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Breaking Patriarchy through Words, Imagination, and Faith

The Hayloft as *Spielraum* in Miriam Toews' *Women Talking*

In Miriam Toews' novel *Women Talking* (2018), three generations of Loewen and Friesen women meet over two days in the hayloft of Earnest Thiessen's barn in the fictional Mennonite colony of Molotschna, modelled on the real colony of Manitoba in southeastern Bolivia.[1] When August Epp, the minute-taker of these meetings, claims that as the mere recorder of the discussions it does not matter what he thinks, Ona Friesen asks him a question that resonates throughout the novel: "How would you feel if in your entire lifetime it had never mattered what you thought?" (Toews 117). Even though August's life has included moments when it did not matter what he thought—he was excommunicated from the colony as an adolescent and has recently returned from England as a marginal community member, a teacher who lives in a shed—the perpetual condition of not mattering at all belongs, without question, not to August Epp but to the women of the colony. August's puzzling presence in the meetings is crucial beyond his practical role as translator and recorder. He provides an outside, male perspective that results in the hayloft becoming a relational, interactive, and dialogical space, thus putting into play an exchange of words and ideas that initiates movement, change, and the future. *Women Talking* depends on a concentrated contact zone or, more accurately, a *Spielraum*, a "playing space in which there is an opportunity for a dialogue" (77), to apply the term and concept used by Magdalene Redekop in her book *Making Believe: Questions about Mennonites and Art* (2020). In the extraordinary move to liberate themselves from patriarchal violence, the

women in the hayloft confront entrenched binary thinking in ways that recall and converse with formative feminist theory. The persistence of rigid divisions and oppositions between men and women in Toews' fictional colony of Molotschna and the real colony of Manitoba accentuates the need for continued and renewed discussions of gender inequality and oppression in a 2020 world existing within and in response to the #MeToo movement. There is nothing new in the stories women are telling, but there *is* something new in the underlying urgency to heed women's feelings and narratives—to listen attentively, pay deep attention to what is being said, and take women's words to heart.

As I look back at earlier feminist theory, particularly the work of Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, I am struck by how much work remains to be done in breaking reductive binary thought. Two recent studies, Redekop's *Making Believe* and Katherine Bergren's *The Global Wordsworth: Romanticism Out of Place* (2019), in their considerations of time and place as flexible, have not only contributed to my emphasis on the hayloft as a dialogical space, but also influenced my reading of Toews' novel as conversing with early French feminist theory and repurposing the work of Romantic poets. Redekop works with the concept of an "anachronic renaissance" developed by art historians Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood to study the flowering of Mennonite literature in the province of Manitoba in the last two decades of the twentieth century. In their book *Anachronic Renaissance* (2010), Nagel and Wood challenge concepts of chronology, progress, and enlightenment by understanding that a work of art, while based in a specific time and place, points "backward to a remote ancestral origin, perhaps, or to a prior artifact, or to an origin outside time, in divinity" (9). As further explained by Redekop, this "move to regenerate by moving into the past" can promote nostalgia but is "also intrinsic to positive revolutions" (9). She maintains that *Women Talking* "contain[s] the quality characteristic of anachronic renaissance: the urge to go deep into the past, confronting skeletons and talking to ghosts, and the desire to savour the sweetness of new growth as you move forward and begin all over again" (209). The hayloft in its embodiment of the qualities of an anachronic renaissance functions as a space of dialogical encounters and a contact zone between temporalities and between regions, rooted in, but not limited to, older and newer Mennonite settlements in Europe and the Americas. It is

"a place of making believe within which to find new ways of exploring old questions" and is also affected by what Redekop identifies as "an Anabaptist vision that always insists on beginning again and again" (161, 210).

In *The Global Wordsworth*, Bergren, who focuses on cumulative transformations of bodies of work over time rather than regeneration through looking back, outlines how a "global" approach "strives to hear conversations between Wordsworth and writers who repurposed him" (14). She describes a "reorientation" in which

> the field of global Romanticism becomes a product of not just scholars but also authors around the world who read and responded to Romantic writing—thus a product of not just the past few decades but rather the past two centuries—as long as Romantic poetry has been traveling the globe. (17)

Toews contributes to this reorientation and repurposing, nudging readers of *Women Talking* to negotiate and probe the words of William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge into a new context rather than exclude or dismiss them. In this way, the hayloft hosts yet a further temporal contact zone between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries and another spatial contact zone between northern and southern hemispheres. Global readings and anachronic renaissances depend on spaces of dialogism; the hayloft in Toews' novel and the novel itself incorporate August Epp and canonical Romantic poets in order to develop vibrant exchanges that turn words into conversation leading to action. Redekop concludes her discussion of Toews' novel *Irma Voth* (2011) by claiming that "all artists, at their best, touch on the deepest parts of our humanity when they open us and them up to dialogue. These examples of flawed and broken community are ways of reimagining us and them" (117). This opening up and reimagining of "us and them" is exactly what Toews and her characters attempt and achieve in *Women Talking*.

The emphasis on "us and them" has been a focus of academic criticism of Mennonite/s writing for some time.[2] My own identity as a non-Mennonite positions me as a reader and critic on the outside. Hildi Froese Tiessen's influential work on moving beyond binary tropes stresses the value of unfixed "in-between" worlds situated far from "oppositional essentialisms that have, for decades, confined the Mennonites and their writers"—writers who more recently "have demonstrated that the conventionally bounded and hierarchical binary categories of insider and outsider, home

and exile reveal little about the complex personal and cultural situations in which contemporary Mennonites live" (500). Past and present form another binary paradigm central to the rich body of critical work on Mennonite literature. As Robert Zacharias argues in *Rewriting the Break Event: Mennonites and Migration in Canadian Literature* (2013), retellings of the past attempt "to multiply, rather than narrow, the possible meanings and forms of the community" (70). The dialogical space of the hayloft reverberates with these familiar and energetic moves toward creative reimaginings of entrenched binary oppositions. In her article "Representations of Melancholic Martyrdom in Canadian Mennonite Literature," Grace Kehler argues that in seeking "a restoration of the ties between self and community," "both must be receptive to difference and to disagreement in order to inaugurate new, vibrant inter-relations" (182). More specifically, in her article on *Women Talking* as parable, Kehler points out how the women's discourse "supercedes binaries (flesh and spirit, here and after)" as the women "forge a language from the scraps of theology permitted them" in order to leave the colony and rediscover their faith ("Miriam Toews's parable" 38, 39). Toews places her novel and the hayloft firmly within those familiar binaries of us and them, inside and outside, past and present, initiating playful and painful collisions from which newness and action emerge.

The meetings in the hayloft are held to decide how to respond to the horrific rapes and assaults repeatedly inflicted on women and girls by eight identified men within the colony. In her prefatory "Note on the Novel," Toews explains that *Women Talking* is "a reaction through fiction" to the rapes that took place between 2005 and 2009 in Manitoba Colony, "a remote Mennonite colony in Bolivia" (vii). While research has been undertaken on the religious, historical, and social contexts of such cultures and communities, Toews turns to speculation and imagination in her creative response.[3] She strikingly refers to her novel as "an act of female imagination," appropriating the phrase used by members of Manitoba Colony to dismiss the so-called "stories" of the victims (vii). Despite the extreme violence and violation, the women in Toews' novel do not simply banish men just as they do not exclude their words. The question of what to do about the men, particularly those not implicated in the rapes, increasingly informs the difficult decisions undertaken by the Friesen and

Loewen women on behalf of the vulnerable members of their society. In deciding whether to do nothing, stay and fight, or leave, the women include and consider the men, beginning with the young, elderly, and infirm, but also thinking about others who are loved and would be missed if the women and children were to leave. Among the many complexities faced by the decision-makers is the knowledge that, as Ona Friesen states, "several of the people we love are people we also fear" (53).

When Earnest Thiessen asks the women if they are plotting to burn his barn, one of them replies in brilliant Toews fashion that "there's no plot, we're only women talking" (179). The lack of a plot on the part of the women and in the novel itself, which evokes *l'écriture féminine*,[4] grants freedom to the three generations of the two families to talk, laugh, play, sing, and weep. This is a novel of talking and affect rather than plot and action. By drawing in August Epp as recorder and translator of the meetings, Ona and the other women provide him with the opportunity to not only witness but also be moved and changed by the words spoken and emotions shared. His presence, by invitation, eliminates the type of resentful anger identified by Luce Irigaray in her observation that "men [get] angry about women-only meetings, wanting to penetrate them at all cost" ("Bodily Encounter" 34). The rage associated with men, familiar to August from listening to his mother's reading of Flaubert's "Rage and Impotence" (Toews 213), belongs, in this case, to the women. August eventually realizes that "there was no reason for the women to *have* minutes they couldn't read. The purpose, all along, was for me to *take* them" (215, emphasis original). And it is in his role as listener, *taking in* the words, that August performs perhaps the most important act in this powerful novel. Taking minutes means that he must concentrate on the words of the women talking. August, who is considered by some to be a "half man" (134), "an effeminate man who is unable to properly till a field or eviscerate a hog" (72), a "*schinda*" or "one not clever enough to know how to farm" (61), shares a degree of suffering and low status with the women of the colony and is thus in a position to hear their stories. He receives the words, takes them in, translates them from the oral language of Plautdietsch (Low German) into English, and releases them in concrete print onto the page. But he does more than passively listen, receive, translate, and write. He probes, challenges, contradicts, accepts, and reinforces the women's words.

At one point in this process August records how, in the midst of petty disagreements, Greta Loewen urges the women not to waste time by "passing this burden, this sack of stones, from one to the next, by pushing our pain away" in a game of "Hot Potato" (177). Instead she urges them to "absorb it ourselves"—"Let's inhale it, let's digest it, let's process it into fuel" (177). August has the opportunity to do with words what the women do with pain—inhale, digest, and process them. Such absorption grants power to women's language to provoke action that confronts systemic patriarchy. Toews urges all participants to inhale, digest, and process words into fuel—fuel that feeds a fire of rage that will not be quenched until conditions change. All of this hinges on the necessity of listening to women's words from beginning to end as they emerge from emotion, thought, and body and are formulated into speech and print. The foundation of the shared word within a contested space promotes playful interchanges and, to quote Redekop, "affirms the value of just being with others in a place where we make believe together" (210). It is crucial that the interactions in the hayloft play out between genders, generations, old and new worlds, former and contemporary times. Boisterous disagreements and differences do not end in forced resolutions or closures; instead tensions, contradictions, and diversity persist, moving forward into regenerative change, renewal, and action.

Men's Words

Although sympathetic to the condition of the women in the colony, August Epp automatically works within the context of literary men, namely Shelley, Wordsworth, and Coleridge. August is saved by a woman in England—a librarian who befriends him, recommending and facilitating his return to Molotschna Colony. In confronting a degree of vagueness when probing his origins, she quotes the first line of Shelley's "Ozymandias": "*I met a traveller from an antique land*" (Shelley 109 qtd. in Toews 10, emphasis original). The librarian's hunch about Epp is quite accurate. Although he is an outcast rather than a traveller, he, like the sonnet's traveller, comes from an oppressive land experiencing the potential downfall of its destructive patriarchy as lodged in the colony's bishop, Peters the younger, and his team of elders. Like the sonnet's sculptor, August reads and understands the passions of the dictator, in his case as revealed by the women's words in the hayloft; and, like the sculptor, August records the cruelty and arrogance

of the dictator and system. Although the minutes are read by nobody but August, he is an important audience of one, marking the crucial beginning of a process through which a single listener is given the capacity to see, hear, and act. And August's written words in the form of Toews' novel are, of course, being read by many.

August, like the British librarian, resorts to the words and ideas of men. He refers, for example, to retrospective contemplation as conceptualized by Wordsworth in "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" in order to contrast "vacant" and "pensive" (Wordsworth 191) moods with the explosive turmoil of Salome Friesen's rage. Salome, who attacked the rapists with a scythe, possesses, according to August, "no Inward Eye . . . , no bliss of solitude. She doesn't wander. And she is not lonely" (Toews 21). Salome's three-year-old daughter, Miep, was "violated by the men" and is on antibiotics that must be procured outside the colony to avoid gossip (43). August uses Wordsworth's poem in an attempt to convey the emotions of the victimized women by articulating what they are not—by emphasizing what is forever denied them. At this point there are no words to describe the devastation of the trauma being released and shared in the hayloft—only indirect words pointing out what does not exist. Repurposing Wordsworth's lines gestures back to the nineteenth century and the pastoral landscape of the Lake District—contexts that are not particularly applicable to the historical migration narrative and places leading to the settlement of Molotschna colony. Although Epp may simply be carelessly applying British Romantic concepts, language, and flowers out of place and time, the allusion to Wordsworth's poem is relevant in a more "global" sense in terms of its structural progression from "the actual to the imagined, from lived experience . . . to remembered experience" (Bergren 45). In bringing Wordsworth's daffodils into the hayloft, Epp accentuates the women's remembered experiences as flashes of nightmares as opposed to blissful recollections of pleasure. Even more devastating, the contrast draws attention to the women's inability to remember at all due to being rendered unconscious—by an anaesthetic meant for animals—when raped.

In his own stories, August tries to inspire his listeners and impose morals. As the women come up with various interpretations of his allegorical story of the ancestral colony by the Black Sea in Odessa, the story expands to encompass as many meanings as there are listeners. August reductively

refers to these unexpected responses as "misunderstanding[s]" (Toews 35), exposing his assumption that there is only one way to hear a story. His didactic intentions are undercut by the playfully expansive and suggestive conversation that emerges in which the women collectively define soft tissue as "the skin and the flesh and all the connective material . . . anything that protects the hard tissue, like bones or anything rigid," and understand that soft tissue is more "resilient" but "decomposes much more quickly in the end" (35-36). August adds "that soft tissue is often defined by what it is not" (36), a piece of information he later repeats after the women have left the loft (201), and he registers what he has learned—that this method of negative definition applies to women, himself, and all others who are branded "not men." The women have taught August one of Irigaray's main points, which is that "the 'feminine' is always described in terms of deficiency or atrophy, as the other side of the sex that alone holds a monopoly on value: the male sex" (*This Sex* 69). August's supposedly simple story has been taken in all directions by the women, leaving the storyteller stunned, admonished, and diminished, but eventually changed. The rage, love, and imagination of the women in the hayloft do not permit them to accept a singular interpretation, particularly a simplistic and didactic one.

It is August's reading of Coleridge that draws attention to his need for more expansive and careful reading. Calling him "the great poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge," August uses the poet's 1808 lecture on education to introduce the women to the poet's "cardinal rules of early education: 'To work by love and so generate love. To habituate the mind to intellectual accuracy and truth. To excite imaginative power'"(Toews 77). August thus emphasizes Coleridge's belief that "'[l]ittle is taught by contest or dispute, everything by sympathy and love'" (77).[5] Working within the traditional binary systems used by Coleridge in his lecture, August advocates the so-called "female" approach of sympathy and love over the more "male"-oriented contest and dispute. In addition to falling into the limitations and divisiveness of binary systems and thinking, August is reading selectively, failing to consider Coleridge's ostensibly less palatable ideas from his Lecture XI: "Women are good novelists, but indifferent poets; and this is because they rarely or never thoroughly distinguish between fact and fiction" (Coleridge 318). In the same essay, Coleridge maintains that "the common modern novel" or "fashionable lady's novel" lacks

imagination, failing to develop judgment and morals because "it incites mere feelings without at the same time administering an impulse to action" and "afford[s] excitement without producing reaction" (318-19). The lecture concludes by relegating human thought itself to a binary of "passive or active" (319). What August has not yet learned—and what Toews is pointing out as the writer of a "fashionable lady's novel"—is the limitation of thinking in terms of dualistic oppositions, the danger of relegating feelings to a category of "mere," and above all the divisiveness resulting from the separation of language and experience into male and female words and worlds.

Women's Words

The words and work offered by early French feminists, particularly Irigaray and Cixous, serve as intertexts in *Women Talking*.[6] It is shocking to realize how strongly the calls for change advocated by this formative work still resonate today. The women in the hayloft, through talking, essentially dismantle what Cixous in "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays" calls the metaphor of the "double braid" (63) based in "dual, hierarchical oppositions" (64). In 1975, Cixous regarded the situation as "urgent":

> Now it has become rather urgent to question this solidarity between logocentrism and phallocentrism—bringing to light the fate dealt to woman, her burial—to threaten the stability of the masculine structure. . . . What would happen to logocentrism, to the great philosophical systems, to the order of the world in general if the rock upon which they founded this church should crumble? (65)

Cixous identifies one result of such crumbling, should it occur: "So all the history, all the stories would be there to retell differently" (65); the retelling, however, depends on the *different* telling of the stable stories that initiates the crumbling in the first place.

Cixous' argument that "[m]ale privilege [is] shown in the opposition between *activity* and *passivity*, which he uses to sustain himself" (64, emphasis original) highlights one of the most basic of the binary oppositions promoting patriarchal control in the community portrayed in *Women Talking*. An impatience with the limitations of binary thinking is voiced by Agata, the eldest of the Friesen women, who urges the others to "put aside the animal/non-animal and forgiveness/non-forgiveness and inspirational/non-inspirational and soft tissue/hard tissue/new skin/old skin debates" (Toews 38). As the women deconstruct the binary oppositions that identify them as

passive and obedient, they demonstrate other ways to tell stories, based in the metaphorical and non-linear.[7] Their illiteracy is intended by the elders of the colony to control them, but fails to do so; a focus on orality and the body bypasses the written and read word in favour of a playful and powerful expression of ideas and emotion through speech and movement. The women's language reveals the pluralistic "female imaginary" (28) described by Irigaray in *This Sex Which Is Not One* as opposed to the hysterical model assigned to the women by the men in the colony. Both conceptions are connected with the woman's body, but the pluralistic orgasmic imaginary is freed from the restrictions and misrepresentations of hierarchical structures and binary oppositions associated with the hysterical. Cixous looked ahead to a time of radical transformations that would usher in a "bunch of new differences," but claimed in 1975 that "we are still floundering—with few exceptions—in Ancient History" ("Sorties" 83) or, in Ann Liddle's translation of Cixous, in "the Old order" (97).[8]

One of the colony's responses to the rapes, as Toews makes clear in her "Note on the Novel," is to dismiss the women's words as the "result of wild female imagination" (vii). In throwing this expression at one of the women, the bishop Peters reduces "wild female imagination" into "three short sentences" by applying "forceful punctuation after each of the words" (58). This aggressive curtailment of women's imagination into truncated one-word sentences emphasizes Peters' dependence on a form of persuasion that evades truth by blocking the flow between words and thus between ideas. Peters crudely and bluntly shuts down objections. It is clear that he not only distrusts the emotional and imaginative but is not even conversant with them. He is one of those men who, according to Irigaray in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, views women's words as "contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason"; such words are "inaudible for whoever listens to them with ready-made grids, with a fully elaborated code in hand" (29). In order to listen effectively, Irigaray cautions one to "listen with another ear, as if hearing *an 'other meaning' always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them*" (29, emphasis original). Because woman "is indefinitely other in herself," she can be "said to be whimsical, incomprehensible, agitated, capricious" (28). According to Irigaray,

"'she' sets off in all directions leaving 'him' unable to discern the coherence of any meaning" (29). Peters experiences this type of bewilderment in his inability to discern coherent meaning. August, less bewildered than Peters, is learning to listen without judgment, without a dependence on grids and entrenched codes, and without violently breaking stories into fragments. As he witnesses and records the women's words, August begins to be guided by a vague awareness of the complexity of the women listening to what takes place within their individual and communal bodies, which Irigaray would identify as that which takes place "within themselves," "*within the intimacy of that silent, multiple, diffuse touch*" (29, emphasis original). Although August's understanding is partial and tentative, it signals the importance of a man learning how to listen attentively to women's bodies and words.

The translation of Plautdietsch to English is a process not unlike the translation of the women's emotions from intimately private spaces to words shared in the hayloft. As August performs the translation of Low German into English, he works at it rather than relaxes into it; he focuses on getting the words down on paper and feels relief at his ability to hold and contain the fluid, pluralistic, emotional, and playful language in the concrete logic and reason of print. He mistakenly assumes that the women feel the same way. In reminding Mariche that she must "act natural," Agata Friesen, as August explains, "has used a Low German expression for which there is no easy translation to English. It pertains to a type of fruit and to winter" (Toews 55). Even though August is aware of the complexities of translation, particularly when bringing the oral words of an esoteric language spoken by so-called illiterate women into a written form of "standard" English, he remains surprisingly oblivious to the nuances of the process and the persistence of his own prejudices and limitations. Just as the translation of Low German to English compromises and flattens the oral language, so August's disregard of the women's metaphorical language and complicated narratives consigns those words and stories to what Irigaray identifies as "the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology" and positions of "waste, or excess, what is left of a mirror invested by the (masculine) 'subject' to reflect himself, to copy himself" (*This Sex* 30). When Agata names her physical affliction as "edema," for example, August detects "a note of pride in her voice" and declares, in one of his parenthetical comments scattered throughout his narration, "(There

must be satisfaction gained in accurately naming the thing that torments you)" (Toews 69). The assumption that such a condition can be adequately contained in a single word accentuates August's limited understanding of the way in which the women are talking in the hayloft. He pounces on the medical term as a sign of progress, but in his condescending comment fails to understand that he is condoning a concise and exact language that can never contain these experiences and emotions.

Despite such limitations, August is aware of the dangers and shortcomings of the language and comparisons he offers. As a result, rather than using his education to argue against or deny the women's ideas, he tries to quell his objections in an attempt to understand what the women are actually saying. He restrains himself, for example, from lecturing Ona when she describes the setting sun as a traitor and coward. Tempted to explain the science of "hemispheres," which he would have offered complete with the moral that "by sharing the sun the world could learn to share everything" (2), he instead goes along with Ona's playful narrative. Her words hold more truth and depth than their surface suggests, and her knowledge is not as limited or naive as August initially assumes. The sun as traitor and coward is deeply relevant and "true" as a signifier of how time and existence have played out in Ona's life thus far. She is talking beyond plot, fact, and science, and August possesses enough intuition and imagination not to challenge or contradict her, but to respect the profound potential raised by her creativity and wisdom. It is also clear that his willingness to take in and listen to Ona's words is the result of his deep affection for her and is essentially an act of love, opening him to possibilities of faith that challenge his skepticism. Ona's thoughts and stories are nimble, in contrast to the very sedentary limitations of her physical existence. Irigaray argues that if women

> could have access to the imaginary of their desires, they would, rather, always be in movement, at home everywhere, finding their security in mobility, their *jouissance* in movement. . . . But if they are to do that, they cannot stay where they have been put. They must, rather, be able to leave the property in which they have been legally confined, so as to try to find their own place(s). ("Poverty" 91)

The strain between movement and confinement as articulated by Irigaray provides insight into Ona, whose increasing dependence on desire and the imagination challenges stagnancy through a drive for mobility.

The women wrestle with ways in which language is used to evade the truth, as in euphemisms such as the colony's reference to the rapists as "unwelcome visitors" (Toews 49). They discuss distinctions between words such as "fleeing" and "leaving" (41) and argue about the accuracy of the term "insurrection" (91) with respect to their plan. In response to Mariche Loewen's criticism of the way the Friesen women are "extolling the glory of precise, accurate language, of using the correct word" (91), Ona Friesen proposes, "[w]e will name it [the plan] properly when we have the details in place" (92), demonstrating a non-aggressive use of language that follows meaning rather than prescribes it. Similarly, by suggesting that the "women can create their own map as they go" (84) rather than following one already made, she promotes flexibility and possibility.

The nimble playfulness of the women's narratives contrasts with August's earnestness. Elaborate stories and styles, including the use of extended metaphors, are plentiful, but not always appreciated. When Agata says that "[a] road is many things," for example, August notes that "[t]his type of 'Friesen talk' (what Mariche characterizes as 'coffeehousing,' although she has never been to a coffee house) exasperates the Loewens" (59). At the point when the women are getting ready to leave the colony, Agata, even though a fan of metaphor, insists that they "must stop talking through flowers" (168). But when there is time and opportunity, playfulness flourishes. Agata's story of the dog and raccoon (23), for example, is received with mixed reactions by the women, leading to competing interpretations, outbursts, gestures, philosophical arguments, discussions of dreams, quibbles, challenges of logic, considerations of theological cruxes, exaggerations, wordplay, humour, arguing, and crying. The presence of *affidamento*, the feminist encouragement of entrustment based on the recognition of differences among women,[9] is apparent in this scene, particularly with respect to age and generations. This recognition enables positions of power to shift into rearrangement. The two youngest in the group, Neitje Friesen and Autje Loewen, both sixteen years old, express their detachment from the arguments and interpretations by swinging on rafters, kicking at straw bales, and playing a clapping game under the table, providing in a very literal sense what Redekop, in *Making Believe*, identifies as the importance of play through movement (320-21). Their energetic and embarrassed desire to break from the group, particularly when

hymn-singing occurs, manifests itself in a type of fun and play that actually connects them to rather than separates them from the others.

Redekop points out how in Mennonite texts music often "floods in and destabilizes the printed word, moving dialogue to a non-linguistic level" (223). Autje and Neitje braiding their hair together draws attention to the joining of separate strands and sections of hair in a style similar to the bringing together of women's voices and parts in the harmonized hymn-singing. Unlike Cixous' double braid, which carries the heavy metaphor of established "dual, hierarchical systems" ("Sorties" 64), this braid, created by and connecting two teenaged girls, playfully subverts the binary hierarchies of Cixous' metaphor. The musical parts that provide the harmony, like the strands of hair creating the braid, combine to form the whole while drawing attention to their separateness upon which the intricate beauty of the creation depends. The strands of arguments, however, remain unresolved. The hayloft, like Toews' novel, is "a place where you accept and live with contradiction" (Redekop 321)—indeed, where you revel in it to the point of creating harmony and something new out of separation, diversity, and difference.

The "Wild Female Imagination" at Work in the World

Toews leaves the women and the reader in process, flow, and flux; rigidity has been exchanged for movement, which is a positive first step. The concept of slow and long time has been conveyed by Ona in the story of the migrating butterflies and dragonflies, who often arrive at their destination led by the grandchildren of those who started the migration (Toews 81-82). Patience is a key ingredient in this journey to an unknown world that can only be conceived of through faith and the imagination. Redekop draws attention to Jesse Nathan's essay on Mennonite American poetry, "Question, Answer," in which he identifies a "Mennonite *inflection* or *accent*" in the way these poets keep asking questions (Nathan 190, emphasis original). Nathan notes that "[t]here is no closure, and there is the embrace of this lack of closure," resulting in "the invention of new answers, surreal answers, parodic answers, paradoxical answers, confessional answers" (190). Redekop sees this "question-and-answer rhythm, this invoking of the conventions in order to challenge them" as "coming from the deepest roots of the anarchic dissenting tradition that is the Mennonite legacy" (43).

The conclusion of *Women Talking* embraces this dissent and lack of closure. Agata, in conversation with Ona, proposes that the women can only gain a much-needed perspective with distance, and so they have a duty to leave in order to find an inclusive balance that is "rational, understanding AND loving and obedient" (Toews 109). Agata's suggestion does not meet with unanimous agreement, but the commitment she expresses to "pacifism, love and forgiveness" is generally accepted as the basis of faith (111), with love constituting the first step from which all else follows. In acknowledging that it is their faith rather than Molotschna that is their homeland (151), the women become mobile and can declare that they are "not fleeing" but have "chosen to leave" (208). Such leaving does not mean forgetting, but turns to the past in order to fold it forward into the future—not by adopting Wordsworth's passively pensive mood, but by asking questions and inventing answers that challenge the stagnancy imposed by entrenched binary oppositions, particularly those based in gender.

Forgiveness arises throughout the women's discussions as the most difficult challenge they face. Ona asks, "[I]s forgiveness that has been coerced true forgiveness?" (26); and the group realizes the perversity of a system that requires them to ask forgiveness of specific men in official positions who were, in unofficial positions, the very ones who raped them and their children (94). The women wrestle with many of the complexities discussed by Jacques Derrida in his work "On Forgiveness," most prominently the understanding that "[e]ach time forgiveness is effectively exercised, it seems to suppose some sovereign power," that if "one only forgives where one can judge and punish, therefore evaluate, then the putting into place, the institution of an instance of judgement, supposes a power, a force, a sovereignty" (Derrida 59). The women of the colony yearn for a "forgiveness worthy of its name"—"a forgiveness without power" (Derrida 59). Feelings of love, forgiveness, and justice are complicated by the possibility that "the attackers are as much victims as the victims of the attacks" in the sense that all are "victims of the *circumstances* from which Molotschna has been created" (Toews 123, emphasis original). In the end, the importance for the Friesen and Loewen women lies in the comfort and confidence of being able to make distinctions between "feeling" and "knowing": the list includes feeling guilty but knowing they are not guilty; feeling homicidal but knowing they are not killers; feeling lost but

knowing they are not losers (159). Feeling and knowing continue to exist in dialogical tension and contradiction, joining other unresolved distinctions that cannot be forced into union. In her discussion of Toews' *Irma Voth*, Redekop argues that "[w]e cannot stop ourselves from constructing us and them oppositions. We can only forgive each other for doing it and then reimagine them once again. Irma is every person, standing in for all of us as she translates and mediates the world around her" (115). Instead of providing an Everyperson, Toews offers in *Women Talking* a women's collective verging on a human collective, which translates and mediates the world from the hayloft, a *Spielraum* in which play between us-and-them oppositions looks back, in the spirit of anachronic renaissance, in order to move forward while faithfully reimagining future spaces as places not just of talk but of conversation. This playful and promising transformation of space shows us the "wild female imagination" hard at work in the world of us and them.

NOTES

1 Molotschna is the name of an actual colony founded in Russia by Mennonites who emigrated from Prussia in 1803 (Redekop 14).
2 See the introduction to *Mennonite/s Writing Bibliographies* for the origin of the term "Mennonite/s Writing."
3 The "ghost rapes" in Manitoba Colony in Bolivia have been the subject of extensive media coverage. See, for example, Friedman-Rudovsky. For scholarship on gender within Mennonite communities in Bolivia, see Warkentin; and Hiebert.
4 For a discussion of *l'écriture féminine*, see Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa."
5 See Robinson 221. August is quoting Coleridge's 3 May 1808 lecture on education as cited and documented by Henry Crabb Robinson's letter of 7 May 1808.
6 Ron Charles refers to Irigaray in his review of the novel. In her article on *Women Talking*, "Miriam Toews's parable of infinite becoming," Grace Kehler discusses Irigaray's "Divine Women" from *Sexes and Genealogies*.
7 For an outstanding discussion of the novel as a feminist parable, see Kehler ("Miriam Toews's parable"), who reads the metaphor as "a quintessentially participatory form of communication" rather than a "didactic or proscriptive" one (37).
8 While all other references to "Sorties" are from the complete essay as published in *The Newly Born Woman*, I refer to Ann Liddle's translation of this particular excerpt here because it resonates with the real and fictional colonies explored by Toews.
9 For discussions of *affidamento*, see Irigaray, "Women-Amongst-Themselves: Creating a Woman-to-Woman Sociality."

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