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#### Recommended Citation

Wiebe, Natasha G.. (2010). Miriam Toews' A Complicated Kindness: Restorying the Russian Mennonite Diaspora. *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 28, 33-54.  
<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/educationpub/58>

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# **Miriam Toews' *A Complicated Kindness*: Restorying the Russian Mennonite Diaspora**

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## **Introduction**

One theory in educational research holds that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world. (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 2)

The 2006 Mennonite/s Writing conference in Bluffton, Ohio was the first scholarly Mennonite event I attended. Given that I was raised outside a Mennonite community and congregation, it was also the largest gathering of Mennonites I had ever encountered in one place! At the time of the conference I was drafting a proposal to investigate some works of Canadian Mennonite literature for my doctoral dissertation in educational studies. So I found myself reading several commentaries written by scholars of Mennonite heritage, including Cornelius Dyck's *An Introduction to Mennonite History* (1981), Ted Regehr's *Mennonites in Canada 1939-1970* (1996), and Leo Driedger's *Mennonites in the Global Village* (2000). I had also begun to read my way through a list of

acclaimed literary works by writers who, I had discovered, shared my Russian Mennonite heritage. These works included Rudy Wiebe's *The Blue Mountains of China* (1970) and *Sweeter Than All the World* (2001); Sandra Birdsell's *The Russländer* (2001) and *Children of the Day* (2005); and Di Brandt's poem "What *de Englische*" (1996a) and her essays "Because because because" (1996b) and "From Berlin Notes" (2003). The aforementioned texts, and others, helped me to recognize that my Mennonite relatives' escape from the Ukraine in the years after the Russian Revolution was part of a larger Russian Mennonite diaspora; that is, it was part of four centuries of mass flight away from intolerance experienced first in Holland, then Prussia, and finally, Russia, until many of the Mennonites arrived in Canada in the 1870s and 1920s. Despite the prominence of the Russian Mennonite diaspora in the books I was reading, I was bemused by how often Mennonite/s Writing participants asked, "With a name like Natasha, you must be of Russian Mennonite descent, right? When did your family come over?" I was also moved by the stories they told, both in hallways and from the podium, of the circumstances surrounding their own families' migrations to Canada.

My conference and reading experiences helped me to recognize that the Russian Mennonite diaspora is a dominant narrative of the Canadian Mennonite scholarly and literary community. By this, I mean that scholars and writers of Russian Mennonite heritage often use the diaspora narrative to re-present community and personal histories and to establish their identities as Mennonites to themselves and others. In other words, the diaspora narrative is one of the "narrative models available for describing the course of a [Mennonite] life" (Bruner, 2004/1987, 694-695). The narrative helps us to understand what it means to be Mennonite and, by extension, it provides a framework "through which we act" (Lyotard, 1984, in Kamler, 2001, 57). As Laurel Richardson (1997) writes,

Participation in a culture includes participation in the narratives of that culture, a general understanding of the stock of meanings and their relationships to each other. The process of telling the story creates and supports a social world. Cultural stories provide exemplars of lives, heroes, villains, and fools as they are embedded in larger cultural and social frameworks, as well as stories about home, community, society, and humankind. Morality and cautionary tales instruct the young and control the adult. Stories of one's 'people' – as chosen or enslaved, conquerors or victims...affect morale, aspirations, and personal life chances. They are not "simply" stories but are narratives that have real consequences... (32)

To illustrate how a dominant narrative like the Russian Mennonite diaspora can shape the way we engage with the world, let me offer one example, among other possibilities, from the 2009 Mennonite/s Writing conference in Winnipeg. This example concerns Rudy Wiebe's decision to resign as editor of *The Mennonite Brethren Herald* during the controversy that surrounded the 1962 publication of his first novel *Peace Shall Destroy Many* – generally considered the first prominent Canadian Mennonite novel in English. In response to a discussion about the genesis of Mennonite literature in English, Wiebe said of his resignation, "I did the classic Mennonite thing – left and went to another country.... The traditional Mennonite method of handling controversy" (personal communication, October 2, 2009). Wiebe repeated this remark two days later, when the conference's literary bus tour stopped outside the office building where he had handed in his resignation. His comments suggest that he experienced the diaspora narrative both as a story to "live by" (Carter, 1993, 7) and as a way to make sense of past experience.

Given the prominence of the Russian Mennonite diaspora in Canadian Mennonite discourse, I wasn't surprised to find references to it in *A Complicated Kindness* (2004), Miriam Toews' critically-acclaimed and bestselling novel about a teenager's coming of age in a small Mennonite town in 1980s Canada. What I *did* find surprising was recognizing not one, but three interconnected stories of diaspora collapsed in the novel's pages. The first story is, of course, that of the historical Russian Mennonite diaspora. The second story is that of the Mennonite or greater Christian diaspora, by which I mean the good Christian's flight from this hard world for his or her heavenly home. The third diaspora story is that of Toews' narrator, Mennonite teenager Nomi Nickel. Nomi tells about the flight of her own family, not from the political upheaval surrounding the Russian Revolution, nor from the misery of this sinful world. Rather, Nomi's family flees the oppressive Christian fundamentalism of their contemporary Canadian Mennonite town. These three interrelated diaspora stories may be seen as forming a continuum within *A Complicated Kindness* as Nomi uses them to think more deeply about why all the members of her family have left her behind in East Village. As I will show, these stories usually lie in fragments in the novel, waiting to be pieced together by the attentive reader into the three separate stories which are different yet similar to each other, not unlike the separate panels of a triptych.

The aforementioned process of constructing new narratives from existing ones can be called *restorying*. Restorying is one way that narrative researchers and other scholars analyze the personal narratives (i.e., the general descriptions and stories of life experience) that form their sources of data (e.g., Creswell, 2007, 2008). I model one

particular approach to restorying in this article when I reconstruct the three diaspora stories interwoven in Nomi's personal narrative and explore how these stories are expressed through the structural elements of characterization, diction, conclusion, turning point, and narrative style. I call this approach *structural restorying*. However, restorying is more than an analytical approach implemented by narrative researchers. Restorying is also a practice that people routinely and often unconsciously perform when telling stories about past experiences to themselves and to others. Restorying is part of the process of constructing a personal narrative. As Jerome Bruner observes, our personal narratives are a "continuing interpretation and reinterpretation of our experience" (2004/1987, 692); our stories change as time passes and we modify them to fit new needs and circumstances (2003, 210). Richardson (1997) writes, "To make sense of the events in their lives, people reconstruct [their personal] biographies. The experience of (re)narrativizing, like the experience of biographical time itself, is open ended and polysemous, allowing different meanings and systems of meanings to emerge" (30-31). In other words, the autobiographical process of renarrativizing or restorying is one way that we interpret and reinterpret past encounters and events. As discussed earlier, the personal narratives that we tell and retell are often shaped by cultural narratives.

This article will explore how Toews' narrator Nomi Nickel restories her experiences with religious fundamentalism in her Mennonite town. To do so, the article will first explain how Nomi adapts the story of Mennonite flight from Russia to retell the Christian doctrine of eternal life. It will then explore how Nomi adapts the story of Christian flight to heaven to make sense of her family's flight from oppressive East Village. I call Nomi's approach *functional restorying* because it serves the function or purpose of helping her to better understand her family's departure.<sup>1</sup> Nomi's narrative includes many examples that demonstrate restorying of diaspora. Accordingly, to keep this analysis manageable, I have decided to focus on school examples wherever possible. I have done this for two reasons. First, I am a narrative researcher from the field of education, and so I am particularly interested in Nomi's experiences with her teachers. Second, Nomi tells her personal narrative for her English teacher Mr. Quiring, so it seems fitting to give their interactions some close attention. When school examples are inadequate for making an argument or coming to a conclusion, I have drawn from outside school discourse, such as Nomi's descriptions of her experiences with the town minister, her family, and her boyfriend. Throughout the discussion, I interweave references to scholarly literature from the interdisciplinary field of narrative research in order to show that, albeit grounded in fiction,

Nomi's restorying process echoes some theorizations about the personal narratives of people living in the "real world."

### **The First Diaspora Story: The Mennonite Flight from Russia**

My mom told [my older sister Tash] that we could have stayed in Russia and had our barns set on fire and our stomachs torn out....

I mean they left with next to nothing, my mom would say. Maybe a dozen buns. Or a few blankets. Most of them fled in the middle of the night. Okay, that's a cliché, Tash would say. People flee throughout the day as well. (Toews, 2004, 91)

Near the end of *A Complicated Kindness*, it appears that Nomi is not just narrating her experiences in East Village; rather, she is writing about them in an assignment for her English teacher Mr. Quiring.<sup>2</sup> The topic assigned by Mr. Quiring is "The Flight of Our People" (Toews, 2004, 243; see also Toews in Wiebe, 2008, 106) or the Russian Mennonite diaspora, a historical event to which this article has already given some attention. Early in her assignment, Nomi alludes to this diaspora:

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. (1) 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. Ironically, they named this place East Village, which, I have learned is the name of the area in New York City that I would most love to inhabit.... (2) 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 kid 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, 5, numbering added)

The above excerpt from Nomi's assignment tells one diaspora story, and hints at a second. The first story, that of the Russian Mennonite history of migration, is familiar to Nomi from conversations with elderly Mrs. Klippenstein about her childhood in Russia (163), as well as from her mother's stories "about the Mennonites in Russia fleeing in the middle of the night, scrambling madly to find a place, any place, where'd they'd be free" (148). Nomi begins her assignment by writing about this topic, but her attention is diverted to a second migration that is more meaningful to her as a teenager who lives not in the era of the Russian Revolution, but in a small Canadian Mennonite town in 1982 (100). This second migration is that of the good Mennonite's – or more generally the good Christian's – flight to heaven through death or the rapture.

### **The Second Diaspora Story: The Christian Flight to Heaven**

The only thing I needed to know was that we were all going to live forever, together, happily, in heaven with God, and without pain and sadness and sin. And in my town that is the deal. It's taken for granted. We've been hand-picked. We're on a fast track, singled out, and saved. (Toews, 2004, 17)

Some glad morning when this life is over, I'll fly away.  
To a home on God's celestial shore, I'll fly away. (A. E. Brumley)

The Christian story of migration to heaven can be pieced together from numerous examples within Nomi's assignment. These examples include the passage in which Nomi describes the Mennonites in East Village as "cheerfully yearning for death" until the "blessed day" when they die (Toews, 2004, 5). Why might the day of death be a blessed one? Nomi implies that it will be an escape from the "dying process" of this life, including the self-imposed misery of avoiding such sinful pleasures as "the media, dancing, [and] smoking" (5). Other parts of Nomi's assignment support this interpretation, such as her observation that she met her boyfriend "five months ago at a New Year's Eve party at Suicide Hill. Good Mennonites," she writes, "don't technically celebrate the arrival of yet another year of being imprisoned in this world. It's a frustrating night for them. But we weren't good Mennonites" (22). An alternative to death as an escape is the rapture, when Jesus will return to the earth to gather up all living Christians. Nomi



alludes to this future event several times, such as when she describes East Village “as a kind of no-frills bunker in which to live austere, shun wrongdoers and kill some time, and joy, before The Rapture” (48). In the Christian diaspora story, there are two routes of migration to heaven: either one’s spirit will fly there at the time of death, or one’s body will be “caught up...in the clouds, to meet the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:17) during the rapture.

Nomi once believed fervently in the story of the Christian diaspora or migration to heaven. In fact, when she was younger, Nomi was concerned that her older sister Tash, “who’d gone bad” (Toews, 2004, 144) was jeopardizing the family’s life together in the hereafter: “Why was Tash so intent on derailing our chances and sabotaging our plans to be together for goddamn ever,” Nomi asked, “and why the hell couldn’t my parents see what was happening and rein that girl in? We were supposed to stay together, it was clear to me. That was the function, the ultimate purpose, the entire premise for the existence of the Nickel Family. That we remained together for all eternity. And it was so doable” (17). In the Christian diaspora story, the protagonist is the person who goes to heaven, or the “good Mennonite” to whom Nomi refers (22), not the bad Mennonite like Tash. Promising heaven to good Mennonites is one way that the Christian diaspora story perpetuates East Village’s expectations for normative behaviour. “Cultural stories,” writes Richardson, “help maintain the status quo” (1997, 32). What is the status quo in East Village? In other words, what makes a good Mennonite? The good Mennonites of East Village, Nomi implies, are those who “live austere” and “kill joy” (Toews, 2004, 48) while still living on this earth. To live austere and kill joy, a conversation with Nomi’s typing teacher suggests, a good Mennonite doesn’t do such things as smoke, drink, “writh[e] on a dance floor to the Rolling Stones,” do drugs, be promiscuous, or describe living forever as “creepy” (48-49). A good Mennonite doesn’t work on Sunday, as can be inferred from Mr. Quiring telling Nomi to remind her father that mowing the lawn on Sunday is against the law (108). Moreover, a good Mennonite doesn’t go to war, as is suggested by Mr. Petkau’s rejection of Nomi’s assignment that criticizes some of East Village’s conscientious objectors (69). The town minister evidently comes to view Nomi as a bad Mennonite for reasons such as failing to attend church, committing arson, and wandering the town dressed immodestly in a bikini top, cut-off shorts, and police boots, complete with shaved head and lots of eye make-up (cf. 235 to 208).

A good Mennonite also “shun[s] wrongdoers” (Toews, 2004, 48). As a result of Nomi’s aforementioned bad behaviour, the town minister visits Nomi and her father to tell them that Nomi has been shunned or excommunicated by the East Village church (235). Some years before,



her mother had also been shunned, seemingly for an angry outburst in which she “stoned her brother’s [the minister’s] house,” “screamed profanities,” and demanded that he apologize to Nomi and tell her that his stories of hell, which were causing Nomi nightmares, were “not true” but just stories (171-173). In East Village where, Nomi says, “There’s no separation of Church and State” (183), where teachers lead their classes in prayer (49), and museum employees recommend Bible readings to wayward teens (186), to be shunned means that you are essentially ignored by the entire community (e.g., 189). “That’s the thing about this town,” writes Nomi, “there’s no room for in between. You’re in or you’re out. You’re good or you’re bad” (10). As a child, Nomi’s favourite bedtime story is a ghost story, but it is a story about the shunning of people in East Village who were wrongdoers: “They lived like ghosts in their own town, right, I’d ask. No friends, no family. Floating around. Bound for hell, right? Crying all the time? Hey, Mom! For fooling around? Right?” (45). If the protagonist of the Christian diaspora story is the Mennonite who obeys all of East Village’s “bizarre” (13) rules, the antagonist is the community member who violates the official code of behaviour in ways, or to a degree, deemed unacceptable by the church.

### **The Third Diaspora Story: The Nickel Family Flight from East Village**

Ray had decided to keep the love alive in his imagination, and leave. That’s what people around here are forced to do if they aren’t strong enough to live without some kind of faith or strong enough to make a stand and change an entire system or overthrow a church. And who of us are that strong anyway? Not the Nickels, that’s for sure. (Toews, 2004, 240-241)

Leonard Webster and Patricie Mertova (2007) note that “People make sense of their lives according to the narratives available to them. Stories are constantly being restructured in the light of new events, because stories do not exist in a vacuum but are shaped by lifelong personal and community narratives” (2). In her assignment for Mr. Quiring, Nomi restructures the story of Christian diaspora to tell yet another diaspora story. In the wake of her family’s gradual departure from East Village, she refashions the story of the good Mennonite’s flight to heaven into the flight of the Nickel family from East Village. This shapeshifting happens in several ways. In her retelling of the Christian diaspora story, Nomi (1) reverses its protagonists and antagonists; (2) secularizes its religious language; (3) replaces its

certain ending with an uncertain one; and, seemingly in consequence, (4) experiences a turning point. In the following pages, I will examine each of these processes in turn.

Nomi's new diaspora story reverses the protagonists and antagonists of the Christian story. In the Christian diaspora story, the protagonist is the good Mennonite Christian, which Nomi's teachers make clear she is not. Mr. Petkau, for example, calls Nomi "wicked" after she turns in the assignment that describes some East Villagers who were conscientious objectors during World War II buying up farmland from the needy wives of deployed soldiers (Toews, 2004, 69). Similarly, when Nomi suggests in class that "it was a really risky gamble to bet everything we had in this world on the possibility of another world," her typing teacher prays publicly, "bring Nomi back within your fold. We just ask you for a miracle this afternoon, dear Jesus" (49). The teacher considers bringing Nomi back to the fold to be a miracle because in his eyes, she has fallen that far away from the ideal of the good Mennonite. However, in Nomi's retelling of the Christian diaspora story, it is her teachers who are the bad Mennonites. She describes Mr. Petkau "goose-stepping" her out into the hallway after rejecting her assignment about the hypocritical East Village conscientious objectors (68-69), and so villainizes Mr. Petkau by associating him with the Nazi regime against which the Mennonites mentioned in Nomi's assignment refused to fight.

But non-resistance includes more than objecting to war; it also includes refusing to resort to violence or aggression in everyday life. This may be one reason why Mr. Quiring rejects Nomi's assignment that begins, "The administration passed her around for beatings like a hookah pipe at a Turkish wedding." Nomi observes, "He didn't even bother reading the rest of it" (152). Yet, minutes later, after Nomi makes an impertinent remark, Mr. Quiring throws Nomi's pencilcase at her and hits her in the kidney; she then throws up (152-153). Similarly, Nomi's geography teacher "slams" her into a locker after she responds flippantly to his question about why she doesn't stand at proper attention during the national anthem (141). Moreover, Nomi's assignment gradually reveals that Mr. Quiring, who says he prays for the Nickel family (46), has had an affair with Nomi's mother, and has even threatened her mother with framing her as a serial adulterer if she does not go back to him (243-244). In these ways and others, Nomi reveals the hypocritical behaviour of teachers who refuse her assignments about similar hypocrisies or otherwise unacceptable content.

As touched on earlier, Nomi's family members are considered to be bad Mennonites by various members of the establishment because they do not follow the town's fundamentalist rules. However, in Nomi's personal diaspora story, the Nickels become the protagonists, the good

Mennonites. Unlike Nomi's teachers – whom Nomi reveals to be religious hypocrites or bad Mennonites in different ways – Nomi suggests that the Nickels try to live according to the Christian principle of love. Nomi decides that her mother left East Village after her mother was shunned in order to “spare my dad the pain of having to choose between the church or her, knowing it would kill him” (Toews, 2004, 244). Nomi also decides that her father left East Village after Nomi was shunned so that he wouldn't have to choose between her and the church that he attends so faithfully, and because he knew that Nomi would never leave town, as she yearns to do, unless he left first (245-246). This, she writes, is a “story” of “sacrifice and pain” and “everlasting love” (245-246).

Thus, one way that Nomi restories the Christian diaspora is by reversing its protagonists and antagonists: Nomi's family becomes the protagonists or good Mennonites, and Mr. Quiring and other teachers become the antagonists. A second way that Nomi restories the Christian diaspora is by borrowing and secularizing its religious language: religion, hell, faith, redemption, and so forth. Consider the following passage, in which Nomi expresses some tenets of her new secular religion:

When I got to school I told my teacher I was on cloud nine. I told her I was so happy I thought I could fly. I told her I felt so great I wanted to dance like Fred Astaire. She said life was not a dream. And dancing was a sin. Now get off it and sit back down.... It was the first time in my life I had realized that I was alive. And if I was alive, then I could die, and I mean forever. Forever dead. Not heaven, not eternal life on some other plane...just darkness, curtain, scene. Permanently. And that was the key to my new religion, I figured. That's why life was so fucking great.

I want that day back. I want to be nine again and be told, Nomi: someday you'll be gone, you'll be dust, and then even less than dust. Nothing. There's no other place to be. This world is good enough for you because it has to be. Go ahead and love it. (Toews, 2004, 209)

According to the above passage, Nomi's new religious framework holds that one day she will be forever dead, so she should love this world because it is all there is. Because this world is all there is, in Nomi's new religion, hell is not a literal place, but something we create here on earth. Nomi's assignment suggests in various ways that East Village is hell, such as when she recalls how she and her boyfriend light the gasoline floating on top of the water in the teenage hang-out of the

pits “so it was like we were in hell. Rainbow pools of fire... the smell of smoking stubble, the hot wind .... the night, my childhood” (200). Similarly, when Nomi writes of having a “new faith,” it is not faith that she will fly away to heaven someday, but faith that her family will reunite on earth in New York City (91). While she recognizes that this reunion may not happen, she decides to keep the faith, and writes, “I’ve learned, from living in this town, that stories are what matter, and that if we can believe them, I mean really believe them, we have a chance at redemption” (245-246). Nomi’s new religion reconstructs the East Village religious framework, replacing faith in heaven with hope for a happy family reunion on earth, and a possible future in a literal hell with the misery of present life in East Village.

The conclusion of Nomi’s story also embodies her reconstruction of East Village’s religious framework. Nomi notes that Mr. Quiring says that all good stories have “preordained” endings (Toews, 2004, 1). The Christian diaspora story has a preordained or “taken for granted” (17) ending – the good Mennonite Christian goes to heaven, and everyone else goes to hell. Yet, the ending of Nomi’s retelling isn’t as clear-cut. In fact, Nomi tries out, and thinks with, several different endings for her story: Did her mother leave to spare her father the pain of having to choose between the church and her (244-245)? Or did her shunning open a way out of East Village and marriage to a man she doesn’t love (244-245)? Has her mother realized her dream of travelling to Israel (cf. 245 to 8)? Or has she drowned herself in the nearby river out of guilt and regret (245)? Did Nomi’s father leave after Nomi’s shunning so that he didn’t have to choose between Nomi and the church? Has he committed suicide? Or is he making sense of things while picking garbage off mountain tops (cf. 244-245 to 157-159)? Ultimately, Nomi provides her reader with an open-ended conclusion: Will she leave East Village or not? Will she reunite with her family or not (246)? In keeping with her rejection of the black-and-white religious framework re-presented in the Christian diaspora story, Nomi’s own diaspora story rejects a certain conclusion and remains ambiguous. Unlike the story of Christian (and Russian Mennonite) diaspora, Nomi’s own diaspora story concludes before she leaves for a new home. Yet her final chapter suggests that she has nonetheless arrived at a different place, as I will discuss.

I have argued that the content and form of Nomi’s diaspora story challenge the rather simplistic religious framework embodied in the Christian diaspora story. At the same time, Nomi tends toward a similarly simplistic view of her hometown long after she begins to question its beliefs. Nomi generally favours negative descriptions of East Village. She often likens East Village to a prison, such as when she describes the main street of East Village as going nowhere

geographically, but ending in a choice between heaven and hell – a field with a water tower with an image of Jesus on it and a field with a billboard that reads “SATAN IS REAL. CHOOSE NOW” (Toews, 2004, 47, 131). Furthermore, she gives East Village the nickname of “Shitville” (50), and notes that “Everything in this town, the school, the church, the museum, the chicken plant, is connected to everything else, like the sewers of Paris” (183). Nomi’s negativity is evident to her guidance counselor, who suggests that Nomi change her attitude “about this place and learn to love it” (5). When Nomi protests, “But I do,” the counselor scoffs, “That’s rich” (5). It isn’t until the concluding chapter of her assignment that Nomi foregrounds a more balanced view of East Village. Consider the description of East Village offered in Nomi’s final chapter. After 10 or 15 minutes of twirling the neighbour kid around, the two of them fall down on the grass, and, Nomi writes,

everything, the sky, the sun, the clouds, the branches overhead were swirling around and making me feel like throwing up so I closed my eyes and that’s when the odd thing happened. I started to see things in my town clearly, the pits, the fires on the water, [my ex-boyfriend’s] green hands playing his guitar, him whispering in my ear move with me, and the trampoline, and the old fairgrounds and the stuff written on the rodeo announcers’ booth and the lagoon and the cemetery...and my windowless school and my desk...and [the town minister nicknamed] The Mouth and Main Street... and everything, everything in town, the whole of East Village, and it didn’t seem so awful to me any more in that instant.... (241-242)

The above passage constitutes the turning point of Nomi’s personal narrative. Bruner (2003) writes, “one rarely encounters autobiographies, whether written or spontaneously told in interview, that are without turning points. And they are almost always accompanied by some such remark as ‘I became a new woman,’ or ‘I found a new voice’” (221). Nomi’s turning point is marked by the phrase, “I started to see things in my town clearly.” The twirling and swirling that Nomi describes – akin to the devices used to signal flashbacks and dream sequences in film – also suggest movement to a different state of mind. When read in the context of Nomi’s entire assignment, the above passage suggests a new appreciation for East Village. Nomi moves beyond favouring negative descriptions of her town to appreciating how it isn’t “so awful,” how it is a place of both beauty *and* unpleasantness. The pits she sees are both the preferred hangout for teenagers and a metaphor for hell; the ex-boyfriend she sees was once a valued companion and also a source of pain; the school she sees was a place where some teachers tried to

reach her (46, 48-49), as well as place of rejection; the main street she sees may lead nowhere, and she has also had enjoyable experiences on the trampoline and in other places nearby .... While East Village is Nomi's place of exile (240), it is also her home.

Nomi's awakening to the complexity of her experience in East Village is sustained over subsequent pages, such as when Nomi contemplates different, contradictory explanations for her parents' departures. As discussed earlier, some of these explanations are painful, others loving and hopeful. Nomi's recognition of the complicated nature of experience is also evident when she confronts Mr. Quiring about his threat to tell church leaders the lie that Nomi's mother was a serial adulterer if her mother didn't resume her affair with him (243-244). Nomi recognizes Mr. Quiring's role in providing her family with "an ending" (243). At the same time, she is also able to acknowledge how "in a whole bunch of perversely complicated ways" she could understand the mutual attraction of her mother and Mr. Quiring, and that she could see that he was using the church (albeit as a threat) to try to "keep alive" the love that he and her mother had once shared (243-244).

While Nomi does seem to experience a discernable shift from a predominantly negative to a more loving and holistic world view, in keeping with the complicatedness of the experience she restories, one can find traces of her new outlook earlier in her assignment, where she shows understanding for the townspeople even while she foregrounds her frustration with their religious beliefs or hypocrisies. While she reveals Mr. Quiring's hypocrisies, she also seems to recognize that he has tried to get through to her (46), and she admires him for expressing regret that her sister's dramatic flair would never be realized in East Village (117). When the store clerk in the Mennonite village museum says she hasn't seen Nomi in church lately, Nomi writes in a context that suggests genuine sympathy, "When she looked at me she saw a child surrounded by flames, screaming. And that must have been hard for her" (Toews, 2004, 186). When Nomi walks home early one morning and sees a light come on in the town minister's home, she stops to watch him mechanically devour a pail of ice cream and then lean his head against the top part of the stove "like a guy completely defeated by life" (51). Despite the fact that she had earlier likened the minister to Stalin (10) – among the worst insults possible by someone of Russian Mennonite heritage – Nomi writes that witnessing this scene nearly brings her to tears. When people ask how her father is doing, Nomi knows they really mean how she is managing without her mother: "There is kindness here, a complicated kindness. You can see it sometimes in the eyes of people when they look at you and don't know what to say" (46). When Nomi describes her best friend Lids as a "straight-edge"



“good Christian girl,” she also notes that Lids is a “decent, kind, sweet person” and “completely, disarmingly, non-judgmental” about “sad, cynical pothead” Nomi (32). Nomi recognizes that some townspeople are trying to realize or express kindness and love within a religious framework that emphasizes correction and punishment.

The aforementioned examples are woven throughout Nomi’s assignment. They foreshadow her movement, in the end, from a predominately negative view of East Village to one that is more tolerant and complicated. Jeff Gundy (2005) writes, “Near the end Nomi says ‘Love is the greatest of these’ (244) [1 Corinthians 13:13]. She believes it. Mennonite Christians have failed her, but her underlying ethos is still Christian, though it remains folded up within her, waiting to flower” (para. 18). Nomi’s new religious framework embraces love and forgiveness. These qualities, not the rules and consequences embodied in East Village’s Christian diaspora story, can be seen as the basis of true Christianity (see Matthew 22:34-36; 1 Corinthians 13). Nomi demonstrates this love and forgiveness in her concluding chapter by showing appreciation for the town that exiled her; by being generous to Mr. Quiring despite his role in dissolving her family; by choosing to believe that her parents left out of self-sacrificing love rather than opportunism or despair; and by “dream[ing] not of revenge” (244) but of “being reunited, of being happy again, somewhere in the real world, our family” (245).

### **Constrained by and Straining Against the Christian Diaspora Story**

The previous section explored how Nomi adapts some elements of the Christian diaspora story in order to tell her own diaspora story. I’m curious about how Nomi’s preferred communication processes inform her restorying. By Nomi’s preferred communication processes, I refer to her tendencies to communicate indirectly, retract, exaggerate, and – particularly irritating to some Mennonite readers – depict the historical Menno Simons inaccurately. I suspect that it is Nomi’s reliance on such processes that have prompted her boyfriend to tell her that she is a “pathological liar” (Toews, 2004, 76). Nomi’s signature style also invites the reader to ask when Nomi is telling the truth, a question conventionally asked of personal narrative (Gilmore, 2001; Smith & Watson, 2001). I will not address this question here. As suggested in my introduction, I see the purpose of personal narrative not as trying to document past events, as though the narrator were “holding a mirror” to his or her past (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, 746). Instead, I believe the function of personal narrative is to help the narrator “to understand, to make sense of the past” (Freeman, 2007, 141). I agree with Webster and



Mertova (2007) that narratives like that embodied in Nomi's assignment are not meant to objectively reconstruct one's life, but to give a rendition of how one perceives that life (3) at the moment of telling. As a result, the question of whether Nomi is a trustworthy narrator is not relevant to my analysis. Rather, I see her often ambiguous and contradictory narrative style as adding another layer of meaning to the personal diaspora story she constructs. Given my focus on Nomi's adaptation and retelling of the Christian diaspora story, the question I choose to ask is: How is Nomi's narrative style both shaped by, and challenging of, the Christian diaspora story?<sup>3</sup>

For brevity's sake, I will address the above question by focusing on how Nomi tends to communicate indirectly and retract the direct statements she does make, rather than also exploring her historical inaccuracies and propensity for exaggeration. Let me begin by offering several examples of how Nomi communicates indirectly. In Nomi's initial conversation with her soon-to-be boyfriend, she tells him about a girl who had "really liked this guy and had thought about him all the time, about being with him, having a relationship.... Do you know what I mean?" (Toews, 2004, 24). On another occasion, Nomi writes a note to her father about why her mother left East Village without her; rather than asking him directly, she first writes him to ask who Samuel Champlain was (cf. 186 to 192). Nomi's assignment about the Mennonite conscientious objectors who purchased the farmland of deployed neighbours suggests that this behaviour is un-Christian, but doesn't say this outright. Moreover, her assignment, "How Menno Lost His Faith in the Real World (Possible Reasons)," could easily be retitled "How *I* Lost My Faith." Nomi's tendency toward indirectness may cause the reader to wonder when she is saying what she means; in fact, Nomi herself writes that "I only ever said half of what I meant" (98).

To make things more complicated, Nomi also tends to retract the direct statements she *has* made, such as when she writes that she told her boyfriend, "You're beautiful... and ...kind of mean. No, I didn't say that last part" (Toews, 2004, 107). Here is another example of retraction:

I have a feeling, a sneaking suspicion, that Mr. Quiring thinks I'm nuts. I mean, just because he knows my family history and all that. The problems it caused. The messy endings. The whole town knows, right? How could they not? He's probably thinking hey, this girl does have a legitimate claim. And I wouldn't blame him or anything. How can you argue with the crazy genes? But don't worry, I'm hanging in there, remembering to keep my pants on, etc., etc. My school assignments have helped me to focus and organize some of my thoughts....

But still, it bugs me slightly to think that Mr. Quiring thinks I'm insane. Not that I can be bothered trying to convince him otherwise. (108)

In the above passage, Nomi admits that it bothers her that Mr. Quiring thinks she's insane. She then negates that admission by suggesting that his opinion doesn't matter enough for her to do anything about it. As a final example of Nomi's tendency to retract, consider her conversation with her typing teacher about eternal life:

I ended up saying stupid stuff like I just want to be myself, I just want to do things without wondering if they're a sin or not. I want to be free. I want to know what it's like to be forgiven by another human being (I was stoned, obviously) and not have to wait around all my life anxiously wondering if I'm an okay person or not and having to die to find out. I wanted to experience goodness and humanity outside of any religious framework. I remember making finger quotations in the air when I said *religious framework*. God, I'm an asshole. I told him that if I heard one more person say it wasn't up to him or her to judge, it was up to God, while, at the same time, they were judging their freakin' heads off every minute of every day (I mean basically they had judged that the *entire world* was evil), I would put a sawed-off .22 in my mouth and pull the trigger. I told him I didn't know what the big deal was about eternal life anyway. It seemed creepy to want to live forever. And that's when he threw me out. (Toews, 2004, 48-49)

Nomi is unusually direct during this conversation; yet, when recounting it in her assignment, she dismisses what she had said by saying such things as, "I ended up saying stupid stuff" and "I was stoned obviously" (48).

The above paragraphs exemplify Nomi's tendency to communicate indirectly and to retract the direct statements that she does make. I propose that Nomi's propensity for obscuring and dismissing her thoughts and feelings has been, at least in part, shaped by East Village's fundamentalist Christian "culture of control and punishment" (Toews in Brandt, 2005, 20). In other words, Nomi's narrative style has been partly fostered by a culture that discourages and even punishes expression that runs contrary to the official religious framework.<sup>4</sup> As the reader is by now well aware, this religious framework is both re-presented and perpetuated by the Christian diaspora story. The protagonist of the Christian diaspora story is the good Mennonite, and as suggested earlier, a behaviour that distinguishes the good Mennonite

is non-resistance or pacifism, or the refusal to resort to violence or aggression in everyday life. Patrick Friesen has said,

Where I grew up, I rarely thought of pacifism as meaning that you didn't fight; I knew that was true. Pacifism meant that you didn't argue or confront each other very often either, and so you found all kinds of other subtle ways of getting around that. And I think that's actually where a lot of Mennonites learned how to write (in Tiessen, 1992, 18).<sup>5</sup>

To place Friesen's comments in the framework of the Christian diaspora story, a good Mennonite doesn't argue or confront. I propose that Nomi's indirect style of communication is both shaped by, and challenging of, this characterization. How so? Nomi may not want to offend others by expressing her strong feelings to them, like telling her boyfriend he is mean. Moreover, Nomi faces negative consequences if she persistently and clearly articulates religious doubts and community critiques in East Village. These consequences include having her controversial assignments refused, being dismissed by her teachers as a bad person, being shunned, and believing that she is bound for hell. Given the potential consequences for ongoing challenges to East Village's expectations and beliefs, it makes sense that Nomi often expresses herself indirectly and that she often backs away from the direct statements she does make.

It is interesting that some direct challenges Nomi does make to the East Village religious framework are in her written assignments and not in person. This is consistent with Friesen's observation that writing is one subtle way that many Mennonites get around non-resistance. At the same time, Nomi's written confrontations remain indirect in some ways. She hides behind Menno's persona in the assignment she calls "How Menno Lost His Faith"; she implies, rather than stating directly in her social-studies assignment, that the East Village conscientious objectors are hypocritical; and she does not even deliver to Mr. Quiring the assignment in which she confronts him about helping to dissolve her family. While Nomi's assignments do challenge non-resistance in their critiques of community beliefs and behaviours, the indirectness or unavailability of those critiques suggest that she nonetheless remains constrained by non-resistance; it is a sensibility that has gotten under her skin.<sup>6</sup>

Despite Nomi's tendencies toward indirect communication, her concluding chapter demonstrates a discernable difference in narrative style. Perhaps her shunning and her father's subsequent departure help free Nomi finally to express herself more directly and clearly. Perhaps by that point she feels that there is "nothing left to lose" (as

she suggests her mother feels following her own shunning: see Toews, 2004, 189). Whatever the reason, Nomi's conclusion shows a movement toward a more direct style of communication. This is exemplified by her revelations of what still lies behind the scenes of her story. These revelations, described earlier, include Mr. Quiring's affair with her mother (242), as well as several possible reasons why her mother and father left her behind in East Village. Perhaps most significantly, Nomi's movement toward more direct communication in her final chapter is also evidenced by a shift from writing *about* Mr. Quiring to writing directly *to* him. "I've put my name in the top right corner and I'll be leaving [this assignment] on your front porch," she writes to him (Toews, 2004, 242). She also says:

There's a part of me that needs your approval and I don't know why. Maybe it comes from being a teacher's kid. Or maybe I just wanted you to think I was as creative as my sister. And maybe there's a chance you'll ask me to read my story to the class.

There were so many times I wanted to talk to you.... (242-243).

Note that this time Nomi does not retract her admission that Mr. Quiring's opinion matters. Earlier, in the context of my discussion of the turning point in Nomi's personal narrative, I discussed how Nomi begins to see things more clearly in her final chapter. I propose that she begins to communicate things more clearly, too.

Of course, Nomi doesn't completely abandon her old ways. A sudden transformation would be unrealistic and better suited to the black-and-white world of the Christian diaspora story than to the complex world of Nomi's diaspora story. Consider the final paragraphs of her assignment: "I lit a Cap, pulled the seat up a little closer to the wheel, found a half-decent song on the radio, and drove" (Toews, 2004, 246). After writing that, Nomi admits, "Truthfully, this story ends with me still sitting on the floor of my room" (246). She can't resist one final retraction. Nomi goes on to say that she is "wondering who I'll become if I leave this town and remembering when I was a little kid and how I loved to fall asleep in my bed breathing in the smell of freshly cut grass and listening to the voices of my sister and my mother talking and laughing in the kitchen and the sounds of my dad poking around in the yard, making things beautiful right outside my bedroom window" (246). Is Nomi celebrating the fact that East Village, however flawed, is still her home? Is she grieving the loss of her family? Or both? She doesn't say. Perhaps she doesn't know. In keeping with the complicatedness of the experience she explores,

Nomi's final chapter is increasingly revelatory and direct, yet remains maddeningly ambiguous.

### Conclusion

During the 2009 Mennonite/s Writing conference, Patrick Friesen remarked, "A danger in being Mennonite is to retell the same stories. It's the danger of repeating something to the point of...where the story...is fossilized, becomes a museum piece" (as cited in Hostetler, 2009, para. 6). In *A Complicated Kindness*, a dominant Mennonite narrative of diaspora does not remain static, but "restlessly chang[es] its shap[e]" (Hostetler, para. 7). Nomi Nickel, the narrator of the novel, adapts the story of the Russian Mennonite diaspora to explore a migration that is more immediately meaningful to her in 1980s Canada: her hometown's belief that the good Mennonite will eventually fly away to heaven. She also refashions this Christian diaspora story to try to make sense of why all the members of her family have left her behind in their oppressive fundamentalist town. Nomi's personal diaspora story expresses what she calls her new religion. In Nomi's story, the flight of Christians from this hard world becomes the flight of her family from the severity of East Village; faith in heaven becomes faith in a family reunion in New York; and love and forgiveness take precedence over correction and punishment.

Nomi's restorying may be seen as culminating in a conversion experience. This is demonstrated by the turning point in her concluding chapter, in which she "sees clearly" that the town she has previously nicknamed Shitville and likened to hell actually "isn't so awful" (242). Nomi's rebirth is into a more loving and holistic way of seeing the world around her, which can lead to different possibilities for engaging with that world, such as Nomi's movement toward more direct communication. As Richardson (2001) observes, writing personal narrative "let[s] us discover new things about ourselves and our world" (37), and "New narratives offer patterns for new lives" (1997, 33). But while the content and form of Nomi's assignment suggest that she has created a new story, a new framework, to live by, that assignment ends before she has truly begun this new life. She has not yet left East Village to find her family; in fact, she doesn't know if she will. She has not even left her assignment, which describes her new religion, on Mr. Quiring's front porch. Such contradiction is characteristic of Nomi's new religious framework, one that rejects the "simplisticness" (46) and certainties of East Village's fundamentalist discourse and accepts the complexities and uncertainties of real life. Nomi's personal diaspora story is as complex and contradictory as

the world she decides to love, and as open-ended as the life she will continue to live and to restory.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> My forthcoming doctoral dissertation (Wiebe, 2010) describes and models several approaches to restorying that are used by both tellers and researchers of personal narrative, including the two referenced above: structural restorying and functional restorying. This article is an adaptation of the fourth chapter of my dissertation.
- <sup>2</sup> This is suggested by Toews, 2004, 242-243. In an interview, Toews confirmed that *A Complicated Kindness* can be seen as Nomi's "Flight of Our People" assignment (Wiebe, 2008, 105-106).
- <sup>3</sup> My language here is inspired by Chase (2005), who writes that the narrator researchers may explicate "how the narrator's story is constrained by, and strains against, the mediating aspects of culture (and of institutions, organizations, and sometimes the social sciences themselves)" (668).
- <sup>4</sup> Of course, Nomi's communication processes are shaped by other interrelated factors. These include her youth. As Toews has observed, Nomi's "opinion on a lot of things changes from day to day, like a lot of 16-year-olds" (in Wiebe, 2008, 109). Nomi is also confused (Toews in Springer, 2005, para. 8); after all, her family has left her to fend for herself. Perhaps Nomi also finds it difficult to confront her painful experiences directly, which is common among narrators who have experienced trauma (Gilmore, 2001; Creswell, 2008, 522).
- <sup>5</sup> Note that when I read Friesen's comments to Toews in an interview, she agreed with him and then discussed some ways that pacifism or non-resistance has influenced her writing and character development (Wiebe, 2008, 114-116). The above discussion was shaped by this conversation.



- <sup>6</sup> This clause is inspired by Toews (in Wiebe, 2008), who said, “For the longest time I didn’t think that all that Mennonite stuff affected me the way that it did. I felt I could somehow just move away from the community and escape and be fine. And then I realized that it gets under the skin and settles in there” (121).