

Religion, Pain, and the Body: Agency in the Life of an Old Colony Mennonite Woman

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With a carefully drawn map in hand directing me to Tiena Wolfe's¹ house, I drove back and forth along Fairfield Road in rural Ontario looking for number 509. According to my map, her house should lie between the urban buildup I had come from and the intersection where the road name changed to Long Stanton. Driving this stretch for the third time, I finally decided to ask for directions. As I drove onto a farmyard, and pulled up next to a large bungalow, I noticed a woman standing inside the door, as if she were expecting me. I stepped out of my car; she out of her door. Instantly I recognized her as *Dietsch*² and realized simultaneously that she must be Tiena Wolfe. After inviting me in, she showed me into a large and spotless room, functioning simultaneously as kitchen, dining and laundry room. Through an open door I could see a large television and a computer in the side room. As we spent the next few hours becoming acquainted, the conversation turned repeatedly to her husband. Her frustration and anxiety caused by her husband's unemployment and the pain she experienced due to his excessive drinking and ill-treatment of her, erupted repeatedly during our conversation. However, I did not know

that in those weeks surrounding my first visit, Tien was preparing herself to disclose to a family support worker that her husband had sexually abused their daughters and that her “rhetoric of complaint”³ to me was part of a lengthy process of self-preparation that enabled her to take this step.

During my second visit, I was drawn into Tien’s life more intimately than I had ever imagined possible when a police officer and an intake worker from Child and Family Services arrived to interview her about this abuse. Being the only other person in the room understanding Low German, I became the interpreter. Tien’s disclosure ensured that her husband was not allowed to live with her and their children, although he was allowed supervised contact with them and ongoing visits with Tien. The intense encounter between Tien and myself during the interview spawned a trust that freed Tien to discuss her troubled domestic situation with me. Our subsequent discussions were dominated not only by Tien’s disclosure and its implications, but also by her husband’s longstanding ill-treatment of her (physical threats, sexual abuse, psychological manipulation) and the destructive effect these have on her family.⁴

Tien took a bold step in her life, disrupting much more than her domestic situation. She was well aware that by reporting her husband’s abuse she contravened the teachings of the Old Colony Church which holds to a conservative, patriarchal model of family and the role of women in families. She recalled a sermon in which the minister stated that difficult domestic situations, which hers surely was, should be dealt with by the church leadership, not by the ‘world,’ the non-Old Colony sphere. Nevertheless, having involved the police and Child and Family Services (i.e., the ‘world’), she remained confident that she had done the right thing. On the one hand, Tien desired to submit to the Church, dutifully carrying out her role as a wife and mother; on the other, having failed to receive the help from the Church that she needed, she decided to expose her husband thereby potentially incurring the disfavour of the Church and community.⁵

As one of the most traditional Mennonite groups, the Old Colony Church emphasizes a strict separation from the ‘world.’ In 1922 nearly 6,000 Mennonites from the Canadian Prairies migrated to Mexico—the majority being Old Colony—in order to maintain their strict separation.⁶ In Mexico they settled on colonies where the Church, for the most part, continues to play a central role in maintaining colony life.

Old Colony Mennonites have a strong sense of themselves as the people of God, the *Jemeent* (*Gemeinde*/community), practically given shape in the brotherhood (all baptized men), a group which regulates

how all members should live, ensuring the continuity of tradition and separation from the 'world.' Among other things, dress, use (or non-use) of modern technology and education are determined by this body. Maintaining traditional gender roles and hierarchical social structures is also paramount to the continuity of Old Colony tradition.⁷

While many Mennonites have prospered in Mexico, economic conditions on most colonies have deteriorated in the past twenty years. The devaluation of the peso and free trade agreements, exacerbated by years of drought on some colonies and the hesitancy of the more conservative colonies to allow agricultural reform, have motivated many Mennonites to look elsewhere for their economic well-being. With rights to Canadian citizenship, many Mennonites living in Mexico have returned to Canada. Initially many returned as seasonal farm laborers, but increasingly they are settling permanently. Approximately 40,000 Mennonites have migrated to southern Ontario.⁸ In other parts of Canada, migrating Old Colony Mennonites have swelled the numbers of existing Old Colony congregations; in Ontario they have established a Church where previously none existed. Tien and her extended family are a part of this migration. Tien has lived in Ontario for approximately ten years, during which time she and her family have participated in the Old Colony Church.⁹

Religion and the Body as Agency: Theoretical Directions

Historian Caroline Walker Bynum asks, "[h]ow do we retain simultaneously a hope for freedom and a forgiving recognition of the limitations always imposed by body and history?"¹⁰ To inquire thus is to revisit the definition of agency. Bynum's question locates agency not primarily in an individual's desire for self-determination. Rather, it holds in balance both possibility *and* constraint, and provides an entree into my discussion of how Tien positioned herself as an Old Colony woman, i.e., her agency.

The singularity of Tien's life has meant that she has insisted on repeatedly bringing her pain-filled life into the purview of the Church. By doing so, she has demanded, and received, responsive action from the Church, though not always to her benefit, she readily acknowledges. To characterize Tien's relationship with the Old Colony Church simplistically as a conflict with a restrictive religious tradition that she has had to challenge if she is to address effectively her husband's abuse, denies the dynamic relationship Tien has with the Old Colony Church. As a forceful presence in Tien's life, the Old Colony Church has established exacting boundaries for her. However,

she too has made her presence felt in the Church, albeit from the margin. As ethnographer Robert Orsi suggests, “religious traditions are zones of improvisation and conflict, and making meaning within a tradition is a dialectical process.”¹¹ Examining Tiena’s life allows me to interrogate how individual religious meaning is created within the parameters of a tradition such as the Old Colony Church, a religious group that highly values conformity and the continuity of tradition, how it imposes its will on Tien, and how she maneuvers within, exploits, and at times confronts those parameters, thereby exposing contradictions inherent to it. By so doing, she must make critical decisions about her role as an Old Colony woman.¹²

Bynum’s query brings into focus not only the complex dialectic that defines Tien’s agency in her conflicted relationship with the Old Colony Church. It also imposes ‘body’ at the core of her agency. Religious meaning making for Tien can only be understood if ‘body’-manifested in her angry words, her prayers, her clothes, her relationships, her headaches, the tears and laughter she shared, and the racing pulse she felt when her husband was angry with her—is recognized as fundamental to her attempts to live creatively in her pain. Religious meaning develops, therefore, in the midst of the relationships to which Tien is inextricably bound: the Old Colony Church and tradition, her husband, children and community. Anthropologist Talal Asad writes of the importance of locating agency at the nexus of pain and relationships, if agency is to encompass both the possibilities and constraints of a person’s life:

[w]hat a subject experiences as painful, and *how*, are not only culturally and physically mediated, *they are themselves modes of living painful relations*. The ability to live such relationships over time transforms pain from a passive experience into an active one, and thus defines one of the ways of living sanely in the world [emphasis original].¹³

Understanding Tien’s embodied relationships as the site of her agency gives meaning to the full scope of her life. It refuses to privilege her one decisive step to remove her husband, and asserts that she actively and continually dealt with the pain and suffering of her life—“the limitations of body and history” brought on by her husband’s destructive behavior—in her many years of marriage. Tien has not quiescently allowed pain to happen to her, though at times she has been able to do little more than survive with it. Nor has she been able to eradicate pain from her life; her courageous step of reporting her husband has eliminated some, but brought on other modes of pain for her.

If Tien's agency can only be understood in the context of her long life of pain-filled relationships, centralizing 'body' also confronts the inclination to deny individual Old Colony Mennonites agency because of their penchant to conformity. Bynum asserts that a person's identity combines the physicality of the human body and the changing events of history. To use her words, we are "shape" and "story" and we are "really changing but bearing our story through the change and bearing it *out there in our bodies*, visible to others as well as to ourselves" [emphasis original].¹⁴ We are not, she says "random shapes with no story." So, while many people suffer from headaches, laugh and get angry, Tien's body tells a particular story. It is therefore important to remember, as Bynum cautions, that we are not "a stereotypical pattern predicted by a generalized shape and tradition."¹⁵ Tien is not just another 'Mexican Mennonite,' impoverished, abused, uneducated, blindly adhering to tradition. She is not an abused woman *because* she is Old Colony, even while that religious tradition provides the framework in which she experiences that abuse.¹⁶ Her life has meaning within a particular historical configuration of time, geography and the individuality of her life in tandem with the larger context: the religious tradition she is a part of, the migration of Mennonites from Mexico to Canada, gender roles among the *Dietsche*, the social stratification of Old Colony society.

The theoretical directions I have laid out situate this article at the intersection of religion, body and pain, and agency. How Tien engaged in religious meaning making, i.e., how she interacted with the Old Colony tradition, as she has disrupted, nurtured, and manipulated her pain-filled relationships, is the focus of this paper. To begin with, I examine more closely those relationships I have already alluded to—what it meant for Tien to be an Old Colony woman who migrated from Mexico to Canada, living in a difficult domestic setting. I then address more directly questions of agency, how she "live[d] sanely," to use Asad's words, creating and maintaining order and structure in her own self, in addition to her domestic and family setting, and how, although she did so in a pervasively religious environment, her actions themselves constitute religious meaning making.¹⁷

Tien as an Old Colony Woman

Tien grew up on a Mennonite colony in northern Mexico. With a chronically ill father, the burden of maintaining the family's farm rested on Tien's mother's shoulders. Tien worked hard alongside her mother and sisters, doing both field work and domestic work. Tien's

marriage meant an economic and social step downward for her. While her family had to work hard to make ends meet, nonetheless they owned their farm. Tien's husband was landless, with little social status in a colony system where only landed men were franchised, and where *Aunwohna*¹⁸ had only limited opportunities to acquire land. Her husband's excessive drinking and his resultant sporadic employment ensured that he forfeited any such opportunity; hence they remained on the edges of Old Colony life in Mexico, both geographically (because *Aunwohna* are usually accorded housing on the edges of Mennonite villages), and socially (because of class distinctions between *Weate* (landed) and *Aunwohna* exacerbated by her husband's repeated violations of the religious dictates of the Old Colony Church).¹⁹ As a married woman, Tien moved frequently from village to village, including another colony for a few months, isolating her from her family and neighbors. In this isolation she also experienced frequent mistreatment by her husband.

Upon marriage, Tien received a cow and a heifer from her parents, and her husband received a cow from his. The colony system was such that they were expected to live off the money they received from the sale of the milk to the colony cheese factory and the income they received from her husband's employment. However, as her husband's debt increased, they sold their cows, one by one, eliminating the one source of reliable income they had, sliding into ever greater poverty. And then, Tien said,

Fooda haud wie nijch, nan vekoft wie [daut Peat] uck noch. Foajtijch vekoft wie, hauden aulemols nijch een Peat. Haud wie doa en bestje Sachen en een bät Teetijch. Dauts waut wie hauden, waut wie hauden aus wie mett fuaren hia han. [We had no feed, so we sold it (the horse) as well. We didn't have a horse anymore, so we sold the wagon as well. We were left with a few things and some dishes. That's what we had, that's what we had when we found a lift here.]

Tien's life improved upon moving to Canada. Her immediate response to my question about what was better about life in Canada was: "Daut wie tjennen hia bätä äten aus een Mexico," [that we have more to eat here than we had in Mexico] meaning that in Canada she could adequately feed her family. She no longer needed to depend exclusively on her husband's sporadic income and charitable assistance from the colony as she had in Mexico. In Ontario she fed and clothed her children with government social assistance and child support.²⁰ Tien acquired new financial resources to deal with the impact of her husband's destructive behavior on her family upon

migrating to Canada, but she also acquired an increased inner reserve of strength, expressed by her as a sense of having come home: “Daut jintj bloos soo vâl scheena fuats aus wie eascht hia wearen. Daut späad sich bloos soo daut wea bloos Tus, en wea ekj hia tjeen mol eeja jewast.” [Things improved immediately once we got here. This was home! And I’d never been here before.]

During my first visit with Tiena, after explaining my interest in her religious life, she retrieved the directory of the Old Colony Church she is a part of, from a nearby table. As I paged through the booklet, I immediately noticed that all of the names listed on those pages were positioned in relationship to the other names, exposing the hierarchical and gendered structure of the Old Colony Church. The preeminence of the *Eltesta* (bishop) whose name appeared first, the authority of the *Ohms* (ministers) whose names followed immediately after the *Eltesta*’s, and the centrality of the patriarchal family (male members were listed alphabetically and women were listed below their husbands’ names), evidenced themselves in the pages of the church directory. Tien and other Old Colony women hold gendered and subordinate positions in the Church and in their families as wives and mothers, as revealed on the pages of that booklet.

Tien was raised in this tradition to fulfil those roles. Her parents, she said, were good parents and both modeled and taught their children to live a Christian life. This Christian life, passed on to Tien by her parents and premised on obedience to the teachings of the Old Colony Church leadership, dictated a lifestyle that conformed to those teachings.

Wie sullen no Tjoatj gonen enn wie sullen hoarchen waut de Ohm säd, enn wie sullen daut doonen waut dee säd. Wie sullen aunhoarchen. Wie sullen natearlijch sennen. Daut denkt eena emma soo, see [äare Elren] han onns seeja goot, seeja goot jeleat. [We were supposed to attend church and listen to the minister, and do as he taught. We were supposed to obey. We were supposed to be seemly. I always think that they (her parents) raised us very well, very well.]

Her mother modeled for Tien how to be a mother who cared for, and ensured the well-being of her children, even as Tien modeled those traits to her own daughters. When I asked her how she raised her six children, she described herself as the next generation, maintaining the tradition she received from her parents and the Old Colony Church: “Etj doo vâl too an [de Tjinja] räden von, von daut waut de Ohm onns enne Tjoatj sajen deit, woo wie sellen läwen, enn woo onse Elren ons uck geleahet ha’.” [I regularly tell them (my

children) what the minister teaches in church about how we're supposed to live. Also how our parents taught us to live.] She is satisfied that her children are reaching adulthood within the tradition of the Church, conforming to its expectations. Her oldest daughter, for example, is maintaining Old Colony tradition by adhering to the pattern of baptism, followed by marriage to an Old Colony man.²¹

Tiena Wolfe's Agency

Scholars of Old Colony Mennonites generally agree that conformity to and maintenance of the tradition defines Old Colony life.²² As Kelly Hedges writes, “[f]or the Old Colony Mennonites in Chihuahua today, the *oole Ordnunk*, the ‘old order,’ provides instruction on how to live their lives. The *oole Ordnunk* tells the Old Colonists how to dress, when to work and when to rest. It provides for the structures of institutions and dictates the form of rituals.”²³ Such a strict code of conduct in the Old Colony Church has led to the predominant view among scholars that the Church is restrictive at best, and destructive, at worst.²⁴ They portray Old Colony Mennonites as passively adhering to tradition, unable to effectively direct their lives. Harry Leonard Sawatsky, for example, concludes that the control exercised by the Old Colony Church “[t]o a pronounced degree ... inhibits initiative and tends to leave the individual with a low capacity for well-reasoned self-assertion and self-determination.”²⁵ Such a pervasive bent towards conformity means that the only alternative, according to Sawatsky, if Old Colony Mennonites are to be agents, is to defy the strictures of the church.

Sawatsky's assessment holds validity up to a point, but is premised on the view that self-determination defines agency. Tien often described herself as a woman who was dependent on outside forces to direct her life. In part, her subservient self-portrayal was the result of being raised in a patriarchal tradition in which God-ordained authority was given to a few men as church leaders, and to most men as husbands. In both family and church, women were taught to obey and conform. This instilled in Tien a department of deference to church authority, but also to authority in general, whether that be social service workers, police or even myself as an educated English-speaking woman. In such an environment of submission, self-assertion was not a virtue. But this does not mean that the only instance in which Tien and other Old Colony Mennonites act agentively occurs when they stand up to the authority of church leaders or when they defy tradition, as Tien did by reporting her

husband. Agency is not about an autonomous self on an evolutionary path of self-determination. As Asad argues, it is a mode of living in the experience of pain, which for Tien included, but was not limited to, reporting her husband. Keeping in mind this definition of agency, I offer an alternative perspective to the dominant assessment of Old Colony Mennonites.

The first person Tien approached about her husband's abuse of their daughters after moving to Canada was a family support worker from a local community support centre, who visited her regularly. This woman decided not to report Tien's husband, insisting that the consequences of such an act would be unbearable for Tien. Following this rebuff, Tien felt she had no recourse, and let the matter lie. A year later when her situation became intolerable, she spoke with an *Ohm* about her difficult life, expecting the Church to intervene in her domestic troubles. Following many tears on Tien's part, the *Ohm* offered to speak with her husband—thereby initiating disciplinary action—but strongly implied that that was not the correct course of action. Tien recalled the *Ohm's* words: “foaken wan see dan met däm janjen räden deeden, dan wortet bloos schljachta.” [In most instances, things just got worse if they spoke with the individual.] Rather than challenging the *Ohm's* assessment, she acquiesced to his recommendation, but was distraught because her only means of recourse had been denied her. Recounting further her conversation, she said,

Enn dan säd etj, daut etj jleew et wudd soos daut sennen aus hee säd, daut wudd bloos schljachta woaren. Oba, etj docht dan soo, *waut saul* etj wan jie nuscht doonen, daut blift bloos soo. Oba! Etj wist bloos nijch waut etj sull doonen. [And then I told him that I agreed with him. It would get worse, just as he said. But then I thought, *what* am I supposed to do if you don't do anything? It's just going to remain the same. Oh my! I just didn't know what I was supposed to do.]²⁶

When new staff replaced the family support worker with whom she had previously spoken, Tien again recognized an opportunity. But she could not bring herself to initiate contact; she waited.

Oba, etj haud en seeha grooten Velange. Dan spääd etj soo, etj woag mie nijch doamet auntoofangen. Mett eenmol phoond see [dee nieha Oabeida] aus see kunn hia spatsearen kohmen. O! Etj docht soo, kohmt bloos, kohmt bloos! [Oh! My yearning was intense. But I felt as if I didn't even dare get into it. Then she (the new staff person) called me and asked if she could come for a visit. Oh! I thought, just come, just come!]

Her desire (or yearning) may not have precipitated the family support worker's phone call, but it broke down any reservations Tien had, and enabled her to speak without hesitation. "Aus etj mett ar räden deed, dan, dan deedet aul meist veselwst daut etj daut aula säd. Na, nich aula. Etj kunn daut goach aula opp eenmol." [When I talked with her, then, then, it's as if everything just came out on it's own. Well, not everything. There was too much for one time.]

Numerous factors come into play when determining how Tien dealt with the pain and agony of her husband's abuse. Tien managed her life in a complex oscillation between quiescence and initiative. Her deference to authority kept her from insisting that the family support worker and the *Ohm* act on her words, thereby allowing them to temporarily silence her. But her yearning (*Velange*) for change in her domestic situation in the context of her deference to authority, also ensured that she vigilantly, and repeatedly, seized opportunities to bring her situation to the attention of people with authority in her life, even in the face of rebuff. She viewed people in her life, particularly those with authority, as opportunities to exploit, by making them aware of her situation, with the intent that *they* would take action. Placing herself in positions where she knew others would (even were obligated to because of their authority) take action, was for her an active response to her pain, even as her dependence on others was an acknowledgment of her limitations.

Moving to Canada opened up an opportunity for Tien, but that does not mean that she passively acquiesced in the face of her husband's abusive behavior in the many years of their marriage while in Mexico. Arthur Kleinman suggests that "[i]n the exigency of routinized hurt and grievance and demoralization, simply not to continue to be overwhelmed may be a kind of desperate victory."²⁷ As Tien gathered the resources to weather the challenges of her husband's continual mistreatment of her, Tien's response to her husband's abuse often seemed passive; she appeared to tolerate it for many years. When in fact, through keeping her own moral framework intact by insisting on faithfully adhering to Old Colony values and beliefs and through maintaining order and structure in her family, social structures she inherited from the Old Colony tradition, Tien actively resisted the pressures of her domestic life that threatened to undermine her.

Linda Martin Alcoff and Laura Gray-Rosendale, writing about survivors of abuse in modern America, provide another perspective with which to understand the many years of Tien's apparently passive response to her husband's abuse of her. They assert that "survival itself sometimes necessitates a refusal to recount or even a refusal to disclose and deal with the assault or abuse, given the emotional,

financial, and physical difficulties that such disclosures can create."²⁸ Tien has been doubly marginalized as someone from the lowest economic class among the *Dietsche*, and as a woman who is expected to submit to her husband and church leadership. From this position, Tien devoted her resources to keeping herself and her family intact, unable, and perhaps unwilling, to jeopardize the fragile balance she maintained between community acceptance and familial stability. Now recently, by challenging what it meant to be a wife and an Old Colony woman, she upset that equilibrium and there has been a cost. Since disclosing her husband's abuse of their daughters, she has experienced the condemnation of other *Dietsche*, backlash from some of her children, and anger from her husband's family. Stepping outside established gender roles, Tien has had to deal directly— independently of her husband—with government, financial and social service agencies, made more difficult due to her limited English.

Pain and Relationships in Old Colony Religious Life

During one of my visits to Tien her greeting was flustered, and she apologized for not being prepared to host me. Her husband had just left the house; he had been very angry with her. She was still shaking from that altercation, and had not had time to change out of her work dress. When she returned from her bedroom, having changed into a black dress with little blue flowers, (something more appropriate for company) she quickly finished cleaning up the dishes before sitting down to talk with me. We discussed the dress she was wearing, its beautiful fabric, and particularly the intricate pleating that made up the front bodice.²⁹ Tien informed me that she could not sew her own clothes because the pleating required concentrated and intricate work, and this brought on headaches. Her headaches also kept her from reading as much as she would have liked to, particularly devotional reading from the Bible. She could not attend church Sunday morning and visit with her sisters in the afternoon—activities that sustained her—because doing both in one day inevitably resulted in a severe headache for her.

I have already alluded to Tien's life as pain filled, both physically and psychologically. Her oft repeated phrase "dauts mie aul soo grulijch schwoa jewast" [it's been so very difficult for me] refers simultaneously to her recurring migraine headaches, her mental anguish caused by her husband, and her psychosomatic manifestation of *schwake Narfe* (emotional fragility), a condition common among *Dietsche*.³⁰ Tien's pain stems from her difficult life. She herself associated her pain with her husband's treatment of her. She

recounted a conversation in which her husband repeatedly accused her, her words themselves as confused as she felt:

Woo etj foaken ha' kunt, mien Kopp, eefach kunt, daut ess, haft mie uck Eena mettjeholpen daut etj daut ha' kunt. Daut späad sitj eenjemohl soo, mie wort de Kopp soo schlemm, mett eenmol wudd etj nijch meeja tjennen, daut kloa, aula kloa moaken. [How I often have been able to, my head, actually been able to, that's, and Someone enabled me to do it. Sometimes I thought, my head began to hurt so much, I wouldn't be able to keep everything, keep everything straight.]

Tien's pain expresses, in her body, her difficult life, and ties intricately in with her religious life. She did not hesitate to place her pain into a religious context. While she sought medical help for her headaches, she attributed her ability to cope with them to God, drawing on established Old Colony theological formulations of theodicy. When I asked her how she managed to deal with all that had happened in her life, she responded:

Etj wunda mie uck selwst woo etj daut kaun wann'et aul soo schwoa jewast ess, enn soo vâl Kopprietinj aus etj aul jehaut ha', daut etj et kaun soo's daut, oba. ... Woat emma jesajcht, de Fiend ess majchtijch oba Gott es aulmajchtijch. ... Etj weens vestoh daut eefach soo, wan, daut hee, hee, etj näm dee Krauft von am. [I also wonder how I manage, when it's been so difficult, and as many headaches as I've had, how I manage everything, but. ... They say that the Devil is powerful, but God is all-powerful. ... That's how I understand it anyway, when, that he, he, I get my strength from him.]

Tien's pain entered the realm of the religious not only in her confidence of God's concern for her, but also in her relationships with others. Here I examine her interactions with two of her Old Colony friends and one of her daughters, and the centrality of body in these relationships. At one point, when Tien was particularly fraught with anxiety about her husband's abuse, unable to rid her mind of what she knew he had done to her daughters, her neighbors, also *Dietsch*, recognized that she was deeply troubled.

En dan mett eenmol dan word see daut enn daut etj Narfetrubbel haud. Dan säd see, see haud mie daut aul aunjeseenen, doa must waut sennen. See haud aul eeja soo jedocht, weet waut nu wea. ... Daut han see mie daut eefach

aunjeseenen woo grülich schwoa haud etj daut. [At some point she became aware that my nerves were troubling me. She told me that she had *seen* that something must be troubling me. She had thought earlier, “wonder what’s wrong now?” ... They could actually *see* how extremely difficult things were for me.]³¹

Tien’s body loudly proclaimed her anxiety, thereby allowing, even *inviting* her neighbors’ concern.

Tien’s youngest daughter—and her most vulnerable child—did not initially understand why her father was no longer allowed to live with them. Eventually she realized the impact his presence in her life could have, and acknowledged that her mother had had no option but to report him. This filled Tien was a measure of contentment. “En soo es see nu” [That’s how she is now], Tiena told me.

See deit nuscht nijch daut see mie beschulljen deit. See’s toofräd. Prooft mie bloos opprajcht toohoolen. Wan etj dan too schwoa enn Jedanken senn, dan tjempt see enn fot mie aun, stritjt mie ditt [de Schulla], prooft too sponen mett mie [lacht see]. O, see deit mie opp earnst seeja, seeja fäl ... [She doesn’t blame me in any way. She’s content, she just tries to support me. If I’m consumed with worry, then she clasps my arm, massages this (shoulder), tries to tease me (laughter). Oh, she (supports) me very, very much.]

Mother and daughter, in the very physical expression of touch and of play, sustained each other in their shared pain. To use Pamela Klassen’s words about mother/daughter relationships in the context of home birth, Tien’s daughter “transformed ... pain into relationship.”³²

In Tiena’s life, body and relationships are integrally intertwined in the context of pain, whether that be when her neighbors recognized in her pained face her inner, intense anguish, or when her daughter supported her through physical touch and laughter. Anthropologist Veena Das eloquently elucidates the articulation of relationship and pain. Language, she says, is not always adequate; only when we recognize that pain is interpersonal, can we “begin to think of pain as asking for acknowledgment and recognition; denial of the other’s pain is not about the failings of the intellect but the failings of the spirit. In the register of the imaginary, the pain of the other not only asks for a home in language but also seeks a home in the body.”³³

For Old Colony Mennonites, such pain-filled relationships as Tien had with her daughter and neighbours are not only empathetic in

nature. Equally they are religious. Kersten Reinschmidt, in her study of Mennonite women's health in Mexico, makes such a connection between health and religion for Old Colony Mennonites:

Individual health ... is a matter of concern to family and community members because health affects behavior and social relations. Keeping in mind that, above all, Mennonites believe that health comes from God and is based on the relationship between communities and God, both health and non-health are simultaneously individual, social and religious phenomena.³⁴

Thus the relationships that Tien sustained with her daughter and her *Dietsche* neighbours, and that were brought on by her pained body, are as deeply religious as they are social. Old Colony religion—the *Christeljet Lāwen* [Christ-like life] that Tien explained defined Old Colony religion—is not about the abstract biblical injunction to love your neighbor, but is lived and experienced in the deeply embodied interaction between people.

Tiena's Relationship with the Old Colony Church

Tien's actions are not typical of how Old Colony women confront domestic violence; few women go to the lengths that Tien did in contravening the patriarchal authority of the Church by publicly disrupting her family life. However, as transgressive as her behavior was, Tien's intent was not to challenge the authority of the Church and her place in it; she did not abandon her desire to conform to Old Colony expectations. Her desire to conduct her life in a manner that corresponded to how she was raised, to do as she was taught, lay at the heart of Tien's religious sensibility. But in order to do this, she had to fracture herself, both in the context of her family—as a wife and mother—and in the Old Colony Church—as a member bearing responsibility for the salvation of the community.

I have already argued that motherhood for Tien was religious as expressed in her physical relationship with her daughter. This relationship evidences that motherhood, as Susan Sered argues in her study of religions dominated by women, was simultaneously “a fundamental physical crisis and a fundamental spiritual matter”³⁵ for Tien. Such a conjunction of religion and body is further confirmed in Tien's pain, the result of internalizing her husband's abuse of her and her daughters. As the above conversation with the *Ohm* indicates, the Old Colony Church leadership placed on Tien the onus to ensure that

the patriarchal family remained intact. Throughout most of her marriage she submitted to this expectation; she was able to reconcile her husband's abuse of her and her role as a wife and mother, as a faithful Old Colony woman, by bearing this contradiction on her body. As Sered observes, "[i]n general, women receive far more positive responses when they define their problems in medical terms than in political terms."³⁶ But her husband's abuse of their daughters became an affront so great to Tien's duty as mother to protect and care for her daughters, that the conflicting demands of her religious tradition grew to be too difficult for her to hold in balance. She exposed an inherent contradiction in Old Colony social expectations because she could not be both the devoted mother and the obedient wife that was expected of her by the tradition.³⁷

Tien's exposure of the disjuncture between motherhood and wifehood resulted in a movement away from the Church, not in terms of her affiliation with it, but in how she dealt with her husband's behavior. Previously I described how Tien's relationship with her daughter was a source of strength for her, affirming that she had made the right choice. In addition, her choice of motherhood over wifehood became for Tien a resource for dealing more directly with her husband's abuse of her. Protecting the children determined Child and Family Services' decision to remove her husband, but for Tien, her desire to protect her children became the catalyst that allowed her to take steps to minimize his abuse of her as well. The empathy she received from the *Ohm* was inadequate to change her husband's behavior. For this she turned to the family support worker, whose social scientific assessment of domestic violence was foreign to Tien, but whose familiarity with Low German eased such active engagement with 'the world.' Tien found ways to withstand her husband's manipulation of her intentions and words, and she more firmly secured her financial resources against his misuse of them.

Since Tien recognized that she had transgressed the Church's expectation of her, she was determined to resolve the disjuncture she created. In part she was able to accomplish this because she had so faithfully gone to the Church for help, both in Mexico and in Canada. Now church leadership was not in a position to criticize her, she claimed, because she had exhausted its resources.

De Ohm dee haft dan nochmol enne Tjoatj jesajcht wie sullen
 nijch de Welt tunn Halp nämen, wie sullen ähnt. Na joh, docht
 etj, waut, waut ess'et? Etj ha', etj ha' junt aujeroopt, etj haud
 daut jedohne. Enn daut späad sijch soo etj tjreach bloos nijch
 Halp. Nu must etj bloos wertjlijch soo's ditt, en nu feelt sitj
 soo'et ess, ess bloos, etj ha' bloos nihch Orrajcht jedone. [Once

in a while the minister says in his sermon that we shouldn't go to the world for help, but we should come to them. All right, I thought, what, what is it? I have, I have asked you for help. I have done that. And I felt as if I simply didn't get help. I simply had to do it this way. And now I feel as if, it's just, I simply haven't done anything wrong.]

Her confidence resulted from more than beating church leadership at its own game. More fundamentally, Tien found a way to define her actions within the bounds of Old Colony religious teaching, though only through fracturing herself. In the interstices between her subordinate position as a woman and the central tenet of Old Colony religious teaching that each member of the *Jemeent* carries the responsibility of the salvation of the community as a whole, meaning that Tien was obliged to ensure her husband's salvation, she acted as a faithful Old Colony woman.³⁸ Paralleling her choice between her roles of wife and mother, her choice between the role of wife and member of the *Jemeent* exposed an irreconcilable contradiction in Old Colony Church teaching. For Tien, this contradiction manifested itself as acute physical and psychological pain.

In Mexico, Tien lived with a pattern of church discipline that allowed her to manage the pain in her life. Whenever her husband's behavior became intolerable due to his alcoholism, her complaints to the *Ohms* resulted in excommunication proceedings against her husband. This process took several weeks, and required of her husband, not only to appear before the *Ohms* to account for his excessive drinking, but also before the entire male membership of the colony. The decision to excommunicate him, or if they deemed him sufficiently repentant, to reinstate him as a member, lay in their hands. These sanctions never permanently changed his behavior, but Tien used such social pressure as one way to manage her situation over time. However, upon moving to Canada, she could no longer depend on the Church to manipulate her husband's behavior through the threat of excommunication. As she discovered when her husband transgressed in Canada, he was not excommunicated by the male membership, but was only required to confess in a private meeting to a few *Ohms*.³⁹ She considered this a great travesty of justice because the punishment was not substantial enough to affect a change in her husband.

Oba! Etj docht soo, etj sie soont nijch jewant, soont, wan se soonts daut doonen dan weah dort [Mexico] emma soo jewast daut dee tjreajen dan Utschluss, enn hee kunn daut hia jroad

soo beräden. [Oh dear! I thought, I'm not used to this, this. He would have been excommunicated for this over there (Mexico). Now here he can just settle the matter so easily.]

When he repeated his offence, her belief that the Church in Canada dealt inadequately in the area of discipline, was confirmed. She was left in a quandary, convinced that her husband's behavior jeopardized his salvation, yet fearful that the Church would not address her husband's guilt. The only way open to her, was for her to punish him herself by forcing him out of their home. For Tien, submission to the tradition as a member of the community took precedence over submission to her husband as a wife.⁴⁰

In his study of Tamil refugees, E. Valentine Daniel suggests that at times of great disruption, such as refugees experience, "prevailing habits" are inadequate for "soothing the resulting shock by providing emergent meanings." According to Daniel such disruptive moments are "agentive moments,"⁴¹ moments when previously un-imagined possibilities for action present themselves. Tien's relocation to Canada disrupted a "habit" of church discipline she had come to rely on. This disruption compelled her to find an alternative means of dealing with her husband's behavior. Taking very seriously Old Colony teaching that individual members are responsible for the salvation of each other, she assumed the guilt of her husband's sins, because the Church would not. According to Tien, the resultant pain, both physical and psychological, was divinely inflicted and left her with no choice but to expose her husband. Her pain-filled body potently gave expression to the conflictual position she was in as she contemplated not addressing her husband's guilt.

Eascht dan wea daut soo schwoa en mien Tjarpa, en mien Hoat. Daut späad sitj soo daut wea bloos gauns oppjepakt, en daut must doa bliewen. Wan etj daut nochmol too Mensche von räden dan wea'et en Stootsje en bät leijchta. Enn dan wan etj doa aun docht, woo woatet bie Gott sennen? O! dan wortet wada aula krank. Daut must mol eajent waut doamet jedohne, aus suss dit daut kunn etj bloos späaren daut jintj bloos nijch, daut wea bloos too schwoa. [Previously I could feel the weight of this all in my body, my heart was heavy. I felt as if everything was bottled up inside me, and couldn't get out. The few times I did talk to people about it, it got a little easier for a while. But then when I thought, what is God going to make of this? Oh! Then I became completely sick again. Something had to be done about it, because I could feel that it couldn't go on like this, it was just too difficult.]

Too often Mennonite women have been expected to accept such pain as redemptive, thereby reinforcing patriarchal justifications of women's subservience. Tien's choice to expose her husband contested that patriarchal domination even while it grew out of a complex interplay between conflicting Old Colony religious teachings. This interplay was clearly inscribed on her body as Tien assimilated and attempted to hold in balance teachings of submission, individual responsibility and God-ordained gender roles of motherhood and wifehood.

I emphasized at the beginning of this article the importance of attributing agency to Tien throughout her life, not merely in the last few years in Canada when she reported her husband. Migrating to Canada opened up new possibilities for Tien, forcing a change of 'habit,' albeit against her will. However, these new possibilities arose not only because she was in a new environment, but also because of the way she had responded to her domestic situation over the course of her life, one of Asad's "modes of living painful relations." To understand how Tien was able to report her husband, this action must not be seen as an anomaly in her life, but as part of Tien's persistent efforts to maintain order and meaning within herself and in her family.

I have already argued that she managed to maintain order through internalizing the conflicting demands made on her by the Old Colony tradition. Her Old Colony religious piety, particularly prayer, was another mode of managing her life. Robert Orsi, in his study of the cult of St. Jude, the patron saint of hopeless causes, characterizes prayer in the lives of women devoted to the saint as a reorientation that opens up new horizons of possibilities. In their prayers to St. Jude the women "moved back and forth during crises between hope and acceptance, fantasy and an acknowledgment of the inevitable."⁴² They "refashioned the world and then directed themselves toward this new horizon... in the moment of praying. ... As women prayed to Jude they sensed a subtle shifting of the axes of their experience; the closed space of hopelessness was opened."⁴³ Throughout her married life, Tien vacillated between hope and despair. I asked her what she thought her life would be like in the next few years, and through her tears she replied:

Etj weet nijch. Dan mett eenmol dan tjempt mie soo aun, hee woat fleicht gaunss weatj woaren, en woat fleicht aules toostohnen, enn woat fleicht mol gaunss aundret Läwen welle fearen, enn dan woatet fleicht noch scheen gohnen tjenne mett am, fa mie. En dan mett eenmol dan dreit mie daut wada grots omm. Dan dentj etj soo, dauts en seeja, seeja hoada Mensch, grülijch seeja hoada Mensch. En dentj etj soo, dee hoada Mensch dee woat opplats nijch, woat nuscht aun

tedoonen senne. Hee woat nijch aundasch wellen, en hee woat bloos, woat emma soo bliewen. ... Doa ess eefach seeja tjleene Hopning. [I don't know. Sometimes the thought crosses my mind that his heart will soften and he'll acknowledge what he's done, and maybe he'll want to live a completely different life. Then it'd be possible to have a nice life together. But at other times things look completely different, and I think, he's very, very calloused, an extremely calloused person. And I think, such a calloused person, in the end, nothing will change him. He won't want to change, and he's going to, just going to continue like this forever. ... There's really very little hope.]

Her desire *and* the reality of her life fueled her prayers throughout her life. As hopeless a cause as any of St. Jude's devout have, Tien prayed for her husband, and she prayed that he would change. "En ekj wensch bloos grulich seeja wan dit [daut äa Maun nich tus senen kunn] halpen kunn. ... En etj denk, woat daut halpen? Woat daut en aundret mouken? ... Etj wel hopen. Etj wel seeja doa aun bäden daut saul." [My greatest wish is that this (that her husband could not live with his family) would make a difference. ... I wonder, will it help? Will it change things? ... I want to believe it will. I want to pray a lot that it will.]

Like Orsi, my concern is not the efficacy of prayer, but rather, what effect prayer has on the person who prays. How does examining Tien's religious devotion contribute to our understanding of how she manages her pain? Moving to Canada resulted in an agentive moment for Tien, albeit conflictual and painful. By reporting her husband, she developed a new mode of living sanely in her pain. However, if prayer functions as a subtle reorientation of one's perspective, creating the possibility of new realities as Orsi suggests, then it is possible to see Tien's decisive step of reporting her husband as a choice made possible because she was in a new environment, combined with her prolonged yearning, expressed by her through the religious devotion of prayer. Through praying for her husband's salvation and that he would recognize the destructive impact he had on his family—a devotional action sanctioned and encouraged by her religious community—Tien shifted her perspective to the extent that she could eventually entertain a new mode of living in her pain.

While the weight she carried and the pain she felt were instrumental in her decision, the easing of the weight indicated to her that God approved of what she had done. Her continual prayer gave her such assurance.

Etj weens ha' weens soo seeja jebät eascht eeja. Grülijch fäl jebät. Daut wea'et dan soo schwoa, daut wea soo leijcht danoh.

En etj weet nijch aundasch aus dee leewa Voda haft mie de Krauft jejäft daut daut soo aus dit sull, soo's dit aus'et nu jeworde ess. Aundasch kaun etj daut nijch festone. [I've prayed so much previously. Very, very much. It was so difficult then; it was so easy afterwards. The only way I can make sense of it, is that the loving Father gave me the strength so that it could turn out like this, like it's now happened. I can't understand it any other way.]

While her life of prayer, often expressed through tears, was for Tien an active way of living with her husband's abuse, she remained aware of her own limitations, expressed by her as a delicate balance between her initiative and divine agency.

Conclusion

Much to her surprise, Tiena was not condemned or even chided by the Church for what she had done, although she was well aware that all around her people were discussing her family situation. There may be several reasons for the Church's silence. Tiena interpreted it as a tacit acknowledgment of the Church's inability to deal adequately with the gravity of her husband's abuse. Tien is undoubtedly correct that church leadership recognized that she had little choice but to report her husband, given that their attempts to support her affected no change. More fundamentally however, the silence of the Church—neither condemning nor affirming Tiena's action—indicates its ambivalent position vis-a-vis the 'world' as it redefines itself in the Canadian environment. Tiena's action challenges the Old Colony claim that hierarchical social and familial structures stem from divine injunction and must be preserved at all costs. It admits the possibility that 'family' is a culturally derived institution, for her family's survival and safety depended on the disintegration of the Old Colony family unit. Her action blurs the distinction between *Jemeent* and 'world' that defines Old Colony religious life, for in this instance, the 'world' was better equipped to deal with domestic violence than the Church.⁴⁴

At its core however, this article is not about the inadequacy of the Old Colony Church to address domestic violence among its members, nor about its metamorphosis into a Canadian entity. Rather, I have sought to demonstrate that constructing religious meaning for Old Colony Mennonites involves an active engagement with the beliefs and practices of the tradition—a tradition that enables even as it constrains—and that the site of this construction remains the body and

the particularity of an individual life. Tien created religious meaning in her physical bond with her daughter and neighbours; as an Old Colony wife and mother, she re-defined Old Colony teaching through a harmonization of conflicting demands that she experienced as bodily pain; she prayed, not only in the ritualized kneeling of Old Colony worship, but daily with the tearful yearning for a happier life. For Tien, religious meaning making constellated her body with her religious tradition, her relationships, her pain, her encounter with the family support worker, her conversations with me, her gendered roles within Old Colony society, and her move from Mexico to Canada.

To examine how Tien constructed religious meaning as an embodied experience is to bring to the fore her agency. I have argued throughout this article that Tien, as she dealt with her husband's abuse, did so within a complex dialectical relationship with the Old Colony religious tradition, not in spite of the tradition, or at the expense of the tradition, but in tandem with it; not entirely determined by it, but nonetheless frequently bounded by it. This does not reduce Tien to a passive participant, or the Old Colony Church to an oppressive, tradition-bound force. It asserts that agency is not about autonomy, but about decisions that are made, and actions that are taken in the web of relationships that make up an individual life. This may not satisfy those who believe that the Old Colony Church binds its members to an archaic code of behavior at best, and at worst, to a destructive one, and who insist that salvation, whether understood theologically or culturally, can only be found outside its boundaries. And it is not intended to satisfy those who ennoble the Old Colony religious tradition, adverse to acknowledging that at times it maintains itself to the detriment of its members.

Finding a path amidst such polarization returns us once again to Tien and her pain-filled life. Insisting that the body is central to religious meaning making for Tien, that it both propels her decisions and gives expression to them, locates religion, not primarily in theology, church structure, or in a code of conduct, but in the limitation and the desire that mark the human body. As another Mennonite woman has written about yet another Mennonite woman: "Her triumph is the recognition that spiritual knowledge is also carnal knowledge."⁴⁵ These are not Tien's words, but she understands the dilemma between limitation and desire, and has found her own way of being an Old Colony Mennonite woman: "Etj well hia bie disse Tjoatj bliewen ... oba etj haud'et foaken bloos seeja schwoa." [I want to remain here, in this church ... but it's often been very difficult for me.]

Notes

- 1 'Tiena Wolfe' is a pseudonym and I have changed some details about my subject's life in order to protect her anonymity. I also make use of the shortened version of the name 'Tien' throughout the article.
- 2 Mennonite immigrants from Mexico refer to themselves as *Dietsch* (literally meaning German). Included in this designation are all Low German speaking Mennonites, as Tien also identified me as *Dietsch*. I, however, use the term in this article to refer exclusively to those Mennonites who have migrated from Mexico to Canada.
- 3 Arthur Kleinman, "Pain and Resistance: The Delegation and Relegation of Local Worlds," in Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good, Paul E. Brodwin, Byron J. Good and Arthur Kleinman, eds., *Pain as Human Experience: An Anthropological Perspective* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1992), 175.
- 4 This paper is based on five separate visits I had with Tiena in her home, each two to three hours in length, over a period of six months. This paper is based on both taped conversations and notes I made following my visits. I prepared a list of questions to guide the conversations and help orientate my thoughts, but most often our conversations were not in an interview style, but free flowing, and ranged far beyond anything I prepared.
- 5 This article is not intended to be an exposé of how the Old Colony Church deals with domestic violence among its members. My research is much too narrowly focused for that; I interviewed only one woman in order to understand how she interpreted her religious experience as an Old Colony woman. I have no reason to believe that the Old Colony Church deals with domestic violence in either a more constructive or more detrimental fashion than other patriarchal religious institutions.
- 6 See Adolf Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?: The Mennonite Experience in Canada, 1870-1925* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1994) for an analysis of the migration to Mexico.
- 7 See Kelly L. Hedges, "Plautdietsch" and "Huuchdietsch" in Chihuahua: *Language, Literacy and Identity Among the Old Colony Mennonites in Northern Mexico* (PhD Dissertation, Yale University, 1996), 90-113 for a discussion of the social and political implications of this separation. For a limited discussion of Old Colony religious beliefs see also David Schroeder, "Evangelicals Denigrate Conservative Mennonites—Understanding the Conservative Wing of the Mennonite Church," in Delbert F. Plett, ed., *Old Colony Mennonites in Canada: 1875-2000* (Steinbach MB: Crossway Publications, Inc., 2001), 33-4.
- 8 This is an estimate made in 2002. From Mennonite Central Committee Ontario Information Sheet n.d. For a description of the migration of Mennonites from Mexico to Ontario see William Janzen, *Build Up One Another: The Work of MCCO With the Mennonites From Mexico in Ontario 1977-1997* (Kitchener ON: Mennonite Central Committee Ontario, 1998).
- 9 The most comprehensive studies of Old Colony Mennonites are Calvin W. Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites: Dilemmas of Ethnic Minority* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1969) and Harry Leonard Sawatsky, *They Sought a Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971). Unfortunately, both of these studies are dated, and no recent comparable study has been undertaken. Hedges, "Plautdietsch" does provide a more current analysis of Old Colony Mennonites in Mexico, though she focuses specifically on literacy. While Redekop includes Old Colony Mennonites in Canada, all three focus on Mennonites in Mexico.

- ¹⁰ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 165.
- ¹¹ Robert A. Orsi, *Thank You St. Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 210.
- ¹² Scholars of Canadian and American Mennonite women have variously addressed the positioning of women in patriarchal Mennonite communities, although no study of Old Colony women exists. Jane Marie Pederson, "She May Be Amish Now, But She Won't Be Amish Long": Anabaptist Women and Antimodernism," in Kimberly D. Schmidt, Diane Zimmerman Umble, Steven D. Reschly, eds., *Strangers at Home: Amish and Mennonite Women in History* (Baltimore, London: John Hopkins University Press, 2002), 339-363 discusses Mennonite women generally. Marlene Epp, *Women Without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2000) and Pamela E. Klassen, *Going By the Moon and the Stars: Stories of Two Russian Mennonite Women* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994) study Canadian Mennonite refugee women's experiences. Royden K. Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and the New Worlds, 1850-1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993) discusses Kleine Gemeinde Mennonites.
- ¹³ Talal Asad, "Agency and Pain: An Exploration," *Culture and Religion* 1 (2000): 43.
- ¹⁴ Bynum, *Metamorphosis*, 189.
- ¹⁵ Bynum, *Metamorphosis*, 188.
- ¹⁶ The portrayal of immigrant Mennonites from Mexico in the media and the 'othering' of these Mennonites by more established Mennonites in Canada would be worthy of a study in and of itself. A particularly distressing example of perpetrating stereotypes about the *Dietsche* is found in Wolfgang W. Moelleken and Melita A. Moelleken, "Language Conflicts of Low German-speaking Mennonites in Southern Ontario, Canada," in P. H. Nelde, ed., *Plurilingua: Language Conflict and Minorities* (Bonn: Dümmler, 1990), 95-108. Moelleken and Moelleken portray Mennonites from Mexico as lacking in personal hygiene with low ethical standards (compared to other Mennonites), dishonest, prone to wife and child abuse, plagued with addiction to alcohol, promiscuous and adulterous. A very different perspective, and one equally extreme, on Old Colony churches in Canada is presented in Delbert F. Plett, ed. *Old Colony Mennonites in Canada: 1875 to 2000* (Steinbach MB: Crossway Publications Inc., 2001), who presents the Old Colony Church as the only true expression of Anabaptism. See David Weaver-Zercher, *The Amish in the American Imagination* (Baltimore, London: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), esp. 122-151, for a discussion of a parallel tension between Mennonites and Amish.
- ¹⁷ I wish to emphasize that I offer only a partial interpretation of Tiena Wolfe's life. Those trained in social work may well be able to identify patterns and meaning in Tien's life that remain oblique to me. Furthermore, to equate Tien's life to the contingency of our encounters is to absolutize and misrepresent her experiences. But more fundamentally, claiming to provide a definitive interpretation of Tien's pain diminishes it to the limitations of my language. As Tien reminded me, "Jie tjennen metffeelen fleijcht, doch, ... nich kratjt. Daut nijch." [You can understand, maybe, yet, ... not entirely. You simply can't.] I have found Kleinman, "Pain," 190-1 most helpful in thinking through the limitations and possibilities of my study. "The ethnographer must be cautious about creating an end that is artificial, an illusion of a finality. ... [W]hen pain is configured as suffering, it evokes intractable, inexhaustible moral and spiritual questions that are worth pursuing to the extent we can better understand human conditions or provide assistance to sufferers, but which are as vulnerable to dehumanizing social scientific accounts as to biomedical ones. ... [The experience of pain] is

best dealt with, not by insisting on a single 'objective' interpretation, but by juxtaposing multiple, positioned, intersubjective perspectives." My intent is that this paper will encourage further research carried out from other perspectives and using other methodologies on *Dietche* women who have migrated from Mexico.

¹⁸ *Aunwohna* are the landless class on Mennonite colonies in Mexico. Literally, *Aunwohna* means those who live on the outskirts of a village.

¹⁹ See Sawatsky, *They Sought*, 269-71, 295-7 for a discussion of the social tension between *Wirte* (*Weate*) and *Anwohner* (*Aunwohna*) on Mennonite colonies in Mexico. Conflict centres around the use of common pasture land to create "Anwohner suburbs," *Aunwohna* claims to use of the common pasture, *Weate* preference to hire Mexican labourers over *Aunwohna*, and economic disparity between the two classes. Sawatsky provides a detailed description of the administration and structure of the colony life of Mennonites in Mexico.

²⁰ The question could well be asked why the Old Colony Church, which so clearly distinguishes itself from the "world," allows its members to readily make use of government programs. As I discuss in footnote #39, for a variety of reasons the Canadian Church's ability to control its members depends more on moral suasion than it does on concretely implimenting its teachings through church discipline. Families such as Tien's so obviously benefit from government programs, that the Church recognizes that to question the use of social assistance would be to alienate its members, which it cannot afford to do. (Many Mennonites, it must be remembered come to Canada because they have access to these very programs.)

²¹ Hedges, "Plautdietsch," 211-2 describes the rite of baptism, as expressed in the recitation of the Catechism, (the first step in the rite) as a central means of promulgating tradition in Old Colony church life. "Performed by all Old Colonists at more or less the same point in their lives, it [reciting the Catechism] is a uniting act linking generations. It provides a recognition of constancy; it creates a collective memory of the past and present and offers up a picture of the future; and it recreates a vision of order in the community. ... In short, the recitation is most significant as a communicative event not as a review of Old Colony Mennonite theology but in the way it recreates continuity in 'tradition', binding the Old Colonists together as a group in the past, present, and future."

²² The question needs to be asked whether it is advisable to rely on studies that are based on research done among Mennonites on colonies in northern Mexico—as all major studies of Old Colony Mennonites are—when in fact considerable differences exist between Old Colony churches in Mexico and Old Colony churches in Canada. Distinct colonies, with their closely integrated governance of secular and sacred matters and their geographical boundaries excluding non-Mennonites, do not exist in Canada. The Old Colony churches in Canada are perforce unable to espouse conformity and maintain their tradition with the aid of the colony system. Furthermore, Old Colony churches in Canada have members who never migrated to Latin America, and whose forebearers have maintained a continuous ecclesiastical presence in Canada. Nevertheless, I make use of these studies because no comparable studies of Old Colony Mennonites in Canada exists and because the memory of many Old Colony Mennonites in Canada is still closely connected to their experience in Mexico. Such is the case with Tiena Wolfe. She spent her formative years on a colony in Mexico, and has, in fact, lived most of her life there. As well, most of her co-religionists (i.e. members of her congregation) are from Mexico.

²³ Hedges, "Plautdietsch," 62-3.

²⁴ This is particularly true of the two standard studies of Old Colony Mennonites, Redekop, *Old Colony* and Sawatsky, *They Sought*. These studies are dated, as both scholars predict that the Old Colony system will not survive in Mexico

because the Church does not allow the adaptations necessary for economic survival. The flourishing of Mennonite colonies in Mexico in the past three decades has necessitated a revision of their approach to Mennonite life in Mexico. Hedges provides such an interpretation, insisting that the structure that Redekop and Sawatsky see as detrimental, is in fact the structure that allows for Old Colony life to perpetuate itself, and that Old Colony culture contains mechanisms for adaptation. However, nothing comparably extensive to Redekop and Sawatsky has yet been produced.

²⁵ Sawatsky, *They Sought*, 279.

²⁶ Linda Martin Alcoff and Laura Gray-Rosendale, "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?" in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds., *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 206 characterize survivor speech as potentially transgressive, challenging the dominant discourse, but point out the ability of the dominant discourse to adapt itself to challenge. "Dominant discourses can ... subsume survivor speech in such a way as to disempower it and diminish its disruptive potential. These discourses should not be conceptualized as static, unchanging, or monolithic entities but as fluid, flexible, and capable of transforming to accommodate survivor's speech while not significantly changing the underlying systems of dominance." I have found this model helpful in understanding Tien and the *Ohm's* exchange. Tien's challenge to patriarchal marriage was subverted by the *Ohm's* 'superior' knowledge of domestic violence. Even though Tien understood the *Ohm's* words as pastoral care, and appreciated his empathy, her underlying frustration, and even panic indicate that she was being silenced as Alcoff and Gray-Rosendale describe.

²⁷ Kleinman, "Pain," 187.

²⁸ Alcoff and Gray-Rosendale, "Survivor," 214.

²⁹ For a discussion of Mennonite women's clothing see Linda Boynton Arthur, "Clothing is a Window to the Soul: The Social Control of Women in a Holdeman Mennonite Community," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 15 (1997): 11-30 and Beth E. Graybill, "'To Remind Us of Who We Are': Multiple Meanings of Conservative Mennonite Women's Dress," in Kimberly D. Schmidt, Diane Zimmerman Umble, Steven D. Reschly, eds., *Strangers at Home: Amish and Mennonite Women in History* (Baltimore, London: John Hopkins University Press, 2002), 53-77.

³⁰ Literally meaning weak nerves. It is difficult to define *schwacke Narfe* with any precision. Kerstin Muller Reinschmidt, *Old Colony and General Conference Mennonites in Chihuahua, Mexico: History, Representations and Women's Everyday Lives in Health and Illness* (PhD Dissertation, University of Arizona, 2001), 406 expands the definition to include "[n]egative emotions" and "unusual behavior" and emphasizes that it is caused by "social disharmony." Tien described two separate manifestations of *schwacke Narfe*: her copious tears, and her inability to learn to drive a car, despite numerous attempts.

³¹ As Tien described her interaction with her neighbors to me, she conflated two separate incidents. Hence her shift from one neighbor to two in her conversation.

³² Pamela E. Klassen, *Blessed Events: Religion and Home Birth in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 206.

³³ Veena Das, "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain," in Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das and Margaret Lock, eds., *Social Suffering* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1997), 88.

³⁴ Reinschmidt, *Old Colony*, 389.

³⁵ Susan Starr Sered, *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister: Religions Dominated By Women* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 106. Sered draws this conclusion because of the close connection between women and health/illness which most often causes women to seek religious solutions. As mothers, they are responsible for the health and well-being of their children, but also deal

with their own illness, frequently brought on because they are mothers. Relevant to my discussion of Tiena Wolfe's life is Sered's observation that women as mothers are frequently ill because of their anxiety over their children, which wears them down.

³⁶ Sered, *Priestess*, 105.

³⁷ Sered, *Priestess*, 126-8 discusses the conflict between women's roles as mothers and as wives, albeit in a very different context. In her discussion of Sudanese women's ritual of genital mutilation, she suggests that "genital-mutilation de-emphasizes sexuality ... and so emphasizes childbearing." She concludes that "it may be that women in certain situations opt to downplay their identities as wives in order to enhance their identities as mothers," in societies where motherhood is afforded more status than wifehood. I am not suggesting that Tien was primarily motivated by her own desire for status, but rather emphasize that like the Sudanese women, Tien's choice between motherhood and wifehood had religious dimensions to it that affected how she was perceived as a woman in the Old Colony community. For Tien, choosing motherhood over wifehood had the opposite effect; she jeopardized her status in the eyes of her community, in favouring motherhood.

³⁸ As Redekop, *Old Colony*, 35 sardonically states: "The highest goal is the goal of salvation, which is understood as acceptance by God as faithful people rather than as faithful individuals. ... The salvation of the Old Colony affects all its members; therefore, it is important that there be no deviants to spoil the chances of the whole group."

³⁹ There are several reasons for this difference. Old Colony Churches in Canada were, following the exodus to Mexico, comprised of those Mennonites who were more willing to accommodate themselves to Canadian mores. While still remaining traditional, it may well be that a more psychological understanding of human behavior has tinted an exclusively theological understanding of sin among Canadian Old Colony Mennonites, resulting in the use of other means to deal with aberrant behavior. Furthermore, the colony system in Mexico is in sharp contrast to the more 'pluralistic' setting Canadian Old Colony Churches find themselves in. They have always existed alongside other (mostly) Mennonite churches, some of which actively proselytize among Old Colony Mennonites. In Canada, the presence of other churches seeking converts, renders the social exclusion of excommunication much less effective, whereas the homogeneity of Mennonite colonies in Mexico ensures that excommunicating a member means social exclusion. (Though this is changing on several colonies where competing churches are being established).

⁴⁰ For a parallel example see Ann Taves, "Self and God in the Early Published Memoirs," in Margo Culley, ed., *American Women's Autobiography: Fea(s)ts of Memory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 57-74. Taves examines the life of Abigail Bailey, a 17th century Puritan woman in New England. Married to an abusive man guilty of incest with their daughter, Bailey came to see her marriage as a violation against God because it kept her from complete dependence on God. She eventually divorced her husband. Like Tien, Bailey used the contradictions within her own tradition to find a position from which her apparent violation of Puritan theology became an act of faithful piety. Taves emphasizes that modern readers should not view this only as a bold step of "increased autonomy" but that for Bailey it was an act of submission to God. See Taves, "Self," 67. For a contrasting example of women submitting to their religious traditions as wives, see R. Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), esp. 169-198 which presents an alternate view of Christian wifely submission. Griffith argues that for evangelical women, submission to both God and husband is the crux of improving domestic life. As

long as they themselves insist on change, their efforts will be foiled. "Prayer ... marks the moment when a woman abandons all attempts to assert control over the conditions of her family life in favor of sacrificial obedience, acceptance, and gratitude." Such a "joyful commitment to wifely submission" aimed at transforming a husband's behavior, is in contrast to Tien's actions. See Griffith, *Daughters*, 172-173.

⁴¹ Daniel, E. Valentine, "Suffering, Nation and Alienation," in Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das and Margaret Lock, eds., *Social Suffering* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1997), 349.

⁴² Orsi, *Thank You*, 208.

⁴³ Orsi, *Thank You*, 211.

⁴⁴ The Church's silence may indicate that it recognizes her husband's behavior as aberrant, but addressing it would be another way of publically acknowledging the legitimacy of Tiena's action.

⁴⁵ Julia Kasdorf writing about poet Jean Janzen in Julia Kasdorf, "'We Weren't Always Plain': Poetry by Women of Mennonite Backgrounds," in Kimberly D. Schmidt, Diane Zimmerman Umble, Steven D. Reschly, eds., *Strangers at Home: Amish and Mennonite Women in History* (Baltimore, London: John Hopkins University Press, 2002), 325.