The Quiet Structures of Violence in Mennonite Science Fiction

Selena Middleton

Introduction to Mennonite Science Fiction

While Mennonite literature is well-established in Canadian literary studies—where it is known as a subgenre of wide prairie landscapes, diasporic narratives, and quiet challenges to oppressive politics—Mennonite speculative fiction is new. In a recent issue of *The Center for Mennonite Writing Journal*, editor Jeff Gundy outlines the sparsely populated history of Mennonite speculative writing, which is comprised of Leigh Brackett's *The Long Tomorrow* (1955) and the works of A.E. van Vogt, "who hid his Mennonite roots carefully" (n.p.). Increasingly, however, contemporary Mennonite writers are turning to speculative fiction to counter the cultural suppression of ideas and identities that conflict with the Mennonite status quo. As a Historic Peace Church known for nonresistance and conscientious objection, Mennonites can be seen as isolationists ill-suited to the imaginative expanses of science fiction. Andrew Swartley, however, counters this idea when he states that "Mennonites avoid conflict better than most, to the point of actively, viciously silencing 'fringe' voices in both public and private forums . . . [so] we need stories that defy our habits of silence and conflict avoidance. We need stories that start conversations" (n.p.). New voices are emerging now to challenge Mennonite silence. This is done not with malice, but with a deep love of Mennonite traditions. One such writer is Sofia Samatar, whose father is a Somali scholar and mother a Swiss-German Mennonite from whom Samatar takes her religious affiliation. Samatar's generation ship story, "Fallow," is the focus of this brief study as its treatment of silence and the violence of conflict avoidance is exemplary of some of the major movements of an emerging subgenre. These themes are increasingly important as we interrogate what it means to make a home—and fight for it—in the context of the deepening climate crisis.

Exodus, Survival, and Silence

Before delving into Sofia Samatar's "Fallow" and the land relationships in that story, it is important to contextualize Mennonite silence, which stems from pacifist nonresistance. The Mennonite relationships to nonresistance and pacifism are a response to The Sermon on the Mount, in which the blessed are described as meek, persecuted, and as peacemakers (*New Revised Standard Version*, Matt. 5.1-10). Further, "the Anabaptist vision was the ethic of love and non-resistance . . . applied to all human relationships. The Brethren understood this to mean complete abandonment of all warfare, strife, and violence, and of the taking of human life" (Bender 21). Religious ideals, however, often come into conflict with social norms and individual human experience. The Mennonite cultural relationship to silence is linked to a history of religious persecution which included torture, martyrdom, and an exodus which forced the community

across continents in search of religious freedom. Mennonite poet and scholar Di Brandt links the Mennonite separatist impulse to this traumatic persecution and how that persecution has been preserved in the culture. She says: "The founding events of Mennonite culture were told and retold to us as children. They were also memorialized in . . . *The Martyr's Mirror*, which came complete with graphic illustrations and inspiring death scene testimonials by the condemned" ("je jelieda" 108). The hymns still sung by Mennonites also feature stories of martyrdom, enforcing a sense that the community is "surrounded by a host of great martyrs and of living in an atmosphere of witnessing" (Stauffer, qtd. in Redekop 17). Magdalene Redekop connects the prevailing presence of the martyr experience to contemporary Mennonite silence, stating that "torture was frequently directed at the mouth" (17), the site of religious speech which the Mennonites refused to give up. In refusing to be silent about their religious beliefs and in becoming refugees for these convictions, a paradoxical tension came into Mennonite culture that resulted in a kind of silence that is markedly different from that demanded by a religious adherence to tenets of humility and peace. In 1985 Dyck wrote that "the motif of suffering has become a major ingredient in Mennonite identity" (qtd. in Redekop) and Redekop qualifies this when she says that the "'tension between martyrdom and survival' may be at least as important in Mennonite writing as the theology of martyrdom itself" (Redekop 13). Perhaps a parallel can be drawn between the way Western societies venerate the sacrifices of soldiers, a veneration used in military recruiting material, and the spiritual honours bestowed upon Mennonite martyrs. Early Mennonites died in tongue screws and Brandt explains that the venerated suffering passed to future generations manifests as a quiet but persistent violence turned inward (*So this* 3). Given the closeness many Mennonite communities feel to the land through both their agricultural practice and their isolationism, it should not be a surprise that the land sometimes becomes the recipient of internalized violence.

Silence and the Land

Scholar of diaspora, Robin Cohen, writes that diasporic communities are marked by their "break event" (qtd. in Zacharias 187) and so the persecution of Mennonites is imprinted on their culture. Mennonite nonresistance becomes intertwined with horrors that Redekop argues were "experienced . . . as unspeakable" (18). But given that the original persecution also includes removal from original homelands, and many Mennonites experienced further exodus in the face of continuing persecution, the "break event" that is inscribed on the community also necessarily influences an attitude to the land. Brandt states that Mennonites demonstrate no desire to return to their homeland even though "the ancestral lands . . . are still so much part of [Mennonite] cultural imagination" ("je jelieda" 125). Despite the continuance of a community that remains connected to the land through agriculture, that land is theologically less relationship than resource. Writing about growing up in rural Manitoba, Brandt stresses that "not once did [she] hear a single [preacher] talk about the land, except to pronounce gleefully that we 'shall have dominion over it'" (*So this* 7). Brandt's work contends with the pacifist ideal's conflict with the reality of Mennonite farms as part of the Canadian colonial project (2). Even Mennonite nonresistance during wartime is marked with colonial violence: Mennonites cut timber in

conscientious objector camps, both harvesting resources and opening up Indigenous land to further exploitation. Thus nonresistance on this land is a quiet complicity in the violence of colonization. This same quiet complicity in acts of violence shapes Sofia Samatar's colonization narrative in "Fallow."

Sofia Samatar's Exo-planetary Diaspora

"Fallow" uses science fictional tropes to examine Mennonite exile, and to interrogate settler culture and the ways that homesteads can remain separate from a sense of community or belonging. When Mennonites are given their own world in a text, the characters' internal attitudes rather than external corruption guarantee continued violence and, as Daniel Shank Cruz puts it, through this story, Samatar "makes the argument that [Mennonites] should interact with the world to make it a better place instead of shunning it" (221). The novella addresses this moment of cultural recovery and what a struggle for reconnection, however painful, could look like in individual characters—and, perhaps, how individual accounts when recorded and submitted to the community archive, could signal communal change.

Samatar's "Fallow" is divided into three parts, each focusing on a character that defies the strict structures of the community and bears the consequences. Each section includes a short epigraph, which I use to frame a discussion of the story's quiet violences and how they relate to the lands of Fallow and the Earth these characters left behind.

Miss Snowfall and the Peaceable Kingdom

The story opens with Miss Snowfall the schoolteacher and her epigraph, which marks Fallow and perhaps specifically Miss Snowfall's classroom and external life as an example of "the peaceable kingdom" (Samatar 206). The children of Fallow love their schoolteacher, who teaches through experience and narrative and shapes her lessons to her students' curiosity and passion. Agar, the story's narrator, calls her method "idiosyncratic" and "associative" (211) but points out in light of Miss Snowfall's suicide that she taught "the proper curriculum" (212). It is Miss Snowfall who teaches the children about themselves and about the Ark generation ship on which their ancestors travelled to Fallow. The story of leaving Earth teaches the children about conflicts among their people too—conflicts so embedded that they resurface on Fallow, even though the people had to put aside their differences to gain a spot on the ship. Miss Snowfall teaches that there were sects within their religion that "practiced seclusion" (213). Of these sects, those who boarded the Ark decided to "accept a life dependent on advanced technology, rather than a life of war or a stillness amounting to suicide" (213). Out of those who stayed behind on a beleaguered Earth "on burnt farms, [and] among the cattle who were dying in the dust" some "shook out their sheets and curtains for the last time and went to bed, resolved not to rise until Judgment Day" (213). Perhaps Miss Snowfall recognizes herself in the histories she shares. Her experience parallels the isolated struggles of the Mennonite community on Earth and the way she labours at both teaching and keeping a peace which is referred to as "yieldedness" (226). Miss Snowfall's story begins with the announcement that "here is the peaceable kingdom" (206), and so over the course of this first

section, the reader learns that a peaceable kingdom on Fallow is one where creativity is quashed, where curiosity yields to rigid structure, where peace dies quietly at the end of a rope. If members of this community are given names based on their attributes or function in society, the reader questions whether Miss Snowfall is named after the purity of the landscape after a winter storm, or for the way the community covers that which is unwanted with a cold blanket that smothers undesirable elements.

Brother Lookout and the Earthmen

The second section, titled for Brother Lookout, underscores the paradox of the narrator Agar's past and present positions in her community, first as a powerless child discovering truths about her people, and then as a writer who documents those truths and seeks to archive them for posterity. Agar's paradox is underscored, too, by Brother Lookout's name and epigraph. Brother Lookout is named for the thick glasses he wears, an irony that highlights an unfulfilled potential, the juxtaposition of desired insight with culturally enforced myopia. Brother Lookout is the community's only psychiatrist, but later, when psychiatry is banned, he is the man Agar knows as "the shambling village street sweeper" (230), demonstrating a focal shift, perhaps, from the psyche of the community to how that community relates to the land as he takes up a humble form of service to put that relationship to rights. Most importantly, Brother Lookout is the character who reveals Fallow as a concept—that this exo-terran space is not a true home, but a holding place where the community waits out the death of humankind back on Earth, to return once "peace" has been restored. The cause of the anguish with which Brother Lookout entreats Brother Pin to relate the revelation of Fallow's origin is apparent in Pin's use of both Biblical allusion and natural imagery:

> Like the priest and the Levite, we have passed by the dying man in the road. Unlike true Christians, we have given no thought to our neighbors. We have not considered those who have perished since we departed Earth long ago, their souls crying out for peace. How many have been born since our departure who, had they only been alive at that time, would have joined the trek? Are they to be punished simply for being born too late? How can we receive Gabriel's reports so complacently? Every quarter century produces a catalogue of horrors, yet we sit here . . . like the carrion birds, the eagle and the ossifrage, waiting for others to die so that we might inherit the Earth. (236)

At Brother Lookout's urging, Brother Pin reveals that travellers from Earth have periodically arrived at Fallow and been kept separate from the community while they are schooled in religion. These refugees are shunned if they refuse to accept community beliefs. On Fallow, exile outside of the careful technological management of the planet's atmosphere means death. Thus the community quietly accepts death on two fronts, allowing the land to maintain their borders without admitting that they are a part of those systems. Samatar's careful use of both Biblical and animal references in this section underscores the two fronts on which the inhabitants of Fallow

have strayed from relationship and suggests an intimate connection between human and non-human relationship which have not been maintained away from Earth.

Temar's World Is Not a Home

The conditions that force the narrator's sister Temar to escape from Fallow are revealed as Agar comes to terms with the planet as a place that facilitates the greatest Mennonite experiment in separatist violence. The epigraph for Temar's section—"This world is not my home"—underscores a relation which makes a parallel of Fallow and Earth and Earth and Heaven; the former places both temporary residences for the religious adherent whose faith attests that believers will eventually gain a true home elsewhere. But Temar knows Fallow in a way that other members of her family do not. Through her work at the castle—the mysterious hub which houses the technology which makes Fallow habitable, the machinery that the low-tech agrarian residents ignore—the mythologies that sustain others are revealed to Temar as hollow or even hypocritical. Following the "Rule of Mary" (249) so as to not reveal the mystery by which they live, the community maintains the guise of a simple lifestyle that Temar knows does not reflect the truth of life on Fallow.

It's unclear what happens to Temar after she rescues the Earthman from the castle and leaves Fallow with him. Temar's family grieve her transgression and hold a funeral for her, an action which could be interpreted as an act of shunning the severity of which matches the gravity of Temar's behaviour, interpreted by the community as anti-social. Holding a funeral for a family member who may not be dead indicates that the community remains locked into social structures that do not respond to the human lives that exist within those structures. But Temar's flight is also a kind of resurrection which works to dispel the quiet but violent illusion of Fallow, leaving Agar with the knowledge that she lives in perpetual exile ensured by the harmful silences of her community. As Agar says at the end of the story, "There is a land flowing with milk and honey . . . and we will never go there" (261). This final statement reconnects the Biblical paradise with Earth and in so doing removes Fallow from the spiritual relationship the Mennonites assumed would follow them to another planet. But the questions of Temar's survival and continued resistance, and Agar's efforts to document the horrors of Fallow and therefore force her people to reckon with them remain unanswered points of generative possibility.

Conclusion

Why is an examination of Mennonite culture and the speculative fiction that critiques that culture important to non-Mennonites? Those of us who value peace and resistance as political positions and are concerned about settler attitudes to the land in a time of immense ecological change can look to the ways both pacifism and resistance become internalized and institutionalized. But Mennonite speculative fiction also offers a way forward from that somewhat static position through works like Samatar's "Fallow," works which use speculative forms to interrogate the connections between social structures and the human beings that live within them and in the space find a way toward resistance, resiliency, and growth.

Works Cited

Bender, Harold S. "The Anabaptist Vision." *Church History*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1944, pp. 3–24. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3161001.

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, National Council of the Churches of Christ, 1989.

Brackett, Leigh. *The Long Tomorrow*. Ace, 1962.

Brandt, Di. "je jelieda, je vechieda: Canadian Mennonite Alteridentification." *Canada in the Sign of Migration and Trans-Culturalism*, edited by Klaus-Dieter Ertler and Martin Lösching, Lang, 2004, pp. 153–82.

---. *So this is the world & here I am in it*. NeWest Press, 2007.

Gundy, Jeff. "Introduction: SF Special Issue." *CMW Journal*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2019. https://mennonitewriting.org/journal/11/1/introduction-sf-special-issue/.

Redekop, Magdalene. "Escape from the Bloody Theatre: The Making of Mennonite Stories." *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, vol. 11, 1993, pp. 9–22.

Samatar, Sofia. "Fallow." *Tender*, Small Beer Press, 2017, pp. 206–61.

---. *Tender*. Small Beer Press, 2017.

Shank Cruz, Daniel. "Mennonite Speculative Fiction as Political Theology." *Political Theology*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2021, pp. 211–27, https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2021.1905332.

Swartley, André. "A Case for Mennonite Horror." *CMW Journal*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2019. https://mennonitewriting.org/journal/11/1/case-mennonite-horror/.

Zacharias, Robert. "'What else have we to remember?': Mennonite Canadian Literature and the Strains of Diaspora." *Embracing Otherness: Canadian Minority Discourses in Transcultural Perspective*, edited by Eugenia Sojka and Tomasz Sikora, Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2010, pp. 186–209.

Selena Middleton earned her PhD in English from McMaster University, where she works as a sessional instructor in the Faculty of Humanities. Her doctoral project, entitled "Green Cosmic Dreams: Utopia and Ecological Exile in Women's Exoplanetary Science Fiction" examined the development of the concept of exile in ecologically focused women's science fiction from 1960. Her research has appeared in *Foundation*, *Quaker Theology*, and in collections published by McFarland and Palgrave. She is also publisher and editor-in-chief at Stelliform Press, which she started in 2020 as an extension of her doctoral research, seeking to publish climate fiction focused on culture over technology. Stelliform Press has since published four critically acclaimed titles, two of which were nominated for awards, with five more titles planned. Under the name Eileen Gunnell Lee, Middleton has published short science fiction, fantasy, and horror stories in *Nightmare Magazine*, *Reckoning*, and *Escape Pod*, among others. She welcomes inquiries for collaborations both academic and creative in nature, and can be found on Twitter @eileenglee.