion occurring in the world of life writing. Some critics have suggested, in fact, that the same issues that Funk Wiebe describes above still exist on some level today. Speaking from an American Mennonite perspective, Ann Hostetler recently made the point that “A widely distributed memoir by a member of an ethnic cultural minority will inevitably have an insider audience critical of its representation of the ethnic group” (“The Self” 28). The issue that Hostetler raises here, though, is not so much the problem of pride but rather the pressure put upon authors to satisfactorily represent their particular community. Hostetler observes how Mennonite texts will often come under scrutiny by Mennonite readers for not adequately portraying the so-called realities of Mennonite life. In many ways, then, Hostetler’s remark suggests that the same issues that plagued Rudy Wiebe’s first publication are still at work to a degree. This, too, can explain the relative absence of Mennonite life writing.

Critics have been suggesting for several years that we are experiencing a memoir boom. As Jeanne Perreault and Marlene Kadar note in the introduction to *Tracing the Autobiographical*, “the varieties of representation of the autobiographical are multiplying” (1). The large number of texts that could lead Olney to plausibly suggest a cultural moment of autobiography in 1980 has been vastly superseded in our time. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson reaffirm this point in their chapter on the memoir boom in their recent edition (2010) of *Reading Autobiography*. There, they note how “Over the past two decades, life writing has become a prized commodity in print and online venues” (127). They list roughly twenty “emergent forms that have recently gained prominence” in the last twenty years and also have a chapter devoted to new Visual-Verbal-

Virtual Contexts of Life Narratives such as Blogs, Facebook, Youtube, etc. (167). Quite recently, in fact, Julie Rak devoted an entire book, *Boom!*, to the subject of what she refers to as “the memoir industry” (1). In this book, Rak notes how “The publishing industry in the United States publishes more than 150,000 new titles every year, and about half of those are purchased and stay in print” (8). So while more Canadian Mennonites are writing more autobiographical texts now, the overall amount does not necessarily reflect the explosion of life writing that is occurring currently.

Ann Hostetler announced in her introduction to the CMW issue on memoir that “Memoir has come of age in Mennonite literature” (1). Hostetler though is quite clearly aware that while such a declaration may be true, Mennonites have arrived at the age of memoir quite late. Perhaps Hostetler is offering an explanation for this when she notes how “Mennonites have long been suspicious of the individual self, the voice unmoderated by community consensus” and that this has put them at odds with “Democratic North Americans” with their “ideology of self-development and equal opportunity” (1). Hostetler’s introduction reveals that while many Mennonite communities have become secularized and entirely open to what was once considered the problematic outside world, the older traditions are still, to some degree, informing the literature of Mennonite writers. I would suggest that the traditions that Hostetler refers to in this introduction, traditions that in many ways hindered the development of autobiography are now being made apparent in the *way* that the Mennonite authors I look at have approached their life writing texts and the various methods that they have used to represent themselves.

The struggle between self and the collective has been a crucial topic of debate in Mennonite scholarship. As Edna Froese has written, “the choosing to subordinate oneself to the community is an integral, or at least an historical, part of Mennonite thinking” (“To Write” 8).

Froese cites historian Robert Friedmann as a crucial early figure who detailed the relationship between individuality and community. In his 1944 article, “On Mennonite Historiography and On Individualism and Brotherhood,” Friedmann suggests that the Anabaptist community was marked by “an *essential fellowship*, something which to a certain extent might be compared with family relations where the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ supplement each other. It is a group life, individual and free (as far as conscience is concerned), and yet of a kind of self-commitment which by far surpasses all sorts of pious co-devotion” (121). The self is therefore necessary but it is necessary in that it plays a crucial role as part of a seemingly more crucial community.

Friedmann’s observations which are, by now, quite dated, reflect what was, at one point, a dominant ideology in Mennonite thinking. Indeed, sociologist Calvin Redekop in his book *Mennonite Society*, published during the 1980s, makes a similar claim. There, he states that “the emphasis on community relates to our basic understanding of Mennonite society” and that this is derived from the Anabaptists who “developed a new form of theologizing and thought: the group or community nature of thought” (131). Redekop, here, traces a historical privileging of the community over the individual. He also notes how this sort of privileging had previously meant that expressions of pride were looked upon negatively because they went against *Gelassenheit*, which he defines as “yieldness to God’s will” (106). He goes on to write:

Traditionally, if a thought, act, or feeling contributed to the *Gelassenheit* of a Mennonite community, it was sanctioned and accepted. Whatever went beyond that, however, seemed to smack of *Hochmut* (‘pride’), a concept which is still very much alive among Mennonites in its various names (‘pride,’ persons who are ‘high and mighty,’ etc.). The one reason for excommunication that still applies within the Old Colony Mennonite community is *Hoffart*, which means a haughty

spirit. Thus, humility, a more observable dimension of *Gelassenheit*, became the norm for general Mennonite demeanor. (118)

This historical respect for fellowship over individualism appears to correlate nicely to both the ethos of modesty within historical Mennonite communities and also what was for a long time a suspicion of the prideful world outside of the community that kept Mennonites a private people, markedly cut off from the outside world until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Despite Redekop's crucial point, here, it is important to note that his claims do not necessarily apply to every person who might self-identify as Mennonite. Mennonites were from their very beginnings a diverse religious group primarily located in Germany, Holland, and Switzerland. Very quickly, in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, when they became persecuted victims for their beliefs, they scattered all over the world in search of safety and tolerance. Rob Zacharias notes that "Many Swiss Mennonites migrated to Pennsylvania in the seventeenth century (of whom a substantial number would ultimately move to southern Ontario following the American Revolutionary War), but the Mennonites in northern Europe found refuge by fleeing to the relatively liberal city-states of the Prussian Vistula delta, in the north of present-day Poland" (48).

The Mennonites in Prussia eventually left for Russia and from there migrated in two major waves to Canada. The earlier wave of Russian Mennonite immigrants, sensing a shift in Russian policies that could (and, in fact, did) encroach on their separatist lifestyle, came to Canada in the 1870s and became known as the Kanadier, a group that were largely considered to be more traditional than the second wave group, known as the Russländer who began emigrating as a result of the Russian Revolution. Zacharias also notes the wide spread of "adherents to Mennonite churches across the world," observing that "the largest number of members [are] in

Africa” (Zacharias 49). My point here in giving this history is that the name “Mennonite” designates a variety of people and cultural groups, each with their own distinct socio-cultural background and each with their own histories. Indeed the term “Mennonite” can mean something very different from one self-identifying Mennonite to the next. Some, for example, see Mennonitism as a religion; some see it as a culture, while others see it as both.

It is indeed true, of course, that today many of these traditions described above by Friedmann and Redekop have been imposed far less rigidly by some or have been abandoned or rejected entirely by others. It is important to note too that I am specifically concentrating on Canadian Russian Mennonite texts rather than life writing by Swiss Mennonites or U.S. Mennonites. As a result, the authors that I examine may not have the same relationship to Mennonitism as a religion as Mennonite writers who write out of other traditions might have. Anthropologist James Urry writes in his book *Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplehood* that the Russian Mennonites are unique among Mennonites because “their attempts to ensure the viability of their communities” in Russia led to “the establishment of a political economy that extended far beyond the requirements of mere self-sustenance or the needs of religious fellowship” (5). Urry goes on to note that the creation of a distinct Mennonite political economy within the Russian economic system gave Mennonites a “sense of a political community, creating almost a state within a state” (5).

Several writers including Al Reimer and Harry Loewen have suggested that the distinct history of the Russian Mennonites accounts for some crucial differences between the Swiss and Russian traditions and that these differences have resulted in distinct literary histories. Loewen has suggested that “the Swiss Mennonite writers appear to be more in tune with their religious communities, whereas many Russian Mennonite artists create from an ethnic community rather

than from a faith community” (568). Hildi Froese Tiessen has agreed with this sentiment, noting that Russian Mennonite literature in Canada is something of an “ethnic or cultural phenomenon” rather than a “religious one” (“State of the Art” 44). The texts that I examine reinforce this point as all authors appear to position themselves as belonging (or, in some cases, having belonged) more to a cultural group than a religious one, though that does not mean that the religious aspect of Mennonitism is altogether excluded from all of these works.

Significantly, though, while the authors that I am looking at often consider their Mennonite identity as more cultural than religious, they nevertheless construct their Mennonite community or even the environment in which they were raised as being rooted in some way within some of the traditions that I have described above, whether it be the condition of being fellowship-oriented or being sealed off from worldliness and suspicious of pride and self-confession. Indeed, for this reason, silence becomes a theme in several of the works. Connie Braun notes how her father “grew up in fear of saying ‘too much,’ a habit of silence that even now makes disclosure feel unnatural” (*The Steppes* 20). She acknowledges that this ethos was in many ways a part of her own upbringing. She writes, “As young children my brothers and I were raised to be polite, which also mean that small children didn’t speak at the table or ask adults questions – a result of my father’s own upbringing” (21). Similarly, Miriam Toews in *Swing Low* writes of her father being “embarrassed” by “this business of ‘wanting attention’” to the extent that he makes a vow “to remain quiet” (5).

While Toews describes herself in the book as excited by “the prospect of freedom, rebellion, and independence” (157), she nevertheless depicts the home in which she grew up as being marked by a father who purposefully made a “plan to remain silent when it came to matters of myself” (90). And while Toews in *Swing Low* does not directly correlate her father’s

silence with his Mennonite heritage, she does make the implication clearer in a later interview with Natasha G. Wiebe where Toews argues that “that kind of repression, and his own guilt and the pressure that *he* felt to play a certain role in a community, in the church, just this *very* constricted life that he had ... was all tied up with religious fundamentalism” (“It Gets Under” 107-08).

Meanwhile Katie Funk Wiebe, along with her claims quoted above about the difficulties that Mennonite Brethren members have with life writing, says to her father in her book *You Never Gave Me a Name* that “You loaded your Mennonite background on us children” (13). Funk Wiebe goes on to say that this background includes the “story of a people enduring pain and suffering for the sake of their belief” (13). Funk Wiebe’s own comments regarding life writing as well as her own struggles throughout the memoir with speaking as a Mennonite woman suggest that her own difficulties with self-confession are very much rooted in this background.

Both Di Brandt and Rudy Wiebe construct a family environment in which worldliness is regarded with a great deal of skepticism. In *So this is the world & here I am in it*, Brandt recalls how she was rebuked sharply by her mother for writing poetry and “scattering our cultural secrets to strangers, blatantly selling us out to the world” (79). Rudy Wiebe likewise, in *Of This Earth*, constructs his family as imparting a particularly Mennonite tradition onto him and his siblings. He writes, “Our families taught us we were Mennonites, and that meant we were hard-working, quiet and simple people who should do almost anything to live peacefully together” (216). These traditions also meant being mindful of the outside world. At one point in *Of This Earth*, Wiebe and his sister Liz go see a movie but notes that they “told our parents nothing about it, they might have forbidden us such worldliness” (322).

Significantly, near the end of the book, Rudy Wiebe describes how he values a kind of privacy for himself, stating that “I discovered how to disappear in a crowd” (385). All the writers that I examine, then, construct (in several different ways) an early environment for themselves in these texts in which privacy and discretion were privileged over self-confession and worldliness. This does not mean that the authors themselves are necessarily “quiet and simple people,” as Wiebe puts it. In fact, in some cases, such as with Rudy Wiebe, Di Brandt, and Miriam Toews, these authors are notorious for being outspoken and for refusing to fully capitulate to traditional and more conservative Mennonite doctrines. That being said, as I will reveal in forthcoming chapters in this dissertation, while the authors that I examine do not necessarily present themselves as quiet and private people, they nevertheless privilege the story of others over the story of the self and I suggest that this decision *does* come from a background in which the story of the self was not recognized as the ultimate priority.

In this sense I suggest that these writers negotiate a tension between tradition and the conventional demands of autobiographical writing. As Mary Cisar points out, autobiography represents precisely what many Mennonites largely dismissed – the exaltation of the individual. Not only that, though, conventional autobiography places the individual on display for public scrutiny on the basis that there is something particularly special about this person or this person’s life. My point in this dissertation is not to suggest that these texts are indicative of the way that all Mennonites or even all contemporary Canadian Mennonite authors conceive of their identity. Indeed, since there is no unified and essentializing category of Mennonite, it would be impossible for these authors to demonstrate a single Mennonite textual selfhood.

Rather, I suggest that these particular authors that I look at in these particular texts construct their own subjectivity in a way that betrays the ongoing influence of what were once



dominating Mennonite traditions and beliefs. Because they do, these authors often de-privilege themselves as the central subject while simultaneously using autobiographical discourse. They do so in ways that are not commonly accounted for in autobiography theory. These examples of contemporary Canadian Mennonite life writing then are crucial, not because they necessarily reveal a single Mennonite autobiographical subject, but because they expose a gap in autobiography theory that does not quite account for autobiographical subjects that are minimized or concealed in texts that are undeniably discursively autobiographical. In order to demonstrate how these texts reveal this gap, then, it is necessary to give a background of autobiography theory.

Despite James Olney's claim that "In the beginning ... was Georges Gusdorf" ("Cultural Moment" 8) most contemporary scholars agree that the first major and influential work on life writing was done by Georg Misch, in particular his book *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity*<sup>5</sup>. Here, Misch becomes the first of many to locate a working definition of autobiography by breaking down the word. He argues that autobiography "can be defined only by summarizing what the term 'autobiography' implies – the description (*graphia*) of an individual human life (*bios*) by the individual himself (*auto-*)" (5). Both in this definition and elsewhere in his book, Misch stresses that the very concept of autobiography privileges the individual and notes that autobiography ultimately fulfills a writer's "need for self-assertion" (4). In a longer passage, Misch reveals how his own sense of what autobiography is, and how it functions best, is ultimately caught up in Enlightenment notions of an autonomous and coherent unified self. He argues that:

We live in possession of ourselves, after the special manner of a being conscious of itself and capable of saying 'I.' To stand as an I, or, more exactly, as an 'I'-

saying person, over against other persons and living beings and the things around us implies that we are aware of our independent existence, [sic] we do not merely impart impulses and perform acts as things of elementary existence, but as living beings we have knowledge of our impulses and actions as our own. (9)

According to this early, canonical study of life writing, autobiography is largely considered to be a space for the writer to characterize his or herself as having an identity that is wholly self-formed. Life writing allows us to understand ourselves not simply as unique and independent individuals but also, Misch asserts, to understand and assert ourselves “over against other persons and living beings and the things around us.”

This is why autobiography scholars, such as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, will often credit Misch for being the earliest perpetrator of the notion that autobiography functions “as the record of a representative life of the great man” (197). While Misch does, in fact, note that “autobiographies are bound always to be representative of their period,” he nevertheless concludes that “when an autobiography is produced independently, out of [an author’s] own life and by the application of his own gifts, by a person of exceptional calibre, it provides a supreme example of representation – the contemporary intellectual outlook revealed in the style of an eminent person who has himself played a part in the forming of the spirit of the time” (13). The best autobiographies, then, reflect the narrative of the extraordinary individual who is not influenced by others but, rather, so exceptionally stands out that he plays a significant role in creating “the spirit of the time.” The best subject for an autobiography is one whose exceptionality paradoxically inspires others to follow his or her lead.

Misch’s work, first published in 1907, undoubtedly set the tone for autobiography scholarship for decades to follow. Georges Gusdorf, who follows in the tradition that Misch

establishes, likewise sees autobiography as firmly deriving from an individualist tradition. In his 1956 landmark essay in life writing scholarship, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” Gusdorf traces the emergence of autobiography back to the Copernican Revolution. It is during this time, Gusdorf claims, that “humanity, which previously aligned its development to the great cosmic cycles, finds itself engaged in an autonomous adventure” (31). It was this new awareness of identity as autonomous and unconnected to the world outside of the self that made autobiography truly possible. Because Gusdorf sees this connection between autobiography and European individualism, it is impossible for him to consider the existence of genuine autobiography beyond European influence. He notes that “autobiography is not to be found outside of our cultural area; one would say that it expresses a concern peculiar to Western man, a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe and that he has communicated to men of other cultures; but those men will thereby have been annexed by a sort of intellectual colonizing to a mentality that was not their own. When Gandhi tells his own story, he is using Western means to defend the East” (29). Gusdorf suggests that while it is possible for those outside of the West to write an autobiography, it is not possible to write a non-Western autobiography. Gandhi can only write an autobiography by sacrificing part of his lived experience since, according to Gusdorf, Gandhi is a member of one of the “more advanced civilizations that subscribe to mythic structures” and in such a world “consciousness of self does not, properly speaking, exist” (30).

The writer of autobiography, then, either has to wholly accept the Western conception of the human as a singular subject or else confront the fact that a life that is understood as being bound to others falls outside of the defined parameters required by the genre. There is no room for humility in Georges Gusdorf’s discussion of autobiography. After all, he notes, “The most

elementary rule of humility requires the faithful to discover traces of sin everywhere and to suspect beneath the more or less appealing exterior of the individual person the horrid decay of the flesh” (34). So while “autobiography is the mirror in which the individual reflects his own image” (33), the supremely modest individual “cannot look on his own image without anguish” (34). As we see, both Misch and Gusdorf established a scholarly definition of autobiography that largely excluded those who did not glorify the independent self and, as a result, largely closed off the genre to cultural groups – even European ones – that did not adhere to a tradition that understood identity as singular and unified.

Following Misch and Gusdorf, a wave of autobiography theorists attempted to define autobiography as a distinct and unique genre. Roy Pascal’s *Design and Truth in Autobiography* is one of the first major books to be published after World War II that explores this subject. In defining autobiography, Pascal anticipates contemporary studies when he observes that autobiography is “historical in its method, and at the same time the representation of the self in and through its relations with the outer world. Perhaps one might say that it involves the philosophical assumption that the self comes into being only through interplay with the outer world” (8). Pascal’s analysis, here, appears to foresee relational life writing theories, which posit an autobiographical self as being constructed in relation to a significant other or others. Yet, while in this respect Pascal distances himself somewhat from the earlier tradition of autobiography scholarship in observing that “the outside world must appear” (9), he nevertheless maintains that “its centre of interest is the self” (9). For this reason, Pascal ultimately shares Gusdorf’s view that “autobiography is a distinctive product of Western, post-Roman civilisation” (180) and is concerned not “just with the moral personality, like the Stoics, but with the self in its delicate uniqueness” (181). Ultimately, while Pascal does pose a minor challenge to earlier

theoretical work on autobiography in acknowledging the possibility that the outside world influences the individual, he nevertheless relies on a standard definition that privileges the individual self above all else and, in doing so, constructs a canon that is far more exclusionary than it is inclusive.

Philippe Lejeune's landmark essay "The Autobiographical Pact" establishes a now-famous definition of autobiography. Lejeune shows a concern with the sheer volume of autobiographical works and he constructs a definition "so as to be in a position to develop a coherent corpus of texts" (3). Crucial to Lejeune's understanding of autobiography is his notion that "autobiography (narrative recounting the life of the author) supposes that there is *identity of name* between the author (such as he figures, by his name, on the cover), the narrator of the story, and the character who is being talked about" (12). For this reason, according to Lejeune, an autobiography is always self-evident as an autobiography. There should be no question as to whether or not a text falls within the category as Lejeune describes it, since the text makes it abundantly clear that the author's name in the front matter of the book is identical with the name of the narrator and the character. Again, the very definition of autobiography, as Lejeune would have it, ultimately depends on the fact that the author constructs him or herself as the central focus of the text.

As Lejeune defines it very early on, autobiography is a "Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (4). Establishing his criteria in this way, Lejeune justifies disqualifying memoirs, biography, personal novels, autobiographical poems, journals/diaries, self-portraits or essays from his definition (4). As with both Gusdorf and Pascal, Lejeune strikes from the genre of autobiography anything that does not focus directly on the self. These

definitions from early waves of autobiography theory were indeed exclusionary but purposefully and understandably so. As Smith and Watson note in their historical analysis of the criticism, “New Critics had eschewed [autobiography] as an inferior literary mode, ... Remarkably, the highly influential 1966 study *The Nature of Narrative* by Robert Scholes and Robert Kellog also situates narrative only in the history of the novel, the epic, and the film, and nowhere alludes to life narrative” (197).

Thus, these early attempts to construct a rigid definition were borne from a desire to make autobiography a legitimate genre worthy of academic attention. And indeed, as Smith and Watson go on to say, these attempts, in fact, worked. They note how “the master narrative set in motion by Misch’s landmark study has influenced subsequent studies of the genre – with significant effects in terms of the texts discussed and critical assessments of their cultural importance” (197). Yet, as this quotation suggests, while these early attempts at defining autobiography were successful in establishing autobiography as a literary genre in the eyes of scholars, it nevertheless also focused critics on particular kinds of texts and fostered a mindset that accepted some types of life writing and rejected others. Lejeune’s exclusion of memoir (among other forms of life writing), for example, was standard procedure amongst scholars in these early attempts to establish autobiography as a genre and illustrated the prevalence of the belief that autobiography (and the only form of life writing worth serious study) was strictly a narrative of the individual.

Smith and Watson have noted that unlike autobiography “the memoir directs attention more toward the lives and actions of others than to the narrator” (198). The autobiographical-I in the memoir is constructed as more of an observer than a protagonist and the author of memoir is not concerned first and foremost with creating a coherent narrative of his or her own life. As

Misch made clear, the memoir writer writes as if he is a minor player taking part in major events. These authors will describe “how it was that they had opportunities of meeting people of eminence, watching notable persons at close quarters, and gaining confidential information” (Misch 15). The memoir, from the point of view of these critics, would be thus entirely at odds with the autobiographical project.

As Julie Rak points out, though, “the Romantic underpinnings of autobiographical criticism” (“Are Memoirs” 308) along with the “problems that a wide variety of autobiography critics have had with popular writing” (306) have led to the devaluation of memoir in relation to autobiography. She observes that memoirs “have been linked to less valued aspects of life writing in autobiography criticism. Memoirs are usually described as texts that are ‘merely’ about public personae or historic events” (308). In the last twenty years, though, Rak and a number of other critics such as Shari Benstock and Leigh Gilmore have acknowledged the significance of the memoir as a space to articulate particular kinds of identities – what Rak calls alternate “constructions of subjectivity” (*Negotiated Memory* 11). Benstock, for example, observes that life writing texts such as “diaries, journals, and letters,” which are notably excluded from conventional definitions of autobiography, frequently do not convey a singular, coherent, individualistic identity. Rather, these texts “have no investment in creating a cohesive self over time. Indeed, they seem to exploit difference and change over sameness and identity” (148).

Gilmore notes how autobiography makes demands for full disclosure and the reading public subject the authors of autobiography a “to a literal truth test” (14). Consequently, Gilmore argues, autobiography as a genre simply does not accommodate certain kinds of lived experiences and certain kinds of self-conceptions. She examines trauma narratives in which authors evade critical calls for objectivity and instead “seek grounds other than the explicitly

testimonial for self-representation. In swerving from the center of autobiography toward its outer limits, they convert constraint into opportunity” (14). I would suggest that memoir too along with the diary, the letter, and the essay illustrate what Gilmore calls the limits of autobiography.

This is significant, particularly when taking into account that Braun, Funk Wiebe, and Wiebe all have their books marketed as memoir rather than autobiography. The Di Brandt book that I examine is a collection of essays but the more overt examples of self life writing, in which Brandt evokes an autobiographical-I, resemble memoir far more than they resemble autobiography in that they focus more on others than they do on the self. Miriam Toews’s book, meanwhile, is written very much as her father’s memoir. These books, then, are either sold as memoirs or, in using what Gilmore calls “the discourses of self-representation,” (2) contain many of the same features as the memoir.

Julie Rak notes that the very act of defining memoir is a difficult one. Nevertheless, she observes that “memoirs blend private and public; they contain writing about the self and about others” (316). Furthermore, she writes, “it is about the self in relation to others, or even just about ‘others’ without being biography or history” (317). The distinction that Rak makes here between the memoir that posits a “self in relation to others” and the memoir that is “just about ‘others’” is significant and very much speaks to what I consider the texts that I look at in this dissertation to be doing quite frequently. Rak, in my view, glosses over this distinction too quickly and, in fact, eliminates the texts that are “just about ‘others’” from the equation entirely when she sums up memoirs elsewhere in the essay as books that are “intended to combine public and private discourse as the stories of the writer entwine with the stories of others” (315). As I hope to show later in this introduction and throughout this dissertation, the distinction that Rak briefly touches on in this article demands a more thorough discussion.



A key point that Rak does raise is that while one aspect of the memoir can be to focus on “the lives and actions of others,” it is not to be confused with biography. In fact, quite strikingly, the term memoir is rarely ever mentioned by prominent life writing scholars in the same realm as biography yet it is frequently discussed in relation to autobiography. Memoir, then, is typically understood as a kind of autobiographical text – indeed, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson include memoir in their list of “Sixty Genres of Life Narrative” in their book *Reading Autobiography*. In fact, as they would have it, biography is something altogether different, as they suggest that “While life writing and biography are both modes of narrating a life, they are not interchangeable” (5). Memoirs are autobiographical in that they require the author to construct an autobiographical-I subject – a demand not made of authors of biography – yet they can also be substantially about others.

Ultimately memoirs can accommodate particular life experiences and models of self-representation (and even models of non-self-representation, or what Gilmore calls “a *nonrepresentative self*” [21]) that autobiography cannot. For example, Mennonites who might have been raised in an environment that had significant doubts when it came to matters of self-confession would have an understanding of identity that would be wholly incompatible with autobiography as it was understood by the major scholars in the field. This does not necessarily mean that Mennonites are entirely opposed to writing autobiographically, but rather, it suggests that certain Mennonites would have been resistant to the form of autobiography as it was defined by the early scholars of the genre. In fact, Canadian Mennonite authors have for a long time embraced an autobiographical style of writing despite resisting, to a large degree, autobiography itself.

One only need to look at the reaction to Rudy Wiebe's first book as well as the critiques of Di Brandt following the 1987 publication of her first book of poetry, *questions i asked my mother*, which conveyed a personal struggle with the patriarchal structure of what was for Brandt a particularly conservative Mennonite family. These texts ultimately elicited negative reactions because they fictionalized or poeticized real life experiences. Other examples see Canadian Mennonite authors writing novels in the style of life writing. *A Complicated Kindness*, for example, which brought its author Miriam Toews significant national attention, is a fictional narrative told as a memoir. Canadian Mennonite authors, then, have never quite shied away from the autobiographical but they do often come to it in particularly guarded ways, and it is telling that for many years the personal stories about the self and the community were somewhat concealed by the form of fictional narrative or poetic writing.

At the most recent conference for the International Association for Autobiography, Rocio Davis called attention to this particular style of writing. She observed that,

The blending of fiction and autobiography is, of course, not a new phenomenon and substantial twentieth-century criticism on the fictionalization of memory and related issues exists. However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have been encountering texts that privilege the word "fiction," are marketed as novels, but make definite autobiographical gestures, on the level of plot or in thought. (1)

Davis goes on to suggest that one possible reason why authors write autobiographically in a genre that could still be labelled as fiction is that it allows "them to negotiate ideas and positions without actually claiming authority over them. This liminality grants them a kind of freedom to propose theories without having to admit responsibility" (2). This notion of freedom without

responsibility is, I think, crucial, when considering both Canadian Mennonite fiction and Canadian Mennonite life writing.

Despite the fact that texts like *Peace Shall Destroy Many* and *questions i asked my mother* caused an internal furore, they were nevertheless, respectively, fiction and poetry rather than life writing. While these texts did open up a private world to public attention, the private world was never marketed as an entirely real world. What Davis does not point out as a possibility, and what both of these books illustrate, is that while there may be a freedom in writing novels that “make definite autobiographical gestures,” this does not necessarily prevent the authors who write them from being rebuked by those for whom the texts are all too real. Nevertheless, Davis’s point remains an intriguing one and relevant when considering how often Canadian Mennonite authors have written about personal subjects without committing to life writing.

Just as Davis suggests there is a freedom in approaching fiction in this way, I suggest that there is also a kind of freedom at work in the way that the authors that I look at in this dissertation make use of the booming trend of memoir writing. I am not making the case that Mennonite authors are cashing in on a current booming trend, just as I do not believe that one could simply say that Mennonite authors were cashing in on the “Mennonite thing” during the era of identity politics. While, of course, that can occur, I also want to suggest that literary booms and trends can also inspire creativity – they can make authors aware of avenues that they previously had not considered. In that sense, it is no surprise that some of the best-known Canadian Mennonite authors (Wiebe, Brandt, Toews) have more directly used the discourse of self-representation in their works in the last fifteen years.

Yet at the same time I am ultimately suggesting that these writers take a guarded approach to life writing and largely refrain from establishing themselves as being the central figure in a narrative in which others are only important insofar as they contribute to the development of the author's life story and the development of his or her identity. As Georg Misch puts it,

Finally, the man who sets out to write the story of his own life has it in view as a whole, with unity and direction and a significance of its own. In this single whole the facts and feelings, actions and reactions, recalled by the author, the incidents that excited him, the persons he met, and the transactions or movements in which he was concerned, all have their definite place, thanks to their significance in relation to the whole. (7)

While it is the case that the authors that I look at in this dissertation do indeed frequently discuss the people they met as well as the significant moments in their lives, it is done in a much more interpersonal way than the method that Misch describes. Rather than describe people and events as peripheral figures and moments in the creation of the individual and the whole of his or her narrated life, these writers will frequently shift attention away from the individual self. Not only do they represent their identity in relation to family, community, or socio-historical events, they frequently privilege these other people and events. It is in this act of privileging where these texts challenge conventional scholarly analyses of relational identities in life writing.

As early as 1980, critics began to consider models of self-representation that had been long ignored. Significantly, the first major contributions came from feminist life writing scholars. Mary G. Mason, in her 1980 article "The Other Voice: Autobiography of Women Writers," was one of the first scholars to interrogate the conventional understanding of

autobiography, suggesting that the traditional definition was ultimately exclusionary. Mason argues that the Rousseauian model of “an unfolding self-discovery where characters and events are little more than aspects of the author’s evolving consciousness, finds no echo in women’s writing about their lives” (210). She suggests, then, that the conventional singular autonomous identity is a specifically male-friendly model of self-representation that fails to properly express female lived experience. In her article, Mason looks at four texts by women writers in order to examine how they created “a set of paradigms for life-writing by women right down to our time” (210). In some respects, Mason is problematically guilty of a reductive approach, suggesting that a good deal of what counts as women’s life writing are texts that specifically recycle the models established in the autobiographical texts written by Margaret Cavendish, Margery Kempe, Anne Bradstreet, and Dame Julian of Norwich.

Yet while Mason’s discussion was somewhat restrictive in this respect, she nevertheless broadened the field in considering alternate modes of self-construction in life writing. In examining these four paradigmatic texts, Mason argues that they are uniquely different from male autobiography because these women authors understand identity “through relation to the chosen other” (210). In other words, their understanding of themselves and the attainment of their selfhood is a consequence of, and dependent on, their relationship with another. In the case of these older texts, as Mason notes, women achieve a kind of self-realization through a relation to their husbands, or to Christ, or to a spiritual community (231). Ultimately, though, she asserts that “The pattern most frequently adopted (and adapted) by later women has unquestionably been the solution recorded in the life and writing of Margaret Cavendish – the pairing of one’s own image with another, equal image” (231). Mason sees the identities developed in women’s life writing as relational and typically in relation to one specific other, though not necessarily

limited to that. In these texts, it is through the “recognition of another” (235) that one comes to have a sense of self.

Following Mason, Susan Stanford Friedman further explored how relational life writing interrogates Western male conceptions of authentic identity. In her analysis, Stanford Friedman mostly critiques the Gusdorf model and states that “The emphasis on individualism as the necessary precondition for autobiography is thus a reflection of privilege, one that excludes from the canons of autobiography those writers who have been denied by history the illusion of individualism” (75). Stanford Friedman’s article reveals that the act of defining autobiography and giving it a narrow-range of characteristics has established artificial and arbitrary boundaries for what counts as an authentic life. With a somewhat broader scope than Mason, Stanford Friedman notes that these “individualistic paradigms of the self ignore the role of collective and relational identities in the individuation process of women and minorities” (72). Not only do these established conventions exclude women, she argues, but also cultural groups who have remained uninfluenced by European conceptions of individualistic identity. Despite this acknowledgement, Stanford Friedman concentrates specifically on the relational aspect of women’s autobiographical texts. Using the feminist psychoanalytical theoretical work of Sheila Rowbotham and Nancy Chodorow, Stanford Friedman re-evaluates women’s life writing in order to consider a particular form of relational identity. She argues that “Instead of seeing themselves as solely unique, women often explore their sense of shared identity with other women, an aspect of identity that exists in tension with a sense of their own uniqueness” (79). Stanford Friedman, then, offers a model that Mason does not entirely account for.

Because Mason sees her four early texts as such influential models and because those texts are rooted in a rigidly patriarchal culture, she mostly considers texts that establish an

identity in relation to “projected male images (father, brothers, lovers, husbands, clergymen)” (232). However, Mason *does* allow that “For some women writers, it is not a man, or men, or a community but a woman, or women, who provide the other of identity” (234). Stanford Friedman, though, considers identity in relation to other women specifically to be a primary concern of female-authored autobiography. Inspired by Rowbotham and Chodorow, Stanford Friedman notes that a woman cannot “experience herself as an entirely unique entity because she is always aware of how she is being defined as *woman*, that is, as a member of a group whose identity has been defined by the dominant male culture” (75). As a result, because “woman” is essentially a category created by a patriarchal culture, women experience a kind of collective alienation. For Stanford Friedman, this particular experience, despite seeming negative, ultimately has transformative potential since it can lead to a kind of collective female consciousness and, consequently, to a “reclamation of identity” (78). Because she is concerned with how women’s autobiographical texts challenge masculinist cultural representations of gender through the exhibition of shared female experiences, Stanford Friedman sees relational identity in women’s life writing in terms of a woman’s relationship with another woman or a group of women.

These early discussions on relational life writing, then, were part of an effort to redirect the study of autobiography – in some cases reinforcing what Rak sees as the devaluation of memoir by calling for an expanded definition of autobiography rather than reading these texts as something altogether different. Because of the very nature of the discussion, in which the singular cohesive independent self was largely understood to be masculinist in nature, the vast majority of work on relational life writing tended to focus on women’s texts. As quoted above, Stanford Friedman *does* spend some time suggesting that the conventional conception of

autobiography works to exclude minority groups (presumably writers with non-Western backgrounds) as well as women. However, the overwhelming focus of her study along with other works on relational identity typically reinforced the notion that relational identities in texts were female identities or the way in which women, specifically, could articulate a distinct selfhood. These studies not only opened up a space for feminist approaches to life writing but also in pushing the discussion of the field forward in general. By the mid-90s though, critics began commenting on the essentializing nature of thinking about relational life writing.

Nancy K. Miller, in her 1994 article “Representing Others: Gender and the Subjects of Autobiography,” was one of the first to point out that while the “massive challenge to the regime of the universal subject” was necessary, the project concluded with the less than satisfying conclusion that “The universal subject, ... was merely a man” (28). Beginning with this premise, Miller said, resulted in “the paradigms of gender polarities that oppose relatedness to separateness” (28). In other words, these studies seemed to rather problematically suggest that identity models that privileged individualism, singularity and wholeness were inherently masculine and identities that were relational and fluid were inherently feminine. Such essentializing only works to enforce along gender lines a similar principle uttered by Gusdorf when he noted that Gandhi would have to construct himself as a Western man in order to write an autobiography. In that vein, one might be curious to ask these early critics of relational identity whether or not a female author might be sacrificing her femininity by constructing her identity as independent and self-reliant. Miller concludes by noting that “We need a way of thinking flexible enough to accommodate styles of self-production that cross the lines of the models we have established. This would have to include a rethinking of gender like identity as an intrinsically relational process” (28). Miller’s call to rethink the way we read identity formation



in autobiographical texts by men and women was taken up, perhaps most stridently, by Paul John Eakin in his book *How Our Lives Become Stories*.

Eakin, like Miller, understands that cultural constructions of gender do indeed account for differences in life writing along gender lines. With that in mind, though, Eakin likewise finds troubling the “unfortunate polarization by gender of the categories we use to define self and self-experience” (48). Interrogating the male-female binary opposition of typical relational life writing scholarship, Eakin boldly asserts that “*all* identity is relational” (43). He suggests that our sense of self is always dependent on the culture in which we live, since the culture provides the “models of identity” (46) upon which we draw in order to position ourselves within the social world. In that respect, Eakin sees the relationship between the individual self and the relational self to be an interpenetrating one.

Eakin borrows from Jessica Benjamin in order to articulate this relationship. He agrees with Benjamin who says that “at the moment of realizing our own independence, we are dependent upon another to recognize it” (52). For that reason, Eakin suggests that “because the assertion of autonomy is dependent on this dynamic of recognition, identity is *necessarily* relational” (52). In other words, our conception of ourselves as independent individuals is wholly dependent on our relationship with an other. For Eakin, self life writing reveals the traces that one’s conception of oneself is always “necessarily relational,” even in texts where the author does not stridently construct him or herself or think of him or herself in this manner. Given that this is the case, Eakin imposes a crucial boundary in order “to preserve the usefulness of the label” (69). In doing so, Eakin proposes a definition of relational autobiography that is useful to my own discussion of contemporary Canadian Mennonite life writing. He characterizes relational life writing as “autobiographies that feature the decisive impact on the autobiographer

of either (1) an entire social environment (a particular kind of family, or a community and its social institutions – schools, churches, and so forth) or (2) key other individuals, usually family members, especially parents” (69). Eakin provides criteria that would allow scholars not only to read contemporary texts that challenge the previous models of identity but also to re-evaluate and re-read older texts in order to show how they portray a relational self that had been overlooked by critics who only understood autobiographical identity (or the autobiographical male identity) to be inherently individualistic.

Yet while Eakin offers this concrete definition “to preserve the usefulness of the label,” his later analyses suggest to me that relational life writing, as Eakin sees it, still far too broadly encompasses a variety of extraordinarily different sorts of textual lives. One of his examples is Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Storyteller* and he asks this crucial question: “what justification is there for understanding *Storyteller* as an autobiography? Certainly ‘I’-narrative is at a minimum in these pages and the portion of it that is directly identified with Silko herself is even smaller” (72). Silko’s book *does* make use of the discourse of self-representation and for Eakin, it articulates a relational identity. The problem for Eakin, though, is that Silko’s own identity is rarely apparent in the book. Instead, Silko relays stories about family members in Laguna Pueblo. Ultimately, though, Eakin argues that “Silko’s transmission of other people’s stories, stories that are in turn versions of a shared body of myths and legends, is properly understood as an act of self-definition” (73). Despite the fact that Silko rarely appears in her own text, Eakin still reads the book primarily in terms of the way that Silko constructs herself.

This is, of course, a valid reading but what is curious to me is this precise act of turning away from the self towards the other while using a discourse of self-representation. Certainly, focusing on the stories of others can still very much be an act of self-definition but it is also, at

the same time, focusing on others. Eakin does acknowledge the phenomenon of the family memoir in which “the lives of other family members” can be rendered “more important than the life of the reporting self” (85). Yet Eakin’s own understanding of relational identity, as influenced by the theories of Jessica Benjamin, seems to be based on the understanding of a mutual dynamic between self and other and the interpenetrating relationship between self-determination and relationality.

In fact, despite Amy Culley and Rebecca Styler’s assertion that relational identities can convey “the relationships between the subject and his/her family, peers, religious and political movements, or intellectual discourses,” (237) critics have tended to examine relationality in terms of a fluid and mutual dynamic between the self and one particular other. A dominant sub-genre of critical inquiry has been what G. Thomas Couser terms “narratives of filiation” (“Genre Matters” 151) or, as he suggests elsewhere, “memoirs of mothers” and “memoirs of fathers” which he respectively terms “*matriography*” and “*patriography*” (“In My Father’s Closet” 891)<sup>6</sup>. David Parker, likewise, focuses on the kind of relationality in life writing “in which the writer and some other, usually a parent, are more or less co-subjects” (140). In a similar vein, Susanna Egan builds on Eakin and Nancy Miller in order to develop the concept of “mirror talk.” Egan argues that “Mirror talk begins as the encounter of two lives in which the biographer is also an autobiographer. Very commonly, the (auto)biographer is the child or the partner of the biographer subject, a relationship in which (auto)biographical identity is significantly shaped by the processes of exploratory mirroring” (*Mirror Talk* 7). As Egan suggests, though, the particular other with whom the author shares his or her story is not always necessarily a parent. Holly Furneaux, for example, has examined how biographical works can reveal “the relationship between biographer and biographee” (244).

Eakin, in *How Our Lives Become Stories*, confirms the notion that relationality is typically understood to be a dynamic between self and *one* other. He observes there that “the most common form of the relational life” is “the self’s story viewed through the lens of its relation with some other key person, sometimes a sibling, friend, or lover, but most often a parent – we might call such an individual the *proximate other* to signify the intimate tie to the relational autobiographer” (86). I would suggest that because Eakin is very much indebted to Jessica Benjamin’s theories which assert the significance of “mutual recognition” (Benjamin 53), his notion of relationality ultimately best accommodates both texts and critical analyses of texts that tend to foreground an identity in relation to one other person. In this sense, the books that I look at, in which the authors often forge relations with numerous others, some wide-ranging in their scope, potentially fall outside the parameters conventionally established by theorists of relational identities.

This is not to say that such theories do not allow for critical analyses of texts that construct selves in relation to larger groups. Arlene Leis, for example, has examined artist Jean-François Rigaud and his “participation in, and membership of, an intimate community of painters, sculptors, and architects” (258). Ultimately, though, Leis characterizes Rigaud’s relational dynamic between self and others as one of “interdependency and affiliation” (259). This notion of relational identities as being a fluid dynamic between self and other(s) is very much rooted in earlier conceptions of relational identities. In writing on women’s autobiographical selves, for example, Susan Stanford Friedman saw female identity as that which “does not oppose herself to all others, does not feel herself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community” (79). I do think, then, that it is crucial to account for distinctions

between acts of self-construction in which the self is rooted in an interdependent relationship with others (as both Stanford Friedman and Leis suggest) and texts which privilege the story of others over the story of the self. In other words, there is a qualitative difference in strategies of self-representation between the authors who write about themselves as being part of a mutual dynamic with others and authors who, in many ways, conceal themselves in the name of focusing on others. And, it seems to me, that these differences are important and go somewhat ignored.

It is in this sense that I think it is crucial to consider relationality as an interpretive lens for critics that can provoke certain questions while foreclosing others. This observation is one that is often overlooked. For example, in his article on relational lives, Eakin notes that “A book such as Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family* (1982), which I used to think of as somehow peripheral, as ‘memoir’ rather than autobiography proper, now seems to me central, and I see relational paradigms prominently displayed in texts that I read otherwise in other days – I am thinking of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) and Alfred Kazin’s *A Walker in the City* (1951)” (75).

This quotation conveys two things. First, Eakin, like many critics before him, is again privileging autobiography over memoir. *Running in the Family* moves from the periphery, where he sees memoir residing, to the centre where “autobiography proper” resides and can now become a subject for autobiographical study. I hope to avoid such value judgements and I again use Rak here who states that “it may make more sense to see these books as their authors described them: memoirs that are intended to combine public and private discourse” (315). Throughout this dissertation, I will consider the books that I am studying not as “autobiography proper” but instead as autobiographical and examples of life writing that make use of the

discourses of self-representation. These texts are often marketed and should be treated as memoir. Indeed the strategies of self-representation at work in these texts position them at the margin or perhaps beyond the margin of autobiography.

The other significant aspect of the quotation is Eakin's contention that by reading texts through the lens of the "relational paradigm" he can find relational identities in autobiographies where previously critics saw only individuals. Yet just as the individualistic paradigm foreclosed examinations of identity in terms of the individual's relation to others (indeed, as Eakin describes it, this paradigm was so pervasive and convincing that it was impossible to see these kinds of identities at work in the text), the relational paradigm likewise prevents crucial questions from being asked, such as why in a memoir do particular narratives of other people tend to dominate over narratives of the self. In that case, while I do think that scholars can look at texts like Silko's for what they reveal about the self, I also think that in restricting ourselves to that sort of interpretation we run the risk of neglecting to explore the strategy of non-self-representation within what could still be called an autobiographical text, which is a unique phenomenon.

This becomes crucial for me when looking at contemporary Canadian Mennonite life writing, for several reasons. One reason is that these authors position themselves in relation not just to an other but several others. And also, frequently, these authors are less co-subjects than background figures, despite their use of autobiographical discourse. In all of these books, in one way or another, these authors privilege the story of something or someone other than their own selves. In that sense, while one could very well adopt a critical frame that would read these authors' identities strictly in relational terms, I suggest that definitions of relational life writing as I have mapped them out above are not entirely compatible with the texts that I examine in this dissertation.

I consider, then, what to make of the authors' disappearances in the text or (if they appear frequently, as is the case with Katie Funk Wiebe and Rudy Wiebe) why they nevertheless still favour the stories of others. Frequently, these writers discuss Mennonite historical others (such as the experiences of Mennonites in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Soviet Russia or even earlier historical moments), family members, communities and they do so in a way that specifically privileges the story of the others. This is not to say that the authors that I look at do not necessarily see themselves in relation to the other. In fact, in many ways, it is their status in relation to others that allows these authors to focus so much attention on them. As I will show, the chosen other that the authors focus on in these texts reveals a great deal about the very central role that history, family, and community play within their lives.

I want to suggest the possibility that it is because of the historical and culturally entrenched discomfort over both worldliness, self-confession, and pride that we see so many Mennonite authors who write autobiographically yet largely about other people. Rather than considering these texts for what they tell us about the individual or even the individual in an interdependent existence with another or others, I think it is useful to explore these texts for what they can tell us about the overwhelming and dominating role that traditions, community, family, and history play within certain cultural groups and among particular writers. Recently, in her discussion on the newly published American Mennonite memoir *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress* by Rhoda Janzen, Ann Hostetler made claims that might appear to be something of the opposite of what I am arguing. Hostetler observes how texts like Janzen's illustrate a "change" that "involves the creation of the self as a literary subject in writing from a Mennonite experience rather than using a voice that represents Mennonites as a group" ("The Self" 24).

On the face of it, Hostetler's arguments might appear to contradict my own. However, Hostetler mostly suggests that Mennonite life writing should not have to include stereotypical representations of community. She writes,

what if the 'self' doesn't particularly care about the project of preserving and protecting Mennonite identity? What if the self treats the community like a backdrop, a backboard, a sounding board, her own particular version of the authoritarian straw man? What if the stories she has to tell compromise a coherent narrative of the community and open it up to critique? For women and outsider narrators, this kind of critique is almost imperative because they run counter to the master narratives of the group. (32)

I do not disagree with Hostetler here and, in fact, do not see her observations about Mennonite literature to be in opposition to my own. Hostetler does not believe that Mennonite life writing should necessarily shy away from representing community (or, assumedly, family and history). Rather, Hostetler suggests that the autobiographical form can allow for a more personal representation of Mennonite life.

For Hostetler, the personal narrative can "run counter to the master narratives." She reaffirms this point later when she writes that "we also need the stories written by those who dare to examine the selves outside of the communal narratives, of reflecting back to the community its own shadow side, the sometimes-unintended consequences of its practices, the ways in which it can be a stranger to itself" (38). Here Hostetler calls, not for Mennonite life writing that merely privileges the self over community but, rather, presents a more personal view of community that might undermine the conventional communal story. Hostetler's point reflects the state of Mennonite literary scholarship as discussed above that sees more and more authors refusing to



fall into the trap of representing the fashionable Mennonite exotic, and instead writing from their own personal milieus.

What Hostetler appears to mean is that Mennonite life writing does not necessarily reflect the master narrative of Mennonite identity nor should it. And, indeed, my argument is patently not that these examples of Canadian Mennonite life writing do that. Each author that I examine brings his or her own particular perspective of Mennonite history, family, and community and I would not suggest that any of them re-present master narratives nor do they attempt to position their takes on history, family, and community as universal or all-encompassing. I suggest that while these texts are a consequence of certain traditions and entrenched beliefs, they nevertheless also reveal the individual filtration of those traditions and beliefs. In other words, Di Brandt in her book *So this is the world* may privilege historical others over the self, but the others that she chooses reflect her own way of thinking about history and community.

Ultimately, though, I do not see this kind of individual filtration as being that which distinguishes life writing from other kinds of texts. Hostetler does not outright suggest that life writing is the singular form that reflects personal, individual views but she leans towards such an argument. She notes that “The memoir privileges personal experience over community in its narrative, which is why it can be a subversive genre indeed” (31). Elsewhere, Hostetler writes that “The old metanarratives no longer suffice. I must write myself, or find companionship with other selves that can braid together the complex strands of multiple selves created in the contemporary world” (38). Hostetler’s point here *does* take into account more recent developments in autobiographical theory in that she acknowledges the possibility of relational identities or, if not that, then non-unified individuals. However, she also appears to suggest a dichotomy here: either one writes autobiographically or one re-presents “The old

metanarratives”); given other statements, one might also assume she is suggesting that one can write autobiographically or one can privilege community over personal experience. But, of course, memoir can very well privilege community over personal experience. And, similarly, fiction can easily privilege the personal over the communal and can certainly reveal the personal way that an author thinks about his or her own community. Hostetler does not quite argue otherwise, but in insinuating this dichotomy, she neglects to fully appreciate the value of writing about others in autobiographical discourse.

What ultimately intrigues me about all of the texts that I examine, then, is that they are autobiographical whilst simultaneously privileging others. In doing so, these texts, especially when brought together, represent a type of autobiographical writing that has been largely unaccounted for. Even as critics have engaged more with memoir, they have been more attuned to the notion of a relational self than a self that is de-privileged in favour of other narratives. I argue that these authors challenge the limitations or boundaries of relational approaches to life writing by pushing themselves into the background of their books rather than emphasizing a self that is in a fluid relationship with another or others. Thus, examples of contemporary Canadian Mennonite life writing such as those addressed in this study demonstrate the inadequacies or limits of the relational paradigm as a way to understand these particular lives and illustrate the necessity of thinking beyond the dichotomy of individualism and relationality.

As previously discussed, the term Mennonite denotes a people that has within it social groups with variously different historical backgrounds, traditions, and beliefs. Consequently, in order to give my study some kind of coherence, I have limited myself to Canadian Mennonite authors coming out of the Russian tradition. There are, of course, ties between the cultural group of Canadian Mennonites from the Russian tradition and Canadian Mennonites from the Swiss

tradition, and U.S. Mennonites from both traditions. Indeed, American, Russian Mennonite writer Rhoda Janzen's memoir might fit nicely in this collection (and it should be noted that Janzen's familial heritage is Canadian) in that she frequently focuses on family, history and community, to the extent that she ultimately ends the book with an appendix titled "A Mennonite History Primer." That said, the identity that Janzen constructs for herself in the book is more conventionally relational and one could conceivably argue that the book is more about Janzen's own struggle to overcome the traumatic experiences of being in an abusive marriage than it is about privileging the narrative of others or establishing a self in relation to a wide array of other people. By the end of the book, Janzen notes about herself, "you made it, land ho, sharks from this point on extremely unlikely" (224). Overall, the book is more about personal triumph over adversity than history, family, or community despite the fact that all play a crucial role in the book.

Nevertheless, the book does have much in common with the five that I examine here as do, surely, many autobiographies or memoirs written by non-Mennonite authors which could probably be read in much the same way I read these texts<sup>7</sup>. Nevertheless, in the interest of coherency, I have drawn a line, which I acknowledge is one that could very well be interrogated, blurred, and deconstructed. The geographical limits within which these authors were born are in fact quite narrow: Di Brandt and Miriam Toews from Manitoba; Katie Funk Wiebe and Rudy Wiebe from Saskatchewan; and Connie Braun from British Columbia. I think that ultimately there is something to be said about the fact that these five texts by authors from the mid-West to Western Canada work well together to dramatically illustrate the limitations of the paradigm of relationality in the similar ways that they construct history, family, and community. Ultimately I have made the decision here that despite similarities, the vast historical differences that have

impacted cultural, national, and religious relationships outside of the Canadian Russian Mennonite tradition would make my inclusion of literature outside this tradition too sweeping in its approach.

Also, because I want to fully explore how these authors negotiate the tension between the private and public, it is necessary to choose life writing texts that are conventional enough and published widely enough so that this negotiation would have to occur. The tension between the public and the private would not necessarily be a central concern in, say, self-published texts, private diaries, letters, or in much older texts written in German or Low German. I will also not examine texts that might be more properly labelled as autobiographical fiction or poetry. Despite the personal nature of Brandt's poetry and Rudy Wiebe and Miriam Toews's fiction, I have looked to works by these authors where the discourse that is used is more transparently autobiographical. Ultimately I am interested in engaging with the way these authors approach a discourse that traditionally demands both openness as well as a focus and foregrounding of the individual self writing, which autobiographical fiction and poetry do not necessarily demand in quite the same way.

Di Brandt's *So this is the world & here I am in it* is a collection of essays, some of which contain critical work and others discuss her relationship to Mennonite tradition and history. Connie Braun's *The Steppes Are the Colour of Sepia: A Mennonite Memoir*, details Braun's own attempt to piece together a family history that mostly focuses on the persecution of the Mennonites in Germany, Russia, Ukraine, and Yugoslavia from the late nineteenth century up to WWII. *Swing Low: A Life* by Miriam Toews is a book written in the autobiographical style but from the perspective not of Toews herself but of her father, Melvyn. The book is partly made up of Toews's own notes that she took from her father's oral recounting of his own past, but much

of the narrative has been creatively constructed by Toews herself who imagines what Mel “might have talked about if he’d ever allowed himself to” (4). Katie Funk Wiebe’s *You Never Gave Me a Name: One Mennonite Woman’s Story* is the chronicle of Funk Wiebe’s search for an identity outside of the patriarchal set-up of her marriage and of her religion. The book details her role as an English professor at a Mennonite college in Kansas where she gradually attempts to make the school more open to women and tries to do the same within the Mennonite church. Finally, Rudy Wiebe’s book *Of This Earth: A Mennonite Boyhood in the Boreal Forest*, recounts how the Wiebe family and their neighbours settled the land when Wiebe was a young boy growing up in Saskatchewan. The book focuses significantly on Wiebe’s family and community, as well as the Canadian Mennonite reaction to WWII.

The structure of my dissertation is somewhat unusual. Whereas conventions dictate that I spend a chapter focusing on one or several primary texts before moving onto different texts in a subsequent chapter, I return to my texts throughout the dissertation. I discuss elements of Katie Funk Wiebe’s memoir in three chapters, for example. The reason why I made this decision is to show how in most of these books, the authors work to privilege the narrative of several others. Again, in opposition to typical examples of relational identities in life writing, the tendency of these authors is not merely to construct a self in relation to an other. Rather, in the case of *You Never Gave Me a Name*, Funk Wiebe tells the story of the self along with the story of her ancestors, her family, her colleagues, and a more general community of women. With the appearance of several of these books over multiple chapters, I hope to demonstrate not only the extent to which these authors focus on others but also how they demand a distinctly different kind of analysis than what is typically given in studies on relational identities in autobiographical texts<sup>8</sup>.

In my first chapter, I consider Mennonite life writing through the lens of Alison Landsberg's work and her notion of "prosthetic memory" wherein a person "takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live" (2). The chapter will focus on the Mennonite self as bound to collective histories, using Connie Braun, Di Brandt, Rudy Wiebe, and Katie Funk Wiebe as examples. Braun's book largely focuses on the experiences of her father in his youth and ultimately works to construct what she calls a "history of a people" (*Steppes* 2) Brandt constructs an identity that is entangled with a historical community that exists farther back in history than the chronological landscape of any of the other authors I look at. She sees herself as belonging to a group of women ancestors and, in focusing on intergenerational trauma, reveals how the self is intimately connected to historical groups that can be centuries old. This allows her to focus significantly on these historical others. Rudy Wiebe's book like Braun's touches on Mennonites who suffered as a result of Soviet repression. Finally, I examine Katie Funk Wiebe's book which conveys the Mennonite historical legacy of rebelliousness, particularly amongst Mennonite women.

Chapter Two looks at the role of family in these texts. Here, I consider Paul John Eakin's observation that relational identity in life writing frequently "takes the form of the family memoir" (*How Our Lives* 85). The texts that I examine challenge conventional ways of thinking about family. Furthermore, the texts allow for a critique of some of Alison Landsberg's points raised in Chapter One. Rudy Wiebe's book highlights how he was simply one amongst a larger family collective unit. Katie Funk Wiebe, meanwhile, addresses how her identity was very much shaped both by her parents and then, later, by her husband and her children, and also co-workers whom she sees as family. Miriam Toews, meanwhile, demonstrates the significance of family by writing entirely from the perspective of her father. Pushing Eakin's premise in a somewhat

different direction, I will look at all these texts to show how the individual self is often abandoned entirely for narratives of others within the writers' families.

My third chapter will focus on Lauren Berlant's concept of "intimate publics" in order to examine the self as bound to place and community. Again, these texts challenge the traditional link between Mennonites and community as both authors that I examine markedly expand on conventional definitions of community. Katie Funk Wiebe establishes herself in relationship with a community of Mennonite females who have either attempted to gain an identity outside of the patriarchal structures of marriage and religion or who have seen those attempts repressed. In addressing a particular community, Funk Wiebe creates an intimate public based on shared experiences. And while Brandt constructs herself as part of the "defecting generation" (*So this is* 125), she nevertheless contributes to an intimate public by revering the tradition of anti-industrialists who have an "intimate relationship to land" (126).

Finally, in Chapter Four, I will look at the current scholarly discussion of relational selves by more contemporary writers on relational life writing such as Amber K. Regis. I consider the significance of Regis's term "intertextual relationality" which she notes is "the construction of narratives and subjects in response to existing, alternative versions of a life" (289). I explore Regis's point in relation to Mennonite autobiography by examining the fact that Rudy Wiebe and Miriam Toews's texts incorporate the work of others. Rudy Wiebe uses journal entries of his sisters in order to construct the story of his family during his youth. Toews's book, meanwhile, relies heavily on the notes that her father took (very much on her advice) before his death. I will suggest that the use of other autobiographical texts within these narratives works to reinforce the notion of a self that is very much reliant on and bound to others and also allows for opportunity to focus and privilege the stories of others.

## Chapter One

### Trauma, Affiliation, and Historical Others

In my introduction, I discussed how my dissertation argues that the texts I engage with reveal a gap in autobiographical theory regarding relational lives. These texts demonstrate less that they are involved in an interpenetrating relationship with an other than they do *privilege* the narrative of others. In this chapter, I look at Connie Braun's *The Steppes are the Colour of Sepia*, Di Brandt's *So this is the world & here I am in it*, Rudy Wiebe's *Of This Earth*, and Katie Funk Wiebe's *You Never Gave Me a Name* in order to examine how these authors privilege the narrative of historical others. Certainly, these authors do see themselves in relation to these particular others. In many instances, they see themselves connected to a historical past that they did not directly experience. As I will demonstrate, these authors frequently are attached to the past via the inter- or transgenerational transmission of trauma. That being said, these authors often focus less on their own relation to these others than on the importance of giving a narrative voice to these people. In an autobiographical context, this works to demonstrate the overwhelming role that history plays in these authors' lives. By examining these texts in terms of how they work to focus on historical others over the self, I hope to speak to an aspect of life writing that has gone under-theorized.

Connie Braun's 2008 memoir *The Steppes Are the Colour of Sepia* deals explicitly with the horrors her father experienced, along with his parents and their family, in Ukraine, particularly during the period between the beginning of Soviet rule in 1917 and the end of World War II in 1945. Early in the book, Braun explains the central motivation behind writing the text. She writes that,



there is a time to forget, a time for the silencing of traumatic and painful memories. But there also comes a time to remember, and a time to speak, a time to tell the stories of loss, catastrophe, persistence and resilience – the stories of our past and of our heritage. Our stories are the evidence of our lives. They are also a passport to where we have come from, and stories permit even those of us who have never been there to return to this “elsewhere.” (18)

Braun’s discussion conveys two facts. The first is that in noting that these “traumatic and painful memories” are “*Our* stories” that are “the evidence of *our* lives,” she is drawing a connection between herself and those who suffered firsthand from the trauma of Soviet totalitarianism. Braun also reveals, though, that she resides amongst those “who have never been” to this place of direct trauma, referring to such a geographical and temporal location as an “elsewhere.” For Braun, the trauma that is such an intrinsic part of her story is a trauma that she did not directly experience.

Braun spends the overwhelming majority of her book dealing with the horrors of this historical time as it is understood and remembered by those who *did* experience the horror firsthand. As she notes in her Preface, “The family story I tell is crafted mostly from remembered history” (xii). While Braun does construct her own identity in this text and writes autobiographically, the central focus of the book is nevertheless on others, namely the direct victims of Leninism and Stalinism, as well as Hitler’s fascism. Constructing a self in relation to historical others allows Braun to focus her attention on *their* narrative. Importantly, as the book’s subtitle suggests, this is not simply a memoir but a Mennonite memoir. Memoirs like Braun’s, I argue, call for a more nuanced discussion of relational lives, since here Braun’s life may be

constructed in relation to others but it is also largely eliminated from the text as a whole apart from a few moments throughout.

While Braun's book is perhaps the most glaringly obvious example in my analysis of a self in relation to historical others, Di Brandt, Rudy Wiebe, and Katie Funk Wiebe all construct themselves as belonging to particular social or cultural groups rooted in a historical moment<sup>9</sup>. This allows each author to discuss events (frequently traumatic ones) that they themselves did not directly experience. These authors discuss not only the historical Mennonite groups that had once lived in Eastern Europe but they also address the broader and even more diverse historical groups of Mennonites and Anabaptists who date back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In this chapter, I wish to examine how these writers work to construct themselves as being one amongst a larger, historical group. Importantly, these authors in many ways emphasize the story of these others to the extent that the story of the other (rather than simply the story of the self in relation to these others) is the one that is privileged.

Recent interest and updated theories on generational cultural memories by scholars such as Alison Landsberg and Marianne Hirsch have resulted in a new discourse being made available for life writing scholars, allowing them to consider Hirsch's "postmemory" and Landsberg's "prosthetic memory" in analyzing the strategies of self-construction used by authors who write autobiographical narratives. I would like to briefly address the theories on trans- and intergenerational memory formulated by Hirsch and Landsberg and consider their significance for life writing scholarship. Ultimately, I believe Hirsch and Landsberg's conception of how memories are transmitted from generation to generation is useful in considering how the authors I look at think of themselves in connection with people and events from the past.

Hirsch's conception of trans-generational memory is particularly concerned with the passing down of traumatic memory. Her focus is specifically on how the Holocaust is transmitted to the subsequent generation. As Hirsch explains it in her book, *Family Frames*,

Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated. I have developed this notion in relation to children of Holocaust survivors, but I believe it may usefully describe other second-generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences. (*Family* 22)

Postmemory, then, involves the taking on of traumatic memories from "the previous generation." Because postmemory is so tightly woven with trauma, the Holocaust figures most prominently in Hirsch's analysis. Yet as she says here, children of other "traumatic events and experiences" can likewise be "dominated by narratives that preceded their birth."

Hirsch's assertion is that those who experienced a traumatic event first hand do not necessarily have ownership over the event. Rather, she suggests in a more recent article, "The Generation of Postmemory," there are those who have a "living connection" to the past who can claim some kind of ownership over these particular memories (104). It is, perhaps, then, no surprise that several of the authors that I examine in this chapter focus specifically on traumatic events or see themselves in relation to people who suffered through traumatic historical violence. This can be seen most strikingly in Connie Braun's book but it can also be seen in Brandt's connection to persecuted Anabaptists, Rudy Wiebe's connection with WWII victims, and Katie Funk Wiebe's connection with subordinated Mennonite women.

According to Hirsch, a central way that memory is transmitted is through photographs. She notes, for example, how “Holocaust photographs, as much as their subjects, are themselves stubborn survivors of the intended destruction of an entire culture” (*Family* 23). Photographs serve as constant reminders and they also allow the subsequent generation to access and experience the past that they know has severely impacted their parents or forebears. While photographs play a large part in Hirsch’s discussion, they are not the only means by which postmemories are formed. Hirsch argues: “To be sure, children of those directly affected by collective trauma inherit a horrific, unknown, and unknowable past that their parents were not meant to survive” (“Generation” 112). Hirsch goes on to explain that the work of these children of survivors is a consequence of “the long-term effects of living in close proximity to the pain, depression, and dissociation of persons who have witnessed and survived massive historical trauma” (112).

For Hirsch, trans-generational trauma can come as a result of the subsequent generation experiencing the after-effects of first hand trauma. Hirsch’s argument helps to explain Connie Braun’s connection to a traumatic past in *The Steppes are the Colour of Sepia*. Braun conveys that there were always traces, perhaps partially hidden, of a traumatic past that were made available to her. Early on, Braun writes, “When I was small, my father told only a few stories about his boyhood and I listened, enthralled, as though I were listening to him tell secrets, for his tales seemed veiled” (19-20). Both this and the abundance of photographs in the book, some of which Braun would have always had access to, allowed Braun and others like her to gain access to a lost world that carried with it the sadness of oppression and exile<sup>10</sup>.

Braun comes to this conclusion near the end of the memoir when she describes her visit to a museum in Kiev during a family trip to Ukraine and Russia. She writes: “Along the wall,

beside this communion table is a gallery of photographs: families in traditional portrait poses, faces of mothers, faces of children, young sons in uniforms. These were the faces of life in this place, of war and of suffering. Each picture framed a silent narrative. It was as though another's face became our other self" (218). These quotations illustrate the general preoccupation of Braun's book with the stories and, indeed, the very identities of others. They also convey, though, how Braun feels connected to these stories and these people and why she makes use of autobiographical discourse to tell a story largely about others. It is here where Hirsch's points regarding postmemory seem to be the most useful in examining the way that the authors I look at see themselves in relation to others, or even see their own story being dominated by the stories of others.

Importantly, though, for Hirsch, postmemory is formed out of "events that can be neither understood nor recreated." Hirsch offers a distinction between the kinds of memories that are recalled by those who experienced trauma firsthand and the kinds of memories recalled by those who did not directly experience the traumatic event yet are, in many ways, still very much imbricated in a cultural and collective suffering. She suggests that it is precisely the impossibility of full recovery or full remembrance of traumatic events that leads to postmemory. Indeed, it is this sense of not knowing that frequently motivates the authors I examine to write these narratives of past events. Braun, for example, notes that "my own family didn't speak about" what she calls their "personal trauma" (*Steppes* 26). She concludes that her book is an "attempt of narrative to seek meaning and order from history's chaos" (27). In many ways, Braun has been affected (perhaps traumatically affected in a different way) by the silencing of a history that her parents experienced; her book is an attempt to understand this history.

At the same time, it is important to avoid suggesting that the traumatic past is knowable and fully understandable even for the first generation. After all, as Cathy Caruth points out in her book *Unclaimed Experience*, trauma is “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (91). In other words, Caruth is arguing that the traumatic moment can only be named, understood, and felt as a trauma in retrospect. This, of course, means that the originary traumatic moment can never be entirely known, only recalled and repeated in various ways. It is crucial to note, then, what Hirsch, intriguingly, does not note, which is that a memory and a postmemory of trauma are similar in that neither allows for any kind of pure access to the original “violent event or events” that continue to haunt the victim of trauma. This is important because Caruth, in many ways, draws an even firmer connection between the two generations and this is helpful in explaining why the writers I engage with take on the memories of others so directly.

Hirsch’s argument is also somewhat limiting in that postmemory appears to be available for a particularly small group – that is, what Hirsch calls “the generation after,” namely the children of those “who witnessed cultural or collective trauma” (“Generation” 106). Hirsch *does* discuss Jan Assmann’s notion of communicative memory which Assmann argues “is transmitted across three to four generations—across eighty to one hundred years” (“Generation” 110), but then she quickly dismisses it, noting that the “direct link to [this] past” is lost “in the case of traumatic interruption, exile, and diaspora” (111). Hirsch, then, considers the trans-generational aspect of postmemory but dismisses the possibility of intergenerational transmission of memories of the sort that Assmann proposes. Hirsch’s emphasis that postmemory, namely traumatic postmemory, is most acutely felt by the generation after seems almost unduly narrow,

particularly if photography, which is accessible to many beyond the generation after, allows us to access what might otherwise be “an irretrievably lost past world.”

In *Family Frames*, Hirsch *does* acknowledge that the museum “needs to elicit in its visitors an imaginary identification – the desire to know and to feel, the curiosity and passion that shape the postmemory of survivor children. At its best, it would include all of its visitors in the generation of postmemory” (249). In this sense, then, Hirsch does suggest that museums (particularly ones with photographic displays) have the capacity to create postmemories for those who visit. Her wording, though, also strongly suggests that museums can typically allow visitors to form an understanding of postmemory and those who experience it, rather than experience postmemory themselves. Furthermore, the quotation also affirms that for Hirsch it is strictly a “generation” who can gain postmemories. By limiting these memories strictly to traumatic memories and by limiting these “others” to the next generation, Hirsch’s arguments cannot fully account for, say, Di Brandt’s and Rudy Wiebe’s felt kinship with some of the earliest Mennonite communities or with Katie Funk Wiebe’s connection to a more nebulous group of Mennonite women in history.

Alison Landsberg’s work, then, is crucial in exploring some of the nuances of intergenerational collective memories. She distinguishes her arguments from other conceptions of historical memory by pointing out how 20<sup>th</sup> century technology changed the way that people can connect to the past. Landsberg argues that,

modernity makes possible and necessary a new form of public cultural memory.

This new form of memory, which I call *prosthetic memory*, emerges at the

interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an

experiential site such as a movie theater or museum. In this moment of contact, an

experience occurs through which the person sutures himself or herself into a larger history, ... In the process that I am describing the person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live. The resulting prosthetic memory has the ability to shape that person's subjectivity and politics. (2)

This process, she contends, is unique to modernity, because of the way that people come to have these experiences. In the wake of an "unprecedented movement of peoples" (1) as well as African-American slavery and the Holocaust (2), Landsberg suggests that there has been a breakdown in the traditional ways that one experienced the past. She writes that in each of these cases, "the links between individual persons and community – kinship ties – were broken, and alternative methods for the transmission and dissemination of memories were required" (2). For Landsberg, it is "Through the technologies of mass culture, [where] it becomes possible for these memories to be acquired by anyone" (2). Prosthetic memories are prosthetic because they do not merely reside within the people who experienced them first but are, rather, "transportable" (3)<sup>11</sup>.

What makes Landsberg's argument here unique is her contention that 20<sup>th</sup> century technology has allowed for memories to be transportable to a wider cultural group. With access to the cinema and to museums, it has become increasingly more possible to take on a "personal, deeply felt memory" of what would have at one point been considered to be very particular memories experienced by very particular socio-cultural groups. Prosthetic memories "challenge more traditional forms of memory that are premised on claims of authenticity, 'heritage,' and ownership" (2-3). Like Hirsch, Landsberg sees images as being crucial in transmitting memories to others. Yet Landsberg goes a bit further than Hirsch in that she suggests that anyone who has access to movie theatres or museums may take on memories of any period of the past that is on



display. And while prosthetic memories “often mark a trauma” (20), her analysis of transportable memories is not limited only to traumatic events.

Landsberg’s work is useful in broadening the number of people who can collectively experience historical memories and she also expands the kinds of memories that can be experienced. Like Hirsch, though, her discussion does not neatly explain how the authors that I examine fully connect with the past. After all, these authors do not typically connect with the past only via modern, transportable technologies, which Landsberg notes “[make] ideas and image available to people who reside in different places and have different backgrounds, races, ethnicities, and classes” (18). Rather, as I will discuss below, these authors demonstrate their connection to the past not only via a variety of personal sources, like Hirsch’s photography, but also transmitted oral and written narratives that have survived many generations. They also connect to the past by way of more public sources such as historical documents and media sources. In some cases, they connect to the past through what appears to be a spiritual connection to the land. I see both Hirsch and Landsberg as helpful in explaining both how experiences of the past can be accessed by those who did not experience that past firsthand and how intergenerational memories can exist for those outside the sphere of the generation after. I also consider the primary texts I am examining as instructive in that they expand and modify both of these theories.

Life writing scholars have for quite some time understood the significance of trans- and intergenerational memories. Articles by scholars like Ursula Kelly and Adrienne Kertzer have put to use Hirsch’s notion of postmemory in discussions of memoirs and, in the latter case, a Holocaust exhibit. Andrew S. Gross and Michael J. Hoffman, meanwhile, have looked somewhat critically at Landsberg to illuminate their discussion of Benjamin Wilkomirski’s discredited

Holocaust memoir, *Fragments*. Despite the fact that scholars of autobiography have engaged with these theories, there has been surprisingly little overlap between those who study relational lives in life writing and theories on intergenerational memories, even though such theories presuppose an identity that exists in relation to others. As Smith and Watson put it, “Memory is a means of ‘passing on,’ of sharing a social past that may have been obscured, thereby activating its potential for reshaping a future of and for other subjects. In sum, acts of personal remembering are fundamentally social and collective” (26). Nevertheless, scholars have not fully explored the potentials of intergenerational memory in autobiographical texts.

A crucial exception can be seen in the critical discussion of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*. At the same time, this discussion on the comic by relational life writing scholars reveals the limitations of these discussions. Paul John Eakin, for example, discusses *Maus* in his chapter on relational lives in *How Our Lives Become Stories*. For Eakin, there are two interdependent stories at work in Spiegelman’s comic book: there is the story of Art’s father’s experiences during WWII and there is also what Eakin calls “the story of the story” which is “the story of the individual gathering this oral history (Art Spiegelman himself)” (59). Yet because his definition of relational life writing still privileges the primacy of the autobiographical subject rather than the story of the related other, Eakin reads *Maus* as being, first and foremost, the story of Art rather than the story of Art’s father Vladek. As Eakin notes, “If my reading is correct, it is the story of the story that has the upper hand. That is to say, for example, that *Maus* is in the last analysis Art Spiegelman’s autobiography” (60). As a result, Eakin does not view this text through the lens of postmemory or transgenerational trauma. That, after all, would itself suggest the very overriding significance of Vladek’s story in determining Art’s identity and could perhaps also run the risk of a pushing the text beyond the narrow confines of autobiography.

Nancy K. Miller, on the other hand, in her discussion of *Maus* as an example of male-authored relational life writing, has suggested that Art is a “‘co-owner’ of his father’s trauma” (“Cartoons of the Self” 400). Miller observes that Spiegelman suffers from the inherited memories of his father. Yet while Miller acknowledges that Spiegelman “sets out to tell his father’s story” making “his own [story] subordinated to that purpose” (400) she also points out, like Eakin, that “the son’s struggle with his father proves to be as much the subject of *Maus* as the father’s suffering in Auschwitz” (389).

In much the same way as Miller refers to Art as a “co-owner,” Candida Rifkind, in her 2008 article on *Maus*, refers to the book as “collaborative auto/biography” (405). Rifkind’s analysis does not necessarily privilege one narrative over another though her focus is primarily on what she sees Art doing in the text, rather than what his father is doing – namely “the violence that his attempt to represent his own and his father’s stories can inflict on the subjects of collaborative auto/biography” (407). Rifkind does not necessarily argue outright, as Eakin does, that Art’s story has the upper hand. Nevertheless, she does make the point that Spiegelman “gravitate[s] towards an aesthetics of smallness” (401) as a way to represent “the son’s guilt in ... representing his father’s past experiences and then making a profit from these representations” (418). In other words, in Rifkind’s analysis, the very design of *Maus* works to tell us something significant about Art rather than Vladek.

I certainly do not quibble with these readings of *Maus*. Rather, I use these examples in order to point out that while the study of relational lives can certainly account for particular stories of trans- or intergenerational memory, it does not necessarily account for what is at work in texts that appear to, in some way, privilege the story of the other while at the same time remaining autobiographical. An analysis that does not acknowledge that the story of the other

may have the upper hand over the story of the self does not easily lend itself to a discussion on the way in which stories of trauma can have a dominating impact on the lives of others who did not experience that trauma firsthand. Is it not possible for an author to have been so affected by the Holocaust that his or her parents experienced that even when he or she chooses to write autobiographically, the narrative that is privileged is that of the parents?

What I am interested in is exploring how Connie Braun, Di Brandt, Rudy Wiebe and Katie Funk Wiebe construct themselves as being entangled with a historical community that existed well before or well outside their lived experiences. These authors frequently shift attention away from the self and place it onto others and reveal the dominating role that these historical narratives and historical communities play in these authors' lives. All four texts that I look at in this chapter do this in various ways for various reasons. Connie Braun's book focuses specifically on the trauma of her parents' and their parents' generation for the central reason that she feels a responsibility to tell a story that runs the risk of evaporating from history altogether – namely the story of the Mennonite communities who stayed in Russia past the 1920s, following a period of emigration that allowed many Mennonites to escape the worst of Soviet violence. Braun's subjects, on the other hand, suffered immeasurably. As she notes, though, these events have gone fairly underreported. Braun argues that,

Their story has been largely overlooked, even by other groups of Mennonites. It arises from the margins of the collective history of Mennonites in Russia. It is also a story from the margins of World War II history. And at the present time, it is a story that belongs among those, only now, emerging from the periphery of the former Soviet Union's history. This story is uniquely situated at the intersection of each of these marginal histories. (3)

Braun, as the daughter of a man who survived this era, is compelled to develop the narrative of this heretofore untold story. And while her focus in the book is frequently on her family, Braun is quick to point out that “the story of this family represents the stories of many others” (xiii). In other words, her family operates in the book synecdochally, standing in for a larger Mennonite community. This is why Braun sees herself in relation not just to family members but to a whole group of Mennonites. Furthermore, this is what allows *The Steppes* to be called specifically a Mennonite memoir, rather than merely a family memoir.

As Braun suggests in her article “Silence, Memory and Imagination as Story,” the necessity to write this book comes not only from the fact that it has been left out of dominant historical narratives but also because of the kinds of details that the story conveys. She writes that “The Canadian children of Mennonite immigrants are returning to the stories of their forebears – writing narratives arising from childhood memories formed over six decades ago – in order to give voice to the experience of suffering through war and dispossession” (1). For Braun and others from the next generation, it is crucial to address these stories because they bear witness to an unaddressed trauma. Braun’s book is not simply a work of recovery; it is also a testimony of untold suffering from a period that occurred before the birth of the author.

The impetus behind Braun’s book is not entirely uncommon. As Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller put it in their introduction of their book of collected essays *Rites of Return*, “The emotional effects of diasporic dislocation and relocation also have led many of us in the twenty-first century to recapture, in writing, family memories and stories, in order to rescue lost legacies, to restore connections suspended by time, place, and politics. This is especially true of descendants of groups that have been subjected to extermination or expulsion” (10). Braun’s book indeed falls into this particular category of life writing as Hirsch and Miller describe it. *The*

*Steppes are the Colour of Sepia* indeed works to document a community that was largely destroyed in the wake of Stalinism and tells their formerly lost story.

Braun *does* represent herself in this text in much the same way that Spiegelman constructs himself in *Maus*. She is the recorder and compiler of a story that has been silenced even within the boundaries of her own family who had kept secret the story of historical suffering. She writes: “My father did not elaborate beyond his few adventure tales. And I, with my own husband and children, became occupied by my present life. Years would pass before I began to recover the words and stories inside this family photograph” (27). Braun makes appearances throughout the memoir, mostly in the role as she describes it here, as she pulls the story from her father and visits family members to track down photographs and get a fuller story from the documents that she uncovers.

Her attempts to create a meaningful and truthful story from what she later refers to as “the gaps and silences” (211) of her family’s history betray a central paradox at the heart of trauma. Leigh Gilmore argues in her book *The Limits of Autobiography*, that

Crucial to the experience of trauma are the multiple difficulties that arise in trying to articulate it. Indeed, the relation between trauma and representation, and especially language, is at the center of claims about trauma as a category. Something of a consensus has already developed that takes trauma as the unrepresentable to assert that trauma is beyond language in some crucial way, that language fails in the face of trauma, and that trauma mocks language and confronts it with its insufficiency. Yet, at the same time language about trauma is theorized as an impossibility, language is pressed forward as that which can heal the survivor of trauma. (6)

Gilmore suggests here that trauma is that which is beyond language – an event that was so horrifying or so troubling that it could not be put into words in any authentic way. At the same time, language is crucial if one is to work through trauma. This paradox is on display several times in Braun’s memoir. Referring back to the Greek word for trauma (wound), Braun echoes Julia Kasdorf’s desire for “the wound [to become] a mouth that finally speaks its testimony” (qtd. in *Steppes* xi). Nevertheless, Braun confronts the very real difficulties that always accompany testimony.

In one example, she recounts a story from her Aunt Mary who obliquely reveals what Braun assumes to be an untellable story of sexual assault: “Early one morning when I awoke, I saw a few of the girls from our brigade stumble back into the camp.... During the night the soldiers in charge of us had dragged them off.’ I know she means the soldiers raped them, but she avoids using the word, for the act is unspeakable. The ugly word cannot encapsulate the experience of violation” (101). Braun is certainly correct here in observing the silences that mark her Aunt Mary’s story. This moment reveals that a historical account of a traumatic event will inevitably be incomplete. Yet importantly, in this moment, Braun fills in the silence, suggesting the desire on Braun’s part to speak the unspeakable.

Braun, herself, reveals that she is self-conscious about being able to properly articulate the events she is describing. At the end of her book, she admits that “My ancestral story has at times proved almost too difficult to write” (222). Despite the difficulties in putting this traumatic history into words, Braun nevertheless continues as she privileges the kind of work that narration does. Importantly, telling this story has, to a certain degree, helped Braun herself. Namely, knowing her ancestral history has helped her come to a fuller understanding of who she herself is. She notes that “narrative becomes a step in a sequence of lives, of past, present and future

generations, providing connections to flesh and blood, place and heritage” (222). Finally, she concludes that “I have presented this story, and in it, I have tasted the sweetness of my present life” (222). Despite the fact that Braun positions herself as the story’s central interpreter and the fact that bringing the past into some sort of clarity is essential in Braun’s own self-actualization, the overwhelming focus of the book is nevertheless on others.

*The Steppes* is a testament to historian Marlene Epp’s observation that “For those families that remained in the Soviet Union after the large emigration in the 1920s, the next decade represented a new cycle of famine, repression, and terror” (*Mennonite Women* 54). Most of Braun’s book is devoted to specifically illustrating this environment. In doing so, she turns the attention away from the self who is compiling the narrative to the historical others who suffered under Stalin’s regime. Braun uses a variety of sources to illustrate the horrors of this era. On the one hand, she conveys what she herself refers to as documented “historical facts and figures,” revealing that “under Stalin’s ‘economic plan’ ten million people died. Some figures cite fifteen million people. It is incomprehensible that multitudes died of starvation or disappeared, unjustly branded enemies of the state, coreligionists, intellectuals and writers, farmers” (63).

Horrifying as this sounds, it does not compare to the more personal anecdotes that Braun relays throughout the book. One scene describes a particularly appalling incident that was viewed by Braun’s father, Peter. The story describes how Peter witnessed the aftermath of a train accident, wherein a freight train crashed into another train of refugees attempting to escape during the Russian-German conflicts in 1943. Braun relays Peter’s remembrances thusly: “‘I can still see it,’ my father says. Tangled steel rail, debris, and bloodied bodies strewn about the station yard with people moaning, skin lacerated – gashes in flesh like crooked red mouths. Some people are covered with angry burns, scalded, on impact, by boiling water that splashed



from boxcar stovetops. Parents, anguished, discover their child is dead” (134). This moment and others illustrate the struggle faced by Peter and his family and the kinds of violence witnessed by those living under wartime totalitarianism.

As Braun points out several times throughout the memoir, though, the Mennonites suffered in a particularly unique way under Stalin’s regime. The central issue for Braun is precisely this Mennonite experience. Her concern is not only with the “twenty-three thousand” Mennonites who “disappeared” trying to flee the Soviet Union but also with “Twelve thousand Mennonites” who “successfully immigrated to Canada, the United States, or South America” (213) in the late 1920s, after which time the “iron curtain” had firmly closed. Braun points out the distinctive way the Mennonites experienced Stalinism. She writes: “When war broke out in the Soviet Union, the colonists of German descent ... were regarded as enemies. The Mennonites, as conscientious objectors to war, were no exception. In the past they had provided non-combatant service, but such status would not be recognized now. Instead, they were taken, not to perform alternative service, but to labour camps, imprisonment and death” (100). While the German background of the Mennonites made them automatically distinct, it was also their cultural and religious background, which emphasized pacifism, that made them a particularly problematic group, especially during war-time.

As historian John B. Toews points out in his book *Journeys: Mennonite Stories of Faith and Survival in Stalinist Russia*, the pacifist stance of the Mennonites had previously “allowed no compromise with the state” (2). Indeed, it is not surprising that the German language and the pacifist stance that kept the Mennonites apart from worldly society in Russia would be what would make the Mennonites so suspect within a totalitarian government structure. Toews continues by pointing out that under Stalin, “Mennonite cultural-religious survival was at stake

and increasingly that struggle was being lost” (5). What the Mennonites faced under Stalin was cultural erasure.

Braun demonstrates throughout the book not only how Mennonite values were being specifically targeted by Soviet power but also how these values were being abandoned by some of the Mennonites themselves in the name of survival. She suggests that as “Stalin’s purges continued” it was “the Mennonites” who “were particularly suspect, considered subversive because of their German-ness” (85-86). Moreover, she admits that “even some Mennonites cast aside the principle of non-resistance” (114-15) in order to defend themselves against the brutality. Braun discusses the ultimately double-edged decision by several Mennonites to fight for the Nazis who were initially understood amongst the community as “liberators” (161).

In raising these points, Braun shows how the story she is telling is not simply a story of those who suffered under Stalin. Nor is this simply the story of her father. Rather, it is a story of Mennonite suffering. As she herself writes, this is a book that “entails the history of a people who have been important contributors to religion and culture since the Protestant Anabaptist break with the Catholic Church in the Reformation” (2). The pictures that Braun places in the book titled “Mennonite refugees on the Great Trek, 1943” (26) and “Refugees in Freital, Lager 93, near Dresden, 1944” (139) serve to reinforce the fact that the book is giving a narrative not only to Braun’s father and his family but to a wider range of Mennonites who suffered during this period.

In positioning herself in relation to a historical community, Braun both reaffirms and challenges the points raised by Hirsch and Landsberg. Braun is not simply affected by the stories of her parents but by her parent’s parents and a larger community. At the same time, though, the fact that Braun receives these memories by way of her father attests to the fact that prosthetic

memories may very well be a consequence of the kinship ties that Landsberg says become broken in cases of diaspora. Ultimately, in crafting this narrative as a story of Mennonite trauma, Braun emphasizes her relational position to her subjects since she constructs herself as belonging to a group that has suffered.

As a recorder of and listener to these stories, Braun is already situated in a relational position with the victim of firsthand trauma. Dori Laub makes a point about this dynamic in his article “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening.” Here Laub illustrates the interdependent relationship between the witness who experienced the trauma and the person who fills the role of the listener. He suggests that “The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time” (57). In other words, once the victim of trauma is able to bear witness to his or her experience by articulating that experience in some form of narrative, the person listening to the narrative becomes a participant in this experience.

Laub goes on to note too that not only does the hearer play a vital role in the testimony to the trauma but also, in hearing, experiences to some degree the trauma that affects the speaker. He contends that

the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself. The relation of the victim to the event of the trauma, therefore, impacts on the relation of the listener to it, and the latter comes to feel the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels. (Laub 57-58)

What Laub says here, in many ways, reinforces the points raised by Hirsch in her discussion of postmemory, though, for Laub, the listener extends towards anyone who is what Laub calls “a witness to the trauma witness” (58).

Braun certainly enters into this kind of relationship with the speakers in her book. Braun, though, is quick to point out that she is not a victim, at least not on the same level as those who experienced the violence of Stalin’s regime firsthand. In Braun’s article, she says that “one must never attempt to compare one’s own experience of suffering with that of another – especially with genocide” (“Silence” 3). Of course, Braun never directly compares her own life experiences with those that she is recording. Laub likewise suggests that there is always a crucial distinction between the listener and the victim. He writes: “While overlapping, to a degree, with the experience of the victim, [the listener] nonetheless does not become the victim – he preserves his own separate place, position and perspective” (58). In other words, the listener may very well experience a reaction to the story of trauma that is similar to the witness’s own reaction to the traumatic event, but his or her experience is nevertheless always different.

While Braun explicitly avoids conflating the nature of her own experiences with those of her subjects, she nevertheless reveals her connection both to the people who suffered and to their symptoms. Not only does she have difficulty articulating this story, as was mentioned above, she also reinforces her relation to the traumatic events by constructing an identity for herself that extends far beyond her own birth. In her preface to the book, Braun discusses what is ultimately for her a kind of spiritual connection to both a place and a time in which she did not exist. Writing about the Russia of her ancestors, Braun observes the following: “It seems as though the soil of that distant place is under my fingernails as my father tells about living there, and I am struck with this thought: the soil of the steppes and the river are the flesh and blood of our

heritage” (x). Braun writes of the historical landscape as if it is part of her own body, as if the soil remains under her fingernails. Noting that “the steppes and the river are the flesh and blood of our heritage,” Braun reveals that this place is a crucial part of her own sense of self, especially insofar as the location plays a particular role in Braun’s own understanding of the Mennonite culture to which she herself belongs.

Braun’s identity, therefore, is connected not only to this place but also to the identities of other Mennonites who lived there. This relational identity allows Braun, also, to forge a connection to the traumatic events that occurred there. She observes: “Russia, a land of wheat and fields of sunflowers aglow with golden halos. To Canadian-born children, this other place was, and is, at once distant and within. We taste its sweet nostalgia now and then. But there is darkness, too. It lies somewhere between our eyes” (19). The darkness that she speaks of is obviously the stories of horror that are to follow in the book. Importantly, though, in this quotation the darkness is felt specifically by the “Canadian-born children,” revealing the prosthetic nature of her ancestor’s trauma.

Braun suggests that she and (according to this quotation) all descendants from this historical group, are so connected to the place and the people that the trauma the historical group experienced firsthand has been passed down. Much like Hirsch and Laub, Braun emphasizes her own difference from the Mennonites who lived in Russia, suggesting that “this other place was, and is, at once distant and within” for those born in Canada. Ultimately while this comment reveals Braun’s separate place and perspective, it also reinforces how the trauma that was experienced by others is nevertheless passed on to Braun as “personal, deeply felt” (2) memories, to borrow Landsberg’s phrasing. Hirsch and Miller refer to this strategy of self-construction as “affiliative self-fashioning,” which, they note, “becomes a useful tool for creating alternative,

transpersonal models of selfhood that take on meaning in relation and in what we might think of as a diasporic kinship based on shared desires” (14). Braun certainly does see herself affiliated with this historical group, because, like many of her parents’ generation and also her own, she has been affected to some degree by the negative consequences of Stalin’s purges.

This better explains the quotation at the beginning of chapter one where Braun refers to these events as “our stories.” Indeed, she goes further at one point after locating a photograph of her great-great grandparents who were the first in her family to live in Russia. Braun’s discovery of the photo comes early on in her process of putting together the story that becomes her memoir. She observes of the picture that “The silent unsmiling mouths seem to hint at the narrative I have yet to recover. So little of a past life in Russia has survived or been preserved, but this photograph spans the old world to the new, and becomes my story’s beginning” (13). Referring to this as “my story” is revealing, especially since so little of this story seems to actually be about her at all.

What this suggests, in fact, is that ultimately Braun’s autobiographical story is overwhelmingly about the story of a historical group whose suffering she wishes to rescue from the margins of history. The book remains autobiographical as Braun understands the Russian Mennonites who lived under Stalin as a group to which she in some way belongs. Despite the silences in both the public and private sphere that have kept this story obscured, the memories of the events are nevertheless alive enough that future generations still feel their effects. These crimes, she tells us, happened to an entire group and continue to manifest themselves in subsequent generations. And while these future generations may not quite experience these crimes in the same way, they do experience them enough for Braun to step “into the lives of [grandparents] Jakob and Maria and their children, if only for a time” (xii). In doing so, she

manages to talk about herself even when she focuses on others. She constructs, then, an affiliative identity by positioning herself in relation to a historical community.

In some sense, then, Braun's book replays what Hildi Froese Tiessen has described as "The trope of 'forever summer, forever Sunday'" ("Between Memory" 629). This trope, Froese Tiessen argues, emerged following the publication of *Forever Summer, Forever Sunday* in 1981. The book collected photographs of Mennonites in Russia from 1870 to 1917. Froese Tiessen argues that the influential book "began to capture the Mennonite imagination" (629) and allowed many contemporary Mennonites, who were largely disconnected from Mennonite histories and traditions, to imagine themselves as being part of a historically continuous community. As Froese Tiessen puts it, the book allowed "many members of the 'Russländer' audience—no matter how disenfranchised from their cultural and religious heritage they had come to feel—the possibility of realizing themselves 'as historical subjects with a common past.'" (629-30). Indeed, one might be tempted to see Braun's book in this light as she ultimately connects herself with the story of the Mennonite experience in Soviet Russia.

Importantly, though, it is the story of the community, particularly the community who experienced the traumatic events firsthand, that Braun privileges. While Braun devotes some space to discussing her own relationship to these events as well as her role in bringing these particular stories to light, she is nevertheless largely in the background of her own memoir. This is a deeply felt, personal story, without a doubt. Yet ultimately it is a personal story largely about others. Robert Zacharias has recently argued that the history of the Russian Mennonite's "dramatic collapse in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution" from "the great heights of its prosperity at the turn of the twentieth century" works now, for many writers "as a mythological beginning or origin story, for the Russian Mennonite community in Canada" (4). *The Steppes are*

*the Colour of Sepia*, as a memoir, illustrates the profound impact that the story of the Mennonite collapse in Russia has had. Indeed, in this text, it is the story of the traumatic events in Russia that trump the story of the self or even the self in relation to those events.

The other texts that I examine in this chapter do not focus on historical others to quite the same degree as Braun's book does. That being said, Di Brandt, Rudy Wiebe, and Katie Funk Wiebe all consider their textual identities in very similar ways at certain points in their autobiographical texts. Brandt, though, is more interested in constructing a self in relation to a much earlier historical community. In *So this is the world & here I am in it*, Brandt forges connections with the earliest Mennonite societies, as well as their Anabaptist predecessors of the sixteenth century. Brandt wishes to address "the collective heritage of our Mennonite people's long history of persecution and, yes, cruelty" (94). In doing so, as I will show, Brandt constructs an identity for herself that allows her to consider her own selfhood as bound to a historical group.

Historians have noted the particularly brutal way in which Mennonites and their forebears were treated during the Radical Reformation and the decades and more following. Like the later victims of Stalin that Braun discusses, Mennonites and Anabaptists were targets because of their desire to largely exist outside the constraints of state power and authority. As historian Stephen L. Longenecker writes in his book *Shenandoah Religion*:

Sixteenth-century Anabaptists jeopardized German political and social cohesion by rejecting infant baptism, refusing to swear oaths, and declining to bear arms, whether to protect the town from military crisis, defend its herds from wild animals, or merely patrol walls. Authorities responded with anger predictable from those who felt their social foundation threatened, and early Mennonites endured so much imprisonment, banishment, beheading, burning, hanging,



torture, and drowning that a compilation of their martyrdom by their eighteenth-century brethren produced a thick book, the *Martyr's Mirror*. (41)

Longenecker speaks here of the kind of depravity that Brandt herself is preoccupied with throughout many of the personal essays in *So this is the world*. Moreover, Brandt is equally concerned with the cultural-historical group of Mennonite women who, in particular, suffered doubly as victims not only of authoritarian state power but also of an increasingly patriarchal internal structure within the Mennonite religion.

Marlene Epp observes that the number of women in the *Martyr's Mirror* that Longenecker speaks of above has suggested to historians that Anabaptist “women were active leaders in the early stages of this radical religious movement” (*Mennonite Women* 15). Despite this, though, Epp goes on to suggest that “an affinity for biblical literalism has also been used by Mennonites to support women’s subordination and silence within churches and homes” (16). Brandt indeed speaks to both of these histories of women’s leadership and their subsequent suppression as she describes the cultural shift that saw women being “free-spirited ... before we were made to tremble under the wrath of God, the vengeful One, and his long-armed, heavy-handed henchmen, our bishops and fathers” (4).

Importantly, Brandt also reveals the ongoing legacy of historical violence and repression the Mennonites faced and suggests the direct intergenerational transmission of these traumatic events. In the first essay of her book, Brandt says:

There was another memory, too, hidden in my blood, my bones, that sang out to me sometimes in that place of newly broken prairie, an older memory of a time when the women of my culture had voices and power and freedom, and their own forms of worship, across the sea, out of the green hills under the moon, in the

Flemish lowlands of northern Europe, a sturdy peasant life, deeply rooted, before the persecutions, the Inquisition, the Burning Times, the drowning times, the hanging times, before we became transients, exiles, hounded from one country to the next, seeking refuge from wrathful authorities who hated our adult baptisms, our democratic communities, our refusal to bow down to priests and kings. (3)

In this lengthy passage, Brandt establishes her relationship to a historical Mennonite community that she sees as being both rooted in an agrarian and communal lifestyle and a target of violence because of that chosen lifestyle. Just as Connie Braun talks of the Russian soil being under her fingernails, Brandt likewise stresses a bodily-felt connection to the past. In noting that these memories are “hidden in my blood” and “my bones,” Brandt appears to suggest that these historical moments are rooted in her very biological structure and certainly play a crucial role in her own sense of self.

Furthermore, Brandt is not simply discussing history in this quotation; significantly, she is discussing these historical moments as being part of her own memories as if she had, in fact, been there to experience these moments herself. The trauma of the early Mennonites, she tells us here, is explicitly prosthetic. Brandt echoes this point later in the book when she writes that “We remember that fact with vividness, do we not, how we were persecuted in large numbers in northern Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, tortured and burned at the stake, and drowned in rivers, and hounded out of our mother countries for precisely these reasons” (83). Crucially here, Brandt tells us that, for her, the traumatic events of Mennonite persecution are experienced as vivid memories.

Brandt, though, posits an alternative to Landsberg’s notion of memories as transmitted through modern technologies. In Brandt’s own article, “The Uses of Poetry,” she states that “Our

bodies carry the truth about our experience, and wish it to be spoken, even if we don't want to listen. ... [Experiences] stay in the air, as old grievances, for other people to take up, be haunted by, chased, insistent in the atmosphere until they find voice in human consciousness and expression" (46). It is difficult to say exactly from where or from whom these memories are transmitted in order to explain, as Brandt does, that "the violence of the persecutions got internalized in our psyches" (*So this* 3). The answer may be difficult to pinpoint for Brandt too as she suggests that traumatic experiences are, in many ways, linked to the natural world when she notes that past experiences may be left "in the air." This is a point that Brandt raises again in *So this is the world* when she senses unwritten Métis history and memories "lingering in weeds, in grassy ditches, on the edges of fields" (3) in the Prairie land that many Canadian Mennonites came to occupy.

For Brandt, then, memories are transportable in ways that are unaccounted for even in the dominant theories of trans- and intergenerational memory. Yet Brandt's discussion of memory is not entirely unique. Intriguingly, other Mennonite writers (as I will note with Rudy Wiebe below) and scholars have come to make similar points about the transmission of memory. In *Surplus at the Border*, for example, scholar Douglas Reimer suggests that Mennonite poet Patrick Friesen's discussion of European oppression in the 1600s leads "to the understanding that the soil of the earth – even soil of the Canadian prairies – holds a secret knowledge of all suffering and strength" (61). Brandt suggests very much the same in *So this is the world*. Despite the fact that there is little empirical reason for Brandt to have access to these memories that she did not directly experience, she is nevertheless "haunted" and "chased" by them.

The memories are so personal and deeply felt that she locates this trauma within her own body. As is the case in her poetry, Brandt uses the body as a site of frequently unspoken

historical trauma in order to address the legacy of violence against Mennonites as a whole. She refers, for example, to the,

historic era [that] was passed on in our collective memory in stories of the clever but tragic figures who, alone and in groups, tried to evade the judgment of the sixteenth century Spanish Catholic Inquisitors and local state officials, as members of the grassroots Anabaptist religious political movement that was wildly popular throughout Europe. Many of these heroes ended up as martyrs, drowned in rivers or burned at the stake in hundreds of town squares across the continent. I am trying, in this account to stay close to the embodied, living, oral version of this heritage. (107).

Again, here, Brandt refers to the memories of these historic events as both “embodied” and “living.” Furthermore, she suggests that these stories have stayed alive and, presumably, continue to reside in present bodies, because of the oral transmission of these stories. This is a tradition that Brandt herself suggests she is attempting to continue with her own testimony of these events.

In many ways, then, Brandt positions herself as belonging to what literary critic Grace Kehler calls a “community of interpreters who shared [the] perspectives” of “the martyrs” and felt an “imperative to speak against injustice and exclusionary tactics” carried out by “the Catholic community” (172). Kehler observes that these interpreters who existed at “the origins of Anabaptist-Mennonite history” revealed “a longing to connect with community” (172). It is significant that Brandt should herself be connecting with this historical community by giving testimony to injustices that occurred hundreds of years ago. Furthermore, by locating trauma in

the body, Brandt suggests that this violence is inextricably linked to everyday traumatic experiences in the present.

Indeed, Brandt herself is concerned in this book with how the trauma faced by the Mennonites during the early modern period has come to repeat itself throughout the centuries. She laments how “we began inflicting [violence] on each other” (3) once the historical violence done to Mennonites had become internalized. Indeed, Brandt herself perceived a condemnation as a result of revealing too much in her poetry about the patriarchal authority and violence embedded within her own community. As Natasha G. Wiebe has written, “Brandt stems from a separatist, patriarchal religious community and says she was exiled from her home community because of her poetry” (“Di Brandt’s Writing” 481). Throughout *So this is the world*, Brandt offers us some glimpses of this condemnation. She notes how she has experienced “so much criticism from my family and the Mennonite community for abandoning the culture” (73).

Brandt constructs herself as something of a nonconformist in the book, referring several times to her own “independence of spirit” (209). Yet while this position initially appears to set Brandt at odds with her Mennonite community, Brandt nevertheless understands her own particular identity as being related to and deeply connected with others, namely her ancestral forebears. She points out the similarity between the nonconformist nature of her own character and the nonconforming Anabaptists and early Mennonites. She observes:

I arrived in urban Canada in the heyday of the '60s counter culture, and leaped enthusiastically from the Middle Ages into the psychedelic world of peace marches and sit-ins and folk festivals and experimental European films and hippie communes and free love, all of which suited my lurking anarchist rebel genes just fine. I am after all a descendent of Anabaptists, who were reviled and hunted all

over Europe in the sixteenth century for their sectarian exuberantly utopian views.  
(209)

Brandt's self-representation is certainly in line with the historical understanding of particular Mennonite communities. James M. Stayer has pointed out the communitarian nature of early Anabaptist societies who promoted the "ideal of Christian community of goods" (14). Royden Loewen meanwhile has discussed Mennonite "efforts to build cohesive, agrarian, pacifist communities, and their many migrations to secure these aims" (334). More than just their religious practices, then, certain Mennonite cultural practices would have also put them at odds with the increasingly more industrialized and capitalist Europe.

Of course, these descriptions do not explain the behaviour and ideology of all Mennonites. Brandt herself notes how she is "offering a slightly different genealogy of our Mennonite cultural affiliations than the one typically written about by Mennonite historians" (82). Brandt suggests that there were many Mennonites who historically "had become enthusiastic industrialists" (82). Certainly, the fact that Brandt should choose to concentrate specifically on the Mennonites who defied the major industrial developments speaks to her own particular interests. By focusing on the "sectarian" and "exuberantly utopian views" of the sixteenth century Anabaptists, Brandt is surely revealing as much about herself as she is about Mennonites in history. That being said, what interests me here is not so much that Brandt is being self-revealing but that by drawing connections between herself and a particular aspect of a historical group, she is able to both write autobiographically and focus on this group of historical others.

Brandt's own experience of rebellion is not entirely different from what she sees as her ancestors' experiences in that she describes both as rejecting conformist, and commerce-driven

attitudes in favour of a more communal lifestyle, allowing for deeper human relationships based on mutual recognition rather than competition. When Brandt herself begins to list the characteristics of her ancestors, she notes their distrust of authority, pacifism, and civil disobedience, as well as their “delight in physicality, sexuality, practicality and dirt; emotional and artistic expressiveness in music and poetic language; and a deep belief in the spiritual economy of ‘love’” (80). Brandt here could very well be describing herself, particularly given her penchant for peace, free love, and communes, as mentioned above. Importantly, though, in this instance, her focus is not on herself but on the historical community.

In my third chapter, I discuss how Brandt constructs an identity for herself that is in relation to agrarian, pro-environmental, and anti-capitalist communities that extend beyond mere cultural affiliation. I will not, then, dwell on the subject here except to say that Brandt relates her own anxieties regarding contemporary capitalism and its effects on both the environment and communities to an earlier, ancestral Anabaptist community. She notes, for example, her own personal fear that “we’re not doing enough to stop the ‘mad drive toward death’ inherent in the push toward ever greater, faster technologization and violent colonization of what few independent local cultures and economies still exist on this planet, that even though we are concerned about the future now, we don’t seem to know how to turn this dynamic around” (106). Her opposition to modern “technologization and violent colonization” as well as contemporary capitalism in general is rooted, she tells us, in her ancestral past.

After briefly discussing her own worries about the destruction of communal and agrarian traditions she discusses her ancestral forebears and how their similar resistance to the projects of modernity placed them in contradiction to “the sixteenth century Spanish Catholic Inquisitors and local state officials” (107). She writes:

Our ancestral ways included various folk customs to celebrate and sustain the intergenerationally woman-centered extended family, village committees to look after the sick and the poor, and gender-equitable inheritance, land acquisition and farming practices. We specifically did not believe in huge idealistic ahistorical leaps from one landscape and cultural history to another. Neither did we believe in expansionist enterprise. (109-10)

Again, here, Brandt inserts herself into this history by referring specifically to “Our ancestral ways.” While Brandt’s focus in this passage is to emphasize the crucial role of women in early Anabaptist societies, she nevertheless also stresses how these communities largely opposed the “expansionist enterprise” of modernism and, instead, had a more traditional (as well as communal) approach to both social welfare and farming practices. Brandt suggests here, then, that she is much like her ancestral forebears (in fact, she belongs to them and is part of them) in that both oppose the same central ruling economic structure in favour of a more equitable and traditional system.

In *So this is the world & here I am in it*, Brandt constructs for herself an identity that is in affiliation with historical others. However, the life writing sections of the book are by no means exclusively about historical Mennonite communities and Brandt certainly does not spend the majority of her focus on the subject as Braun does. As subsequent chapters will suggest, Brandt sees herself in relation to several cultural and social groups. What Brandt does do in her book, though, is suggest that she is so connected to this historical community of Mennonites that their lived experiences become her own lived experiences as well. Both the early Anabaptist and Mennonite ideals as well as their subsequent traumatic experiences have been passed on in such a fashion that Brandt connects with them in a deeply personal way.



Brandt affirms several key points raised by Hirsch and Landsberg but she also transforms them to suggest that the body can be site of transmitted historical trauma. What is important, though, is that while Brandt does suggest her own place in this history as well as her connection to it, she spends a great deal of focus on others rather than her own self. Her ongoing attention and repeated references to early Anabaptist communities throughout the book stress the importance of giving testimony to a trauma that occurred hundreds of years before Brandt was born. Drawing a connection to this group ultimately allows Brandt to devote space to others within a form that is still ostensibly self life writing.

Like both Braun and Brandt, Rudy Wiebe in his memoir *Of This Earth* suggests an unequivocal connection to a history that he himself did not personally experience. Wiebe draws connections between himself and early Mennonite origins and he is also affected by war stories that he hears about Mennonites fighting in World War II. Like Braun, Wiebe's own sense of self appears also to develop from traumatic events as he is certainly affected not only by the stories of violence that he hears about the Mennonite past in Russia, from which his parents left in 1929 before Wiebe was born, but also by stories of historical events as they are unfolding. Furthermore, Wiebe demonstrates his connection to historical Mennonite mythology that, for him, remained largely unknown during the childhood years that he writes about in this book.

Near the end of *Of This Earth*, Rudy Wiebe writes about his travels throughout Europe. While there, he experiences the re-awakening of what have been, for him, dormant prosthetic memories. He writes:

I have felt remembrance beyond words when I returned to the boreal place where my sister is buried, where my mother conceived and bore and fed me. But such remembrance also happened when, after six decades of life, I walked in places

where I had never before physically been: in Russia, the former Mennonite village once called Number Eight Romanovka, north of the city of Orenburg, driving up the great steppe hills that stretch into horizons, the village cemetery where my parents met beside my grandmother's grave and where gravestones overgrown by grass and lilac bushes still say 'Wiebe' in both German and Russian; ... and in the town of Harlingen on the North Sea coast of the Netherlands where my blood forebears were forced to begin their wandering ... (367-68)

Wiebe, here, like Braun and Brandt, establishes his deep connection to the land of his forebears despite the fact that, by his own admission, he "had never before physically been" there. Wiebe conveys that it is precisely memory that allows him to forge this link despite the fact that his memories are of events that he did not directly experience. Nevertheless, by beginning this discussion with references to events he lived through, such as the death of his sister, which act as a point of comparison to other events such as the meeting of his parents, Wiebe highlights the very real and material connection he has to these places and events.

Like Brandt, Wiebe goes on to suggest that memories can be passed down and registered in the body many generations later. He notes that "It may be that our bodies, despite our minds, retain what we have neglected to notice; or even undermine our ability to forget what we long not to know about ourselves. ... Even when all facts seem lost, the bodily effects remain" (369). Importantly, just as Brandt suggests that memories can be located "lingering in weeds," Wiebe similarly becomes aware that prosthetic memories can be awakened when he connects with a particular location. As Hirsch and Miller put it, "Perhaps places do not actually themselves carry memory, but memory can be activated by the encounter between the visitor and the place" (17).

Certainly for Wiebe in the above quotation, the body registers ancient memories that he could only fully become aware of when visiting the homeland of his parents “after six decades of life.”

Perhaps more than Brandt, Wiebe is able to directly pinpoint the source of these received memories, though in many ways his explanation is similarly nebulous. On the one hand, Wiebe’s affiliation with a historical community is a consequence of generational transmission. In *Of This Earth*, Wiebe frequently discusses how the values, beliefs, customs, and traditions of a widely dispersed culture have maintained themselves despite centuries of exile and wandering. The book begins with a scene of the Wiebe family travelling on a horse-drawn bobsled through the boreal forest. Wiebe describes himself as a child listening to his family singing a song that is rooted in cultural tradition: “They are singing. My father’s favourite hymn, which they have carried with them from their Mennonite villages on the steppes of Ukraine and Russia to sing in Saskatchewan’s boreal forest” (2). This moment is significant because it conveys the notion of “carrying” that runs throughout the book where cultural traditions and stories from a distant elsewhere in the past are carried into the present and taken up by the next generations.

Wiebe tells us repeatedly that the past survives and is transmitted from one generation to the next. Critics have previously noted how, for Wiebe, the past plays a crucial role in the present as well as in informing one’s own sense of self. In his analysis of Wiebe’s book *Sweeter Than All the World*, Maurice Mierau writes: “Look at this, says Rudy Wiebe, look how we are rooted in our past, rooting in it like pigs in shit, how we never get away from it, how it holds us and traps us appearing on every channel” (79-80). Similarly, according to Heinz Antor, Wiebe tells us that “It is important to have a history in order to know who one is and to be able to place oneself in the world, to feel at home in it” (130). As critics have noted, then, it is a significant

element in Wiebe's work that the past, including past traditions, is not only inescapable but it also plays a vital role in one's own sense of identity.

In *Of This Earth*, Wiebe demonstrates how it is the traditions and the past *of others* that help inform one's sense self. Wiebe writes, for example, that "Before I was born my mother's blood and breath formed me to know that God is everywhere" (122). Not only are beliefs imparted to the next generation but so too is a firm sense of place and history which come by way of stories. He notes that "For Russian Mennonites who don't drink or dance, storytelling is the heart's core of visiting and my generation, the first born in Canada, was imprinted with story in our mothers' wombs" (218)<sup>12</sup>. He goes on to note that the stories that this older generation tells are frequently of "the magnificent Ukrainian and Russian steppes" (218). Wiebe points out here the significance of storytelling in the intergenerational transmission of history. The stories that Wiebe hears as a child are particularly important in this case because, for someone born in Canada, the stories of the Ukrainian and Russian steppes give one a firm sense of a time and place that are irrevocably gone. As Wiebe himself notes, "I sat on the floor in the heater corner or under the kitchen table and listened to this, a world I did not know and would never see" (219). Wiebe, here, calls attention to how diasporic conditions can work to develop postmemory.

In *Family Frames*, Marianne Hirsch notes how "The children of exiled survivors, although they have not themselves lived through the trauma of banishment and forcible separation from home and the destruction of that home, remain marked by their parents' experiences: always marginal or exiled, always in the diaspora. 'Home' is always elsewhere" (243). Hirsch is talking strictly about the Jewish diaspora and the "sudden violent annihilation of the Holocaust" (242) here but a good deal of what she says applies to a Mennonite community who were persecuted and violently driven from their homes on multiple occasions throughout

history. As Heinz Antor puts it, “Mennonites, we are told, have no home on this earth. If anything, they can only have a transient sense of home on a cultural level” (134).

Hirsch notes that “This condition of exile from the space of identity, this diasporic experience, is a characteristic aspect of postmemory” (*Family* 243). For Hirsch, children of exiled parents suffer because of their inability to ever experience firsthand a world that plays such an indelible role in their own identity. Wiebe himself confronts this when he experiences memories of a world he “would never see.” He reinforces this point more succinctly later in the book when he suggests that “when you have lost the place on earth where you come from, when your ancestral name has been ground out of existence, you suffer damage” (369). Wiebe frequently paints a picture throughout his memoir of a culture (and a self) that has been undeniably damaged by a long history of exile which led ultimately to the diaspora of Mennonites throughout the world.

Returning to the land of origin, despite the fact that (because it was violently destroyed), it can never fully be the same land that the parents or their ancestors knew, can have a significant effect, as this place functions so crucially in one’s sense of self. As Daniel Mendelsohn has said,

when you grow up in an immigrant family, you’re always hearing about the country of origin. So it does feel like going *back*. ... Certainly if you’re a certain generation of American Jew, people always talk about ‘going back,’ even though it’s not a place you’ve been – it’s a locution that, if anything, goes to the heart of the strong sentimental role that the country of origin plays in the lives of even distant descendants of immigrants. (Hartman et al. 112)

Wiebe’s return to Russia at the end of *Of This Earth*, where he in fact does go back to a place that he has never been, speaks to Mendelsohn’s point. Wiebe’s memories of former Mennonite

villages that he experiences upon visiting Russia are a result of postmemory and a consequence of his being “imprinted with story” in his childhood.

Much like his mother’s recipe for “baked golden Tweeback, our ancestral double-decker buns” that was “carried for centuries across three continents” (174), the historical past and the memories from it can be brought forward into present lives. This is particularly true of what Wiebe calls “Sad family stories that fade but never vanish, hard edges that remain irrefutable as fossils” (75). Wiebe’s use of the term “fossils” is noteworthy since fossils in many ways symbolize the enduring survival of that which existed potentially centuries earlier. Furthermore, fossils serve to remind us of our own connection to the past. Wiebe’s discussion of sad stories brings us back, too, to a discussion of trauma. The book conveys Wiebe’s connection to a traumatic past that is transmitted via stories.

He recounts moments in his past where he would overhear the conversations of recent immigrants from Russia now living in his community of Speedwell. They describe for him in fairly gruesome detail the horrors of Soviet Russia. He writes:

Speedwellers had lived in Russian Mennonite colonies thousands of kilometres apart; they had escaped to Canada in many different ways between 1923 and 1930, but they all had stories to tell that were stunning in their own way: of starvation, cholera, murderous bandit raids, beatings, fire and theft, vicious Red and White Army battles of advance and retreat and again advance; of torture, sons forced at gunpoint to torture their fathers, the slaughter in villages of every male over fifteen with not a shot fired ... (220)

Wiebe is haunted throughout his childhood by these stories of violence. He details how his youth and lack of knowledge served to give him a confusing though nightmarish understanding of

World War II as events were unfolding overseas. He notes that he was “The youngest in the family” and “had to learn everything from everybody” (186).

The information he does get, though, does not fully register and this appears to increase the terror. When he hears about “groups of men attacking, killing other men” he admits that he “could only think of the Martens dogs and Carlo, naked teeth...I could not imagine it. Don’t try, my mother said, don’t think about it. That was, of course, impossible. The war stared at us every minute we were in school” (178-79). The horrors of WWII are both incomprehensible and impossible for him to avoid, particularly when he was faced at school with flags, world maps, and pictures of world leaders which serve, for Wiebe, as reminders of a war that saw the threats of global domination as a consequence of rampant nationalism. At times, Wiebe departs from the narrative in order to relay facts about historical events that he did not experience nor was fully aware of at the time:

I am certain Miss Anne Klassen, who arrived to teach us in January 1944, could not have told us anything about Canada’s RCAF Bomber Group which was sending great fleets of four-engined Stirling and Lancaster and Halifax bombers across the English Channel every evening in massive night bombing of German-cities. ... no civilian could then know that more than 10,000 Canadians would die in those raids – pilots, navigators, bombardiers, tail gunners ... no one would ever know the number of children – say those my age at the time, eight or nine or ten – who were killed by burning or explosion or flood or crushing when those fleets of relentless planes dropped their ‘eggs’ on a terrified city; to say nothing of knowing their names. (208)

Much like Connie Braun, who writes the narrative of her parents in order to make sense of history's chaos, Wiebe devotes space to historical events that he could not know in any clear way at the time that they were happening. Also like Braun, Wiebe finds it crucial to report on such incidences because elements of the story, like the children's names, continue to exist as historical gaps.

Furthermore, as Wiebe notes, both he and other Mennonite families in Canada had a personal connection to the war, even if they were not directly involved in it, as Germany began attacking Russia. He recalls how "everyone worried about all those relatives we all still had in Russia, whom everyone had prayed for for years" (182). Once again, Wiebe notes how he eventually took on the traumatic memories of others through their stories. Despite being far away from "that Land of Terror," those who were lucky to emigrate earlier nevertheless "would eventually hear about those events; decades later, personally from the few aunts and uncles and cousins and friends who had endured it all and yet survived, somehow. Though often with their bodies, and minds, torn beyond fathoming" (182). What we see repeatedly then is the transmission of traumatic suffering to an other – in this case, Wiebe himself - so that these stories can in some way survive and can continue to be passed down. And because, for Wiebe, stories can be imprinted "in our mothers' wombs," there is a sense here that the stories of others become an intrinsic part of one's own identity to the extent that the stories of "them" are also the story of "I"; hence the frequent turn in Wiebe's memoir to stories that preceded his own existence.

What is, perhaps, even more affecting are the stories that Wiebe does not hear. He frequently portrays a home where members of his family – particularly, his parents – are quite visibly suffering from the ongoing terror of the Soviet Union. Occasionally, though rarely, Wiebe brings up the subject of his mother's brother Johann, "whom Stalin's police have



disappeared” (43). He relays how he would see his mother praying for him “in High German, and weeping” (43). Wiebe himself notes that, at the time, he knew very little of the story of this uncle as well as another uncle, Heinrich, who, in fact, fought as a Red Army soldier. Nevertheless, Wiebe, as a child, bears witness to his mother’s own silent suffering on multiple occasions (43, 220).

Here and elsewhere, Wiebe illustrates what were at one point the gaps in his own knowledge about his own historical past. Like Braun, Wiebe as a child is prevented from hearing particular aspects of a horrifying Mennonite history. Overhearing stories from friends in his Speedwell community about life under Stalinism, he observes that “No one ever said the word ‘rape.’ I knew the word *jewaultijch*, which meant God, All-powerful and Great and Capable of Anything, but never did I hear the word *vejewaultje* – to be overpowered, or forced, as in sexually violated. No Mennonite child in Canada needed to hear that such a word existed, oh God have mercy” (219-20). Elsewhere, he reveals that his own father largely ignored “the inexplicable brutalities of his past” (238). While Wiebe never heard these particular stories as a child, his recollections reveal that he was innately aware of the silencing that was taking place and that there were unspoken words and stories out of his reach.

Scholars on trauma theory have suggested that this very lack of knowledge can lead to intergenerational trauma and, therefore, unintended connections between parent and child. Anne Whitehead has noted how “symptoms are transmitted from one generation to the next when a shameful and therefore unspeakable experience is barred from consciousness or kept secret. The trauma is communicated without ever having been spoken, and resides within the next generation as a silent presence or ‘phantom’” (14). A reading of *Of This Earth* does not suggest that Wiebe considers himself in any way to be a victim of traumatic experiences, though he does suggest

that the historical suffering of the Mennonites has been passed down to him when he notes that, “for me, nothing could be more serious than life itself” (238) and suggests that this seriousness is a consequence of his community’s earlier confrontation with violence. He observes that “Life is serious, especially for Mennonites having fled a world destroyed by Communism; God’s divine revelation only underscores the heavy, mostly murderous history of mankind” (237). The environment in which Wiebe was raised, which, he notes, included a great deal of “happiness and laughter and good work and play” (238), nevertheless also instilled within him a particularly dark understanding of the world that is rooted in suffering. Furthermore, Wiebe’s own acknowledgement of missing information throughout the book and his desire to retrace Mennonite history as Braun does in her book, suggests a need borne out of personal attachment to give some testimony to what he calls the “massive burden of stories” that “neither my parents nor my community” could share (229).

Wiebe also laments the lack of knowledge within his own community of his own particular ancestral Mennonite roots dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He writes:

Certainly no one in Speedwell could have told me of a genius named Wybe Adams, or Adam Wiebe, the Frisian ancestor of all Russian Mennonite Wiebes, who in 1616 sailed from Harlingen on invitation by the Free City of Danzig to become its water engineer, and who protected Danzig from the ravages of the Thirty Years War, ... by building a high, thick wall of earth around the entire city which was impenetrable by cannon balls. (229)

Yet while Wiebe notes that such historical information was lacking in these formative years, he nevertheless appears to feel connected to these events and to Adam Wiebe. Surely, in claiming that this man was “the Frisian ancestor of all Russian Mennonite Wiebes,” Wiebe is calling

attention to his own familial connection to this historical figure. Wiebe, though, forges an even more direct link with his ancestor near the end of the book, upon visiting Wybe Adams's hometown, Harlingen. He writes:

And then, when I step back out onto narrow Noorder Haven Street in Harlingen, I have a sudden overwhelming sense that this water glittering in this canal passing this hotel door and being pumped up into the North Sea, is, molecule for molecule, cycle for cycle, the very water my ancestor Wybe Adams van Harlingen last saw here in the town of his birth, when he sailed away to Danzig in 1616. (368-69)

This moment, where, for Wiebe, the natural world allows for a connection to a seemingly though not quite vanished past, brings us back to Brandt.

Like Brandt, Wiebe appears to be suggesting that a connection to the natural world can put us in touch with our past and allow us to understand identity as the condition of being affiliated with historical others. He reinforces this point earlier in the book when he observes that “my bare feet on bare earth made me feel as if I knew, that my body already remembered what happened everywhere on the globe” (227). For Wiebe, it is nature that allows one to re-connect with history and remember past events in a deeply felt, personal way. This is not entirely unprecedented in Wiebe's writing. In Janne Korkka's reading of Wiebe's book *Playing Dead*, he observes how Wiebe's portrayal of the relationship between man and the Arctic incites “the erasure of any boundary between a geographic, historical space and an interior, narrative space” (104). Korkka argues that in that book what connects the interior space to the historical is an understanding that both will always “remain unknowable” (104). In *Of This Earth*, Wiebe suggests the opposite – that history is knowable through a personal connection to the land. This

is crucial given what Hirsch refers to as the “the need” amongst those whose diasporic experiences result in post memory, “not just to feel and to know, but also to re-member, to re-build, to re-incarnate, to replace, and to repair” (*Family* 243). In *Of This Earth*, Wiebe is able to remember and, in some sense, recreate the history that informed his own identity via transmitted stories.

Rudy Wiebe suggests that we do not take on the memories of others only through storytelling. In fact, while both Wiebe and Brandt reinforce Hirsch’s and Landsberg’s points regarding trans- and intergenerational prosthetic memories, they modify their arguments significantly. Wiebe and Brandt’s work, together, challenges traditional ways of understanding the process of memory-making in order to suggest what is, possibly, a more spiritual form of prosthetic memory. For Hirsch, postmemory occurs when a victim of trauma transmits his or her experiences directly to his or her children. For her, the transmission of memories does not seem to extend beyond this “generation after.” For Landsberg, prosthetic memories are typically formed when one experiences the past when it is presented through a medium of 20<sup>th</sup>-century technology like film. Brandt and Wiebe, though, appear to be suggesting that the natural world is a source for accessing the memories of historical others. Ultimately, Wiebe’s affiliation with these historical others is revealed in the book through the interweaving of his own narrative with the narratives of family and historical figures.

In *You Never Gave Me a Name*, Katie Funk Wiebe also establishes an identity affiliated with historical others. By considering family as a link to a genealogical history, Funk Wiebe places the autobiographical-I in this book in a constant fluid relationship with others located in an ancestral past. This allows Funk Wiebe to consider her narrative, which includes information on a familial history that she herself did not experience directly, as autobiographical. Critic Doug

Heidebrecht has previously made a case regarding Funk Wiebe's relational status in her book. He notes "Katie's autobiography self consciously seeks to establish her identity, which finds expression not only within her personal story but also within the journey of the Mennonite Brethren" (119). Heidebrecht concludes that the book illustrates "the interwoven nature of personal and communal narratives" (125). Yet while Heidebrecht notes the parallels that Funk Wiebe draws between herself and "the journey of the Mennonite Brethren," he does not fully address specifically how Funk Wiebe aligns herself with historical figures in her book.

*You Never Gave Me a Name* is far more traditionally autobiographical than Connie Braun's book in that a good deal of attention focuses on Funk Wiebe's own struggle to gain recognition as a writer, and to clear a path for a stronger female voice both within the academic institution in which she worked as well as in the Mennonite Brethren church. Despite the fact that a significant portion of the book focuses on these particular struggles, Funk Wiebe nevertheless highlights the significance of the historical past in her self-formation. Indeed, Funk Wiebe frequently reveals how her own narrative always contains traces of the past and suggests that historical others inform her sense of self.

At the beginning of the book, Funk Wiebe has an imaginary conversation with her father wherein she complains to him that he saddled her unfairly with a Mennonite faith and heritage in which she finds "nothing but narrow authoritarianism and ecclesiastical pomposity" (13). She suggests that she was doomed from the beginning because she was given a traditional Mennonite name. Her imaginary father retorts:

"I did give you a name, Katie, child of the prairies, child of the Russian steppes, child of many wanderings. But your name, being the gift of others, must be made your own. You didn't select your parents, your nationality, or your name, but you

have to choose what you make of these experiences of your parents and of their parents and of all those who searched for freedom of faith. Sometimes that search ended in failure for them. Sometimes it succeeded. It was a triumph of the spirit when those people accepted the gift of their heritage – the weaknesses, faults, mistakes, and the strengths, conquests, and joys – and gleaned from them what was needed to move ahead with courage.” (14)

This passage reinforces Funk Wiebe’s understanding of her own identity as being tied to historical others. Here, she is not only a “child of the prairies” but she is also, at the same time, a “child of the Russian steppes” (a place that she, in fact, never directly experienced as a child) as well as a “child of many wanderings.”

Funk Wiebe emphasizes these historical affiliations elsewhere in the book. She suggests that it is specifically through knowledge of the past, which for her frequently means an ancestral past that she did not directly experience, that one comes to have self-knowledge. She writes that “The story of my family started for me when, during the 1920s and 1930s, letters from Russia where Mother’s parents and many siblings still lived arrived at my childhood home in Blaine Lake, Saskatchewan. These letters spoke of intense hardship, cold, and hunger” (248). Importantly, here, for Funk Wiebe, the story of her family starts only when she begins to understand her connection to a larger collective family unit.

These letters re-establish a bond and an ancestral heritage broken by migration and exile. They are, in a sense, a gateway that allows Funk Wiebe to understand her own relation to another time and place. As she goes on to note, “These letters and other information passed on to me over the decades taught me about lineage” (248). For her, self-understanding comes by way of having a firm understanding of one’s roots. She argues that “A family does not begin with a

marriage certificate, range, refrigerator, and a mattress on a bed or the floor. Family begins with parents and grandparents and great-grandparents, and with the preceding generations and what happened to them and what they did to life. Each leaves a legacy of some kind” (252-53).

Funk Wiebe’s use of the term “legacy” is revealing here, because it betrays her own belief that the present is always bound up with traces of the past. Consequently, in several instances, Funk Wiebe focuses specifically on the past. She writes,

Grandfather and Grandmother Johann Funk and their seven children lived on the hill at the edge of the village of Rosental near the windmill. Before that there was another windmill in Osterwick. Before that a family on a horse-drawn wagon with many other wagons rumbled down the rutty road from Prussia to the Ukraine[.]  
And before that? Always movement and wandering in search of a better livelihood, greater freedom of religion, and opportunity to better the family. (253)

Here Funk Wiebe illustrates the connections between past and present. She works her way back through time, suggesting a historical lineage or link by pointing out how these generations are all joined together in the same narrative of “movement and wandering” – a narrative, as I will explain in chapter three, that Funk Wiebe sees herself as belonging to as well. At work in this text, then, is not just Funk Wiebe’s own individual identity. Rather, what we discover is that Funk Wiebe considers her own self in relation to a collective and fluid, ancestral history. She notes that “I tell my children and grandchildren we are part of a deeply flowing river with one generation moving on the scene to be replaced by another” (253). The book – in particular Part IV – is Funk Wiebe’s attempt to highlight that particular understanding of her own selfhood.

It is in this section where Funk Wiebe gives the most detail about ancestral others. She writes, for example, about both of her grandfathers who died before she was born, noting that “I

learned one had died of typhus caused by poor sanitation and lack of medical assistance after the Russian Revolution, the other of starvation and undiagnosed illness during Stalin's rule" (248). Funk Wiebe relays how her desire to gain access to the past becomes an obsession. A good deal of the final third of the autobiography is a mixture of the family stories that Funk Wiebe collected over the years as well as her attempts to locate these stories. From an aunt visiting from Germany whom she had never met, Funk Wiebe receives stories "about war, illness, death, famine, exile, hard work, and separation from loved ones as well as stories of good times" (250). Yet, as she goes on to conclude, "even successfully putting together what seemed like disparate stories didn't satisfy my hunger to know more about my family left behind in the steppes of the Ukraine" (251). As these quotations reveal, storytelling has its limitations for Funk Wiebe, even though for her the stories of historical others are an important source of self-understanding, as they are for Connie Braun and Rudy Wiebe.

As is the case with Rudy Wiebe, though, it is a particular connection with a specific geographical landscape that awakens a sense of self rooted in history. For Katie Funk Wiebe, this comes during a trip to Ukraine and Siberia. She recounts: "To walk the streets of Rosental where my parents had once walked and to see the building where my sister Anne was born, the spot on the hill where the Funk windmill once stood, and the edge of the ravine where possibly my Grandfather Funk had eluded his political captors brought me into even closer touch with my past" (251). Funk Wiebe does not necessarily experience memories here in the same way that Rudy Wiebe and Di Brandt do in that she does not entirely appear to take on directly the memory of historical others, but importantly what she does do is refer to this history as "my past."

For Funk Wiebe, the personal stories of others are also her own stories. She reaffirms this point again later when she conveys one of the purposes behind the book, writing that "I give my



children our past in this autobiography” (255). By once again claiming co-ownership of historical events and by calling attention to her own intentions to convey these stories as autobiographical (though by my own definitions the book is more correctly a memoir as it is categorized in the front matter of the text), Funk Wiebe reaffirms the point that her sense of an affiliated identity allows her to take on the story of her ancestors as her own. This effectively allows Funk Wiebe to redirect attention toward the stories of others within an autobiographical text.

She devotes a good amount of space, for example, to the story of her “Aunt Neta and her family” who, she notes,

had been forced to work at hard labor in the lumbering or other heavy industry in another part of Siberia after World War II for 11 years. At the Treaty of Yalta and the division of Germany, all Russian-born German people caught in the Russian-controlled zone were forcibly returned to the USSR. Thousands of these hapless people caught in the Russian net were loaded onto cattle cars and shipped off to live out their days in the harsh winters of Kazakhstan. My aunt and her four children survived the ordeal. Many didn't. (253-54)

This section of Funk Wiebe's book, importantly, describes not just Funk Wiebe's own distant relatives but also the “Thousand ... hapless people” of German descent who continued to suffer under Soviet rule after World War II. Funk Wiebe's perceived connection to this past and her understanding of her own identity as belonging to a “deeply flowing river” allow her to view her own actions in relation to the actions of historical others. Furthermore, she emphasizes the importance of conveying the historical narrative of Mennonite oppression by giving space to it in her memoir.

Funk Wiebe not only gives textual space to a historical group that suffered under Stalinism but she also writes about the early significant accomplishments of Mennonite women. A good deal of the book recounts Funk Wiebe's work in breaking down barriers in order to encourage women (particularly Mennonite women) to pursue roles outside of the domestic sphere. She draws awareness to her own work as a writer and a teacher as an example for other women. She always calls for more openness and inclusivity within the Mennonite Brethren faith and encourages women to pursue a spiritual life which, in her time, she observes was a path largely closed off to women. Her position puts her rather dramatically at odds with the prevailing beliefs of her church: "How could any woman break the long line of women who remained true to traditional ways to serve God? How dare she?" (195-96). She concludes somewhat mournfully that the "Mennonite Brethren have usually dealt with the issue of women's roles reluctantly, often with great pain and discomfort on the part of all concerned, because it is enmeshed in firmly entrenched cultural mores. We are not a church that has learned to deal gracefully with conflict" (196). Funk Wiebe's opposition to these traditions could work to establish her as a fiercely independent individual. Much like Di Brandt, though, Funk Wiebe uses this opportunity to view her own actions as a rebel as being intimately bound to the historical actions of her ancestors.

In one respect, Funk Wiebe parallels her own experiences living in a patriarchal culture with similar historical experiences of other Mennonite women. She observes that when she was going to college, a prevailing cultural assumption was that "Men were heads of family and of the church; women should know how to cook, take care of the children and husband, and, if needed, work in the local Sunday school" (32). If this is the kind of environment Funk Wiebe

encountered, it is noteworthy, then, that she should devote attention later in the book to Mennonite women who had historically been placed into a similar role. She writes,

My mother told me that women in the Ukraine had dresses sewn before marriage to accommodate an expected pregnancy and breastfeeding. A man married wife after wife as each one died, often in childbirth complications. Some men sired from eight to eighteen children. Did anyone every [sic] murmur? I can only speak for the under-the-breath mutterings I hear even now when the number of children one woman bears seems too many. But women didn't and couldn't restrict the number of births if she was submissive. It was her role. (219)

The obstacles that Funk Wiebe describes for herself are, by no means, the same as the ones that she describes for other Mennonite women in history. However, what is similar is that both Funk Wiebe and the women she described faced the obstacle of a society that largely placed women into the role of submissive caregiver.

Yet if Funk Wiebe aligns herself with historical Mennonite women in this respect, she also aligns herself with historical others by fighting against these obstacles. In her preface, she notes how “My ancestors had not been complacent, accepting blindly what others told them to believe about God, life, and themselves. They had chosen. Mother and Dad had chosen a new way of living in a new country. That was their gift to me. I too could choose” (14). We learn at this point, then, that Funk Wiebe’s own independent spirit, which guides her throughout her difficult life as a writer, a teacher, and a speaker on women’s rights in the church, is largely a consequence of what she sees as the Mennonite historical legacy of rebelliousness, and some Mennonite women’s refusal to accept the authority of others.

Funk Wiebe's own rebelliousness against the authority of her Church, then, is rooted in a deeply felt connection to a cultural past and to historical others who likewise took part in rebelling against dominating religious belief systems. In fact, she later goes on to say that, "we Anabaptists" come "from a long line of protestors" who "started out being against something" (221). Furthermore, in considering her own actions as a feminist within the Mennonite Brethren church, she writes how she "had descended from a long procession of women who made tremendous contributions to their world which had never entered the memories of present church members" (207).

Significantly, Funk Wiebe devotes space to discussing these accomplishments. She writes:

In those early years in Russia, the women's individual contributions were vast but unrecorded officially. They served to the limit of what was allowed them and some stretched the limits. They were advisers and secretaries to church-leader husbands. They offered hospitality for house churches and itinerant ministers and others, not a small matter in those days without household conveniences. They served as missionaries or supported missions and sewing circles; cared for the sick and hungry, especially during the revolutionary years; and looked after their own families but also other people's children orphaned when parents were exiled or died of typhus and starvation. (206)

Funk Wiebe, here, describes Mennonite women from an earlier era who largely pushed the boundaries of gender normative behaviour. As Funk Wiebe puts it, these were women who "stretched the limits" of "what was allowed them."

Here Funk Wiebe draws our attention to how her sense of self is bound to a larger, collective historical group of others who rebelliously stepped outside of their culturally imposed role. Importantly, though, Funk Wiebe demonstrates what is, for her, the importance of these historical others by focusing on them in the way that she does. In quotations like these, Funk Wiebe does not talk about herself but instead focuses specifically on this historical group and she does so specifically because their story was “unrecorded officially.” Funk Wiebe can tell this particular story of these particular others within her memoir because of the link that she draws between herself and them. Katie Funk Wiebe’s book, then, illustrates the profound importance that history has in informing her sense of self, in that she devotes a good deal of space within her own book to uncovering the stories of historical others that have largely gone unwritten.

The lives represented in these four books are remarkably different from each other and each author represents a different past in different ways, from the freer Anabaptist societies represented by Brandt to the Russian Mennonite victims of Stalinist aggression that we see in Braun’s book. These differences in many ways speak to the remarkable cultural diversity amongst self-identifying Mennonites. Nevertheless, one aspect that connects these authors to each other is that they all suggest having a deeply felt connection to past events and places that they did not directly experience. Hirsch’s notion of postmemory and Landsberg’s theories on prosthetic memories are helpful in explaining how the past can be transmitted to future generations. Indeed, these texts often convey how the legacy of trauma can be passed down to the extent that one connects intimately to the traumatic experiences of their forebears. Storytelling, too, in these books, has the kind of power to create memories. These books, though, go beyond Hirsch and Landsberg by considering how an intimate connection with particular places and landscapes allows one to gain access to the past.

Ultimately what we see in this chapter is that one of the ways these particular authors understand themselves is in relation to a collective, historical group. In positioning their own identity as being bound to historical others, these authors manage to write autobiographically whilst simultaneously focusing on others, sometimes temporarily, but sometimes for the majority of their own text. These books, I argue, reveal a gap in autobiographical theories on relational lives. For one, these theories, typically, do not take into account the impact of historical others or the role that history (particularly history from before the author was born) plays in the life of an autobiographical author. Furthermore, these theories rarely take into account texts that privilege the other in the way that these texts do. These books do not merely talk about the past in order to convey a fluid relationship with others, although they do that too. Importantly, though, these authors also talk about the past because they feel it is crucial to give that past a voice. I will next examine the role of the authors' immediate families in these texts and how these books often privilege familial others over the self.

## Chapter Two

### The Family Plot

In Chapter One, I discussed four authors who construct their autobiographical selves in relation to a larger historical collective. Sometimes (though not always) this collective is familial in nature. Ultimately, though, I hope to have made the point that in those texts the authors that I examined frequently privilege the narrative of a historical, collective other. Connie Braun was not simply narrating the history of her relatives. Rather, from the beginning, Braun notes how the book is “a story about Mennonites” that “entails the history of a people” (*The Steppes* 2). Di Brandt, likewise, does not merely inherit the history of her ancestors, but she also carries in her body the traces of a historical collective of Mennonite women. In this chapter, I would like to examine more closely the relationships that the Canadian Mennonite authors I have chosen to foreground in this study establish with their immediate families. These texts frequently deviate from the classic autobiographical act of self-construction in order to focus attention on other family members.

I will be looking at three books: Rudy Wiebe’s *Of This Earth*, Katie Funk Wiebe’s *You Never Gave Me a Name*, and Miriam Toews’s *Swing Low*. Each book uses autobiographical discourse yet, at the same time, privileges the narrative of family or particular family members over the narrative of the individual self. These authors frequently challenge the conventional way in which “family” is defined by autobiographical theorists, in particular theorists on filiation memoir. Rather than simply write memoirs about a father or a mother, these texts frequently focus on the whole family or reconceive of family to consider other models of kinship beyond the traditional familial structure. Perhaps more importantly, though, is that in privileging the

narrative of others, these texts challenge conventional ways of examining family memoirs as examples of relational identity.

In *Of This Earth*, Rudy Wiebe gives as much attention to his family, especially his sister Helen, as he does to himself. In that case, Wiebe's autobiographical self is largely connected to the relational others that informed his identity in his childhood and a great deal of his memoir focuses specifically on these others. In a more extreme example, Miriam Toews's book *Swing Low* adopts autobiographical discourse in order to tell the life story of her father from his own perspective. I will look at both Toews's and Wiebe's books, along with Katie Funk Wiebe's, in order to suggest that these texts not only convey the overall significance of the family in informing these authors' own sense of self, but also to illustrate how the concept of the family is so overwhelming for these authors that the story of the personal frequently gives way to the story of the familial.

In his book *How Our Lives Become Stories*, Paul John Eakin argues that "an important variety of relational autobiography" is "the family memoir, in which the lives of other family members are rendered as either equal in importance to or more important than the life of the reporting self" (85). Importantly, Eakin suggests the possibility that a relational autobiographical text, and particularly a familial narrative, could in fact privilege the story of others rather than the story of the "I" who records the events. It is these moments of privileging others that I am most interested in. These moments also make me consider why writers invoke autobiographical discourse in order to focus on the story of familial others. Eakin suggests his own particular reasons why the family memoir is of particular importance. He writes that texts that convey an identity in relation to familial others suggest that "the key environment in the individual's formation is the family, which serves as the community's primary conduit for the transmission of



its cultural values” (85). Eakin’s point resonates with several of the texts that I look at, which position the family, or at least certain family members, as instrumental in the construction of one’s selfhood.

At the same time, though, these texts reveal what I consider to be the problematic conflation at the heart of Eakin’s claims regarding relational identities. As I mentioned in my introduction, Eakin’s conceptualization of relational identities is very much indebted to psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin who, he notes, considers the “intersubjective dimension” (qtd. in Eakin 52) of identity formation. Indeed, a crucial aspect of Benjamin’s argument in her book *The Bonds of Love* (the same book Eakin relies on) is her claim “that the balance *within* the self depends upon mutual recognition *between* self and other” (53). It is this very notion of “mutual recognition” that runs through a good deal of Eakin’s own analysis<sup>13</sup>.

Yet if mutuality plays such a significant role in the concept of relational identities, and if earlier theoretical work by scholars such as Susan Stanford Friedman support this, then I am left unsure of how autobiographical identities in texts that render family as “more important than the life of the reporting self” can be entirely conflated with autobiographical identities that treat the family as being equally important. It seems to me as if the latter is far more in keeping with relational lives as Eakin typically describes them even though he allows for the former in his discussion. What I want to suggest is that the texts that I look at allow us to recognize that there *is* a difference between these two types of identities in that they provoke different sorts of questions, such as what accounts for the privileging of family in these autobiographical texts.

That the family figures so heavily in these texts is significant particularly when one takes into account Alison Landsberg’s claims regarding prosthetic memory that I discussed in the previous chapter. Landsberg asserts that since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, traditional means of transmitting

memories have changed, not only because of the advent of “new technologies like the cinema” (2) but also, she claims, because immigration, exile, and subsequent diasporas have resulted in “ruptured generational ties, rendering the traditional modes for transmitting cultural, ethnic, and racial memory – both memories passed from parent to child and those disseminated through community life – increasingly inadequate” (2). These “ruptures” as Landsberg calls them led not only to people relying on film for memory, whereas before they could rely on family and community, but also to prosthetic memories, as the past could be transmitted to a larger group of people. The texts that I look at, though, do not necessarily suggest this. Landsberg is indeed helpful, as I discussed earlier, in showing how the past can be felt by those who did not directly experience events. Nevertheless, as I also discussed, these texts modify Landsberg’s point in that the authors do not necessarily gain access to this past via 20<sup>th</sup> century technology.

In fact, while these texts affirm Landsberg’s points regarding the prosthetic nature of memory, they also in many ways challenge her observations regarding family, community, and technology, demonstrating less the rupture of generational ties than they do the ongoing strength of familial identities. Recent autobiography theory on exile narratives reinforces the point I am making here. Some critics have addressed the position of liminality and instability that accompanies states of diaspora. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, for example, have characterized exile memoirs as “inscrib[ing] a nomadic subject, set in motion, for a variety of reasons and now inhabiting cultural borderlands, who may or may not return ‘home’ but who necessarily negotiates cultural spaces of the in-between” (269). The autobiographical subject in exile, for Smith and Watson, is one that inhabits an ever-conflicting and shifting space.

At the same time, though, Marianne Hirsh and Nancy K. Miller have noted how “Memoir ... has become an increasingly productive form for exploring the meaning of family,

generational identity, and ethnicity, as well as for researching a past marked by historical calamity – the losses caused by the vicissitudes of violence, war and genocide” (10). Hirsch and Miller conclude that certain memoirs of exile reaffirm “the power of the personal voice and of the family as vehicle in the transpersonal writing of historical return” (10). In Chapter One, I demonstrated how the family and connection to historical others functions as a way to investigate moments from the past before the ruptures of violence and war. These texts demonstrate the still very necessary role that family plays in the memoirs of writers who are descendants of exiled cultural groups.

In this chapter, I investigate less about how the texts by Katie Funk Wiebe, Rudy Wiebe, and Miriam Toews highlight the importance of family as a vehicle for the historical return to a pre-exiled space. Instead, I look to these books as evidence that, while the family remains crucial for these writers in terms of forming an autobiographical identity, it is the family narrative itself (or the narrative of one close family member) that is frequently privileged over the personal narrative. Contrary to Landsberg’s argument, I see these texts as evidence that the family (rather than modern technology) is essential for these authors in identity formation, storytelling and memory making. Indeed, for many of the writers I look at, their early formative period of growing up in an isolated and separated community meant that the cinema was outside of their experience. Di Brandt recounts how she only encounters “experimental European films” (209) after her departure from her community. Similarly, Rudy Wiebe describes going to the cinema as a unique experience which could have only happened while his family was away from the Saskatchewan boreal forest, visiting family in Vancouver. He notes, “I had never seen a movie before, ... I’d never heard the clicking flicker of a projector, seen the beam of light in a shuttered room and shadows twitch and tumble over a screen” (321). When he does see movies he notes

how he has “forgotten them” and suggests the reason why is because the stories of his going did not circulate within his family since his parents might have “forbidden” him from going had they known (322). This remark suggests that, for Wiebe at least, family plays a far more vital role in bolstering memories than the worldly films he watches. Here, and elsewhere, family ties still remain strong.

Indeed this is not entirely surprising given the prominent role that family has played in some Mennonite societies. According to historian Marlene Epp, “the Mennonite family, either nuclear or extended, was a central institution for organizing community life and transmitting beliefs” (61). Epp goes on to note that “The Mennonite family functioned as an economic unit, a migration unit, and was the building block for village and settlement formation” (62). Significant here is Epp’s observation that family continued to play a crucial role for Mennonites even as they were being uprooted or uprooting themselves in order to begin new settlements elsewhere<sup>14</sup>. Epp suggests what Landsberg does not entirely account for in her book: that while “traditional modes” for transmitting memory (such as family and community) may very well have been put under pressure as a result of migration, they were not necessarily eliminated altogether. In the case of many Russian Mennonites who emigrated before the Iron Curtain slammed shut in 1929, these traditional modes were often refashioned in some form elsewhere.

It may be useful to consider, in this context, the work of Maurice Halbwachs, who wrote in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and whom Landsberg herself largely dismisses in her text. Like Landsberg, Halbwachs, too, sees memory as being collective in nature. Halbwachs argues that “The individual calls recollections to mind by relying on the frameworks of social memory” (182). For Halbwachs, according to Patrick H. Hutton, “the images of memory are always fragmentary and provisional” (78). Individual memories only take shape and only begin to have

any real kind of meaning if they are embedded within a “framework of social memory” which produces a common collective memory that is consistently shaped by all the individuals who exist within the framework. Halbwachs suggests, then, that memories can only “hang together” when they are placed “within a totality of thoughts common to a group” (52). In other words, our memories simply disappear unless others remind us of the events that the group as a whole considers to be worth remembering.

As Lewis A. Coser puts it in his introduction to Halbwachs’ book *On Collective Memory*, “we will surely realize that the greatest number of memories come back to us when our parents, our friends, or other persons recall them to us” (38). Because memories become concretized in a social setting and are legitimized “within a totality of memories,” what becomes clear, according to critic Patrick Hutton, is that Halbwachs is suggesting that our individual memories typically reflect the “social mores, values, and ideals ... of the social groups to which we relate” (Hutton 78). This does not mean, necessarily, that the individual has no say in what he or she remembers. Rather, his or her personal memory largely contributes to the memory of the group as a whole. For Halbwachs, one of the three crucial social frameworks (along with religion and the traditions of the social classes) is family. He writes, “In the case of the family group the similarity of memories is merely a sign of a community of interests and thoughts. It is not because memories resemble each other that several can be called to mind at the same time. It is rather because the same group is interested in them and is able to call them to mind at the same time that they resemble each other” (52). Families, then, operate as a social collective wherein each member contributes to what becomes a common set of interests and customs. This, in turn, shapes the kind of social memories that the member gathers.

Indeed, for Halbwachs, we typically experience moments of remembrance as a result of traditions and commemoration, and it is certainly the case that “family possesses traditions that are peculiar to it” (74). A family, according to Halbwachs, will have particular rituals and will commemorate certain events that preserve and concretize the recollections of the individuals within the family unit. I might suggest further that within families stories can circulate that keep certain memories alive. A family trip, for example, might elicit particular stories that the family members tell and re-tell to each other to the point that years later those particular stories – the stories that the family as a whole decided were important – are all that is recalled of the trip. Importantly, too, Halbwachs notes that the memories that are created by the social framework of family maintain themselves both when the individual lives within the framework and also when the individual leaves the framework. Even as members leave the family (perhaps to begin their own family, or perhaps as a result of an emotional break) traditions can “echo” (77) to borrow Halbwachs’ term. As a result, “older memories will take a position within a new framework” (77). For Halbwachs, then, the memories that are constructed by the family unit typically exist in some form or another throughout a person’s life, reinforcing how formative and enduring these particular social frameworks are.

That Halbwachs should suggest that family is a key framework of memory is crucial for my own analysis of these texts as examples of life writing. After all, Smith and Watson assert, “Memory is thus the source, authenticator, and destabilizer of autobiographical acts” (22). To be sure, our very sense of self and our ability to construct an identity for ourselves is dependent on having memories. Memory confirms that we have had experiences, and experience, for Smith and Watson, “is the very process through which a person becomes a certain kind of subject owning certain identities in the social realm, identities constituted through material, cultural,

economic, and psychic relations” (31). As critic Joan W. Scott points out, though, merely understanding lives by their experiences conceals how experience plays a key role in how identities are ideologically constructed. She notes that “the project of making experience visible precludes critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself, its categories of representation ... its premises about what these categories mean and how they operate, its notions of subjects, origin, and cause” (25).

As Smith and Watson put it, Scott argues “how our notion of meaningful experience is socially produced” (31). Their use of the term “meaningful experience” is apt. Scott calls into question specifically what *counts* as experience, and presumably, what counts as something to be remembered. Given the historical (and perhaps mythological) import of the family, both within consumer capitalist frameworks and within certain Mennonite cultures, it is perhaps no surprise that family memories tend to be a crucial part of what counts when the authors that I look at construct their autobiographical identities and their life narratives. Halbwachs is important in this regard as his arguments regarding familial collective memory help me to illuminate why these authors consider their own identities as being bound to familial others.

This does not mean that the books that I am looking at here, by any means, suggest that the identities that the authors construct for themselves are entirely a consequence of familial influence. As Smith and Watson suggest above, there are many competing and frequently intersecting networks of relations out of which identities are constituted. As already noted, Halbwachs himself argues, according to Patrick Hutton, that there are several frameworks of social memory that are always at work and there are several social groups that “compete for our allegiances” (79). Indeed, the authors that I am looking at certainly consider their own subjectivity as informed by (and, in these cases, often obscured by) a variety of relations, several

of which are discussed in other chapters. Nevertheless, I intend to show here that certainly family plays a pivotal role for these authors in terms of how they conceive of their own particular identities.

It is for this reason that I challenge Landsberg's assertion in her introduction to *Prosthetic Memory* that "the forces of modernity and the changes wrought by modern mass culture have made Halbwach's notion of collective memory inadequate" (8). I do suggest that Landsberg is correct when she argues that "memories and images of the past" can "circulate on a grand scale" (18), though I question whether the age of rampant commodification necessarily swept everyone up to the extent that she suggests it does. After all, what do we make of the various sub-cultures who, whilst never entirely outside the influential sphere of the modern consumer capitalist age, nevertheless largely maintained humble lives, often in geographical locations that were not nearly as penetrated by industrial development as other spaces were.

It seems to me, though, that it is ultimately unnecessary to choose between Landsberg and Halbwach since they are talking about two very different kinds of memory. Landsberg is mostly concerned with how one gains access to memories of a past that one did not directly experience, while Halbwachs is concerned with how social groups generate memories of the past in the present. In his discussion of the family, at least, Halbwachs is not concerned with the notion of family members taking on memories of events before they were born, but rather with how their own personal memories of their own familial past have been generated by the family unit collectively. Ultimately, then, I would like to recover Halbwachs's point, not to undermine Landsberg's own claims regarding the prosthetic nature of memory, but rather to suggest another key way that people (especially people not particularly affected by kinship ruptures and the age of commodification) might access memories.



That the family plays a key role in one's self-identification has been long acknowledged by scholars of life writing, as the quotation above from Eakin suggests. Nevertheless more work needs to be done in theorizing family memoir as a sub-genre. In their book *Reading Autobiography*, Smith and Watson discuss the filiation narrative, which they define as a text that "seeks to memorialize the relationship to a parent, sibling, or child, someone with whom one has had a long-standing affiliation" (270). It is this sub-genre of the filiation narrative as Smith and Watson describe it, rather than the family memoir, that *has* been effectively theorized. The term itself was coined by life writing scholar G. Thomas Couser. Like Eakin and others,<sup>15</sup> Couser argues that autobiographical stories of filiation are largely relational narratives. He suggests that,

The term 'filiation' has two distinct but related meanings that are pertinent here. First, it refers to 'the condition or fact of being the child [not necessarily the son, though the root is the Latin *filius*, son] of a particular parent (not necessarily a father); second, in law, it refers to 'judicial determination of paternity' (*American Heritage Dictionary*). By calling the texts in question narratives of filiation, rather than merely memoirs of fathers, I seek to highlight their relationality, their rootedness in a sense of entitlement and their intent to enact some kind of engagement with the father, whether living or dead. ("Genre Matters" 151)

While Couser is clearly far more interested in stories about fathers written by children (particularly sons) here, he expands the sub-genre of filiation narratives in a subsequent article to include both *patriography* and *matriography* ("In My Father's Closet" 891), memoirs of both fathers and mothers, respectively. This quotation also reveals that Couser places certain limits on what constitutes a filiation narrative. For Couser, filiation narratives are not simply about other

family members but are, rather, implicitly relational in conveying a one-to-one relationship. They are stories that highlight the dynamic between child and parent.

Couser also places limitations on the sub-genre by suggesting that all filiation narratives are borne out of a common necessity. It is for this reason that Couser dismisses the possibility that “all memoirs of fathers ... constitute narratives of filiation” (“Genre Matters” 151). On the contrary, “only those written out of a certain sense of need or lack” (151) can be appropriately classified under the umbrella term that Couser constructs. Couser’s point was largely reaffirmed by scholars who contributed to the 2004 volume of the journal *Auto/Biography Studies* that was devoted specifically to intergenerational life writing. John D. Barbour, for example, observed that

In many recent family memoirs, ‘unfinished business’ between parents and children structures the narrative as the author delineates personal identity largely in relation to a parent. Usually because of some suppressed, shameful, or hidden aspect of the parent’s past life, the parent was absent or emotionally distant during the autobiographer’s childhood. Writing a memoir helps the author come to terms with and redefine the problematic relationship to a mother or father. (19)

Roger J. Porter similarly suggests in his article “Finding the Father” that “These authors are often desperate to discover what they hope is ‘hard’ evidence in the face of parental barriers thrown in their way. These authors are often desperate to discover what they suspect but cannot prove, or what has baffled them about their parent(s) for a long time” (101). The common consensus, then, is that filiation narratives are largely spurred on by an absence or lack of proper closure – the “‘unfinished business’” as Barbour would have it or the inability of the author to fully grasp the reality of a parent’s life.

I want to suggest that this work on the filiation narrative is helpful in considering how the authors who are the subject of my commentary consider their identities in relation to their families. That being said, I find it unfortunate that the terms “filiation narrative” and “family memoir” have been conflated to the extent that they have. After all, Barbour, in the quotation above, takes family memoir to mean stories about parents by their (now grown-up) children. The concept “family” though is complex, and it seems to me that the discussions regarding the family memoir have not fully taken account of the flexibility of this term. Family of course can entail the relationship between a parent and a child but it could also suggest the relationship between siblings, the relationships between partners, and it could entail the stories of parents about their children, rather than the other way around. Furthermore, the word “family” could be applied to co-workers and those who serve in the military where paradigms of family are also in circulation. I do think, then, as my analysis of the first two books in this chapter will show, that the discussions of family memoir could stand to be expanded somewhat given how individual authors consider the term. For my purposes, I want to look at these texts as family memoirs because they often (though not always) come out of a similar absence, but also, and more importantly, because the authors’ identities are so very much tied to their family life as they understand it.

Rudy Wiebe in his book *Of This Earth* understands family to be not just his parents but also his two brothers, four sisters, and siblings’ spouses. The book demonstrates how family assists in forming Wiebe’s collective memories and also helps shape his own self-understanding. Appropriately, Wiebe begins the acknowledgements section at the end of the book with the statement that “Childhood memory is always a family affair, especially in an immigrant Mennonite family” (389). Wiebe here asserts the importance of family in his particular

Mennonite upbringing and also the importance it continues to have in shaping his own remembrance of the past. Wiebe's belief that his childhood memories are collective in nature is put into practice in the overall structure of the text.

Often Wiebe relies not only on his own memories but also the memories of his other family members to shape the family story he is telling. Early in the book, for example, Wiebe talks to his sister Tina who recalls how their mother was embarrassed about being an older woman and pregnant (with Rudy) when her eldest daughter was also pregnant and considerably less affected by the weight of the baby (33). Elsewhere, Wiebe recounts the story of the family's move from Kelstern to Speedwell which occurred before Wiebe himself was born. In order to do this, he relies on memories from other family members. He notes, "My mother remembered the exact day that our family, for the first time, drove north along this road. May 9, 1933, she told me when I was writing Pah's obituary; in a small rented truck. They wanted to be farmers, but after three years in Canada they did not own a single animal, not a cow, not so much as a dog" (71). Wiebe's brother, Dan, fills in more details: "When I ask Dan why, of all possible places, they hauled themselves to stony Speedwell, he relies, 'There was really no work in the south, and Mam and Pah wanted their own land to work'" (72). This episode suggests several important things. First, it affirms what is for Wiebe the significance of collective familial memory. Here, he tells a family story based on the memories of both his mother and his brother. Wiebe, in a sense, takes on their memories here as he tells the familial narrative. Important, too, is that Wiebe should choose to tell this story in his memoir, given that it occurs before he is born.

These moments also serve to reveal how this book is not simply the story of Rudy Wiebe but the story of Rudy Wiebe's family. Wiebe simply constructs himself as being one amongst many and ultimately we understand him through his relation to the collective and relatively

harmonious identity of the Wiebe's. The point is made quite literally from the very beginning of the book when Wiebe describes his family as singing together in harmony:

In the crystalline cold my mother's soprano weaves the high notes on 'Pi-il-ger' back and forth into my father's tenor like wind breathing through the leaves of summer aspen. My oldest sister, Tina, is married and my oldest brother, Abe, in Bible school, they are not there, and Dan is standing at the open back of the sledbox, tall and silent; but we four younger siblings are humming inside our layered clothes under the covers, Mary especially because she can already thread alto between Mam and Pah's voices, make three-part harmony, and if only Dan would open his mouth, as Mary tells him often enough, we could have a family quartet even if Helen and Liz and I are too little for anything yet except melody.

(2-3)

As this quotation suggests, the collective familial identity does not deny individual behaviours and characteristics. After all, as Wiebe notes here, the three youngest children cannot entirely contribute to a harmony but rather sing the melody and brother Dan is a silent participant. The point, though, is that they are participating in this moment together with each member bringing a part of themselves to the familial whole. Even the ones that are missing, Tina and Abe, are present in Wiebe's memory for their absence and, moreover, that their absence is so obviously felt is only further evidence of the importance of the overall unity of the familial identity. Here the familial overwhelms that personal, a point that is reinforced glaringly considering that Wiebe barely mentions himself at all.

He notes elsewhere how an important part of being Mennonite, according to his family, meant that he would "listen to sermons and sing, sing, sing. Always full harmony" (216).

Intriguingly, this moment fits nicely within Wiebe's oeuvre. Focusing in particular on the function of both singing and knitting in Wiebe's novel *Sweeter than all the World*, Edna Froese writes that "singing, in the context of the rich harmonies of those who sing together, evoke – in all of Wiebe's novels – the protection afforded by family and community" ("Adam" 21). Jane Hostetler Robinett, in her own discussion of *Sweeter* makes a similar point when she suggests that in Wiebe's book, harmonious singing can signify "the fundamentally spiritual nature of love and its relationship to the idea of home" (43). I suggest that Wiebe uses singing in much the same way in his autobiographical writing. As Wiebe recounts the family singalong at the beginning of *Of This Earth*, it is evident that this memory is meant to convey his belonging to a protective family unit as he pictures himself "in blue darkness and covered by blankets" (1).

This is a memoir, then, about the self as inextricably linked to familial others. We end up focusing as much if not more on the family than we do on Wiebe as an individual. Critic Malin Sigvardson has gone so far as to suggest that there are moments in the book where the story seems to be told by "a spectator rather than by a participator" (136). Sigvardson suggests that Wiebe's distanced descriptions of his several "homesteads" in the book reveal that the author's "sense of home" cannot be located in a single and essential space (136). I think, though, that Sigvardson is ultimately able to read Wiebe's position as a spectator because he regularly pushes himself out of the autobiographical spotlight.

That Wiebe sees this book as the story of a family rather than the story of the self is readily apparent in the several passages in the book devoted to stories of other family members. In one example, Wiebe tells a long story about his sister Mary and her husband Emmanuel. He writes:

Mary was not happy at having married Emmanuel. The man she really wanted ... was one of his John Lobe cousins. ... But the Lobes had also left Speedwell ... and something had happened, or hadn't happened that should have, and Mary suddenly agreed, on the rebound as it might have been whispered, to marry Emmanuel who had tried to woo her for a long time and whom she just teased, laughing. She liked certain ways of laughter, very much, and he was forever telling jokes – not really witty or ironic, more folksy sayings or long, slow build-up stories that were sometimes okay but at other times she would simply snort her disdain and walk away, her lovely lips curled” (169-70)

Again, Wiebe tells a story here that has very little to do with himself. His personal connection to the story is strictly that it involves his sister and her husband. The lengthy passage is indicative of the fact that Wiebe is privileging the family narrative over his own in the sense that he relays stories of family members to which he has only a tangential connection.

While these moments serve to illustrate how crucial family and family memories are for Wiebe in this book, Wiebe does not fully romanticize or even entirely trust these memories. The reader, for example, gets glimpses into events from the lives of Wiebe's parents. We learn that,

Money had nothing to do with how they met. In 1897 Russia, in the cemetery of their Orenburg Mennonite Colony village, tiny Katerina Knelsen stood weeping as the coffin of her mother Susanna Knelsen nee Loewen, aged twenty-five, was lowered into the muddy ground. And then Abram Wiebe, the Jakob Wiebe boy from the farmstead across the village street from the Knelsens, came beside her and comforted her. She was two years old, he nine. (97)

In this moment, Wiebe does not participate at all because, of course, he was not there when his parents met. We receive this particular story though because it is a crucial origin story in what is ultimately the narrative of the familial identity that Wiebe constructs throughout the text. This moment is as important to Wiebe's sense of self as anything that happened in his life because it is the beginning of the family that informs Wiebe's identity in the book. In other moments, like the sing-a-long previously discussed at the beginning of the text, Wiebe participates but only as a piece of a larger familial network.

What is perhaps most remarkable about this origin story, though, is how unstable it is, since it strikingly contradicts the depiction of Wiebe's parents that Wiebe gives us throughout the book. Essentially, we learn that Wiebe's father "had no backbone" (106) while Wiebe's mother is "stern and loving" (19), always "afraid of sin for her children" (19) and also a crucial model of strength for Wiebe. He notes that "In our family, our mother did what needed to be done, always. For us small children the thought of Mam not knowing what to do on the farm was incredible; that she would not do whatever was necessary we could not imagine" (61). Indeed, it is Wiebe's mother to whom Wiebe appears to look as a source of inspiration for how to act rather than his father, whom he describes as "hopeless, perhaps even a coward" (105). This image that we get of Wiebe's parents is repeated throughout the book, which makes this origin story so vexing. In this moment, the roles that Wiebe constructs for his parents are reversed – Pah becomes the source of comfort to his mother who is experiencing a moment of weakness.

Wiebe himself questions the authenticity of this story. He writes: "Our family beginning here has few explications: did my father pick my mother up, crying hysterically, or did he stand close beside her, perhaps take her hand, warm it between his own in the autumn air? What Mennonite village boy of nine would call such attention to himself, surrounded at a funeral by



everyone he knew?” (97-98). Finally, he concludes that this moment conveyed a “warmth and tenderness” which he did “not, in my childhood, remember between my parents” (98). In this sense, then, Wiebe does not shy away from exposing the very instability at the heart of this familial identity. He reconfirms Smith and Watson’s observation that “identities are not fixed or essentialized attributes of autobiographical subjects; rather, they are enacted and reiterated through cultural norms and discourses, and thus remain provisional and unstable” (214).

Yet, as Maurice Halbwachs points out, the collective memory that comes out of familial bonds (which, in my view, sustains a relational and familial identity) is always unstable. Ultimately, for Halbwachs, it is in the very act of recalling moments from the past when “we distort that past, because we wish to introduce greater coherence” (Halbwachs 183). This point of view leads Patrick Hutton to suggest that “memory invent[s] a skewed pattern of the past” (Hutton 77). Moreover, though, as Lewis Coser observes, “everything [in Halbwach’s work] seems to indicate that the past is not preserved but is reconstructed on the basis of the present” (39-40). From this we can conclude that, for Halbwachs, the past is always in flux. Our memories of events are contingent on where we are and who we are in the present. It is important, then, that Wiebe should acknowledge that while his family and collective family memories are a crucial factor in his own self-understanding, it is nevertheless also the case that this identity is never fully secure.

I suggest that it is precisely for the reason that the past is in flux that Wiebe wishes to concretize particular family memories in his memoir. The front matter of the text contains a Russian Mennonite proverb that appears both in Low German and in English: “That was so long ago, it is almost no longer so” (ix). In other words, in the face of gradually fading or possibly changing memories, the past as Wiebe understands it is in danger of disappearing. This is a

particularly difficult possibility for Wiebe, given the significant role that his sister, Helen, played in his youth.

As Wiebe notes very early in the book, “Helen will be the first of us to die, in late March when World War II in Europe is at last coming to an end” (26). Helen, for Wiebe, played a crucial role in the family unit as a contributor to collective family memories and, consequently, a contributor to Wiebe’s own sense of self. Indeed, the book relies substantially on Helen’s own diary entries as a way for Wiebe to recall his shared past. Because so much of Helen’s writing appears within Wiebe’s memoir, I discuss her importance to Wiebe and to the book in my fourth chapter on intertextual relationality. Suffice it to say for now, Helen appears as a central figure in the book and that Wiebe focuses so much attention on his sister who died in 1945 is very much indicative of the kind of anxieties that come with confronting a past “that was so long ago, it is almost no longer so.”

The photography that appears throughout the memoir reinforces this sense of concretization of a fading or disappearing past. As in the rest of the book, though, Wiebe’s use of photographs demonstrates the impossibility of getting an entirely accurate narrative. Moreover, the photographs highlight Wiebe’s privileging of familial others. Timothy Dow Adams has previously noted the kinship shared by life writing and photography in his book *Light Writing and Life Writing*. He writes,

Just as autobiographies are obviously artificial representations of lives, so photographs are clearly manufactured images: sitters are artificially posed and lighted, made to conform to the laws of perspective and the ideology of the photographic culture, reduced in size, reproduced on a flat plane often without

color – and yet there is something undeniably different about a photographic representation of a person as opposed to a painting of that same person. (5)

Dow Adams notes here how photography, like life writing, is mediated and shaped, offering mere “artificial representations” of reality.

Marianne Hirsch, in her book, *Family Frames*, discusses how photography works to shape a particular narrative about family. She writes that “photography quickly became the family’s primary instrument of self-knowledge and representation – the means by which family memory would be continued and perpetuated, by which the family’s story would henceforth be told” (6-7). In *Of This Earth*, photography certainly assists Wiebe in making sense of the past and also making sense of familial relationships. Investigating one family photo he writes,

[My sister] Tina stands at the back, so slender between Abe and Dan, her face tilted down and it seems her eyes are closed. Or it is possible, to judge from the angle of her head, that she is looking down over Mam’s shoulder at me, and it comes to me that memory in these images is like the ineffability of the love she and I gave each other, ... a love we felt that needed no comment or overt demonstration. (29)

In this moment, Wiebe is very much reading the ambiguous image (are Tina’s eyes shut or are they not?) and drawing a conclusion that works to reinforce a kind of familial connection and unity, namely an unspoken bond between him and his sister.

In noting that the “memory in these images” is ineffable, Wiebe is stating that the photographs are communicating something that the written text may not be able to communicate. At the same time, though, the similarities between the written text and the photography are striking. The photographs suggest, in much the same way as Wiebe does in print, that the past is

never entirely retrievable. At one point, Wiebe asks, “is there a yeast in memory that grows, knits our past into the timeless shapes we desire? Or do I now know events and times only from what I see in accidentally retained pictures, the exact Kodak instant focused on crimped paper” (332-33). Wiebe acknowledges the possibility here that collections of photographs create the sense of a knowable and accessible past. Hirsch suggests, though, that “As photography immobilizes the flow of family life into a series of snapshots, it perpetuates familial myths while seeming merely to record actual moments in family history” (7). Collections of family photographs, then, create very particular memories and work to construct a very particular kind of past. This is something that Wiebe himself appears to recognize when he confronts the possibility of only knowing of events and times as a result of a collection of scattered frozen moments.

The book then works to concretize the family of Wiebe’s past while at the same time recognizing the impossibility of doing so. Frequently when Wiebe discusses a family photograph with Helen in it, he also references her subsequent early death even though the photo itself does not appear to warrant the remark (15, 26). In making these comments, Wiebe reinforces the fact that the photographs captured and recorded Helen’s life in some manner before it was too late. If it is the case that Wiebe recalls the past via “accidentally retained pictures,” it is meaningful then that photographs of Helen should survive over the years. At the same time, though, Wiebe includes a photograph of Helen as a baby where her face has largely been blurred out. Wiebe observes the picture and sees “Helen crooked tight in Mam’s arm, her face already blurring before life’s iron reality” (192). In this moment, Wiebe conveys what Hirsch notes is the ability of the photograph to “bring the past back in the form of a ghostly revenant, [while] emphasizing, at the same time, its immutable and irreversible pastness and irretrievability” (20).

In anticipating Helen's death, the photograph serves as a nagging reminder of what Wiebe cannot retrieve. Other photos in the book emphasize this as well. While Wiebe can be quite descriptive of the people who are in the photographs and what they are doing, it is ultimately fairly difficult for the reader to make out much of anything. In several instances (14, 92, 162, 173, 333, 334) the subjects of the photo are standing so far back that it becomes impossible to see anyone. In other cases, the subjects are either too difficult to see or it is impossible to tell if there are subjects at all because of lighting or the focus of the camera (270, 280, 349). The photographs, though, ultimately play a significant role in that they reinforce the kind of family narrative that appears in the written text and emphasize that the overall focus of the book is not Wiebe himself despite its being his memoir. Remarkably, given that the book is marketed as a memoir of a "Mennonite boyhood," only four out of forty-four pictures feature Rudy Wiebe alone. Instead, Wiebe appears with others in sixteen photographs, fourteen of which include him with other family members. Wiebe does not appear at all in twenty-two photos. There are a total of seventeen pictures of other family members (either family photos or individual family members) that do not include Wiebe.

*Of This Earth* works to reaffirm what David Parker refers to as "the ethical imperative" of the family memoir. Parker argues that the author of the autobiographical text will frequently suggest in his or her text that "If I don't remember and tell [the stories of familial others] then no one else will. ... [O]nly I can prevent their potentially empowering voices and stories from vanishing forever" (150). Parker's point certainly holds true for Wiebe in his book. He laments near the end of his memoir that "With every passing day our memory is what we can still find in it, or cannot avoid, ... there are many [memories] we would wish never to lose: the more precise they are, the more they comfort us" (372). In his memoir, Wiebe presumably attempts to

represent his memories as precisely as possible. Wiebe produces a text about a time, place, and people who played an important role in the development of his own personal understanding of the past and, thus, in informing his own sense of self as tied to that past.

At the same time, though, Wiebe interrogates what Marianne Hirsch calls “familial myths” by conveying how genuinely imprecise these memories can be. What is significant here is how much Wiebe relies on the memories of others and how often the familial stories are about other family members. Ultimately, then, *Of This Earth* is a family memoir in which the narrative of the family takes precedence over the narrative of the self. Because of this, the book pushes the limitations of the theoretical discussions on relational identities in life writing.

Similar to Rudy Wiebe, Katie Funk Wiebe expands the conventions of the family memoir to include a wider family unit in her book *You Never Gave Me a Name*. While it is true that Katie Funk Wiebe does focus a great deal on her parents as being crucial figures in her own self-understanding (the “*You*” in the title, after all, is directed specifically towards her parents), she also devotes ample space in the book to her children, co-workers, and perhaps even more so in the first part of the book, her husband. In this sense, the first part of the book appears, on the surface, to confirm Mary G. Mason’s early argument about relational identities in women’s life writing. Recall that Mason argued that women’s autobiographical texts conventionally convey women positioned in relation to men. Mason *does* acknowledge that “For some women writers, it is not a man, or men, or a community but a woman, or women, who provide the other of identity” (234). Despite these acknowledged exceptions, though, Mason clearly suggests that “The pattern most frequently adopted (and adapted) by later women has unquestionably been the solution recorded in the life and writing of Margaret Cavendish – the pairing of one’s own image

with another, equal image” (231). The other “equal image,” for Mason, is typically what she calls the “marital other” (231), a point that is reaffirmed in Mason’s example texts<sup>16</sup>.

Funk Wiebe certainly does give a great deal of textual space to her “marital other,” Walter, in the first hundred pages of the book. Walter dies quite early in the marriage following a narrative wherein he and Funk Wiebe have four children and move repeatedly throughout Canada, eventually ending up in Hillsboro, Kansas in the United States. The space that Funk Wiebe devotes to Walter suggests a relational identity and indebtedness to his influence on her life in a way that follows the tropes of early, conventional women’s life writing, as Mason describes them. Nevertheless, her departure from this kind of identity in the following two thirds of the book serves, I argue, to comment on these conventions as well as to provide an alternative model of identity for Mennonite women outside of the patriarchal structure of marriage.

This is not to say, as I will show, that her post-marriage identity is fully autonomous and independent. Rather, Funk Wiebe constructs a different kind of relational identity (one that is frequently still a familial identity) which is an expression of a new kind of self that was largely submerged by her marriage. In displaying the shift from one identity to another, Katie Funk Wiebe demonstrates the possibility of change and growth from the kind of identities that women in earlier autobiographical texts seemed bound to perform. Ultimately, though, the book shows Funk Wiebe as having a relational identity with those whom she considers to be family, whether it is her parents, her husband, her children, or even her colleagues.

Funk Wiebe establishes a familial collective identity in several ways. The beginning of the book reveals how her sense of self was largely influenced by her parents. A good deal of the memoir concerns her feeling uncomfortable with the name that her parents gave her. She writes, “The name my parents gave me was Katie, a plain German-Mennonite name. I didn’t like it

growing up because it didn't sound sophisticated enough to suit my ambitions. To me, it brought up images of *Schlorre* (simple footwear), drab clothing, and dull living of another country and era" (11). This aspect of "*Schlorre*" that Funk Wiebe evokes is repeated throughout the book. According to Funk Wiebe, "My Russian-born father understood the meaning of shoes as a symbol of belonging. He grew up wearing *Schlorre*, a wooden sole with a leather band over the toes. . . . As a young boy, my father yearned for a pair of shoes" (158). Funk Wiebe uses the *Schlorre*/shoes dichotomy in her memoir in order to explore both her sense of belonging to a creative writing community as well as her own sense of comfort within a Mennonite cultural community.

As the quotation above indicates, Funk Wiebe connects her own Mennonitism, at least Mennonitism as she experienced it early in her life, with a simplicity that she largely rejects because she recalls it being the primary obstacle in her desire to become a writer. She acknowledges "the deep rut, theologically, I was falling into by accepting without question the thinking that women had only one role in life – that related to her anatomy, not her mind" (26). The book, then, in many ways charts Funk Wiebe's own growth from *Schlorre* to shoes. As she eventually tells us, "now I always wear shoes" (159). This transformation from *Schlorre* to shoes means several things to her.

Given that Funk Wiebe understands shoes to be "that symbol of acceptance as equals" (158) and *Schlorre* to be "simple footwear," the transformation indicates her acceptance into the world of writing (in fact, she has a chapter called "How I received shoes as a writer"), as well as her shift from a more simple (or, as Funk Wiebe characterizes it, traditional, "drab," and "dull") life to something far more modern. Though she does not entirely suggest this, the transformation also indicates her growing acceptance of her own identity as a Mennonite. One might assume



that her former equation of Mennonitism with simplicity would negate this possibility. Instead, Funk Wiebe tells us about how, in her later years, she has re-conceived her relationship to the Mennonite Brethren as well as her understanding of what Mennonitism could be.

In one of her final chapters, tellingly titled “Sticking with what you’re stuck with,” Funk Wiebe asks herself the question: “Why am I Mennonite Brethren when some MB congregations lean strongly toward fundamentalism?” (264). She answers this question by highlighting the “Changes in theology, changes in social mores, changes in life goals, changes in attitudes” (267). Her point here is to say that ultimately she desires the Mennonite Brethren world to be as accepting of her as the creative writing world eventually was. She is more comfortable within her religion specifically because it has become more tolerant and more inclusive. The religion itself has transformed, in some small way, from Schlorre to shoes, to borrow Funk Wiebe’s own analogy.

Funk Wiebe’s own desire to make this transformation personally as well as to encourage transformation elsewhere is rooted in a familial identity. Funk Wiebe says that, “I see myself in my father who longed for leather shoes instead of the unrelenting Schlorre. He wanted to be a fully accepted member of Russian Mennonite society, highly socially stratified at the time” (159). Importantly, here and throughout the entire Schlorre/shoes dichotomy, Funk Wiebe’s father plays a crucial role. Not only does she relate her own struggle for acceptance to her father’s struggles but she also suggests that her father played a key role in ensuring that she inherited this struggle by giving her the name Katie.

This is a point that Funk Wiebe makes quite clear from the beginning of the memoir. In her imaginary conversation with her father, she states: “Dad, you made me a Mennonite when you gave me the name of one, Katie. You had the chance here in Blaine Lake to pass us off as

Russians or Germans, but you didn't take it. You loaded your Mennonite background on us children" (13). Funk Wiebe is not only "loaded" with a cultural and religious background by her father but she is also, as a consequence of these things, loaded with similar desires for acceptance and a desire to escape a life she characterizes as being far too traditional. These concerns, though, as her remarks about her father illustrate, are familial and not simply restricted to Funk Wiebe as an individual. Ultimately, while Katie Funk Wiebe does not necessarily present a family collective like Rudy Wiebe's that sings together in harmony, she nevertheless constructs an identity that is bound to familial others, in particular her father. While there is a sense that she wants to largely divorce herself from this binding relationship, she ultimately concedes that she "embraced [her] roots" (14). She reaches this conclusion after several attempts to refashion her identity by re-naming herself Kay.

This act of re-naming came out of an effort by Funk Wiebe to disconnect from the familial and cultural collective identity that her own name, Katie, reflected. She concedes, however, that "Over a period of years Kay disappeared and Katie returned. ... I had an obligation to my parents to fill the name they gave me with worth and integrity. It didn't matter who I was or wasn't named after" (13). This quotation strikingly illustrates Funk Wiebe's journey as she constructs it throughout her book, wherein she becomes more comfortable with an identity that is bound to others. Here she reverts back to the name Katie specifically because of her obligation to her parents who gave her the name as a result of their own Mennonite heritage. Funk Wiebe's identity, then, is bound to her family in numerous respects. She carries not only the traditions that her parents gave her but, in doing so, she is also bound to replay a common familial trait of attempting to find a better alternative to their traditions.

There are more glaring examples of Funk Wiebe's focus on familial others when she discusses her husband, Walter. Funk Wiebe conveys to us repeatedly the profound influence that Walter had on the overall direction of her life. She illustrates early on how tradition dictated that her life as a married woman would be largely controlled by a patriarchal structure that would keep her subordinated within the private domestic sphere. She writes: "I was married. I had said yes to becoming a wife and homemaker and expected to spend the rest of my life happily ensconced in our home-to-be. I was intent on becoming the best possible Christian homemaker. Abundant happiness beckoned me" (43). Here Funk Wiebe reveals that she gains subjectivity via what Althusser would call hailing. According to Althusser, "ideology hails or interpellates individuals as subjects" (49). In saying this, he means that individuals are called upon to fulfil certain roles and to perform particular identities that require a certain amount of conformity in terms of what one does and what one believes.

For Althusser, "an individual is always-already a subject, even before he is born" (50). There are certain expectations of what kind of role a child will perform upon being born. One only needs to consider gender expectations, for example. Ideology largely sustains itself because subjects respond to the hail and fulfil the role accordingly, largely unaware that they are being interpellated by an ideological system. He notes how, typically, "subjects recognize what they are and behave accordingly" (55). Indeed, the above quotation from Funk Wiebe suggests that she largely worked to fulfill a role that was created for her by others. When she notes how she "said yes to becoming a wife," she is in effect responding to the hail interpellating her as a subject. She notes too that the identity of "wife" that she takes on carries with it particular beliefs and behaviours. Becoming a wife means also "becoming the best possible Christian homemaker."

Yet while she initially goes into this arrangement with a great deal of positivity, “behaving accordingly” as Althusser puts it, Funk Wiebe quickly learns that her life becomes largely informed by her husband. She laments that “I wanted something more than being the one who ironed his shirts and pajamas and met his physical needs” (55). Finally, Funk Wiebe concludes that “Husbands were their wives’ status symbols in a preacher-conscious world. Wives found their identity in their husband’s identity. I chuckle to think how important it was at the time and how trivial it seems now” (78). This quotation illustrates the problematic consequence of the relational identity that Mason discusses in her article wherein she sees women’s identity as being constructed mostly in relation to men. Funk Wiebe establishes a relational identity in the early part of her book in order to reflect on how her own individuality was largely submerged as a result of her marriage. This does not, of course, mean that Funk Wiebe depicts Walter in an unflattering light. Rather, the identity that Funk Wiebe constructs for the first third of the book is one that was conventional for the temporal and cultural context in which she lived. As the quotation above indicates, the idea of wives finding “their identity in their husband’s identity” was not a unique aspect of her own marriage but rather the status quo as Funk Wiebe experienced it.

Marlene Epp confirms Funk Wiebe’s impressions in her book *Mennonite Women in Canada*. She suggests that Mennonite women, by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, had frequently come to occupy a subordinated role in the family unit. Epp argues that “ideals of submission, especially of women to their husbands, were taught in explicit ways, most public perhaps in the sermons and writings of church leaders. Teachings on Mennonite marriages followed the order of benevolent patriarchy – considered God-ordained – in which husband and wife had specific and well-defined roles and in which the husband was clearly the head” (*Mennonite Women* 112). Epp

suggests here and elsewhere in her book that the subordination of women in marriage was essentially a cultural norm that was taught as a crucial factor in the successful structuring of a family.

Given that Funk Wiebe, like other women at the time, understood her own identity through her husband's identity, it is no coincidence that she focuses so much attention on Walter in the early part of the book. She writes how,

[Walter] designed book covers for his father's poetry and music. He experimented with becoming a vegetarian after suffering kidney problems. He kept a scrapbook and spent hours copying parts of poems and writings by great writers expressing noble thoughts. His handwriting was carefully crafted. He indulged himself in calligraphy. He took long, long walks in the moonlight by himself and with friends, sometimes quite discouraged. He saw his life as a failure, going nowhere. His inner searching led him to write letters of apology to people he might have hurt in the past. He longed for a deeper spiritual life with purity of body and mind... (47)

Here, and elsewhere, the text frequently threatens to become a biography. In fact, there is a section of the book devoted to giving historical details about Walter's parents. She notes, for example, how "Walter's father, Peter P. Wiebe, was neither a farmer nor a good manager. His great passion was arranging and directing music and writing poetry, not digging the soil. Yet the government expected homesteaders to become farmers. He became an outstanding choir director for the Borden MB church, which gave him his identity as farming did not" (44). The way that Funk Wiebe prioritizes Walter's life narrative (including his own filiation narrative), at times, reflects the way in which the husband's role was prioritized in conventional Mennonite

marriages in Funk Wiebe's cultural milieu at the time. As this quotation suggests, Funk Wiebe represents Walter as a man who is perpetually striving for a kind of emotional and spiritual fulfillment that he never entirely finds. Funk Wiebe's role in her short marriage is to largely follow Walter on his quest for fulfillment.

After Walter dies, we read about how Funk Wiebe gradually begins to find an identity for herself as a writer. Importantly, though, she reveals how the patriarchal society in which she existed made it so that she inevitably had to rely on her husband, as well as other men, in order to become a writer, recounting how her first significant job came by way of Walter's own position as editor of a Mennonite Brethren publication called *The Youth Worker*. She writes: "This small multi-graphed publication was sent out eventually to about 400 addresses with ever more requests. Youth work was just beginning in the churches as a separate ministry. As Walter became busier with his teaching and other assignments, I assumed more and more of the editorial responsibilities. I wrote articles and signed his name to them" (76). In what is the ultimate example of establishing her own identity through her husband's, Funk Wiebe signs her husband's name to her own work.

Later in the book, though, Funk Wiebe successfully breaks away from an identity that had been, for the most part, obscured by her husband's. Nevertheless, she always constructs her identity as being linked to others. The book then is not simply her attempt to display her growth into a fully autonomous individual but into an individual who comes to the point where she can choose for herself the network of relations that work to produce her own sense of self. Funk Wiebe is certainly indebted to Walter for her career but she makes sure to write that she is not *only* indebted to Walter. Later in the book, she acknowledges,

I wear the shoes of a writer because of editors who encouraged me and gave me assignments. Among them are Daniel Hertzler, editor of *Christian Living* and *Gospel Herald*; Frank H. Epp of *The Canadian Mennonite*; Orlando Harms who first asked me to write a column for *The Christian Leader* and those who followed him: Wally Kroeker, Don Ratzlaff. I risk mentioning a few other names knowing I am leaving others out: Paul Shrock, Harold Jantz, Michael A. King, and others.  
(172)

This quotation reveals two things. It demonstrates that Funk Wiebe's sense of her own identity is very much tied to her role as a writer but, also, that she understands her role as a writer as being largely borne from her relations with many other people. The quotation reveals also the lack of female role models for women who wanted to work outside the home, or wanted to write, since all the people she describes here are men.

Note here also that this quotation comes later in the book when Funk Wiebe shifts her identity to be far more than the conventional and traditional Mennonite wife. At this point she no longer acknowledges, as she does earlier in the book, the role her husband played in her eventual vocation. I do not believe that this is meant as a purposeful slight, nor do I think that she does not mention him because she already gave him his due earlier in the book (after all, she acknowledged Daniel Hertzler and Orlando Harms earlier in the book too<sup>17</sup>). Rather, Funk Wiebe is illustrating, once again, her departure from a traditional relational identity available to women. Rather than reaffirm her relation to her husband, Funk Wiebe instead shows the many networks of relations she has belonged to as a result of not being beholden to such a restrictive identity.

Once on her own as a widow and a mother, Funk Wiebe revises her understanding of family and her role within a family unit in order to fashion a new identity for herself. Initially, because her identity had been so thoroughly tied to Walter's, she writes that his death rendered ambiguous her own possibilities in life: "Much of the fifteen years we had been married, Walter had been studying, preparing for a literature ministry. I had supported him in every way I could. His death hung like a huge heavy curtain between me and the future" (103). She concludes later in the book, "With no husband, who was Mrs. Walter Wiebe? I had lost my identity" (237). Indeed, at this point, Funk Wiebe's own self-understanding is largely a consequence of her role as a wife and supporter of Walter. Returning to Althusser, her very subjectivity had been constituted by being hailed into this role of "wife and supporter." Walter's death, then, works initially to void Funk Wiebe's own identity. At first, she mostly maintains the role that she had been given, noting that "Motherhood was at the top of my priorities" (112). However, rather than depend on the identity given to her, Funk Wiebe illustrates instead her desire to construct a new identity outside of the sphere of the patriarchal marriage.

She continues to write creatively and accepts a teaching position at Tabor, a Mennonite Brethren college in Kansas. Describing her experiences at Tabor, Funk Wiebe writes, "An institution, especially a small one like Tabor, is like family. It, too, has its own DNA, passed on by a process of osmosis through generations of students, faculty, parents, alumni, and supporters, holding the entity together" (122). This quotation is noteworthy in its description of the college as both a "family" and an "entity" wherein both students and faculty work as a support network. Importantly, then, in her independent act of self re-construction, Funk Wiebe takes on a new relational identity where she becomes part of a different kind of family and, in the process, challenges the conventions of the family memoir.



Funk Wiebe's construction of herself as being one amongst a larger entity allows her to again focus attention on others. This is not to say that she disappears from the narrative entirely. In fact, she does tell us about her own personal experiences at Tabor College, noting, for example, her near-dismissal as a result of a student who "complained about my choice of literature for a Christian school" (137). Yet while we are privy to some of these personal stories, Funk Wiebe's construction of herself as member of a familial identity allows her to place a great amount of focus elsewhere as she writes about school and faculty politics as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the school. She sketches out, in some detail, the biography of her co-workers, notably President Roy Just, whom she describes as "a man of enthusiasm, with a measure of charisma and great zeal for evangelism and missions" (129).

Funk Wiebe also describes incidents at the school wherein she played a minor if not wholly outsider role. There are several examples where this occurs but perhaps the most prominent one takes place when she describes how the faculty were encouraged to invest in a real estate venture called the Antelope Valley Project. She recounts how several faculty members bought into the venture largely because they had faith that "God would bless" a "Christian institution" that "was offering investment possibilities with Christian principles" (135). The real estate project eventually resulted in "huge losses" (135) and Funk Wiebe concludes that this event was a "dark blot" in the history of the college (135). Importantly, though, she reveals that she "kept [her] distance from the whole affair and was never approached" (135). In other words, she seemingly has almost nothing to do with this story personally. Nevertheless, as she suggests, it was a rather negative moment historically for Tabor. Because Funk Wiebe's identity is so bound with the Tabor familial entity, she ultimately tells Tabor's story, rather than simply her

own. Constructing her identity as being connected to this larger network ultimately allows her to spotlight other stories in which she plays a less significant role.

Funk Wiebe neither romanticizes nor mythologizes the notion of family or home. Rather, she questions the traditional familial enterprise as patriarchal and repressive. In fact, J. Alicia Dueck suggests that authors like Katie Funk Wiebe “look at the gendered nature of biological distinctions attached to women, in the sense that they point to the particular norms and expectations attached to some women because of their ability to bear children” (52). Furthermore, in re-defining family and locating alternate networks of relation that sustain a new identity, Funk Wiebe illustrates in the very way the text is structured the departure from traditional models of relational identity as discussed by Mary G. Mason, to a more contemporary and expanded understanding of relationality that has occurred in Mason’s wake.

Ultimately, while Funk Wiebe refuses to romanticize the notion of family, she nevertheless constructs family as a social framework that works to produce her own memories and, consequently, her identity. The fact that she recounts the past of familial others (her comments on her father’s peasant upbringing, her description of Walter’s parents’ early experiences in Canada as Russian immigrants, her discussion of the real estate venture) suggests that her own understanding of her past is very much shaped, in part, by the memories of those in her collective familial unit. This is not to say that Funk Wiebe tells the story of the family at the expense of herself. In fact, as I will demonstrate in the following chapter, Katie Funk Wiebe in many ways privileges the narrative of the community to which she belongs above all else.

Furthermore, Funk Wiebe does not shy away from listing her own accomplishments in the book. There are many sections that detail her significant lifetime achievements (although, again, many of these are tied to notions of community). Nevertheless, family is a crucial network

of relation in the book. Unlike *Of This Earth*, though, Katie Funk Wiebe occasionally privileges the familial narrative in order to critique it. Walter Wiebe plays a dominating role in the early part of the book's narrative but this, in many ways, illustrates the way in which women's identities were largely shaped by their husbands or by the institution of marriage as it was conceived within Funk Wiebe's cultural milieu. There are, of course, other times where Funk Wiebe shows a great deal of reverence for family. That she admits to having felt loaded, in her youth, with a cultural heritage given to her by her parents and then notes how she has, in later years, embraced her roots is evidence of Funk Wiebe's ongoing shifting sense not only of Mennonitism but, also, of family. In *You Never Gave Me a Name*, Katie Funk Wiebe re-defines, accepts, and critiques family all at once. Regardless of which aspects of family she accepts or challenges, she nevertheless demonstrates the dominating presence her several families have had in her life.

Miriam Toews's *Swing Low* likewise demonstrates the overwhelming influence of family, in this case the role that Toews's father played in her life. The book follows a somewhat more traditional pattern of the filiation memoir as Couser describes it though only in certain specific ways, given that the book cannot be classified as autobiography or memoir though it does use the discourse of self-representation to tell a non-fictional story. Much like the authors of conventional filiation memoirs, Toews appears to be motivated to write about a parent because of that parent's death. Nancy K. Miller has addressed this issue in her book *Bequest & Betrayal*. Just as Halbwachs argues that memories are a product of collective social networks (such as family), Miller contends that it is within the family unit where identities can be constructed. She suggests in her prologue that "happy or unhappy, families provide a scenario in which we get to try out and perform ideas about ourselves, who we would like to be – within limits. The limits set

by the family constitute the blueprint of a self, the outlines of autobiographical space. We could also think of this as the family plot” (xi). She concludes by insisting “on the inordinate power of that plot to shape our profoundest ideas of self and other” (Miller xii). For Miller, it is the family plot – the notion of being able to conceive of one’s self within an “intergenerational, historical, and spectral matrix of identifications” (xii) – that provides models of identities.

For this reason, too, Miller notes that one’s sense of one’s own selfhood can come into question with the death of a parent. She writes:

The death of parents – dreaded or wished for – is a trauma that causes an invisible tear in our self-identity. In the aftermath of a parent’s death, which forces the acknowledgment of our shared mortality, loss and mourning take complex paths, since our earliest acts of identity are intimately bound up with our relation to the dead parent. But the closure produced by the end of their plot does not signal the end of ours. (x)

Much like Katie Funk Wiebe, who faces a lack of identity following the death of her husband, Miller notes that children of deceased parents can experience a similar crisis for similar reasons. What Miller says here regarding “our earliest acts of identity” being “intimately bound” to parents certainly holds true when looking at these particular examples of Canadian Mennonite life writing. And indeed, as Rudy Wiebe’s book demonstrates, there is a certain impulse to write a book about people who helped establish your sense of self and who are no longer around, perhaps because, as Miller suggests, their deaths have left a “tear in our self-identity.” *Swing Low* is a book that Miriam Toews was compelled to write after her father’s suicide. In light of Miller’s above comments, it becomes easier to view why Toews chooses to write about her father at this particular time.

*Swing Low* is an attempt by Toews to work through her own difficulties not only in losing a father to suicide but also in having a father who suffered in silence for a large part of his life leaving Toews herself somewhat confused about who her father was, why he acted the way he did during his life, and why he ended his life the way he did. As she notes in her introduction,

I became obsessed with knowing all that I could about his life, searching, I suppose for clues that would ultimately lead me to the cause of his death. With the help of my mother and my sister and Dad's friends, colleagues, and relatives, I've managed to put a few pieces of the puzzle of his life together. But in spite of many theories and much speculation, there's really only one answer, and that is depression. A clinical, profoundly inadequate word for deep despair. (xiii)

The book then is, in many ways, an attempt by Toews at uncovering an identity of her father's that she can comprehend. Ultimately Toews writes in a way that is discursively autobiographical in that the book features an autobiographical-I recounting real life experiences. Yet at the same time the book is first and foremost about her father's experiences rather than her own.

What makes *Swing Low* unique from the other books that I am looking at is the fact that, apart from the introduction, the entire book is written from the point of view of another person. In that sense, I will not attempt to argue that the book is a memoir but it importantly *does* adopt the form in significant ways. Toews herself has written autobiographically on several occasions, most notably in *A Complicated Kindness* and the recently published *All My Puny Sorrows*. Crucially, both of these autobiographical novels deal with a family made up of a father, a mother, and two daughters, which not coincidentally is the same familial structure in which Toews herself grew up. Perhaps because Toews has a first person narrator in both novels, one could make the case that in these books, as well as in *Swing Low*, Toews uses an

autobiographical discourse. However, *Swing Low* differs in a crucial respect. Unlike Nomi in *Kindness* and Yolandi in *Sorrow*, Melvyn Toews was very much a real person. Whereas Toews constructs a narrative in *Swing Low*, she fictionalizes one in *Kindness* and *Sorrow*. In *Swing Low*, Toews pointedly uses the autobiographical-I in order to tell a story that was sold and marketed as a non-fiction. Consequently, I suggest that many aspects of Lejeune's autobiographical pact are still at play here even if the key connection between the name of the author and the narrator of the book does not hold up.

I contend that Toews's use of the autobiographical-I rather than a more biographical "he" is a crucial choice and that if the book were to be categorized as a memoir it would be Melvyn Toews's memoir written by his daughter. This, of course, is not unprecedented. Perhaps the most famous example of this particular kind of life writing is Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* – a book which, despite not being authored by Toklas, has been taken up by autobiography scholars in that it "imitates traditional autobiography" (T. Smith 67). Stein's book, in recent years, has been interpreted via a relational approach. Thomas R. Smith, in his article "Generating Selves," has argued that "Stein violates Lejeune's strict contract by not identifying all three narrative functions as aspects of the same person. In so doing, she intimates that her own identity is inextricably combined with that of Toklas" (67). Smith, then, positions Stein's book within the realm of relational life writing by reading the text for what it can tell us about Stein's own mutual and fluid relationship with Toklas.

While Smith's point may very well be true, I find it somewhat problematically re-asserts the dichotomy of individualism and relationality. Reading Stein's book through the lens of the "relational paradigm" forecloses the important gesture of privileging Toklas's narrative in the context of self life writing. Similarly, while *Swing Low* does reveal a good deal about Toews's

“self-conception,” (which is something I will discuss below) it is also necessary to admit that her choice of writing from the perspective of another is a markedly different choice from writing from her own perspective even within the realm of what could be called relational life writing. To borrow Thomas Smith’s wording, I am not particularly concerned with whether or not Toews “intimates that her own identity is inextricably combined” with her father’s. Rather, what is more significant to me is that Toews, for the very personal reasons outlined in the quotation above, explicitly wants to tell the story of her father.

Intriguingly, Toews herself largely dismisses the notion that the book is in any way self-revealing. In an interview with Toews, Natasha G. Wiebe brought up the similarities between this book and *Toklas*. Wiebe observes how “Some people think that Stein was telling her own story as much as Alice’s, but in a way that she was comfortable with, through the distancing provided by using another person’s voice” (121). Toews replies, “I don’t think I was doing the same thing that Gertrude Stein may, or may not, have been doing” (122). In answering whether the book is Toews’s own personal story as well as her father’s, she notes, “Maybe in some small way. But not overall” (122). She concludes, “Yeah, I think of it as his story. I was very careful to write it in his voice, and everything that happens in the book really did happen” (123). Whether or not one takes Toews’s claims about her own work as gospel, these quotations ultimately pose a problem for those who might read *Swing Low* through the lens of the relational paradigm as has been done with Stein’s book. Such a reading eliminates questions like why Toews focuses primarily on her father’s point of view rather than on her own.

Ultimately, central to *Swing Low* is the imperative of breaking the silence and stigma on mental illness. In this book, Toews allows her father to speak to an experience that he was in many ways shamed into silencing for most of his life. At the beginning of the book, Mel is

admitted into the Bethesda Hospital in Manitoba after displaying increasingly erratic behaviour. Mel says, “Eventually my brother went on a bit to say that he felt my ‘admission’ was a big step forward, an essential part of the healing process, and now, perhaps, I’d be able to open up with my psychiatrist. You’ve got to be honest, Mel, he said. And of course he’s right” (2). Toews demonstrates though that for Mel to be honest about depression meant to divert from what he understood for most of his life to be the conventional way of dealing with personal problems.

Significantly, Toews connects Mel specifically to other family members who suffered in much the same way that he did. A good deal of the book, for instance, focuses on Mel’s comparing his own depression to the battles experienced by his parents. In these particular moments, Mel breaks the problematic silence that has surrounded what appears to be a transgenerational issue. He says, “I should have wondered . . . about my father’s own bout of despair and about his three-month stay in bed after leaving the feedmill. But it didn’t occur to me then, or ever, to ask him” (79). Later, he speaks of his mother’s alcoholism in similar terms, “Perhaps if I had known more about my mother’s past, about her own dark secrets and demons, I might have understood why she was the way she was” (106).

Here Toews presents Mel as having faced the same problem that she herself has faced, namely, a lack of discussion about “dark secrets and demons” within the family and the confusion that comes as a consequence of this silencing. Toews eventually conveys her own direct personal connection to this history of silence through the voice of her father. Mel writes, “The birth of my second daughter [Miriam] triggered something inside of me, and I stopped talking at home. I didn’t say a word to my wife and daughters for a year. The only sound I made resembled the sounds of abject, wordless grief” (107). In illustrating these moments, Toews



conveys that she, like her father, is part of a familial chain which has served to perpetuate the problem of unaddressed mental instability in the family.

Toews in several ways makes this a cultural concern and goes so far as to have a nurse tell Mel at one point that “there are unusually high numbers of Mennonites who suffer from depression” (95). Furthermore, as I will detail further below, it cannot go unaddressed that in this book Toews implicates Mennonite in a culture of silencing. There is varying scholarship on how mental illness is treated within the Mennonite community. Historian Erika Dyck, for example, has stated that historically “mental health issues were woven into the fabric of the community, as sources of pride when they involved establishing care homes, and as sources of concern or even embarrassment when events strayed toward the misunderstood or stigmatized” (94). Dyck ultimately suggests that Mennonites who openly suffered from mental illness were not silenced. Yet literary critic Grace Kehler, who also examines Toews’s *Swing Low* suggests otherwise. Kehler argues that Mel’s “story is inherently inter-personal and his psychosomatic suffering an event inseparable from his Mennonite community in Steinbach, Manitoba” (171). Kehler argues that stories such as *Swing Low* convey “generations of muted affects and curtailed conversations” (171) and reveal that “acts of silencing, shaming, or exiling paradoxically stem from a desire to preserve the Mennonites as a distinct cultural and spiritual group” (170).

Certainly Dyck and Kehler’s opposing points of view reflect the variety of ways that different sub-cultures within Mennonitism have dealt with issues of depression and mental illness. Nevertheless, Toews herself appears to agree with Kehler’s assessment. In her interview with Natasha Wiebe, Toews says,

Back then I was very angry, because of all of the circumstances surrounding my dad’s death, his suicide, and everything that played out in the community, before

and after and surrounding that. I *was* very angry, you know; I was very bitter. I think I in part blamed the Mennonite community and church – to a certain extent, not entirely, obviously, it wasn't the whole picture in terms of my father's mental illness and suicide. But certainly, that kind of repression, and his own guilt and the pressure that *he* felt to play a certain role in a community, in the church, just this *very* constricted life that he had that was all tied up with religious fundamentalism. And then, some of the responses from some of the people in the community in the terms of their *denial* of his illness and suicide, or the rumors that were spread that were not true. To a certain degree, I blamed the Mennonite community and Mennonite fundamentalism for contributing to my dad's mental illness and death. ("It Gets Under" 107-08)

Toews's point of view here is unquestionably represented in the book. Toews shows Mel learning from a young age that his mother's own personal issues were not to be publicly discussed.

This becomes clear in a scene when young Mel is undergoing analysis. Mel says, "The doctor, who was really a psychiatrist from Winnipeg, and who may not have been aware of the implications of a small-town confession, had asked me if there was anything bothering me, anything untoward happening at home, anything that might be making me feel sad" (76). When Mel does reveal his mother's problems with alcohol to the doctor, he is sharply rebuked for it. He notes, "I had shamed the family, I had jeopardized our status in the community, and my father's livelihood. I had ruined my mother's reputation and undermined my father's efforts to cope by turning away from it" (76). This is a critical moment in Mel's narrative as it ultimately solidifies the notion that, in his own community at least, personal problems are to be kept quiet.

Mel observes, “I had been brought up to learn that who we are at home and who we are at work and in the community can be as different as night and day” (104). Here he is speaking both about the silencing of his mother’s alcoholism as well as the overall silencing of his own mental illness.

This is significant because here Mel reveals his decision that the public persona that he, in many ways, crafted, would show no appearances of depression. This, of course, has many ramifications in a discussion on life writing which, as Andrew Lesk puts it, “is a field of cultural production” and “self-authorship represents an attempt not only to shape the public self but also the reception of that self” (174). Lesk suggests here that the autobiographical self is very much a “public self” – it is the self that the writer wishes to portray to a reading audience. Given that Mel had always intentionally silenced his own depression in shaping his own public self, it would make sense that it would be difficult for him to write autobiographically as writing autobiographical texts require openness and honesty.

Toews, as discussed by Mel throughout the book, does not appear to suffer directly from the same issues. Rather, as Mel puts it, she takes after her mother, Elvira, while Marjorie, Toews’s sister, takes after Mel. Of Toews, Melvyn notes, “I would see her at assembly occasionally and she would remind me of Elvira in that old kindergarten photo I was telling you about, elbowing her way to the front row, determined to see and be seen” (131). He concludes later that it “has been easier to understand Marjorie as she grew from a girl to a young woman” (157), but “Miriam, on the other hand, baffled me” (158)<sup>18</sup>. Given that the book gives no indication that Toews likewise suffers in the same way as her father, it is ultimately a remarkable choice on her part to have her father’s voice, rather than her own, break the silence on the issue through telling the book from his perspective. It is as if Toews is saying that it is important to

specifically listen to the voices of those who experienced depression firsthand, even when they are no longer around.

Yet while Toews writes *Swing Low* in a way that spotlights Mel and gives him the opportunity to break the silence on depression, she also reaffirms the notion of the family unit as a producer of identities. Intriguingly, a great deal of the book's narrative is made up of what appear to be shared familial memories. There is, for example, the section of the text in which Mel and five-year old Toews watch a family of young wrens in their outside birdhouse unable to get food from their mother because of a "sparrow" who was "blocking the entrance, ... preventing the mother wren from returning home to feed her babies" (27). The point of this episode, according to Mel, was that it confirmed his suspicion "that evil would inevitably triumph over good" but also that "the struggle to be good was the purpose of life" (27). This episode helps to construct Mel as pessimistic yet also positive about the value of struggle.

The presence of young Toews in this episode though begs the question of whether this was a memory for Mel at all, though there is a similar doubt about whether a five-year old would remember this moment which only seems to have a real memorial value because of what Mel takes away from it. What seems most likely, then, is that the event could be recalled here in this moment of identity construction because it was a common and shared moment between the two. Similarly, Mel tells the story of his wedding to Elvira which turns out to be comically disastrous when Elvira's veil catches on fire during the wedding kiss. Melvyn notes, "That fire bothered me more than I ever let on, and as Elvia recounted the tale, in all its hilarious detail, to whoever would listen, I would sit quietly smiling at intervals and waiting for it to be over" (43). Again, this moment works to tell us about Mel's character but it also tells us that these memories are not

brought about and retained by the individual but, instead, are shaped through a collective familial recounting of events.

The book, in many ways, demonstrates how Mel's self-conception is a family effort, particularly when it comes to the way that his family members shift his own sense of self.

Speaking of his own parenting skills, Mel writes,

I didn't know how to be with them, other than as a teacher, and the odd time I made an effort to interact casually and affectionately as I felt a father should, it felt forced and artificial and I knew they sensed it too, and I became self-conscious. I retreated into my bedroom, reassuring them with a few words of my love and concern, and smiling at them often like a distant relative, unsure how to proceed from there. (141)

If it is the case that Melvyn was a distant father, as he suggests here, Toews ultimately does not use this book as a space to critique him. In fact, Toews's book reinforces the points made by critics on filiation life writing, in that these books often come out of a certain absence or lack.

Scholars have noted that because authors are frequently writing out of absence, their work is rarely judgemental. Couser, for example, suggests that works of filiation life writing are often "driven not by the desire to memorialize a beloved or admired father but by the impulse to shore up, repair, or compensate for a flawed relationship" ("Genre Matters" 151). In agreement, Roger J. Porter notes that in these books there is often an "attempt at reconciliation of some kind, for their function is to understand rather than to blame. Sympathy, not anger, tends to predominate" (103). A good deal of the book, then, involves Melvyn's being reassured by his family. These moments make *Swing Low* a crucial example of a text where the collective family works to construct identity via memory.

At one point Mel's daughters remind their father of moments from his past in order to challenge his negative self-conception. He says,

I have neglected them horribly and it's much too late now to make amends. They tell me in big block letters that I have not neglected them, that I have provided them with everything they could ever want in life, with holidays and riding lessons and music lessons and summer camp and new bicycles and a cottage at the lake and university and... They tell me I was a good father, but they of course are lying to me, trying to make me feel better. (37)

At this point, Mel is confused regarding his own past and consequently his sense of self. In this case, there is a need to remind Mel of these memories because of his depression, though given what we have seen in the other texts in this chapter, this exercise in collective familial memory-making is simply an extreme example of a common practice<sup>19</sup>.

The quotation above does say outright that Mel seems to believe his children are "lying" when they tell him he was a good father; however, a subsequent passage in the same section of the book suggests that he relies heavily on his daughters to confirm that this identity of the good father is true. He writes, "I have pages and pages of YOU'RE A GOOD FATHER, A GOOD MAN, AND WE ARE PROUD OF YOU. THIS IS NOT YOUR FAULT. WE LOVE YOU AND WE KNOW YOU LOVE US. Please write it down one more time, I ask them, and they do" (37). This moment illustrates how Mel is not only dependent on his daughters to give him a good sense of who he is as a father, but also reveals that his belief that such an identity can be legitimized through the act of writing. Importantly, it is Toews herself who seeks to establish her father as a kind and sympathetic man rather than simply an emotionally distant and frequently incomprehensible figure, through the act of writing his story in this book.

As critics of similar types of books like *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* point out, *Swing Low* works to establish Toews's own identity, which is also bound to family. Toews makes this clear on a much more basic level when she suggests that her sister Marj inherited her father's traits while she inherited her mother's. Yet while this conventional relational approach may be accurate and has its merits, it does not fully explain why Toews should focus so much on her father rather than illustrate the mutual dynamic between self and her familial others. What is remarkable with *Swing Low* is that it conveys the importance of self life writing in that it stresses the imperative of breaking the silence of depression, yet at the same time contains an autobiographical-I which does not correlate to the name on the cover of the book. Toews, like Rudy Wiebe and Katie Funk Wiebe, ultimately conveys that memory, and with it identity, can be a familial project and doing so allows her to construct an autobiographical text that focuses on others.

The authors I have looked at in this chapter have stressed the significance of family in one form or another. I began by re-assessing the claims made by Alison Landsberg, whose arguments on the issue of prosthetic memory were crucial in my discussion of intergenerational trauma in chapter one. In this chapter, the authors I examined reconfirmed Landsberg's point that one can take on the memories of others. In each text, the book's authors present the memories of familial others – memories the author either did not experience firsthand or forgot – in their work of autobiographical construction.

That being said, these works also challenge another key point made by Landsberg that the onslaught of 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity effectively disrupted and rendered "inadequate" traditional ways of transmitting memory, such as family ties. These books show how Landsberg's point neglects to fully account for particular cultural groups like the Russian Canadian Mennonites of

the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century who were, for a time, less influenced by new technological trends and sought to sustain familial connections. These texts are, in many ways, testaments to the success of those endeavours even when the families presented by the authors are plagued by very real and very damaging issues such as patriarchy, depression, intergenerational silence, and so on.

More than that though, in effectively illustrating Maurice Halbwachs' point that memory can be produced in collective social networks such as family, each of these authors effectively manages to provide an autobiographical account that illustrates the dominating role familial narratives play in their own lives. In evoking and revealing the lives of others within the discourse of autobiography, Rudy Wiebe, Katie Funk Wiebe, and Miriam Toews reveal how the story of the family (or, of particular family members) could be privileged over the story of the individual self. In my next chapter I will look at Lauren Berlant's concept of "intimate publics" and consider how several Mennonite authors' work obscures the autobiographical-I by shifting attention to issues for a small and intimate community of others so that the works are both revelatory as well as closed off.



## Chapter Three

### Intimate Publics and Community

In my previous chapter, I discussed how Rudy Wiebe, Katie Funk Wiebe, and Miriam Toews positioned themselves in relation to an intimate group, namely family, to the extent that the familial narrative was privileged over the narrative of the self. The relationship between self and other that I described in chapter two was somewhat different from that which I discussed in my first chapter where I discussed Mennonite authors in relation to a more abstract group of historical others. In this chapter, I would like to in some ways blend elements of my first two chapters by discussing Mennonite authors who frequently privilege the narrative of an intimate but, at the same time, abstract group. By that I mean an abstract public community who potentially share similar life experiences to the writers.

In discussing community, I am not necessarily talking about the Mennonite community in which the authors were raised (though I will talk about that as well). Rather, my notion of community is somewhat inspired by critic Lauren Berlant's use of the term in her discussion of "intimate publics" in her books *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* and *The Female Complaint*. In the latter book, Berlant defines intimate publics as a group of people who "share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience" (viii). Berlant uses the term intimate publics interchangeably with the term community. In *The Female Complaint*, for example, she notes that "The concept of the 'intimate public' thus carries the fortitude of common sense or a vernacular sense of belonging to a community, with all the undefinedness that implies" (10). Elsewhere, in an interview with Jay Prosser, she refers to intimate publics as an "affective community" (Prosser 184). This community, though, is somewhat unusual because none of its members necessarily have to ever

know each other or meet. Rather, as Berlant says, intimate publics can be understood as a collection of “strangers” connected “in a kind of nebulous communitas” (*Female* xi).

This chapter will look at authors Katie Funk Wiebe and Di Brandt in order to show how both authors forge identities in relation to a larger community, the members of which they themselves do not necessarily always know personally<sup>20</sup>. Rather, these authors connect with this abstract group on the grounds that they share a common ideological belief system or have similar past experiences. Thus, Di Brandt sees herself in relation to a community of others who are, in many ways, victims of environmental exploitation carried out in market driven economies. Katie Funk Wiebe, meanwhile, constructs her identity in relation to a community of females who have struggled against patriarchy, and she also sees herself in relation to a community in exile. Importantly, for each of these authors, identifying themselves in relation to this abstract community allows the writers to focus their attention on others who have similar life experiences.

I will begin by exploring in some detail Berlant’s discussion of intimate publics and will then consider its relevance to both life writing scholarship and Mennonite literary scholarship. As discussed above, an intimate public is a sphere wherein people assume a connection to others because of their perception of having had similar life experiences and holding common ideologies. What draw members together in an intimate public can be quite simply shared beliefs and activities. As Gabriele Linke points out, “Berlant finds intimacy emerging in unpredictable places and forums - for instance, when people walk their dogs at the same times or read a book” (15). Linke’s examples, here, of people who do the same activity “at the same times,” and who also forge connections to others via text, draw out the obvious parallels between Berlant and Benedict Anderson. Anderson traces the prevailing conception of national communities to the

origins of print culture. In particular, he states it is in the mass ceremony of reading the newspaper that an understanding of community is formed: “It is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion” (35).

Berlant’s theorization of intimate publics, then, really belongs within a larger theoretical framework which helps explain how different cultural groups conceive of their own collective identities. Like Anderson’s imagined national communities, Berlant’s intimate publics are equally illusory. As Michael Warner puts it in his complementary discussion on publics and counterpublics, “publics exist only by virtue of their imagining. They are a kind of fiction that has taken on life, and very potent life at that” (8)<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore, just as Anderson sees national communities emerging out of a print culture, Berlant observes intimate publics “[operating] when a market opens up to a bloc of consumers, claiming to circulate texts and things that express those people’s particular core interests and desires” (*Female* 5). Here Berlant adds to the points made above by Linke. Certainly an intimate public *can* be formed between two people who “walk their dogs at the same times,” but as the quotation above demonstrates, an intimate public is also crucially reliant on text as a product that can reach a reading public. It is through the act of reading, she suggests, that one can see their own “interests and desires” and consequently imagine belonging to a unified social community.

Yet while Anderson’s readers imagine a nation, Berlant’s readers often imagine themselves belonging to a far more narrow social (rather than national) group based on a common set of concerns. Berlant’s communities are social groups that are populated by those unable to take on the role of a legitimate social actor in the grand narratives of nation. She writes,

“Whether linked to women or other nondominant people, [an intimate public] promises a certain experience of belonging and provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as an x” (*Female* viii). Thus, intimate publics are a way for historically nonprivileged subjects to connect with fellow nonprivileged subjects in a way that is otherwise denied by the socio-political structure.

As Gabrielle Linke correctly points out, though, Berlant sees intimate publics as being “part of the mechanisms of capitalism” (16) precisely because they emerge out of a commodity-driven culture. Thus intimate publics can never fully undermine the system that has rendered them subordinate. Intimate publics illustrate how the politically subversive spirit of the sixties was undermined and rechanneled during the Reagan era of the 1980s. She argues that “A conservative coalition formed whose aim was the privatization of U.S. citizenship. One part of its project involved rerouting the critical energies of the emerging political sphere into the sentimental spaces of an amorphous opinion culture, characterized by strong patriotic identification mixed with feelings of practical political powerlessness” (*The Queen* 3).

Berlant argues that because political subversiveness has been silenced in the name of feelings of powerlessness, connections between people are made through emotionally (but not politically) charged discussions about common experiences of injustices and helplessness, thus reinforcing a status quo rather than enacting systemic change. I give this information not only because I want to engage with Berlant’s notion of intimate publics but also to convey the very specificity of its definition in order to explain my own departure from Berlant and how the authors that I look at may very well be forging a similar yet different kind of intimate public in their autobiographical texts.

Berlant's conception of intimate publics have been taken up by life writing scholars, most notably at the 2010 IABA conference in Sussex and subsequent publication of a selection of IABA conference papers in a full issue of *Biography* (2011) devoted to the subject of life writing as intimate publics. It seems to me, though, that many of these papers illustrate how intimate publics and life writing are a more uncomfortable fit than what one might be led to assume. Many of the scholars in the special issue of *Biography* themselves begin with Berlant's own assertion that "By 'intimate public' I do not mean a public sphere organized by autobiographical confession and chest-baring, although there is often a significant amount of first-person narrative in an intimate public" (*Female* viii). Despite Berlant's claims, life writing scholars have used the notion of intimate publics in order to examine how life writing works to draw together nonprivileged social groups. But because Berlant's notion of intimate publics is so specific, I often find that these analyses cannot fully engage with the term as Berlant herself means it.

Ioana Luca, for example, uses Berlant in her examination of autobiographies written by authors who experienced the effects of Eastern European Communism in order to "show what kind of worlds and spaces intimacy builds in the context of a totalitarian regime" (71). Luca's discussion is a good one but to me the theory of intimate publics seems somewhat out of place in a paper on totalitarian Communism when, for Berlant, intimate publics are specifically a consequence of consumer capitalism. Similarly, Susan Stabile's article, "Tell-Tale Heart" refers to "organ donors and recipients" as being "one of the historically disenfranchised groups recognized by Berlant" because "their legal identities are institutionally censored" (135). Rather than examine literary texts, Stabile suggests that a sentimental intimate public is formed between an organ donor and the patient who benefits from the donation. Fascinating though this article is,

it does not fully account for the way Berlant herself appears to use her own terminology. These examples illustrate the inherent difficulty in applying Berlant to an analysis in life writing.

I want to suggest, though, that Berlant's concept of "intimate publics" is helpful in discussing the works that I am looking at. For one, Berlant (along with Anderson) helpfully suggests how the commodification and circulation of texts proliferates relational identities or what Berlant calls a "collective sociality routed in revelations of what is personal" (*Female* 10). For Berlant, cultural conditions produce subjects that see themselves as part of a larger organization of people with shared interests, ideologies, and desires. Anderson and Berlant, then, give me a solid theoretical background in order to explain how the authors I examine construct themselves in relation to an abstract community of others, one which is frequently reinforced by literature or literary texts, on the basis of perceived similarities.

Important too to my own particular discussion is Berlant's notion of intimate publics as being a formation of nonprivileged people excluded from the dominant political or socio-cultural sphere. Berlant draws on Deleuze and Guattari's notion "that one's identification with any material marked by a 'minor' voice performs one's attachment to being generic, to being a member of a population that has been marked out as having collective qualities that are apprehensible in individuals" (x). Significantly, similar claims have been made about contemporary Canadian Mennonite literature. In *Surplus At the Border*, for example, Douglas Reimer likewise uses Deleuze and Guattari in order to characterize Mennonites as a "minor" group who are "gathered around the outside edges of the major English group" (4). While he later asserts that "Much Mennonite writing of the late twentieth century belongs to the tradition of major literature" (10), he nevertheless notes that even writers "who have imitated the major"

such as Rudy Wiebe and Di Brandt, “continue actively to write for their Mennonite communities” (6) and thus, as he concludes, write “against major literary conventions” (191).

At the same time, it should be noted that Reimer is referring to authors who frequently write out of personal experience, even if it is a personal experience that is somewhat cloaked by poetic language or fictionalized characters. Ultimately, then, these personal stories serve to connect with a community of readers (for Reimer, specifically “Mennonite Canadians”) who have had similar histories. Reimer notes that Rudy Wiebe’s personal novel *Peace Shall Destroy Many* speaks to a “community threatened by the failing leadership of its religious, political, and education institutions” (5). Certainly, it is the case that Wiebe’s first novel can be read as a personal text even if many events that occur in the book did not occur in real life. Wiebe himself has referred to the book as “the first realistic novel written in English about the Mennonite experience” (“The Skull” 16) and, in a rejoinder to criticisms he received over the book, somewhat sarcastically noted that “clearly such things happen [in his Mennonite society], but they should not be spoken of in public” (“The Skull” 18).

Paul Tiessen has likewise drawn a connection between Wiebe’s memoir *Of This Earth* and *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, calling attention to “the essentially autobiographical nature of both texts. The novel’s material setting – its place in Saskatchewan, its time, its demographic, and, implicitly, many of its people – is more or less identical to that of the memoir, published 44 years later” (203). In other words, in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, Wiebe draws from his own personal life in representing a Mennonite family growing up in a small Mennonite community and, according to Reimer, portrays a social experience recognizable to other members of the socio-cultural group out of which he writes.

Reimer is not the first critic to have observed the custom of contemporary Mennonite authors writing for a specific community to which they see themselves belonging. In 1988, Hildi Froese Tiessen noted that “As they have moved relentlessly into the mainstream, many of these Mennonite writers have incorporated mother tongue into their work in such a way that it functions as shibboleth, re-delineating the very barriers between insider and outsider many of them have railed against in their work” (“Mother Tongue” 181). For Froese Tiessen, even Mennonite authors who refuse to adhere to the traditional Mennonite desire for separateness and aversion to wordliness can nevertheless sometimes reflect the tenets of their (occasionally former) community in their writing. Moreover, their use of the “mother tongue” which “For over 400 years” Froese Tiessen notes, “functioned as shelter for the Mennonites committed to existing as a people apart” (183), works to relate the personal with the public. In other words, in evoking the mother tongue, these authors point to themselves and their texts as belonging to and speaking for a particular culture with members who have shared life experiences. As Reimer still asserts in 2002, these mainstream authors write in a way that speaks specifically to a Canadian Mennonite community.

This should not be surprising given the significance of community in the Mennonite historical tradition. As Calvin Redekop puts it in his book *Mennonite Society*, “Mennonites throughout their history and wherever they have lived have displayed in most explicit ways the very central concept of the Mennonite community. Community has always been an influential factor in the thought and life of the whole Mennonite society” (130). Almost in line with the kind of publics that Berlant discusses, Redekop goes on to define community in the Mennonite sense as a “network of interrelationships, among persons who share the same history, who have the same symbolic system, who feel emotionally one with other Mennonites, and who tend to live in



spatially defined areas” (131-32). I argue that this tradition of community, in the sense of emotional connections with others who have shared “the same history,” has in many ways influenced the two authors I look at in this chapter in the sense that they are particularly accustomed to foregrounding or privileging the narrative of community.

Reimer and Froese Tiessen as literary critics, are crucial in explaining how this socio-cultural convention of placing an emphasis on community has influenced several Canadian Mennonite authors. Yet unlike Reimer and Froese Tiessen, I will show in this chapter that while these authors construct themselves as being one amongst a community, their community is not necessarily always strictly a Mennonite community. What I want to show is that the Mennonite ethos of community which is enacted in these texts extends to other communities as well. It is perhaps the case that as these authors have become more mainstream and less separate their sense of community has shifted whilst still remaining a vital component of their sense of self.

To be clear, the community I see at work in these texts is not a stable, unified, and essential Mennonite community and sometimes not even a *Mennonite* community at all. Yet while Funk Wiebe and Brandt see community in various ways, they both speak for and count themselves amongst a public they connect with via personal, autobiographical stories. In this sense, the model of intimate publics works well for this analysis. Nevertheless, I stray somewhat from the model established by both Anderson and Berlant in that I am making no presumptions about audience. I do not focus on how these texts work to construct a sense of community or intimate public with a group of readers. What concerns me is how the authors themselves presume an intimacy with their addressees and others whom they mention in the text. To borrow a phrase from Michael Warner, I am focusing on how the text itself conveys a “sense of its public” (110). In other words, I am looking at how these writers of autobiographical texts

establish their own particular identity in relation to an often imagined community whom the author constructs as sharing similar histories, beliefs, and goals. In presuming these intimate publics and in characterizing themselves as members of this public, the authors are able to write autobiographically and at the same time privilege the narrative of a community of others.

While I see Berlant as useful in explaining how these authors construct themselves as belonging to a perceived community, I also think that her definition of intimate publics is limited in the sense that it does not account for texts, like the ones I examine here, in which authors do not rely primarily on affect. While the authors that I examine may make emotional pleas and forge emotional connections to a community of others, they also make very rational (and sometimes radically political) systemic critiques against the patriarchal social structure and a destructive profit-oriented capitalist economic system. In that sense, I agree with writers Helga Lénárt-Cheng and Darija Walker who see the political potential for intimate publics. Specifically examining the sharing of life narratives on social networking sites, they argue that “Although Berlant’s description of the ‘intimate public sphere’ is relevant to our topic, it is important to note that in her examples it is the actual private act that is appropriated, while in ours, the emphasis is not on the actual private experience, but on the communal act of sharing it” (152).

Lénárt-Cheng and Walker stress that “communal sharing of individual lifestories can lead to more effective, and more individualized, forms of participatory democracy” (142). Lénárt-Cheng and Walker, here, are speaking quite specifically about places of exchange, such as an online forum, where life stories can be in dialogue with others. While the cases that I look at are different, these authors nevertheless do share their personal stories with and about a perceived intimate public that they consider themselves as belonging to, with the intention of creating genuine systemic change. In the same way that Lénárt-Cheng and Walker discuss online sites, I

likewise suggest that these texts reveal how sharing both the personal as well as the narrative of a community with an intimate public can be a form of social and political activism.

Beginning with *You Never Gave Me a Name*, I would like to consider the multiple ways that Katie Funk Wiebe's text speaks to an intimate public. One of the ways she does this is by connecting specifically to a Canadian Russian Mennonite community who share the loss of a homeland as a key aspect of their collective master narrative. Robert Zacharias has recently noted that the story of "the rise and fall of the Mennonite Commonwealth" (5) has "taken on the status of a supplementary scripture for Canada's Russian Mennonites – as if its retelling has become as central to the identity of this deeply religious community as the biblical narrative itself" (4). Developing his argument further, Zacharias suggests that it is the "1920s migration narrative" that functions as the "break event" for Mennonites, which affirms "communal identity across national and generational borders" and has led "much of their recent literature" to be "characterized by clear tropes of migration, displacement, and homelessness" (5). I suggest that Funk Wiebe taps into this marker of communal identity and works to construct an identity for herself in the text that connects with this Russian Canadian Mennonite community by constructing her *own* origin story of "migration, displacement, and homelessness."

Funk Wiebe's first chapter, aptly titled "A beginning that led to many beginnings," starts with her already having left home to attend the Mennonite Brethren Bible College. There Funk Wiebe meets her future husband Walter, and at that point begins a rather unstable journey of re-locating to different destinations that include Yarrow, B.C., Hepburn, Saskatchewan, Funk Wiebe's hometown of Blaine Lake, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, Kitchener, Ontario, and finally, Hillsboro, Kansas. Funk Wiebe notes how financial concerns were a significant motivation behind these moves, suggesting that "Money was always short" (82), which

increasingly becomes an issue for Funk Wiebe as her family grows to include four children followed by Walter's becoming ill. The narrative of constant wandering, of course, bears a striking similarity to the historical narrative of the Mennonites. Funk Wiebe's description of her own ancestors reinforces this connection: "Always movement and wandering in search of a better livelihood, greater freedom of religion, and opportunity to better the family" (253). One could describe Funk Wiebe's own early life in similar terms. In fact, when Funk Wiebe's father refers to her as a "child of many wanderings" (14) during an imaginary conversation that she herself constructs, it is unclear whether he is referring to her heritage or to her own life. What is more likely is that he means both and that Funk Wiebe is calling attention to the feeling of homelessness that continues to persist amongst contemporary Canadian Russian Mennonite communities.

Funk Wiebe's decision to illustrate the condition of homelessness through a personal story rather than through the larger, historical narrative of Mennonite exile is not without precedent and is, in fact, common in contemporary Canadian Mennonite literature. In her article on Miriam Toews's *A Complicated Kindness*, titled "Restorying the Mennonite Diaspora," Natasha G. Wiebe notes how "writers of Russian Mennonite heritage often use the diaspora narrative to re-present community and personal histories and to establish their identities as Mennonites to themselves and to others" (34). She refers to this practice as restorying, which she suggests is a "process of constructing new narratives from existing ones" (35). For Wiebe, Toews restorys the Mennonite diaspora narrative in *A Complicated Kindness* in three different ways.

One of these ways is through a direct re-telling of the "Mennonite Flight from Russia" (37) but she also tells the story of diaspora through less direct narratives such as "The Christian

Flight to Heaven” (38) and “The Nickel Family Flight from East Village” (40). Natasha Wiebe’s point, similar to the one Zacharias offers, is that the diaspora has operated as a master narrative in Mennonite writing and for establishing a particular Mennonite identity. As Zacharias argues, writers reveal the overarching cultural influence of this mythical origin narrative by writing specifically about the experience of migration from Russia to Canada. As Natasha Wiebe points out, though, Mennonite authors can also re-tell the narrative indirectly through more figurative versions of the history in stories about other kinds of flight, migration, and exile.

This practice of restorying is a familiar one within autobiography scholarship where it has long been understood that, in life writing, authors adopt the discourses of self-representation (along with the stories that go with them) that are made available through cultural circulation. As Smith and Watson note, “Conventions that are culturally and historically specific govern storytelling options, narrative plotting, and the uses of remembering” (91). The stories that we use to talk about ourselves, then, are rooted in a very particular time and place. Moreover, stories are crucial in the discursive formation of identities and, as a result, we frequently come to understand who we are via entrenched cultural narratives. As Jerome Bruner puts it, master narratives help “to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very ‘events’ of a life” (694). Restorying, to use Natasha G. Wiebe’s term, is a crucial method of writing that allows one to make sense of one’s life by positioning one’s self within a larger cultural master narrative.

I am suggesting that this restorying is at work in Katie Funk Wiebe’s narrative of migration that shows her and her family frequently and repeatedly “moving into the unknown” (*You Never* 99). This is not to say, of course, that these moments of constant wandering did not occur. Rather, what I am suggesting is that cultural conventions are at work in Funk Wiebe’s

decision to understand and subsequently relay her own lived experiences in this way. To use Natasha Wiebe's phrasing, the narrative of diaspora "provides a framework" (34) for Katie Funk Wiebe to make sense out of her own life. Furthermore, by evoking the narrative of diaspora, and in effect by calling attention to the double meaning inherent in the name "child of many wanderings," Funk Wiebe connects her own story to the story of a community of fellow Canadian Mennonites who continue to see exile as a crucial part of their collective identity. As Natasha Wiebe notes, these stories of homelessness reveal "personal histories." Yet, as Zacharias points out, these particular stories resonate amongst a specific audience of Canadian Russian Mennonites. It is with this audience that Funk Wiebe connects herself in her memoir.

In this sense, I see Funk Wiebe's story as establishing not only an intimate public but also what Svetlana Boym has termed a "diasporic intimacy." Similar to Berlant, Boym argues that diasporic intimacy "thrives on unpredictable chance encounters, on hope for human understanding. Yet this hope is not utopian. Diasporic intimacy is not limited to the private sphere but reflects collective frameworks of memory that encapsulate even the most personal of dreams" (500). Much like intimate publics, diasporic intimacy works to construct a community on the basis of shared experiences, in Boym's case, the shared experience of exile. Both intimate publics and diasporic intimacy function to draw the personal to a specific, collective and communal public.

In his memoir *Of This Earth*, Rudy Wiebe likewise calls attention to this pervasive feeling of homelessness amongst Canadian Russian Mennonites when he speaks of his family moving throughout Canada until they find a home that "was as close to a Russian Mennonite village as my parents ever found in Canada" (374). This quotation reveals the pervasive feeling of displacement amongst Russian Mennonite migrants and their inability to fully recover their

mythical origin which leads to an ongoing wandering. Unlike Rudy Wiebe, though, who speaks here of his parents, Katie Funk Wiebe tells an explicitly personal story of constant wandering. To borrow from Robert Zacharias, Funk Wiebe reveals “the ongoing importance of the migration narrative for the contemporary community” (11). Ultimately, in her memoir, Funk Wiebe connects her own identity (rather than her parents’ identity) to a community of Canadian Russian Mennonites who still consider exile as a crucial component of their self-understanding.

Katie Funk Wiebe, though, establishes her identity in relation to a Mennonite community in other ways that are potentially more subversive. This is noted, in fact, in the foreword of Funk Wiebe’s book by Wally Kroeker who writes,

This “life review,” as she calls it, is a wine of late harvest, a story “told right” which many readers can embrace as their own. It is, in a sense, a social history of the Mennonite movement of the second half of the last century, as refracted through her Mennonite Brethren lens. Her opening depiction of earnest but stifling Bible college life, for example, is not simply personal reflection but a candid analysis of Mennonite piety, a textured rendering of a generation in flux.  
(9-10)

Kroeker’s notes, in this quotation, that this memoir is not simply Funk Wiebe’s story but rather the story of an entire generation. Moreover, he importantly suggests that readers can look at this personal story “as their own” as if what happened to Funk Wiebe in her own personal life also happened in much the same way to a larger collective group. Her book is a “personal reflection” but at the same time, it is a story that speaks for many who saw their lives in a state of “flux” during the same time.

The flux that Kroeker speaks of is articulated by Funk Wiebe as the experience of a slowly changing attitude regarding the role of women in the Mennonite Brethren church, a point that Kroeker calls attention to when he refers to Funk Wiebe's "Stifling Bible college life." *You Never Gave me a Name* discusses, in no small detail, Funk Wiebe's own attempts to have a more active public life – particularly, a life that would be more active in her Mennonite Brethren religion. She notes soon after her husband Walter dies that her goals were "to become a better writer and to clarify for myself my role as a woman in the church" (114). Such a life was largely discouraged by the patriarchal structure of the Mennonite Brethren. As Marlene Epp observes, "Until the mid- to late twentieth century, and in certain subgroups still today, Mennonite women were explicitly excluded from important aspects of church organizational life and expression" (*Mennonite Women* 120).

Funk Wiebe indeed addresses precisely this sort of exclusion but also the problems that accompanied the gradual change of the system in the late twentieth century. She writes,

I sensed women were reluctant to expand their ministry into new aspects of church life, especially leadership roles, even as the church rapidly changed in the latter third of the twentieth century. They had accepted that a woman's role was to be subordinate, submissive, silent, working alongside the men or from behind the scenes. Furthermore, they were inexperienced, fearful, and uncertain about stepping outside long-held views of women's roles even though they knew they had a contribution to make. Because women seldom participated in real church decisions, they couldn't see the big picture of what was taking place in church and conference and where they might fit in. (196)



This is a central struggle for Funk Wiebe throughout the book – namely her fight against the conventional role established for Mennonite women and the social structure that largely stifled a woman’s opportunity to influence the culture that was shaping gender identities.

Importantly, though, in this quotation, while Funk Wiebe is describing what could be read as her own personal struggles, she only uses the autobiographical-I once. Otherwise, she appears to be talking about a more generic group of “women” who struggle against a role of subordination, submissiveness, and silence. This is, in fact, a common convention that Funk Wiebe utilizes throughout the book. When she goes to Bible college near the beginning of the autobiography, Funk Wiebe describes how the school essentially worked to reinforce gender norms. She writes:

We women were advised out of theology classes, which didn’t bother me too much because I didn’t know what theology was. And homiletics and Greek, of course, was out of the question. No woman in the MB Church would ever been called upon to preach. After all, we were told, we would probably become housewives, and our ministry would be in Sunday school, women’s circles, or child evangelism. (25-26)

Again, here, Funk Wiebe makes it clear that this is not merely her story. Rather, this is the memoir of “we” and at times, as the previous quotation displays, it also slips into the story of “they.”

Funk Wiebe uses the same technique when she describes the various stages of her life. When she begins to break free of the mould constructed for her by the patriarchal culture, she frequently devotes space to explaining the stories of other women who were similarly escaping the confines of traditional Mennonite gender roles. For example, she writes about “women” who

“were growing in spirit and mind and in their teaching and leadership. They had great gifts; they only needed experience and opportunity. Devotionals, those darlings of women’s circles, changed from gentle little readings from *Chicken Soup for the Soul* to more independent thinking. Women were becoming more involved in church work, locally and nationally” (183). The book, at times, is less about Funk Wiebe’s own stories than it is about the stories of women’s communities as she observed them. The struggle that she talks about, then, is not merely personal, although it is that too. Significantly, though, Funk Wiebe alerts us, through her very wording, to the fact that this is also a collective story of what she sees to be a female community. Funk Wiebe’s positioning of herself within this collective allows her to speak autobiographically as well as focus some of her attention on the story of others.

Funk Wiebe quite strikingly constructs an identity in relation to a larger community of Mennonite women who lived through the same history and felt similarly discriminated against and constrained by a patriarchal religious structure. She largely sets herself up as a representative of a nonprivileged social group, to borrow Berlant’s terminology. This is crucial because, as Funk Wiebe herself notes, there were very few role models for progressive Mennonite women to look to during the time period she describes. At one point in the book she notes that “My role models were loving, generous women who made excellent *Zwieback* and borscht and sewed fine stitches in pillow cases, but understood little of my yearning to give myself away on paper” (163-64). In other words, while Funk Wiebe admired the women she looked to in her socio-cultural milieu, she nevertheless observes that there were no women she could look to who outwardly shared the same desires and wants. She later argues that the lack of role models negatively affected the women’s movement in the Mennonite Brethren community. She writes that “Women’s groups were looking for direction. They had zeal. They had money. They had

energy but lacked direction” (190). Again, here, it is crucial to mention that Funk Wiebe’s own lack of direction and the absence of progressive role models in her own life transforms into a discussion that is not about her but is, rather, about a larger and more general group of women who likewise “lacked direction.”

On a more basic and fundamental level, Funk Wiebe notes that the absence of prominent female voices in her community led to a very real confusion on crucial issues. Pregnant with her first child, she recalls that “I knew nothing about the birth process. No one took time to explain the stages of labor. I longed for someone to be with me through those long lonely hours as my tense body was racked by pain after pain. But that was the way childbirth was done in large city hospitals” (62). Soon after giving birth in the hospital, she writes, “A wonderful woman in the bed next to mine had just given birth to her seventh child. Her positive, refreshing spirit reached me, soothed me. She was an early mentor” (62). Here Funk Wiebe’s confusion and anxiety over giving birth becomes soothed by the model of motherhood she sees next to her. She suggests that such female role models are necessary for women who are pregnant and going through labour and the absence of such women from the impersonal atmosphere of the hospital which was, at the time, surely male-dominated, had detrimental consequences.

As she does with the mother in the bed next to her, Funk Wiebe looks to find mentors in other contexts. Importantly, for her, she finds role models by integrating herself more within a Mennonite Brethren community. She writes,

In August 1962 Walter and I had the wonderful opportunity to attend sessions of the Mennonite World Conference held in Kitchener and entertained guests in our home. This was my first introduction to the wider Mennonite family, coming from many countries and branches of the church. I heard speakers of the caliber I had

not experienced before. I attended a women's session. I opened myself to this generous unexpected outpouring of blessings. (99)

Funk Wiebe goes on to call this moment a "mountaintop experience" (99). By attending these conferences, she witnesses females playing a role in religious life that she herself felt was denied to her. By integrating herself more into a wider religious community of Mennonites, she is able to locate models that encourage her to develop her own rebellious position as a more powerful female figure within the church.

As the book continues, Funk Wiebe encounters more women playing active roles in the church, which helps to bolster her own stance. She writes, "Women are rejected for ministry because many people have never seen them in active ministry. My early role models were pioneers Ruth Brunk Stolfus, Lois Clemens, and Ella Mae Miller of the then-(Old) Mennonite Church. I traveled around the country to allow men, women, and children to see a woman in ministry with all her flaws and follies as well as strengths" (181). Here, Funk Wiebe names the women who have played a crucial role in the formation of her own sense of self. Important here, too, though, is her point that she also puts her own self on display for others in order to encourage their own personal development. Funk Wiebe is again presuming a kind of intimate public – a community of like-minded people who need to see a role model in order to spur a reaction against what they feel is the repressed development of the church. This was, after all, Funk Wiebe's own personal experience as she describes it. She herself needed to see the actions of other females in order to confirm her own desire to be more than a conventional homemaker and mother. Thus, Funk Wiebe assumes that the personal is also the public and that her own experiences and beliefs would largely connect with the experiences and beliefs of a larger Mennonite community.

Perhaps more important, though, is that it is especially through the act of reading that Funk Wiebe herself recognizes that she belongs to an intimate public. She recalls, “As I read Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* in the 1960s, I couldn’t believe other women thought the way I did, hundreds of them, maybe even thousands. I wasn’t alone in my feelings about being set aside when it came to use of gifts” (199). Through reading Friedan’s monumental book, Funk Wiebe becomes aware of the burgeoning feminist movement that would become more mainstream and organized during the 1970s. Intriguingly, as Gloria Neufeld Redekop notes, Friedan’s book was introduced to Mennonite readers via a positive review in *The Canadian Mennonite*. Redekop writes how the reviewer “agreed with Friedan that women were living below their capabilities and queries whether the Mennonite church had been guilty of asking too little of Mennonite women” (78). *The Feminine Mystique*, then, as Redekop suggests, would have held a particularly unique resonance for Mennonite women. The book spoke for a nonprivileged community in which members were connected to strangers on the basis of similar thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Funk Wiebe constructs her own identity as being very much connected to this group of “hundreds” or “maybe even thousands” of other women readers.

Funk Wiebe’s story, then, is a story of personal growth but it is also the story of the growth of a community of women of which Funk Wiebe counts herself a member. As Gloria Neufeld Redekop puts it, “women were beginning to question male-centered biblical interpretation and traditionally held positions in the church but also ... Mennonite women were being influenced by society around them, in particular, the women’s movement” (78-79). Funk Wiebe’s experiences as she describes them in this book can be very much understood as shared or transportable experiences that are applicable to other women. Importantly though, as Funk Wiebe describes it, it is the text circulating as a commodity that creates the assumption that there

exists an intimate group of strangers who share the same concerns. Funk Wiebe reinforces the relationship between text and community throughout her memoir. She notes that “I lined my shelves with all the new books about women coming out. I watched and studied what was going on in the broader Mennonite constituency and elsewhere” (204). Indeed, literature plays a crucial role in giving Funk Wiebe a sense of a community.

Significantly, Funk Wiebe tells the story of becoming a writer herself. Discussing her early experiences as an author, she notes how she wrote about her own personal struggles and, as a result, connected with a community of readers. Consequently, she acknowledges her own role in forming an intimate public with her writing:

I had not expected reader response. But letters arrived with comments like these:

“Your articles reflect an insight and awareness beyond most MB women I know.”

The writer described my *Christian Leader* column as “meat for her spiritual diet.”

Another reader found in my writing truths she had sensed but not thought through.

As the years sped by, I became aware that wrapping words around thoughts

readers were struggling to articulate was my greatest gift. Other women were also

striving to find answers to questions they didn’t know how to formulate. I was no

different except that I had the opportunity to think openly about them. (114)

This quotation reaffirms the point that subjects within an intimate public have a sense that a community of likeminded strangers exist before the “‘culture of circulation’ takes hold,”

(*Female 5*) as Berlant puts it. In fact, in some ways, moments like these in Funk Wiebe’s text

reinforce the notion of a women’s culture – what Berlant refers to as “the first mass cultural

intimate public in the United States” (viii). Berlant goes on to say that “This ‘women’s culture’ is

distinguished by a view that the people marked by femininity already have something in

common and are in need of a conversation that feels intimate, revelatory, and a relief” (viii-ix). Certainly, the readers’ letters, as they are described here, suggest that Funk Wiebe put into language a feeling that a community of women had always shared but could not express.

Furthermore, there is no question that Funk Wiebe’s writing and the responses to it rest specifically on a belief that it is women in particular who need to hear stories about concerns that are specific to women. At the same time, though, it is worth noting that Berlant’s claim is that these stories are narrow in scope. That is, they continually revisit what she calls “the female complaint,” which, as she puts it, stresses the notion that “women live for love, and love is the gift that keeps on taking” (1). In other words, Berlant sees these texts as critiquing romantic relationships whilst simultaneously arguing for their inevitable necessity and, in doing so, are maintaining “some fidelity to the world of distinction and desire that produced such disappointment in the first place” (2).

While it is most definitely the case that Funk Wiebe’s book does adhere to a belief in a kind of essential and unified group of women readers, she does not resort to sentimentality or to what Sara L. McKinnon, in her review of Berlant’s book, has called “the conventional fantasy [of romantic love] that is projected so pervasively in women’s culture” (333). Indeed, Funk Wiebe’s book encourages each woman to consider her own identity as an individual, not as one that is “submerged in someone else’s – a husband’s, a father’s, sometimes even a child’s if that child was a missionary or other prominent person” (Funk Wiebe 114). Funk Wiebe’s book, then, both affirms Berlant’s points about women’s culture as an intimate public and, at the same time, presents an alternative and perhaps more productive discussion for this culture that writers like both Berlant and McKinnon see as being so pervasive.

The long quotation above from Funk Wiebe also gives insight into the kind of work that she believes her writing is doing and, thus, the kind of work she believes her own autobiographical writing in this book is doing. For Funk Wiebe, she is not merely telling her own story. She is also articulating the story of an entire community of women. Consequently, the identity that she constructs for herself in this book is not merely her own but is rather a collective and communal identity. Constructing an identity that is very much bound to a collective community allows Funk Wiebe to privilege the narrative(s) of others. She articulates how she sees the relationship between her own private self and the wider community in greater detail, later in the book, writing that,

My own personal journey as a woman in ministry in the Mennonite community has been a never-ending roller-coaster ride, yet here I am, not where I began but on a much surer level. It took a while before I realized I was part of something much bigger than my little thoughts, an idea whose time had come, even as it had been coming, off and on, for centuries. I think of it as wispy spider webs floating in the atmosphere, pulled together first by one person, then another, until a strong fabric results. (198)

The description here of “wispy spider webs” reaffirms Funk Wiebe’s positive emphasis on community. The suggestion appears to be that the role of women “in ministry” could only improve once more women joined the movement and recognized their vital role in organizing a cohesive and coherent movement that could work to dismantle old prejudices.

Perhaps here, more than anywhere else in the book, Funk Wiebe best explains how she sees herself in relation to this community. She notes that she has, indeed, had a “personal journey” but that this journey was merely part of a larger collective struggle which, here, she



suggests, was a more significant struggle. This quotation ultimately demonstrates why she can privilege the narrative of others throughout the book while also talking a great deal about her own significant accomplishments. Indeed, even as she recognizes the figures in the movement who pulled together the “wispy spider webs,” she acknowledges this pulling together as being done by “one person, then another,” rather than pointing to her own role in helping to construct a “strong fabric.” Certainly, Funk Wiebe *does* point out her own role elsewhere in the book, but it is noteworthy that in this instance, when she is describing the importance of the women’s movement, she ultimately diminishes her own role or leaves herself out entirely.

In my previous chapter, I observed how Funk Wiebe’s book challenges the assertions made in earlier theoretical discussions on women’s autobiography, as exemplified by figures such as Mary G. Mason who argued that women most frequently construct autobiographical selves in relation to a marital other. Here, I would like to suggest that Funk Wiebe fits better into the paradigm of women’s autobiographical selves as outlined by post-Mason theorists of women’s life writing, such as Susan Stanford Friedman. As I noted in my introduction, Stanford Friedman distinguishes women’s life writing in suggesting that their texts demonstrate how women do not consider their selves as being “solely unique” (79). Rather, she argues, the authors of these texts “often explore their sense of shared identity with other women” (79); they oppose themselves to “individualistic paradigms” which “do not recognize the significance of interpersonal relationships and community in women’s self-definition” (79). Significantly, Stanford Friedman highlights community as a crucial aspect in informing women’s sense of self. In that respect, Funk Wiebe’s consideration of the community in her own book, particularly a community that is driven by the concerns of the feminist movement, illustrates how her work functions well as a representative of Stanford Friedman’s conception of women’s life writing.

Yet the above quotation from Funk Wiebe, citing her “own personal journey” also serves to show how Stanford Friedman’s conception of relationality does not leave much space for the kind of self-construction that occurs in *You Never Gave Me a Name*. Ultimately, Friedman notes that “this autobiographical self often does not oppose herself to all others, does not feel herself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community” (79). While it is certainly true that Funk Wiebe does not shy away, in this book, from her own significant role as a member of this community, her remarks regarding the “Mennonite community” do not necessarily suggest an “interdependent existence.” When Funk Wiebe suggests that she “was part of something much bigger than my little thoughts,” she is essentially minimizing her own part in the movement and is even humbly characterizing her own thoughts as “little” in order to do so. Funk Wiebe, here, does not construct a community that is as dependent on her as she is on it. Rather, for her, the actions of the community are far more important than her own. Here, Funk Wiebe’s remarks reaffirm the limitations of the relational approach to women’s life writing by Stanford Friedman, which was then applied to a larger group of writers by scholars like Paul John Eakin and Nancy K. Miller.

I suggest that Funk Wiebe’s privileging of community over the self is very much rooted in a cultural discourse. Edna Froese notes that “the choosing to subordinate oneself to the community is an integral, or at least an historical, part of Mennonite thinking” (“To Write” 8). *You Never Gave Me a Name* illustrates this to some extent. Funk Wiebe never outright dismisses her own story and her own role in the growing movement of Mennonite women. She does, in fact, highlight her own accomplishments as a writer and as a speaker and this helps explain how

she became a crucial figure at the time. The personal is important in this book but it is important in terms of how it can contribute to the larger social community that is working to enact change.

I argue that the book itself works to speak to and speak for a perceived intimate public in much the same way that Funk Wiebe describes her earlier writings in the book when she discusses the connections she forges with women readers. There are moments where she speaks directly to a female reader. She states, “I want to say to all women, ‘You’ve come a long way, baby, but’ – and this is a big BUT – ‘you’ve still got a long way to go.’” (224). Funk Wiebe ends her discussion on her role in the women’s movement by, once again, speaking to and for an intimate community of women who share similar concerns and have similar goals. To some extent the intimate public formed by Mennonite women’s groups as observed by Funk Wiebe, worked to foreground what Berlant calls “affective and emotional attachments” (*Female* 10) rather than political ones. Ultimately, Funk Wiebe writes of relationships that are often forged through a deeply emotional connection. We see this quite strikingly in the text when Funk Wiebe describes her experience at the Evangelical Women’s Caucus, which she attended in 1975:

Of the three hundred women present, about thirty were from Mennonite denominations. The late Herta Funk, a vigorous Mennonite women’s leader, called us together for a breakfast meeting. We looked each other in the eyes and knew we shared an undisclosed hurt – often unarticulated even to ourselves. I found myself bonding with women who did not see me as someone out of her mind. (202)

Certainly, in noting specifically that these Mennonite women found a common connection through their shared pain that had heretofore gone unspoken (what she calls an “undisclosed

hurt”), Funk Wiebe describes what Berlant calls the “emotional contact” upon which the “intimate public sphere” depends (*Female* viii).

In my view, though, Funk Wiebe moves beyond a mere emotional response to systemic discrimination in this book. In doing so, she forges connections in ways that are more subversive than what Berlant’s definition of intimate publics allows for. This is not to say that Funk Wiebe calls for an end to capitalist consumer culture, which Berlant argues makes intimate publics possible in the first place, and typically diffuses the possibility of genuinely subversive discussion. However, the book does go further than the limitations that Berlant described in conversation with Jay Prosser at the IABA conference on life writing and intimate publics. She observes that “Intimate publics usually flourish to one side of politics, referring to historical subordinations without mobilizing a fundamental activism with respect to them” (Prosser 184). In fact, Funk Wiebe specifically calls for activism in her memoir, or at the very least presents herself as an activist for women readers by detailing her various activities as a spokeswoman.

Funk Wiebe’s argument for a larger and more significant role for women within the Mennonite church is often made on intellectual grounds. Speaking primarily to Christian women and speaking as a Christian herself, she re-interprets the Christian discourse that had historically undermined women in order to challenge the male-dominated power structure of the church. Marlene Epp notes, “the biblical admonition that women be ‘silent’ became dominant in Mennonite church life” (*Mennonite Women* 121). However, as Gloria Neufeld Redekop suggests, by the late 1960s, Mennonite “women were beginning to question male-centered biblical interpretation and traditionally held positions in the church” (78). *You Never Gave Me a Name* illustrates this shift in biblical interpretation. Funk Wiebe herself argues that,

To succeed I had to change my thinking about the role of women in the church. I had to accept that I, as a member of the body of Christ, like all other members, had the responsibility to define for myself the nature and teaching of the church. I had to accept that I had the obligation to test its doctrine and theology against the Scriptures with the goal of growth of individual members as well as the body as a whole. Which meant venturing into areas of thought and life not usually open to women. (162)

More than simply dwelling emotionally on her place as a subordinated subject and victim of a patriarchal structure, Funk Wiebe re-reads the Bible and, in re-interpreting it, challenges the “doctrine and theology” of the religion that has discriminated against women.

The quotation also highlights the subversive nature of her argument. Biblical interpretation was, after all, not the domain of women, as she herself observes when she tells us that she was “venturing into areas of thought and life not usually open to women.” In recognizing her own “responsibility” in defining “the nature and teaching of the church,” Funk Wiebe refuses to be passive and consequently refuses the admonition of silence that Epp says historically prevented women from questioning the role that had been imposed on them. Reinterpreting the Bible from a woman’s perspective allows Funk Wiebe to make a case for improving women’s role in the church whilst maintaining fidelity to the religion. She says,

For years I encouraged women to recognize God had given them a gift – giving, encouragement, hospitality, evangelism, helps, caring, listening, knowledge, teaching, leadership, celibacy. Their task was to discover that gift and risk using it. The world was opening up to women. Why were we holding back? Some men were more ready to open doors to service than women were willing to enter.

Today I rejoice to see women using individual gifts instead of falling into identical patterns. (193)

This passage demonstrates how Funk Wiebe appeals to what she considers to be an intimate community of like-minded women through means other than affect. Instead, she proposes alternatives to domestic servitude for women and she does so by re-appropriating religious discourse. Rather than accepting the doctrine that suggested it was God's will that women be silent, Funk Wiebe suggests that "God had given" women gifts that extend beyond the private sphere.

More than that, though, while she writes here about her own activist work, she nevertheless quickly abandons the autobiographical-I in favour of a discussion about women. Furthermore, in asking why "we" were holding back, she constructs herself not simply as an activist leader, but also as a figure amongst the crowd of women she herself was speaking to. In that sense, she tears down the line between herself and her audience, and counts herself among the community who still struggled to make progress. Funk Wiebe, then, characterizes the women's movement as being bound by more than an emotional connection. While the women she describes are connected to one another as a result of a history of common pain and ongoing struggles, they are also connected by a desire to set goals for changing systemic discrimination and to communicate these goals to a broader audience.

In *You Never Gave Me a Name*, Katie Funk Wiebe establishes an identity in relation to a larger, abstract community in several ways. In one respect, she forges a relationship with what she constructs as a community of Mennonites on the basis of a shared history of exile and an ongoing experience of diaspora or homelessness. She also constructs herself as being one amongst a larger community of Mennonite women who struggled for a voice and fought for a

greater role within the Mennonite Brethren church. In creating an identity that is at once personal as well as bound to larger community, Funk Wiebe is able to write an autobiographical text that speaks for others as much as it speak for herself. Ultimately, then, the book frequently gives priority to a movement and a community rather than the individual who is writing.

In the same way that Katie Funk Wiebe privileges community, Di Brandt in her autobiographical texts often foregrounds the stories of others over the story of the self. Of the many strands of thought that are at work in Di Brandt's *So this is the world & here I am in it*, the most prevalent one is ecology and its relationship to a profit-driven capitalist economy. As Tanis Macdonald stresses in her review, the book conveys "a naked despair over the possible loss of the land to a postindustrialized culture" (82). Significantly, Brandt's remarks on the environment are at once personal and communal. While she focuses specifically on the destruction of the prairie land where she grew up, she nevertheless considers herself as being part of a large community (made up of several cultures) which has been and continues to be victimized by a corporate power structure and forced to destroy the environment in the name of profiting elite institutions. In that sense, Brandt constructs herself as being one amongst a larger community on the basis of a shared connection.

At the same time, though, Brandt perhaps goes further than Funk Wiebe in her critique of power. Brandt draws on a conception of community based on what she sees as similar histories in order to suggest a political alternative to the market economic system that she considers to be destructive. She connects herself, for example, to what she sees as a community of Mennonites drawn together by their common ancestors who lived "low to the ground with fierce communal independence" (107). As I mentioned in my first chapter, Brandt mostly focuses on Mennonites and Mennonite characteristics that work to reaffirm her own values. It is, of course, the case that

the Mennonites who lived “low to the ground with fierce communal independence” were but a small part of the heterogeneous whole. In this sense, the community as Brandt describes it (particularly in the monolithic terms in which she represents them) may very well be an imagined one.

Nevertheless, this potentially imagined community plays a pivotal role in Brandt’s book – it is an ongoing subject of her focus and continues to provide, for Brandt, a model for subsequent communities (also potentially imagined) to whom she speaks in the book. Brandt, in fact, calls upon Mennonites to recuperate what she considers to be common amongst them, namely their “ancient peasant loyal ties to traditionalist local land and community practices” (115) as a way to combat the oppressive and destructive machinations of consumer capitalism. Yet along with this, Brandt sees both herself and her fellow Mennonites as having collectively turned away from that tradition. In other words, Brandt is self-positioned within a community, members of which, because of their common heritage, are primed to enact genuine political change but have, at the same time, ignored this heritage.

Brandt presumes and considers her identity in terms of its relation to a community of nondominant people. Moreover, Brandt establishes this intimate community in order to call into question the structural economic system that has positioned her community as nondominant. I want to initially focus on the first chapter of Brandt’s book in order to discuss how she establishes an identity largely in connection with a nonprivileged community. Once having done that, I will then go on to look at the whole book in order to examine how Brandt uses this communal identity in order to consider both political solutions to ongoing subordination and ecological destruction as well as the obstacles to those solutions.



In the book's first section, Brandt constructs an intimate public that is frequently (though not exclusively) a Mennonite community that has been victimized by financial institutions as well as the larger capitalist economic system in which such institutions flourish. This economic system has not only worked to harm people, Brandt argues, but it has also severely damaged what she calls, "This land that I love, this wide, wide prairie" (1). She articulates this concern in her first chapter in a way that connects the personal to the general. Brandt begins by talking about the experiences of her father, noting that "Like almost all farmers in the modern era, he was a victim of economic exploitation by multinational corporate interests ... which are profit rather than health driven, and proliferate false propaganda about the environmental risks of chemicalization" (9). Almost immediately in the book, then, Brandt implicates corporate hegemony in damaging both the health of her family and the land where they lived.

Brandt is in many ways responding to the consequences that occurred as a result of changes in farming practices in Canada during the post-WWII era. As Mennonite historian T.D. Regehr observes, "Canadian farmers were bombarded after the war with literature and public addresses that insisted that those who wanted to succeed as farmers had to become more business-like. They must take advantage of new technologies, which in turn required much larger capital investments" (143). Regehr notes that these changes had a particularly poignant effect on Mennonite farmers, since "For them, perhaps more than for almost any other Canadians, farming represented an idealized and separatist way of life" (118). Moreover, Brandt suggests that, for her at least, traditional Mennonitism involves being deeply connected to the land, as she observes on multiple occasions (80, 127). In that case, then, the technological takeover and mechanization of farm practices along with what she calls above the "chemicalization" of the land, would work

to undermine what many Mennonites (among them Brandt herself) believed were important cultural traditions.

Indeed, Brandt states in explicit detail the way corporate practices have affected Mennonite families and the prairies in general. As Berlant might put it, Brandt chooses examples that demonstrate her own affective response to the corporatization of prairie farming practices in order to reinforce her critique. Brandt observes how “The rivers are being choked with reeds and fungi, because of fertilizer run-off in the water systems. Many people in south central Manitoba, in the heart of Mennonite farmland, are dying of cancer, MS, pneumonia, leukemia, all of them victims of damaged immune systems and, indisputably, environmental pollution” (7). Indeed, Brandt demonstrates repeatedly how she has a personal and emotional connection to this particular story. She tells us that her own father “died of cancer at age sixty-one” and that her brother quit farming “due to environmental illness, almost certainly caused by exposure to pesticides” (6). Brandt, then, has seen suffering first hand and she describes it in great detail, but she also suggests that this suffering belongs not just to her but to a wider community.

She first draws a connection between her own family’s experiences and her “friend Owain Jones” who, she notes, had a father who “was a Welsh farmer” and had a “family story” that was “similar to mine even though he’s a son, not a daughter, and was not brought up in a separatist, migrant culture, and lives on another continent” (9). Importantly, Brandt sees herself as connected to others not on the basis of gender, culture, or familial background. Rather, she draws connections on the basis of a shared feeling of being exploited by the dominant group. She writes, for example, how Owain Jones’s story,

startled me into empathy for my father, who worked so hard to provide for us, who so loved his farm. Empathy for my mother, who had so much imagination and feeling, and so little decision-making power. Empathy for my people, the Mennonites, who didn't realize they were being swindled by the promise of riches into corporate practices they wouldn't have approved of if they'd understood them. Empathy for the citizens of Canada who have worked close to the land, in good faith, and been implicated in so much exploitation by the corporate powers who were organizing giant, and as it turns out, potentially lethal, takeovers, without declaring themselves. Empathy for the First Nations and Métis peoples of Turtle Island who signed treaties, albeit under duress, with strangers who practised duplicity, that put their inheritance and the future of this great land in jeopardy. It has been the same, and worse, in other countries around the globe. (9)

What is striking in this quotation, first, is that Brandt repeatedly uses the term “empathy” rather than sympathy.

Brandt counts herself amongst the victims by noting that she feels empathy, defined by the OED as “The power of projecting one’s personality into (and so fully comprehending) the object of contemplation.” Brandt, then, considers herself to be as much a victim of corporate exploitation as those she discusses in this quotation. Unlike Katie Funk Wiebe, Brandt does not, at this point, replace the “I” with “we” or eliminate herself altogether the way Funk Wiebe occasionally does. Nevertheless, the remarks that she makes here are ultimately far more about the experiences of others. Significantly, for Brandt, community consists of Mennonites whom she refers to as “my people” but also to a much larger group of people who were similarly victimized, including women, First Nations, Métis, and all of the “citizens of Canada who have

worked close to the land.” Brandt here creates a large but intimate community of strangers who share with her similar historical and ongoing experiences of economic and social exploitation.

Brandt, though, diverts from the kind of intimate community as described by Berlant by questioning the binary oppositions between privileged and nonprivileged and victim and perpetrator. In the first chapter of *So this is the world*, Brandt discusses her personal relationship with the land. She begins by describing her great reverence for the prairies where she grew up, saying “How I loved you, how I love you, how I love you” (1). In many respects, the book falls within the category of eco-autobiography as defined by Peter Perreten. Perreten suggests that in eco-autobiography, “The story of the landscape and her personal story are one; ecology and autobiography merge into a single text” (8). Eco-autobiographies as Perreten describes them convey selves in relation – in this case, a self that is constructed in relation to place. These texts reveal the capacity that place has in shaping the self.

Certainly, Brandt conveys such a relationship in her book. At one point, she explains the lingering influence of the prairie landscape in her life: “I haven’t really gotten very far away from my sensuous childhood love of prairie silence and four leggeds and green places after all. ... I’m still country in my imagination and my bones” (73-74). Furthermore, Brandt continues to explore the relational connection between self and place by equating the poisoning of the land with the rise in illnesses amongst the population who live there, as quoted above. Yet importantly, in this case, Brandt is not merely talking about her own relationship with the land, but an entire community’s. Ultimately, while this identity of self in relation to place exists in the book, what is even more pervasive is the sense that she is not the only person who has such a connection to land<sup>22</sup> – that, in fact, an entire community is connected in ways that must be addressed in order for change to occur.

She notes that “In a little more than a hundred years, we, the immigrant settlers of this beautiful land, have managed to poison the land and our food sources and our own bodies so drastically as to jeopardize the future of all life in this country” (7). Importantly, at this point, Brandt *does* use the word “we” to include herself amongst a group she designates as “immigrant settlers” which, here, clearly applies not only to the original settlers but to their descendants as well. Brandt, then, is suggesting that while the intimate community to which she herself belongs has a shared history of being exploited by the dominant class they also have a shared responsibility for damaging the land along with participating in practices that have been harmful to the people who have lived there.

Nowhere does Brandt make this issue more explicit than in her discussion regarding the Mennonite relationship with Native people. As has already been noted, Brandt sees similarities between the exploitation of her own Mennonite family with the exploitation of Native Canadians. Brandt is not the first Mennonite writer to draw connections between her own cultural background and indigenous communities. As Penelope Van Toorn has observed, Rudy Wiebe’s books such as *The Temptations of Big Bear* reveal “Wiebe’s own observations on the similarities between the traditional Native Indian and Mennonite Christian outlooks” (105). Yet while Brandt similarly sees other connections between Mennonites and Natives, she is also very much aware of the Mennonite role in displacing indigenous populations from the land. She writes, “This stolen land, Métis land, Cree land, buffalo land. When did I first understand this, the dark underside of property, colonization, ownership, the shady dealings that brought us here, to this earthly paradise” (1). Brandt’s love of the land is coloured by the very notion that the land itself is uneasily bound to destructive economic and political practises that her “people” participated in.

She acknowledges her own community's historical culpability in this destructiveness, writing that the Mennonites "would have been part of the agricultural project of the newly formed Canadian government," which saw "the arrival of numerous immigrant groups to take up farming in what had previously been uncultivated grasslands" (2). Brandt notes how this land "had previously been First Nations and Métis territory" and therefore the new policy of farming this land was "one of the reasons for the Métis rebellion" (2). Brandt, here, speaks to the complex and somewhat contradictory position of Mennonite settlers in Canada. As Amy Kroeker argues,

Mennonites in Canada occupy a position of ambivalence as they struggle, as they have struggled, to maintain their identities in the face of pressure to assimilate culturally and linguistically yet base those identities in part on a geographic separation made possible only through cultural practices which removed resident Native populations from the land that became Mennonites'. Although 'white Canadians,' Mennonites traditionally do not hold positions of dominance, yet their actions as agents of colonization make impossible a neat categorization as either 'colonized' or 'colonizers'. (240)

Brandt indeed portrays herself as belonging to this ambivalent community – a group who are nondominant yet, at the same time, are also agents of power as witnessed by their active participation in the colonial project along with their role in poisoning land, food, and bodies.

In recognizing her own community's culpability in poisoning the land and its people, Brandt offers the possibility of genuine change, since, for her, responsibility rests as much with the nondominant group as it does with the dominant group. Ultimately, Brandt in this case appeals to a community of Mennonites to whom she herself belongs and who come out of a

common historical tradition. Brandt argues in favour of returning to certain traditions as a way to resist the oppressive and destructive policies of the dominant class rather than participate in them as she believes has historically been the case. One of the traditions of the intimate community Brandt sees herself as belonging to is fiercely anti-industrial. She notes that “at the heart of Mennonite culture lies a much older world view than the early modern” (122). Brandt explains this pre-modern mindset in more detail elsewhere in the book. She argues that,

Our resistance to textualization and industrialization therefore happened not because we were intellectually backward, as the contemporary world has depicted us, but rather because we valued our oral peasant culture enough to want to preserve it, originally in resistance to the violent multinational globalizing tactics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, not waiting to be shepherded into factories and crowded city ghettos or culturally alienated suburbs as the peasants of England and Scotland were forced to do at that time. We have practised our traditionalism ever since, migrating from one country to another in search of political/cultural freedom, in resistance to whatever sources threatened it, including the pressures of citizenship in the modern national state, at the cultural investments of text and electronic media. (81)

Again, here, Brandt neglects to use the autobiographical-I but instead adopts a more general “our” and “we.” The self that Brandt constructs recalls the one that I described in my first chapter, as she draws a connection between herself and a general Mennonite located in a historical past before she herself was born.

Yet Brandt also speaks to a more current community here. While she notes that at one point in history, Mennonite ancestors largely opposed the early developments of the Industrial

Revolution, she also goes on to say that “We have practiced our traditionalism ever since.” In that sense, Brandt is suggesting that the anti-capitalist spirit amongst Mennonites that largely drove the movements against “the violent multinational globalizing tactics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries” still exists to some degree amongst the intimate community as she understands (indeed constructs) it. Indeed, Brandt is romanticizing the Mennonite past here, in many ways seeing only anti-industrialists when, in fact, as Rob Zacharias notes, “an elite class of wealthy Mennonite industrialists emerged” in the Russian Commonwealth (50-51). Importantly though, Zacharias suggests that this was more true for the Russländer population “who, remaining in Russia [beyond the 1870s], accommodated themselves to the new regulations and went on to enjoy remarkable levels of commercial and cultural success over the next fifty years” (51) Brandt’s imagined community perhaps speaks more to her own Kanadier background. Nevertheless, what is significant is that the community she constructs and positions herself within is stridently traditional. She refers, for example, to the “Mennonite celebration of dirt” which she experienced in her childhood (80). She describes how her “mother would send us out on summer days after a rain shower to leap around in the puddles” (80) and notes how “fathers” would “[caress] the black earth in their fields around newly sprouted green” (81). Brandt demonstrates how what she sees as the traditions which historically kept many Mennonites in opposition to industrialization were still, in some ways, still alive when she was growing up.

However, Brandt does say that her community gradually turned away from traditions in fundamentally negative ways. She criticizes “the villages of my childhood” which valued “our separatism” only in the “aesthetic sense” of “food and dress and language and demeanor – while farming itself, during the postwar years of the 1950s and ’60s while I was growing up, was cheerfully and unquestioningly assimilating to Canadian mainstream agricultural practice



through intense and rapid mechanization and chemicalization and corporatization” (82). Brandt laments how the Mennonite community that she grew up in mostly remained traditional in the conservative sense. They maintained strict rules regarding behaviour but largely turned away from the more subversive traditions that included their refusal to participate in the modern industrial world.

Importantly, Brandt describes how she herself is very much part of this community of Mennonites who have distanced themselves from the tradition of separatism. She writes how

I was not the only one to leave the village; my twin sister, and eventually my other siblings, and most of the village children of our generation left, too. ... The whole edifice of our Mennonite separatism, preserved so carefully at so high a cost through four centuries of exile and migration and hard labour, in harsh, inhospitable landscapes, was coming, as my father rightly perceived it, crashing down. (209-10)

Brandt does certainly draw a distinction here between her generation and the generation before her. Her parents’ generation, she says, abandoned traditional conceptions of separatism by taking on modern, business-oriented farming practices. Brandt’s own generation, on the other hand, did so by turning away from village life. Yet while the turn away from traditions occurred in different ways, Brandt’s language in these two different sections of the book indicates that ultimately both turns were very much part of the same process. In both cases, she notes how the two generations abandoned “separatism” in favour of the “mainstream.” The cost of this, Brandt tells us, has been severe.

What Brandt does, here, then is construct a large and intimate community of people she herself is connected to which allows to her to focus on others rather than herself. In some

respects, Brandt does construct herself as independent of the community when she notes how she “was the first one to reject Plautdietsch in favour of English, the first to attend university ... the first to leave Manitoba to pursue a graduate degree, in Toronto, the first to stop attending church, the first to go secular, assimilationist, mainstream” (210). Yet while she may have been the first, she was far from the only one, as she herself admits. Ultimately, the story Brandt tells here is not the story of an individual but rather of a community who, for several generations, had made the same decision to turn away from what Brandt sees as traditional Mennonite values.

Brandt ultimately considers her identity as tied to a group of people who have been historically victimized by the dominant class and elite institutions who have forced Mennonites and others to carry out actions that have been and continue to be both destructive to the land and to themselves. At the same time, though, she also argues that this intimate community has its own traditions that prime them for resisting and overturning the interests of the dominant class. This community, though, has been thus far unable to do so because of their collective abandonment of the rebellious aspects of their tradition. She mourns the possibility that “our Plautdietsche ways of living low to the ground with fierce communal independence are lost” (107). Brandt ultimately speaks directly to the intimate community of readers in an attempt to encourage a recovery of traditions that she sees her community as sharing.

At one point, Brandt discusses the concept of wildness, which she considers to be frowned upon by contemporary Mennonites. Yet Brandt in many ways re-constructs the Mennonite tradition in order to include it. Speaking both for and to her community, Brandt asks,

do we really hate and fear wildness, we Mennonites, haven't we in fact loved it, ... Is that where we have been most comfortable, balancing on the precarious edge between so-called 'civilization' and 'wildness.' Haven't we, socially

speaking, been more comfortable locating ourselves next to Turkish and Aboriginal and Métis communities with their oral, tribal, hunting-gathering sensibilities than within modern post-industrial hierarchical bureaucracies. (83)

Significantly, in re-constructing the Mennonite tradition, Brandt once again widens her sense of community. Her identity is connected not only to a Mennonite community but to a larger group that includes “Turkish and Aboriginal and Métis communities.”

This expansion extends to several of Brandt’s essays and results in numerous moments where Brandt’s focus tends to be on others over the individual autobiographical-I who is telling the story. There is the chapter, for example, in which Brandt recalls her trip to Germany (East Berlin) where she encounters a country in which people are far more in tune with their collective history than her own. She observes how “They haven’t thrown away the old here. They have woven it in with the new. Jazz is flourishing, the burned books are being reprinted, the synagogue has been rebuilt, ...” (103). This refusal to forget the past, Brandt suggests, means that Germans have not fully accepted the attempts to globalize the neo-liberal capitalist model. She writes,

Live here among the Ossies for awhile: you will see, the dream hasn’t died. There are demonstrations along the street every month. Cells, study groups, political rallies: the vision of communalism will never die. (It is my heritage too.)

Globalization in the capitalist mode may be an unstoppable force around the world at the moment, but look at the opposition. The world’s poor, the disgruntled, the visionaries, are reorganizing quietly (on occasion noisily), with some bewilderment, but lots of high passion. (101)

Apart from the brief moment here where she notes how this is “[her] heritage too,” Brandt all but eliminates her own part in this community that she very much sees herself as belonging to. Here the focus is ultimately on the “Ossies” and “The world’s poor, the disgruntled, [and] the visionaries.”

The point for Brandt is that in recalling the past, one can retain a pre-modern sensibility, one that is based more on wildness than on an adherence to market-driven economics. She defines wildness as “a radical irreducible difference at the heart of all living beings and organisms and communities” which presents itself with “an energetic fiery free-spiritedness that also connects these differences in unexpected, erotic and magical ways, and that resides at the very heart of life on this planet” (79). Wildness, for Brandt, is very much politically subversive. The kind of subversion that Brandt calls for is explained in more detail when, borrowing from Carolyn Merchant’s book *The Death of Nature*, she discusses “the communitarian movements of Europe during the Reformation, among which [Merchant] includes the Anabaptists, our forebears” (81). Brandt notes how Merchant characterizes these protests as “peasant-led resistance movements to corporate takeovers by expansionist landlords during the early modern period” (81). Both Brandt and Merchant are referring to events such as the enclosure of the commons in which landowners seized lands that had previously been commonly shared.

These events would be particularly significant for Brandt since enclosures marked the beginning of environmentally destructive policies. As Vandana Shiva points out, “Land and forests were the first resources to be ‘enclosed’ and converted from commons to commodities. Later, water resources were ‘enclosed’ through dams, groundwater mining, and privatization schemes” (44-45). Brandt tells us that her Mennonite ancestors, with their adherence to wildness, opposed such schemes. It is precisely this common ancestry amongst the Mennonite community

that Brandt considers to be worth reviving. She asks, “What if we spent our imaginative energies celebrating and honouring wildness, and locating ourselves within it” (85). This, for her, means to recall a past where Mennonites were “wild-minded, Métis flavoured, independentiste, socialist, shtetl, forever rebellious a la Riel and the General Strike, mistrustful of Ontario capitalist interests” (144). Yet significantly, for Brandt, it is not merely Mennonites who have a propensity for wildness.

Importantly, Brandt devotes a good amount of textual space to describing the various ways in which she sees wildness manifesting itself in other cultural groups. She draws a connection, for instance, between what she considers to be her own cultural heritage of wildness with the indigenous cultural heritage, noting how “the people the Mennonites have found themselves closest to, and felt the most affinity with, are the indigenous and tribal peoples of those lands, with similar attachments to land, communalism and ancestors, superstitious beliefs in the paranormal, and carnivalesque celebration of the body” (122). Here Brandt calls for a return to the “erotic” and the “magical” by way of rejecting the conformist and destructive aspects of modern capitalist culture. Again, Brandt’s conception of Mennonite history is one very much of her own construction but it is in constructing Mennonite history in this way that allows her to connect with and focus on a large, heterogenous community of others.

In a longer passage, Brandt details how she sees an adherence to these sorts of traditions and consequently notices the sentiment of wildness being addressed in more contemporary literary works. She writes how,

it is easy to think of numerous fictional depictions in contemporary Canadian literature that still remember old versions of living communally, and close to the earth, which barely survived their forced entries into industrialized modernity, and

now, like the Mennonite community I have been describing here, tragically on the verge of extinction ... Thomas King's wild-minded Blackfoot in Alberta, for example, who practise extended family arrangements, and rituals of gift-giving, sacrifice, and homecoming ... Alistair MacLeod's unrepentant Scots in Cape Breton, who retain many of their visionary Gaelic beliefs and relational environmental practices while at the same time participating uneasily in exploitative contemporary economic life; Hiromi Goto's renegade Japanese Canadians in Alberta, who despite concerted efforts by the Canadian government to break their communal solidarity by incarcerating and then scattering them across the country in the '40s, joyously practise traditionalist Japanese cuisine in their enforced assimilations, exhibiting traces of ancient Shinto nature worship, and exuberantly retelling and revising old Japanese folk tales and classic literary texts to suit their present hybrid purposes; and even Mordecai Richler's thoroughly contemporary cosmopolitan Montreal Jews, who misremember the indigenous meaning of land ownership as an exploitative commercial venture, but nevertheless struggle heroically to inhabit the New World in emotionally and earth-connected, embodied, ways. (127-28)

Here Brandt's conception of a community unified by communal traditions is reinforced by literature. In the Anderson sense, literature works to reinforce an imagined community. Also crucial is the fact that Brandt is not simply speaking for herself here. Rather, she speaks to and for what she perceives to be a community with a common history as a way to challenge the system that continues to destroy the land.

Brandt creates an intimate public certainly, but it is one that functions much differently than the ones that Berlant describes. To an extent, Brandt *does* rely on affect to make her point. She explains how she is connected to others on the basis of collective suffering. Not only do these others suffer because they work to benefit elite institutions rather than themselves but also, in a much more dramatic sense, they suffer physically along with the land itself as a result of destructive farming practices. Yet in no sense does Brandt reaffirm commodity culture in creating this communal identity. On the contrary, by calling for a return to an identity that is at once independent, socialist, and rebellious, and also fundamentally questions the central economic framework that produces commodities and consumers, Brandt directly encourages a politically radical paradigm shift. In fact, for Brandt, it is crucial that her intimate public understands that such a communal identity exists in order for this political change to occur.

Ultimately, then, in *So this is the world*, Di Brandt does not construct an identity that is individualistic. Rather, her identity is very much tied to a community of people who have relatable histories and concerns and share a similar space within the social hierarchy. I suggest that the special role that community plays in her textual self-construction stems from her own Mennonite background. This is something Brandt herself acknowledges in the book when she speaks of leaving her Mennonite village and experiencing “the sense of deep loss of the gathered community that knows each of its members intimately” (79). In constructing an identity in relation to a large, communal other, Brandt writes a book that is very much about her own experiences yet at the same time focuses a great deal on the experiences of others. As the above analysis demonstrates, Brandt autobiographical writing is replete with usages of “our” and “we” frequently in place of “I” and “my.” While she does use the latter, Brandt’s more autobiographical essays appear far more concerned with “our shared history” than with the story

of “I.” Frequently, too, even “our” and “we” give way to more general discussions about Mennonites, or Ossies, or “indigenous and tribal peoples.” Again, Brandt here frequently privileges the experiences, stories, and traditions of others over her own experiences.

In this chapter, I have examined two authors who see themselves as belonging to an intimate public and, in doing so, reveal the influence of community that has historically been a crucial component of Mennonite life. Much like the imagined communities that Anderson argues emerged via print culture from the modern era, these authors in their autobiographical texts conceive of a community to which they belong and whose members they do not necessarily know. In Berlant’s terms, these intimate communities are groups who are formed via a circulation of texts in a consumer culture and consist of nonprivileged people who share a history of marginalization and use text as a way to exchange common stories of suffering and as a space to offer comfort. For Berlant, intimate publics are significant in that they give voice to a historically silenced group. At the same time, though, she argues that such texts are for the most part apolitical and that intimate communities, because they rely primarily on affect and emotional connections and neglect to make pointed systemic critiques, typically reinforce rather than undermine the consumer culture that constructed the communities in the first place.

In many ways, the texts that I look at reinforce Berlant’s points in that the authors consider their identity as bound to marginalized communities who all share a common history of suffering in one form or another. At the same time, though, these texts reveal the limitations of Berlant’s discussion on intimate publics. It is true that Funk Wiebe and Brandt presume a connection to an intimate community of strangers based on what they perceive to be a commonly shared social position and a collective history of marginalization. At the same time, though, despite forging emotional connections with others, these authors do not emphasize affect. Rather,



they make pointed critiques at what they consider to be a ruling authority, offering solutions as well as encouraging their community to interrogate, challenge and ultimately shift the power structure. In the case of Brandt, this means considerably undermining consumer capitalist culture. In that sense, then, while these texts do reinforce Berlant's notion concerning intimate communities, they also break away by offering significant and, at times, subversive critiques.

Finally, what is most significant is that in offering a model of identity that is connected to a large community of others, these authors allow themselves to speak autobiographically and simultaneously shift attention onto the experiences of others. In the next chapter, I will consider how Mennonite authors incorporate what Amber K. Regis has recently termed intertextual relationality in their autobiographical texts. I will explore how these authors convey a relational identity but also push attention away from the individual self who writes the book by incorporating the narratives of other people into their own texts.

## Chapter Four

### Intertextual Life Writing and the Decentered Self

In the previous three chapters, I have examined the various ways that Mennonite Canadian authors have rendered subordinate the personal story of the self (the autobiographical “I”) in the name of emphasizing the story of others. One of the ways that these writers have done this, I have shown, is to directly privilege the other over the self, as, for example, Katie Funk Wiebe does in *You Never Gave Me a Name*, when she spotlights the significance of the greater women’s activist community over her own personal experiences. Another way that the self is subordinated is by the author’s simply devoting more textual space to others, as Connie Braun does in *The Steppes are the Colour of Sepia*, when she focuses the majority of her attention on her ancestors and her father, and as Di Brandt does in *So this is the world*, when she devotes a good deal of space to discussing both historical and contemporary victims of oppression.

In this chapter, I examine a way of emphasizing the other that has gone relatively untheorized in contemporary autobiography theory, namely the incorporation of life writing documents written by someone else within autobiographical texts. In Rudy Wiebe’s *Of This Earth* and Miriam Toews’s *Swing Low*, both authors directly use the written (and, in the case of Toews, dictated) works of family members within their autobiographical narratives. Wiebe incorporates excerpts from his sister Helen’s diary entries while Miriam Toews pieces her narrative together, in part, from the autobiographical accounts that her father wrote and spoke during the final stages of his life. As I mentioned in my second chapter, both Wiebe and Toews write texts in which the authors not only convey the crucial impact of family on their identities, but also position the story of the family or a particular familial figure (the father, in Toews’s case) as being *more* crucial than the narrative of the individual telling the story.

I argue in this chapter that Wiebe and Toews emphasize the primary importance of others by refusing to fully speak *for* them. Wiebe and Toews do not simply tell the story of Helen Wiebe and Mel Toews. Rather, they acknowledge that these two family members have a story that should be told personally. In these texts, Wiebe and Toews do not establish themselves as the singular authority who can represent their respective family member. On the contrary, they highlight the significance of others by letting them directly contribute to the life writing narrative, a position that Toews makes clear quite explicitly when she creatively constructs her father as the book's narrator.

Neither Wiebe nor Toews are entirely unique in this regard. Contemporary Canadian Mennonite poet and playwright Patrick Friesen calls attention to the generous incorporation of outside sources that occurs in *Interim*, a collection of Friesen's essays, some of which could be classified as life writing. Throughout the book, Friesen frequently quotes the work (mostly poetry) of others in order to help explicate his own point of view. To illustrate an example, in the fifteen pages from 120 to 135, Friesen either paraphrases or includes direct quotations from Basho (120), Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (120), Czeslaw Milosz (125), Jane Kenyon (125), a Portuguese fadista (125), Federico Garcia Lorca (130), Gwendolyn MacEwen (130), and Joseph Brodsky (134). Many more quotations like this are given throughout the whole book.

At one point, Friesen somewhat self-consciously confronts his use of other authors in his work. He writes,

Enough quotes. Even in quoting these various artists I'm falling back on what we're taught to do, appeal to authority. Why not simply speak out of personal experience? If what is spoken is stupid, it will be judged. Authority doesn't make anything more true. There is, I guess, a reassurance in quoting other artists, a

feeling of not being alone. And, often, there is the pleasure of hearing one's incomplete thoughts expressed beautifully by others. Like Bill Evans spontaneously quoting someone else's composition within one of his. The fun of it, the endless interrelatedness of things. (39)

Certainly, quoting others does not necessarily always raise the kind of concerns that Friesen raises here. Indeed, within particular contexts, such as an academic essay or a newspaper article, quoting is an essential component of the discourse at work. Nevertheless, Friesen's self-consciousness about consistently and routinely incorporating someone else's words into what is ostensibly self-life-writing makes sense. Friesen himself notes in this context that quoting tends to reaffirm the authority of others rather than the self as an authority. This is a point that is especially significant for Friesen given his overall opposition to authority, as he himself notes in this quotation.

Friesen's conclusions are significant though because he suggests that quotations within life writing affirm the notion of relational identities – what Friesen himself refers to as “the endless interrelatedness of things.” This point is reinforced further when Friesen somewhat comically justifies his own use of outside sources by giving an example of another person, “Bill Evans,” who likewise “spontaneously quot[es] someone else's composition within one of his.” I think it is also important to point out that even while Friesen notes his suspicion of quoting and even threatens to stop doing it, he continues to do it to a great extent throughout the rest of the book, suggesting an overall acceptance of this interrelatedness.

I agree with Friesen here when he suggests that quoting, especially within this context, suggests a kind of relationality. Although Friesen constructs a more conventional relational identity in his essays than the authors whose work I foreground in this dissertation, his points

regarding quoting and interrelatedness nevertheless work as a helpful jumping off point to discuss what Wiebe and Toews are doing in their respective texts. I must note, though, that Friesen is somewhat of a different case than Wiebe and Toews. For one, Friesen is writing in the mode of the essay and while the type of essays that he writes in this collection do not always call for quotations (hence Friesen's own skepticism about using them in these contexts), they do make more sense within the discourse that he is employing here than they might in other self life writing contexts.

Moreover, Friesen uses outside sources in a manner somewhat differently than Wiebe and Toews. He quotes from a variety of texts throughout the book, but this is quite different from Wiebe's giving excerpts from his sister's diary and Toews's building a narrative from her father's own attempts to write his life story. Wiebe and Toews are explicitly using the self life writing of others (and, for the most part, one particular other), whereas Friesen is quoting poetry, song lyrics, and essays. What Wiebe and Toews ultimately do that Friesen does not do, then, is incorporate the *life narratives* of someone else into their own work, which is a qualitatively different discursive act and one which I argue raises crucial questions in life writing analyses.

The incorporation of someone else's life writing within autobiographical texts has not been sufficiently theorized. For the most part, the discussion on using the work of others in an autobiographical text has been approached within the larger conversation on ethics in life writing. Nancy K. Miller, for example, takes on this issue directly in her article "The Ethics of Betrayal," when she debates whether or not to use the "letters written by my ex-husband to me" (151) in her memoir. She suggests in the article that it may, in fact, be more ethical to incorporate the letters, because it ensures a more objective account of their lives. She writes, "So perhaps there really is such a thing as an ethical betrayal: publish the letters and let the man

speak for himself” (157). Nevertheless, Miller goes on to note that the bigger obstacles in this case are legal restrictions. She observes that “the letter writer (or her estate) retains the right to the *contents* of her own letter, even if the letter is in someone else’s possession” (157). Miller concludes, finally, in her article, that she will paraphrase the letters rather than publish them as they were originally written.

Richard Freadman similarly reveals a critical concern of life writing scholars when he observes the truism that “Self-revelation just does entail revelations about others” and that “The moral issue is where to draw the line” (“Decent and Indecent” 128). One of the crucial questions in these analyses is precisely what are the ethical quandaries of representing the lives of other real people in autobiographical accounts? What rights do authors have when it comes to sharing the story of someone else? As Freadman quite correctly points out, this is a question that applies to just about all writers of autobiography. However, as Paul John Eakin notes, these concerns have become even more relevant in the contemporary era. He notes how “in recent years, reflecting the circumstance of our relational identities, autobiographies have become increasingly *biographical*, featuring those others in our lives – parents, siblings, lovers, friends, and mentors – who have shaped us decisively” (“Introduction” 9). If writing the lives of others is somewhat of an ethical dilemma, and if relationality is key to the way many authors currently conceive of their own subjectivity in life writing, then these ethical concerns are of crucial importance in this era of life writing.

Now that critics have increasingly paid more attention to life writing texts that convey interdependent relationships between self and other (often a loved one of some sort), they have subsequently confronted the question of whether or not writing the story of someone else is necessarily a violation of that relationship. As Claudia Mills puts it in her article “Friendship,

Fiction, and Memoir”: “So now the issue is whether one can indeed value one’s loved ones appropriately while also drawing on their lives as material for one’s work. We have come to what is clearly the central issue when writers write about their loved ones: the public betrayal of trust” (104). Mills’s point here regarding the possible “betrayal of trust” is relevant since so much of the Mennonite life writing that I am foregrounding examines not only the interrelated dynamic between self and others, but also focuses a substantial amount of attention on others rather than on the self. Significantly, Wiebe and Toews not only publish the private life stories of family members for public scrutiny but they also publish their family members’ own private writing. In the case of Wiebe, this means publishing sections from his sister’s diary and in the case of Toews it means re-working the notes written by her father. What is more, both Helen Wiebe and Mel Toews are deceased.

Wiebe’s and Toews’s use of these two people in their texts does raise ethical questions, such as the one posed by Paul John Eakin: “what rights do the dead retain that the living are bound to respect?” (“Introduction” 10). This is the question that Richard Freedman confronts when he considers writing the story of his deceased father. He asks, “But what of my father? He had been dead eight years. How was I to assess *his* rights, the feelings he might have had, the attitude he might have taken to my project?” (“Decent and Indecent” 124). In many ways, Helen Wiebe and Mel Toews appear to be what G. Thomas Couser has termed “vulnerable subjects.” For Couser, vulnerable subjects are “persons who are liable to exposure by someone with whom they are involved in an intimate or trust-based relationship but are unable to represent themselves in writing or to offer meaningful consent to their representation by someone else” (*Vulnerable* xii). And while Couser mostly focuses on people who are unable to represent themselves because

of illness or disability, he does explain how death renders someone perhaps more vulnerable than any other person. He writes,

*Death* would not seem to qualify as a state of dependence; indeed, it might seem to suggest utter invulnerability to harm; but I would argue that it entails maximum vulnerability to posthumous misrepresentation because it precludes self-defense. Thus, we trust that after we die our corpse will be treated with respect, that our ‘will’ will be honored, and that secrets we may have divulged will be respected, either by being kept or by being communicated only to certain parties or in certain ways. In this regard, death may be the state of ultimate vulnerability and dependency. (16)

By the parameters sketched out by Couser, then, the ethical concerns of incorporating the texts of Helen Wiebe and Mel Toews become apparent. Helen and Mel are essentially doubly vulnerable in the sense that both are not only dead but have died as a result of the illness which made them vulnerable in the first place, and it is specifically this illness that both writers focus on in their respective texts.

These issues of ethics, illness, and death take on an even greater relevance and poignancy in light of the publication of Rudy Wiebe’s *Come Back* in 2014. The book revisits the character of Hal who appeared first as the younger brother of the protagonist Thom Wiens in Wiebe’s debut novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. In *Come Back*, Hal is in his mid-70s in the year 2010, at the same time when Wiebe himself would have been in his mid-70s. As I noted in my previous chapter, critic Paul Tiessen has already acknowledged the connection between the literary character of Hal and Wiebe himself, in his comparison of *Peace Shall Destroy Many* and *Of This Earth*. In *Come Back*, Wiebe draws out these connections further by showing the character Hal



mourning the death of his son, Gabe, who committed suicide twenty-five years earlier. Indeed, Wiebe's own son committed suicide in the mid-1980s. Hal, in the book, desires to "know [Gabe's] stories, for myself" (214). Thus, much of the novel includes portions of Gabe's journal entries from the years leading up to his death. Here Wiebe forms a connection between *Come Back* and *Of This Earth* in that both include diary entries (one presumably fictional, the other not) of close relatives who died many years ago.

Yet the ethical concerns that I have brought up with *Of This Earth* are important for *Come Back* as well, despite its fictionality. Indeed, the diary entries reveal twenty-three year old Gabe's obsession with Ailsa whom Hal describes at one point as "A girl two months a teen" (55). Elsewhere, Gabe himself notes that it was when Ailsa was "nine years old" that he "really became aware of [her] existence" and was "enchanted" with her then (73). At one point, Gabe also states that "I've been looking at pictures of myself from grade 3 or 4, I've noticed that I am a cute little kid. For a few years then, just after the crew cut, just before the awkward adolescent years I looked really cute. Then I noticed I had the same kinds of feelings toward this 'Gabriel' that I have towards young girls. I think if I had met me when I was that age I would have liked myself" (238). What Gabe means here about his feelings toward young girls in grades three or four is never stated explicitly but there is indeed a link made towards his romantic attraction to the very young Ailsa and his subsequent suicide.

Given that Wiebe is already drawing connections between Hal's experience and his own personal life, one wonders how much about Wiebe's own son is being revealed in these fictional passages and certainly *Come Back* provokes possible questions regarding the ethics of Wiebe's decision. These moments, though, serve to illustrate what has been for Wiebe a long time fascination with the artifact. In her analysis of Wiebe's historical fiction *Sweeter Than All the*

*World* and short story “Where Is the Voice Coming From?”, Hildi Froese Tiessen has argued that Wiebe shows us that the “facts and artifacts of history, . . . may lie at the threshold of the past, but we cannot apprehend them as though they were the past itself” (“Between Memory” 634). Yet despite the fact that artifacts, such as Gabe’s diary, cannot be fully apprehended and are always marked by an “incompleteness,” (636) they nevertheless have the capacity of providing “an instant of transcendence” (623), delivering readers “to the location of their desire” (623). Indeed, Hal in *Come Back* grapples with this notion of incompleteness. He wishes to be “a *histor*, a wise Greek who gathers stories” (214) but ultimately finds that there is no revealing fact that unveils why Gabe committed suicide. The diary, though, much like the artifacts that Froese Tiessen describes, provides an opportunity for “an instant of transcendence” as problematic as the privacy violations may be. This, though, may ultimately be Wiebe’s justification for using his sister’s own diary entries in his memoir.

Whether or not Rudy Wiebe or Miriam Toews succeed in ethically portraying Helen and Mel is not the focus of this chapter. Moreover, I do not wish to be in a position to award favourable or poor marks to writers for what I perceive to be their ethical stance. However, to put it briefly, I will say that the several discussions on ethics in life writing suggest that both texts by Toews and Wiebe qualify as ethical treatments of their subjects with some reservations. In short, I will concur with Couser, who concludes that life writers give ultimate respect to their subjects when they are given a degree of autonomy. As he notes, “Autonomy is best respected when subjects are granted some control over their stories” (22).

There are no firm conclusions when it comes to the ethics of representing others in life writing. Theorists for the most part have certainly avoided taking the position that biography in general is an unethical act. Furthermore, some of the research suggests that whether or not a text

fairly or ethically represents others (especially loved ones) is ultimately a conclusion best reached by the author of the text. Take, for example, Richard Freadman, who, in his article “Decent and Indecent” finds himself able to fully decide whether or not he is ethically representing his dead father only after manufacturing a conversation with him on the subject. Yet while life writing theorists have considered the question of ethics from a personal standpoint, the positions of both Couser and Miller regarding autonomy suggest to me that in devoting space that allows both Helen and Mel to speak for themselves, Wiebe’s and Toews’s use of their family members as subjects in autobiographical discourse is ultimately quite respectful.

At the same time, though, Couser suggests that there is more to the question of ethics than mere respect for autonomy. He suggests that “Life writing that is ethically ideal, then, might involve optimizing the autonomy of subjects, not merely ‘respecting’ it” (23). Couser gives an example for this, noting how “In medicine, one manifestation of respect for autonomy is the principle of informed consent” (24). In the case of *Swing Low*, Melvin *does* ask his daughter to write down what he says (or, at least, that’s how it is represented in the book), though it is ultimately unclear whether or not he would have consented to her publishing his statements in book form.

For Rudy Wiebe, it would be impossible for him to gain consent from his sister Helen, as the events that he describes are written more than sixty years after her death. However, as Kathryn Carter has written, “Diary writing engages in dialogue with an audience – a real or imagined community of one or many” (12). She goes on to suggest that diaries have a history of being circulated amongst family, friends, and the public, and notes that in the nineteenth century, “Diaries were, in fact, semi-public documents” which, she notes, “calls into question what we mean when we label diary writing of that period ‘private’” (13). Helen, of course, is not writing

in the nineteenth century, but Carter's point raises the possibility that her diary may have never been a private text but instead, something that other members of the family might have had easy access to. Nevertheless, the reader should never discount the other possibility that Helen would have kept her diary very private. Importantly, though, the information that Wiebe divulges is not entirely personal. As I will remark, the notebook entries that he reprints in his book are more striking for how impersonal they are.

I devote space to the subject of ethics here for several reasons. One reason is because I think the issue is unavoidable in a discussion of these examples of contemporary Canadian Mennonite life writing where the focus is often overwhelmingly on others. The second reason is that in this chapter I am dealing with particularly unique cases in which the authors not only focus on other people but outright incorporate the stories that other people wrote. And because this chapter is focused on this textual act of incorporation, it would be a major omission not to discuss the subject of ethics since ethics has been a central theoretical lens through which critics examine life writing that writes about, and incorporates the writing of, other people. Furthermore, a good deal of the discussion in this chapter is centered around how the authors represent vulnerable subjects – subjects who become a key focus for the writers not only because the authors were affected by their deaths but also because they were affected (seemingly profoundly) by the illnesses that caused their deaths (as were Helen and Mel themselves, as we learn from the texts). Significantly, both Helen and Mel appear to grapple with how to represent their own vulnerable states.

For me, though, it is also useful to bring up the subject of ethics in order to reveal a kind of gap in the theory that does not necessarily account for other key questions that arise when an author incorporates the writing of others into his or her life narrative. After all, what is

noteworthy to me in these texts is not the question of whether or not the authors are behaving ethically but the fact that neither Wiebe nor Toews is satisfied with speaking *for* their family members. Rather, they are more interested in having their family members speak for themselves. Furthermore, in doing so, both authors use autobiographical discourse in a unique way in that they are more interested in relaying the story of another's illness than in how the illness of the other has affected them personally. Consequently, I am interested in how incorporating someone else's life writing works to place an emphasis on the other rather than the self.

In more recent years, the incorporation of outside writing within autobiographical discourse has been viewed through the lens of Eakin's theories on relational identities. In her article "Competing Life Narratives," Amber K. Regis applies the term "intertextual relationality" to life writing. Regis examines both an autobiographical account of British author Vita Sackville-West as well as biographical accounts written first by her son, Nigel, and then by Nigel's son, Adam. Each subsequent life writing account relies on and incorporates the previous accounts. Regis draws on the conception of relationality as it is understood in autobiography theory in order to explain how the phenomenon of intertextuality that she sees in this work is operating in a fashion that is both similar yet also somewhat different from the way that authors construct relational identities. She writes, "For Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, relationality suggests that 'the boundaries of an 'I' are often shifting and permeable' (86). Intertextuality extends this project, with repetitions and revisions suggesting that life narratives are never fixed, nor are they isolable. ... These models function as intertexts; they impact on the construction of life-writing subjects" (289). For Regis, then, intertextuality dispels the notion of the autonomous individual and instead discloses the porous nature of identity. Much like other texts that might construct

relational selves, intertextuality in life writing reveals a conception of identity that is constantly shifting between self and other.

Yet while Regis sees how the Sackville-West *Portrait* texts function when read through an established theoretical lens, she also notes how the texts depart from the way relationality is typically thought about in life writing. She writes, “By comparison, Eakin’s categories of relationality are all intratextual; they recognise the negotiations between subjects that occur within texts. *Portrait’s* composite structure, alongside subsequent revisions and appropriations, suggests an intertextual relationality: the construction of narratives and subjects in response to existing, alternative versions of a life” (289). What Regis sees as unaccounted for, then, in conventional life writing theories is a notion of a relation between two *textual* subjects: subjects who write their lives in relation to other written lives.

Regis’s observation is significant. For one, it brings to the forefront the notion that lives are not merely influenced by others, but by the *narratives* of others. The suggestion is that the way others have shaped their life narrative impacts crucially on the way that we shape our own life narratives. For Regis, then, when viewed through the lens of intertextual relationality, the narrated identity should reveal traces of the narratives that have informed the author’s own life story. This is why, for Regis, “the palimpsest” functions “as an appropriate model for the revision, repetition, and accumulation of life narratives” (290). In the examples that Regis uses, authors work to “overwrite” (290) previous accounts with a new interpretation. In that sense, these autobiographical works are always exposing the self who is writing the life (either autobiographically or biographically) and the agenda that is at work in these texts.

Other critics have dealt with the incorporation of outside writing in a similar fashion. More recently, Jo Collins similarly offered the term *bricolage* in her article on Edwidge

Danticat's diasporic life writing. Collins's term builds on and departs from Françoise Lionnet's *métissage*. For Lionnet, *métissage* "is a reading practice" (8) that calls attention to the hybridization or creolization of language. Countering what she calls "the totalizing languages of racism" (16), Lionnet examines a more postcolonial writing style wherein authors braid different forms of writing, reflecting a multiplicity at the heart of the postcolonial condition which is typically denied by hegemonic and imperial forms of writing. As Collins points out, though, Lionnet's request for "solidarity" as "the fundamental principle of political action against hegemonic languages" (Lionnet 6) is a call for a uniformed response to texts that presumably generate "uniform ethical messages" (Collins 11).

Ultimately, Collins sees "The notion of 'ethical autobiographical reading'" as one that "prioritises the learning experience of the reader over and above the contextual specificities of the (postcolonial) realities explored in the text" (11). Collins instead uses the term *bricolage*, which re-focuses attention on texts that juxtapose "previously unrelated, diverse materials" (12). Although Collins does not acknowledge his influence, the term *bricolage* is largely derived here from Claude Lévi-Strauss who essentially saw *bricolage* as "mak[ing] do with 'whatever is at hand'" (11). The project of the *bricoleur*, he notes, is one that makes use of "a set of tools and materials" that are "always finite" and "also heterogeneous" and, finally, have "no relation to the current project" (11).

Collins argues that Danticat uses *bricolage* techniques because of "Danticat's mobile authorial stance, coupled with her inclusion of diverse source materials in her writing" (9). She goes on to note that "This *bricolage* ... allows for layering and even discordance in signification. It also significantly decentres Danticat's voice within her own narratives, thus emphasising an authorial self that is relational rather than 'monadic and autonomous'" (9). Much like Regis,

then, Collins sees autobiographical texts that depend on outside material as falling within the parameters established by theorists of relational identities in life writing, as these works ultimately produce “decentred and relational authorial stances” (11).

Along with Amber Regis’s use of the term intertextual relationality, Collins’s discussion of *bricolage* illustrates the recent emergence of a theoretical discussion that accounts for the incorporation of outside autobiographical texts written by others within a larger life writing narrative. Collins’s term *bricolage*, as well as her argument that the layering of voices leads to a decentering of the author, is helpful in considering ways to approach these texts, particularly her Straussian assertion that acts of *bricolage* work “to fashion polyphonic forms out of available resources” (12). Collins’s point ultimately allows me to liken the subjectivity created by way of intertextual relationality to the other kinds of subjectivities (familial, communal, etc.) that I discussed in earlier chapters that were also polyphonic in nature. Yet it cannot pass without saying that Collins’s discussion of *bricolage*, just like Lionnet’s use of the term *métissage*, is used by authors as a way of responding to conditions of postcoloniality or diaspora. This is not entirely problematic as discussions on Mennonite literature and theories on diaspora are not incompatible<sup>23</sup>.

That being said, it is difficult to say convincingly that the intertextuality and polyphony in Rudy Wiebe’s and Miriam Toews’s books is the result of a condition of diaspora. A case, perhaps, *could* be made in the instance of the former, since diaspora plays a role in Wiebe’s text. Yet at the same time, Wiebe’s use of outside texts in *Of This Earth* suggests more of an allegiance to a familial community than a cultural diasporic community. In this sense, while I do find Collins’s discussion helpful, I am reluctant to call what Wiebe and Toews are doing *bricolage*. Both *Of This Earth* and *Swing Low* are instructive, though, in that they demonstrate



how the intermingling of various life writing sources is not merely a phenomenon of conditions of postcoloniality and diaspora.

In fact, I argue that *Of This Earth* and *Swing Low* both make use of intertextuality in ways that neither Regis nor Collins fully account for. That is not to say that Regis's use of the term intertextual relationality does not apply in these two cases. Indeed, to some degree, Regis's metaphor of the palimpsest is helpful, particularly in the case of *Swing Low* in which it is ultimately unclear whose voice is speaking. Readers can know that there are traces of Melvin's original words that Toews transcribed, but they can never fully say which words are Melvin's and which words are Toews's. The palimpsest metaphor is less helpful when discussing Rudy Wiebe's work because of the way Wiebe clearly delineates where he is writing and where he is devoting space to Helen's notebook, though, as I will point out, there is a degree of overwriting that occurs in *Of This Earth* as well.

The metaphor of the palimpsest that Regis employs suggests that intertextuality reveals a lack of closure. This is ultimately helpful in my analysis of Wiebe and Toews in ways that I will address below. However, neither Regis nor Collins suggests how the incorporation of outside texts might work to *privilege* the story and account of the other. In *Of This Earth* and *Swing Low*, the authors are indeed expressing how each of them was personally affected by a family member. However, the fact that the authors include someone else's life writing suggests more than merely a personal response to the family member (and does more than suggest how the self was formed in its relation to another). What Wiebe and Toews tell us is that it is more important for their family members to speak their story than it is for the authors to speak for their family. Indeed, in *Swing Low* the source of the the outside material, Melvin, is the key focus and narrator of the text. Ultimately both authors use autobiographical discourse but, in practicing intertextual

relationality, they shift focus away from their own selves, feelings, and experiences in order to highlight the importance of other selves and *their* feelings and experiences.

In *Of This Earth*, Rudy Wiebe uses several examples of what qualifies as external life writing. He includes, for example, a letter from the “regional inspector of schools” who complains about how Mennonites in Wiebe’s home town took the initiative upon themselves to build a local school for the children who had gone without an education (113-14). He also includes some entries from his sister Liz’s notebook. Importantly, though, Liz only begins writing notebook entries after the death of Wiebe’s sister Helen, who had previously taken on the role of the family chronicler. The overwhelming majority of intertextual life writing in *Of This Earth* is Helen’s diary entries and these entries work to reaffirm Helen’s central position within the book’s narrative. As Amy Kroeker correctly notes, “Helen has a presence in this story almost greater than that of those living as she haunts its edges” (“Scar Tissue” 170).

From the beginning, Wiebe’s use of Helen’s notebooks has one primary function, which is to demonstrate what Helen’s central preoccupations were in the final years of her life. Wiebe writes, “a year later [Helen] would begin chronicling all our family illnesses in a tiny notebook” (86). A reflection of Kathryn Carter’s point that “The dailiness of diary writing speaks to a desire to give meaning to the chaos of everyday events” (19), Helen’s diary entries reveal a desire to make sense of familial illnesses, but in particular her own illness that was seemingly taking away her life quite meaninglessly. Indeed, many of the entries that Wiebe transcribes display Helen’s concern with illness.

The first entry she writes demonstrates this concern:

1940. Helen Wiebe got sick 5 of Jan. On her birthday [her twelfth]. was sick quite a while had to go to hospital [North Battleford] on 13 of Jan. got operation the

same day 13 Jan. at 5 P.M. was very sick got water about 15<sup>th</sup>. got meals on 16<sup>th</sup>, then came home on 24 of Jan. still was very sick then on night about the 26 of Jan got very sick got heart trouble and stayed in bed 4 months and on Mother's Day [May 12] Schroeder [with his truck] came over and brought me too church & after she was well. (86-87)

Here, and elsewhere in the book, Wiebe's use of Helen's entries has several functions. On the one hand, it serves to illustrate the decisive impact that Helen and her illness had on Wiebe's own life and sense of self. Indeed, as these personal moments are embedded within the life narrative another, they can ultimately serve to illustrate how illness is not necessarily always personal (or, perhaps, it is better to say that one's personal illness can cause ripples that affect others in ways that are inevitably different from the ways that one experiences her own illness).

On the other hand, Wiebe is devoting space that allows Helen to articulate an experience that Wiebe himself cannot fully articulate. Recent studies of illness narratives in life writing observe that "autobiographical illness narratives reclaim patients' voices from the biomedical narratives imposed upon them by modern medicine" (Jurecic 3). I bring this up not to suggest that Wiebe represents the possible threat of modern medicine imposing a hegemonic narrative on personal experience, but rather to suggest that what is important about "autobiographical illness narratives" is that they allow for those who suffer from illness to tell their own story outside of the confines of other powerful discourse models. This is precisely what Helen's incorporated text does within the larger autobiographical narrative written by Wiebe.

That being said, what is, perhaps, remarkable upon first examining Helen's text is how little it does to challenge "biomedical narratives." This, though, is perhaps not so surprising when one takes into account G. Thomas Couser's point that "the impulse of patients to reclaim

their bodies and their stories from medical discourse” is a “postmodern experience” (*Recovering* 11). It is quite likely, then, that because Helen is not writing in an age where it is more common to question the authority of discursive master narratives, she mostly conforms to a rather cold, clinical, and disinterested description of illness that is more in keeping with medical discourses. As Rudy Wiebe himself points out on more than one occasion, “In her tiny pulp-paper notebook she always recorded the dates of her life in the third person” (231). The above excerpt from Helen’s notebook in some respects illustrates Wiebe’s point.

The discussion of her sickness is, for the most part, impersonal and unemotional. In many ways, Helen is distancing her writing self from the body that is experiencing the illness. Yet, at the same time, it must be acknowledged that Helen cannot help at times but revert to a more subjective voice, as evidenced by her statement that “Schroeder [with his truck] came over and brought me to church & after she was well.” Even in this brief moment, Helen switches back and forth between the personal and the impersonal. Here, even the most neutral discussion of personal illness inevitably gives way to a kind of subjective experience.

Ultimately, though, Helen’s impersonal recording of relatively mundane information is fairly in keeping with conventional practices of diary writing. Kathryn Carter points out that “banal details ... form the backbone of a diary” (20). In *From the Inside Out*, a collection of Mennonite diaries from the period of 1863 to 1929, editor/historian Royden Loewen observes how the diaries from this period “record daily acts, not emotion and analysis” (1). Ultimately, he suggests, these texts typically do not convey “the inner thoughts of the individual” (1) even though they *do* illustrate the “preoccupation[s]” of the person writing the diary, with illness being given as an example. Helen’s preoccupation with names, dates, and basic facts also speaks to Julia Watson’s observations about genealogical records. In such records, “A personal story is

subordinated to the history of the family, and that story tolerates no embroidery” (300). Consequently, “the researcher can resist autobiography’s grip by stripping information of its narrative elements” (303). In this sense, there are several conventions at work in Helen’s diary entries, revealed in the way that she records events.

Helen does not discuss other events in her life with a great deal of depth or description either. At one point she notes, “It’s three months I have been in bed today. Biechs were over today. In the evening Rudy read stories to me. Got a dozen oranges from Mrs. Biech” (266). This account itself seems not only fragmented but also not entirely rooted in a linear development, as the point about the “oranges from Mrs. Biech” seems like it should be written before Helen’s statement about Rudy’s stories. Ultimately, Helen’s use of the private notebook allows her to explore and consider her experiences outside of the demands of more public or literary forms that would typically require Helen’s story to be shaped into a narrative or plot. Couser speaks to this distinction between the private diary and the public autobiography, suggesting that,

Although memoirs cannot render the subjective experience of illness, they can represent conditions (and outcomes) unavailable to autobiography. ... To a lesser extent so can the diary (or journal) precisely because it does not await the resolution – whether in recovery from or accommodation to dysfunction – that seems to license most retrospective autobiographical accounts of illness and disability. (*Recovering* 6)

Couser’s point is useful in several ways in that this quotation is not only applicable to Helen’s discussion of her illness but also the larger frame of Wiebe’s narrative of the memoir. Indeed, I will discuss below the value of Wiebe’s representing illness in a way that is seemingly “unavailable” to Helen.

Important too is that Helen is not writing from a point of temporal distance from her illness but rather as the events themselves are happening. As Margo Culley says about diaries, “A novel creates a fictional world complete unto itself, while an autobiography or memoir looks back from a fixed point in time which is the terminus of the retrospective. A diary, on the other hand, is created in and represents a continuous present” (20). Culley is sure to note that the lack of temporal distance in a diary does not mean that the constructed self is any more authentic than the kind that would appear in an autobiography or a memoir. On the contrary, “The pages of the diary might be thought of as a kind of mirror before which the diarist stands assuming this posture or that” (12). Nevertheless, Wiebe’s incorporation of Helen’s notebook entries allows us to glimpse how another conceives of or, at least, writes her illness beyond the constraints of certain narrative strategies, such as the conventional recovery plot that is often evoked in narratives of individual illness. Certainly, these moments are helpful in showing us a side to Helen that Wiebe cannot give to the reader within the greater context of his memoir. As Watson correctly points out, forms of life writing such as Helen’s that are solely meant to just give facts are not reconciled very easily with autobiography in which there are greater demands for narrative. The value of these diary excerpts is not so much that they add any significant detail to Rudy Wiebe’s own story. Rather, they are important because they give Helen a voice with which to articulate her experience as it is happening. Whether or not they serve to better someone else’s story appears to be entirely beside the point.

Significantly, Wiebe does not attempt here to assimilate Helen’s story into his own. Rather the two texts, to use Jo Collins’s term, are juxtaposed, in many ways, against each other. This is a significant choice Wiebe makes, given his own history with incorporating other people’s life stories into his own work. The most dramatic example of this is the 1998

collaborative memoir written with Yvonne Johnson, *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman*. In *Stolen Life*, Wiebe constructs the life story of Johnson, a Cree woman serving a twenty-five year sentence for first degree murder. As has now been frequently reported, Johnson specifically requested Wiebe to help tell her story after reading his 1973 novel about Big Bear, whom Johnson identifies as her great-great-grandfather. Their collaboration elicited mixed reactions. Susanna Egan pointed to the main criticism against the book in her article “Telling Trauma” when she observed that,

Wiebe positions himself from the beginning of this text as so immersed in Cree culture as to have no critical distance, no position separate from Cree culture from which the Mennonite writer, Rudy Wiebe, may come into the situation. For me, this immersion ... provoke[s] the politically correct reading that excoriates Wiebe for appropriation of a Native woman’s voice and story” (“Telling Trauma” 23)

Indeed, this very notion of “appropriation” was at the heart of many concerns regarding Wiebe’s role in the book.

In Jonathan Dueck’s review of the criticism on *Stolen Life*, he observes how Wiebe was charged with having “stolen a First Nations voice” (146). Dueck notes *Stolen Life* led several critics to conclude that “by appropriating *and misrepresenting* the voices and stories of First Nations people, Wiebe has supported a stellar writing career with less-than-stellar writing” (146). If the appropriation and misrepresentation of the other was a key issue for critics of *Stolen Life*, one could argue that Wiebe approaches different but similarly dangerous territory in *Of This Earth*. Ultimately, though, I suggest that because Wiebe’s writing appears in juxtaposition to Helen’s and because there is no seamless transition between Wiebe’s words and Helen’s, he does not fall into the same traps that Egan suggests he does in *Stolen Life*; rather, he maintains a

“critical distance” and a “position separate” from Helen’s experiences. In constructing a space that allows for Helen’s own words to appear in juxtaposition to his own writing, Wiebe neither appropriates her story nor misrepresents it.

In fact, Helen’s diary entries do not quite work to strengthen or legitimize Wiebe’s own autobiographical account at all. For one, the entries do not necessarily add any revelatory information about Wiebe’s own youth. Nor do Helen’s words help bring Wiebe any closer to an authentic or more truthful account. It is certainly true that Wiebe does position Helen’s diary as more concrete than the ephemeral oral language that was used during the time period that Wiebe writes about. He notes how as a child he and his family spoke Low German which is “A language that could not be written down, nor corrected by being made visible” (141). Because the language in use was not a written language, he observes that “Everything my parents and I told each other in the first twelve years of my life, gone” (141). This, Wiebe notes, is quite different from Helen’s diary written in “neat English” and containing words that are “still here on the paper of her tiny notebook” (141). The diary, then, operates as one of the few living documents that was written during the period that Wiebe represents in the book.

Yet despite the diary’s status as a concrete document from the era, Wiebe nevertheless demonstrates that Helen’s notebook does not work to shed light on the truth or the way things actually occurred at the time. Wiebe makes this clear when he points out a discrepancy in Helen’s diary regarding his own sickness:

Helen’s little notebooks actually record ‘Rudy Wiebe got sick’ twice, but they are exactly the same words and there is a contradiction in the dates. One note says it was “1940” and “Sat July 22,” the other “1939” and the day “Sat July 27.” But these dates are reversed: in 1939 Saturday fell on July 22, and in 1940 on July 27



and therefore both dates are wrong. So, which year was I sick once? Was I almost five or almost six years old when I was dragged uselessly from “Doc” to “nurse” to be brought back “home in the night” and be “very sick for first weeks”? If only my sweet sister, now sixty years gone, had left a single descriptive word about my sickness. (143)

Wiebe suggests that Helen’s entries are not entirely trustworthy. They are not untrustworthy because Helen is lying (in fact there is very little for Helen to lie about) but, rather, because she is writing diary entries she is susceptible to minor errors, memory lapses, etc. These moments serve to reinforce what Wiebe has shown in other books to be the instability of the historical artifact. As Froese Tiessen puts it, for Wiebe, “fact and artifact fail to provide a secure and reliable entry into ... [the] past” and while artifacts may “suggest something about what the past might have been” they nevertheless “fall short on conveying what it was and what it meant” (“Between Memory” 628). Again in *Of This Earth*, the historical documents that Wiebe uses serve a purpose other than finding the real story of his past.

Wiebe makes it clear that he is not necessarily incorporating Helen’s entries in order to help better define a sense of himself. If this were the case he would not point out cases in which Helen’s entries only serve to confuse questions of *what really happened* to Rudy Wiebe as a child. The lack of certainty that comes about because of these diary entries reinforces Jo Collins’s point that *bricolage* can offer a sense of discordance. What’s more, as Collins would note, these moments work to decentre Wiebe, and distance him from being the book’s primary focus. Helen’s diary entries serve to tell us, first and foremost, about Helen herself and namely how she was reacting to her own illness, which was simultaneously profoundly affecting everyone in the family. This does not mean, of course, that Wiebe does not consider himself and

his identity as being bound, in some way to his sister. Indeed, a central reason why Wiebe incorporates Helen's notebook is because the two were and continue to be inextricably linked.

Certainly Wiebe demonstrates how Helen played an instrumental role in his life. The identity that Wiebe constructs for himself in *Of This Earth* is very much a relational one and Helen appears to be one of the more significant figures in his life story as he sees it. In fact, Wiebe's "first memory" (6), which he gives at the very beginning of the book, is more a story about his sisters Liz and Helen than it is about himself. He writes,

My sister Liz – she is five years old, or six – has stepped into the family washtub too quickly, at the instant Helen, certainly nine, began to pour boiling water into the tepid, slightly scummy bathwater I have just scrambled out of. The boiling water slaps down Liz's leg, that's her scream, and with a cry Helen drops the steel kettle to the floor, the water splashes out with the crash, pours over the bumpy boards as the kettle lid rings away and I am screaming too. (5)

Wiebe himself is certainly involved in this moment but he is, at best, a tangential figure. His first memory that he uses to begin his memoir is not so much about anything related directly to him but is rather about his two sisters.

While this moment features both Liz and Helen, and while the family as a whole unit is crucial in Wiebe's self understanding (as I discussed in chapter two), it is clear throughout the book that Helen, specifically, plays a very important role. She, along with Wiebe's sister Mary, is the first to help teach him the English language but also the significance of language in general. After the young Wiebe reads a poem that has the word *moon* in it, the following exchange occurs between him and his sister, Helen:

“That’s *moon*,” ten-year-old Helen points up with the same finger that has led her voice and my eyes across the page, speaking out loud the tiny black tracks on the perfect white paper. In the long northern evening light she is multiplying meaning from sound to sight and back again. “It’s almost like *Mohn*, just a little different.” And of course I believe her instantly; I will understand these shifty differences for the rest of my life. For Helen and me anything can have as many names as it wants: that giant ball of light rising out of the black aspen across the field on Louis Ulmer’s homestead can change its sound from Mam’s Low German *de Mohn* to the church preacher’s High German *der Mond* to the school English ‘the moon’ as easily as it will, I already know, change its shape night after night sailing across the sky. (41-42)

Helen, here, appears to teach Wiebe important facts about the nature of language. In conveying how the object moon can produce multiple words, she reveals to him the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified as Saussure would put it, or the “arbitrary mysteries that everyone older agrees about” (40) as a young Rudy Wiebe understood it. Furthermore, Helen also helps Wiebe come to understand that the sign as a concept and a sound-image does not necessarily refer to anything stable, as the moon itself changes “night after night.” Thus, Wiebe also comes to understand language as an “endless chain of signifiers” in the Derridean sense. It is in this moment of the book where we learn that Helen plays a crucial role in the development of Wiebe’s mastery over the English language. It is not outrageous to suggest, then, that Wiebe is in many ways crediting Helen as significantly influencing his own identity as a writer.

Important, too, is that the entries that Wiebe (perhaps strategically) chooses from Helen's notebook reveal how Helen also saw herself as being very much bound to her brother, specifically more than to other family members:

Saturday, Feb. 3: I started to knit the other sock while mom and dad went to school to wash floor. I helped Rudy make a scrap book on food in the evening.

Sunday, Feb. 4: Today nobody was over, and Rudy helped me learn the ten Bible verses by heart, which was terribly hard, He also stayed home with me at night for there was church. (267)

This section, along with several others, illustrates how Helen also very much conceives of her identity as relational. Wiebe tells us in these moments that the relationship between him and his sister was largely one based on reciprocity. Just as Helen helps Wiebe with language as well as the "scrap book" for school, he helps her with "Bible verses" and provides what was most likely much needed company and companionship when the house was otherwise vacant. Helen's notebook ultimately confirms how both Wiebe and his sister were very much reliant on each other.

The impact of Helen on Wiebe's life though is perhaps rendered more significant as a result of her death. This point is made clear when Wiebe departs from the autobiographical format in order to insert an early draft of one of his earliest pieces of short fiction which was a quasi-autobiographical story of the night of Helen's death written "eleven years after" (250). This section is remarkable not just because it gives what might be read as a dramatic and emotional account of Helen's last night, but also because in presenting the events of this evening via his former short-story, Wiebe simultaneously reveals the impact that this moment had on him (so much so that it became the source of his first fictional writing). Here Wiebe detaches himself

from speaking about the event in a personal way by shifting the autobiographical “I” over to his short story narrator.

Here and elsewhere, Rudy Wiebe shows us the profound impact that Helen’s death had on him. As he indicates in the story, “The house did not smell right” (259) following his sister’s death. Upon going to school, the autobiographical character in Wiebe’s short story similarly observes that “somehow, school was not right either” (259). Wiebe portrays not only the character within the short story but also himself as a person whose life has been irrevocably altered not only as a result of the death of his sister but also because of the extremity of her illness the night before her death. He writes, “Then, inhumanly, the screaming came again. It was like a pointed ... he could hear and feel nothing, just the searing scream, as if he and it were the sole inhabitants of a universe. It drowned his brain until he could not hear it for the sound” (251). The short story serves to highlight what the book as a whole reveals – that Helen’s early death continues to significantly affect Wiebe.

In that sense, the book occasionally slips into the category of the grief narrative, since it is clear that even sixty years later, Wiebe still mourns the loss of his sister. As Amy Prodromou recently suggested, grief narratives work as a reminder that we are relational subjects. She writes, “The loss of a beloved other results in the loss of a vital understanding of our selves in relation to that other - the whole concept of self must be reworked and revisited when we attempt to define ourselves within the literal (geographical) and psychically altered space that results from this new absence” (58). By focusing on Helen, her illness, and the aftermath of her death, Wiebe illustrates how her absence shifted his sense of self.

At the same time, though, Wiebe does not fully adhere to the generic demands of the grief narrative. As Smith and Watson put it, “Memoirs of grief are often passed from hand to

hand as how-to guidebooks, serving as contemporary books of consolation” (138). Yet as Prodromou points out, many contemporary autobiographical texts by writers dealing with loss are now avoiding this particular narrative model. She refers to the texts that challenge this model as memoirs of “textured recovery.” Prodromou writes that “many memoirs provide answers and have definite agendas for what the purpose of their memoirs should be, while memoirs of textured recovery do not” (61). Rather, memoirs of textured recovery “complicate traditional movement from loss to renewal” (61). While Wiebe’s discussion of Helen does indeed reveal that her death is still very much a crucial marker in his life, he resists using her death as a way to posit advice on how to recover from grief. At the same time, though, in spite of what Prodromou suggests is also the case with memoirs of textured recovery, Wiebe does not “insist on a grief that does not end” (62). Perhaps the reason why Wiebe avoids either of these tropes is because ultimately, when discussing Helen, Wiebe’s focus is primarily on her feelings rather than on his own.

In that sense, then, Helen’s function in *Of This Earth* goes beyond a conventional reading of relational life writing. She exists in the book not simply to illustrate the impact she had on her brother’s life. Certainly it is the case that she *had* an impact and this is what allows Wiebe to focus so much attention on her within his own autobiographical narrative. Yet at the same time, Wiebe tells us that quite apart from the kind of impact that she had on him, Helen’s life in and of itself is important and worthy of focus and attention. The story, he suggests, is not necessarily about him in relation to his sister. Rather, in certain parts of the book, what matters is simply Helen’s life and her own experiences. That her story does indeed come across in the book is a remarkable achievement particularly when one takes into account the kind of life that Helen has in her fourteen years. G. Thomas Couser points out that,

although our selves and our lives are fundamentally somatic, the body has not until recently figured prominently in life writing. Traditional biographers usually treat illness as an interruption of the life that is their proper concern, except when it threatens life or ends it. And although autobiographers are better situated than biographers to report on the somatic lives of their subjects, traditionally they too have seemed disinclined to do so. (*Recovering* 5)

Couser suggests that if it is the case that autobiographical or biographical accounts conventionally call for some sort of narrative, then illness typically goes undiscussed because it is largely considered to be that which thwarts any kind of linear development of a life narrative. Couser, therefore, goes on to conclude that “illness or disability” is often considered to be “threatening” to “one’s sense of identity” given that it disrupts “the apparent plot of one’s life” (5).

As Wiebe tells us, though, Helen’s whole life has been consumed by illness. He notes that “Helen had been sickly, sometimes gravely ill, from the day of her birth” (262). Consequently a good deal of her life is spent without much activity. Countless times throughout the book, Wiebe discusses Helen’s seclusion. He observes, for example, how Helen spent much of her life “in bed, barely able to step outside the house for a brief picture” (232). Helen’s own words reflect a life of inactivity. She writes: “Was at home for a month and was not feeling very good. Had to go and see the doc in Battleford on the 21. Had to stay home a whole month and on 21 June went to see the doc” (233). Helen reveals how months go by without too much to report. In some ways confirming Couser’s point, Helen has little to say here other than that she “was not feeling very good” and the only events that seem to operate as markers of narrative development are her trips to the doctor.

On the surface, then, Helen's life lacks the kinds of events that might count as meaningful experience<sup>24</sup>. Wiebe, for example, tells us that examining Helen's notebook reveals that she stopped going to school several years before her death: "While I gnawed my way happily through grade school, Helen did not. . . . her attendance days throughout October, November and December [1942] are simply marked 'S' – sick. Her fifteenth birthday was on January 5, 1943; the school began on Wednesday, January 6, and her line of attendance for the rest of the year is blank: she never returned to any school" (230-31). As a young woman who has been ill since birth, Helen is largely bereft of the events and social relationships that are crucial in helping to create one's sense of identity. In this sense, perhaps Wiebe's insertion of Helen's diary (a form that itself typically rejects conventional notions of narrative and plot) works to convey Helen's life as a sick young girl in a way that his autobiographical writing could never fully achieve.

Wiebe's book illustrates though that while Helen was denied the kind of moments in life and social relationships that are conventionally held as significant in informing one's sense of self, she nevertheless was a person who had very real experiences that are worthy of readerly attention. Wiebe not only devotes space within his memoir for Helen's own life writing but he also takes the focus off himself within his own narrative in order to give a good amount of biographical information about Helen. In many ways, Wiebe accomplishes in his own narrative what Helen does not, or perhaps cannot, in that he constructs Helen as someone other than a person consumed with, as well as consumed by, illness. Affirming Couser's point that memoirs can represent conditions of illness that are "unavailable to autobiography," Wiebe articulates his sense of Helen in a way that seems to be beyond the generic confines of the personal diary and outside the demands of autobiography for a personal story of the individual author.



Helen records day-to-day experiences and events, which means that only reading the diary entries leaves us with very little insight about her personality and character, as valuable as the entries are. Wiebe, on the other hand, tells us that “Helen loved to sing, smiling even when she could not breathe well enough to join in with Isola on her guitar or Mary pumping our brown organ. . . . She liked stories” (273). Similarly, he also notes that while Helen certainly was “Afflicted with sickness all her life,” it was nevertheless also true that “her hope for ‘many years’ did not falter” (241). These biographical additions by Wiebe flesh out a personality for Helen that does not come across in her diary both because of her own illness and, simply, because of the conventions of the form. In that sense, as Amber Regis might suggest, Wiebe does in some ways overwrite Helen’s narrative.

However, in Regis’s discussion, overwriting occurs when multiple life writing narrative accounts are in competition with each other. She suggests that authors in some ways appropriate the life narratives that they are recycling to suit their own current purposes and concludes that “constant revision and reiteration” allows for “the constant repackaging” of particular lives “for the market” (299). However much this makes sense for Regis’s example of Vita Sackville-West, it does not entirely hold true here. After all, Regis notes how subsequent authors would recycle Sackville-West’s confession in order to, first, blanket and, then, “restore its narrative of homosexuality” (298). This is significant because here the purpose of recycling is to alter the public perception that was shaped by the previous act of intertextuality.

In *Of This Earth*, though, the implications of the intertextuality are entirely different. Unlike in the case of Sackville-West, there is no significant consumer market that would have been previously aware of Helen’s life nor would an audience have formed any opinions on it. Wiebe’s overwriting, then, is not working to alter a public mindset that Helen’s writings

previously shaped. Moreover, Wiebe's main goal in overwriting (or, perhaps, supplementing) Helen's diary with his own biographical details appears to be to tell the audience more about Helen and the aspects of her identity that do not come across in her own notes. Again, just as is the case with Wiebe presenting excerpts from Helen's diary, the focus in these biographical moments is far more on her than on him. In the two quotations above written by Wiebe about Helen, he observes that while illness was clearly a significant part of her identity, she was nevertheless not entirely oppressed by it. He portrays Helen as a girl who continues to sing even when she is having difficulty breathing.

While Wiebe certainly represents Helen as having lived a rather sheltered and troubled life on the homestead as a result of her illness, he refuses to project Helen as a victim. For Wiebe, Helen is also, as he notes, a positive figure, a symbol of hope, as well as being "sweet" (241) and the "gentlest" (231) of sisters. Important too is his observation that Helen "liked stories." This is a point that Wiebe makes earlier in the book as well when he examines a photograph: "All the girls look into the camera, except Helen, who is exactly my height on the chair and looking at me, her mouth open. Perhaps she is already telling me a story" (28). This quotation reaffirms the notion that this book is not merely about Rudy Wiebe but it is also about Helen's story. And more significantly, the book is not only Helen's story as told by Wiebe but also Helen's life as told by Helen. Just as she was always telling Wiebe a story in his youth, Wiebe gives Helen the opportunity to tell a story in his memoir, more than sixty years after her death. Indeed, Wiebe does embellish Helen's writing. By including her diary entries, though, Wiebe gives the reader an insight into how Helen perceived her own day-to-day life.

The question to ask is why Rudy Wiebe singles out Helen's narrative in particular. Wiebe addresses this point when he speaks to how Helen's diary managed to remain a family

possession sixty years later. He writes, “Beyond all odds in my older sisters’ relentless opp’rieme, cleaning up, after our mother died, Helen’s notebooks have survived, . . . It may well be these notebook words exist because they were Helen’s; her life was so short and we had so little to remember her by; and she lived such a continuous illness that the repeated litany became her solitary solace” (142-43). Ultimately, then, placing Helen’s diary entries within his own narrative preserves her memory and, importantly, because Wiebe’s book is published on a wide scale, her writing is ultimately preserved in the public sphere that was largely denied to Helen for most of her life.

*Of This Earth* reaffirms a good deal of what both Regis and Collins have to say regarding the use of other life narratives within larger autobiographical frameworks. The embedding of Helen’s diary entries within Wiebe’s memoir illustrates and reinforces the mutually fluid identities of both Rudy and Helen Wiebe. As Regis suggests, the use of outside life writing texts does not function to make the story appear any more authentic. Helen’s entries, at times, reinforce Wiebe’s own memories, but ultimately they do not necessarily encourage the reader to trust the story any more than they would without the entries. In fact, Wiebe goes out of his way to demonstrate both the untrustworthiness of Helen’s entries as well as their lack of detail. As he points out: “Dates, times, contradictions. Visible words that fix memory despite decades of forgetting and impossible recall” (248). As this quotation suggests, though, it is ultimately not accuracy or the level of detail that matter so much as the fact that Helen’s words exist and should be given import. As Regis would put it, Wiebe’s own sense of self is not simply indebted to Helen but to Helen’s life writing. The book is an example of how one person’s life narrative is ultimately reliant on outside writing that depicts other people’s lived experiences.

Ultimately, though, Regis's notion of intertextual relationality is still very much bound to considerations of what these acts of intertextuality can tell us about the author. Regis argues ultimately that intertextuality reveals either the wish of the author to "overwrite" the previous text so that it aligns with the agenda of the current life writing project, or the motivation of the author "to 'resurrect or uncover the underlying text', to restore an original, authentic account" which, in fact, does not exist (298). Thinking of *Of This Earth* strictly in these terms, though, would be limiting. What is important here is Wiebe's refusal to appropriate or misrepresent Helen. Instead, he creates a space for her to speak to her own particular experiences. In this sense, the intertextualism in *Of This Earth* works to illustrate the privileged role that Helen's life and life writing play in Wiebe's memories of his own youth.

Like *Of This Earth*, Miriam Toews's *Swing Low* contains a substantial amount of intertextual material, yet it does not attempt to change the public perception of any previous text. As is the case with Wiebe, the texts that Toews uses in her own book – the notes left to her by her father which were written in the months leading up to his death – had been previously unknown to the public. This is not to say that there is not overwriting taking place in *Swing Low*. Toews's book is based partly on the notes that Mel himself made as well as the remarks that he asked his daughter to write down for him. Unlike in Wiebe's memoir, it is difficult to tell for sure which sections came directly from Mel and which parts were written by Toews herself based either on conclusions reached from Mel's notes, her interviews with others, or her own personal memories. The text, in which Toews employs the discourse of self-representation so that Mel can tell his own story as the autobiographical-I, is ultimately the result of a blending of writing by both Toews and her father.

In her introduction to the book, Toews describes the process that ultimately led to the narrative of *Swing Low*. She writes, “At the end of his life, my father, in a rare conversation, asked me to write things down for him, words and sentences that would lead him out of his confusion and sadness to a place and time that he might understand” (xiii). By the end of his life, Mel suffers to a greater extreme from a bipolar depression he had experienced throughout his life. As I will detail below, Mel’s mental illness makes communication more difficult for him. The book conveys how he has a particularly hard time expressing himself via the written word. Yet, at the same time, Mel desires to express himself because, for him, writing and reading his own story allows him to retain a sense of himself which he feels is disappearing as a result of his illness.

In that sense, Toews is crucial for Mel as she, in effect, is able to translate his story into something that will not only be helpful for him but for her as well. She notes,

Soon I was filling up pages of yellow legal notepads with writing from his own point of view so he could understand it when he read it to himself. After his death, when I began writing this book, I continued to write in the same way. It was a natural extension of the writing I’d done for him in the hospital, and a way though not a perfect one, of hearing what my father might have talked about if he’d ever allowed himself to. If he’d ever thought it would matter to anybody. (xiii)

This passage is, perhaps, the best explanation of both how and why *Swing Low* was written. The book is, in some sense, a transcript of Mel’s own spoken words. In its pre-published form, Toews’s transcriptions were meant to have a kind of therapeutic value for Mel who could “read [them] to himself.” Yet as Toews also admits here, she continued writing after Mel’s death, not necessarily transcribing his words but, instead, writing “what my father might have talked

about.” She goes on to note that “By dragging some of the awful details into the light of day, they became much less frightening. I have to admit, my father didn’t feel the same way, but he found a way to alleviate his pain, and so have I” (xiv). Here, Toews refers to Mel’s suicide, which was, according to Toews, the way he “alleviate[d] his pain.”

Yet she notes here too how the text ultimately had a kind of therapeutic value for her as well in that telling the story has allowed her to come to an understanding about her father’s mental illness. In my second chapter, I spoke about how *Swing Low* works to convey the importance of family and how Toews is, in many ways, a person who has been dramatically affected by her father’s illness. In this chapter, I wish to explore the act of intertextuality in *Swing Low* and what it means to use and transform the written (or in this case, spoken) work of an other who is struggling with mental illness. I want to suggest that, in making this textual transformation, Toews uses autobiographical discourse not to spotlight her own experiences but instead to give voice to an experience that was, for Mel, unrepresentable and outside the confines of conventional discourse.

Ultimately, the overall focus of *Swing Low* is Mel and his own personal struggle with depression. One of the ways in which this struggle manifests itself is in his inability to legitimately express his own subjective experience of mental illness. The book begins with Mel lying in a hospital bed talking about the trouble he has in both writing and understanding his experience. He says, “I’ve been trying for weeks to make sense of things. For instance, why am I here? I’ve filled up several yellow legal pads, right to the margins, with words and sentence fragments, but nothing is clear to me” (1). This quotation is significant for several reasons. In having Mel reference the “yellow legal pads,” Toews joins together her own writing project with her father’s. In an above quotation, Toews makes the same reference about herself filling out

yellow legal pads with writing. Immediately, Toews establishes a fluid and relational identity with her father to the extent that the line between the two becomes blurry. Toews makes it unclear from the beginning precisely who is doing the writing. While she does suggest here that the text is explicitly intertextual and very much the result of the notes that Mel outright says he is making at the beginning of the book, she ultimately does not reveal to what extent she relies on these notes. This moment is also significant, though, because here Toews establishes what Mel considers to be his inability to construct a coherent narrative. His writing, he tells us, is reduced to “fragments.”

This difficulty in writing is a major theme throughout *Swing Low*. Significantly, Mel sees writing as a way to alleviate his symptoms of depression. At one point, he says,

I will write my way out of this mess! I will fool myself. If I can continue to remember right up to the present, then I will know why I'm here. Slowly, I will creep towards the present, step by step, memory by memory, and my mind will then be eased, gradually, into a place of understanding. It will be very natural. Am very excited with new strategy. Pens, paper, must have, and to begin, now. (92)

Crucially, by “writing,” Mel specifically means life writing. He discloses his desire to “review my life as a movie” (19). Yet while the above quotation expresses a kind of hope that writing about his own life will act as a kind of cure, he is ultimately unsuccessful because he is unable to write about himself in any clear and cohesive manner. Mel admits from the start that “words don't come as easily to me” (2). His mental illness ultimately seems to work as a kind of block that prevents him from writing. He says, “My brain is still stuck. I meant to write about myself as a boy but...reverse, forward, reverse, forward, reverse...flooded” (17). The narrative of the book, then, is, in many ways, about Mel's inability to construct his own life narrative.

The epilogue, written by Toews in her own voice, glaringly reinforces this point when she writes about the day that her father committed suicide by throwing himself in front of an oncoming train. Toews explains that,

even after his body was removed, there remained scattered on the tracks and in the ditches on each side of it several bright yellow recipe cards for writing notes. For as long as I can remember, he wrote notes to himself on cards like these before going to bed, carefully arranging them on top of his shoes where he'd be sure to find them the next morning. Sadly, the yellow cards that fell out of his pocket and onto the tracks were blank. (190)

Again, Toews provides the repeated image of the yellow paper, though this time rather than being “filled up” as they are in the previous examples, they are blank. On one level this illustrates how Mel never fully explained his reason for committing suicide and this absence of explanation appears to be what specifically motivates Toews to write the book. Furthermore, the blank notes reinforce Mel's ultimate inability to complete the written narrative he was hoping would act as a kind of cure – a point that is rendered even more dramatic when Toews tells us how Mel's unwritten life was found at the same time and place that his body was discovered.

Mel's inability to construct a narrative is very much in keeping with several studies on illness life writing. Sidonie Smith was an early contributor to this discussion in her article on autobiography and autism. In the article, Smith urges critics to “consider the everyday impediments to autobiographical storytelling” (227). Smith focuses specifically on writers with autism and notes that “Perhaps, ... autistics remain outside the linguistic, narrative, and communal circuits of autobiographical telling, unautobiographical subjects who cannot get the message into the narrative ‘life’ in our everyday sense of the term” (231). Ultimately, then,



Smith asks the crucial question, “Does this mean that a person cannot be an autistic and an autobiographical subject simultaneously?” (243). Mel’s situation is somewhat different from the kinds of cases that Smith describes and I want to avoid conflating a bipolar disorder with autism. Indeed, Mel is able to communicate in a way that people with the kind of severe symptoms of autism that Smith is talking about are not. Indeed, Smith is referring specifically to “autistics [who] remain forever silent of speech, or become only occasionally communicative through mimetic utterances” (235).

Yet, at the same time, Mel is not entirely dissimilar to these cases. Certainly, by the end of his life, as represented in the book, Mel is usually unable to communicate in any way that might be considered rational or clear. Indeed, his very lack of clarity is what makes him repeat phrases that are entirely rooted outside of reality, such as his ongoing false assertion that “I have killed my wife” (6). To borrow G. Thomas Couser’s phrasing, Mel has become “simply too ill – too debilitated or traumatized by [his] condition – to imagine writing about it” (*Recovering Bodies* 5). Ultimately though, Mel does “imagine writing” about his life, but finds it impossible given his condition. Smith’s description of “unautobiographical subjects” seems particularly apt for describing Mel’s own situation. This becomes most apparent when Mel remarks on several occasions how he is unable to grasp a sense of self as a result of his illness. He says, “Nothing I see is familiar and the parts of my body are strange, as though they belong to somebody else” (14). Very soon after he notes the same problem in relation to the writing he is doing. He writes, “It is interesting that I have used the word ‘myself’ three times in the last two paragraphs and have no idea what it means anymore” (18). In both of these cases, Mel’s self is positioned as an unknown and unknowable foreign entity.

Much like the people whom Smith discusses, Mel is constrained by the very nature of his illness, which prevents him from writing about himself in a coherent way. As the title of *Swing Low* suggests, Mel's depression causes powerful mood swings that ultimately bring about shifts in character, as if he swings from one type of person to another. This is not to say that Mel suffers from a multi-personality disorder, but the book certainly does reveal two distinct identities for Mel throughout the book – the seemingly happy, professional, and successful teacher and the overwhelmingly unhappy sufferer of depression who typically exists behind closed doors. It is as if these swings, then, prevent a coherent narrative from developing because, in fact, there is no development, but rather a series of stops and starts or, as Mel might put it, “reverse, forward, reverse, forward, reverse.”

Mel, in fact, makes this point when he begins writing and observes of his life that “It has all the structure of a bamboo hut in a hurricane and I must apologize for this lack of cohesion. A series of jerky stills, courtesy of my renegade mind, will have to do. Just wait for the inevitable upside-down slide in the carousel” (19). Quotations like these are crucial because they suggest that Mel is not simply writing to alleviate his illness but also to regain a sense of self that he feels has been lost. It is a rediscovery of self that Mel feels will help him manage the symptoms of his mental illness. In other words, Mel feels that his identity has been in some way erased by his depression and he is attempting to recuperate this identity through the process of writing.

In many ways Mel reaffirms Couser's observation about how many see illness as an interruption of life. Therefore, illness is perceived to be that which exists *outside* of the parameters of life narratives. The crisis that Mel experiences is not unlike the one that Richard Freadman describes of author Inga Clendinnen, in his article “Clinging to the Shreds of the Self.” Again, Clendinnen's experience is different from Mel's – her illness is physical, the result of

liver failure. Yet, like Mel, Clendinnen experiences what Freadman calls “florid hallucinations” that “are playing havoc with her customary sense of things and her memory, her very sense of self and with them her capacity to enact a coherent response to her situation are faltering” (377-78). Importantly, Freadman notes the significance that writing plays to the subject whose illness results in a dissipating sense of self. He observes, “Clendinnen fears that without writing there will cease to be a sentient individual who suffers the disease; ... In order to continue to be that sentient narrative individual she must write; and writing can then help make further sense of what is going on” (381).

Freadman later notes, “Discomposed by illness, as it were, she claims to have recomposed herself in narrative” (386). Freadman’s observations about Clendinnen can very much be transplanted to Mel and both cases speak to the impulse in illness life writing (particularly where the writers see their illness as destroying their sense of identity) to recuperate a lost self textually. Yet there is a striking difference between Mel and Clendinnen as Freadman describes her. Indeed, Freadman considers Clendinnen’s autobiography to be proof that life writing may operate as “a place in which an enhanced self can flourish, even as that self is severely threatened” (381). *Swing Low* is far less affirming in that Mel never entirely finds a way to express himself in a way that is fulfilling, a point reinforced by the fact that the book is ultimately written by Toews rather than Mel. A text like the one Freadman describes appears to adhere to what Couser refers to as “the comic plot expected of autobiography” which typically concludes with a “triumph over adversity” (5). Yet as Couser notes, “those with chronic disability or illness may have difficulty reconciling their experience of illness” with this conventional plot structure and “in many cases the culturally validated narrative of triumph over adversity may simply not be available” (5). Indeed, Mel’s difficulties in articulating his own

experiences affirm the point made by Timothy Dow Adams that “Only a very small percentage of mentally ill people survive their experiences with the ability to write a sustained narrative” (“Borderline Personality” 123). *Swing Low* in many ways represents a person’s struggle with being an un-representable autobiographical subject.

However, this is not to say that the book’s message on these issues is entirely hopeless. Intriguingly, one of the ways that Mel was able to manage his depression for quite some time was of establishing connections with textual others. Early in the book, Mel says, “I’ve been researching the lives of important Canadians such as Emily Carr, Lucy Maud Montgomery, and Foster Hewitt. By writing down the details of the lives of these accomplished individuals, I learn how to live” (4). Later in the book, Mel reiterates how reading non-fictional narratives of others has been instrumental in informing his own sense of self. He writes, “All my life I have read biographies of famous men and women, mostly politicians and journalists, and these life stories help to give my own a little context, and also inspiration. They give me tips on living, goals to strive for, pitfalls to avoid, they teach me about life. I look up to these individuals. I suppose that sounds boyish but it’s the truth” (36).

This moment reinforces Amber K. Regis’s point that relationality extends beyond the fact that people’s lives are impacted by other people and suggests instead that people’s sense of self can be informed specifically by someone else’s life narratives, here not so much autobiographical writing but biographical writing. Ultimately, though, Mel gains an understanding of his own life – in fact, learns how to live his life – via the narratives of others. Importantly, this is not simply something Mel has begun to do since his hospitalization but is rather something he has done “All my life,” and thus during periods when he was able to better manage his depression. Unlike Clendinnen’s book as Freadman describes it, *Swing Low* does not

stress writing a personal narrative (particularly since, for Mel, it is impossible for him to do so on his own) so much as it acknowledges the vital role that other non-fictional narratives of lived experience have in informing one's own sense of self.

*Swing Low*, then, emphasizes the necessity of the other in narrative formation, particularly for someone suffering from an illness that makes the construction of selfhood so difficult. Grace Kehler argues how *Swing Low* demonstrates that "Psychic affliction, typically experienced individually, bespeaks both the inevitable failures of the relational and the need for a receptive community" (171). Kehler's point here stresses the positive possibilities of a properly-functioning relational community – namely, a community that does not silence otherness but, instead, incorporates it. Importantly, then, when Mel confronts his inability to tell his own story, he comes to understand his dependence on others to help him realize his own selfhood. He says, "I reminded myself of phone calls I needed to make, questions I needed to ask, but towards the end I was going in circles. Towards the end I was going in circles. Towards the end I asked her to write it down for me" (38). Of course, the "her" here is Miriam Toews and it is at this point where Mel expresses his desire to construct a life narrative that is collaborative rather than individualistic. In the conversation regarding ethics, this moment is also significant as Toews suggests that Mel expressly asked his daughter to help construct his story.

*Swing Low* ultimately posits collaboration as an important element in the development of illness narratives. The text consistently, though at times with a great deal of subtlety, reminds the reader that this is a story that is being told by both Mel and Toews. That being said, while Toews acknowledges her instrumental collaborative role in the realization of her father's life narrative, she nevertheless places most of the focus of the text onto Mel. In other words, despite the fact that this is a story being told both by Toews and by Mel, Toews ensures that the autobiographical

discourse she employs functions specifically to construct Mel as an autobiographical self. At one point in the book, Mel notes, “What I do believe is that I have accomplished nothing in my life, nothing at all. I have neglected my children and I have killed my wife. There is nothing left to do now but record the facts, as I always have” (6). In her introduction, Toews said that it was this belief, which she ascertained directly from Mel’s own spoken words “Nothing accomplished” (xi), that ultimately spurred the development of the narrative as a whole.

Toews writes, “I don’t know what my father meant when he said it. I had asked him, the day before he took his own life, what he was thinking about, and that was his reply. Two hopeless words, spoken in a whisper by a man who felt he had failed on every level. This book is my attempt to prove my father wrong” (xi). Ultimately, then, *Swing Low* is an uncontroversial example of intertextuality in that it is an autobiographical narrative developed out of *another* autobiographical text (or, at the very least, other moments of autobiographical discourse spoken by Mel) and, in fact, it frequently (though, at times, ambiguously) directly incorporates the other autobiographical text into the new narrative. *Swing Low* sits somewhat outside the theoretical lens of intertextual relationality established by Amber K. Regis because Toews’s writing, along with her outside sources, are all working to forge one autobiographical-I for the same person. In that case, despite its intertextuality, *Swing Low* poses a challenge for critics reading the text strictly for relational paradigms.

This is not to say that there is not a degree of relationality at work here. As I mentioned in chapter two, the kind of critical work that interprets Stein’s *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* in terms of what it can tell readers about Stein’s own relational identity can be similarly done here too. Indeed, Toews illustrates to us that her own sense of self has been dramatically affected by Mel. This is why writing an autobiographical narrative from his point of view helps to alleviate

her pain. Toews reinforces this relationship with her father throughout the book. Mel recounts one particular incident in which he attempts to prevent Toews from leaving home on a trip to Quebec, to be followed by a trip to Europe, after her graduation from high school. His desire to keep her from travelling appears to stem directly from his illness. He writes, “When it came time for Miriam to graduate from high school, I suffered another breakdown and was hospitalized here, at Bethesda. Had I been trying to avoid the inevitable reality of my youngest child leaving home, for that is what she did directly after the graduation ceremony?” (160). Mel’s attempts to get her to stay are ultimately fruitless but they have a profound impact on Toews. Mel notes, “I quietly retreated to my bedroom and listened to her sobbing in the kitchen, asking Elvira why I had to be that way, why I was the way I was, and Elvira saying nothing but I don’t know, honey, I don’t know” (161). Here, Toews is responding, it seems, not just to this one incident, but rather to a lifetime of incomprehensible actions.

The book demonstrates, then, that Toews indeed sees herself in relation to her father. This relationship is presented structurally in *Swing Low* via intertextuality. Toews reveals the fluid relationship between self and other in a text that ambiguously shifts between Toews’s writing and Mel’s writing. Yet significantly, Toews uses autobiographical discourse less to construct her own selfhood but, rather, to tell the story of an other. Indeed, because it is never clear who exactly wrote what and because the autobiographical “I” (outside of the brief prologue and epilogue which total to roughly five pages altogether) is always Mel’s, Toews is suggesting ultimately that the important story is Mel’s and that it is his story to tell. In speaking with Natasha Wiebe, Toews herself has made this clear, noting that “the reason why I wrote it from his point of view, ... [was] because of his experience in hospital and how eventually I had to write things from his point of view for him to read so that they would make sense to him because

he was so confused” (“It Gets Under” 122-23). Toews, then, reveals two central reasons for turning Mel’s notes into a narrative written from his perspective.

On the one hand, she suggests that doing so provided a kind of therapeutic value for Mel while he was alive. Collaborating with him, based on his own notes, Toews could shape Mel’s writing into the cohesive narrative structure that eluded Mel in his own attempts to write, thus helping him re-gain a sense of the self that he believed was slipping away. Secondly, Toews is compelled to continue the narrative for another central reason after her father dies, namely to construct a life narrative for Mel that she feels is more accurate than the one he was constructing for himself in his final days. Toews herself has publicly attempted to de-emphasize her own role in shaping the narrative. She tells Natasha Wiebe, “His thoughts at any given time are based on what people *told* me about that he had said about what he was thinking. So in the book when I say *he’s* thinking this or that, it’s based on something that somebody had told me he had said” (“It Gets Under” 123). It must be noted that Toews, here, minimizes what is surely her role as a mediator as the story’s writer.

Yet at the same time, the quotation betrays the impulse on Toews’s part to write a book that attempts to accurately capture her father’s own words. Much like Wiebe does with Helen, Toews allows Mel to speak to his lived experience – a significant decision when considering how, quite frequently, testimonies from patients are silenced or de-privileged. As Couser writes, “doctors may both reinterpret patients’ pasts and literally pre-script their futures. The process is collaborative but one sided; patients must submit their bodies to tests, the life histories to scrutiny, while doctors retain the authority to interpret these data” (10). To some extent, Toews does reinterpret her father’s past and in some ways submits his “life history to scrutiny.” Yet, I would suggest that by giving Mel his voice, and by attempting to avoid putting words in his



mouth, Toews demonstrates how in this collaboration, it is Mel's testimony that matters, rather than her own interpretation.

In many ways, Toews does reinforce Amber Regis's point that intertextual life writing often betrays the desire to locate an "original, authentic account." I do not want to stress this point too much though, as Toews does indeed trouble any notions of there being an authentic identity available to write for Mel in *Swing Low*. Given that Toews portrays Mel as a private man who spent a good deal of his life hiding crucial parts of his own self from the public, the reading audience is made acutely aware that we are only getting the side of Mel that he revealed to others. Certainly, Mel reveals more at the end of his life when he is no longer in as much control of his intense emotional and mood swings, but we are nevertheless never fully sure just how much Mel ultimately kept to himself.

Ultimately, what is more important for Toews than constructing an originary and essentializing identity for Mel is to have him speak a story of his life that he, in his final days, was unable to articulate or make sense of. In doing so, Toews acknowledges the fluidity of her own identity in relation to her father. Both she and her father compile the narrative of his life which is portrayed as a life that significantly impacted those around him, including Toews herself. More than *Of This Earth*, *Swing Low* openly acknowledges the kind of use value that relationality with other textual selves can have as it portrays Mel as a man who attempts to gain a better sense of himself by actively reading the biographies of famous people. Yet while relational identities are certainly constructed in the text, what is ultimately important is less Toews's story than Mel's story. Toews uses Mel's notes in order to construct a narrative wherein the focus is predominantly on Mel and his life. Toews ultimately produces this story because Mel's own illness prevents him from writing his own life in the way that he himself might have wanted it

written. Ultimately, then, Toews's use of intertextuality is significant as it highlights the fluid relationship between self and other. Importantly, though, Toews shifts the focus onto the other to the extent that the other becomes the autobiographical-I for the overwhelming majority of the book.

In my previous chapters, I have examined how history, family, and community have played crucial roles in informing the author's sense of self. In my final chapter, I have used Amber K. Regis along with Jo Collins in order to show the impact that other texts, namely other life scripts or life writing texts, have had on the author. Both *Of This Earth* and *Swing Low* are books that make use of autobiographical discourse and simultaneously rely on the autobiographical narratives of others. In the case of Rudy Wiebe's *Of This Earth*, this is articulated by Wiebe interjecting his own narrative with the diary entries of other family members, most predominantly his sister Helen's. In *Swing Low*, it is less clear when Toews is using the text written by her father and when the text is a product of her own writing. Ultimately, though, in both cases, the author's identity is constructed as being bound to the other, indeed the textual other, whose writings are being incorporated into the autobiographical narrative. Furthermore, using the text of someone else, in these cases, allows the authors to stress the importance of the other person's story over the story of the self.

## Conclusion

### The Value of Decentering and Where to Go From Here

For the Penn State symposium, “Mennonite/s Writing: After Identity,” in May 2013, Di Brandt wrote a paper that called on Mennonites to recognize, rather than ignore, hybridity as a crucial component of their cultural condition. Brandt noted that Mennonites “were always a thoroughly hybrid people,” (“Is There Such” 4) pointing to their beginnings as “part tribal kinship, part international peasant land rights cause, part cosmopolitan urban intellectual church reform group, part Christian, part traditionalist pagan, part Converso Jew” (4). She also called attention to how the diasporic condition of the Mennonites added to their hybridity and observed how different “food, clothing and farming practices” (4) were picked up in the various countries in which the Mennonites landed over centuries. Brandt troubles the notion of a stable category of Mennonite and suggests instead that Mennonites bear the marks of a cultural group who have been substantially impacted by outside influences.

Consequently, Brandt laments the preference by some Mennonites to keep apart or to maintain a sense of an essential Mennonite identity. In many ways, the critique bears a striking similarity to the critics of the paradigm of individualism in autobiography theory and the work that these critics have done to interrogate the notion of a stable individual self who stands over and above his culture and society, affecting others while never being affected by them. Brandt suggests that Mennonites should be “fluidly ‘open to the Other,’” (11) and says that it would “be better if all people did what most writers aspire to do, to speak out of their whole selves, including their interculturally hybrid selves” (13). Brandt, here, calls attention to the work of authors who construct not individual identities, but identities that speak to the various influences that make up hybrid identities.

I conclude my dissertation with these remarks because the texts I have foregrounded speak to the kinds of identities for which Brandt calls in her talk. The authors who have written these memoirs have all constructed identities that are, to use Brandt's terminology, "fluidly open to the Other," if not the multiple and varied others of whom Brandt speaks. In some ways, though, these texts do not entirely reveal quite the same sorts of hybrid selves. Brandt would prefer Mennonites to think of the influence and impact of histories, communities, and customs outside of their own. In that case, when Connie Braun connects with her forebears who experienced the trauma of Stalinism, she demonstrates what Brandt calls the conventional Mennonite "attachment to that particular version of our history and identity" (6) – a history that Brandt believes has kept Mennonites isolated and precludes their connecting with others.

In other cases, though, Brandt's sense of hybridity is on display such as when Brandt herself, in *So this is the world*, connects with a large community of people who have been affected by contemporary capitalism's destructive environmental policies; similar hybridity is at work in Katie Funk Wiebe's *You Never Gave Me a Name*, when Funk Wiebe sees herself in connection with numerous feminist groups, some Mennonite, some not. One could likewise easily suggest that there is nothing particularly Mennonite in the way that Rudy Wiebe and Miriam Toews portray the influence of family and familial illness. Significantly, though, I suggest that collectively examining several contemporary Canadian Mennonite memoirs works to disrupt conventional ways of thinking about life writing; in other words, that because conceptions of history and community have dominated in some Mennonite groups (something Brandt very much acknowledges in her essay), contemporary Canadian Mennonite life writing can serve as an excellent paradigm for questioning certain theoretical assumptions about autobiography.

Rocio G. Davis has correctly observed that “One of the most consequential insights in auto/biography theory in the last two decades has been that identity - for both men and women - is essentially relational, defined and represented intersubjectively” (“Writing Fathers” 229). Certainly, a substantial amount of theoretical work has been done exploring texts that reveal relational identities rather than independent, unified, and essential individuals. In the works I have looked at here, the authors indeed display their relational status. But more than that, these works are distinct because while they all use autobiographical discourse, they frequently position themselves in the background of their own autobiographical text or they privilege the narrative of others, sometimes eliminating the individual writing altogether. The selves in these books do not sit comfortably within the binary established within autobiographical criticism in the sense that they are not individualistic nor entirely relational. I believe, then, that there are important facets to these books that are ignored when viewed through these theoretical lenses. As a case in point, we might examine, for example, what I consider the crucial political import of these texts.

The books that have been the focus of this study have been published at “a time when neoliberal capitalism has gained ascendancy across Western democracies, including Canada” (Greig and Martino 5). According to Christopher J. Greig and Wayne J. Martino, there has been a “neoliberal assault on the welfare state” (5) which had led to “the slashing of public services in health care, education, social services, and infrastructure” (6). The neoliberal capitalist model tends to favour personal responsibility and self-reliant individualism yet those who implement these programs neglect to take into account the disadvantages faced by particular socio-economic and cultural groups in a culture that has historically privileged affluent white males. Greig and Martino note that neoliberal programs have especially “presented significant economical, political, and social challenges” (6) for women, visible minorities, and the working class. The

neoliberal capitalist system, then, ignores the significance and importance of the other in the constitution of the self, such as the dominating role that history plays in identity formation and the substantive role that family plays in determining one's social status. Furthermore, the massive cuts to social spending suggest that the neoliberal capitalist model fails to take into account the role that community (and even the political construction of community) plays in informing one's place.

What the books I have looked at in this dissertation tell us, though, is that for some people, other narratives take precedence over the self-narrative. These books, in privileging "the other" over and above the individual self who is writing the story, have the potential to provide alternate ways of thinking about the self in our relation to history, family, and community at a time when the individual is being problematically privileged at the expense of public services and social programs. Thus I believe we do a disservice to these texts and overlook the potential relevance they have when we strictly see the identities constructed within them as being relational and as part of a mutual dynamic between self and other. In my discussion of these texts I have pushed aside their political relevance which I think is very much there in order to discuss how particular narratives of history, family, and community have a privileged place in these works. The political issue, though, is one that I believe to be worth pursuing and may be an issue for other critics to take up in subsequent analyses that look beyond what Eakin calls the relational paradigm.

Again, I do not mean to suggest doing away with this paradigm nor do I wish to ignore its import. Ultimately, I agree with Davis's point that the concept of relationality beyond the binary opposition of gender has been "one of the most consequential insights" in autobiographical theory in the past twenty years. I might also suggest, though, that life writing critics would do

well to attend to how broadly the term “relational” has been applied to texts, and to consider what kind of work is being done by these applications. In 2011, the journal *Life Writing* devoted an issue to the subject of Lives in Relation. In the first article, Holly Furneaux examines John Forster’s biography on Charles Dickens, *Life of Charles Dickens*. Furneaux notes that since the book’s publication in the late nineteenth century, Forster has been critiqued for his “obtrusion into the text” (244). Furneaux takes a different stance and instead reads Forster’s frequent appearances in the text not as an example of obtrusion but as a testament to the “significance of a personal relationship between biographer and subject” (244). In other words, for Furneaux, Forster, in his biography, constructs a relational dynamic between himself and Dickens.

Arlene Leis, in the next article, examines the eighteenth century portraits by Jean-Francois Rigaud in order to similarly argue that the artist’s “group portraits of Founding Academicians operate as a revealing form of pictorial biography and autobiography that represented the interdependency and shared ideals of a community of artists” (264). Leis provides images of the two portraits; significantly Rigaud does not, in fact, appear in either. In the first article, a biography in which the author appears in a way that many have deemed obtrusive works to reveal a relational life; meanwhile another cultural object in which the artist does not appear at all also works to reveal a relational life. In other words, the same terminology is used to describe what are, in my opinion, two vastly different forms of self-representation. Indeed, in the case of the latter, the authorial self does not appear at all.

I am not arguing against the arguments made by Furneaux and Leis. However, I do propose a new way of thinking about relationality in order to avoid eliding the crucial differences between different modes of self-construction. I believe it is crucial for life writing scholars to recognize that “relationality” in the field, as it has been defined in the literature so far, is one of

several models of identity available to authors of life writing and exists as a theoretical lens for critics through which certain performances of identities can be seen, and others cannot. While Eakin provides a definition for relational life writing that narrows the kinds of interpretations that can be made, his initial point that “all identity is relational” has made for a very broad application of the term. I think, then, that it is necessary to consider a distinction between relationality as a human condition and relationality as a model of literary self-construction and a mode of interpretation. I think critics, in being attentive to this distinction, will be better equipped to consider the crucial differences between autobiographical texts in which authors see themselves in relation to an other and texts in which the authors position themselves in relation to several different others. Likewise, recognizing this distinction will also ensure that critics do not elide the differences between authors who posit a fluid identity and authors who privilege other narratives over their own to the extent that they can occasionally disappear from their own text.

Indeed, the five texts that I have examined in this dissertation can very well be read with what I suggest is a relational lens. However, read collectively, these texts illustrate the limitations of this lens. I do not mean to suggest here that *only* contemporary Canadian Mennonite life writing can challenge the limits of the “relational paradigm”; nor do I mean to argue that *all* contemporary Canadian Mennonite life writing does this. However, I do suggest that reading these texts together brings the problematic nature of the “relational paradigm” to light in a very stark and overt way. I do think in these cases, the dominating role played by specific histories, as well as what were once dominating conceptions of family and community in some Mennonite groups, have had an impact on the way in which these five authors made use of the autobiographical discourse.



Again, though, different writers have their own histories and their own conceptions of family and community that would be similarly dominating. Consequently, I look forward to seeing other analyses of life writing that look at identities beyond the dichotomy of individualism and relationality and to considering the possible reasons why the personal and the self are positioned in the background in favour of other narratives. I think it would be useful to consider the similarities between the Mennonite literature that I have examined here and Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* or Wayne Johnston's *Baltimore's Mansion*. In the case of the former, how can we examine a text that makes much use of the autobiographical-I but is also, at the same time, very much an attempt to recover what Ondaatje calls a "lost history" (43) and ultimately becomes a story about the author's father. What, too, can we make of the role of magic in a life writing text? Johnston's book, in similar fashion, begins with his telling the reader how he was "foreborn of spud runts who fled the famines of Ireland in the 1830s" (1). Soon, he transitions into telling the story of his father and Newfoundland's Avalon Peninsula which, Johnston recounts, was "founded in the 1620s" by Lord Baltimore. Although packaged as a memoir, Johnston's book is far more about his father, Arthur, as well as the historical and mythological narrative of a place and its people. We might also re-consider Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* in light of my arguments here; rather than consider how the text "intimates that [Stein's] own identity is inextricably combined with that of Toklas," (T. Smith 67) we might consider specifically why Stein experiments with the discourse of autobiography in order to tell someone else's story. Indeed, all of these books reveal relational identities, but there are other strategies of self-representation or even non-self-representation at work here that invite further consideration.

I believe too that we can use this study in order to further examine the role of autobiographical discourse in texts that may be classified more easily as fiction. As I have already noted, several of the authors I have foregrounded here have written autobiographically, beyond the memoir or autobiography, without fully going the distance and making an autobiographical pact with the reader as Lejeune would have it. Indeed, several texts by Rudy Wiebe, Di Brandt, and Miriam Toews have had many autobiographical and personal elements in them, but these personal elements have been masked by fictional characters, third-person narrators, or a poetic voice. Just as we might consider the reasons why an author uses autobiographical discourse to privilege the narrative of another, we might likewise consider why an author writes autobiographically under the guise of fiction. What does it mean to write semi-autobiographically? In this case, I am thinking of texts like James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*.

Ultimately there are still many questions to pursue and I hope that critics will see the value in considering tactics of non-representation or of de-privileging the self in life writing. I hope to have shown the various ways that one could approach such an analysis. In some cases, such as Connie Braun's memoir *The Steppes Are the Colour of Sepia*, I have demonstrated how the narrative of the self can be subsumed by a singular dominating historical narrative. Likewise, Miriam Toews in *Swing Low* largely tells the story of one significant other, namely her father. In some ways, this fits the standard conventions of the filiation narrative in which the author typically positions herself in relation to the other. Yet importantly, in *Swing Low*, Toews places far more emphasis on the narrative of the other than the self, thus rendering difficult the standard interpretations of life writing that sees the self as belonging to a mutual dynamic and in a fluid

relationship with the other. While Toews's central influence is only one other figure, the presence of that other figure is a dominating one.

Other texts, such as Di Brandt's *So this is the world*, Katie Funk Wiebe's *You Never Gave Me a Name* and Rudy Wiebe's *Of This Earth* present more conventional autobiographical selves but frequently present these selves in relation to a wide range of multiple others. In doing so, these authors illustrate qualitative differences from standard relational identities where the self is positioned in relation to one other. Again, in these books what matters is how the authors appear to privilege the narratives of others over the self. Indeed, there are a variety of selves on display in these books and there are a variety different ways and reasons why the authors either push themselves into the background or de-privilege their own narrative. The books do not suggest a singular way that contemporary Canadian Mennonites approach autobiographical discourse. They do, however, work nicely together to showcase the validity of interrogating the relational paradigm in life writing theory.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Among the examples of Canadian Mennonite literary texts that express the tension between the individual and the community are Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962), Patrick Friesen's play *The Shunning* (1980) and Miriam Toews's *A Complicated Kindness* (2004). As I will note later in the introduction, this issue of the self vs. community has been taken up by critics as well, though the focus has been on fiction.

<sup>2</sup> In the latter half of this introduction, I will show that current understandings of autobiography, in fact, affirm Olney's point that autobiography is "practiced by almost everyone." Olney though, at this stage in 1980, seems to have a more traditional understanding of autobiography, referring to this popular form as writing that is "offered up to the general public for consumption" (3). The fact that Olney is evoking consumerism here suggests, to me, that he is talking about a more conventional style of autobiography - one that is published and sold in book form, rather than, say, private journals or personal letters. Hence my assertion that his point (at this stage) is hyperbolic.

<sup>3</sup> In general, many of the texts that exist either focus on spirituality and the spiritual journey, such as J.B. Toews's *JB: The Autobiography of a Twentieth Century Mennonite Pilgrim* and David Ewart's *A Journey of Faith: An Autobiography*. Other autobiographical texts have focused on the transition from Russia to Canada, such as Gerhard Lohrenz's *Storm Tossed* and the collection *Hope Beyond the Horizon*, compiled by John P. Nickel. Many other earlier life writing texts were not published until more recently, such as Royden Loewen's anthology of Canadian Mennonite diarists, *From the Inside Out*.

<sup>4</sup> The Mennonite Brethren originated in the Russian colony of Molotschna in 1860. As Frank H. Epp observes, the Mennonite Brethren "thought of themselves as Mennonites" but were

influenced by “the Luteran Pietists and German Baptists” (174). The Mennonite Brethren were a dissenting group who, according to James Urry, formed a new congregation as a result of “the lack of spiritual life in the colony, the sinful practices of colonists, and the failure of religious leaders to maintain proper discipline. The only true Mennonites they claimed were those whose baptism confirmed a true experience of faith and salvation” (*None* 180). Indeed it was baptism by immersion that soon became a definable mark of distinction for the Mennonite Brethren. As Epp notes, “the Brethren were the leading renewal movement” and “when the movement was transplanted to North America, it became the second largest in Canada and the third largest in the United States” (174). There are currently over 250 Mennonite Brethren congregations in Canada. Both Katie Funk Wiebe and Rudy Wiebe identify as Mennonite Brethren.

<sup>5</sup> See Smith and Watson’s book *Reading Autobiography* for their discussion of the history of autobiography criticism.

<sup>6</sup> See the second chapter for a more in-depth discussion on filiation memoirs.

<sup>7</sup> See my conclusion for how I think this kind of analysis can be applied to other texts.

<sup>8</sup> Two counter examples of this are Connie Braun’s book *The Steppes are the Colour of Sepia* and Miriam Toews’s *Swing Low*. Intriguingly both authors spend less time talking about themselves in these books than the other three authors that I look at in this dissertation. While I analyze Toews’s book in two chapters, I am mostly examining how the book largely uses autobiographical discourse to tell the life story of her father. I only look at Connie Braun’s book in chapter one given the extent that she focuses on one particular historical group, and focuses specifically on her father’s early 20<sup>th</sup> century experiences. Yet while Braun and Toews do not shift attention towards a multiplicity of others, they still work to challenge conventional readings of relational identities in that the authors are very much not the central focus of their narrative.

<sup>9</sup> As I suggest elsewhere in this chapter, Brandt, Wiebe, and Funk Wiebe do not focus on historical others in quite the same way that Braun does. Indeed, Connie Braun's book focuses almost entirely on her extended family along with other Mennonites and their experiences under Soviet rule. This kind of focus does not occur in the other books that I look at here. This explains why this is the only chapter in which I discuss Braun, while I look at the other three books over several chapters including chapter one. In other words, while Braun focuses on the story of Mennonites rooted in a historical period, Brandt focuses her autobiographical narratives on several others. This one chapter, then, does not necessarily show the extent to which Brandt, Wiebe, and Funk Wiebe privilege the story of others in the way it does for Braun. However, the culmination of all the chapters should demonstrate the extent to which each text works to tell the story or privilege the story of other people.

<sup>10</sup> Photography plays a significant role in Braun's book. She includes twenty-nine photos, all of which were taken before she was born. Given that the book is marketed as a memoir, the photos are demonstrative of the way that Braun conceives of her identity and also illustrate which story Braun believes to be the important story to tell within the format of the memoir. Photography is likewise important in Rudy Wiebe's book, *Of This Earth*. However, the photographs function somewhat differently in that text. Many of the photos, for example, are taken after Wiebe's birth and several feature Wiebe himself. The topic of photography within a life writing context is an important one and I devote a good amount of space to it when I discuss the subject of family in the following chapter.

<sup>11</sup> Landsberg's claims are undeniably useful, as I hope to make clear in this chapter, but they are also problematic. These particular quotations illustrate the somewhat generalizing and universalizing nature of her claims and do not fully account for the possibility that, for some,

kinship ties remain strong. I agree with Landsberg's point that modernity offered new ways to take on memories but I am less convinced that previous ways of memory-making were largely broken. While this chapter affirms the former point, the following chapter challenges the latter point. Furthermore, I want to be careful about Landsberg's claim that memories of others can be acquired by "anyone." It is crucial to note that Landsberg does not say "everyone." While it does remain possible for anyone to acquire memories prosthetically, it does not necessarily follow that they will. Indeed, the negative consequences of this have been taken up by critics, which I address in subsequent paragraphs.

<sup>12</sup> Wiebe, here, is referring to Russian Mennonites of the 1920s migration, often referred to as the Russländer generation of Mennonite immigrants to Canada, as opposed to the Kanadier who migrated to Canada in the 1870s.

<sup>13</sup> It is no coincidence that this very term "mutual recognition" (148) should come up in Eakin's own analysis of Kathryn Harrison's *The Kiss*, a book, he argues, that illustrates "Benjamin's theory ... in striking fashion" (144).

<sup>14</sup> Epp does point out that "Many Mennonite families that arrived in Canada as displaced persons from the Soviet Union and eastern Europe after the Second World War were 'fragmented' or 'grab bag' families" (98). It is possible that narratives that come out of this particular wave of Mennonite migrants might very well speak to the kind of lived experiences that Landsberg suggests in her book. This quotation insinuates, though, that there was a relative stability and coherency amongst migrant Mennonite families before this wave and perhaps speaks to the ways in which family is prioritized in the books that I look at in this chapter.

<sup>15</sup> See, in particular, David Parker's "Narratives of Autonomy and Narratives of Relationality in Auto/Biography."

<sup>16</sup> The following section from Mason's chapter should indicate the kind of example she sees being used most frequently in women's autobiography: "A modern parallel to the Duchess's story is to be found in the two-volume autobiography of Beatrice Webb, ... Her first volume, *My Apprenticeship*, is dedicated to Sidney Webb, Beatrice Webb's marital other; the second volume, *The Partnership*, opens with a chapter entitled 'The Other,' which unsurprisingly, is a minibiography of her husband/partner. Likewise, Elizabeth Barrett (Browning as she was to become), who as a young girl wrote brief autobiographical accounts that reveal – as with the Duchess of Newcastle – an early vocation as a writer, tells the story in her autobiographical *Sonnets from the Portuguese* of her identification with Robert Browning, her husband, a poet less known that she was when they married. In the present century, Simone de Beauvoir's public/private relationship to Jean-Paul Sartre has often been at the center of the self-defining efforts of her autobiographical volumes without at all diminishing the strong sense of her identity" (231-32).

<sup>17</sup> See pages 76-99 for Funk Wiebe's discussion of her first forays into the publishing world. Here she acknowledges the significance of both Harms and Hertzler.

<sup>18</sup> It should be noted here that Marjorie Toews similarly ended her life by suicide on June 5, 2010 after, what her obituary in the Winnipeg Free Press called "a hard struggle with mental illness."

<http://passages.winnipegfreepress.com/passage-details/id-165454/>

<sup>19</sup> In my fourth chapter, I speak in greater detail about the issues of representing mental illness and how this relates to intertextual relationality.

<sup>20</sup> Note that in Brandt's case, I am restricting myself to mostly looking at the more autobiographical essays in her collection. Other essays in the text, such as Brandt's critical reviews of other texts, may very well be self-revealing and may also be useful in considering



how Brandt sees herself within a community. Nevertheless, I am more interested in the essays that are more overt examples of self-life-writing in order consider how Brandt sees herself and her life as being connected to an intimate community of others.

<sup>21</sup> Importantly, Warner has also collaborated with Lauren Berlant on the subject of publics, most notably in the article, “Sex in Public.” *Critical Inquiry* 24.2 (Winter 1998): 547-66.

<sup>22</sup> In more general terms, Brandt frequently discusses a communal relationship (and therefore responsibility) to nature. An excellent example of this in the book is Brandt’s chapter “& then everything goes bee: A poet’s journal” (171-200) which is ostensibly about Brandt’s collaboration with artist Aganetha Dyck and the poem she was asked to write for Dyck’s bee project. Brandt defers in several ways in this chapter. In one act of deferral, Brandt puts off her poem until the very end of the chapter. In another act of deferral, Brandt largely devotes most of her attention to a likeminded community of others, like Dyck herself whose project ‘Hive Bodice,’ Brandt says, responds “to the deep suffering of women, whose bodies are registering the ravages of environmental pollution in even greater numbers” (178). Brandt also devotes the majority of space to talking about (and quoting) others, such as biologist Rupert Sheldrake (190), anthropologist Jeremy Narby (196) and poet Louise Halfe (197) who all stress the value of treating the natural world humanely rather than exploitatively.

<sup>23</sup> See in particular chapter one for a lengthier discussion of diaspora in Mennonite life writing. There has also been some discussion about how Mennonite writing in Canada could be seen through the lens of postcolonialism. In her introduction to *Acts of Concealment*, a compilation of articles derived from a 1990 conference on Mennonite literature in Canada, Hildi Froese Tiessen writes that “Post-colonial literary theory may well prove to be instructive in any future study of the development and place of the literature of the Mennonites in Canada in so far as it has

focussed on how language and writing in post-colonial cultures have been appropriated for use away from a 'privileged norm' or dominant cultural centre" (12). Froese Tiessen is correct in noting the overlap in Mennonite literary studies and postcolonial theory. Indeed, postcolonial theory is concerned with how the subaltern speaks when they have historically been forced to adopt the language of colonial oppressors. Consequently, as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin suggest in *The Empire Writes Back*, truly independent literature is "dependent upon the abrogation" of the "constraining power" of imperial discourses, "and the appropriation of language and writing for new and distinctive usages" (6). Froese Tiessen herself notes how "the current generation" of Canadian Mennonite authors write "in English, with a sprinkling of German and Low German words and syntax" and this works to demonstrate their "cultural distinctiveness" (12). These aspects are certainly at work in Mennonite literature and have been and continue to be well worth exploring. That being said, as Amy Kroeker points out in her article, positioning Canadian Mennonites as postcolonial subjects is complicated for several reasons. For one, she notes the concern by theorists such as Linda Hutcheon and Arun Mukherjee, regarding whether a "settler/invader country like Canada" should be included within the parameters of postcolonial theory in the first place. Furthermore, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, Kroeker also notes the Canadian Mennonite "position of ambivalence" as subjects who struggled against cultural and linguistic norms practiced by the hegemonic majority but also settled within the country and displaced the native population (240). As I noted in chapter three, some Mennonite authors like Di Brandt reflect this position of ambivalence rather than strictly a position of postcoloniality. Needless to say, the question of Canadian Mennonites as postcolonial subjects, is an issue just as vexed as the question of Canadians in general as postcolonial subjects.

<sup>24</sup> For more on Joan Scott's notion of what counts as meaningful experience and the role of ideology in the notion of experience, see Chapter Two.

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