

Pioneers, Refugees, Exiles, and Transnationals: Gendering Diaspora in an Ethno-Religious Context

Marlene Epp

Volume 12, numéro 1, 2001

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/031145ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/031145ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)

1712-6274 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Epp, M. (2001). Pioneers, Refugees, Exiles, and Transnationals: Gendering Diaspora in an Ethno-Religious Context. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 12(1), 137–153.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/031145ar>

Résumé de l'article

Dans cet article, l'auteure présente quatre femmes axant immigré au Canada de diasporas d'époques et de lieux divers : une Amish qui a fui la persécution en Bavière au début du XIXe siècle ; une Ukrainienne déplacée durant la Deuxième Guerre mondiale ; une exilée politique de l'Amérique centrale dans les années 1980 et une travailleuse itinérante transnationale contemporaine qui réside à la fois au Canada et au Mexique. Si toutes s'identifient à une communauté ethno-religieuse particulière, soit les Mennonites, leurs points communs découlent principalement de leurs expériences similaires de déracinement et d'établissement, et de leur rôle familial. Chacun des récits témoigne du bouleversement des rapports hommes-femmes et de la mutabilité des repères ethno-religieux provoqués par l'expérience de la diaspora. L'auteure propose donc que les déplacements transnationaux et de la diaspora permettent de mieux comprendre l'expérience de ces femmes en ce qui a trait à leur identité sexuelle, que les traditionnels concepts téléologiques et progressifs de l'immigration.

Pioneers, Refugees, Exiles, and Transnationals: Gendering Diaspora in an Ethno-Religious Context

MARLENE EPP

The motif of migration has been central to Mennonite self-description and self-understanding to the extent that paradigms of religious persecution, courageous uprooting, and successful settlement and adaptation have clearly become part of a collective consciousness. So deeply held are these myths of group displacement, for instance, that a 1998 collection of Mennonite creative writing is titled *Migrant Muses*, even though some of the contributors are seventh-generation Americans.¹ The language of diaspora has been less prominent in analyses of Mennonite movement, but as Terry Martin, a historian of the Soviet Union recently said, “That the Mennonites were and are a diaspora is clear enough.” He cites their origins in central Europe in the sixteenth century Reformation, followed by dispersion eastward as far as central Russia and westward to North America, and later southward to Mexico, central and South America. In fact, ongoing twenty-first century Mennonite diasporas from Mexico, Central America, and the former Soviet Union are among the largest examples of Mennonite mobility in the group’s five hundred-year history.

Martin further characterizes Mennonites as a “mobilized diaspora” with “a strong corporate identity” and a leadership that represents their interests.² Such characterizations of Mennonite movement, with emphasis on group identity and authoritative leadership, tend to make invisible those experiences and

1 John D. Roth and Ervin Beck, eds., *Migrant Muses: Mennonite/s Writing in the U.S.* (Goshen, IN: Mennonite Historical Society, 1998).

2 Terry R. Martin, “The Russian Mennonite Encounter with the Soviet State, 1917-1955” (Bechtel Lectures in Anabaptist Mennonite Studies, presented at Conrad Grebel University College, March 2001), published in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 20/1 (Winter 2002). Martin does not reference his usage of the term “mobilized diaspora.” See for instance, John A. Armstrong, “Mobilized and Proletarian Diasporas,” *American Political Science Review*, 70/2 (June 1976): 393-408; reproduced in *Migration, Diasporas and Transnationalism*, eds. Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd., 1999). Frameworks of diaspora have been used by social historian Royden Loewen to analyse the movements of Mennonites who migrated to southern Manitoba in the 1870s. See for instance: *Family, Church, and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and the New Worlds, 1850-1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993) and *Hidden Worlds: Revisiting the Mennonite Migrants of the 1870s* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2001).

choices that depart from the collective discourse established by the writings of leaders. Ethno-religious groups such as the Mennonites, perhaps more than any other tribal entity, maintain significant collective myths – patterns of thinking about or telling their story – that are shaped by both cultural tradition and religious belief. With respect to their many global migrations, the story has been one of adventurous and visionary community leaders, all male, guiding a particular group *forward* historically to a new land where the integrity of religious belief and cultural custom could be preserved. Thus, migration became deeply rooted in myths of progress and purity, that is, from the perspective of those who led particular movements. While Mennonites shared a religious identity based on particular core beliefs, and also varying group identities defined by ethnicity or national origin, these were mediated by individual lived experience that varied according to class, education, occupation, regional origin, gender, and family position, for instance. The perspectives of followers, especially women, or those left behind for that matter, are not prominent in the “social memory” of migration and thus we know little about the extent to which they shared in the myths of forward movement. One analyst of Mennonite women’s diaries observes that women migrants commented more on their feelings of homesickness, loneliness, and on the possibilities of return, than they did about the group reasons behind decisions to migrate.³

This paper will examine four women who immigrated to Canada within diasporas originating in disparate times and places: an Amish woman escaping persecution in Bavaria in the early nineteenth century; a woman displaced from Ukraine during the Second World War; a political exile from Central America in the 1980s; and a contemporary transnational migrant with homes in Canada and Mexico. Their stories were chosen for several reasons. First, because their written or oral narratives were available. Second, each woman was part of a community migration that has an established place in historiography. And third, despite the familiar narratives surrounding their experiences, each woman’s life story contains elements that deviate from the collective story. I find the method of storytelling appropriate since, as Sherene Razack has noted, it “refers to an opposition to established knowledge ... to the experience of the world that is not admitted into dominant knowledge paradigms.”⁴ Because of the motivating factors in each woman’s immigrant experience, I have chosen to define them as pioneer, refugee, exile, and transnational respectively. While they held different ethnic, national, or religious identities prior to migration, the process of dias-

3 Esther Epp-Tiessen, “Gains and Losses: The Experience of Mennonite Women Immigrants of Late Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 18 (2000): 146-56.

4 Sherene Razack, “The Perils of Storytelling for Refugee Women,” in *Development and Diaspora: Gender and the Refugee Experience*, eds. Wenona Giles, Helene Moussa, and Penny Van Esterik (Dundas, ON: Artemis Enterprises, 1996): 165.

pora brought them together under a common religious identity as Mennonite. It is my contention that recent theoretical thinking about notions of diaspora that emphasize “loss and hope as a defining tension”⁵ and in which individuals have a sense of “being simultaneously ‘home away from home’ or ‘here and there,’”⁶ may be especially apt for women migrants whose social roles were closely tied to family and domestic space. Even while many Mennonites migrated in family and village groupings, in all four stories examined below, both extended and nuclear family ties were disrupted in the process of migration and homes were left behind. The “copresence of ‘here’ and ‘there,’” according to James Clifford, results in an “antiteleological ... temporality” that is characteristic of diasporic experience.⁷ Indeed, it may be the need to cling to ideas of teleological, linear history that have made Mennonites reluctant to apply descriptions of diaspora to themselves. To the extent that the concept of diaspora “disavows essentialist and unchanging notions of identity and emphasizes interconnectedness across borders,” it is also useful for understanding the “tensions, negotiations, and contestations” over gender identities that women experience in the process of re-location.⁸ The diasporic experience provides a site at which gender meanings are de-stabilized and challenged. Occasionally, circumstances demand that gender roles are irreversibly deconstructed. More often, women’s roles as “cultural carriers” and their gendered roles within families are reinforced in order to ensure community survival in a new society.

Similarly, most definitions of transnationalism in some way hinge on connections – economic, social, mental – between a migrant’s country of origin and country of settlement. As Nina Glick Schiller and her colleagues express it: “Transmigrants take actions, make decisions, and feel concerns, and develop identities within social networks that connect them to two or more societies simultaneously.”⁹ Other theorists have said that transmigrants are characterized by “dual-place identities,”¹⁰ and are “people who are in transit, whose identi-

5 James Clifford, “Diasporas,” *Cultural Anthropology* 9/3 (1994), reproduced in *Migration, Diasporas and Transnationalism*, eds. Vertovec and Cohen, 225.

6 Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen, “Introduction,” in *Migration, Diasporas and Transnationalism*, eds. Vertovec and Cohen, xviii.

7 Clifford, 231.

8 Shirlena Huang, Peggy Teo, and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, “Diasporic Subjects and Identity Negotiation: Women in and from Asia,” *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 23/4 (2000): 392.

9 Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton, “Transnationalism: A New Analytic Framework for Understanding Migration,” in *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration: Race, Class, Ethnicity, and Nationalism Reconsidered*, edited by Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1992), 1-2.

10 Constance R. Sutton, “Some Thoughts on Gendering and Internationalizing Our Thinking about Transnational Migrations,” in., *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration*, eds. Nina Glick Schiller, et al., 241.

ties are unfixed, destabilized and in the process of changing.”¹¹ For the transnational women discussed here, ethnic and national identities become as malleable as gender roles as they cross borders, even while the religious label Mennonite becomes a unifying category that allows for comparison of their experiences. The combination of attachments to home, to places left behind, and the multiple identities that result, are ingredients in all four of the stories that follow.

Story 1: Barbara Schultz Oesch, Pioneer

The first narrative is of Barbara Schultz Oesch, an Amish pioneer woman.¹² The Amish had split from the Mennonites in the late seventeenth century over issues relating to the degree of conservatism and discipline within the church community. Barbara Schultz was only sixteen years old when she married John Oesch in Bavaria in 1820. Three years later she had three children and was preparing to immigrate to Upper Canada. The motivation of Amish to migrate to North America was similar to that of other pioneers, but they had the additional reason of wanting to escape military conscription during the Napoleonic wars. For Barbara and her family, the future in Bavaria seemed bleak for political and economic reasons. Though John was unable to persuade many of their friends to accompany them, they were joined by Barbara’s father, her unmarried siblings and an unrelated young single man. They left their home on 1 June 1824, arrived in New York two months later, and some weeks later joined a small group of Amish – only four families to that point – that preceded them to Wilmot township, just west of present-day Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario. Barbara gave birth to her fourth child within the first year of settlement and fourteen other children followed. Three of her eighteen children died in childhood.

Barbara’s years in Upper Canada were characterized by the demanding and constant physical labour of subsistence production and the equally constant bodily changes she experienced from continuous reproduction. As well, she carried the responsibility of being married to a leader in the church, as her husband John was ordained minister in 1829 and later bishop. This meant running the household in his absences, setting an example of piety within her own large family, and acting as frequent host to the newcomers who arrived from Europe

11 Linda McDowell, quoted in Huang, et. al., “Diasporic Subjects and Identity Negotiation,” 391.

12 Unpublished story of Barbara Schultz Oesch, by Lorraine Roth. Used with permission. See also a version of this story in Elaine Sommers Rich, *Mennonite Women: A Story of God’s Faithfulness, 1683-1983* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983), 57-60. For background on Amish settlement in Canada, see Orland Gingerich, *The Amish of Canada* (Waterloo, ON: Conrad Press, 1972); Lorraine Roth, *The Amish and their Neighbours: The German Block, Wilmot Township, 1822-1860* (Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario, 1998).

and the United States. After twenty years in Wilmot, Barbara may have been content to rejoice in the many obstacles they had overcome, but with so many sons and not much land, John decided they should push further into the frontier. And so, while heavily pregnant with her last child, the family moved to Hay Township near Lake Huron. Only four days before that child's first birthday, John died, possibly of appendicitis.

Barbara, a relatively young widow at the age of forty-six, would live for another thirty years yet. Though she asserted some autonomy at this point by learning to sign her name, in many ways John's authority in the family was now replaced by his eldest sons. Six years after her husband's death, Barbara travelled to Berlin (present-day Kitchener) to sign off her claim to the family's farm at Baden when oldest son, Christian, chose to sell the land and eventually move to Missouri. Four other children also scattered to the United States and three others died in mid-life. Barbara spent her last years sharing a home with her daughter Leah and family.

Story 2: Agnes Goerzen, Refugee

Agnes Goerzen was born in 1929 in the Mennonite settlement of Chortitza in Ukraine, the youngest of three girls.¹³ Her Mennonite ancestors were part of an eastward diaspora that originated in the Netherlands and had moved through Prussia to the Russian Empire in the late eighteenth century.¹⁴ She was born one year after official collectivization was instituted, when Mennonite churches began to be closed, and as a decade of Stalinist repression began the disintegration of Mennonite culture in southern Ukraine. Her father, who had been an engineer working on the famous Dneprostroi hydro-electric dam, was arrested one night in 1937, just after Agnes's seventh birthday, along with forty-two other men from their village. He was never seen again. Agnes's family experience was not unique, as the Stalin purges of the 1930s took numerous Mennonite men, leaving a community composed mainly of women, children, and the elderly. When he was gone, her mother worked on the collective farm and later as cook in the village orphanage. She sold her husband's clothes and tools and was able to purchase a knitting machine and earn some income selling stockings. She also made slippers out of felt, cardboard and glue. Anna recalled with amazement how her mother managed to feed three young daughters.

13 The story of Agnes Goerzen (not her real name) is from a personal interview, Kitchener, Ontario, 1992. Her life history and others of her migrant group are described and analysed in my book, *Women without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

14 The literature on the Mennonite settlements in Russia is extensive. See for instance, John Friesen, ed., *Mennonites in Russia, 1788-1988: Essays in Honour of Gerhard Lohrenz* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1989); "Mennonites and the Soviet Inferno," special issue of *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 16 (1998).

In 1941 the German army occupied western Ukraine and the family was immersed in German culture and language. When the Germans retreated westward from Ukraine in 1943, they evacuated with them the remaining population of Mennonites – about 35,000 – along with other ethnic Germans. Like many of their friends and relatives, Agnes with her sisters and mother packed whatever possessions they could take with them, were loaded onto railway freight cars, and left their homes forever; they were given two days notice prior to departure. They stopped periodically during their flight from Ukraine – in Poland, in eastern Germany – but each time the Soviet front advanced they picked up and moved further west. They were in constant fear of falling into the hands of the Soviets, of being raped, killed, or deported to Siberia. As it was, two-thirds of the Mennonites who left Ukraine during the war either were killed or went missing, or were repatriated to labour camps far from their homes. When the war ended, Agnes’s family was in Marburg, under American occupation, where Agnes attended school. From there, they established contact with Canadian relatives, including Agnes’s grandparents, and immigrated to Waterloo, Ontario in 1948.

Even though Agnes and her family were automatically assumed to attend a Mennonite church, there was a great divide in experience between their Canadian Mennonite sponsors – also of Russian origin – and the newcomers. She felt “everybody was criticizing us.” While there were familial relationships, and a shared language and history, the postwar refugees were sometimes considered uncultured, uneducated, and lacking in Mennonite religious values, given their longer residency under the Stalinist regime. Agnes’s story diverges from the narratives of most Mennonite refugees when she gradually reveals a history of domestic violence. As her story unfolded in an oral interview, it was ascertained that she arrived in Canada somewhat later than her mother and sisters due to her marriage in Germany. She moved with her husband to western Canada for a time, but returned to Waterloo with her daughter when her husband became abusive and Agnes began to fear for her life. She divorced him in the mid-1960s, something almost unheard of in Mennonite churches at this time. She was accepted back into the church but felt marginal now as a single mother and divorced woman. Her mother, who had been widowed so young, remarried in her seventies but also suffered a bad marriage; according to Agnes, all her new stepfather wanted was a “housekeeper.” Eventually Agnes and her sisters took legal action to rescue their mother from this situation. The postwar Mennonite migrants were already considered socially aberrant because their fragmented families, many of which were female-headed, placed them well outside of the idealized “father knows best” nuclear family of the fifties. The status of both Agnes and her mother as divorced women placed them even further to the margins of acceptability.

Prior to leaving her husband, Agnes had operated a kindergarten for neighbourhood children but when she and her daughter returned to Ontario, she dis-

covered that provincial educational standards demanded an early childhood training certificate. As a single parent, Agnes found there was no way she could travel to London to take the necessary course and so gave up this vocational dream. Instead, she was employed at an eyeglass factory and later as a sewer in a dress shop. Her working-class identity added more complexity to her experience of being a Mennonite migrant.

Story 3: Gloria Gonzalez, Exile

Gloria Gonzalez was raised in a family of eleven children in a poor neighbourhood in San Salvador, El Salvador.¹⁵ Her mother was the primary provider and caretaker of the family, since her father's alcoholism disabled him from those roles. Gloria was the main target of his physical abuse and she recalls hiding at a neighbour's until late at night when her mother would seek her out with assurance that her father was home and asleep. She believes that the colour of her skin – lighter than her siblings – made her father suspicious regarding the girl's birthright. Gloria's mother was a model of exemplary hard work and self-sacrifice and despite the family's poverty, made it a priority to send her children to an upper class school in the hopes that a better education would give them a better future.

Gloria's main community was a close-knit Roman Catholic church – called a base community – that was informal, non-hierarchical, activist and in which she developed a strong religious faith. Motivated by her beliefs and desire to help the poor, a teenaged Gloria and committee of friends became active in the underground distribution of food and other goods to needy families. Under an oppressive right-wing dictatorship, this work branded her as subversive and a threat to the state. She continued in this work, despite escalating tensions in El Salvador in the late 1970s and early 1980s. During this time, her two older brothers and father disappeared and were presumed to have been executed by the national guard. Gloria herself was arrested and held for questioning for several days in the mid-eighties but released after the intervention of a Roman Catholic priest. However, many of her friends, in the church and outside of it, were tortured and some were executed. Knowing that her fate would soon be the same, Gloria took the advice of her priest and family members and decided to immigrate to Canada.

She did so in 1989, with her husband and their four-year-old daughter. Despite several attempts, Gloria and José had not yet been legally married, since each time they had planned an appointment with the justice of peace, they were warned of a possible arrest. In fact, Gloria had not seen José for at least

¹⁵ Gloria Gonzalez's story (not her real name) is from a personal interview, Kitchener, Ontario, October 2000.

two years prior to their reunion at the airport, since living together was too dangerous for both of them. When they arrived in Kitchener, Ontario, they faced the usual challenges of new immigrants – learning English, finding jobs and housing, acquainting themselves with new systems and rules.

A priority for Gloria was finding a church that met her spiritual needs and possibly a faith community like she had known in El Salvador. However, the Roman Catholic churches that she was introduced to seemed unfamiliar: the liturgies too formal, the priest too remote, and the people unfriendly. A connection with another Central American family brought them to a Mennonite congregation. Here she recalled there was welcome and warmth and a sense of community that was most like what she had known growing up. The mutual aid practised so well by the Mennonites was a material manifestation of that warmth, yet after a while Gloria felt discomfort over the continuous offerings of food and other goods, even though her family was employed and self-supporting. Her unease at the Mennonite church grew when she separated from her husband; because she didn't feel able to explain his absence from church, she simply stopped attending. Eventually, Gloria returned to another Mennonite congregation, this one Spanish-speaking, with many members who were also immigrants from Central America. She became a member, and after a six-year separation, legally married her husband José there. In describing her marriage, Gloria's voice contained a note of regret, yet she said that in her culture, women couldn't imagine giving their children a stepfather by marrying someone else.

Gloria's reflections on becoming Mennonite had little to do with a sense of history or doctrine. Like many others from a Roman Catholic tradition who joined the Mennonite church, Gloria was not rebaptized and never rejected her baptism as an infant. To the extent that for many centuries, Mennonitism was primarily defined by its adherence to an adult, voluntary baptism, the absence of this ritual in Gloria's experience signifies just how adaptable ethno-religious definitions are. Her Mennonite-ness was very immediate, and grew out of her comfort level with a particular community and with the spirituality she was able to express there. Gloria's experience of Mennonite community, at least in the Spanish-speaking group, offered an ongoing link to her country of origin, and was also a connection with a female culture, since of about fifty adults and children regularly involved, there were only about five adult men, she said. At the time of my interview with her, Gloria expressed uncertainty over the upcoming shift from a female to a male pastor; she was concerned that this would change the dynamics within her congregation that had nurtured leadership qualities in her and other women. It is likely that Gloria became a Mennonite – in that particular setting – more because of gender empowerment and ethnic affinity than because of religious renewal.

Story 4: Susie Reddekopp, Transnational

Susie Reddekopp is also a Mennonite, part of a group that, despite a social and religious culture that appears static, has in the past several decades been characterized by its transnationality. Susie shares an ethnic history with Agnes in that her ancestors were part of a diaspora that left the Russian empire for the Canadian prairies in the late nineteenth century. Her grandparents were members of an ultra-conservative sect called the "Old Colony" Mennonites who clung to rigid cultural boundaries between themselves and modernizing society. In particular, they rejected public school education, and because of their pacifist beliefs, refused to perform military service during the First World War. The group left Canada en masse in the 1920s to establish colonies in northern and central Mexico.¹⁶ Attempting to escape bleak economic conditions and a legalistic church and community authority, Mennonites from Mexico, travelling mainly in family groups, began a return migration to Canada beginning in the 1950s. Many families spent the summer months in Canada, employed as migrant agricultural labour, and returned to winter in Mexico. A transnational process occurred that saw some families eventually settle permanently in Canada while others continued to move between north and south on a regular basis.

Leaving their parents behind in Mexico in the late 1990s, Susie and her husband Henry decided there was a better future for them and their children in Canada. Henry found employment as a farm labourer near Drayton, Ontario, just north of the city of Waterloo, while Susie cared for their two young daughters. In the year 2000, Susie became a widow at the age of twenty-one when her husband Henry died in a tragic farm accident. Susie had complied with her husband's initiative to move to Canada in search of a better life, but in his absence considered her options limited and so chose to return to her family in Mexico. She did not feel she could successfully "make it" in a new land without her husband. She was poor, educated only to the equivalent of grade eight or less, and had limited English-language skills. Yet she also mused about the possibility of staying only a short time in Mexico, then returning to Canada, perhaps to Alberta where her sister's family had settled.

16 Susie Reddekopp's story was told in "A People Apart," *The Record*, 27-28 October 2000. For background on the Old Colony Mennonites, see for instance Calvin Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites: dilemmas of ethnic minority life* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1969); Delbert Plett, ed., *Old Colony Mennonites in Canada, 1875-2000* (Steinbach, MB: Crossway Publications, 2000); Larry Towell, *The Mennonites* (London: Phaidon, 2000); Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1982), chap. 3.

Gender and ethno-religious identities in diaspora

Representing almost a two hundred-year span of history, and despite the obvious difference in ethnic and national background, there are nevertheless interesting commonalities in the life stories of Barbara, Agnes, Gloria, and Susie. While the unifying label of Mennonite brings them together here, the real connecting points in their lives rest on different identity phenomena altogether, in particular their identity as migrants, and as women on the margins because of marital status – as widowed, divorced, and separated women.

That all four are about women immigrants is the most obvious commonality, suggesting that my emphasis is mainly on including women's voices in an historical narrative that has been predominantly male. Each woman's story occurs within a Mennonite diaspora that has received less attention by historians than more clearly "mobilized" movements, such as large-scale, group movements that saw 18,000 Mennonites leave south Russia for North America in the 1870s and another 20,000 in the 1920s. Or the smaller, yet similarly negotiated movement of some 2,000 Mennonites to Upper Canada from Pennsylvania beginning in the late eighteenth century. The migrations represented in this paper, especially the twentieth-century ones, are less examples of planned community initiatives than they are responses to local and global phenomena that affected Mennonites simultaneously with other groups. As such, the 8,000 Mennonites who immigrated to Canada after the Second World War were but a small minority of hundreds of thousands of displaced persons seeking homes after the war. The story of political exile from Central America in the 1980s was repeated many times over for individuals and families that had no connections whatsoever to Mennonite groups. And Susie Reddekopp's story, while containing some particular ethno-religious meanings, is also one example of an increasing global pattern of migrant labour. Exploring and analysing these four stories for what they reveal about female newcomers may provide us with a woman-centred migration narrative that genders and de-stabilizes the given explanations for transnational movements in the Mennonite context. Historian Lorraine Roth, in her book on early Amish settlement in Wilmot township, says the following about gender relations among pioneer immigrants: "The settler (usually male) was the head of the household, and his wife was an accessory, albeit an indispensable one."¹⁷ This of course was the dominant portrayal of gender relations in immigration historiography¹⁸ and in histories of

17 Lorraine Roth, *The Amish and their Neighbours: The German Block, Wilmot Township, 1822-1860* (Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario, 1998), 55.

18 For a discussion of gender in Canadian immigration historiography, see for instance, Franca Iacovetta, "Manly Militants, Cohesive Communities, and Defiant Domestic: Writing about Immigrants in Canadian Historical Scholarship," *Labour/Le Travail* 36 (Fall 1995): 217-52.

Mennonite mobility as well. Several recent studies of Mennonite migrations, informed by gender analysis, have demonstrated that immigration frequently de-stabilized normative gender roles and, in some cases, presented women with opportunities to exert high degrees of power and influence.¹⁹

Lack of relevant sources prevents us from knowing how Barbara Schultz felt about or interpreted the events of her life; analysis of her as a diasporic subject is mainly speculative. The popular reading of women such as Barbara is of their long-suffering natures and indeed unimaginable burdens alongside the adventuresome spirit of male partners who led them to new frontiers. The fact that women were the ones who waited, anxiously, while husbands searched out and negotiated land deals, signed the deeds, and made the arrangements, leads us to identify women as the followers. Indeed, Amish leader Christian Nafziger's family waited a year and a half for his return from a land search, and indeed, began to doubt that he ever would.

Yet even if Barbara was the follower, her reproductive role was a crucial contribution to the settlement fortunes of her family and her Amish community. Bearing and raising large numbers of children was as essential to the survival and success of her pioneer people as chopping trees and tilling acres. Pointing out the dangers of childbearing for homesteading women in the Canadian west, Nanci Langford says, "Women literally risked their lives to establish their families and a future for their children..."²⁰ In giving birth to eighteen children, Barbara knew, however subconsciously, the importance of generational succession in ensuring that a community flourished. While Mennonite and Amish birthrates have historically been higher than average, there is evidence that birthrates rose in the early years of migrant settlement. The male-centred analysis of early immigration and settlement that focuses on land cultivation rather than people production prevents us from seeing Barbara as an equal participant. But particularly in a pioneering setting with a sparse European population, Barbara's reproductive capacity was crucial to the success of her community's settlement. Family formation was central in the pioneer agenda.

Barbara chose to migrate with her husband – though we will never really know whether she urged or acquiesced in that decision – but in Agnes's case, larger political events of the Second World War overtook the situation and allowed her minimal active choice. In her migratory group of "women without men," women stepped out of gender roles that were normative for their conservative patriarchal communities. They led their families through war zones, negotiated with and bribed military and immigration officials, found homes and

19 See my own study on the post-Second World War migration, *Women without Men* (2000); and Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market* (1993).

20 Nanci Langford, "Childbirth on the Canadian Prairies, 1880-1930," in *Telling Tales: Essays in Western Women's History*, eds. Catherine A. Cavanaugh and Randi R. Warne (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2000), 170.

created livelihoods in Canada, and in the absence of male ministers, took responsibility for religious practice and teaching. Yet given their enormous losses, they viewed those changing roles as “something to be endured not relished.”²¹ Whatever autonomy, power, and influence that the migration process gave to Agnes and women like her was soon erased as they were immersed in the theologically fundamentalist and socially patriarchal culture that existed in many Canadian Mennonite churches in the 1950s. Even while women were changed inside because of their experiences, they learned to acquiesce and adapt in order to be accepted by their religious communities.

Gloria was urged to leave El Salvador by her family – mother, sisters, and her priest – but made the decision independently of her husband. Indeed, she did not know until the last minute if he would be accompanying her. Having grown up in a family in which her mother was effectively the “family head,” and her father made weak by alcoholism, Gloria had a model of strength and self-sufficiency to follow when she decided to migrate, to separate from her husband, and one that perhaps drew her to the female leadership in her Mennonite church community. Susie’s decision to return to Mexico after her husband’s death suggests that perhaps the decision to migrate to Canada in the first place was mainly his. Or, her return to Mexico may have been predicated on awareness that within her Old Colony culture, a woman who was not attached to the household of father or husband was an anomaly. For Susie, a member of a traditional and gender-stratified church community, the perceived success of migration depended on the presence of a healthy patriarch who could provide for the family. Rigid gender identities that characterized the Old Colony group overrode the potential for Susie to construct new roles for herself as the head of her family. For these women, the experience of diaspora offered a point at which gender roles were de-stabilized and re-constructed according to the limitations and possibilities of each woman’s social and religious environment.

The stories of these four women highlight the sense that migration is not just about forward movement and progress but is also about escape, regret, and loss. And it is about risk. From the story of Barbara Schultz, we learn how real was the possibility of not succeeding:

Barbara had prepared and saved as much food for the journey as possible. They could take some flour, grain, dried fruits and dried and cured meat, but they could not possibly take enough food to last for six months or even longer. Johannes and Barbara had always prayed, but now they began praying in earnest. They knew that only God could see them through. If they had to depend on their own resources, they would perish.²²

21 Linda Peavy and Ursula Smith, *The Gold Rush Widows of Little Falls: A Story Drawn from the Letters of Pamela and James Fergus* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1990), 55.

22 Unpublished story of Barbara Schultz Oesch, by Lorraine Roth.

Gloria similarly had no assurance, until she actually arrived at the Toronto airport, that she would not be arrested. For Agnes, each step of the journey was filled with uncertainty and like Barbara above, she often gave herself over to transcendent forces when it seemed that death or disaster was imminent. She describes the scenario for her family when thousands of refugees were trying to flee the Soviet advance into eastern Europe in late 1944. Attempting to board a westbound train in Poland, Agnes was overwhelmed by the hordes of panicked people also trying to find a place. "There was no way that three of us – my shy Mama, my sister Mary, who had been quite ill, and I just a schoolgirl – had a chance to get on that train. We must have looked like chickens in the rain."

Susie's life, at least where it ends in the narrative here, is one of ongoing insecurity, as future opportunities in Mexico were limited for her family, but after losing her husband, prospects in Canada seemed equally precarious. A discourse of "mobilized" diaspora that reflects the agenda of authoritative religious leaders emphasizes push and pull factors in migration that leave little room for ambiguity or indecision. Women, whose mental place was culturally encoded in familial relationships and domestic spaces, were often individually "looking backward" even while collectively "moving forward." This is not to say that male migrants did not also feel uncertainty, risk, and insecurity as they embarked on transoceanic or cross-border journeys to new settlements and homes. Explanations of migration that are linear and teleological are nevertheless decidedly modernist and masculinist, even if not always reflective of individual male experience.

While the diasporic experience de-stabilized gender identities in ways particular to each woman's context, ethno-religious markers were simultaneously mutable. While each woman identified herself, at least most of the time, as Mennonite, the nature and centrality of that identity altered over time and according to circumstance. The process of diaspora illuminates Cynthia Cockburn's thesis that "collective identities, such as gender and national identities, no matter in how essentialist a form they are dressed by politically interested parties, actually [are] lived by individuals as *changeable* and *unpredictable*."²³ If there is an ethno-religious collective identity shared by these four women, it may be an "imaginary coherence" to use the words of Stuart Hall,²⁴ created by historians in order to write history. If Mennonite alone were the identity-marker used to compare the women, the contrasts would be glaring indeed.

23 Cynthia Cockburn, *The Space Between Us: Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict* (London: Zed Books, 1998), 212.

24 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Migration, Diasporas and Transnationalism*, eds. Vertovec and Cohen, 224.

Furthermore, becoming a Canadian was more by coincidence than intention for each woman. And more importantly, linkages with their lives in the "old world" continued to shape the culture and values of each woman, though again we can only speculate how often Barbara's thoughts turned to Bavaria. Certain cultural theorists suggest that physical displacement is the most formative experience shaping the recent century, and for the three twentieth-century migrants, their rootedness in several national or ethnic identities suggests that physical displacement was accompanied by multiple, mental placements. While Barbara, Agnes, Gloria, and Susie have an immigrant identity in common and arrived at a common destination, their pre-migration lives occurred in distinct national and cultural contexts. All women lived transnational lives that caused them to remain rooted in the lands from which they had migrated. To that extent, they had a strong sense of national, ethnic, and perhaps regional, identities that were neither Canadian nor Mennonite. Again, it should be emphasized that many individual male migrants also experienced displacement and remained psychologically tied to a homeland. Yet given male hegemony over Mennonite institutional and public life, their possibilities for empowerment in new geographic locales were that much greater.

While later historians have ascribed the Amish label to Barbara Schultz and her immigrant kin, one authority on the subject noted that if they spoke of themselves at all in terms of religious identity it was as "Menist" (a antecedent of Mennonite) rather than Amish; that differentiation came later.²⁵ In the localized frontier outlook of Upper Canada, one's main identity label may have been by township and line. Agnes Goerzen thought of herself as German more than anything else, until joining a Mennonite church in Canada. Even though her ancestors had never physically lived in Germany, they had adopted the German language and other cultural accretions in Prussia, and later carried that ethnic identity with them as colonists to Ukraine. For Agnes, her immersion into a community of Mennonites in Waterloo, Ontario, had much to do with the immediate feelings of inclusion that that created. As she said, after years of being part of a mass of humanity displaced across Europe, finally "we weren't alone anymore. Here were relatives." Her identity as a Mennonite began with familial connections that began to heal the alienation and anonymity that she felt as a refugee. Her introduction to Mennonite religious life came in a refugee camp in Germany operated by a Mennonite relief agency. Agnes describes it as follows: "We were like a field that's freshly-ploughed and whatever seed falls on it takes root." It just happened to be a Mennonite seed. Susie, whose ancestors were also from Russia, has a stronger identification as Mennonite, but a very particularized one, defined by codes of dress, language, and other social

25 From a conversation with Amish historian, Lorraine Roth, November 2000.

boundaries that set the Old Colony apart. Though she is the most mobile of all four women, in that her family and community are constantly travelling between two countries, her sectarian identity is perhaps stronger than her transnational identity, though one inevitably shapes the other. She carries the complexity of Dutch and Ukrainian cultural traditions, with Mexican upbringing, and Canadian citizenship. For Gloria, Mennonite became a formal designation of her church community, with religious but not ethnic connotations, that says little else about her overall identity which is still rooted so firmly in “my country” as she calls El Salvador.

For each woman, being a Mennonite was a process of becoming and indeed, a category imposed. As historians of the Italian diaspora have observed, migrants often “became Italian” abroad as regional loyalties important in the homeland broke down and as receiving nations lumped them all together.²⁶ Similarly, individuals who may have had relatively strong ethnic or national identifications prior to migration, claimed a stronger Mennonite identity in Canada as a source of belonging. Yet, a shared destination – Canada – and a shared religious affiliation – as Mennonite – do not belie the critical importance of pre-migration lives.

Creating transnational families

The stories of these four women also illuminate the ways in which transnational families are created in the process of migration and the pivotal role that women play in recreating various forms of family life. The centrality of women migrants in “replicating social networks” in the new world and in maintaining familial connections across vast distances has been noted by several historians of Mennonite migrations.²⁷ The marital status and family circumstance of each woman were also vital in shaping her identity and her experience of diaspora. Even if gender was as unpredictable and changeable as ethnicity, all four women lived in particular social milieus that measured their status and social identity in terms of their familial roles, especially as wife and mother. Here their commonalities become more apparent as we understand how important to each woman was her identity and status either in or out of a marriage relationship and family unit. Barbara conformed to normative domestic ideals by marrying young – indeed, leaving her father’s house for her husband’s – and bearing children beyond expectation. It is possible that her extreme fertility was

26 Donna Gabaccia and Franca Iacovetta, “Women, Work, and Protest in the Italian Diaspora: An International Research Agenda,” *Labour/Le travail*, 42 (Fall 1998): 179.

27 See for instance Royden Loewen, “‘As I Experienced Them Myself’: The Autobiographical German-Language Immigrant Woman in Prairie Canada,” in *A Chorus of Different Voices: German-Canadian Identities*, eds. Angelika E. Sauer and Matthias Zimmer (New York: Peter Lang, 1998).

related to her diasporic, pioneer identity, but few historians have made direct linkages between childbearing and migration.²⁸ Barbara spent as many years as a widow as she did married, and we can only speculate about how that shaped her identity in the latter half of her life. Did she become a community matriarch, whose wisdom and opinions mattered? Or did her identity continue to reside mainly with the reputation of her deceased husband-bishop? Did she become marginalized as a widow as historically was often the case? Susie Reddekopp's identity was seriously challenged because of her status as widow, so much so that she felt she had no other options but to return to a family ruled by her father.

Both Agnes and Gloria did become marginalized as divorce and separation respectively shaped their identities from the perspective of their churches and in terms of their societal status.

Agnes's migrant group was already viewed as "weak" and aberrant because it lacked the strength of fathers and husbands. By leaving her husband, she was stepping further to the edge of acceptability, as she was perceived to be rejecting that which brought stability to a life thus far shaped by chaos and insecurity. Her ongoing relationship with the Mennonite church was shaped by this crucial and difficult decision.

Gloria has much in common with Agnes, though it is unlikely they will ever meet. Both left war-torn environments and came to Ontario as displaced persons and political refugees. Ironically, however, both were escaping repressive political regimes at opposite ends of the political spectrum, a factor that undoubtedly influenced them differently in terms of their own ideological affinities. Both were/are "working class" women, earning their livelihood in factories and with their hands. Both have struggled as single parents. At one point in her life, Gloria withdrew from Mennonite connections because of her marital status. She was re-united with her husband, but anguishes over the alcoholism that has tainted her relationships with the men in her family. There is a sense in her narrative that she was happier when single. For all the women described here, becoming a Mennonite meant negotiating particular gender identities and expectations and finding their place within the familial and domestic ideologies that existed at a given time.

Conclusion

Daphne Winland, in her 1989 study of Kitchener-Waterloo Mennonites, in particular a refugee community from Laos, noted that "group identity cannot be reduced to a single common denominator, rather it is a dialectical process

28 An exception to this is a discussion of "Immigrant Families and Pioneer Women," in Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market*.

involving the simultaneous expression of numerous and often seemingly conflicting expressions of identity."²⁹ For the four women profiled here, these conflicting, and overlapping, expressions of identity include vastly different chronological contexts, divergent family forms and marriage experiences, varieties of ethnicity and related self-perception, and gender. Even while my organizing principle is the category Mennonite, it may well be these other identity factors that help create a meaningful discourse about diversity. Each of them carries a complex web of identities that has a great deal to do with personal experiences of diaspora.

The irony here is that the shared discourse of these women is not about ethnicity, nor about religiosity, even though they all carry a label that at least publicly, bears mostly ethno-religious meanings. Each has a particular notion of ethnic or national affiliation, whether immediate or residing mainly in historical memory. As well, their self-identification as Mennonite church members had and has very localized meaning, shaped by particular origins and characterized by the intersection of particularized languages, theological emphasis and symbolic practice. As gendered diasporic subjects, their sense of (dis)placement within patriarchal systems including their own families, combined with their lived experience of transnationality, are the strongest elements of shared identity that these women possess.

29 Daphne Naomi Winland, "A Plea for Peoplehood: Religious and Ethnic Identity Continuity and Change among the Mennonites of Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario" (Ph.D. thesis, York University, 1989), v.