

University of Windsor

## Scholarship at UWindsor

---

Education Publications

Faculty of Education

---

5-31-2008

# Mennocostal Musings: Poetic Inquiry and Performance in Narrative Research

Natasha G. Wiebe  
*University of Windsor*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/educationpub>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Wiebe, Natasha G.. (2008). Mennocostal Musings: Poetic Inquiry and Performance in Narrative Research. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 9 (2).  
<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/educationpub/60>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty of Education at Scholarship at UWindsor. It has been accepted for inclusion in Education Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholarship at UWindsor. For more information, please contact [scholarship@uwindsor.ca](mailto:scholarship@uwindsor.ca).

## **Mennocostal Musings: Poetic Inquiry and Performance in Narrative Research**

*Natasha G. Wiebe*

**Key words:** arts-based research, autobiographical writing, Di Brandt, educational research, Canadian Mennonite literature, Miriam Toews, narrative inquiry, Pentecostal, performative research, poetic inquiry

**Abstract:** My narrative research investigates the writing of two critically-acclaimed Canadian Mennonite authors. My methods include interviews with the authors and narrative analysis of their works. I also use a less conventional method, that of writing poetry. Through writing poems about my "mennocostal" (Mennonite and Pentecostal) background, I am coming to new understandings of my self, my past experiences, and my writing-research practices. In turn, these insights help me better understand some experiences and writing practices of my research subjects, as well as what the scholarly literature says about such practices. I research how writing personal narratives can be an act of inquiry—how it can help the writer construct new understandings about her self and her topic. While studying how writing can be inquiry, I practice writing as inquiry. I also perform the poetic data from my research.

In this article, I perform some poems through [audio files](#) and give examples of how writing them is making me a better researcher. Along the way, I mention how participating in poetic performances as a listener and performer has helped shape my poetic inquiry and engendered new insights into my narrative research. I conclude by situating my poetic inquiry as performative research.

### **Table of Contents**

- [1. Writing Poetry as a Research Method](#)
- [2. An Example of Poetry as Inquiry: Revision Brings Insight](#)
- [3. A Second Example of Poetry as Inquiry: Coming to Know Through Style and Voice](#)
- [4. A Third Example of Poetry as Inquiry: Writing the Past becomes a Vehicle for Understanding](#)
- [5. A Final Example of Poetry as Inquiry: A Place to Experience Theory](#)
- [6. Poetry as Inquiry, Performance as Inquiry](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Appendix](#)

[References](#)

[Author](#)

[Citation](#)

## 1. Writing Poetry as a Research Method

"... I consider writing as a *method of inquiry*, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic. Although we usually think about writing as a mode of 'telling' about the social world, writing is not just a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project. Writing is also a way of 'knowing'—a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it." (RICHARDSON, 2000, p.923)

"[T]he poet *is* a human scientist. Where many human science researchers focus on research questions and methods, conclusions and implications, as a poet I am often more intrigued with how language works to open up possibilities for constructing understanding." (LEGGO, 2004, p.30)

Canadian faculties of education are experiencing a surge of interest in the study of personal narrative, or life stories, particularly those told of teacher and student experience. One methodology used to study these stories is called *narrative inquiry*, which finds its roots in sociology, anthropology, sociolinguistics, and second-wave feminism, and which is "flourishing" in the social sciences (CHASE, 2005, p.651). To date, the analysis of the narratives collected or produced during narrative inquiry has received more scholarly attention than the process of actually *writing* these narratives (cf. CONLE, 2000). I am interested in how writing personal narratives or life stories can itself be an act of inquiry or research. My doctoral research examines the narratives of two acclaimed authors of Canadian Mennonite heritage—poet Di BRANDT and novelist Miriam TOEWS. I am investigating how the process of writing has helped my research subjects—the Mennonite narrators of Di BRANDT and Miriam Toews' books—interrogate and discover new insights about what it means to be Mennonite.<sup>1</sup> To help me in this exploration, I use several different research methods conventional to narrative inquiry in Education: investigating relevant scholarly literature, interviewing BRANDT and TOEWS about their writing, conducting narrative analysis of their works, discussing ideas and drafts with other narrative researchers, and keeping field notes (journals) in which I reflect on methodological, theoretical, and personal aspects of the research. Another one of my research methods is less conventional; it is writing storied poems about experiences from my Mennonite and Pentecostal background that are similar to those described in the writing of BRANDT and TOEWS. While I suspect I have not yet reached the midpoint of this process, it has already deepened my insight into the literary form, themes,

---

1 For what is meant by Canadian Mennonite, please see [Appendix](#).

and experiences described in BRANDT and TOEWS' writing. My "mennocostal method" is also giving me an experiential understanding of the scholarly literature that I am reading to set the context for my research. I am experiencing how writing autobiographical poems is an important personal commitment through which I can work through a changing sense of self and reinterpret past experiences (cf. BRUNER, 2004). I am also learning how to shape and use the process of writing autobiographical poems as part of a larger critical exploration that raises new perspectives about the Canadian Mennonite narratives that I am studying. [1]

How did I get to the point of using autobiographical poetry as a research method? My previous studies in English Language & Literature and in Education, and my career as an instructional designer, have affirmed for me that connecting new knowledge to what I already know can help me learn and retain this new knowledge (a constructivist view of learning). They also convinced me that writing is one way to make such connections; it is a means of learning and discovery. I first consciously encountered these ideas in an undergraduate composition course where the professor introduced the class to the course journal. At his invitation, I wrote in my journal about what I was reading for my courses, the questions these readings raised for me, and how what I was reading related to my life experiences and to what I was learning in my courses. Through writing, I "constructed" my own understanding of course content; I discovered my own ideas and found connections between them and the curriculum. I *thought* in writing. I solved problems, answered questions, recognized patterns, and experienced "eureka" moments. One benefit of journaling was that when a research paper was due, it often took less time to find a topic or draft an outline, because I could find a focus in the recurring themes of my journal entries. Much of the raw material for a paper, or least its inspiration, was already there, implicit or explicit within my written questions and observations. [2]

I continued the practice of keeping course journals during my graduate courses (and I am using journals as part of my dissertation research). Over time, some entries in my assigned course journals began to turn into poems. This was partly because I had already been writing poetry privately, and I wanted the chance to make it public. Also, I had encountered readings in my doctoral courses in Education that suggested that storied poems could be considered research data or field texts, and/or that writing storied poems could be considered a research method (e.g., CLANDININ & CONNELLY, 2000; RICHARDSON, 2000; CAHNMANN, 2003). In addition, I met John GUINEY YALLOP, a fellow doctoral candidate who introduced me to our now mutual advisor Dr. Cornelia HOOGLAND. Both John and Cornelia are poets who use poetry in their arts-based research. Cornelia is an award-winning poet and scholar who is known internationally for her artistic and scholarly work (e.g., HOOGLAND, 2004). John writes poetry as research (e.g., GUINEY YALLOP, 2005). His poetic performance at an educational studies conference was the first I had encountered in an academic context, and it encouraged me to try writing poetry as part of my course assignments. My poetic and performative research finds its genesis, in part, in the poetic and performative research of others. [3]

I began to call some poems I wrote, "mennocostal"—a light-hearted phrase that emerged from a slip of the tongue during a conversation with John—a phrase that brings together two spiritual and cultural traditions that have helped shape who I am and which continue to have an impact on my life through my writing-research. Another impetus for my mennocostal poems was the writing of Di BRANDT and Miriam TOEWS, the two Canadian Mennonite writers whose work I am studying. Some experiences described in their poetry, essays (BRANDT) and novels (TOEWS) remind me of my Mennonite relatives and their family dynamic and stories, as well as my upbringing in the Protestant Christian denomination called the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada. BRANDT and TOEWS' writing moved me to try to express my own experiences in writing. My advisor and I had the sense that these storied poems would form part of my dissertation, but it was only over time that a possible place suggested itself, and it continues to evolve as I write my way around and through my dissertation. Through reading the scholarly literature, through discussing my work with others, and through participating in performances of my own and others' poetry, I began to see how my mennocostal poetry is inquiry, how writing poetry is a research method. I am recognizing how poetry helps me to analyze the writing of BRANDT and TOEWS; to find connections among their texts and between their texts and those of others; to find new meaning in the experiences that they describe and in my own similar experiences. I first consciously learned how to think critically in writing through the uncensored reflections or "free writing" of my course journals. Now, through writing and performing storied poems, I am learning how to think critically through autobiographical writing and to incorporate this process as one of several research methods in my doctoral research. In the remainder of this article, I will give four examples of my mennocostal poems and describe how writing each has already contributed to my investigation of the Mennonite narratives of BRANDT and TOEWS. Along the way, I will allude to performances of these poems that have prompted new interpretations and helped to shape the place of poetic inquiry within my larger narrative research project. I will conclude with some thoughts on how my poetic inquiry is also performative research. [4]

## **2. An Example of Poetry as Inquiry: Revision Brings Insight**

As I mentioned earlier, the first poet I met who located his work as educational research is my fellow doctoral candidate, John GUINEY YALLOP. The first time I heard John perform, he read a poem that brought together sex and religion, the sacred and profane, with such impact that in the silence that followed one woman gasped audibly (GUINEY YALLOP, 2004). (And then, John reminds me, someone clapped.) I remember being moved by the poem, but I was also taken aback; I didn't understand why John wrote and performed it. I knew he did so for reasons other than to simply shock his audience, but these reasons were elusive. I had a similar response while reading some of the "missionary position" poems published by Di BRANDT (1987), a Canadian Mennonite writer whose work I am studying. The first poem in this collection describes having sex with Jesus. I wondered whether BRANDT wrote the poem to shake up her conservative Mennonite home community; whether it was an act of rebellion for the sake of being rebellious. Through the scholarly literature (e.g., REIMER, 1993), I came to

understand that another possible reading of the poem is that BRANDT is satirizing a belief that the Bible should be read literally; a view that is shared by conservative Mennonites and the Pentecostals among whom I was raised. The Bible suggests that the church is the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:24-27; 2 Corinthians 11:2; Revelation 19:7-9), and BRANDT literalizes this metaphor in her poem. Lines like "let me tell you what it's like / having God for a father & Jesus / for a lover" and "well Jesus ... / he's a good enough lay / it's just that he prefers miracles / to fishing" (BRANDT, 1987, p.28) can shock the reader into realizing the biblical image of Jesus as the bridegroom is just a metaphor and is not to be read literally. [5]

Through writing storied poems about my Pentecostal experiences, I began to see similar expressions of sexuality embedded in Pentecostal discourse; things that weren't talked about in my church community, but which I thought were there, under the surface. One day I looked at a draft of my poem, "mennocostal 2: filled with the spirit" (below), scratched out several lines that didn't seem to belong, and sat back, surprised at what remained—lines that suggested that the Holy Spirit was not just a member of the Trinity, but *the* member. I had never considered this idea before, and it is an idea with which most of my former Pentecostal friends and acquaintances, and my Mennonite relatives, would likely be uncomfortable. Writing in response to BRANDT's missionary position poems helped prompt my reconstruction of the Holy Spirit as phallus. In turn, as my poetry constructed sexual imagery from Pentecostal discourse, I came to appreciate more deeply why BRANDT has described her early poetry as "transgressive" (1996, pp.18-23) and the risk she took in writing about religion and sexuality within her conservative Mennonite home community, a community that, she says, later excommunicated her for writing poetry (2006, pp.48-49). [6]

Incidentally, while preparing for a poetic performance that evolved into this article (WIEBE & GUINEY YALLOP, 2007), I wrote my way toward understanding that one way of interpreting some of John's poems about sex and religion is that they position the physical act of love between two men as a sacrament.<sup>2</sup>

2 John GUINEY YALLOP responds: "For my PhD dissertation, I am writing poetry to explore my own experiences growing up as a Roman Catholic and my experiences as an out gay elementary school educator. Through writing my own poetry for my doctoral research, I, in an autoethnographic, queer, arts-informed study, take a journey, and I create a space for the reader to take a journey, through my own emotional landscape. For me, poetry is the methodology, the method, and the representation of this research. The performance of my poetry has become a part of my ongoing research and has helped me better understand what my research might mean for others. Shortly after I performed my work at the conference that Natasha attended (GUINEY YALLOP, 2004), I was present at what Natasha describes as her first public reading of her poetry. While I do not recall the specific poem, I do recall what I believed to be Natasha's excitement and trepidation—emotions I was very familiar with. Natasha's generous comments about my work and the role it might have played in her own coming to poetry—in particular, to poetry as inquiry—reminded me how important it was to share my work by performing it and by allowing audiences to engage with it—whether that be through comments, questions, applause, or even gasps. That my work, my poetry, had become part of someone else's journey to writing, and to the public performance of that writing, moved me. I am always honoured (and humbled) when Natasha makes connections between my work and the writing of Di Brandt. This is the wonderful gift of giving one's poetry in a performance, or in a written form; listeners or readers bring their own experiences and understandings to the work and they make of it something more than the work is by itself. The other side of that, of course, is that the work also makes of the listener or reader something they were not prior to having heard or read the work. Both the listener or the reader and the work are transformed by

mennocostal 2: filled with the spirit

*come holy spirit i need you come sweet spirit i pray*  
(pentecostal song)

our church was pentecostal so we spoke in tongues the rhythmic patter of our very own prayer languages speaking in tongues was a rite of passage like having sex for the first time (but we didn't do that until we were married) i got mine when i was only eight my sister took longer one day we surrounded her and laid our hands on her and prayed in tongues as loud as we could so the holy spirit could find her and get inside and she finally started to speak in tongues and the angels rejoiced but she later said she made it up to get us off her case that's my sister she didn't mean it she's always trying to shock. [7]

### 3. A Second Example of Poetry as Inquiry: Coming to Know Through Style and Voice

One of my endeavors in this article is to illustrate how writing poetry is making me a better researcher of the writing of my research subjects, the Mennonite narrators of BRANDT and TOEWS' books. Accordingly, I would like to describe how writing "mennocostal 2: filled with the spirit" (above) and "mennocostal 1: singing in tongues" (below), helped give me insight into some stylistic choices made by BRANDT and TOEWS. Like "mennocostal 1" and "mennocostal 2," a number of BRANDT's early poems (1987) are also without punctuation and use run-on sentences. They create the sense that words are spilling onto the page after being held back for much too long, which is fitting given that one of BRANDT's themes is that of breaking silence in writing (WIEBE, 2008a). Initially, I resisted using a similar poetic style because I didn't want to copy BRANDT. But I found that the stream-of-consciousness style evokes the sound and feel of speaking in tongues, which is described in "mennocostal 1" and "mennocostal 2" (especially when you read them silently because then you don't have to pause to take a breath). The style also approximates a young person's voice. While preparing for the first performance of my mennocostal poems (WIEBE, 2007a), I realized that I was more comfortable using a youthful voice to examine my Pentecostal experiences because I wanted to respect my heritage as much as I wanted to examine it critically (and so I was gratified when, at a recent performance, several listeners expressed appreciation for the respectfulness and loving seriousness" of my poetry). I recognized that I was gentling any criticisms by describing my Pentecostal experiences through the innocent eyes of a young

---

the coming together. Perhaps that, for me, best describes what has happened over these few years of getting to know Natasha through poetry. We have responded to each other's writing. We have edited each other's poems. We have performed our work together. Our work has changed through those meetings and those performances. We, too, I believe, have been transformed—as researchers and, in case we forget what researchers are, as human beings."

person and that this literary strategy also made people more receptive to these criticisms. I began to wonder whether the youthful narration of *A Complicated Kindness* (TOEWS, 2004) is one reason why, according to TOEWS, the novel has received more positive than negative responses from the Canadian Mennonite community than did BRANDT's early writing (WIEBE, 2008a). Like BRANDT's "Mennonite" poems, TOEWS' novel criticizes Mennonite fundamentalism and hypocrisy, but it does so with humor and through a teenager's eyes. It sugar-coats the pill that it offers, something that BRANDT's poetry tends not to do.

mennocostal 1: singing in tongues

every summer my family traveled to a revival meeting in mennonite country and my sister and me ran through the gravel parking lot and pointed at cars painted black and squealed when we saw horses and buggies standing near the door inside we played *where's menno* the women were easy to find because they wore print dresses like laura ingalls and we counted their hairnets during the sermons except those by our favorite speaker mr yutzi he used to be mennonite like dad was once in fact mr yutzi used to be *amish* he must have been really old fashioned sometimes during the singing he would start to dance a little hop hop that charged the crowd and my sister and me danced with him and mom too but dad kept his eyes closed and talked to jesus who lived in his heart

best of all was the singing in tongues back home we didn't sing in tongues we talked in them speaking in tongues was a gift from god and in our church you got your prayer language like you got your moustache or period but if you were slow you didn't have to worry because we had starter sentences to help you let go and let god (*sell me a hyundai he bought a bow tie say them a few times and you were off*) speaking in tongues was noisy like altar calls when we rushed forward after sunday night service to scrub sin with tears and glossolalia and like tongues&interpretation when mr lear wailed a message from the holy ghost in *gullamashundalla* his face ripening like a tomato and his arms stretched and flapping like kite strings in the wind (and mom translated in english *thus saith the lord* and my sister and me didn't know where to look)

but singing in tongues was different you could tell it was coming when everything got real still (even the babies were quiet) it was that holy hushshhh when you could feel the spirit slide on by *ssssssshhhhhhhh* then a high voice would begin to sing like icicles in the sunlight and

willow leaves in the wind and soft ice cream in the dish the narnia voice would sing and mr yutzi would join it and mom and dad and my sister too and then we were a choir our voices *rising* and falling and *rising* and falling and *rising* and falling and i hear mom for a moment before she's swallowed by the sound and i hear dad and then he is gone i hear mr yutzi and my sister i hear everyone and no one and our voices are *rising* and falling and *rising* and falling and we're like my school-trip symphony but without a conductor and we're *crashing* and quiet *crashing* and quiet we're *crashing* and quiet and my skin my skin tingles because we sing parts from a blizzard's hymnbook we sing we sing we sing in a tuning orchestra's gooseflesh harmony. [8]

#### 4. A Third Example of Poetry as Inquiry: Writing the Past becomes a Vehicle for Understanding

To follow is "mennocostal ten commandments," a poem that is inspired by descriptions of religious legalism in TOEWS' novel, *A Complicated Kindness* (2004). TOEWS' narrator, the teenaged Nomi Nickel, offers several humorous descriptions of the rules in her Mennonite community and observes, "There were so many bizarre categories of things we couldn't do and things we could do and none of it has ever made any sense to me at all" (p.13). Nomi's lively examples of the do's and don'ts in her fundamentalist community brought back some memories of my childhood and early teenage years in a Pentecostal church, which I explored through writing "mennocostal ten commandments" (below). I discovered additional memories while writing the poem. I wasn't surprised when, at a poetic performance, some members of the audience commented on the sadness of the poem (WIEBE & GUINEY YALLOP, 2007). One listener, for example, mentioned that he sympathizes with the character of the father, who is trying so hard to do what he thinks is right, but meets resistance from his family at every turn. I was surprised by the joyfulness—the humor, good-natured naughtiness, and sense of having fun—that also emerged in the poem, and I am appreciative when listeners suggest that this is what appeals to them about my writing. ("Why did you ever leave?" asked one woman.) "mennocostal ten commandments" gives the sense that the narrator enjoys what one listener called her "crazy, beautiful" childhood despite its many restrictions. [9]

The audience's interpretation of "mennocostal ten commandments" as both happy and sad is similar to my interpretation of TOEWS' *A Complicated Kindness* as both affirmative and bleak. In fact, I am not sure which interpretation preceded the other. Did writing poetically about the constraints and richness of my upbringing help me to appreciate why Nomi calls her oppressive fundamentalist town, "Shitville," yet still finds it difficult to leave? Or did Nomi's comic voice, and her recognition of the positive aspects of Shitville (TOEWS, 2004, p.242), encourage me to explore the humor and joyful experiences of my own strict upbringing? Nomi gives examples of how some Mennonite neighbors show

kindness within a religious framework that emphasizes punishment over forgiveness, such as by leaving food beside an excommunicated woman who faints regularly outside of a grocery store, a woman with whom church leaders state they must have no contact (p.45). Did recognizing the tension between Christian love and legalism in Nomi's story influence me to (unconsciously) depict the father in "mennocostal ten commandments" as someone who tries to do what he thinks is right, even as the poem questions some of his (and others') decisions? Or did my listener's expression of sympathy for the father encourage me to recognize that Nomi, too, empathizes with some Mennonite neighbors even while experiencing some negative consequences of their fundamentalist beliefs? I'm not sure which came first. The processes of reading Nomi's fictional life story and of writing and performing my own storied poems have become intertwined; they are overlapping and recursive rather than linear and chronological. In turn, these processes are working together with my other research methods to inform my narrative analysis of *A Complicated Kindness* (e.g., WIEBE, 2008b).

mennocostal ten commandments

1) thou shalt not celebrate hallowe'en for it is satan's holiday and a festival of witches

the day after my sister and me used to beg candy from  
our friends at school but we had to be careful who  
we hit up and how often or they would get mad  
our church had parties where we could dress up like  
bible characters and my sister wanted to go as the holy ghost  
but my parents said no because the parties were still on  
hallowe'en and god should have his own holiday

2) thou shalt not take up toothpaste made by procter and gamble for it is bedecked  
with a satanic symbol nor employ magic baking powder for magic is an  
abomination to the lord

i threw out my narnia books because they were full of witches  
(what was c s lewis thinking wasn't he a christian)  
once my babysitter gave me *the hobbit* which was supposed to  
be written by a christian but it had witches in it too  
so i threw it out and when she asked to borrow it i said it was lost

- 3) thou shalt not behold horror movies on television lest you become possessed by demons

in the summertime we had drive-in movies in the church parking lot  
and we watched the *thief in the night* series about the rapture and  
being left behind and one night i was scared silly after i was mean to  
my babysitter because i couldn't hear her downstairs and i thought  
jesus had come back for all good christians and left me behind

- 4) thou shalt not revel in the darkness of movie theatres

once a visiting pastor did an expose of *ET the extra-terrestrial* with  
lots of slides and our church was shocked that steven spielberg  
dared to make ET a christ figure who died and was resurrected  
and went home to heaven (but we still ate reese's pieces)

- 5) thou shalt not dress in blue jeans for they are a symbol of teenage rebellion

my sister and me said but dad it's not fair even the pastor wears them  
and he said all day long i teach teenagers in blue jeans  
but he gave in when his favourite evangelist stayed at our house  
and told him to relax

- 6) thou shalt not pierce your ears and adorn them with gold rings like the heathen

my sister and me said but dad your mom had pierced ears and  
she was *mennonite* and mom said the girls have you there dear  
so my oma who used to be a doctor froze our ear lobes and  
poked them with a syringe and we wore really small gold studs

- 7) thou shalt not drink wine or beer for it will bite you like a serpent and sting you like  
an adder

every year at church camp we'd rush the altar after service  
and cry and pray and hug and sway and  
once my friends had to help me walk back to our cabin  
and i broke away and danced around them laughing

8) thou shalt not attend school dances which incite fornication

my sister and me were the best girl skaters at christian roller skating  
but couples-skate made our stomachs squirm  
what if we were asked by that weird kid from the united church  
we'd have to skate with him to show god's love

9) thou shalt not listen to rock music which is the devil's music and is backward  
masked with his messages

christian metal was the most fun to skate to and we'd show off  
for the baptist boy my sister liked and the italian pentecostals  
who thought we were cute but praise night was boring because  
the music was slower and sometimes the parents came

10) thou shalt not divorce and remarry because by so doing you commit adultery

mr robinson couldn't teach sunday school because he was divorced  
but mr snipe was an elder and everybody knew he was messing around  
when dad tried to do something about it he got told off  
so we ended up at another church where the pastor made a man and  
a woman stand in front of everybody and repent for having an affair

we knew we were at the best church then. [10]

## 5. A Final Example of Poetry as Inquiry: A Place to Experience Theory

Earlier, I explained that my poetry explores themes and experiences from my "mennocostal" (Mennonite and Pentecostal) background that are similar to those described in the writing of BRANDT and TOEWS. By helping me to gain a better understanding of my own experiences, these poems are deepening my insight into the stories told by BRANDT's and TOEWS' narrators. Another way that writing storied poems is making me a better researcher is by grounding what I'm reading in the scholarly literature. Conventionally, the narratives that are studied by educational researchers are stories of life experiences (SCHWANDT, 2001; CHASE, 2005). When these life experiences are written down by the person who experienced them, the result may be called (among other things) "autobiographical writing." This is one reason that my work draws from the interdisciplinary field of life writing or autobiographical studies. Writing storied poems deepens my understanding of autobiographical theory and criticism by giving me an opportunity to move beyond reading *about* autobiographical writing to actually *doing* it. As a result, I am experiencing the characteristics of autobiographical writing as these are described in the scholarly literature. For

example, the literature suggests that autobiographical writing blends fiction and historical fact (e.g., SMITH & WATSON, 2001; BUSS, 2002). That is, autobiographical writing not only borrows the conventions of literary fiction (e.g., plot, character, metaphor) when retelling past experiences, but it also includes details that are based on the writer's imagination rather than the biographical particulars of her life. Writing storied poems has helped me to see firsthand how some details of autobiographical writing can be truthful, can contain truth, even though these same details may not be historically, or literally, true. For example, "mennocostal 1" describes singing in tongues at an annual charismatic Mennonite conference, an event which I attended a number of times as a child and preteen. The first stanza describes the sister and narrator (my "autobiographical self" or persona) playing "Where's Menno?" and counting the hairnets of the Mennonite women at the conference. I don't recall my sister and I ever doing this. Yet, counting hairnets is something that would not have been out of character for us; the activity is "true" to, or consistent with, our childhood selves. Moreover, including the detail in the poem helps to convey not only our youth, but also helps to evoke the feeling of excitement and wonder that we felt on those occasions, a feeling which is essential for the success of the poem. Writing "mennocostal 1" and other poems is helping me to understand at an experiential level how autobiographical writing uses the imagination to flesh out skeletal memories of the past and recreate their emotions, and how while some details of autobiographical writing may not be historically true, these details can still be emotionally true. [11]

Autobiographical writing, I am learning from the literature, can also lead to new understandings of the past (e.g., BUSS, 2002; BRUNER, 2004). For example, through writing the poem "altared states" (below), I constructed a masochistic theme from my past experience of the Pentecostal altar call, which was something I had never considered before. Like "mennocostal 1," this poem also contains some fiction that is nonetheless truthful, such as when the sister remains in her pew and stares at the narrator, rather than joining the narrator and others in their passionate prayers. I do not have a specific memory of my sister watching me on the many occasions that I prayed at the altar. Yet, she and I have discussed how this detail is "true" to her childhood self as someone who embraced the Pentecostal Christian experience somewhat less enthusiastically than I. The image also helps to convey a larger truth to the audience—that at some point during a "good" Pentecostal altar call (at least as I experienced it), the person praying would be transported to the point that she would lose any initial self-consciousness, including the awareness of being observed by others. [12]

I am continuing to explore "autobiographical truth" (SMITH & WATSON, 2001, pp.12-13) and other characteristics of autobiographical writing through my ongoing reading of the scholarly literature. Now that I am writing autobiographically, these sometimes abstract and sophisticated discussions are becoming more accessible. My autobiographical poems are becoming a laboratory in which I am testing the claims and observations that other scholars make about writing autobiographically. In turn, my ongoing poetic results are helping me to better understand how, for instance, Di BRANDT can call her

collected poetry and essays "life writing" (WIEBE, 2006), even though this writing includes obvious fictions, like the poems in which her literary self has sex with Jesus (1987, pp.28, 35). While these poems by BRANDT are not literally true, they are nonetheless autobiographically true in that they fit BRANDT's self-characterization as a rebellious Mennonite woman (which I explore in WIEBE, 2008c):

altared states

*just as i am, and waiting not  
to rid my soul of one dark blot  
to thee whose blood can cleanse each spot  
o lamb of god, i come, i come*

after sunday night service if it's a good night the pastor calls you to the altar to rededicate yourself to god because sometimes being in the world but not of the world gets hard and your soul gets dirty and you need to scrub it clean under the shower stream of your tears and with the washcloth of your prayers and sometimes you rush to the front because you can't wait to be clean again and other times you have to be dragged with verse after verse of *just as i am* and you kneel down facing the pews and it feels weird to have grown-ups whose kids you played with earlier that day kneeling on either side of you because they maybe told you off for making too much noise when you were playing in their basement between services but they had sinned during the week too and here they were sniffing into the pew next to you and it makes you feel good that you're just as full of sin as they are and that god thinks your sin is just as bad as theirs

it takes some time to get warmed up to where you find a flow  
first you pray in your head or so quietly that only the pew can hear  
then you say a few words out loud

*thank you jesus  
hallelujah and if you're really old  
sweet holy spirit*

next you begin to say these words one after another

*thank you jesus hallelujah sweet holy spirit  
thank you jesus hallelujah sweet holy spirit  
thank you jesus hallelujah thank you jesus hallelujah thank you  
jesus hallelu*

and if it's a *really* good night you start speaking in tongues and you might even cry or raise your arms in the air because god likes that and during a good altar call mr lear gets worked up and begins to wail just like when my sister and me get spanked but he's feeling the fire of the spirit and not a burn on the bum and soon everyone begins to pray as loud as he does and your tongues-talk turns into a chant like you imagine the africans do around their fires in the bush before the missionaries save them and back and forth mr lear's *shundais* dance with your *lallamatikas* back and forth you go and your body begins to rock with the rhythm of your talk and maybe you fall back from the power of the spirit and you forget that your sister is sitting in a pew staring at you and you feel tingly like after a morning swim at grandpa's cottage and a grown-up might walk over and place their hands on your head or shoulder and pray in tongues and if they pray in english it's really special because you can understand what they're saying and you can feel the crackling coming down their arms and it's like sticking your finger in the bathroom plug when you were little except it doesn't hurt it doesn't hurt at all. [13]

## 6. Poetry as Inquiry, Performance as Inquiry

So far, I have suggested several ways that writing my storied poems is a research method. Throughout these examples, I have alluded to various performances of my poems or to the performances of others. I have suggested how poetic performance has helped me to situate my poetry as scholarly research (Section 1) and affirmed some directions taken in my writing (Section 3). I would like to conclude by focusing on the performative aspect of my poetic inquiry, beginning with how audience response has encouraged me to approach my poems, and my poetic method, in different ways. [14]

My first poetic performance at an academic conference was followed by silence, and the written feedback I later received suggested that some audience members were uncertain about how the poetry was scholarly research (or the implications that my poetic inquiry had for their own research or teaching practice). Some narrative researchers doing similar work prefer to leave interpretation and analysis to their audience, in part "to disrupt the politics of traditional research relationships, traditional forms of representation, and traditional social science orientations to audiences" (CHASE, 2005, p.660). That being said, the response that followed my first performance—as well my own experiences of being a moved, but bemused, audience member—convinced me that, in addition to performing my poems, I should also provide context for my poetic method that is customized for my particular audience (which I have tried to do in Section 1), at least until poetic research practices become more mainstream. [15]

The interaction with audience members after most performances has helped me to "see other meanings that might lead to further retelling" (CLANDININ & CONNELLY, 2000, p.60; e.g., see sections 3 and 4). On one occasion, audience response helped to dissolve writer's block and inspire new poems. Audience response is also clarifying the role that poetry plays in my overall research (this article, for instance, finds its roots in three different performances). Poetic performance and audience response have also prompted new ways of looking at the process of writing and performing my poetry. For instance, although as a musician I have often performed, I had not previously considered bringing my performative self to my research. Yet, during some poetic performances, I have felt a connection to my audience—a sense that they are listening intently and are feeling the emotion of the poem with me—which is similar to what I have often experienced during my musical performances. I have also found that during a poetic performance, I am unconsciously responding to the same inner voice that I listen to as a musician—that intuitive sense honed over years of live musical performance which suggests when to use more volume, and when to use less; when to meet someone's eyes and when to look away; when to pause for effect and when to speed up. (As I write now, I realize that this inner voice/sense is represented by the "unseen conductor" in "mennocostal 1: singing in tongues.") After a recent poetic performance, one listener, a professor of music, asked whether she could set some of my poetry to music. The conversation has encouraged me to think about how I could move beyond citing song and hymn lyrics in my poems (like I do at the beginning of "mennocostal 2" and "altared states") to writing poetry that interweaves lyrics from different hymns and songs. How could I then sing and/or play piano as part of the performance of these poems? What new layers of meaning would the music bring? [16]

My poetic inquiry is performative research in that it is performed to an audience, and because it is reshaped as a result of interaction with that audience (cf. CHASE, 2005, p.657). Moreover, my poetic inquiry is performative because it is giving me the opportunity to construct and "perform" my self in different ways. Before beginning to write my mennocostal poems and perform them in academic venues, I would not have called myself a poet or arts-based educational researcher. Moreover, as someone who was raised outside of a Mennonite community and congregation, it was meaningful to recently be described—with others and in the context of an upcoming poetic performance (WIEBE, 2007b)—as a "Mennonite writer" (CONRAD GREBEL UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, 2007). Through writing storied poems, and performing them to and with others, I am experiencing a process similar to the one that my research suggests is experienced by BRANDT's and TOEWS' narrators (e.g., WIEBE, 2008b, 2008c)—the process of reshaping one's sense of self through writing about life experiences. Norman DENZIN observes that "A good performance text must be more than cathartic—it must be political, moving people to action, reflection or both" (2003, p.xi). I have come to understand that my poems are performative texts not only because they can be performed to an audience, but also because writing and performing them moves me to think more deeply or differently about my self and my past, and my writing-research practices. [17]

## Acknowledgments

This research has received support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada; the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities; and The University of Western Ontario.

Previous versions of "mennocostal 1: singing in tongues" and "mennocostal 2: filled with the spirit" were published in *Rhubarb: The Magazine of New Mennonite Art and Writing*, 13, 39-40.

## Appendix 1

Who are the Canadian Mennonites? I thought I should answer this question for those readers who may be unfamiliar with this group. I contemplated providing a short definition of "Mennonite," but quickly realized that this would be an inadequate way to describe such a diverse community (especially for a narrative researcher who values rich description). After all, the Canadian Mennonites form over 25 different religious groups (REIMER, 1990, p.52) of primarily "Swiss" or "Russian" heritage; an additional and unknown number identify as Mennonite because of descent, not spirituality; and Canadians from other ethnic backgrounds have joined Mennonite congregations. While "Mennonite" may call to mind a quiet people who dress in black and drive horses and buggies to church and to the market where they sell their homegrown and homemade wares, the majority of Canadian Mennonites are now urban professionals (REGEHR, 1996; DRIEDGER, 2000) rather than farmers. Given this diversity, I have decided to share two perspectives on the contemporary Canadian Mennonites from the narratives that I am investigating and reference in my article. The authors, Di BRANDT and Miriam TOEWS, were raised in different Russian Mennonite communities in Manitoba. Enjoy.

"We're Mennonites. As far as I know, we are the most embarrassing sub-sect of people to belong to if you're a teenager. Five hundred years ago in Europe a man named Menno Simons set off to do his own peculiar religious thing and he and his followers were beaten up and killed or forced to conform all over Holland, Poland and Russia until they, at least some of them, finally landed right here where I sit ... . We are supposed to be cheerfully yearning for death and in the meantime, until that blessed day, our lives are meant to be facsimiles of death or at least the dying process.

A Mennonite telephone survey might consist of questions like, would you prefer to live or die a cruel death, and if you answer 'live' the Menno doing the survey hangs up on you. Imagine the least well-adjusted kin in your school starting a breakaway clique of people whose manifesto includes a ban on the media, dancing, smoking, temperate climates, movies, drinking, rock 'n' roll, having sex for fun, swimming, make-up, jewellery, playing pool, going to cities, or staying up past nine o'clock. That was Menno all over. Thanks a lot, Menno." (TOEWS, 2004, p.5)

"How strange to think of my Dutch German Mennonite heritage filtered through the lens of this landscape, this past. The great statues of Friedrich the Great on Unter

den Linden were built around the time my people had to leave yet another poverty stricken landscape, cultivated from bare steppes into rugged farmland by their strong hands, to begin all over again on the Canadian prairies. One exile after another. Northern Germany, Prussia/Poland, Ukraine. How did they manage to preserve all these northern German customs so perfectly? The *Pflaumenkuchen* recipes, the creamy *Gurkensalat*, the ancient inflections of *Plautdietsch*, our mothertongue. I am overwhelmed by the thought of my ancestors' stubborn faithfulness, their anarchistic traditionalism, that crazy beautiful heritage, still flourishing in the old ways in the Canadian prairies, surrounded by Indian history, the resonance of drumbeats on buffalo hide, the modern world of machinery and chemicals gradually moving in." (BRANDT, 2003, p.16)

## References

- Brandt, Di (1987). *questions i asked my mother*. Winnipeg, MB: Turnstone Press.
- Brandt, Di (1996). *Dancing naked: Narrative strategies for writing across centuries*. Stratford, ON: The Mercury Press.
- Brandt, Di (2003). From *Berlin Notes*. *Prairie Fire: A Canadian Magazine of New Writing*, 24(3), 8-19.
- Brandt, Di (2006). Afterword: You pray for the rare flower to appear. In Di Brandt & Tanis MacDonald (Eds.), *Speaking of power: The poetry of Di Brandt* (pp.47-53). Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Bruner, Jerome (2004). Life as narrative. *Social Research*, 71(3), 691-710.
- Buss, Helen M. (2002). *Repossessing the world: Reading memoirs by contemporary women*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Cahnmann, Melisa (2003). The craft, practice, and possibility of poetry in educational research. *Educational Researcher*. April, 29-36.
- Chase, Susan E. (2005). Narrative inquiry: Multiple lenses, approaches, voices. In Norman K. Denzin & Yvonna S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp.651-679). Thousand Oaks CA: Sage.
- Clandinin, D. Jean & Connelly, F. Michael (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc.
- Conle, Carole (2000). Thesis as narrative or "What is the inquiry in narrative inquiry?" *Curriculum Inquiry*, 30(2), 189-214.
- Conrad Grebel University College (2007). Special Ontario issue of *Rhubarb* launches at Grebel [Press release], [http://grebel.uwaterloo.ca/aboutgrebel/releases/2007\\_13\\_rhubarblaunch.shtml](http://grebel.uwaterloo.ca/aboutgrebel/releases/2007_13_rhubarblaunch.shtml) [Accessed: February 4, 2008].
- Denzin, Norman K. (2003). Preface. In Norman Denzin, *Performance ethnography: Critical pedagogy and the politics of culture* (pp.ix-xiv). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Driedger, Leo (2000). *Mennonites in the global village*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Guiney Yallop, John (2004). *Exploring an emotional landscape through poetry: Searching for the researcher's poetic voice and the poet's research methodology*. Performance at Joint PhD in Educational Studies Program Conference, Brock University, St. Catharines, ON, Canada.
- Guiney Yallop, John (2005). Exploring an emotional landscape: Becoming a researcher by reawakening the poet. *Brock Education*, 14(2), 132-144.
- Hoogland, Cornelia (2004). An aesthetics of language. *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies*, 2(2), 43-59.
- Leggo, Carl (2004). The curriculum of joy: Six poetic ruminations. *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies*, 2(2), 27-42.
- Regehr, Ted D. (1996). *Mennonites in Canada, 1939-1970: A people transformed* (Vol. 3). Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

- Reimer, Al (1993). *Mennonite literary voices: Past and present*. Newton, Kansas: Mennonite Press.
- Reimer, Margaret Loewen (1990). *One quilt many pieces: A reference guide to Mennonite groups in Canada* (3rd ed.). Waterloo, ON: Mennonite Publishing Service.
- Richardson, Laurel (2000). Writing: A method of inquiry. In Norman Denzin & Yvonna Lincoln (Eds.). *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp.923-948). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Schwandt, Thomas A. (2001). Narrative inquiry. In Thomas A. Schwandt, *Dictionary of qualitative inquiry* (p.171). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Smith, Sidonie & Watson, Julia (2001). *Reading autobiography: A guide for interpreting life narratives*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Toews, Miriam (2004). *A complicated kindness*. Toronto, ON: Knopf Canada.
- Wiebe, Natasha (2006). Interview with Di Brandt. *Prairie Fire Magazine: Review of Books*, [http://www.prairiefire.ca/interview\\_wiebe\\_brandt.html](http://www.prairiefire.ca/interview_wiebe_brandt.html) [Accessed: December 15, 2007]
- Wiebe, Natasha (2007a). *The mennocostal method: The transgressions and transformations of autobiographical poetic inquiry*. Paper presented at Inkshed 24, The University of Western Ontario, London, ON.
- Wiebe, Natasha (2007b). Four poems. Poetic performance given by invitation at the Celebrative Reading to Launch a Special Ontario Issue of *Rhubarb: A Magazine of New Mennonite Art and Writing*, Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo, ON.
- Wiebe, Natasha (2008a, in press). *A conversation with Miriam Toews*. *Conrad Grebel Review*.
- Wiebe, Natasha (2008b). "My school assignments have helped me to focus and organize some thoughts": Nomi Nickel and the restorying of her Canadian Mennonite world. Paper to be presented at *Narrative Matters*, Toronto, ON., May, 2008.
- Wiebe, Natasha (2008c, in press). Di Brandt's writing breaks Canadian Mennonite silence and reshapes cultural identity. In Mathias Schulze, James M. Skidmore, David G. John, Grit Liebscher & Sebastian Siebel-Achenbach (Eds.), *German diasporic experiences: Identity, migration, and loss*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Wiebe, Natasha & Guiney Yallop, John (2007). *Meeting in poetry: Educational research on the margins*. PhD Study Group, The Faculty of Education, The University of Western Ontario, London, ON.

## Author

Natasha G. WIEBE is a doctoral candidate at the Faculty of Education, The University of Western Ontario.

Contact:

Natasha Wiebe

Faculty of Education  
The University of Western Ontario  
1137 Western Rd.  
London, Ontario, Canada  
N6G 1G7

Tel.: +1 519 661 1111, ext. 88860

E-mail: [nwiebe@uwo.ca](mailto:nwiebe@uwo.ca)

URL: <http://natashagwiebe.googlepages.com>

## Citation

Wiebe, Natasha G. (2008). Mennocostal Musings: Poetic Inquiry and Performance in Narrative Research [17 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 9(2), Art. 42, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0802423>.